Not Black, Not Black Enough and Both

Satirical Investigations of Race in Percival Everett's Novels

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What is the reality of race in the United States of America in the 21ˢᵗ century? How can we account for this arbitrary yet real concept and possibly move beyond it? And if it has no meaning beyond racism, to what extent, after all, are our current means of accounting for race potentially perpetuating the cultural and social structures undergirding the systemic persistence of racism? These concerns of identity, equality and democracy had been spectacularly pushed to the public forefront in what seemed to be the moment of race's very own transcendence: the election of the first U.S. President of African descent.

On November 5, 2008, Barack Obama was heralded as the progressive promise incarnate of a country compromising its own democratic ideals at home and abroad. Amidst a crisis of economic, political and social proportions (evident in the crucial keywords of the time: Lehman Brothers, Abu Ghuraib and Katrina), "Yes We Can," the signature slogan of Obama's campaign, resounded as a fierce counter-claim to these hallmarks of hypocrisy. Yes, America could elect its first president of African descent; and yes, an African American taking the nation's highest office could be conceived as indicative of an unparalleled state of equality. Obama's stellar rise, after all, showcased a spectacular social upward mobility. This euphoria was reflected in a Gallup poll conducted shortly after the election in 2008. According to this questionnaire, over two-thirds of Americans appraised Obama's victory as the most important or among the two or three most decisive advancements for African Americans in the past 100 years. Almost seventy percent of the respondents agreed that a solution to the racial divide between blacks and whites would "eventually" be worked out.[1] Obama's election offered the historical moment of condensation to the notion that through this gradual progress the U.S. were (close to) reaching a race-free phase, in which (unrestricted) opportunity was granted to *every* citizen, even "a man whose father less than 60 years ago might not have been served at a local restaurant," as Obama put it in his "Inaugural Address" on Capitol Hill. This putative "post-racial" turn incited a radical reconsideration of race that rippled through the political and cultural sectors of the nation.

Racism without Race: The Political Debates on the Putative "Post-Racial" Turn

In a veritable "post-racial" hype, TV shows, newspapers, magazines, radio shows and blogs all capitalized on the nationwide attention that race and thus "post-race" received. Thus, the pressing question, which NPR asked its listeners in 2009 ("Are We Living in a Post-Racial America?" February 11), informed a vast array of responses from various political camps. Optimistic outlooks articulated on the liberal to conservative side of the debates sharply contrast with a host of critical accounts.[2] "Promise," "dilemma," "myth," "illusion," "fantasy," even "paralysis" – in numerous publications in the journalistic and academic sector (op-ed articles, political/electoral analyses, sociological and pedagogical studies) "post-race" figures as a sarcastic shorthand paired with one of these descriptors.[3] This connotation of sarcasm increasingly dominated the term's use as the initial Obama-euphoria was dampened by a growing disillusionment with the present and prospect of a "post-racial" America. The most prominent rebuttal of this notion, finally, came from the (former) President himself: "[H]owever well-intended," Obama declared during his farewell speech, it "was never realistic," as "race remains a potent and often divisive force in our society."[4]

Accounting for the hegemonic force of race in the aftermath of the putative "post-racial" turn means to attempt "to make sense of a nation tossed about violently by the push-pull of racial domination and racial progress, one beset by racial contradictions and paradoxes," Matthew Desmond and Mustafa Emirbayer assert (*The Racial Order*, 5). The unsettling simultaneity of formal equality and structural inequality, based on the historical link between past and present forms of oppression that Michelle Alexander has drawn (*The New Jim Crow*), runs along various axes of identity, from race to class and gender.[5] Both urban ghettoization and mass incarceration benefit from the "disturbing national trend" of the so-called "school-to-prison-pipeline" in the education system (ACLU), which seems to have remained very much "separate and unequal" (Cook).[6] A gradually declining rate of high school dropouts (IES) contrasts with the fact that only 19 percent of African American adults (aged 25) receive a bachelor's degree (in 2013, NCES). In the professional sector, the unemployment rate among blacks oscillates between two thirds and almost twice the national average (8.4% vs. 4.9%; Bureau of Labor Statistics). The "glass ceiling" on the management-level of U.S. businesses remains very much intact (EEOC), as does the asymmetry between the median black and white family-income (two thirds).[7] These *material* realities of race interrelate with its *symbolic* force. It essentializes corporeal attributes (such as skin-color, bone-structure, idiom, physical and intellectual capabilities) as universal traits of identity.[8] Denying the mythical force of this category that is operationalized to identify and classify human difference is not to

"deny that it has real material effects in the world; nor is it to suggest that 'race' should disappear from our critical vocabularies," Diane Fuss stresses. Rather, "[w]hat is called for is a closer look at the production of racial subjects, at what forces organize, administer, and produce racial identities" (*Essentially Speaking*, 91-92).

This has nowhere been more evident than in Obama's own reception as the nation's first *black* political leader. Far from having been uncritically heralded by blacks and categorically dismissed by whites Obama entered the political platform as a powerful figure of projection for the virulent racial assumptions harbored on *both* sides of the symbolic divide of race. The stagnating support of African Americans prior to his election, which arguably attested to the widespread fear among blacks of the first African American presidency being a hopeless case, contrasted with the liberal media's appraisal of Obama's alleged ability to transcend stereotypical notions of race. Obama first emerged as an icon of black national equality and global visibility, receiving the Nobel peace prize in 2009 as a prospective honoring for his much-anticipated (and partially accomplished) achievements such as nuclear disarmament, the Iraq war withdrawal, the shutdown of the Guantanamo Bay detention camp, the promotion of minority rights and the reform of the health care system. His silence and relative inaction regarding race-specific issues, especially during his first year in office, soon caused widespread criticism. Both in his carefully orchestrated public bearing[9] and policy-making Obama promoted political unification, which often de-emphasized potentially polarizing particularities of race to counter white anxieties of racial bias. Still, he was caught between the accusation of fostering "hatred for white people" and "acting white."[10]

This inquiry approaches the concept of "post-race" as the keyword for the most recent and ultimately insufficient attempt to rebrand the post-Civil Rights debates on race, identity and in/equality and translate them into the 21st century. As such, the concept marks the culminating point of "color-blind" racism.

In the aftermath of the Civil Rights movement and the on-going effort for social justice in the 1970s and 1980s, the neoconservatism of the 1980s fostered a sociopolitical climate of increasing hostility towards minorities. Suffering from the widespread retreat from affirmative action policies and deteriorating economic conditions, the black middle class became the prime object of macro-social and in-group contestation. In the public debates on race, according to Sikes Feagin, the de-emphasization of *institutional* inequality corresponded with the implementation of a new vocabulary of "the black underclass," "reverse discrimination," and "the privileged black middle class" (6). This colorblind doctrine, under which various racially coded programs were implemented (the "War on Drugs," the welfare

reform), helped to establish the assumption of black middle-class prosperity and underclass depravity. In Howard Winant's words, the doctrine of "color-blindness" helped to transform the

> old recipes for racial equality, which involved creation of a 'color-blind' society, […] into formulas for the maintenance of racial inequality. The old programs for eliminating white racial privilege are now accused of creating nonwhite racial privilege. The welfare state, once seen as the instrument for overcoming poverty and social injustice, is now accused of fomenting these very ills. ("Racial Dualism," 88)

"Post-race," too, forms a condensation of already circulating racial thought. The *first* black presidency, for instance, was famously predicted in 1963 by the then-Attorney-General Robert F. Kennedy. The idea that one *black* president represents the end of race resonates with several racial common-places associated with African Americans. According to the cliché, American racism implies racism against blacks, first and foremost. Blacks are thought be ahead in what is reductively referred to as the "oppression competition," given the fact that they (were) "immigrated" to the U.S. unwillingly by way of mass-deportation and economic exploitation in the slave trade. Secondly, blacks are the *only* "hyphenated" minority subsumed under a pluralist label that does not designate a *country* but a *continent* of origin: "African-American." The term "post-race," in turn, first surfaced in the early seventies in an article by James T. Wooten, who promoted a "post-racial South" whose economic prosperity was unhindered by racial considerations (*New York Times* 1971), and has since been integrated into the mainstream racial vocabulary as "denoting or relating to a period or society in which racial prejudice and discrimination no longer exist" (*OED*). As such, it stands in accordance with the doctrine of "color-blindness."

According to the twisted logic of this doctrine, which has dominated national policy-making and public discourse since the decline of the Civil Rights coalition, race should be neglected precisely because of the ubiquity of difference. In other words, one does not "see" color or race, one just sees different people. Promoting the eradication of race as a category of legal, political and social practice in order to allegedly assure *true* equality, conceived as the lack of bias towards any social community, the notion of color-blindness represents "a cultural structure […] which encompasses sociodices (of white privilege) as well as mythologies or narratives (such as those of whites overcoming racism, Latinos raising themselves up to positions of success, or black triumphantly being incorporated into a race-neutral society" (*The Racial Order*, 105). Being so overtly inaccurate in terms of its denotative promise – the end of race - "post-race" is indicative of the very consolidation of this cultural structure, of the privilege to implement and naturalize the categories of racial discourse. This privilege,

fostered and expressed by the "new racial ideology" of what Eduardo Bonilla-Silva calls "colorblind racism," seems to be the distinctly *white* privilege to "rationalize minorities' contemporary status as the product of market dynamics, naturally occurring phenomena, and blacks' imputed cultural limitations" (*Racism Without Racists*, 2).

This "posterizing" of race implies a social-progressive teleology from racial oppression (slavery and segregation) to integration (desegregation) to race-eradication. Conceived in this way, the transcendence of race seems to mark a milestone in the fulfilment of the pluralist promise of a nation built as "one from many" ("E Pluribus Unum"). Charged with these connotations, the concept has been exploited in an epistemic competition over race. Commentaries from the white (liberal and conservative) spectrum suggest that the election of the first black U.S. President was proof that the racial debate could finally be concluded. Thus, pressing problems of *systemic* racism as well as the lingering question of reparations for slavery were silenced. What is so striking in these "post-racial" debates and elsewhere is that the central fact about this disenfranchisement is systemically obscured: that for most of its victims it is almost impossible to break out of the vicious circle of poverty and penalization. The systemic dynamics of racism at work here are misrecognized as the individual inability to (re-) integrate in societal life while often being denied the right to vote or the opportunity to successfully apply for jobs. These problems are thus naturalized as symptoms of racial pathology. As a discursive silencer, "post-race" does not allow for both of the two contrasting readings inscribed into the "post," namely *post*-race (as in transcending 'race') and *to post* 'race' (as in proclaiming and reconsidering 'race'). In attempting to account for its topical impact it is vital to differentiate between the term's denotative and connotative dimensions. Its nominal meaning – the end of *race* – differs from its implicit promise, namely the end of *racism*. This crucial difference has been pointed out, among others, by Ta-Nehisi Coates.

"America's struggle," the black journalist and cultural critic contends, "is to become not post-racial, but post-racist" (2014). "Post-race," in this regard, appears as an installment of race's power to cement the tacit disconnect between race and racism, or, more precisely, between those social agents subjected to racialization and those who dwell in the privileged spheres of racial neutrality. Coates stresses that "post-race" serves to conceal "a kind of fear, not of having a 'conversation about race' but of asking the right questions about racism," such as those of economic inequality. Today the political conversation on "post-race" has been concluded. In the aftermath of the Ferguson protests against the police shootings of blacks we are challenged to negotiate the increasing standard of critical insight and public awareness about the need for political action – be it with regard to the #blacklivesmatter movement or,

more generally, the civil protest against the Trump administration – with the structural asymmetries and habitualized antinomies that undergird the contemporary backlash of white nationalism, racism, misogyny and xenophobia. Having been one of the "crudest" and "crassest" instances of what Toni Morrison defines as uninformed but necessary contemporary racial discourse (*Playing in the Dark*, 8), "post-race," after all, has reignited and complemented debates on the *cultural* figurations of race that persist until today.

Their central aim was to reconsider the role of race as a category of cultural identity, which determines a historically situated set of experiences and customs shared by people of color. This concept was emphasized by critics of "post-race," and especially by African Americans, who warned against abandoning their shared sense of community and heritage (cf. Michael Eric Dyson "Race, Post Race," Matt Bai "Is Obama the End of Black Politics?"). Situated in the multicultural entertainment era, these debates grapple with this era's central characteristic: the unsettling simultaneity of mass-marketed otherness and the political neutralization of race. These hegemonic models of blackness were created and circulated in governmental studies such as the Moynihan report. Daniel Patrick Moynihan's infamous study has been widely influential in implanting various misconceptions about black (familial) life in the American public imaginary ("The Negro Family: The Case for National Action"), pioneering the sociological linking of the social problems associated with black childhood and adolescence to African American motherhood (cf. *The Moynihan Report and the Politics of Controversy*). Policies (such as the legal and carceral targeting of minorities), public trials (consider Rodney King and O.J. Simpson), news reports (consider the medial framing of the Ferguson race "riots") or entertainment formats in sports, comedy, and the arts, shape the ways in which blackness today is associated with a sound of music (Hip Hop) and style of speech (the black vernacular), a form of clothing (e.g. the hoodie), athletics (e.g. Basketball), comedy (e.g. Dave Chappelle), and writing (consider "urban fiction" by Sapphire and her contemporaries), but also with social ills naturalized as *pathologically* black. Caught between commercial hyper-visibility and sociopolitical marginality, being recognized as black in America often means to be perceived either as a cultural pastime or a social problem.

This inquiry centers on an American author, who not only challenges preconceived notions of black identity and authorship, but also of the established means of scrutinizing and criticizing race: Percival Everett. Born in 1957 and based in Los Angeles, the black writer has written bitingly comical satires of race that are both theoretically challenging and socially insightful. In his post-millennial novels of racial satire, he puts the ambivalence between moving beyond race's cultural centrality *and* accounting for its social gravity center stage in their aesthetic

agenda. In anticipating and articulating many of the current debates, Everett's project has culminated with its so far most recent exemplar published one year after Obama's inauguration.

Diversify Et Impera: Identity Politics and the Cult(ure) of the "Post"

How, many scholars and critics have asked, can we navigate the shifting sociocultural landscape of race in the post-Civil Rights paradigm? How do these shifts affect the lives and experiences of people of color in the U.S. and how, by extension, can the artworks of minority artists, in responding to and anticipating these changes, contribute to our understanding of the nature and workings of race in the era of "color-blindness"? In the wake of Obama's presidential nomination, the black professor and novelist Charles R. Johnson has joined various scholars in stressing the insufficiency of formulaic notions of black identity, community and cultural homogeneity. These common-places, Johnson claims, push many of the contradictions that are characteristic for present-day minority experiences outside of the frame ("The End of the Black American Narrative"). This pervasive "'post ethos'," which Kwame Anthony Appiah has seminally discussed in the capitalist context of commoditized ethnic culture, has inspired "post-Soul," "post-Black" (and "post-race,") accounts to go *beyond* conventional conceptions of racial difference and clear a space for these inconsistencies.[11] Defined by ambiguity and ambivalence, the epistemological modalities of humor and satire – tellingly – have prominently complemented current artistic attempts to "reference, riff on, reconfigure, or even reject" the "ideological and narratological inheritances" of the established racial discourse (Román, 17).

Percival Everett's satiric debut at the turn of the millennium falls into a period of multicultural incorporation, canonic consolidation and aesthetic pluralization. American writers of color engage in increasingly self-conscious "conversations both with cultural antecedents and with contexts of consumption and interpretation," as well as social integration (18).[12]

Subsuming societally sanctioned taxonomies of ethnic identity, multiculturalism reached its heyday in the late 1990s, when, as Werner Sollors stresses, it took on "an undreamed of centrality in literary and cultural studies, [while] the aesthetic expression of minority groups [reached] a global circulation" (151). Multiculturalism, generally speaking, defines the diversification of both the American cultural and academic landscape, when minority art (and the theories of its inquiry) became an institutional part of the nation's curricular canon and cultural corpus. As a concept of civic cohesion and sociocultural belongingness the term

subsumes a multiplicity of variously connoted employments in a conservative, liberal, left-essentialist and radical left context, as it has been "adopted internationally and is variously employed as a description of contemporary societies and communities characterized by racial, ethnic, and cultural diversity; as an official national and institutional policy that recognizes diversity; as a unifying national concept; as a principal marker of national identity and guideline for citizenship; as a collective description of various forms of identity politics; and a political stance on how to address social and cultural diversity in society and in communities." (*Encyclopedia of Race and Racism*, 321). In the so-called canon or culture wars in the 1990s, minority scholars in the American academy challenged the Western corpus of "high" literature and its inherent notions of aesthetic artistry and value by criticizing established conceptions of language and history and the modes of their inquiry. These struggles for civic recognition qua cultural representation correlate with the radically increased commercial circulation of blackness as a signifier of difference in the entertainment arenas of music, sports, comedy and literature. Notions of aesthetic value and cultural authenticity have hence become highly contested concerns in the public and scholarly debates.

The idea of American society as "a container of cultures" (Hollinger, 79), i.e. as a cultural conglomeration of separate communities of race, ethnicity and national origin, recurs to Horace Kallen's notion of "cultural pluralism."[13] Kallen, a Jewish journalist with an anti-assimilationist agenda, discarded the "melting pot" doctrine of the Progressive Era (cf. Israel Zwangwill's eponymous play), according to which minorities are absorbed into the Anglo-Saxon mainstream. Kallen's emphasis on "the *autonomy* and *persistence* of the different cultures brought to America by distinctive immigrant groups" (Hollinger, 94; my emphasis), however, was "exclusively European in scope" (100). According to the racial dogma of "diversity," in turn, every minority represents a valuable aspect of the nation's wider sociocultural whole. Rather than a veritably novel guiding principle of social organization and representation, Multiculturalism's core-ideal,[14] polemically speaking, seems to have fully realized the segregational doctrine of "separate but equal." Subscribing to the notion of living and expressing oneself freely and "authentically" among a variety of diverse but equally free and authentic identities eligible to the same opportunities in their private and professional life seems to be "a matter of being true to who you already are, or would be if it weren't for distorting influences," Kwame Anthony Appiah claims (*The Ethics of Identity*, 17). An either/or-compromise is thus camouflaged as a self-choice of identity.

Identity, generally speaking, describes the subjective vision of one's self-hood and being in the world based on the epistemological, experiential, performative and expressive possibilities granted by society. Appiah describes the dialectic of identity and identification, of labels being "applied to people, ideas about people who fit the label [coming] to have social and psychological effects" in shaping "identification, the process through which individuals shape their projects [of identity]" as based on the public availability of labels (and their consensual applicability usually informed by stereotypes), their individual internalization (in identifying as a member of a collective identity) and the resultant behavioral patterns in what Appiah terms the "treatment-as" (66-69). This treatment-as prompts to the problematic of self-choice, when

> the criteria for ascribing a certain identity include things over which you have no control – as is the case with gender, race, and sexual orientation – then whether you identify with that identity […] is not only up to you. […while] someone who has an identity as a black person, identifying with his or her African American identity, is doing more than simply acknowledging an African American ancestry, it is nevertheless true that they are responding to a fact (about […] ancestry) that is independent of their choices, a fact that comes, so to speak, from outside the self." (*The Ethics of Identity*, 70)

The liberal ideals of mutual civic responsibility and equal inclusion, according to Appiah, foster a radical diversification of human life: "Because there are so many human possibilities worth exploring, we neither expect nor desire that every person or society should converge on a single mode of life" (*Cosmopolitanism*, xv). In promoting identity as the all-defining principle of *self*-definition, diversity *itself* seems to obstruct a socially inclusive and politically effective *collective* action and inter-communal solidarity. Framed as an "*intra*cultural problem," diversity promotes cultural purity and independency that "presupposes a fixed and permanent identification by [the respective group-] members" (Breinig and Lösch, 31). Ultimately, "the commitment to diversity," as Walter Benn Michaels asserts, may "at best [be] a distraction" not only from economic inequality (16) but also from structural asymmetries in (higher) education and – most importantly for this work – aesthetic evaluation.

The problematic assumptions inscribed into the multiculturalist taxonomy manifest in the increasing prominence of "ethnicity," too. This concept has superseded race as a more politically correct category of difference, which ties corporeal characteristics to behavioral and cultural traits (cf. Markus and Moya, 22-23). Especially in liberal discourses, it serves as a "cop-out" term in dealing with issues and tensions that actually pertain to the social domain of race. Desmond and Emirbayer posit ethnicity as the umbrella term of its interrelated

concepts race and nationality. Broadly conceived as a shared sense of group-belongingness predicated on a common culture and ancestry, ethnicity has emerged as a more inclusive rubric for other non-whites incompatible with the "racially Other" compartment (especially those Southern and Eastern European immigrants at the beginning of the 20th century). "Ethnic categorization and conflict 'as such,'" Desmond and Emirbayer claim, "have existed always and everywhere. Yet it took the expansion of Western colonial rule to form the system known today as whiteness-centered racial domination (in a binary with people of color)" (*The Racial Order*, 58). In contrast to race, ethnicity is much more positively connoted. However, the fact that ethnic self-assertion remains largely the prerogative of non-black people attests to its implication in the American system of classification and domination. In contrast to other differential designators, Eric Sundquist claims, "*black* and *African American*" have not become "ethnicized." Rather, the scholar asserts, "blacks remain *racial*, […] because color, whether the communal traits associated with it or the group membership ascribed to it, still trumps everything else" (14-15).

Absent an "honest, natural opposite," David A. Hollinger claims that the tremendous success of diversity has fostered the clash between pluralistic claims for a unified American identity (predicated on Euro-American cultural and political primacy) and what he calls the "diversification of diversity" (80; 102). In contrast to this restrictive particularism, multiculturalism should be superseded by "postethnicity" since it "projects a more diverse basis for diversity than a multiplicity for ethnocentrisms can provide" (107). Cautioning against the detrimental effects of ever-diversified difference on art, Emory Elliott has famously called for an end of the "culture war" debates (*Aesthetics in the Multicultural Age*). Instead of the "divisive" views of art-making contra cultural politics, Elliott argues for a reconsideration of the aesthetic, stressing that "[t]he issue then is not whether we can rid ourselves of the disciplines that address the desire for beauty and art; rather, it must be how to redefine the parameters of 'art' and formulate new questions for evaluating cultural expression in ways that are fair and just to all" (9). In the realm of African American culture, the most prominent attempts to contribute such a new and comprehensive terminology for cultural criticism have been made by proponents of the "post-Soul" and "post-Black" branches of cultural theory.

The term "post-Soul" has been famously coined by Nelson George in his discussion of black culture succeeding the end of the 1970's era of "Soul," when consistent representations of black social and cultural identity prevailed (*Buppis, B-Boys, Baps, and Bohos: Notes on Post-Soul Black Culture*, 1992; cf. *Post-Soul Nation: The Contradictory, Triumphant, and Tragic*

1980s as Experienced by African Americans (previously Known as Black and Before that Negroes)). In her curatorial introduction to "post-black" art (2001), Thelma Golden has pioneered this term as "a clarifying term that had ideological and chronological dimensions and repercussions. It was characterized by artists who were adamant about not being labeled as 'black' artists, though their work was steeped, in fact deeply invested, in redefining complex notions of blackness" ("Introduction", *Freestyle*, 14). Golden and her fellow scholars' effort at "posterizing" Blackness and the Soul condition - notice the capital letters as signs of the monolithic implication of these labels – relates to post-modern notions of history and periodicity, specifically with regard to the problem of tradition and current artists' debt to and distance from it, as well as *post*-colonial notions of former conditions of inequality, which continue to shape social life in *structural* asymmetries.[15]

Mark Anthony Neal has been the prominent theorist of the "post-Soul" school. His theory of "post-Soul" promotes a generational shift that coincides with the sociopolitical transition from desegregation and urban deindustrialization, as well as the retreat from race-centered policies (affirmative action) to the era of mass-commoditized minority culture. Unencumbered by segregation and its social limitations, Neal's "Soul-Babies" born between 1964 and 1984 represent complex subjectivities embedded in a radical change from monolithic models to "metanarratives of blackness" (3). Paul C. Taylor, thus, defines "post-soul" as an overarching *condition*, to which artists are especially but not exclusively attuned (627). Aiming at an equal level of terminological openness, Bertram D. Ashe posits the "post-soul aesthetic" as "matrix" of traits and techniques shared by artists in representing this cultural condition ("Stomping the Blues No More?" 613). In developing principles of artistic response to this shift, Neal and his scholarly contemporaries have drawn on Trey Ellis' enthusiastic celebration of a new spirit of pop-cultural mixing and poetic self-consciousness that he propagates in the "New Black Aesthetic." It is the "cultural mulatto," the archetype of a younger-generation black artist well-conversant and versatile in various traditions and codes, which has been Ellis' most significant and controversial concept. This concept remains significant because it has set the agenda for subsequent attempts to theorize a more open, i.e. non-essentialist vision of black art, and problematic, because it tethers this notion of hybridity to the physical domain of the black body, re-affirming an experiential agency that de-emphasizes if not discards many troubling questions about the hegemonic dynamics of subject-formation. With a distinct focus on contemporary art-forms such as Hip Hop, scholars have since chimed in with this celebration of cultural legacy and artistic freedom. Mark Anthony Neal, too, emphasizes present-day black music, considering the seemingly ironic engagement of R'n'B singer R.

Kelly and his contemporaries with black themes, traditions and stereotypes as a characteristic "response to the world that they live in." Highlighting "their complicity in rendering those things 'familiar' in forms that seemingly undermine the sensibilities and struggles of previous generations of black folks is a legitimate engagement with a world that itself more powerfully undermines those strategies and struggles" (2001, 21). Among the most euphoric discussions of this shift has been Touré's widely influential intervention *Who's Afraid of Post-Blackness? What It Means to Be Black Now* (2011). Problematizing the "homogenizing media culture," the cultural critic equates "Post-Blackness" with "limitless" options of identity. In contrast to "post-race," which is "a bankrupt concept that reflects a naïve understanding of race in America […'post-Black'] means we are like Obama: rooted in but not restricted by Blackness" (12). What, tellingly, remains an important concern for scholars like Bertram Ashe is whether this "troubling of blackness by post-soul writers is ultimately done in the service to black people," and, by extension, whether this dwelling on issues of community and solidarity does not actually hinder a nuanced and unbiased account of black art (614). For Richard Schur, in turn, artists labeled as "post-Black" or "post-Soul" embrace the contradictions arising from this socio-aesthetic tension. "If previous generations, such as the artists of the Harlem Renaissance, sought to capture the dignity and moral worth of African American life or to demand equality, as the proponents of Black Power did through their provocative canvases that challenged white cultural and political hegemony, then the current generation emphasizes the metaphysical reality (or unreality) of the blackness they have inherited," Schur argues ("Post-Soul Aesthetics," 646).

Many of these accounts fail to critically address their own biases. For one, their meritocratic glorification of black (pop-cultural) elites prompts to a crucial concern of this book. The increasing socioeconomic and sociocultural divides within the black population of the United States complicates a monolithic notion of "the" black community. These disparities notwithstanding, black public figures, usually from the well-situated ranks of political, religious and cultural elites, continue to be considered as spokesmen of their racial community in its entirety, even those lower-class members, who are situated in a social stratum far below that of their supposed racial leaders. Secondly, many of these "post-Black/Soul" accounts indicate an ambivalent stance towards race, which they seek to both challenge as a reductive criterion of black identity and retain in order to posit black cultural practice not "just" as art but as culturally distinct. Their tacit reinscription of race contrasts with the satiric use of "post-race," which Ishmael Reed and Colson Whitehead have championed.[16]

In his 2009 *New York Times* op-ed piece, Whitehead reflects on one year of "living postracially." The black novelist zooms in on "Pop culture […,] the arena for our hopes, our fears and our most cherished dreams," insinuating that the eradication of race represents, first and foremost, a "branding problem," which threatens the core of an entire industry. In a sarcastic sweeping swipe at various media formats from film to literature (including the 1970's sitcom *Sanford and Son* and Toni Morrison's Pulitzer-Prize winning classic *Beloved*), Whitehead chastises the exploitation of stereotypical images of blackness. Now that these images are allegedly decoupled from race and thus bereft from their empirical realities, Whitehead proposes an alternate racial denominator: "People Whose Bodies Just Happen to Produce More Melanin and That's O.K." Promoting "restless leg syndrome" as the trending differential condition of the day, Whitehead insinuates that the eradication of race hurts its proponents' own interests, for the only area, where it would actually make a difference is culture – since it has already been banned from political discourse. Restless Leg Syndrome, in this sense, can be read as a medical metaphor that alludes to a particular euphemism often used to describe black artistic (self-) exploitation, namely "shuffling," which, obviously, involves a constant movement of the feet. Whitehead's satiric essay suggests that racism is likely to persist structurally because, first and foremost, it is a cultural condition.

The attempt to debunk race not only as a mythical but misleading concept is not new. George S. Schuyler's satiric dystopia *Black No More* (1931) speculates on a cure for black skin-color that results in the reinstatement of race based on shades of (light-) blackness. That race is an empty signifier has likewise been argued by Zora Neale Hurston, who claims that blackness solely acquires meaning in negative relation to whiteness ("How it Feels to Be Colored Me" 1928). Whiteness, James Baldwin has asserted, in turn, is nothing but a "moral choice," that recurs to "the price of the ticket" paid by American settlers in order to become white by "denying the black presence, and justifying the black subjugation" ("On Being White…and other Lies," 1984 167-169). Today, the problem of the reality of race has reached an unparalleled importance in ethnic cultural discourse. It comes as no surprise that Percival Everett, a writer known for his break with race as a (-n exclusive) cultural concern, is a pivotal point of reference in Saldivar's attempt at adapting Whitehead's satiric exploitation of "post-race" to ethnic literary criticism (2011, 2013).

With the "postrace aesthetic" the American Studies scholar synthesizes "a new 'imaginary' for thinking about the nature of a just society and the role of race in its construction" amidst an unparalleled diversification of ethnic life in the U.S. ("The Second Elevation of the Novel," 5). The four key aspects of this aesthetic reflection include the critical update of

postmodern poetics in the self-conscious mixing and reworking of genres in the mode of "speculative realism." Since "neither literary realism, nor modernist estrangement, nor postmodern play, nor magical realist wonder can suffice as *formal* stand-ins for the concrete *content* of [racial] justice," it is these contemporary minority artists' mixing of fantasy and history that thus creates a specific "transformative" effect, as they "attempt to explain *aesthetically*, in the formal terms of novelistic irony, why race in the twenty-first century still matters, […] as a real effect of imaginary patterns of behavior" ("Historical Fantasy, Speculative Realism, and Postrace Aesthetics," 594-96).

To calibrate the tone of my book, I have refrained from putting neither the term "post-Soul," "post-Black," nor "post-race" at its definitional center.[17] This study, however, is indebted to Saldivar's scholarship inasmuch as it has helped to put Everett on the map of contemporary minority writing beyond the latent inter-generational scope of the former two labels. Thus, it is crucial to think Everett's satiric novels as (a counter-) part not only of the black tradition but also of a larger intercultural discussion of race in America. Taking Saldivar's notion of this new racial imaginary as a methodological point of departure this study attempts to provide what Saldivar (so far) has not: a detailed discussion of Everett's specific articulation of the "meta-consciousness" that, as Saldivar claims, defines this contemporary minority writers' *formal* re-negotiation of established models of ethnic *and* (post-) postmodern writing. Whitehead reminds us that race continues to matter because it is *needed* on *both* sides of the symbolic divide of blackness and whiteness. While the call for the end of race as a social category betrays the desire for the end of racism, the call for the end of race as a cultural category, which Gene Andrew Jarrett has noted in contemporary black writing (*Deans and Truants*, 3), often seems to betray what Alexander G. Weheliye identifies as the urge "to render African American identity a bit more complex without abandoning it" (quoted in Everett's interview with Peter Monaghan, 79). It is a characteristic aspect of Everett's writing that it categorically complicates such a turn from complexion to complexity, as it were, *especially* when labeled as "post-racial" (cf. Abramovich). "If," as Darryl Dickson-Carr considers, "Everett is 'post-racial' in any respect, it may be that his works highlight how often Americans beg the question with regard to 'race'; its reality is assumed rather than demonstrated" ("Afterword: From Pilloried to Post-Soul," 271-72). What, in this sense, would appear like an emancipatory move *away* from race can be considered as Everett's strategic attempt to revitalize the racial debates and highlight their blindsides.

Not Black, Not Black Enough and Both: Satirical Investigations of Race in Percival Everett's Novels

Percival Everett was born in Fort Gordon, Georgia, in 1956, two years after one of the crucial incidents inciting the Civil Rights movement: The Brown vs. Board of Education supreme court ruling. He grew up in Columbia, South Carolina, as one of three children in a family of doctors. After graduating from AC Flora High School in 1974, Everett earned a B.A. in Philosophy and Biochemistry at the University of Miami. After two years of graduate study at the University of Oregon, where he wrote his dissertation on Ludwig Wittgenstein and the Philosophy of Language, he completed the creative writing program at Brown University (1980-82), earning a master's degree for his first novel *Suder*, which was published in the subsequent year. His first scholarly positions as a D.H. Lawrence Fellow at the University of New Mexico and as (Visiting) Assistant Professor of English at the University of Kentucky (in 1984 and from 1985 to 1989 respectively) were followed by appointments at the University Notre Dame (1989-91), the University of Wyoming (1991-92), the University of California Riverside (1992-98) and the University of Southern California. At USC, he has worked as Professor of English from 1998 to 2007 and served as Department Chairperson from 1999 to 2002. Since 2007 he has been the Distinguished Professor of English and since 2009, he has directed the Ph.D. program in Literature and Creative Writing. Since 1994, he has been working as fiction editor for the journal of African American art *Callaloo*. Over the years, he has served as a fiction judge, among others for the PEN/Hemingway Award for First Fiction, the Hurston/Wright Legacy Award and the Rea Award for the Short Story. Among his many national and international accolades are the New American Writing Award (for *For Her Dark Skin* and *Zulus*), two Hurston/Wright Legacy Awards (for *erasure* and *I Am Not Sidney Poitier*) and the American Academy of Arts and Letters Award for Fiction. In 2011, he was inducted into the South Carolina Literary Hall of Fame. Five years later he was elected to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in 2016.

Everett, has been one of the most prolific and versatile writers of the American literary scene. He has been publishing (at least) one book per year without the literary mainstream so much as taking notice (at least at first). Today, his body of work comprises twenty novels, four collections of short fiction and poetry each, a collaborative volume of paintings and poems written by Chris Abani, various uncollected short stories, a children's math book, as well as numerous critical essays and op-ed articles. Thirty-five years after his literary debut, the Los Angeles-based author remains one of the most popular insiders' tips of his field.[18]

Everett's reception, as the scholars Keith B. Mitchell and Robin G. Vander concede, "has been slow in coming" (7). Their scholarly study *Percival Everett: Writing Other/Wise* (2013) is but one of three essay collections singularly devoted to Everett's art.[19] Derek C. Maus has so far been the first one to discuss Everett's writing in a single scholarly work (*Jesting in Earnest*, 2019). Anthony Stewart's study is currently pending (*Approximate Gestures*). The "big" anthologies and companions of African American literature have so far widely refrained from mentioning Everett. "[G]iven the length and breadth of Everett's career," Trent Masiki concludes, "it is hard to imagine how the editors of the *Norton Anthology of African American Literature* (1997) and the *Oxford Companion to African American Literature* (1997) managed to overlook him" (36). The number of Everett-related articles in smaller companions of African American literary history, in turn, has steadily increased over the past three decades (see "Works Cited"). The diversity, variety and complexity of his literary project has brought Everett the acclaim of being an "unpredictable" (Goyal), "uncategorizable" (Sallis), or – more appropriately – a "characteristically uncharacteristic" writer of African American literature (Bates).

His "uncategorizability" has often been discussed with regard to the author's complication of canonic "placement." How, Tracie Church Guzzio has self-ironically asked, can we categorize a writer whose work

> includes revisions of Dionysus, Medea, Tiresias, Icarus, and the John Wayne film The Searchers and at the same time attempts to write a "history" of African Americans penned by the most notorious political foe of integration in post-World War II America, [the late] South Carolina senator Storm Thurmond? Whose work reflects the influences of French poststructuralist theory (especially semiotics), the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein, Ralph Ellison, and Laurence Sterne? Who has written a children's book as well as a new introduction to The Jefferson Bible? (53)

That Everett's refusal to write the same book twice – polemically speaking – should cause wonder if not consternation prompts towards the problems of aesthetic (e-) valuation, on which this book focuses. namely those of authorial autonomy, aesthetic innovation, and cultural legacy. As much as it would be misleading to label Everett a "one-man-camp," it is important to stress his counter-conventional stance. The task at hand, thus, is to describe the political implications of Everett's innovatory impetus with politicizing his break from (conventional notions of) race as an aestheticist move.[20] Rather, Everett is a case in point for what Charles R. Johnson has aptly pointed out. According to Johnson, the critical task at hand is to combine an awareness of the necessity for a continued discussion on race with a break from (some of) the limitations inscribed into those models of black identity and authorship

authorized as "canonic," and thus as legitimized to partake in and contribute to the "official" debates on race.

Writers of color such as Everett, in fact, are subjected to tacit claims for cultural consistency. These claims dominate the extremely politicized, author-fixated, subjectivity-centered and authenticity-governed discourse of African American literature (see chapter 2). They have coalesced into a representational protocol better known as the "burden of representation," famously coined by James Baldwin. This protocol prescribes and normalizes the social classification and cultural consumption of blackness. In the cultural sector, the artworks by racialized artists are subjected to what Joe Weixlmann terms a "'race'-based cultural delimitation" ("Introduction," xv). They are relegated to spokespersons of their ascribed racial communities *as such*. They are thus included and absorbed into the public sphere of the dominant culture while being denied access to alternative avenues of (self-) representation. Since racialized subjects enter these symbolic competitions over public visibility and legitimacy at a structural disadvantage, the question of the adequate response to cultural stereotyping cannot be a simple matter of conscious non-/conformity. Rather, it highlights what John Guillory describes as the dangerous conflation of cultural and political notions of representation: between ascribed racial identities and authorial self-positionings, between functionalistic notions of communal spokesmanship and the fictional scenarios of identity and solidarity envisioned by literary artists (*Cultural Capital*).

The problem of reading (for) race, which affects Everett's reception as an author of African American literature, has to do with the cultural logic of race. This logic undergirds the highly profitable exploitation of black "authenticity," *the* tacit standard in the literary marketplace, which polices the boundaries of the writeable. Circumscribed as the "African American experience," black authenticity correlates with a specific set of reading expectations that, as discussed in the following, circulate in both the commercial and academic sectors. Kept in what Madhu Dubey describes as the "tight interlock of mimetic realism, racial particularity, and delegation," (*Signs and Cities*, 44), the literary works of writers labeled as "African American" are commonly expected to

> feature African American protagonists alongside certain historical themes, cultural geographies, political discourses, or subjectivities defined by race. And these texts are "authentic" when their authors are identifiable as African American, regardless of whether these authors desire to be characterized in this way. These protocols contribute to the idea the canon, or the "best," of African American literature only portrays the realities of black life. (*African American Literature Beyond Race*, 2)

Percival Everett himself has seminally stated that he "cannot represent African Americans [...n]o one can," (interview with Anthony Stewart, 127). Not only do many of his novels *not*

feature black protagonists. Some completely omit race as a characterial marker.[21] Others, in turn, feature black characters who have occupations, interests or social backgrounds conventionally considered incompatible with the so-called black experience. A self-declared critic of "the autobiographical deal" (interview with Rone Shavers, 70), Everett does not write about *the* so-called black experience but about the experiences of so wide-ranging a spectrum of black protagonists as baseball players (*Suder*), Vietnam veterans (*Walk Me to the Distance*), romance writers (*The Water Cure*), ranchers (*Wounded* and several short-stories), hydrologists (*The Watershed*), fly fishermen (*erasure* and various short-stories), and police officers (*Assumption*), to name but a few. Concomitantly, as Mitchell and Vander have pointed out, the "cultural material" and intertextual alliances shaping Everett's fiction exceed established boundaries of race. As we will discuss in chapter 2, Ralph Ellison, Lawrence Sterne and Mark Twain are key references for Everett's fiction among a long list of African American *and* Euro-American authors in the tradition of novelistic fiction (12). Finally, in aesthetic regards, his experimentation with genre and form, his preoccupation with (language-) philosophy and (sign-) theory, his adaptation of both modernist and postmodernist poetics complicates bifurcated notions not only of aesthetics and politics, social criticism and theoretical reflection, but also of fiction and fact (cf. Stewart "Theoretical Blackness").

It comes as no surprise that Everett's counter-conventional focus is directed at both multicultural and canonic models of blackness, which, as his novel *erasure* most prominently stresses, have been complicit in establishing "African American literature" as an ultimately limited and limiting label (cf. interview with Anthony Stewart).[22] What makes the author such a crucial case in point for the racial politics of black cultural production, after all, is the fact that his texts reflect the pivotal problem of *representational rights*, in other words: of black *self*-representation (cf. chapter 2). In this regard, Everett stands in a long lineage of literary innovators struggling to be defined as artists and not (only) as "black" artists. This struggle recurs to the early history of black letters, when the abolitionist attempt at arguing for black equality to end slavery defined blacks' civilizatory parity according to their mastery of the arts. These first black literary artworks, which were ordained by white patrons to disprove that "[a]mong the blacks is misery enough, God knows, but no poetry" (Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia*), set the agenda for future endeavors to counter the historical and cultural erasure of black Americans from the white master narrative. The first major move beyond this narrow framework of artistic justification culminated in the so-called Harlem Renaissance. Black artists and critics sought to "wrest control of black representation from hostile forces to redefine what 'blackness' was in the eyes of the nation, and to present images

of black competency and genius to a wider public" (Japtok and Jenkins, 18).[23] Over the course of the 20th century, the debates on African American literature have continuously shifted between particularism and universalism, between a culturally specific and aesthetically inclusive vision of art. The fault line between politics and aesthetics that undergirds the field today surfaces in various conflictual oppositions, from folklore and high-brow art, orality and literacy, as well as race and theory (cf. Stewart "Theoretical Blackness"). Despite attempts to bridge these gaps by instrumentalizing the black vernacular as a "synthesis," the canonic landscape of African American literature remains divided along the lines of (white) theory and (black) culture, as well as female and male writing and criticism (cf. chapter 2 and 3.1 on *Glyph*).[24]

As a critical modality and literary form, satire, for Everett, serves as a means of socio-literary criticism, but also as a way to engage in a critical conversation with the black tradition(s). The author has been outspoken about his standing *in* a certain tradition of (African-) American literary writing. What he frequently emphasizes is that he refuses to stand *for* this tradition on behalf of the label "African American," under which his work is often simplistically subsumed. We can conceive Everett as situated in the *field* of African American literature, in which his novels represent position-takings that enable him to write as an outsider from within the canonic sector (cf. chapter 2). Accordingly, I argue that in his racial satires, Everett consistently explores various conventions of "black" writing to explode the boundaries of African American literature.[25] In so doing, he has appropriated various elements conventionally conceived as nonblack. Everett's extensive novelistic project, which ranges from Plato to Sidney Poitier, can in fact be conceived as the *systematic* attempt to claim *new* positions in (and thus expand) the African American literary field. These positions relate to literary areas and aspects as diverse as Greek mythology (*Dionysus*, *For Her Dark Skin*), the Western and the American West (*God's Country*, *Wounded*), ecocriticism, Native American and Mexican American mysticism (*Watershed, The Body of Martin Aguilera*), crime fiction (*Assumption*), the grotesque (*Zulus*) and the epistolary form/historiography (*A History of the African-American People [proposed] by Strom Thurmond, as told to Percival Everett and James Kincaid*), as well as non-raced or racially ambiguous storytelling, in general (e.g. *Cutting Lisa*, *Walk Me to the Distance*).

As an exceptional pioneer of his field, several facts about Percival Everett and his scholarly reception warrant an author-centered approach. Firstly, until today, Everett's literary work remains largely understudied. Derek C. Maus' comprehensive discussion of Everett's work, which takes Menippean satire as its specific scholarly angle, has laid the groundwork for

future inquiries, which – like this book – may focus on specific sections and aspects of Everett's work. The slowly but steadily growing community of Everett-scholars approach his literary work from various critical perspectives. Among these, several have become particularly prominent: racial satire (with specific regard to black literary conventions and cultural concerns such as masculinity and class; protest and tricksterism), (post-) regionalism (with specific regard to the American West),[26] ecocriticism, theory (and the theory novel), as well as numerous other language- and form-related concerns such as genre, intertextuality and humor (parody and irony). Given these critical foci, Everett, secondly, can be conceived as occupying a distinct spot within the literary landscape of contemporary African American art. His aesthetic agenda, which shapes his novelistic program, decisively differs from a range of projects, such as Ishmael Reed's "Neo-Hoodoo" poetics, Toni Morrison's "tribal" memoirs of racial trauma, John Edgar Wideman's urban parables of a haunting past of oppression, Paul Beatty's Hip-Hop-heavy parodies of the black urban scene, to Colson Whitehead's middle-class portraits of black life and techno-futuristic visions of racial dystopia. Of course, these descriptive one-liners do not necessarily do justice to the poetic spectrum of these authors' work. What they highlight, however, is the author-specific characteristic for which these writers are widely recognized. In contrast to these authors, Everett can be considered as a "meta-black" writer who has written academic satires on the cultural regime of race. His racial satires launch their attacks on the social and cultural status quo from the conceptual sphere of the academy. As a crucial domain of social advancement and cultural institutionalization the university represents a contested site of both liberalization and economization of knowledge-production in Everett's storyworlds. *Glyph*, for instance, features an 18-month-old black baby genius named Ralph, who likes to "play" with theory, reading the entire Western philosophical tradition in his crib. As a mute master of language and literature, he is Everett's criticism incarnate of literary dogmatism on both sides of the Atlantic, that specifically attacks strategically essentialist theories of black cultural expression. In *I Am Not Sidney Poitier*, in turn, Everett himself makes a cameo appearance as Professor of Nonsense at the traditionally black Morehouse College. He coaches the novel's protagonist named "Not Sidney Poitier" how to use the identificatory incompatibility of his name in his favor and give his white and black oppressors hell. What these texts, including Everett's most popular project *erasure*, share is the author's signature emphasis on (higher) education. This emphasis defines not only his authorial stance as a literary intellectual (cf. chapter 2.2), but also his preoccupation with race as a *cultural* problem that recurs to the

overarching reference-systems – science, politics, the media, art and popular entertainment – that encroach upon our being and acting in the social world.

Everett's reception has been decisively shaped by the publication of his 2001 satiric novel *erasure*. This text not only ties in with Everett's turn towards theory and more markedly meta-discursive forms pioneered by *Glyph*. As an acerbic attack on the publishing industry and the genre of urban fiction, in specific, *erasure* has cemented the importance of satire for his literary production in the first decade of the new millennium (cf. chapter 3.2). This study focuses on three novels that are part of what I circumscribe as Everett's *post-millennial novels of satire*. This novelistic corpus spans the years from 1999 until 2009 and comprises six novels and one novella. Among them are *Glyph* (1999), *erasure* (2001), the novella *Grand Canyon, Inc.* (2001), *American Desert* (2004), *A History of the African-American People (proposed) by Strom Thurmond as told to Percival Everett and James Kincaid* (2004), *The Water Cure* (2007) and *I Am Not Sidney Poitier* (2009). The three novels under study represent Everett's core-texts of racial satire: *Glyph*, *erasure* and *I Am Not Sidney Poitier*. In synthesizing these novels according to their *extensive and exclusive* engagement with race and its *contemporary* realities, I take my cue from Everett himself, who has stressed that "I don't consider any work singularly. I think I am writing an entire body of work, as diverse as its pieces are" (interview with Tissut et al, 83). Thus, the author describes all of his works "as fitting together, as an overall project. I'm writing one big novel." (interview with Anthony Stewart, 121).[27]

A distinct but heterogeneous group of texts, they allow us to both discuss contemporary racial concerns in profound detail and pinpoint (some of) Everett's aesthetic idiosyncrasies. The texts' respective choices of genre, form, and theme suggest a scale of possibilities ranging within a specific set of aesthetic criteria. What crucially characterizes Everett's shifting satiric engagement with race is the *programmatic* quality of its interventional and the *meta-discursive* quality of its experimental impetus. Thus, the author intervenes in the critical (*Glyph*), commercial (*erasure*) and social debates (*I Am Not Sidney Poitier*) on race and blackness, conceptualizing a self-help satire of critical uplift (*Glyph*), a parodic requiem for protest fiction (*erasure*) and a comedic origin narrative of a black billionaire (*I Am Not Sidney Poitier*). The central claim of this study is that these texts present race not a problem of identity but of language and, thus, of reading and, more specifically, reading expectations. In (varying) picaresque plotlines and cross-sectional scenes, Everett sends what I call centromarginal characters from initial situations of intellectual (Ralph, a mute but extremely smart infant critic; *Glyph*), cultural ("Monk," an experimental writer of revisionist Greek

myths; *erasure*) and economic privilege (Not Sidney Poitier, the not-/same-named Sidney Poitier look-alike; *I Am Not Sidney Poitier*) through absurd episodes of racial oppression. These contradictory, awkward and elusive black characters cannot be integrated into the dominant social and cultural frameworks. Thrown back into states of oppression, they mirror the structural mechanisms of racism, rendering visible its regressive force. They, thus, are permanently misrecognized and marginalized as not black (*Glyph*), not black enough (*erasure*) and both (*I Am Not Sidney Poitier*). Always critically reflecting back on the larger cultural frameworks of sense-making, these three texts thus provide dehabitualized readings of racial normativity, in which race remains an imperative yet insufficient coordinate.

Such a comprehensive and comparative approach to Everett's more recent satiric novels of race has not been pursued by scholars, so far. To stake a claim for the distinctiveness of my argument I assert that in order to fully grasp the critical gist of these texts, which operate with and against race, we have to factor out (several) culturally specific notions of black writing. These notions have frequently been placed onto Everett's texts, despite the resulting ambivalences. This pertains, above all, to concepts and conventions associated with black folklore, orality and subjectivity, as well as humor (cf. chapter 2). In order to both fill scholarly gaps and suggest new avenues of inquiry, I champion an inductive approach that aims to be acutely attuned to the historical, intertextual and theoretical emphases prompted by the texts *themselves*. With a distinct focus on poststructuralist theory, European, American and African American traditions of the novel, as well as reader-oriented approaches to literature, satire and the comic, the following research questions guide this critical inquiry: How can we situate Everett's counter-conventional project in the contemporary scene of African American literary practice? What is the critical contribution that his novelistic satires of race manage to make in contemporary racial discourse? What, in turn, is the specific function of these meta-discourses on language and literary signification that define Everett's race critique? And how, finally, does this emphasis on language relate to the readerly engagement that Everett's texts seek to promote? Addressing and answering these questions in the methodological segment, I am then going to provide a detailed discussion of the aesthetic agendas, historical contexts and cultural work of Everett's racial satires in the three text-analytic chapters.

2.1 Literary Politics: Race, Identity, and Representation

"The purpose of art," James Baldwin has argued, "is to lay bare the questions that have been hidden by the answers" (quoted in Bogart, 82). Questioning those answers that have ossified into conventions, encapsulated in categories of form and identity, such as "African American literature," and "the African American experience," is arguably the most consistent characteristic of Percival Everett's expansive literary project.

Throughout his career Everett has been fundamentally invested in complicating conventions by testing the limits of language, aesthetics, and thinking, more generally. His post-millennial subset of racial satire has taken his aesthetic agenda to the next level. It has introduced and further developed many themes and tropes that have become characteristic for Everett's more recent work. To this subset, I allocate *Glyph* (1999), *erasure* (2001), and *I Am Not Sidney Poitier* (2009; cf. introduction). This group of texts is part of a novelistic segment that explicitly engages with the contemporary American cultural scene in the wider post-Civil Rights context. In these texts, Everett investigates various American "-isms:" academic dogmatism, religious fundamentalism, militant nationalism, media sensationalism and – most importantly for this study – racism. If, as we have noted in the introductory chapter, racism is an issue of social and cultural proportions, Everett's texts zoom in on the latter to make a statement about the former. They complicate our received means of understanding the world in order to come to terms with the systemic injustices that are rooted in our habits and assumptions shaped by the overarching cultural frames of reference. His socially insightful and theoretically challenging texts, thus, combine both interventional and experimental traits. Like Everett's writing at large, they are situated within an area of overlap between two discursive domains: the political and the aesthetic. Working with and against their hegemonic claims – representation vs. experimentation – they operate on both the so-called high- and low-brow levels of literary art. They incorporate a broad spectrum of historical, (pop-) cultural, philosophical, literary and linguistic ideas and issues. They implement these literary, social and theoretical discourses in a classic novelistic setup that is based on a "hero"-centered story portraying a black character's struggle for social recognition. This struggle, essentially, highlights race not as a problem of identity but of our modes of reading (for) race, both in the sense of identifying the "other" and interpreting texts labeled as "black."

"The Lord of Allusion": Everett in the Field of Literary Blackness

Numerous critical studies attest to Everett's extensive engagement with the black tradition and its literary and cultural branches. Labeled as "Lord of Allusions" (Powell), Everett reworks historical topoi, literary tropes, themes, scripts, and cultural iconography, often in unexpected or unfamiliar fashion.[29] His counter-conventional stance renders established categories and frameworks of literary analysis fundamentally problematic. Thus, the two key concepts of African American cultural incorporation and disciplinary consolidation – the "canon" and "tradition" – can guide us only on our first steps towards a more nuanced understanding of Everett's authorial status and literary impetus.

The conservatory incentive inscribed into the concept of the canon betrays the hope that certain cultural forms of a community, which represent certain values, worldviews and other customs shared by the members of this community, stay the same regardless of their context of production. But which one of these forms count as worth preserving for the "best," i.e. most "representative" of a community's cultural identity, after all? It is the process of canonic selection that lies at the center of the problem. It reifies cultural values in the form of a literary-historical or pedagogical corpus (anthology, companion, encyclopedia, syllabus). It, thus, functions as a principle of power-delegation and preservation, to secure the field-specific currency of literary and critical capital in the institutionalization of African American literature, which has helped to raise novel critical questions as to the implementation of new hierarchies *within* the field. The "antinomies of value", Guillory argues, encroach upon concerns of curricular selection and literary anthologization, but also of literacy and educational access. The canon thus prompts the problem of America's "culture of reading," in general ("Canonical and Non-Canonical", 486; for an in-depth discussion of the institutional dynamics of canon formation see John Guillory. *Cultural Capital. The Problem of Literary Canon Formation*).

In the literary sense, the term tradition, in turn, specifies the transmission of themes, strategies, i.e. conventions by written means from generation to generation of authors and these elements considered collectively. What is problematic about the concept, then, is that despite its being rooted in the past, it extends well on into the future, suggesting a *trajectory* of literary innovation. The selection of texts, which are (deemed) worthy of preservation and allocation to distinct traditions, prospectively inscribes the standards of future selections. Thus, it imposes certain limits of aesthetic innovation, meaning the "deviation" from the projected pathway of tradition-conforming (and –confirming) literary practice. Two notions of tradition dominate black writing today. Houston A. Baker has famously defined the black
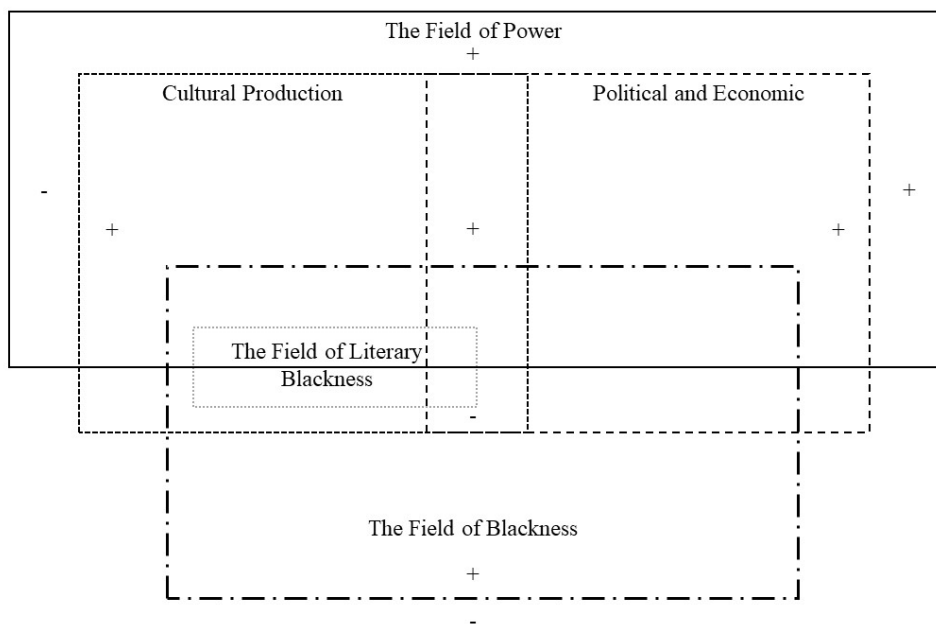
literary tradition as a matter of being rooted in the shared sociocultural milieu of what he calls the blues "matrix" (*Blues*, see discussion). Henry Louis Gates Jr. has famously defined this shared experiential framework of social origin (and expressive originality) as the root of the ritualized oral exchange of trickster tales subsumed under what he terms the traditional language of "Signifyin(g)." From this language, Gates argues, black writers' literary strategies of formal repetition and revision of their predecessors are derived (*The Signifying Monkey*, see discussion).

Rather than overemphasize these two freighted terms, the black canon and the black tradition, we should come to terms with Everett's work differently. If, in the problematic and productive sense of the term, Everett is part of the agglomeration of artists and works of literary art subsumed under the label of African American literature, we can conceive of this agglomeration as a *field* in Bourdieusian terms.

The French social theoretician Pierre Bourdieu considers any social relation, from the institutional spheres of society to situational interactions in everyday life, as a competition over symbolic legitimacy. Domination, for Bourdieu, is essentially a matter of distinction. The *field*, an important component of his methodological apparatus, is the crucial socio-symbolic site, in which agents claim and occupy *positions* that grant them influence in the struggle to acquire and (re-) define what Bourdieu calls the field-specific *capital*.[30] This capital provides the means to participate in and attain a dominant position in a field by transforming it into symbolic profits. In his seminal study *The Rules of Art*, the theoretician has developed a sociology of art by discussing the advent of literary modernism in the late 19th century as an inaugural moment of both the autonomization of the French literary field and its hierarchization "according to the degree of real or presumed dependence on the audience, on success, on the economy" (*Rules*, 218). In the literary field, a sub-sector of the field of cultural production, position-takings include literary works as well as other (political) statements and stances, with which an author can claim and occupy a position. Nothing, Bourdieu claims, divides these cultural and literary producers more clearly "than the relationship they maintain with worldly or commercial success (and the means of obtaining it)" (228).[31]

In mapping a network of positions within the field of literary blackness, I take my cue from Emirbayer and Desmond's conception of "the field of blackness" (*The Racial Order*, 90-99). Both sociological scholars argue that rather than "speak of a 'black community' or the 'black population,'" the field of blackness aids in defining "a space or field marked by a differential distribution of various types of assets, including racial capital, from which African Americans

– and some nonblacks too – derive their racial identities" (90). This *"black capital*, black authenticity, how black (in the symbolic sense) one is" defines the status of its "differently positioned entities: political figures, entertainers, intellectuals, artists, sports, foods, and geographic places" (94). As "a relatively autonomous social microcosm, [where] blackness possesses a relatively autonomous logic, one distinct from classed, gendered, or other societal logics" (93), foreign field effects (policies, market forces) continue to shape this field's internal structure. I have added the field of literary blackness to Emirbayer's and Desmond's graphic arrangement:

Their central claim is that the political-economic standing of agents in the field of blackness is anti-proportional to their blackness. The scholars claim that

> [w]hereas one easily can exchange economic for political capital (e.g., fund a senate campaign) or for cultural capital (e.g., finance a college education), or in other ways convert one to the other, one cannot as easily exchange black capital for political, economic, or cultural capital. In fact, it seems that the more politically, economically, or culturally powerful one is, the less 'black' one becomes."

Since the field of cultural production has its own field-internal logic, however, "'[s]elling out' or 'acting white'" can have the effect of dispossessing oneself of one's black capital. There is commercially successful black "authenticity," and then there is blackness deriving its ("street"-) credibility from the subversion of hegemonic models of what blackness should look, sound or read like.

For our discussion of the American field of literary blackness, we can roughly divide this field, in accordance with Bourdieu's emphasis on the economic exigencies of artistic

production, into a commercial and an avant-gardist sector. The boundaries of these sectors, significantly, are shifting and transparent. Bourdieu's notion of the field allows us to think the relationship between Everett and other black writers, between the dominant and dominated players of the field in *interrelational* terms. Thus, we can conceive of blackness as a symbolic currency defining the exchange-value of certain aesthetic choices. Among these are genre (the memoir, the epistolary form, the historical novel), poetics (social realism), and language (the black vernacular), as well as theme (slavery), setting (the rural South or urban North) or character-models (the trickster):

Commercial Value +

the canonical quadrant

Sapphire · urban fiction
Toni Morrison · neo-slave narrative
Colson Whitehead · social realism · Slavery · Blue · Spirituals
autobiography · poverty · The Urban North
Alice Walker · the confessional · The Rural South
the epistolary form · The Vernacular
Paul Laurence Dunbar · Frederick Douglass · Signifyin(g) · the trickster
Richard Wright
the novel · Langston Hughes
Ralph Ellison
Sidney Poitier · Zora Neale Hurston · James Baldwin · African myths
The black middle-class · Malcolm · spectrality
Baseball · Booker T. Washington · Jazz · X · black mysticism · poetry · Amiri Baraka
The Western · W.E.B. Du Bois · modernism · Hoodoo · The Black Arts Movement
James Weldon Johnson
The Harlem Renaissance · Chester Himes
John Edgar Wideman · Ishmael Reed

Hip Hop
Afro
The N-Word
Blaxploitation

Black Capital − ———————————————————————————————— Black Capital +

postmodernism

formal experimentation

Danzy Senna · George Schuyler
Percival Everett · Paul Beatty
(*erasure*) · Trey Ellis · Bob Kaufman
Fran Ross · Cecil Brown
Mat Johnson · Wallace Thurman

Strom Thurmond · Native American mysticism
ecocriticism
Wyoming · ranching
fly-fishing · Percival Everett · painting
Greek Mythology · (pre-*erasure*) · obstetrics
theory

Commercial Value −

Including the diachronic aspects of Everett's self-positioning (note the "pre-*erasure*"- and "*erasure*"-markers) I sought to visualize two things. Firstly, it is quite unnecessary if not misleading to think of Everett as in-/outside of the black canon or not/part of the black tradition. Given the particular constellation of his aesthetic choices, the author has been all of these things (with or without being referenced in the respective anthologies). Thus, secondly, we can think of Everett's novels as strategic interventions that individually appropriate and reinscribe certain traditions, tropes and conventions. Everett, in this sense, pursues a strategy considered central to black cultural practices, for he draws on a "stock of expressive resources," whose "modification" Houston A. Baker has defined as integral to black literary self-marketization (*Blues*, 196-197). This, thirdly, helps us to grasp satire's crucial function for Everett not only to intervene in racial discourse and investigate the cultural figurations of race, but also to engage in a critical conversation with the black tradition(s).

What Is (Not) African American Literature? Everett's Ellisonian Intellectualism

Thus, Everett's writing is "far blacker" than any of us might fully realize in another regard (cf. chapter 3.2 on *erasure*). Conceived as a problem of representational rights, his authorial reception is indicative of the crucial challenge for black writers to claim their own means of expression in a cultural context where *both* commercial *and* canonical models of black authorship regulate the aesthetic value and potential of texts labeled as "African American." Tellingly, it is the paragon of literary modernism and the controversial advocate of a cross-cultural aesthetics – Ralph Ellison – who has been crucial for Everett to "accept the fact" that he stands in a tradition (interview with Anthony Stewart, 131).

Significantly, Everett relates this literary alliance with Ellison to the latter's seminal novel *Invisible Man* (1953), stressing, however, that

> it could have been possibly another book. It could have been *Tristram Shandy*. There are different references to *Tristram Shandy* in my work and it's no less important to me. It's just that those are the ones that are easy to see and the ones that are more fun. Maybe it's postmodern. I don't know what postmodern means. If anything, I'm a modernist. Not that I want to be, but in the new work, in the novel that I've just finished, that's coming out in August [*The Water Cure*], nearly every reference in the book is either to Lewis Carroll or James Joyce. I'd be hard pressed to find Ellison in there. I'm trying to think. But of course, he is, because I can't escape that." (131)

Ellison provides not only an important point of reference but also of entry into a comprehensive and inclusive discussion of Everett's multifaceted work, which combines black American, Anglo-American and Euro-American scripts, forms and traditions (see discussion). Given his Ellisonian agenda, as it were, Everett can be situated in the avant-gardist sector of black literary intellectualism that Jablon terms the "school of Ralph Ellison" (*Black Metafiction*, 16, cf. Mitchell and Vander, 7). Avant-gardism, to be clear, not only implies a normative center but also a literary-historical telos (see subsequent chapter).[32] By framing Everett's project accordingly, we aim to account for the ways in which his texts go beyond the limitations of cultural affiliation and aesthetic innovation that the canonical narratives of *survival* and *surpassing* prescribe.

Henry Louis Gates himself has noted "the odd role that originality has assumed in black letters" (*The Signifying Monkey*, 123). Marveling at the authorial strategies of black writers, Gates argues that they have extensively drawn on their predecessors "as if the sheer process of the analysis [of the tradition] can clear a narrative space for the next generation of writers" (234). Tradition, in this sense, boils down to the re-articulation of prior authors' narrative techniques in the struggle for authorial self-assertion. Through this *narrative of surpassing*, the nonconformist nature of innovation is reframed as an act of surpassing the aesthetic achievements of one's forebears by lending their authority for the sake of artistic

advancement. What should be a matter of artistic freedom thus seems to be reduced to a concern of canonical control. The "responsibility to write from within the race," Kenneth Warren claims, paradoxically perpetuates the very principles of literary hierarchization it seeks to challenge (*So Black and Blue*, 17). Who, after all, gets to claim (which part of) the tradition? In other words, what are the stakes for an author to institutionalize herself in a specific sub-field of African American literature? Kwame Anthony Appiah reminds us that this is an inevitably market-related problem: "To sell oneself and one's products as art in the marketplace, it is important, above all, to clear a space in which one is distinguished from other producers and products – and one does this by the construction and the marking of differences" ("The Postcolonial and the Postmodern," 143).

As his texts highlight the homogenizing effects of both canonical models and societal ascriptions of black authorship, Everett's texts depart from the single most dominant literary school, namely the Wrightian school of *protest* (Jablon, 16). This approach prescribes race as a mandatory characterial and culture-geographical specifier, and social realism as the aesthetic mode of "telling [of] the truth about black experience" in order to promote social change (Dubey *Signs and Cities*, 44; see discussion of "realism"). The term itself is tremendously freighted, prompting to the field-defining debate over the political purpose of literary art. This debate remains divided between the two argumentative poles, which W.E.B. du Bois and James Baldwin famously articulated: propagandistic "shamelessness" as a (necessary and temporary) compromise in the struggle for racial equality ("Criteria for Negro Art," 103) and protest as an ultimately "comforting aspect of the American scene" ("Everybody's Protest Novel," 19; for a detailed discussion of the protest genre's iconic proponent Richard Wright, see chapter 3.2 on *erasure*). Jablon claims that in contrast to the Wrightian school of "protest," which was embraced by the Black National Arts movement to promote their culturally nationalist ideal of poetic militancy and independency, the form-oriented works of the Ellison-branch of African American literature "provide a critique of a society through the rejection of these conventions [of mimetic realism], works that question that ideology underlying realism through self-study – works wherein the political content is articulated use of form." (*Black Metafiction*, 17).

Today, in the historical aftermath of the post-Civil Rights paradigm and the cultural continuum of postmodernism, the struggle to break out of what Dubey defines as the representational paradigm of protest remains widely discussed in terms of form (and genre), often linked to the exhaustion of (social) realism (Weixlmann 1983; Jablon; Dubey 2001, 2015; Larkin, Saldivar 2011, 2013; Spaulding, Harper, Greenwald Smith, Román).[33] Everett

can be situated in a literary lineage of black writers, whose impulse "to find and utilize new and different forms" defines their attempt at updating their socio-literary criticism of race in light of increasingly complex racial realities, Joe Weixlmann has argued ("The Changing Shape(s) of the Afro-American Novel," 113). Everett's satiric debut, thus, follows the peak phase of African American literary institutionalization and ties in with the expansion and diversification of his field. He is a member of a younger generation of black writers of satire and humor, including Harryette Mullen (*1953), Darius James (*1954), Trey Ellis (*1962), Paul Beatty (*1962), Suzan Lori-Parks (*1963), Colson Whitehead (*1969), Mat Johnson (*1970), Touré (*1971) and Danzy Senna (*1970).[34] This cohort of literary artists follows in the footsteps of authors of humoristic and satiric fiction such as George S. Schuyler, Wallace Thurman, Cecil Brown, Chester Himes, Bob Kaufmann, Fran Ross, Charles Johnson and Ishmael Reed.

The expansion of the black literary field has been accompanied and fostered by the rise of satire and an increasing scholarly interest in the same.[35] Satire is *the* aesthetic mode most prominently known for its criticism of conventions, traditions, and institutions. Its renaissance in black letters, according to Derek C. Maus, is owed to an increasing normalization of critical self-interrogation (*Post-Soul Satire*, xv; cf. Murray, 9). It can be considered as sign of progress being made, but also as a virtue made of necessity. Not only has satire served to reconsider the sociocultural shifts of the post-Civil Rights era. It has also helped to re-consolidate African American literary studies. Satire, thus, seems to have been a crucial factor in this recent disciplinary re-investigation. This is suggested not only by the significant rise of scholarly attention given to it, in general. Through his specific focus on satire, the preeminent African American satire-scholar Darryl Dickson-Carr has used the satiric angle as a theoretical means of redefining established fields, such as African American modernity and the Harlem Renaissance (*Spoofing the Modern*).

Among the most provocative instances of this institutional (self-) critique has been Kenneth Warren's "What Was African American Literature" (2011). In his polemic essay, Warren twists his rhetorical knife in the wound of African American literature's presupposed political justification as a literature (15). The African American scholar thus provocatively predates its conclusion as a *collective* cultural endeavor to the end of Jim Crow, thus fundamentally questioning persistent patterns of race critique. However, Warren champions a conception of historicity that can be conceived as problematic, too. He relegates African American Literature's defining incentive to a single supreme court decision, namely the landmark case of *Plessy vs. Ferguson*, which (re-) sanctioned the institutionalization of the "separate but

equal" doctrine in the U.S. social system of segregation. Warren thus implicitly homogenizes the field of black literary writing, which has always been shaped by canonic and counter-canonic currents and projects. Tellingly, he bases his institutional critique on such an avant-garde project: George S. Schuyler's *satiric* novel *Black No More* (1929). Thus, Warren draws on *the* consensually considered "first full-length satire by an African American" (*Oxford Companion to African American Literature* 1979, 79-80). George S. Schuyler's novel *Black No More* (1931), a dystopian fantasy of a race-free society, debunks a color-obsessed culture, in which race functions as a camouflage for a class-based hegemony (cf. his polemic essay "Negro Art Hokum," 1926). Of course, the name Schuyler itself bears a distinct connotation. As a sort of "enfant terrible" of the black canon, Schuyler has sparked controversy as a young radical and converted conservative. If, as Glenda R. Carpio suggests, Warren does not seek to re-periodize African American literature but to highlight its exclusions,[36] Warren's alliance with Schuyler reveals the peculiar dialectics of institutional criticism. Such criticism cannot function without mobilizing the models it seeks to undermine. It is thus bound to reemphasize if not reaffirm them, in the end. The question, then, is how to complicate this process of reaffirmation. Everett's fiction manages to make a powerful statement about the tacit limits that established models of black writing impose on the aesthetic means of innovation and intervention by dwelling in the shifting grey areas of canonic and counter-canonic concepts.

The Vernacular Disconnect: Black Folklore, Orality and Subjectivity

What holds true for Everett's entire novelistic corpus is of signal import for the three novels under study: they cannot be considered as a continuation of institutionalized black literary practices. They strategically deprioritize or discard those aesthetic precepts central to canonical conceptions of black expressive *particularity*. Thus, Everett's racial satires are disconnected from the prime models of black oral culture: folklore, orality and subjectivity, on the basis of which African American literature has been institutionalized.

The author's "vernacular disconnect" has generational, sociocultural and aesthetic aspects. As a member of a younger generation of black cultural producers, Everett has been able to depart from the literary-theoretical consensus, which African American scholars such as Henry Louis Gates, Jr., first had to achieve.[37] Today, this scholarly consensus about the social function and institutional stakes of literary and critical practices, secondly, appears more and more questionable in light of increasingly complex racial realities. Thirdly, Everett's poststructural theory-informed texts put particular emphasis on the *sign*, similar to the canonic projects of Gates, Jr. et al. This they do, however, not for the purpose of cultural

incorporation. Rather, they provide the means for reading beyond "conventionalized signifiers" of blackness, as Stewart stresses ("Theoretical Blackness," 218, see discussion). This specifically relates to that conventional account of black literary practice that has taken a dominant position in the field: Signifyin(g).

Introduced in his seminal study *The Signifying Monkey*, Gates Jr.'s neologism synthesizes a transhistorical, i.e. genealogically grounded notion of black expressive practice that the scholar posits as intrinsic to the black tradition. As a literary-historical and rhetorical principle, Signifyin(g) defines the black tradition of oral storytelling as such, its themes of counter-hegemonic criticism and the expressive strategies of revisiting and revising this tradition. As a double-voiced discourse defined by "satire, parody, irony, magic, indeterminacy, open-endedness," (cf. 7), the scholar retraces this "trope of tropes" from the tales of the Signifying Monkey to contemporary black musical and literary art.[38]

Negotiating black culture with poststructuralist theory, Gates' pursues an impressive anthological and critical task: to name and retain the black literary canon and legitimize African American literature as an academic discipline.[39] Not only has Gates, like Baker, thus provided a thoroughly historicized discussion of black literature by defining the "literariness" of black literature as rooted in the specifics of a certain figurative language-use "that are shared, repeated, critiqued, and revised" (*Signifying Monkey*, 132). Gates' significant contribution has been to posit irony as a structural idiosyncrasy of black culture to subvert the "Western racial discourse that has marked blacks as illiterate, unreasoning, and absent" (Johns, 87). Finally, and more generally, Gates and Baker have crucially promoted the black vernacular and thus the black "voice."

Today, the centrality of orality in African American literary discourse informs the ideal of "finding one's voice" in order to "give a voice" to one's racial community. The institutionalization of this ideal has been further fostered as an integral aspect of programmed writing, in the wider context of which Everett as a taught and teaching writer can be situated (cf. Mark McGurl's *The Program Era*). In postwar ethnic writing, the "voice," as McGurl argues, has often taken on the meaning of the "housing of the storytelling imagination not only in the human body, but in a racialized and gendered body with 'bloodlines' or 'roots' in an organic community or culture with its own repository of storytelling tradition" (236). In African American literary discourse, the black voice has been established as the poetic synthesis of corporeal, cultural and historical aspects that relate to slavery, the genealogical uprooting, physical abuse and systematic censorship of blacks, as well as the cultural legacy of oral storytelling and the literary project of ontological self-proclamation (cf. the "slave

narrative" and its postmodern adaptations). While Everett's texts' aesthetic setup may resemble the "sophisticatedly self-deconstructive" project of Ishmael Reed, for instance, who is Gates' key reference in his "valorization of the African American trickster voice" (McGurl, 233), they are not anchored to the vernacular in the same way, because they lack its anthropological kernel and culture-mythological grounding. The black vernacular, hence, either does not surface at all (*Glyph*) or as markedly parodic hyper-stereotypical slang (*erasure*) used by all other characters except the protagonists themselves. To thus risk an overstatement, Everett simply does not "signify" in the Gatesian sense. If anything, he satirizes Signifyin(g) (see *erasure*).

Severed from the folkloristic roots of black culture, the three texts under study incorporate neither mythical, mystical nor musical forms as expressive principles of racial representation *without* satirically reframing them.[40] Neither does slavery figure as central theme, for that matter.[41] Rather, his texts ridicule this monolithic notion of "folk" or "the black folk," as in the black American population or black community, and the totality of traditions forming from the cultural practices by black artists. They break with the assumption that folk culture should be considered a *single* source-material of cultural identity, on which, according to Martin Japtok and Jerry Rafiki Jenkins, "everyone from Du Bois to Hughes agreed" (19). In this sense, Everett clearly sides with Ralph Ellison, who has famously promoted folklore as a *foundational* means of creativity, warning against viewing it "narrowly as something exotic, folksy, or 'low-down' […rather than] recognize it as an important segment of the larger American experience" ("The Art of Fiction," 172). The task at hand, Ellison argues accordingly, is to translate its insights "into wider, more precise vocabularies" ("Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke," 59). This more inclusive view on black experiences includes both concerns of oppression and privilege. It thus resonates with Zora Neale Hurston's famous criticism of the market-driven disregard for stories about upper-class blacks ("What White Publishers Won't Print," cf. Japtok and Jenkins, 25).

Finally, and most importantly, Everett's black protagonists complicate ontological notions of subjectivity and, thus, autobiographical notions of narration. As socially awkward, intellectually gifted and culturally distinguished profiteers of the Civil Rights legislation, they seem inevitably displaced from the sociocultural milieu of black expressive particularity, which Houston A. Baker describes as the "blues matrix" (*Blues*, 3). In *Blues, Ideology and Afro-American Literature* (1984), the scholar draws on African American folklore and Western (poststructuralist) theory to conceptualize the Blues as the "social grounding – the basic subtext, as it were – that necessarily informs any genuinely Afro-American narrative

text" (38). In so doing, he draws on its symbolic and historic implications of repetition, improvisation and translation (of ineffable injustices experienced in slavery and segregation) at the "junction" of regional (Southern hobo cult), cultural (African, African American and American traditions) and commercial intersections (dispossession and commoditization).

Everett's protagonists lack this socio-ontological grounding. They are marked as fictions by their intellectual capabilities (consider Ralph Townsend's IQ of 475), cultural and economic capital (consider Thelonious "Monk" Ellison's exceptional educational portfolio and Not Sidney Poitier's financial means) and, most significantly, their burdensome and confusing names (cf. Thelonious Monk Ellison, Not Sidney Poitier). Socially and ontologically precarious, all of Everett's protagonists are "I"-narrators that cannot be related to an intentional entity in the conventional sense. An autodiegetic narrator is often tacitly reduced to a stand-in for either an unknown real-world entity or the author herself, who provides an indirect and ornamented version of her intentional self. The consensual social function of the "I"-narrative in black literary discourse has been convincingly questioned Richard Yarborough. Could black writers, he asks, even afford

> to create a fictionalized 'self'? For many authors, the self-justifying (and often therefore race-justifying) urge must have been so powerful that the very thought of using the first-person point of view (a mode of expression that blacks literally had to fight for) to create an openly fabricated voice must have appeared so irrelevant as to seem downright perverse – if it occurred to them at all. Thus, it is hardly surprising that white authors produced fictionalized first-person "black" narratives before their Afro-American counterparts attempted to do so."
> ("The First-Person in Afro-American Fiction," 111)

Everett's fictionalized "I"-narrators represent grammatical particles, which cannot be constituted materialiter, at least not without foregrounding the language-based processes of subject-formation and -representation crystallizing in the "I." Hence, these characters serve as autodiegetic avatars, in other words, as stand-ins *not* for an autobiographical subject, but rather for a certain marginalized perspective on or vision of the racial landscape in the United States.

Everett, hence, focuses on the social locales and cultural contexts that shape subjectivity, in the first place. Tellingly, his key concern is the "ever-cropping-up problem of naming" (cf. *The Water Cure*, 115), the nominal constitution of the subject, which epitomizes language's referential function as a means to conceptually organize the experienced world. It is from this angle that Everett taps into the distinct historical subtext of naming in the realm of black culture. Naming, thus, evokes the nominal erasure inherent in enslavement, re-inscribed in what Kimberly W. Benston has called the "semantic lineage stretching from ['N-word'] to

'Colored' to 'Negro' to 'black'/'African-American'" ("I Yam What I Am," 152). The re-possessive, deconstructionist act of Malcolm X's self-re-naming, by way of which the activist both reasserted and subverted his ancestral slave-signified *Little* in the "X," is representative "[f]or the Afro-American," Benston concludes, and his "self-creation and reformation of a fragmented familial past [that] are endlessly interwoven: naming is inevitably genealogical revisionism. All of Afro-American literature may be seen as one vast genealogical poem that attempts to restore continuity to the ruptures or discontinuities imposed by the history of black presence in America" (ibid). In naming, Ellison contends, the "manipulative" and "magical" power of language manifests, both as a linguistic principle of individuation and appropriation: to be named "after" someone as a form of genealogical grounding ("Hidden Name and Complex Fate").

"I," the "Other": Everett's Centromarginal Characters

Everett's protagonists are fictions, named after famous black people, imposed with racial ascriptions and assumptions by the dominant society, with which they constantly and quite unintentionally come into conflict. Like Ralph and Monk, Not Sidney Poitier echoes Huck Finn, the savvy tyke, who passes through episodic stages of a satirized society during his journey along the Mississippi river; Don Quixote, the caricaturesque chivalric nobleman who fights a losing battle against the figments of his own imagination; Ishmael, the young sailors and narrator-companions of captain Ahab partaking in the allegorical hunt of the whale; but also Tristram Shandy, the programmatically unreliable and digressive narrator, who has helped to redefine the limits of novelistic fiction; and, finally and most importantly, the "Invisible Man," an outsider mistaken for Rhinehart, who as a "gambler" and con-man claims a spot in the white mainstream society at the cost of his black identity.

Everett's protagonists thus show facets of what M.D. Fletcher describes as satire's "traditions of relevance": "the railer; the fool; the clown; the classical comic archetypes of the alazon, eiron, buffoon and agroikos; and the picaro, Quixote and naïf" (7). Generally speaking, Everett's protagonists are situated at the intersection of two interdependent traditions of tricksterism: those of (post-) colonial discourses of difference (Indian and African American folklore/mythology) and Euro-American modern novelistic storytelling.[42] The former features themes of hierarchy-subversion and cultural survival, with a paramount emphasis on language as a means of ironic double-discourse manipulated by the debased racialized subject to outwit and indirectly get back at his master. As a "demigod, a mythic figure, a genre, a symbolic embodiment of human imagination, or a postmodernist hermeneut," the trickster is pervasive

across historical and geographical spheres of both folkloristic and high-literary texts (Hynes, 216). From Hermes to Esu-Elegbara and his New World "nephew," the Signifying Monkey (cf. Gates 1988), the trickster appears in narrativized myths of origin and creation that portray a holistic cosmological order. Frequently endowed with animalistic features and supra-human capabilities, he mediates between the worldly and godly spheres in order to restore spiritual and communal integrity. As such he is traditionally associated with disorder and many-voicedness and acts, as Paul Radin contends, as "creator and destroyer, giver and negator, he who dupes others and who is always duped himself." (ix). Charged with subversive potential, this transgressive nature makes the trickster a figure of "change, contradiction, adaptation, surprise" (Ammons et al, xii). The trickster's dual capability of social subversion and cultural transformation, innovation and self-representation has been seminally stressed by Gerald Vizenor, who describes him as a "comic holotrope", a figure of unification and de/stabilization thriving on a chaotic plurality of consciousness and meaning ("Trickster Discourse, 285). The processual, communal and comically liberatory qualities of the trickster suggest a distinct didactic incentive, of ethical instruction by way of a temporary suspension of social normativity. In order to realize this didactic potential, the trickster may assume various roles in a satiric context, acting as a veritable shapeshifter.

The picaro (etym. probably from Span. *picar*: to prick, hack, stab) is often synonymously used with the augmented form picaroon (second meaning: pirate, corsair) and, generally, refers to a rogue, prankster, and rascal (German and Jewish *Schelm*), who as a vagabonding outcast, usually from a precarious social milieu, passes through adventurous levels of a corrupt and hostile society by way of morally dubious and comically witty means. Usually presented in an autobiographical, episodic narrative, whose plot is actuated by a conflictual initiation-experience, the picaresque tale provides a satirically distorted image of society. This study draws on the notion of the picaro as a literarily "anointed" trickster and conceives this figure as a modern literary archetype and picarism as a principle of structuration.[43] Thus, as a "parody of the heroes in the romances" (Ardila, 17; cf. *Don Quixote*), the picaro epitomizes a shift in generic and social regards. On the margin of social change and literary innovation, it emblematizes novel liberties of literary self-criticism (and self-consciousness) and a thematic reorientation owed to the modern context of the novel's rise: "upward mobility and the formation of a middle class" (11).

With the "distinctive feature that is as well a privilege – the right to be 'other' in this world" (Bakhtin *Dialogic Imagination*, 159), the picaro is an "outsider or misfit, a bastard or a boy too intelligent for his station in life, who can find no regular occupation or fixed place in a

stratified society" (Hodgart, 218). His outsiderdom is not a permanent condition but the prerequisite of eventual social re-integration. A hybrid form of "journeying," a movement in mind and matter (i.e. a subjective change corresponding with a horizontal and/or vertical social progression), defines the "true" picaro, Shaw argues accordingly (9). This imperative of mobility shapes the story's composition "not of one protracted incident but of many differing incidents," Shaw stresses (10). In the picaresque pattern of journeying, the potentially disorienting and disruptive state of societal chaos represents the point of departure for (re-imagining) a new (and potentially more just) social order. The picaro, thus, provides satiric scenarios of ideological diagnosis and social re-integration centered on outlaws passing through various societal levels of corruption. Arguing against the scholarly overemphasis on the former, this study takes Everett's satires' up on their thematically evident and intertextually anchored inscription into the latter tradition. Signaled by iconic references of novels such as those mentioned above, the texts under study crucially concentrate on concerns of social *mobility* and *re-integration*. Writing in a picaresque manner, in social terms, means to be invested in teasing out the *structural* dynamics of a societal conflict and the ideological mechanisms undergirding the tacit obfuscation of its *systematicity*. Running up against the structural borders of race, Ralph, Monk and Not Sidney Poitier, significantly, bring out the worst in their fictional communities. Disconnected both from their racial community and the social mainstream, they represent "cultural orphans," who pass through case studies of racial (mis-) recognition. Their naiveté, showing in their "curiosity" for conflict causes cyclic offenses or trespasses of the symbolic demarcations of race. Aesthetically speaking, the detours and impasses, in which picaros such as Everett's protagonists (might) wind up, seem to invite or mirror the digressions, asides, and authorial self-insertions that various canonic writers have realized.[44]

True, Monk and his fellow narrators partake in comical conflicts of language-centered subversion, in which pre-established power-hierarchies are destabilized. More often than not, they wind up as the victims of their own subversive energies. There are several aspects, thus, which severely complicate the reading of Everett's satiric protagonists as tricksters (in the culture-mythological sense). For one, Ralph Townsend, Thelonious "Monk" Ellison and Not Sidney Poitier are all disconnected from the pivotal principle of tricksterism: the vernacular. Ralph refuses to speak; Monk detests the black vernacular as sign of his in-group marginalization and commercial failure; Not Sidney Poitier grows up in a gilded cage of white privilege. The practices and beliefs that lend Everett's protagonists significance in their respective (fictional) social settings are decoupled from these characters' living situations,

socioeconomic status and cultural background. Secondly, their socioeconomic status as members of the (upper) middle class conflicts with the trickster's (and picaro's) traditional origin in the lower strata of society and his function as a renegade of the underprivileged. Everett's protagonists, in essence, are *centromarginal characters*.[45] What I seek to highlight with this label is not an identity or positionality but a certain structural tendency. Ralph, Monk and Not Sidney Poitier initially dwell in a social sphere of intellectual (Ralph), cultural (Monk) and economic (Not Sidney Poitier) privilege, being inserted into a sequentially shifting state of permanent marginalization. In other words, Everett's protagonists serve to highlight the *regressive* force of racism, as they are being *pulled* back from what *seems* like the center or mainstream of a "color-blind" society towards a marginal position of academically (Ralph) and commercially (Monk) exploited and socially marginalized (Not Sidney Poitier) difference. Ironically, they have a particularly disruptive effect when remaining inactive or silent, aiding the overarching system of racial debasement to reduce *itself* to absurdity. In so doing, they perform a specific mirroring-function (Hynes 208, cf. Klapp, 30). They render visible the structural aspects of their misrecognition as not black (Ralph), not black enough (Monk) and both (Not Sidney Poitier).

Be it with regard to the black traditions of tricksterism, protest, (neo-) slave and passing narratives, or naming, Everett's repurposing of these principles can hardly be conceived in terms of the development of a culturally specific conception of literary production and cultural contribution. If there is something about Everett's writing that renders him – in the problematic sense of the term – "representative" for past and present concerns of *black* identity and authorship, it is the author's insistence on self-representation in a cultural context of structural marginalization. It is a peculiarity of the present-day cultural condition that this artistic marginalization is fostered by both commercial and canonic models. These models, thus, are incorporated into Everett's racial satires as conventions *under erasure* (see discussion). In this sense, his protagonists are the focal points of what his texts aesthetically perform: the erasure of identity in the socio-cultural process of racialization.

Myths and Signifiers: The Cultural Language of Race

This process of racial identification boils down to the meaning-making dynamics of what Stuart Hall defines as the cultural "language of race" ("The Floating Signifier"). Hall describes this "language" as subsuming signifiers that refer to "the system and concepts of a classification of a culture to its making meaning practices." These signifiers gain "their meaning not because of what they contain in their essence but in the shifting relations of

difference which they establish with other concepts and ideas in a signifying field" ("Race: The Floating Signifier"). Racialized subjects, thus, are embedded in a field of racial signification, in which identities are constructed in relation to others by way of a (momentary) fixation of traits and features ascribed to these subjects. This process relies on the social and cultural markers of race. These markers can function as communicative components of what Roland Barthes has famously theorized as *mythical speech* (*Mythologies*).

One of the key concepts in his project, the French semiotician has drawn on the term's connotation, which is rooted in the word "mythos" (gr.), which terms folk tales with supernatural themes and those widely shared fictional stories that seem to have a timeless appeal or truth. In so doing, Barthes posits mythical speech as the ideological mechanism by way of which historically specific ideas and narratives are naturalized as timeless and universal. This ideological message, the mythical signified (what Barthes calls "concept"), depends on the retransformation of these first-order signs (in the Saussurean sense of the sign-signifier-signified triad) into mythical signifiers (what Barthes calls "form"). This instrumentalization makes for the peculiar ambiguity of myth in making us understand something and concomitantly imposing this understanding on us (115). Significantly, Barthes stresses that myth "prefers to work with poor, incomplete images, where the meaning is already relieved of its fat, and ready for a signification, such as caricatures, pastiches, symbols, etc." (125). We can think of Sidney Poitier, for instance, as a particularly powerful image of blackness precisely because of its cinematically homogenized core of non-threatening black masculinity (see chapter 3.3). In the image of the black French soldier saluting the tricoleur (*Mythologies*), Barthes identifies a multi-addressed message of patriotic pride predicated on the semiological relation between, blackness, militariness and Frenchness. This visual myth signifies black otherness militarily assimilated into the French national identity. In retracing the logical and ideological mechanisms undergirding the process of racial identification, Everett racial satires evoke and revoke essentialist notions of racial identity. They create palimpsestic and unstable representations of the black "I" that rather than relate to a consistent notion of selfhood and cultural identity push the assumptions and stereotypes that inform such a reductive view of identity to the foreground. In so doing, they work with *and* against racial categories of social classification and cultural representation, in which the logical regime of *binarity* is consolidated.

Part and parcel of a long-standing Western thought-tradition, binarity originated with the preeminent Greek philosophers' attempts at making sense of the ontological and epistemological foundations of being. Its logical regime was further solidified in the

Enlightenment idealization of reason and the binaries it helped to implement in the (white European) subject's self-definition in contrast to its "other" and the world at large.

At the core of this thought-tradition, which Jacques Derrida has termed the "metaphysics of presence," the French pioneer of Deconstruction identifies "logocentrism." This doctrine describes the "exigent, powerful, systematic, and irrepressible desire for [...a transcendental] signified" (*Of Grammatology*, 49). This transcendental signified is equated with "an order of meaning – thought, truth, reason, logic, the Word – conceived as existing in itself, as foundation" (Culler *Deconstruction*, 57).[46] It has helped to divide the Western world in terms of the presence *or* absence of this signified or *logos* (etym. *Greek* "word," "speech," "discourse," "reason" which is conceived an ordering principle of knowledge since Heraclitus). The "West" or the "Western world", of course, is not an empirical reality but a mental structure that continues to govern the ways in which we divide the world along the geo-political lines of nationality, but also along the social lines of class and race. This bifurcated vision of the world is rooted in the logocentric "idea that, before everything else (history, knowledge, consciousness, etc.), there is presence [...] the Logos, the undeconstructible origin of the meaning of being, the rationality of thought, the absolute interiority of truth [..., while such] things as history and knowledge, then, exist only [...] for getting back at the Logos" (Niall, 71). Prescribing the epistemological and philosophical limits of various knowledge-systems, logocentrism, thus, continues to foster the axiomatic persistence of binarity. Instilled with a deep-seated skepticism towards categorical inconsistency, we tend to perceive that which we cannot integrate into an "either/or"-model, as odd or even threatening (cf. the law of the excluded middle; lat. *tertium non datur*). Breaking with this pattern by working towards the inside from the conceptual margins of binaries remains the crucial yet inherently incomplete task of deconstructionist thinking championed by Derrida.

The Deconstruction of Difference: Writing Race under Erasure

Everett's texts strategically take up this task. They deconstruct categories – identities, genres, traditions, disciplines – by *erasing* them. The "X" represents this strategy of writing *sous rature* ("under erasure") that Derrida developed for his comprehensive critique of metaphysics. It stands for the eradication of *and* the zooming in on "[i]naccurate yet necessary" concepts (Spivak, xiv). These are thus "shaken and dislodged," and – significantly – retained in order for their ideological core to be scrutinized (Norris, 69). Through this process of writing under erasure, of crossing concepts and categories out while keeping them

legible, we "come to such unfamiliar conclusions," as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak concludes, "that our very language is twisted and bent even as it guides us" (Spivak, xiv).

Among the various unfamiliar conclusions, at which Everett inspires us to arrive, is not only the insight that race is an arbitrary, because politically and culturally *constructed* category (Stuart Hall, "New Ethnicities, 443), which bears a remarkable social force. What is more, scrutinizing race is a reflexive challenge, for those categories, which we operationalize in order to come to terms with racial realities, are always already shaped by these very realities. How, then, can the discursive conditions of dominance, especially those concerning race, serve as the grounds of intervention? This question has been addressed most prominently by Homi K. Bhabha. In *Locations of Culture*, the postcolonial scholar argues that it is in the "cultural interstices," meaning "the overlap and displacement of domains of difference – [where] the intersubjective and collective experiences of *nationness*, community interest, or cultural value" can be *re*-negotiated (2). The scholar defines the creation of these representational "spaces of intervention" as a complex and continual performative process of cultural hybridization that breaks with Western binary normativity (12). "[I]t is by living on the borderline of history and language, on the limits of race and gender," Bhabha concludes, "that we are in a position to translate the difference between them into a kind of solidarity" (170).[47] This notion of (border-) transgression as a culture-constituting act relates to the legacy of binarity and the bipolar structures of thinking championed by metaphysical theory, which continue to shape the ways in which we recognize and systematize the perceived world.

Bhabha's most remarkable and problematic proposition is precisely this political notion of interstitiality as the cultural grounds of resistance. In fanning out the "liminal space[s] in between difference, the border space[s] of encounter, interaction, and exchange, the space[s] of relation and the narratives of identity such relations engender," in the words of Susan Stanford Friedman ("Border Talk"), difference is remodified and retained in order to strategically posit it against reductive ascriptions by the dominant culture (by way of what Bhabha defines as "mimicry," cf. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's notion of "strategic essentialism"). Spivak's notion of "strategic essentialism" terms a tactic of mobilizing a shared and secured basis of ethnic or racial identity, which, while having been shaped in hegemonic processes of racialization, may provide a platform of self-assertion and -representation. This strategy, according to Sedlmeier, characteristically manifests in "conceptual tropes of liminality" that figure prominently in postcolonial discourses of difference (cf. Henry Louis Gates' concept of the "Talking Book," *The Signifying Monkey*,

34). Sedlmeier claims that these tropes are constitutive components of transgression-narratives. These narratives foster the revalidation of difference in a "steady oscillation between liquefaction and solidification of differentials." Difference, thus, "is essentialized and pejoratively ascribed by hegemonic structures, it is then recoded by means of an investment in and a strategic affirmation of its value qua difference, before it is dissolved and deferred to avoid the charge of essentialism, just to be reinforced from what is construed as a displaced vantage point" *The Postethnic Literary*, 9; cf. "Allegorie in der Postkolonialen Literatur und Literaturtheorie").

The "radicality or conservatism of essentialism depends," Diane Fuss crucially reminds us, "to a significant degree, on *who* is utilizing it, *how* it is deployed, and *where* its effects are concentrated. It is important not to forget that essence is a sign, and as such historically contingent and constantly subject to change and redefinition" (20). Picking up on Fuss's emphasis on the *contextual* dependency of counter-hegemonic acts, we can think of Everett's critical incentive to counter the conceptual consolidation inherent in processes of racialization as the attempt to permanently complicate stable notions of identity and difference. If hegemonic models of difference, however, cannot be successfully subverted and potentially altered without mobilizing these models first in order to put them center stage in one's attempt at scrutinizing and criticizing their ideological core, this results in what Florian Sedlmeier identifies as the "circular logic of strategic essentialism." The task at hand appears to be to permanently disrupt this cycle of in- and revalidating difference and to prolong the dwelling at the threshold of binary restoration. In order to thus secure critical efficacy and preempt the absorption into established frameworks of corrective race writing, one has to operate "from within and against" what Sedlmeier terms "the paradigm of representativeness." Sedlmeier's concept synthesizes a cultural complex of representational liability. It informs the

> discursive production of the literatures of ethnic identity [as it] yields a notion of authorship that is thought to scrutinize and correct misrepresentations of communal-cultural sign systems. These sign systems are conceived in terms of collective symbolic property and discursive control: Multicultural and postcolonial literatures are believed to intend to represent a cultural community through the corrective recoding of devaluing stereotypes and their ideological depth structure. (*The Postethnic Literary*, 21)

It is precisely this representational obligation that Everett's texts strategically decline. If they recode stereotypes, they do so to unearth their ideological investments on both sides of the symbolic divide between black and white. I am going to argue that this is most successfully achieved in Everett's *I Am Not Sidney Poitier*. In this particular novel, the author has

inscribed the racial problematic into the protagonist's social core of (self-) identification, the *name*. In so doing, Everett negotiates racial identity (and agency) not as a concern of "communal-cultural" re-appropriation and re-affiliation but of language and permanent socio-discursive re-negotiation. Whereas his protagonist's "I" is safe in *writing*, as the reader encounters him through his narrating "I," his name is the constant source of misrecognition and marginalization. Through this character, Everett *both* speculates on the political potential of individual counter-hegemonic acts *and* discards self-sufficient notions of selfhood and political agency (see discussion).

2.2 Aesthetic Practice: Race, Writing and Ambivalence

A binary opposition such as black and white, the French philosopher Gilles Deleuze stresses, "teaches us nothing about the nature of that which is thought to be opposed" (*Difference and Repetition*, 267). The notion of negation inscribed into this oppositional relation, rather, tends to reinscribe the potential affirmation of "that which is thought to be opposed." Thus, the only way to get beyond the binary, or "outside the dualisms," as Deleuze and his colleague Felix Guattari suggest, "is to be-between, to pass between, the intermezzo," (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 323). Everett's writing oscillates between bipolar pairs, dwelling in-between poles conceived as self-sufficient and mutually exclusive. Instead of the "either/or" relation, which categories such as the "I" and the "other," fiction (-ality) and fact (-uality), and, more generally, politics and aesthetics suggest, his texts operate according to the principle of "both/and-ness", Anthony Stewart argues (Stewart "Theoretical Blackness," 223).

Writing (in) the Slash: From Oppositions to Openness

Everett's texts invite us to embrace the intellectual possibilities arising from the tension of (unresolved) binaries. They dare us to read both *for* and *against* race while making this receptive vacillation a programmatic aspect of their aesthetic agenda. This is why it is important to focus on the "and" in what Stewart describes as their "both/and" character.

In an artistic statement published on the French critical platform "La Clé des Langues," Everett himself defines this conceptual intersphere – the "and" in "both/and" – as "the Slash" (2014). "My fascination," he states, has

> always been with the *slash*, that thing, that notion, that ether that both divides and unites a *thing* and its *name* or *designator* or *signifier / signified*. And with that slash comes the business of binary oppositions and Deconstruction and a whole world of play with meaning is constructed or deconstructed. Meaning can be ostensibly controlled, but always upon closer inspection we discover that the slash is either a slippery slope or a steep hill. I argue and seek to explore, in my own way, through my fiction the idea that meaning resides in the *slash* itself.

This paragraph betrays Everett's fundamental investment in sign- and language-theory and, more specifically, poststructuralism. The transatlantic transition in sign- and language-theory labeled by American academics as poststructuralism was inspired by the scholarly climate of the structuralist, Freudian and Marxist debates of the 1960s in continental Europe. Poststructuralism is closely linked to the theoretical projects of postmodernism, deconstruction and constructivism. The diverse accounts subsumed under the label share an academic peripheral position and an anti-humanist, -metaphysical and -hermeneutical impetus. The most widely influential attempt of liberating (literary) language from (many of)

its long-standing metaphysical misconceptions, Jacques Derrida's deconstructionist project had a huge impact on the European and American academy. Structuralism, forming out of the disciplinary expansion of the Saussurean approach to various fields of cultural analysis (ethnology, semiology, philosophy, psychoanalysis a.o.) conceived as the "linguistic turn," describes a scientific school. Its advancements include the notions of the arbitrariness of the sign and the differential dynamic of meaning-making based on the tripartite notion of the sign constituted by the binary split between signifier (sound/image) and signified (word-concept). This structuralist notion of language as an encapsulated and stable system of differential meaning engendered ideas such as the differentiation between *langue* and *parole*, as well as language's synchronic and diachronic dimensions.

Resonant with the basic structuralist premise that difference is fundamentally constitutive for meaning the "slash" is a symbol of separation, which touches the ontological ("thing"), conceptual ("notion"), and social ("ether") dimensions of reality. It crucially concerns the referential function of language, i.e. the connection between a linguistic unit and its referred-to realities. Everett describes the "business" of binaries and (their) deconstruction as originating from the recognition that the "slash" is as much a symbol of separation as connection, namely between language and the world of "things." The "whole world of play with meaning" that he here pictures can be expanded to limitless proportions by what Derrida describes as the precondition of this limitlessness – the theoretical double-movement of retracing and erasing, *constructing* and *destructing* the transcendental signified, from which "deconstruction" derives its terminological purpose. Fiction, Everett's texts suggest, is particularly apt at performing this conceptual oscillation, as it offers certain possibilities to facilitate and sustain this writing (in) the slash.

Everett thus posits the aesthetic as a privileged platform to counter what Ralph Ellison has defined as the "release from the complications of the real world" that categories or "absolutes" such as race legitimize ("The World and the Jug," 121). To create and sustain the aesthetic preconditions for this critical attempt of dwelling in-between the dualisms, Everett endows the aesthetic as such with a function: openness. Similar notions have been proposed by various critics, who stress the interpretive "plurality", "undecidability", "simultaneity" and "multidimensionality" of Everett's texts (Hogue; Wolfreys; Roof; Mitchell and Vander). What I conceive as openness relates to the "model of the open work" theorized by Eco (*The Open Work*). The semiotician defines a work of art as "a corn-piece and closed form in its uniqueness as a balanced organic whole, while at the same time constituting an open product on account of its susceptibility to countless different interpretations which do not impinge on

its unadulterable specificity" (4). While this receptive plurality is a fundamental feature of *every* (aesthetically sophisticated) work of art, Eco considers it a programmatic principle of literary poetics since the modernist turn. This "second-order" openness derives from the dialectic interplay of the artwork's closedness and openness: its *singularity* as a "signifier," what the semiotician calls the "structural vitality which the work already possesses, even if it is incomplete" (20), and the *plurality* of its possible interpretations.[48] It is the "aesthetic organization of a complex of signifiers that [are] already, in themselves, open and ambiguous," which makes the "open artwork" *open* (40). Just like this openness allows for the received models of closure to be recognized as such, Everett's erasure of concepts and conventions renders them legible and criticizable as such, in the first place.[49] This openness to interrogate ideas, categories, conventions and literary forms is what makes Everett's fictional interventions in racial discourse both powerful and precarious.

Language, Logics and Ambivalence: Everett's Second-Order Satires

An art-form that is crucially concerned with the precarious nature of justice and the attempt of arguing for it through art, satire raises fundamental questions about the relationship between aesthetics and politics. Traditionally, this problem has been conceived in terms of negativity, both with regard to the occasion and the purpose of art, meaning the historical realities that shape its moment of creation and in response to which it may or may not possess some sort of capacity to criticize and even alter these realities for the better. This notion, that the difference between the aesthetic and the nonaesthetic is a relationship of negativity, has been seminally argued by Theodor W. Adorno. The theorist of the Frankfurt School has formulated a dialectical conception of art, arguing that "[e]very act of making in art is a singular effort to say what the artifact itself is not and what it does not know: precisely this is art's spirit." In the dialectical un-making of truth in art, Adorno argues, artworks draw their power to participate in "objective truth" from the longing towards the transcendence of these historical realities that define their otherness as art. Adorno saw this critical potential most fully realized in the literary works of Samuel Beckett and Franz Kafka, two authors who have had a huge influence on Everett' writing, as he himself frequently confirms (*Aesthetic Theory*, 180).

Rather than through negativity we can conceive Everett's aesthetic agenda in terms of *ambivalence*. Ambivalence generally describes the volitional, intellectual or emotional state of contradiction (etym. *Lat.* ambi- "both, on both sides" + valentia "strength," "capacity"). This term resonates with the precarious state of satire and aesthetics, in general. And it may serve as a basic guideline for our discussion of Everett's approach.

Satire defines an attack on social normativity that displays and distorts the very corruption, moral and otherwise, it seeks to criticize. Thus, satire, by definition, is a complicated and ultimately ambivalent endeavor. Charged with associations of (universal) beauty, value, and excellence, the aesthetic remains a controversial concept in present-day discussions of literary practice, especially in the realm of race. What these assumptions about its ideological complicity, its repressive, immoral, fetishistic, elitist qualities, betray, as Heinz Ickstadt has argued, is the dangerous neglect of the "literariness" of a text, i.e. its "specific literary work: why it can do the cultural work it does; why it can do it better (or differently) than a nonliterary text; or why fiction has the power to even subvert its own ideological complicity" ("Toward a Pluralist Aesthetics," 264). It comes as no surprise that this complicity of art, of satire, of the very protagonists that seek to challenge the status quo in Everett's texts, is the leitmotif of the three novels we are going to discuss. After all, each of Everett's racial satires puts this problem center stage: being stuck with the very concepts that have either originated with and/or been conducive to the proliferation of those schemes of thinking supplanting systemic forms of racism. Significantly, Everett's so far most widely received and controversially debated satiric novel *erasure* problematizes in a devastatingly meticulous fashion what can go wrong when embarking upon the dangerous endeavor of writing a satire. This novel represents a characteristic case of what I conceive as an Everettian second-order satire. In a "meta-fictional" fashion this novel draws its satiric force from the critical discussion not only of literary meaning-making but of the pitfalls of protest (see chapter 3.2).

Like the other two texts under study *erasure* ties in with various traditions of literary practice, humor and satire. Their principles of character and plot closely align Everett's racial satires with the classic genre of comedy, in the vein of Aristophanes and Molière. For one, the social constellations portrayed in his texts are based on *heteronomy*. They portray characters who grapple with the external, i.e. societal delimitation of their experiential and agential horizon. Also, these texts share a *cyclic* or *episodic story-structure*, as their protagonists benefit from a comedic sense of *physicality /immanence*, remaining ultimately unharmed in the stories' incremental progression towards pseudo-closure reminiscent of comedy's happy endings. His novels, too, tie in with the tradition of Anglophone satire, from Lawrence Sterne, Jonathan Swift, and Samuel Butler to Mark Twain. *Erasure* is an Everettian *Modest Proposal* (Jonathan Swift, 1729), if you will. The novel or rather the novella in the novel sardonically suggests that, since writers labeled as "African American" are systematically relegated to depicting stereotypical blackness, those of them that revolt against this imperative might as well as have their audiences choke on these very reductive scripts and images. *Glyph*, in turn,

is a sort of Everettian *Gulliver's Travels* (Jonathan Swift, 1759), a children's story camouflaged in a dense and daunting scholarly satire of theory. *I Am Not Sidney Poitier*, finally, is a classic *Catch-22* (Joseph Heller, 1961), portraying the hysterical repercussions of the identificatory aporia inscribed into its eponymous protagonist's name.

Especially Twain is an important point of reference for Everett's writing in the American tradition of the Jeremiad. Sacvan Bercovitch has emphasized the particular nation-building function of the jeremiad as a distinctly American mode of (self-) correction and narration. "The ritual of the jeremiad," the American Studies scholar concludes, "bespeaks an ideological consensus – in moral, religious, economic, social, and intellectual matters – unmatched in any other modern culture. And the power of consensus is nowhere more evident than in the symbolic meaning that the jeremiads infused into the term America" (*The American Jeremiad*, 176). *The Water Cure* is probably Everett's most fervid rendition of the Jeremiad as the novel appeals to or rather bemoans the lack of a national consensus on human rights in light of its political administration's scandalous violation of ethics during the Iraq War. George Schuyler, finally, is but one point in reference of how Everett's texts relate to African American satire, in general. Given their literary-historical background and theoretical aspirations, Everett's racial satires qualify as *academic satires*. They launch their critiques of the American scene from the institutional position and/or with specific reference to the academy as a public counter-sphere of cultural inquiry and political dissent. What all of them share is the tendency to operate on the second order of literary meaning-making and satire as a mode and genre.

Satire terms a tradition, text and tone. It is broadly conceived as a poetically parasitic and protean phenomenon with an inherent tendency towards the transgression of ethical and aesthetic norms (cf. Breinig *Satire und Roman*, 68-69; Brummack 281). Imitating and parodying genres, texts and discourses, it connects (to) various textual techniques, genres and traditions. Elevated to the high-art ranks by the New Critics, today, its theory encompasses a multitude of definitions theorized in a multitude of methodological approaches.[50] Etymologically relating to Latin term for mix or medley (lat. *satura*), satire is historically associated with the Greek satyr-dramas, the Roman Saturnalis and the Medieval Feasts of Fools and Asses that celebrate the politically and ecclesiastically sanctioned subversion of social hierarchy and propriety (cf. Bakhtin's study of the Medieval folk-roots of humor in the writing of Rabelais).[51] Today, the term specifies two distinct word usages. Thus, unlike any humor-related categories, satire designates both an aesthetic mode and a historical genre. Firstly, it is considered as a historical genre, which subsumes a somewhat distinct group of

texts sharing similar characteristics. This group of artworks constitutes a tradition rooted in Greek and Roman culture of letters. The Greek origins, of which only few sources survived the centuries, are often allocated to the comedic work of Aristophanes. Lucilian verse and Menippean prose satire, subdivided in a jovial Horatian and a more sinister or sardonic Juvenalian branch mark its beginnings. Yet, satire also refers to an ethical attitude, an intonation and an intention. One of the historically most productive of these generic affiliations has been with the novel. In accordance with Michael Bakhtin, who has identified Menippean satire as one of the pivotal proto-novelistic genres, the crucial relation between satire and the novel continues to be highlighted by contemporary critics (cf. Maus' *Jesting in Earnest*).

As *the* aesthetic modality most prominently associated with the aesthetic negotiation of social reform, satire defines an aesthetically socialized attack on individual and institutional wrongdoings to provide insight into an ethical-normative problematic. Often thriving in historical moments of social and cultural transition, the targets of satire's attack, surfacing in themes of corruption, hypocrisy, and dogmatism, have often been those normative entities associated with social consolidation and stagnation, society's religious, political or academic establishment. In proposing, pondering or elaborately denying a potential remedy to or reform of these societal ills, satire reveals a distinct didactic incentive. To "this ideal alternative," Ruben Quintero states accordingly, the satirist "either explicitly or implicitly, tries to sway us […without being] obligated to solve what is perceived as a problem or replace what is satirically disassembled or unmasked with a solution (3). Quintero's broad sketch of the ethical and aesthetic stakes of satire, obviously, has to be complicated. Satiric communication, especially in the artistic framework of *written* literature, should not be conceived as either "explicit" or "implicit." Rather, as Charles Knight argues, the "referential function of satire implies an audience sufficiently informed of the *context* for the message to be comprehended" (Knight, 45; my emphasis). Satire is fundamentally dependent on the context of its production and the cultural knowledge and mindset of its readers. (consider Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*; cf. Frye "Satire," 77-78).

Doubling Down on Indeterminacy: Irony, Paralipsis and Contrafactum

In targeting persons, institutions, nations, ideas or patterns of thinking, satire draws on a wide spectrum of (comic) forms, from jests and jokes to diatribe and invective, resulting in mild ridicule or acerbic scorn. The rhetorical dimensions of satire span the techniques of sarcasm (gr. *sarkazein*: to speak bitterly, to tear flesh), as the sort of ultima ratio of criticism, and irony

(gr. *eironeia*: dissimulation). Irony is often considered as a means to sidestep censorship, camouflaging the truth in a varyingly thin layer of conformity in order to hold up a mirror to the dominant culture. In the context of postmodernism, this notion has been complicated, as irony has been somewhat degraded to a seemingly apolitical escaping-strategy, to keep troubling realities at a safe and laughable or distance. Satiric signification can comprise varied types of ironic-satiric discourse ranging from structural irony, i.e. double-discourse, which results from the discrepancy of the diegetic and receptive state of knowledge, and intradiegetic irony used by a character within the diegetic level of the narrative. Conceiving of this irony solely as antiphrasis, yet, falls short of what Linda Hutcheon stresses about the ambiguity of irony in postmodern literature and the interpretive energy that has to go into its decoding.[52] Satire's critical message may elicit a feeling of amusement, grandeur (in one's solidarity with the attacker), or maybe even shame (of one's complicity with the object of attack), leaving the laughter sticking in the reader's throat, as it were. Satire, for Northrop Frye, hence, is "militant irony" (*Anatomy of Criticism*, 223).[53] The specificity of satiric fiction presupposes an awareness of its adaptation of irony's indirect direction. Thus, satire actually *does* claim to relate something while relating to an exact something outside of the diegesis (Breinig *Satire und Roman*, 72).[54] One could say that it combines both indirect direction and direct indirection (cf. "murder by indirection," Bridgman "Satire's Changing Target," 86).

This is why his racial satires often feature what Stewart has described as a form of "misdirection" or paralipsis. They address the racial problematic by side-stepping conventional discussions of it in order to counter the potential risk of fostering the conceptual consolidation of these principles ("About Percival Everett," 189 ff.). In so doing, Everett's texts tackle troubling questions such as these: should race play a role in our aesthetic consideration of art by American artists of African descent (*Glyph*)? How to articulate a critically potent fiction of protest against the self-enforcing mechanisms of an entire commercial machinery of minority literature (*erasure*)? Finally, how to arrive at any basic notion of identity and, by extension, cultural resistance, on the basis of which minoritized subjects can develop some sort of political agency while being subjected to pervasive stereotypical scripts of good *and* bad blackness (*I Am Not Sidney Poitier*)? The critical force of Everett's fiction originates with their insistence on addressing these questions while making us ponder the insufficiency *and* necessity of the attempt to *answer* them.

An aesthetic principle closely connected to satire is parody. Its inherent quality of targeting a pre-existing prototype has led to its frequent treatment as a sub-phenomenon of the former. Whereas satire prescribes sociopolitical referentializability parody's critical scope seldom

exceeds the aesthetic dimensions of its medium. In literary practice, thus, the object of the parodic adaptation is often a specific form(at) of a text or group of texts. The specificity and model-function of these parodied elements of a given hypertext (in constructing a new text), differentiates parody from *travesty*, according to Gérard Genette (*Palimpsests*). Travesty, Genette argues, tends towards a distinctly disparaging adaptation of its foil. This process of what Genette calls stylistic transposition (cf. parody as semantic transformation) is much more satiric or aggressive than the "playful" or "serious" variants of parody, which prioritize transformation over exhortation (42-43). "My Pafology" / "Fuck", *erasure*'s novel in the novel, borders on travesty inasmuch as the structural specificity of its foil (Richard Wright's *Native Son*) is a secondary concern of its provocation. What is of crucial concern, here, is not *Native Son* as a narrative *form* (despite explicit reworkings of story-segments) but as a narrative archetype, a commonplace in the cultural imaginary.[55] In addition to these critical instances of transtextual reinscription, we are going to use the term *contrafactum*. This concept allows for a methodological approach less dominated by postmodern protocols. Since its emergence in medieval and early modern music and poetry as a respectful recreation of canonic works (often qua inversion of the original secular or sacred theme) the concept's aesthetic scope has significantly widened. In literary practice, contrafactum differs from parody inasmuch as it does not exhaust its aesthetic possibilities by comically reflecting its foil. Rather, it articulates a message of its own by re-inscribing constitutive aspects of a given text or group of texts into an adaptation congruent with the foil's essential form. Concomitantly, it differs from the concept of *pastiche*, which describes the style-centered process of imitation (vs. transformation) qua exaggeration of a text's unique compositional characteristics.

Even in its wildly absurd instantiations satire proves to be a discourse deeply invested in logics. Rather than a "rationalist discourse" itself (Weisenburger, 1), satire is often camouflaged in what seems to be a rational argument in order to attack ratio and rationalist discourses, be it in the form of dogmas, doctrines or common sense and common nonsense, such as the notion of a black person "not being black enough." This fundamental investment in logics can be witnessed in the brutal precision with which Everett follows even so crude a proposition such as the aforementioned to its (il-) logical conclusion.

Transgressing boundaries of the thinkable and the sayable (and the "writeable," i.e. established genres, forms and themes) leaves the satiric attacker in a precarious position (consider Juvenal's dictum of the satirist's apologia). It is this "aggressiveness," with which these aesthetic and ethical standards are transgressed, in order to galvanize the reader, which

have inspired satire's traditional ostracization. The contravention of literary norms of illusion (regarding specific strategies of indirection) serves to actualize an is-ought conflict that the reader is supposed to retranslate to an empirically identifiable socio-normative setting. As Brummack stresses, satiric aggression, in order to qualify as such, should not be considered as sublimated but has to be discernable *within* the text as a structuring component of narrative (282, cf. Frye "Satire", 76).[56] Satire's distinct affinity for transgression, its ability "to fascinate, infuriate, and delight us to the extent that it transgresses boundaries of taste, propriety, decorum and the current ideological status quo," thus remains somewhat ambivalent (Dickson-Carr *The Sacredly Profane*, 1).

Tellingly, contemporary scholars frequently emphasize self-reflectivity as a means to update satire's critical actuality and efficiency. The postmodern presupposition of the ideological questionability of culturally codified sign systems shapes, according to Linda Hutcheon, defines a trait of contemporary art that is "both intensively self-reflexive and parodic, yet […] also attempts to root itself in that which both reflexivity and parody to short-circuit: the historical world" (Hutcheon *Parody*, x). Thus, in order to maintain its critical reference to this historical world satire depends on a critical self-evaluation of its own textual configuration, Claudia Heuer and Weisenburger argue.[57] Thus, satire seems to be in need of updating its textual means to be understood as a meaningful figuration of social critique in the postmodern era of irony.[58] To ensure the communicational "contact" between satirist and reader, satire implements the textual premises for its effective reception by working with (what Charles Knight terms "satiric 'keys'," 45). These keys can have a "phatic" and a "metalinguistic" function. The former mirrors the text's receptive processing (by installing a real or fictional reading situation – cf. Not Sidney Poitier's nominal misreading), the latter provides examples of discursive synchronization (by incorporating the specific discourses that satire parodies in dialogues, or list of keywords such as in Everett's *Glyph* and *erasure*). In contrast to Feinberg's assessment, that "[s]atire may criticize evil but the didactic elements are incidental, not primary," these components highlight and relativize the didactic authority of *established* modes of thought (7). The problematic relationship between postmodern poetics and satire (cf. Heuer) does not obviate a sort of definitional (minimal-) consensus on satire. Essentially, one cannot approach satiric forms of art without an at least basic and inevitably broad notion of attack. This is, after all, what separates satire from its poetic epiphenomena such as irony and parody. These referential concerns are specifically problematic given the seeming conflict between the latently uncontrollable effect of humor and the authorial intent presupposed in satire.[59]

Productive Perplexity: Everett's Comical Collapse

Humor has been considered a key mechanism in negotiating the ineffability with the outrageousness of racism. Central to African American cultural discourses, it bears the crucial dilemma of attempting to cope with the tragedy and absurdity of what Howard Winant calls the "common sense […and] nonsense" of race ("Racial Dualism," 89). Ralph Ellison has seminally argued that racial humor is the crucial cultural phenomenon where this mutual understanding of the deeply paradoxical nature of race can be achieved in the most unsettling way ("An Extravagance of Laughter"). Its historical gravity and cultural complexity, Ellison suggests, is thus a crucial matter of racial interdependency (1967, 116, cf. 1958, 54-55). Dexter Gordon concurs that it often "reflects a consciousness of multiple audiences, constructed along and divided by racial lines" ("Humor in African American Discourse," 273). What we can draw from Ellison's notion, Mel Watkins has stressed, is the depth of ambivalence that is voiced in racial laughter (*On the Real Side*, 18).[60]

This is specifically evident in the legacy of minstrelsy, whose "ritual of [racial] exorcism" echoes in present-day forms of commercial exploitation of blackness as a signifier of difference and distinction (or "hipness"; Ellison "Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke," 48). Championing a "comedy of the grotesque and the unacceptable," the theatrical spectacle of minstrelsy is a deeply racialized cultural phenomenon, in which the ritualized reiteration of stereotypical images of blackness often presented by white performers serves to negotiate white subliminal assumptions and anxieties about the racial Other. Despite its "baggage of liberal-pluralist notions of inclusion and industrial imperatives of market share and box office," Bambi Haggins concedes, it is important to consider "the process of crossover – and the extension of both humor and influence beyond black communal spaces – [as adding] a problematic twist to the already Byzantine task faced by the African American comic [entertainer and writer]: to be funny, accessible, and topical while retaining his or her *authentic* black voice" (*Laughing Mad*, 4). The notion of artistic authenticity and integrity prompts to a more delicate intricacy of African American culture and humor. Navigating the blurry line between provocation and entertainment, artists who channel and invalidate "the potency of stereotypes […always risks] the possibility that the conjured stereotypes may take lives of their own and exceed […] efforts to control them" (*Laughing Fit to Kill*, 14). Serving for both inter- and intraracial criticism (or "house-business"), satire conflicts with the long-standing imperative for "seriousness," which necessitates what Carpio describes as the camouflaging one's comical intentions to disprove "the purportedly innate relationship between blackness and buffoonery" ("Humor"). Even today, for many comedians of color, the

right to speak (about the problems defining one's minoritized position) often comes at the cost of humoristic self-humiliation.[61]

While satire and humor are central to traditional discussions of African American literary and cultural production (cf. the trickster discourse), the predominant mode of reception of black art is either tragic (cf. black-authored neo-slave and passing narratives) or melodramatic (cf. white-authored projects from Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* to Kathryn Stockett's *The Help*). Tellingly, this culture-political divide runs along the fault line of female and male authorship. Satire, generally speaking, is a male-dominated discourse. As such, it rings with peculiar hegemonic overtones. Questions of representational rights, here, are deeply entangled with those of institutional standing, cultural prestige and economic opportunity. These concerns are most prominently addressed by *erasure* (consider Everett's gendering of black authorial agency). Who gets to speak, at all, and who gets to speak for and about whom? More specifically, who gets to satirize whom and what it as at stake for the satirist in launching satiric critiques? This problem of privilege in the cultural context of racial disenfranchisement prompts to the striking amount of (mis-) representations of black men (by black women writers) and black women (by black male writers) as co-conspirators of each other's subjugation. Consider, for instance, *Native Son*'s portrayal of black women as complicit in Bigger's white emasculation and, in comparison, *The Color Purple*'s problematization of black male misogyny. While his position as satirist is implicated in this structural asymmetry, Everett's power to speak up and out against injustice poses the problem of (mis-) reception that all of his satiric novels put center stage.

In contrast to the dominant "language of trauma" (*Laughing Fit to Kill*, 13) satire offers an epistemological and affective modality that is capable of productively confronting the increasingly contradictory racial realities beyond unilateral notions of racial loyalty and ethical complicity, which Darryl Dickson-Carr has described. In the only compendium, which comprehensively considers satire as a distinct literary element of the African American novel, Dickson-Carr stresses that "[r]acism and racists are not stable, monolithic quantities any more than the black Other is" (*African American Satire: The Sacredly Profane Novel*, 32). White hypocrisy, black complicity, institutional inequality and the first black presidency – the simultaneity of these aspects seems to severely complicate the impulse of laughter and its critical potential in a satiric setup. Everett's racial satires, significantly, thrive on a complex and often self-complicating laughter, that sticks in reader's throat and provokes her to reconsider her assumptions. Both Haggins and Carpio, significantly, suggest the importance of the writers' "self-conscious" engagement with form to "illicit thought along with the

laughter" (7; *Laughing Fit to Kill*, 14). Stressing the interconnection between satire and the comic in Everett's writing aims, essentially, at complicating the critical tendency to reduce satire to concerns of authorial intent, which seems to conflict with the ambivalent affair of making someone laugh. Above all, the assumption about laughter as an inevitably system-reaffirming phenomenon, as a momentary relief from sublimated societal constraints, seems to conflict with satire's critical purpose. In contrast to the consensus that has remained unchallenged since antiquity, however, satire does *not* have a consistent relationship with humor. Discarding the term "humor"[62] in favor of the comic, this study retraces Everett's poetic strategy of what I conceive as *comical collapse*.

Humor analysis is subdivided into three major branches: the theory of superiority, relief and incongruence.[63] As the representative of the first theory, Thomas Hobbes has been the first to depart from the Aristotelian notion of humor as a subcategory of the ugly, describing the "sudden glory" of self-aggrandizement in laughing at another's inferiority (*Leviathan* 1651).[64] Thinkers associated with the European Enlightenment have redefined humor as a structural phenomenon governed by epistemological mechanisms.[65] This philosophical notion of humor's violation of our patterns of apperception and thinking, in general, has fundamentally influenced the approach commonly known as *incongruence theory*. Incongruity has been an integral aspect of various accounts ever since, from Henri Bergson to Sigmund Freud.[66] Freud considers it part of the psychic economy of laughter (*The Joke and Its Relation to the Unconscious*). According to his tripartite taxonomy of the joke, the comic and humor, this economy is based on the pleasurable spending of excess energy usually used for the psychic effort to uphold societal conventions of conduct.[67] Freud's account has inspired relief notions of black humor as a means of relief in the face of insurmountable injustices. Potentially instilling a sense of superiority and self-pride in the racial victim, it ultimately aims at "redress."

Against the scholarly overemphasis on relief in black cultural discourse, Carpio claims that incongruence has been widely neglected as a theoretical focus, so far. Enacting "'what if' games that suspend normativity [...forms of incongruence humor] momentarily reconfigure habits of mind and language," Carpio concludes (*Laughing*, 6). This dehabitualization potential stems from the pre-reflexive aspects of comicality. The erupted laughter seems to precede a state of full awareness of why and about what we are laughing and attests to what Freud, in drawing on Immanuel Kant, says of the comic: "that it has the remarkable characteristic of being able to deceive us only for a moment" (12). That the spontaneous, eruptive and seemingly pre-reflexive ritual of laughing can be aligned with a certain notion of

reflexivity, of (self-) awareness of and in laughter, Wolfgang Preisendanz has suggested. Preisendanz compares the function of the comic with the aesthetic structure of the laughable. In contrast to the ludicrous, he claims, the comical can be conceived as the objectification and, implicitly, the virtual referent of a reflexive laughter, as the provocation and justification of laughter that is already pre-mediated in it (552).

This has to do with what Wolfgang Iser defines as comic collapse ("Das Komische: Ein Kipp-Phänomen"). In the laughing response, Iser argues, an oppositional constellation linked in mutual negation (or incongruence) is engaged in a comic chain reaction, in which these positions cause each other to continuously collapse or tilt. The characteristic effect of exposure in laughter does not define the affirmation of *one* of those positions. Rather, the collapse of the negated position exposes (something about) the negating position, too, as this position has lost its (stable) counterpart. From this mutual break-down stems the momentary, "pre-reflexive" perplexity in laughter. It signals the collapse of the (entire) oppositional constellation along with its perspectival orientation, the mutually defining interdependency inherent in negation or congruence. This sudden and shock-like affection of the recipient by the comical collapse results in a temporary cognitive and affective overload. Iser terms laughter, in this sense, as a "response of crisis," whose varying intensity corresponds with its specific form or setting, in which the comic effect is shaped by certain expectable pre-regulative measures.[68] In this sense, satire, and its sardonic and sinister variants, in specific, is characterized by the attempt to keep the comic level of crisis at a constant high, to prolong the (pre-) reflexive moment of almost-awareness, as it were. The comic, thus, can provoke the recipient to laugh *and* persistently dwell on her incapacity to come to terms with the motivations and implications of her own response.

Everett's texts deploy classic comic principles that cohere around the laughter-accompanied psycho-cognitive state of perplexity: incongruity and contradiction, parallelism and misdirection, dissimulation and hyperbole. In an "another turn of the screw" fashion, they retrace racial assumptions and commonplaces, pinpointing their illogical nature and carrying them to extremes in order to reduce them to absurdity. Everett's comical arsenal of racial criticism includes an abundance of wordplays, points and punch-lines, jokes (and riddles), absurd characters, character-names (like, say, Not Sidney Poitier, a three-word-punch-line, so to say) and -constellations.[69] Everett's racial satires, in addition, feature trickster-picaros, (historical) caricatures (cf. Strom Thurmond in *A History*), stereotype-inversion, picaresque plots and comedic ("happy"-) endings, and, as we have already discussed, parody, travesty, irony, as well as absurdity and grotesquerie (see chapter 3.3).[70]

Everett's satiric novels often operate on a very subtle and witty comicality. Seldom do they take a sledgehammer to crack a nut, as it were. A particularly striking example of Everett's use of the comic can be found in *erasure*, more specifically the fictional dialogue between D.W. Griffith (the director of the iconic filmic rendition of white supremacy *Birth of a Nation*) and Richard Wright (the iconic African American "protest" writer of *Native Son*):

> "D.W. Griffith: I like your book very much.
> Richard Wright: Thank You" (193).

The laughter, which this point may inspire, hardly qualifies as relieving or liberatory, at that. Lacking the basis for a stable notion of superiority or degradation, it evinces an irritating or even "oppressing" quality of comicality, as it thrives on an incremental realization of indeterminacy. "The mere suggestion that Griffith might have liked *Native Son*," Stewart asserts, "levels a critique at Wright's novel that leaves us not knowing where to look" ("About Percival Everett," 192). While the oppositional constellation of Griffith and Wright, at first, seems to teeter towards Griffith (for it seems utterly improbable that he should appraise Wright), it is Wright who emerges as the negating position being subsequently debased in the comic collapse. The recipient, in turn, may slowly realize that what Everett really aims at here is satirizing the commercial exploitation of racial essentialism compromising *both* white supremacist and black protest approaches.

The comic can serve as an aesthetic vehicle to foster what Karlheinz Stierle describes as an "alarming abeyance of distance and identification" promoted by many modern forms of comic-use (267). That neither negativity of humor in satire is unambiguous nor the condemnation expressed in laughter is unconditional, however, has been emphasized by Wolfgang Preisendanz. As it radically problematizes the disparity or incompatibility between a positively connoted but potentially unrealizable "ought" and a negative "is" that (persistently) elides critical reflection, the comic force of satire, Preisendanz stresses, has to do with the discrepancy between empirical and fictional realities and *not* with the ludicrousness of normative transgressions. In contrast to (mere) invective or polemic, satire's defining agenda of indirection, of transforming non-textual realities with techniques of distortion, reduction or exaggeration, relates to this notion of comic incongruence, which provokes the reader to always (at least try to) achieve a somewhat stable state of reconciliation between the familiar and the unfamiliar, between alterity and identity.[71]

In the Reading Laboratory: "Every Novel is an Experiment"

In Everett's aesthetic program, significantly, this satiric-comical criticism of race always crucially concerns the *form*, in which it is articulated and, by extension, the forms in which it

has been *traditionally* articulated. If, as Umberto Eco stresses, "art has no choice but to break away from all the established formal systems, since its main aim of speaking is as form [...] the only meaningful way in which art can speak of man and his world is by organizing its forms in a particular way and not by making pronouncements with them." Hence, the literary semiotician concludes, form "must not be a vehicle for thought; it must be a way of thinking" (*The Open Work*, 142). If form, generally speaking, thus describes the structural framework, through which the idea of the artwork as an aesthetic unity takes shape in the mind of the reader, this aesthetic processing, in the basic phenomenological sense of a literary transfer between text and recipient, takes the form of an *experiment* in Everett's writing.

Everett himself has frequently punctured reductive notions of experimentalism and other related terms such as abstraction, digression, or representation, for that matter. If every literary work of art can be considered as an experiment, as Everett stresses (interview with Anderson, 54; Shavers, 58), one could likewise argue that every literary work of art is, ultimately, about identity, as the meaning-making mechanisms of fiction can be related to basal epistemological concerns of human world- and self-understanding.

In this general sense, Everett's texts are experiments, namely language- and thought-experiments. They show a striking proclivity for philosophical reflection, as they play with language(s), ideas and concepts. They operate in logical and linguistic registers, subsuming language-games, morphological riddles, nominal oddities, and, more generally, structural incongruities of character, plot and setting. The author himself has stressed his fascination for the epistemological potential of fiction, asserting that it is important for him

> to watch how ideas work and how they can be manipulated. That's probably the most important question to me in the world: What can you do with thinking? (interview with Rone Shavers, 59).

If we think of Everett's fiction as a thought-experiment, of course, that evokes the connotation of a thought-experiment, namely that it represents a real experiment conducted in thinking, suggests that it takes place in an "ontological vacuum," lacking actual consequences. This reproach, that it represents a sort of "armchair inquiry," in Peter Swirski's words, is ironized in Everett's comically playful but deeply perplexing scenarios (100). This Everettian experimentalism has a speculative and analytic aspect. Firstly, his texts share a certain "what if" character, i.e. the *speculative* impulse to envision or gesture towards an alternate reality of equality or, rather, an alternate state of racial awareness. Therein, as Ralph Ellison has stressed, lies fiction's "true function and its potential for effecting change [in the] thrust towards a human ideal [...] by a subtle process of negating the world of things as given in favor of a complex of man-made positives" ("Introduction" to *Invisible Man*, xx). Hence,

Glyph, *erasure* and *I Am Not Sidney Poitier* tweak race-pertinent variables (intelligence, cultivation, socioeconomic status), featuring an impossibly intelligent (Ralph), culturally elitist (Monk) and ridiculously rich black protagonist (Not Sidney Poitier). In these scenarios, the reader is confronted with fictional situations that are both race-centered, covertly color-coded and race-neutral. What they share is the negotiation of the desire of the end of racism, which is debunked as farce, stressing the need to complicate our conception of racism's structural persistence.

In the *analytic* sense, Everett's racial satires resemble the propositional pattern of a (scientific) experiment. With changing parameters, from the domestic domain of family life to the larger societal spheres of science, politics, religion and the media, these case studies are *tests* in the more concrete sense. They follow a specific proposition to its (il-) logical conclusion. Think of Ralph, the incredibly intelligent and linguistically gifted baby, whose encounter with his fictional environment raises questions about the core of our understanding of the world through language. This sequential encounter, which takes place in various spheres of social life, serves to tease out ever more peculiar insights about our institutions of thought and life. In this regard, Everett's experimental fiction is fundamentally invested in dehabitualization, both with regard to racial normativity and literary convention. Characteristically, Everett's texts persistently destabilize the established binarism between fiction and fact. Claudine Raynaud has pointed out that this "[b]lurring [of] the autobiographical with the fictional [is] a means of simultaneously undermining the truth-value of autobiographical notations and anchoring the fictional unto the real" (2). In foregrounding the truth-telling potential of fiction Everett's texts experiment on "reality" or, more precisely, those ideas and schemes of thinking that can acquire a reality of their own in shaping social praxis.

As the formal frameworks of his language- and thought-experiments, Everett's texts are "reading laboratories," in which the author experiments with the culturally established modes of writing and reading circulating in the wider cultural context (cf. Bauer, 9). In the intertextual regard, they are heteroglossic hubs, grand textual connecting devices that produce readings (cf. Eco *Nachwort*, 9). This creative machinery, Eco's metaphor implies, is in *partial* control of its own interpretation. It prestructures its own openness for (a plethora of possible schemes of) reading.[72] Everett's texts champion an openness of formal design and interpretive possibility that closely aligns them to foundational texts of the novelistic tradition.

Modern, Postmodern, Postpostmodern? Everett's Writerly Texts

If Ralph Ellison is the crucial point of reference for Everett's self-positioning in the black tradition, Mark Twain (Samuel L. Clemens) and Laurence Sterne personify the author's investment in the novel and its traditions. *Don Quixote* (1615, Miguel de Cervantes), *Tristram Shandy* (1759, Laurence Sterne), *Moby-Dick* (1851, Herman Melville), *Huckleberry Finn* (1885, Mark Twain), *The Way of All Flesh* (1903, Samuel Butler), *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake* (1922, 1939, James Joyce) *Waiting for Godot* (1953, Samuel Beckett), *V* and *The Crying of Lot 49* (1961, 1966, Thomas Pynchon), *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969, Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.) – this by no means comprehensive list of novels, of which both explicit and structural references abound in his writing, illustrates Everett's investment in the novelistic tradition. An important nonblack point of reference for Everett's self-positioning in the field of ethnic literature is Frank Chin. Consider Everett's tip of the hat to Chin's *Donald Duk*: Not Sidney Poitier's classmate's is named Eddie Eliazar (*I Am Not Sidney Poitier*, 30). Inscribed in the traditions of European, American and African American novelistic writing, Everett exploits the intertextual generic malleability of the novel form.[73]

His texts, thus, are imbued with its "ethos of opposition" towards institutions of writing, thinking (tradition and theory), and thus of social life, which is its basic feature according to Walter L. Reed (3). Everett draws on its foundational affinity for humor and polyphony, as well as its structural tendency towards parody and satire, which has fostered the novel's rise as the paradigmatic (post-) modern literary genre,[74] as Mikhail Bakhtin suggests (Dialogic Imagination, 20). His texts, thus, are resonant with the "self-suspicion" of such iconic projects as Sterne's Tristram Shandy and Miguel de Cervantes' Don Quixote, as well as with the experimental and satirical energies of James Joyce's Ulysses and Twain's Huckleberry Finn.

For what creative benefit the novel's "suspicion" of its own literariness (Reed 1981, 4) can be exploited has been spectacularly proven by Laurence Sterne's *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* (1759-67). This novel is a fictional autobiography that programmatically questions our expectations of what a novel should be and to what our reading of it should amount. In this sense, Sterne's elaborate plotting against plot and any other conventional criterion of narrative consistency, for that matter, makes it a kind of anti-novel filled with numerous digressions, which "incontestably, are the sunshine;—they are the life, the soul of reading!—take them out of this book, for instance,—you might as well take the book along with them" Chapter 1 XXII, 52). The text provokes the reader to constantly jump in the text and reorient herself, in order to make her reflect on its material reality and symbolic potential as medium of textual meaning-making. This novel is renowned for being

the first novel that problematizes the literariness of (prose-) fiction in a fashion that is today conceived characteristic for modern and postmodern writing.

Echoing the epoch-making project of Laurence Sterne, Everett's novels qualify as "writerly" texts, of which the reader is "no longer a consumer, but a producer" (*S/Z*, 4). Connected with the affective state of "bliss," which Roland Barthes theorizes in *The Pleasure of the Text*, the *scriptible* text emerges as a (partially) *reversible* script of significational plurality. The text's excessive indeterminacy, its "explosion and dispersal into the intertextual, into the cultural text," causes a pleasurable receptive experience in the reader's loss of control (Allen, 88). Barthes seeks to liberate the reader from her own cultural incapacitation by attacking "the commodification of literature and the socially sanctioned association between what is consumable and what is clearly communicated" (ibid). In the writerly state of bliss, which thrives on the productive preservation of indeterminacy, the text's communicational efficacy cannot be measured in terms of the transmittal of a final and fixed signified, but in the reader's active engagement in a latently overwhelming, ideally self-conscious experience of reading. The provocative and subversive quality of this reading experience closely aligns the writerly text with the satiric mode.

With such striking innovatory idiosyncrasies as novelized theory (in *Glyph*), a novel in the novel (in *erasure*) and authorial self-insertion (in *I Am Not Sidney Poitier*), Everett's racial satires draw on a substantial spectrum of subgenres that spans the Bildungsroman, the coming-of-age-novel, the artist's novel, the academic novel, the novel of ideas, the novel of theory and the picaresque novel. The three racial satires under study represent individual instances of a novelistic spectrum of aesthetic potential. Corresponding with each text's specific form-political agenda, Everett has gone through different registers of novelistic narration. *Glyph* most radically breaks with the novel's conventional representational mode, namely realism,[75] radically questioning its historical universalization as the norm of literary art.[76] Rooted in the genre of the artist's novel, its diegetic infrastructure includes fragmented realist story-bits implemented in the scientific framework of an academic paper designed by an "I"-narrator-reader-writer. *Erasure* retains these meta-textual elements from Everett's first racial satire while putting some of the (African American) novel's conventionalized features center stage. It features an autobiographical "I"-writer-narrator, whose narration combines the confessional mode and the journal-diary format with a melodramatic family memoir echoing the Bildungsroman/coming-of-age-novel. *I Am Not Sidney Poitier,* finally, most strongly tilts towards the realist pole of storytelling. The comedic Bildungsroman dispenses with the formal pyrotechnics of the latter two texts, prioritizing instead the picaresque plotline and

imprinting its meta-linguistic discourse in the protagonist's name. This is why, despite the periodical setup of this study (1999 to 2009), it makes a lot of sense to label Everett's texts experimental "playfulness,"[77] their self-reflective, intertextual composition that breaks with the modernist binary of high- and popular culture "postmodern."[78]

Everett's texts often operate on paradigmatic postmodern principles such as textual frame-breaking and formal hybridization. In foregrounding the material-medial and sign-symbolic dimensions of literary meaning-making they echo the postmodern emphasis on the signs and symbols that make for what we refer to as objective reality. Likewise, in zooming in on the illogicalities inscribed into every-day and academic (critical and philosophical) language, Everett challenges established models of intellectual and theoretical engagement with the experienced world that language serves to facilitate and organize. However, when it comes to the specific techniques of irony, pastiche and parody, which Jameson has famously theorized as the crucial cultural modalities of the postmodern condition, the aesthetic ambivalence of Everett's texts complicates the ethical-political premises associated with the dicta "neither/nor" or "anything goes" and "free-play," respectively. If irony, generally speaking, defines the tension between two conflicting meanings, Everett's texts celebrate the ambivalence inherent in the irresolution of this conflictual opposition. In promoting readerly responsibility, their irony, thus, often takes on a distinct ethical undertone (cf. *erasure*).

Despite its affinity for the margins of knowledge, culture and society, postmodernism's deconstruction-inspired skepticism towards the knowability and representability of individual subjectivity and historical reality seems to conflict with race critique. Making sense of the "truth" of the traumatic past and paradoxical present of systemic racism while writing against historical erasure (and "whitewashing"), thus, seems to necessitate conceptions of identity, subjectivity and agency that are not fragmented, disrupted and destabilized in the postmodern sense. Criticizing postmodernism for its ostensibly obscurantist nomenclature of high-theoretical critique, bell hooks claims that a "postmodernism of resistance" necessitates the grounding of its theoretical insights in what West calls the historical and material "reality [one] cannot *not know*" ("Postmodern Blackness," 395).[79]

"What You Can Do With Thinking": Reading Everett's Fiction for Theory

Everett's metafictionally self-suspicious, openly ambiguous and socially resonant texts read as theories formed in fiction. According to Bakhtin, the novel "often crosses the boundary of what we strictly call fictional literature" (*Dialogic Imagination*, 33). Originating with the first (English) novelists' response to "theory in the guise of the eighteenth-century obsession with

intellectual explanatory systems," the affinity for and subversion of theoretical thinking, Waugh claims, has remained an intrinsic component of the novel ("Critical Theory and the Novel"). Everett's texts novelize, in the Bakhtinian sense, (Pre-) Socratic philosophy, Wittgensteinean and Fregian language-philosophy, as well as poststructuralist theory (Derridean deconstruction, Barthesian semiotics, speech act theory, a.o.) and, more generally, Euro-American and African American strands of criticism.

It is quite impossible to overstate the importance of theory for Percival Everett's post-millennial project. First surfacing in *Glyph* as the inaugural instant of his "theoretical turn," Everett's more recent novels are profoundly imbued with theories from a host of household names of Western thought. They often tie these theoretical discourses into the aesthetic negotiation of form and theme. This meta-discourse resembles what one of his protagonists specifies as "a retracing, of sorts, of what they call Western philosophy so that I might make some sense of the world that I have been rudely thrust into and have had abusively thrust upon me" (*The Water Cure*, 72). Everett's texts not only shake the philosophical and intellectual foundations of Western thought. They specifically mobilize that particular theory, which has been crucial in postcolonial scholarship and African American literary institutionalization: poststructuralism. In novelizing theory, Everett's texts – *Glyph* and *erasure*, in particular – rearticulate the poststructuralist departure from classic categories of hermeneutics (sense, subjectivity and intentionality), which helped to open writing, reading and criticism to a profound anti-hermeneutical critique. Poststructuralism promoted "a new sense of literature's potential for critique of and freedom from dominant cultural ideology," which denigrated and homogenized literary texts as consumable artefacts with a "clear, decipherable, readable, finite" meaning (Allen, 75). Everett's transfictional texts, which feature autodiegetic avatars, but also a fictionalized version of the author himself (*I Am Not Sidney Poitier*), celebrate a radically de-limited, self-contradictory and ever-elusive textuality, in other words, a radical variant of deconstruction, for which Paul de Man saw literature as best fit ("Allegories of Reading," 17, cf. discussion on *Glyph*).

Even in the late 1990s, when *Glyph* spearheaded Everett's turn towards theory, poststructuralism had already been considered as a well-established if not outdated school of thought. Explicitly prompted by all of the texts under study, I argue that this theoretical preoccupation with language functions as the baseline Everett's texts' racial criticism. In other words, it provides the point of departure for Everett to push the institutional (*Glyph*), commercial (*erasure*) and social (*I Am Not Sidney Poitier*) debates on race *forward*. It is this choice of theory that – significantly – allows Everett to engage with the literary and scholarly

mainstream of African American literature. Thus, this choice aligns him with those established African American scholars, who have drawn on poststructuralism to institutionalize black writing (see following discussion). In this sense, theory does not only serve as a metaphor for the increasing intellectual effort necessary to navigate current racial realities defined by both formal equality and structural inequality. It specifically relates to Everett's self-positioning in the wider institutional context of race critique. It is from this perspective that we should consider his texts' theoretical aspirations, after all, as they seek to build on the current consensus and puncture (some of) its blindsides.

Everett's theory-informed texts, consequently, are quite demanding. They require significant receptive capabilities and cultural knowledge of the reader to analyze and synthesize various elements and strands of meaning. Everett has frequently stressed that he does not (seek to) cater to his potential audience when producing texts (cf. Interview with William W. Starr, 21). This textual production is, however, the reader's ultimate responsibility: "the work isn't complete until somebody reads it. The circuit of art isn't complete until it is received. And meaning's not made until that happens." Everett expects the "reader to study. If you want to get through the layers of meaning, it requires some work. The works I love to read require that and that's the kind of literature I'm interested in, and that's what I make" (interview with Anthony Stewart. 138, 143). That the discrepancy between the epistemological level of the text and its recipient is not only conducive to but constitutive for readerly involvement has been famously pointed out by Wolfgang Iser.

Inscribed into what the theoretician of reception-aesthetics calls the text's "'performing structure'" (*The Act of Reading*, 26), the "prestructuring of the potential meaning by the text" depends on the reader's actualization of this potential through the reading process" (The Implied Reader, xii). "[E]ach actualization," Iser argues, "therefore represents a selective realization of the implied reader" (The Act of Reading, 37). The quintessential concept of Iser's theory, the implied reader epitomizes the dialectic relationship between a literary text's closed and open aspects, what Iser calls the artistic and aesthetic pole of writing. In short, it represents a textually pre-structured template of interpretative performance. Always selective and temporary (expressed in Iser's notion of the reader's "wandering viewpoint"), the reader's mental images of the text, created in the actualization of the interpretive options inscribed into the implied reader, "will be colored by the reader's existing stock of experience, which acts as a referential background against which the unfamiliar can be conceived and processed" ("The Act of Reading", 38). Iser has received much criticism for his concept's allegedly apolitical and ahistorical quality. In this study, the concept helps to

grasp Everett's texts' readerly involvement precisely because they do not cater to a specific readership but create their own audience. Everett's establishment of new mode(l)s of reading literature labeled as "African American," true, comes at the risk of readerly misrecognition (see discussion of *Glyph*). Readerly exclusion, in turn, is not an Everett-specific problem, but an issue connected to educational access and thus America's reading culture, in general, as I am going to argue below (see "What is (Not) African American Literature").

In Everett's texts, this theoretical vision of the text, as Anthony Stewart points out, seems to confront readers and critics with "some sort of either/or choice-compromise" between its theoretical aspirations and its fulfillment of the expectations associated with the "limited and limiting" label of "African American literature" ("Theoretical Blackness," 218). Who is Everett's "implied" reader, then? Undoubtedly, his texts address an academy-affiliated if not academically trained audience. This may inspire some scholars to raise objections of elitism. These objections are both problematic and absolutely appropriate. Measured by the commercial standards of black urban fiction, which *erasure* so adamantly satirizes, for instance, Everett's writing, is, by all means, elitist. True, one could say that the author has deviated from these standards in a peculiar fashion, discarding economic concerns in favor of the controversial ideal of artistic autonomy. Recognizing Everett's drive towards aesthetic innovation should neither be predicated on the reductive notion of art being an isolated segment of society nor of avant-gardism being reserved for a few eccentric geniuses. On the other hand, we should not hesitate to emphasize the simple but crucial fact that artistic autonomy (often) comes at a professional cost that Everett has been able to pay. The problem is that minority artists are often reduced to their racially ascribed subject-positions without the structures shaping these positions being considered. The dangerous conflation between this subject-position and a writer's respective authorial position-taking betrays a symptomatic fixation on the individual artist. Everett's innovatory impetus, significantly, has taken him into areas both considered pop- (the Western) and high-culture (Greek mythology). It is important to note that Everett has gradually shifted his focus from the high-brow sector of theory to the pop-cultural mainstream of film. I am going to say more about the case-specific constellation throughout the following text-hermeneutic section of this study.

Notes of a Native Novelist

Institutional Blackness and Critical Uplift in the Self-Help Satire *Glyph*

It is one thing for a race to produce artistic material; it is quite another thing for it to produce the ability to interpret and criticize this material.
W.E.B. Du Bois

Give us Negro life and experience in all the arts but with a third dimension of universalized common-denominator humanity.
Alain Locke

We want poems that kill.
Amiri Baraka

The 'blackness' of black American literature [...defines] specific uses of literary language that are shared, repeated, critiqued, and revised.
Henry Louis Gates, Jr.

I am a complete reading system.
Ralph

Ralph, the Terrifying Black Toddler That Can Write a Paragraph

In his seminal essay "Notes of a Native Son" (1955), James Baldwin defines being black in the United States as "never [being] looked at but simply at the mercy of the reflexes the color of one's skin cause[s] in other people" (93). Published in 1999, *Glyph* provides insight into the experience of a black writer who is an allegorical victim of the reading "reflexes" that govern the reception of literary texts labeled as "African American."[80] More specifically, this black writer suffers from the institutionalized disconnect between race and theory.[81]

The satiric novel recounts the first four years of Ralph Townsend's coming-of-very-early-age, a black baby, who is gifted with an IQ of 475, a photographic memory and the linguistic acumen of a deconstructionist doyen. Reading and writing fiction and (his own) theory (thereof), the Nietzschean "überbaby" formulates a literary-philosophical treatise on Western models of reason, meaning and language, in short, "knowledge" as we (grownups) know it. In so doing, Ralph sparks a categori(c)al chaos, triggering and complicating the identificatory impulses of his (non-) fictional counterparts. This chaos has wide-ranging institutional implications. I claim that *Glyph* can be read as a satiric commentary on the establishment of African American literature as an object and discipline of literary inquiry. Ralph's expansive reading project offers a self-help study of critical uplift. Its playfully emancipatory agenda centers on the expressive principle, on which this literary institutionalization has been based:

the black vernacular. Ralph's lack thereof defines *Glyph*'s programmatic ambivalence as a "black" text that questions the ways we read (for) race.

Thus, the "voice" of *Glyph*'s narrating "I" belongs to an extremely smart, snarky and completely mute master of language. Ralph asserts that his muteness is an "expression" of silent revolt against his linguistic initiation, on which he comments accordingly: "My parents, however, clawing at speech like sick cats, could not fathom my *lack of interest* in parroting their sounds" (5); "*Choosing* not to engage in speech had its drawbacks, among them an inability to summon help from the next room" (49, my emphases). Rather than imitate his parents' oral attempts at meaning-making, Ralph prioritizes textual knowledge-reception and -production. At the age of ten months, the brainy baby "not only comprehend[s] all that they [are] saying but […marks] time with a running commentary on the value and sense of their babbling" scribbled on small notes (6). He spends the nights in his crib reading his way through what seems to be the entire Western tradition of philosophy, language-theory, criticism and literature. Drawing supplies from his parents' library, he reads *everything*, from the service manual of their 1963 Saab to "the Bible, the Koran, all of Swift, all of Sterne, *Invisible Man*, Baldwin, Joyce, Balzac, Auden, Roethke" (17). Ralph's reading survey enlists programmatic pairs: two major religious texts; probably the two most influential Anglophone writers of humor (Swift the preeminent satirist, Sterne the most famous humorist); the two African American writers most important to Everett – Ellison, the doyen of novelistic modernism (represented by his opus magnum), and Baldwin, the famous race critic; two major European novelists - Joyce the most important modernist, Balzac a great representative of the social novel, and, finally, two poets, one British (W.H. Auden), one American (Theodore Roethke), some would claim, the most accomplished of their generation. With this synopsis Ralph sets the agenda for his aesthetic program, introducing his characteristic strategy of working *in-between* ontological and epistemological, aesthetic and political, satiric and humoristic, as well as novelistic and poetic registers. Favorably reading novels, the brainy baby dissects and comments on various texts, arguments and ideas, compiling his creative and critical output in a theoretical tractate on his worldly adventures.

Based in 1970's Los Angeles, Ralph grows up as the only-child of the black middle-class Townsend family. He is fostered and supplied with books by his mother Eve, an amateur painter of non-representational art. Eve shares her son's appreciation for art as a mode of engagement with the world that is not as readily accessible for critical (e-) valuation as Inflato would have it. She is the first to recognize and foster Ralph's exceptional talent, supplying the baby with books after testing his capabilities by reading Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*

Logico-Philosophicus (1921) to him. Ralph is feared as a "freak" by his father Douglas, whom Everett's protagonist names "Inflato" and antagonizes as an unoriginal novelist and slumping critic that champions poststructuralism as the fashionable critical mindset of the day. His father's signature notion, that "nobody is fooled by fiction anymore. Writing is the only thing. Criticism is my art" (11), is abhorrent to Ralph. "[S]educed, or fooled, by the language [his father] had chosen, though claiming a simple awareness of discourse" (12), Ralph derides Inflato for his disproportionate (or "inflated") academic aplomb and opportunistic obsession with the critic/celebrity Roland Barthes, whose fictionalized alter ego visits his university. At the order of his father, Ralph is tested by the psychologist Dr. Steimmel, who then kidnaps the baby in order to exploit it as a scientific sensation. From his crib-shaped niche of intellectual and cultural excellence, Everett's centromarginal character is vaulted into "the world of bad weather, people and ideas" (57), embarking upon a tumultuous excursion through a starkly satirized American scene of fame-craving scientists, cold-war-bred government agents and military executives, religious fundamentalists, as well as sensationalist news reporters. Ralph, thus, is abducted, tested, and trained in the name of science, national security, and God. After a carnivalesque brawl involving all of these fractions, the baby is finally reunited with his mother.

Glyph is a generic contrafact of the artist's novel, academic and the picaresque novel, a political thriller dime-novel and a research paper. The text combines socio-critical analysis with a theoretical meta-discourse on language, whose formal organization features various classic postmodern principles. In so doing, it puts emphasis on (higher) education and the theme of uplift, which the novel pioneers in the Everett's post-millennial subset of racial satire. Staging a crisis of epistemological *and* ontological proportions, *Glyph* satirizes doctrinal knowledge-production and hegemonic power-abuse. Its protagonist is at the center of an absurd constellation, which is based on a characteristically Everett strategy: incongruity. Ralph is a baby genius, a toddler philosopher.[82] What makes this discrepancy particularly comical is that Ralph constantly suffers from boredom in the face of both intellectual excellence and grave danger. He responds to external input, even that in written form by established theorists, with a mild disrespect, as if being *under-challenged*. He is a *poeta doctus*, who lectures his fellow fictional characters – all adults – on their intellectual shortcomings and ideological biases. Ralph, simply speaking, represents anti-dogmatism *as such*. The brainy baby's peculiar predisposition, his intellectual capability of challenging *any* established idea, individual or institution makes him a subversive singularity, the mere "possibility" of which, as Dr. Steimmel concludes, "would terrify the nation" (166). Ralph

inflicts a *taxonomic terror* upon *Glyph*'s story-world, thwarting what Michel Foucault terms the "taxonomic impulse" of the Western episteme.[83]

As the constant "object of attention, if not discussion" (95), Ralph is received as a "radical," who "exist[s] in the margins of sense, perhaps even as a vague shape or form on the horizon of logic, [by laying claim to the] existential affirmative statement, *i.e.*, *there is at least one baby who can write a paragraph*, […] denies the possibility of universals" (206).[84] In the story's latter cartoonish, cross-cultural adventure-section, various scientific, political and religious entities attempt to abduct and appropriate the toddler by re-classifying him as "an evolutionary burst" (51), "the perfect spy" (111), "a miracle" (146), and "the devil's baby" (193). Ralph, utterly exposed to the cultural contingencies of *Glyph*'s fictional universe, is being put in labs, high-security facilities, and categories. In the truest sense, the baby is a prisoner of people's prejudices, the victim of a form of misrecognition, which Pierre Bourdieu describes as "an alienated cognition that looks at the world through categories the world imposes" (*The Logic of Practice*, 140-41). His abductors, thus, constantly deny Ralph's humanity, relegating his personhood to what the baby is not, namely a "subject" (of experimental treatment; 57/107). Obviously, these habitualized attempts at taxonomic integration fail to come to terms with Ralph. Rather, they reveal, qua sequential similarity, varying symptoms of societal corruption. All of these – scientific dogmatism, militant nationalism and religious fundamentalism – cohere around a common concern: language.

In the Literary Lab of the Brilliant Black Baby's Mind: Aesthetic Vision and Fictive Space

At the root of *Glyph*'s radical reconsideration of both natural language and what Yuri Lotman describes as its "secondary modelling systems," the cultural, aesthetic, religious and scientific frameworks of world-understanding, is Ralph's refusal to speak (*Universe of the Mind*). His *native* intellectual, linguistic and literary capabilities challenge preconceived notions of (spoken) language as the primordial principle of human initiation, individuation and civilization. He thus ironically literalizes what Noam Chomsky conceives as a "generative grammar", the innate ability to adopt *any* language. Rather than entering and experiencing the social world by learning to speak, Ralph achieves a pre-mature knowledge of it by reading. Tellingly, he begins to write during the primordial phase of language-acquisition (18 months), which *clearly* marks Ralph as a fiction and obviates any (reductive) representational reading of *Glyph*. Ralph, thus, raises fundamental questions about human identity and sociality.

"I am child and all I see," Ralph proclaims accordingly, "is infinitely beyond my grasp, my understanding, my consciousness" (5). But, adds Ralph, my

> unconsciousness is what my father and my mother were just sick with anxiety over. They paced and worried aloud to each other about what I might sense in their tone, in their manner, but failed at every turn to attend to the very words they spoke, saying anything they pleased in front of me, wondering aloud to each other whether I had Uncle Toby's ears – *they're just so huge* -, commenting on my slow rate of attaining a full pate of hair, and above all else, paining at my seeming inability to adopt language. But while they stewed, I watched and contemplated potential and actual infinities and interestingly I found that there is no space between the two, that the arrow may indeed halve the distance to its target until the cows come home, but the target and the arrow situated together in my field of vision were therefore in the same place and so the arrow was there and not there, making Zeno both right and wrong. (ibid)

Ralph here evokes Zeno (c. 490-430 B.C.). This Greek thinker is an important figure for Everett's poetological project in and beyond *Glyph* because his offers a philosophical point of entry into language and meaning that thrives on paradox and contingency (cf. Stewart "Theoretical Blackness"). The pre-Socratic philosopher sought to defend his mentor Parmenides and the latter's anti-pluralist stance by way of paradoxical arguments. In the "Arrow" paradox, Zeno turns the theory of plurality (the notion that reality is divisible and changing) against itself. He argues that what moves is always in the now, i.e. *in* an instant, suggesting that during one of these instants a flying arrow occupies a space equal to itself. The question is, then, where does the motion actually occur? If the total term of the arrow's movement is exclusively composed of instants (of a motionless arrow), the arrow cannot be moving. Before the arrow arrives at its destination, it arrives at the infinite halves of its divisible distance. Zeno arrives at this logical impasse by assuming the pluralist notion that time is (infinitely) divisible into instants (and *nothing* else), each of which lasts zero seconds. Without time, there is no speed, obviously. Assuming that instants are indivisible (as tiny as they may be), in order for the arrow to at least move a tiny bit its movement has to have a start and an end, thus making it divisible again and Zeno, paradoxically, "both right and wrong." In *Glyph*, Zeno's arrow symbolizes the inherent in/stability of meaning (to be) pinned down with words.

Not only is Ralph fully able to wield the significational power of language. He is capable of coming to terms – in the truest sense – with the elementary dynamics of human perception and emotion. Everything the brainy baby "sees," i.e. apprehends and processes, crucially concerns his

> having skipped what Steimmel would have wanted to call a symbolic or imaginary stage in my development, a prelinguistic rite of passage, a necessary inconvenience during which they [my parents and Dr. Steimmel] expected to have enormous influence. But my thinking was *organized*; the time during which I was to roughly

> come to understand the delimiting of my body I used to form a personality, changing, as we always are changing, but knowing more than the parts of my body and their relations. Indeed, the claim might be made that because I lacked the prelinguistic clutter, the subtextual litter, I actually understood language better than any adult. (43)

Everett's protagonist represents the "link" between what the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan has famously conceptualized as the two crucial registers of identity formation: the *imaginary* and the *symbolic* order (cf. Dr. Steimmel's assessment on page 51). Lacan's concept of the "mirror stage" defines the fundamental framework of the production of subjectivity *prior* to thinking and language. It designates both a historical phenomenon in child-development and "an ontological structure of the human world," which governs human subjectivity beyond infant age. In the former sense, it represents, in "an exemplary situation [of jubilant but ambivalent self-assertion,] the symbolic matrix in which the *I* is precipitated in a primordial form, prior to being objectified in the dialectic of identification with the other, and before language restores to it, in the universal, its function as subject" ("The Mirror Stage as Formative of the *I* Function," 1949, 76). The imaginary, thus, is the order of images and imagination, where the interplay between sensory perception and visual appearance shapes our negotiation of the inner and the outer world in a fantasy-like state of (self-) recognition.

In Lacan's theory, the child develops a first sense of self in a process of objectification, by apprehending its own image in the mirror. Between six and eighteenth months, the child is yet unable to control its own body while already being able to see. The discrepancy between the infant's perception of itself as a synthetic whole in the "specular image" and its experience of corporeal incapacity fosters a primordial sense of self-fragmentation. To resolve this tension, the child identifies with its specular image, what Lacan terms the "'ideal-I'." The "mirror stage," Lacan postulates, fosters "an alienated, virtual unity" of the self (*Seminar II*, 50). Because the subject "only perceives the unity of this specific image from the outside, and in an anticipated manner […,] all the objects of his world are always structured around the wandering shadow of his own ego" (*Seminar II*, 166). Through this asymptotical alignment between the "*I*'s mental permanence […and] its alienating destination," the ego (*moi*) is created through a fundamental misrecognition, what Lacan terms "méconnaissance" (ibid). "[B]eing captivated by an analogy and suspending [its] disbelief," the child retains an ambivalent mastery over its own self in dependence on the mother (Gallop *Reading Lacan*, 78). Trapped in this circuit of longing for completeness bound to realize its alienation, the infant develops a desire to have its specular image ratified. This desire is directed at its omnipotent supporter, whose central figure for Lacan is the mother, who represents the promise of future self-integrity (cf. *Seminar XI*, 235).

This dependency is disrupted by the symbolic figure of the father. He severs the relationship between mother and child by way of his authority, compelling the infant to channel its demands of the mother through speech, thus enframing it within language. The father, thus, actuates the child's transition from the imaginary to the symbolic order. The symbolic stage, discussed by Lacan in his essay "The Function and Field of Speech and Language" (also known as the "Rome Discourse," 1953), is the "order of the subject," which represents "the register of language, social exchange, and radical subjectivity" (Gallop *Reading Lacan*, 59). It spans those cultural, political and religious structures of social reality, in which the symbols of these discursive formations have the power to emerge and encroach upon the individual's self- and world-view.[85] The child's symbolic initiation provides the basis for the creation of a seemingly unified self, the symbolic "I" (*je*). "The form in which language is expressed itself," Lacan asserts accordingly, "defines subjectivity […] I identify myself in language, but only by losing myself in it like an object" ("The Function and Field of Speech and Language," 85-86). Against this continual sense of loss and lack, language enables the child to indulge in the illusion of self-integrity and –mastery. Contrasting with the symbolic sphere of social interaction, the imaginary, in turn, "is the realm where intersubjective structures are covered over by mirroring." Thus, Gallop concludes, "Lacan's writings contain an implicit ethical imperative to break the mirror, an imperative to disrupt the imaginary in order to reach 'the symbolic'" (59). Ralph has breached the imaginary "wall of language" that inverts and distorts the discourse of the Other, which according to Lacan, is the unconscious (cf. "Seminar on the Purloined Letter," 32). The baby's mind, thus, represents the aesthetic site of the unmediated interplay between the unconscious and language in *both* its imaginary and symbolic dimensions.

Ralph's refusal to speak, thus, signifies a radical departure from the established structures of language, human sociality and, significantly, *community*. Severing the traditional link between language and objects (Plato) and language and subjectivity (Lacan), Ralph's experiential engagement with the world is – from the very beginning – mediated through the aesthetic language of literature. In contrast to his fellow fictional adults' linguistic "stratification," Ralph not only complicates the notion of language as a pre-established, stable and teachable system of self-identification and –expression.[86] The baby, cannot be integrated into the established social framework, as he breaks basic rules of linguistic exchange and thus human interaction (cf. Paul Grice's cooperation principle). In terms of societal indoctrination, in turn, Ralph resists what Louis Althusser seminally defined as "interpellation," the social process of subject-constitution, what, in sociological terms, defines the reflexive process of

reconciling one's self-image with one's perceived image by the other ("social validation feedback loop"). In the American realm of the "color-line," as W.E.B. Du Bois has famously argued, this process results in a "double-consciousness," which blacks acquire by internalizing of the image of denigration projected onto them by whites (*The Souls of Black Folk*, 2). Ralph bypasses or at least complicates this socio-psychological process.

With his central character, Everett's literary text thus provides us insight into a virtual reality through the "I"'s of a toddler, who is *technically* able to grasp *Glyph*'s storyworld but has yet to *learn* about the world. This virtual reality translates into an aesthetic vision of social reality as fictive space.[87] In order to develop his own "Theory of Fictive Space" (194-200), which he appends *within* the text of the novel as a theoretical tractate, Ralph choses two crucial intellectual allies: Piet Mondrian (1872-1944), the Dutch constructivist painter, and Ludwig Wittgenstein, the British-Austrian language-philosopher (1889-1951). In the text's single most programmatic statement, Ralph is

> relaxing in the corner […,] four years old now, and tucked away writing this. Writing myself into being? I think not. Doing more than surface, novelistic rendering? I think not. […] My emotional makeup is a sculpture, a marble real-world representation of the real world. Buoys float in my tears and toy boats collect about the buoys. Mondrian considered his work "New Realism," claiming to see in nature what it was he represented, however cold and mathematical and empty. […] The world I see has no hard edges like his and it is full of symbols, but not simply symbols or my language's symbols, but reality's own symbols. (16)

Mondrian is famous for having pioneered an abstract or non-representational approach to painting, for which he developed an aesthetic vocabulary whose "symbols" were radically reduced to geometrical shapes and essential colors. In Everett's daring thought-experiment, Ralph disconnects the traditional – realist – link between reality and art, suggesting that every aspect of the social world can be related (back) to an aesthetic kernel. This, essentially, is a move to challenge the tacit hierarchy not only between art and reality but between fiction and factuality. Accordingly, Ralph's theoretical tractate reads:

> "B.AHA) Every story has an internal logic and the breaking of a logic becomes a part of that logic. Therefore, within fictive space all is logical, provided the limits of the space remain intact. […] B.BB) A story is true. B.BBA) A story represents itself. B.BBB) A story may disagree with reality. B.BBC) Reality may be false when regarded within a corresponding fictive space. B.BBD) Reality has spatial and conceptual limitations. C) Nothing is a story but a story." (200)

Ralph's "Theory of Fictive Space" is a contrafactum of the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1921), Wittgenstein's controversial criticism of metaphysics, in which he performs philosophical inquiry as a *practice* of language-criticism. Ralph's alignment with the controversial theorist Wittgenstein attests to Everett's promotion of language as a situational and unstable system of signification. Throughout the novel, Ralph draws on both

Wittgenstein's early *and* later project (of the *Blue Books* and *Philosophical Investigations* published posthumously in 1953). While in the former Wittgenstein dwells on the illogical, imponderable aspects of language (consider his notion of the "disposable ladder"), he re-emphasizes language's social functioning in the latter (consider his notion of "language-games," as well as the so-called "private-language argument" and its associated experiment of the "beetle in the box"). The "meaning is use" doctrine, which undergirds Wittgenstein's later project, posits language as a rule-based communicative tool dependent on two principles of dynamic meaning-exchange in everyday language-use, namely context-dependency and – adaptability.

Ralph's proclamation of fiction's *structural* integrity (in the sense of "fictive space") can be read as an attempt to carve out a spot for (his own work of) literary art, to assert its tangible reality contra its relegation to a mimetic supplement of reality. *Glyph*'s diegetic domain represents a "playpen prison" (24), whose reality Ralph envisions like a crib mobile.[88] As a symbol of play and education, as well as perspectival shift, the mobile connotes the (intellectual) mobility, which for Ralph is fundamentally at stake in confronting institutional consolidation and ideological appropriation: "[t]hrough reading I had built a world, a complete world, my world, and in it, I could live, not helplessly as I did in the world of my parents" (17).[89] In *Glyph*, the amount of mobility granted to Ralph, meaning the symbolic dimensions of his allegorical predicament, depends on the reader in a programmatic way.

The novel, I argue, aims at creating or fostering a specific sort of aesthetic sensitivity by inviting its reader to read against the conventional framework, in which "African American" texts are placed: the sociological framework of racial realism. Discarding central statutes of the realist novel, *Glyph* completely lacks any sort of verisimilitude (a "true-to-life," i.e. authentic depiction of reality), as well as any kind of character-development regarding its protagonist. Rather, the novel is inscribed into a non-fictional, white-codified discourse, making us ponder the problematic question of what *theory* should have to do with the so-called African American experience. *Glyph*, thus, can be read through two intersecting semantic lenses, one experimental, and one allegorical. Generally speaking, Ralph represents a thought-experiment, pushing the boundaries of human intelligence and theoretical expertise to speculate on Ralph's social repercussions. In the Quintilian sense of an extended metaphor, in turn, the black baby can be read as an allegory, namely of African American literature *as such*. Everett dares us to conceive the baby's confinement as emblematic for the critical curtailment of black literary innovation. As a variant of the archetypal American self-made man, Ralph is a self-taught critic, who has pulled himself up by his own book sheets, as it

were. Reading against the *totalizing* tendencies of dogmas and disciplines, Ralph emblematizes an ironic notion of critical uplift.

In the following subchapters, I am going to first delineate the particulars of Ralph's reading approach and subsequently relate them to the institutional discourses of race that *Glyph* (re-) negotiates.

"I Am An [In-]Complete Reading System": Formal Infantilism and the Hermeneutics of Boredom

Glyph, simply speaking, is a book about reading, or more specifically, readings. An exceptionally and prematurely gifted reader (and writer) of fiction and theory, Ralph represents a certain method of critical thinking, but also of critical reading. He can, hence, be read as a conceptual kaleidoscope of various notions of creation, ideation and interpretation both from the thought-traditions of metaphysics and (early-/post-) modern (anti-metaphysical) philosophy and critical theory:

- *the classical ideal of the artist*[90]
- *the Renaissance ideal of craftsmanship*[91]
- *the Romanticist notion of genius*[92]
- *Biblical exegesis*[93]
- *Humanist hermeneutics*[94]
- *Form-centered analysis*
  - i) Formalism (and the modernist turn towards form and structure)
  - ii) New Criticism (text-immanent interpretation)
- *Post/Structuralist criticism*
  - i) Semiotics (Roland Barthes)
  - ii) Psychoanalysis (Jacques Lacan)
  - iii) Discourse-Analysis (Michel Foucault)
  - iv) Deconstruction (Jacques Derrida)
  - v) Reader-Response-Theory[95]
  - vi) Speech Act Theory[96]
  - vii) Postmodernism[97]
- *Race-Related Research*
  - i) Critical Race Theory
  - ii) Whiteness Studies
  - iii) African American Studies (see discussion)

This by no means comprehensive list of potential (language-theoretical) readings is a statement in and of itself. However, if we seek to do justice to Ralph's project, it is very much irrelevant, after all. *Glyph* celebrates what the poststructuralist revolution in the Euro-American humanities has helped to establish as common sense: that there is no single, consistent and ideologically-indifferent (reading of a) literary text. Ralph seems to be "living proof" that fiction, though ultimately dependent on language as it is socially acquired and used, precedes or exceeds the limits of linguistic signification defined in conventional frameworks of "sense," "truth," or "reality." In this regard, Everett's novel ties in with an overarching trend in literature that followed the poststructural turn, namely the theoretical shift towards the reception-side of the literary transfer. With a decidedly reader-centered, metafictional focus on literature, the novel's main aim is to undermine the interpretive authority of the *critic*, who, one could argue, tacitly took the *author*'s place in the poststructuralist paradigm-shift. This impetus is inscribed into the novel's title.

The novel's title signals this programmatic focus on textuality and interpretation. As a sculptured mark or symbol, "Glyph" prompts a terminological correlation with "hieroglyph." Considering the cultural connotations of its etymological variant "hieroglyph," Everett's novel alludes to Derrida's seminal notion of writing as a dangerous *supplement.* Complicating the notion of writing as an unstable derivative of speech, which lacks the latter's presence of the speaker and thus its communicative consistency, the text privileges what the Derrida scholar Christopher Norris states about "other kinds of writing – for instance, the ancient Egyptian or Chinese – [namely that they] operate according to a wholly different logic, one that goes straight from the idea itself to a graphic inscription on the page." Christopher Norris. *Derrida.* 69. The notion of extraction or expression is ironicized in the phonetic structure of "Glyph", too, which shows a peculiar resemblance with the narrator's name "Ralph". With the exception of the location of the consonant [**l**] both words share a pronunciation-progression from the back of the mouth to the lips: uvular plosive [**g**] – lateral approximant [**l**] – close-mid vowel [**ɪ**] – labio-dental fricative [**f**]. Thus, Everett's novel implicitly provokes us to read *Glyph* as Ralph and vice versa, i.e. the narrator as text and vice versa. Ralph's encapsulation in written text (as his sole means of self-expression through written notes) corresponds with the articulatory movement from the internal to the external, i.e. from the back of the mouth to the lips. It hints at Ralph's corporeal confinement, i.e. the baby's self-willed refusal to get his point across the symbolic line of its articulatory end organ, i.e. the

mouth. This corporeal demarcation corresponds with the Saussurean sign based on the split between the signifier (sound-image) and the (vocalized) signified (concept).

"Glyph" thus not only alludes to semiotics, i.e. the scientific study of signs and their structural and ideological dimensions. It also denotes the journal *Glyph*, which was issued between 1977 and 1981 (later renamed *Representations*) and served as the crucial organ for the institutionalization of poststructuralist theory in the United States. The journal's blurb strongly resonates with Ralph's impetus: "Situated in the crosscurrents of continental and Anglo-American developments, *Glyph* provides an international forum for articulating a common set of problems that not only cuts across traditional academic divisions but also calls into question the very status of such divisions." In harking back to the post-structuralist revolution, Ralph retraces what Jane Gallop identifies as the "elitist, canonical and ahistorical" tendencies in the transition from New Criticism to the American branch of Deconstruction ("The Historicization of Literary Studies and the Fate of Close Reading," 182).

This prompts to the central paradox around which Everett's text has been constructed. Precisely because of its extensive engagement with poststructuralist theory, *Glyph* seems to demand a reader well-versed in this particular theory, if not an academic reader institutionally trained in this particularly theoretical school, in order for its general message to be grasped. In typical Everettian fashion, *Glyph* creates a striking irony, by forcing any critic – such as yours truly – to face the distinct disadvantage if not utter irrelevance in tackling Ralph. If anything, the list of readings presented above serves the function of highlighting that all of these interpretative angles are necessarily insufficient and, like Wittgenstein's famous ladder, to be climbed and discarded (cf. *Tractatus*). The question, which thus arises, is: what makes literature so much more fit for what Everett has in mind here than poststructuralist theory, which in and of itself champions the inherent irreducibility and fluidity of meaning and has used this theoretical insight to make political claims about culture and social life? What, in essence, is the theoretical work enabled by (this piece of) fiction? What, in addition, are we to make of the discrepancy between this intellectually daring project's author and his extremely high-IQed narrator? Can a narrator be more intelligent than its creator, after all? Isn't it true that a text somehow always "knows" more than its creator, because it is created through the reading process, in the first place? Obviously, we are facing an intriguing puzzle, one that bears the potential of extensive readerly self-reflection. On the other hand, *Glyph* may prompt a relevant critique: that it is an elitist text, one that is highly selective and exclusive in postulating a well-educated reader.

Again, it is important to point out that Everett – in this particular text – is inscribed into a *scholarly* discourse. If the novel posits an academic reader, this is owed to the fact that it wants to be read as an academic intervention. After all, *Glyph* is a self-proclaimed "Deconstruction Paper," with the latter word crossed-out, i.e. written "under erasure" in the Derridean sense. It wants to be read as deconstructionist project *in the making*. With this de-emphasization of writing as a *product* (implicit in "paper," notice the academic connotation) the text de-prioritizes the *producer* of this "paper." Putting the text itself and, by extension, literary textuality as such center stage, Everett invites us to read Ralph as *Glyph* and *Glyph* as Ralph. While various scholars have pointed out this textual analogy, no one has specifically related it to the novel's satiric project of critical uplift. The baby, after all, forms a strategic union of the novel's operational units: a narrator-writer-reader triad. Ralph represents a *principle* of reading governing a programmatically infantile text. The symbiotic relationship between Ralph and *Glyph* manifests in the parallelism between the text's defining incongruities: *babiness – intellectualism* and *theory – genre fiction*.

Everett's protagonist is a member of a cohort of fictional (child-) characters, rascals, pranksters and rogues subsumed under the tradition of tricksterism and picarism. This literary lineage spans from Tristram Shandy (notice that both Ralph and Tristram share an uncle named Toby, 5), Don Quixote (referenced on page 74), tar baby (to which Ralph's large ears allude; cf. Feith, 305), topsy (the archetypal "pickaninny" of Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*), Huck Finn (Ralph's father has the same name as the widow Douglas, who adopts and attempts to "sivilize" Huck), Maisie (the famous title-character of Henry James' portrait of a crisis-ridden marriage) to Alice in Wonderland (notice that Ralph's mother changes her name to Alice at the end of the novel). Entering the fictional world of *Glyph* compares to a descent into a "rabbit hole," as it were, a highly complex diegetic structure with multiple layers of meaning, in which theoretical digressions into various disciplinary domains and satiric excursions into various social sectors abound. Showing a characteristic proclivity for pranks and other childish tricks, Ralph lures others into sticky situations – the reader included – making them the victim of their own assumptions about Ralph's racial identity, for instance (see "Assuming Whiteness, Reading Blackness").

As the voiceless voice of an autodiegetic narration, Ralph shares features of the hermeneutical and semiotic model of character. Structuralist accounts define a fictional character as a human-like fictional entity capable of thought and action, which is culturally rooted in the historical context of their fictional being and literary creation. From the triad of onto-experiential perception, intentional action and expression, which traditionally point to the

fictional "existence" of a character, *Glyph* prioritizes perception and speech (or language, more generally). As has been discussed above, Ralph's main means of engagement with *Glyph*'s fictional world are eyesight and writing. His physical mobility remains severely limited throughout the story, except for its successful attempt to escape from Dr. Davis followed by its rapid abduction by government agents. At least since Aristotle, characters are fundamentally associated with action and plot. *Glyph* seems to systematically sever this traditional link, except for Ralph's opening move to disclose his capabilities, which, by intent, leads to ultimately "fatal" crisis of his parents' relationship. This subversive incentive to "move things along" (7) has been considered as indicative of Ralph's status as a *trickster* figure (cf. Feith). Hermeneutical models, in turn, often relegate fictional persona to a textual structure of attributes (or "codes," cf. Barthes seminal study *S/Z*, 1970) associated with a proper name or pronoun. Barthes terms the (re-) construction of these characterial characteristics the "process of nomination," the intrinsically "erratic" attempt "to name, to subject the sentences of a text to a semantic transformation" (*The Pleasure of the Text*, 92). The ambivalence of this transformation is inscribed into the "Proper Name," which "enables the person to exist outside the semes, whose sum nonetheless constitutes it entirely. As soon as a Name exists (even a pronoun to flow toward and fasten onto), the semes become predicates, inductors of truth, and the Name becomes a subject." (ibid, 190-91). Ralph's conflicting semantic qualities of "babiness" and "ingenuity" do not hinder his fundamental identification as character. This is owed to the fact that in fiction, as Fotis Jannidis reminds us, identity is first and foremost a phenomenon of referential recurrence and not of onto-experiential consistency (*Figur und Person*, 138). Fictional identity, thus, is not an ontological or semantic but a communicative category, a character not *merely* a linguistic unit but a linguistically *constructed* conceptual unit (147). From this communicative angle, Jannidis concludes, a fictional character that complicates consistent notions of narrative probability or causality, always only reflects on (the premises of) its creation and *not* its designation (130).

Like all of Everett's main characters, Ralph Townsend is clearly *marked* as a fiction, both in ontological and nominal regards. Wondering, whether there is "a kind of ideal *Ralph*, Ralphness perhaps, a kind of denotation while my private *Ralph* was just a connotative manifestation of *Ralph*" (77), the baby-narrator pinpoints the discrepancy between the name's function as a designator of identity (in the conventional sense of self-*identicalness*) and its inflationary use in the *social* world. In *Glyph*, the referential *exclusiveness* of "Ralph" is undermined, as the baby undergoes an extensive process of re-naming (see discussion). Ralph's role as narrating "I" focuses on the first-person pronoun, of which Ralph has nothing to say except "where would *I* be without it and that there is no situation more self-affirming as

seeing *I* to *I* with oneself" (181). Highlighting the self-referential quality of the letter "I," this homonymic analogy between the first-person pronoun and the eye signals that Ralph's reading "I" functions as a receptive proxy, a reading mask. Simply speaking, Ralph defines a specific way of approaching (his) literary art: with a fresh pair of eyes, in the truest sense, namely those of an exceptionally talented toddler.
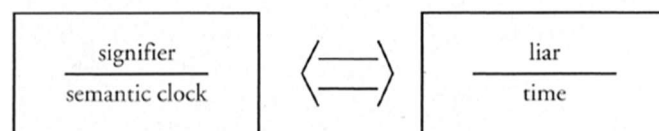
Ralph's reading-model implements various institutionalized modes of reading and their disciplinary investments in consensual criteria of research and argumentation. The baby draws on the chief advancement of poststructural theory and criticism, which has been the systematic excavation of the ideological foundation of culturally consolidated discourses, specifically those discursive practices that operate under the premise of universality, objectivity, factuality, neutrality, or what Rita Felski has famously described as a distinct type of scholarly skepticism. Ralph is the target of oppressive models of thought such as these, which tend to reinscribe the hegemonic order by assigning value to notions of the "natural" or "neutral" or "critical" in favor of the dominant race, class, gender, or discursive formation.

Echoing what Friedrich Nietzsche described as a "mistrust [of] all systematizers […who suffer from] a lack of integrity" ("Twilight of the Idols," 470), the baby draws on various interrogative principles associated with these thought-traditions, while turning these modes and methods of thinking and text-inquiry against themselves. For this, Ralph uses various elements from a host of literary, critical, scientific, political, military and religious languages. His solipsistic status as a baby enframed in text can be read as a sort of infantile "ivory-towerism," ironizing the stereotypical predilection towards abstraction and unworldliness of academics. Also, Ralph reverses the linear "application" of theory to text, drawing his theory from fiction. The baby mocks, too, academese (characterized by excessive verbosity and obscurity), military "acronymism" (excessive short-cutting), as well as religious forms of symbolism (parabolic/allegorical language). Its methodological apparatus comprises the various milestones of metaphysical and anti-metaphysical theory. Ralph adapts the argumentative methods of the Platonic dialogue (featuring historical and fictional personae from Socrates to James Baldwin), the syllogism and the ontological argument, as well as Descartes' famous dictum of the "cogito," the New Critical strategy of close reading, structuralist sign-criticism and poststructuralist binary-dissection.[98]

Ralph compiles his creative and critical output in a formally complex amalgamation of an eight-part research paper and the literary genres of the Bildungsroman, the artist's novel, the picaresque and the academic novel. He portrays his formative years as a writer in brief (< one page long) paragraphs of realist narrative discourse that are divided by Deconstructionist

nomenclature. This scholarly vocabulary serves as paragraph-headings and subheadings throughout the eight sections introduced with the letters A to H.[99] Semiotic graphs and formulas, as well as logical equations complement lists of keywords, the initial letters of which are congruent with the eight sections' alphabetical order, and serially numbered footnotes, which begin anew with each of the eight sections. In addition to various citations (from the Bible and Foucault's *Madness and Civilization* to a song by the "Carter Family"), aphoristic bits, knock-knock jokes, morphological riddles, fourteen poems (about body-parts relating to speech), two letters (between Bertrand Russel and Ludwig Wittgenstein, and Inflato and Derrida) and two short stories by Ralph complement the main narrative.

In what I conceive as a *formal infantilism*, Everett dares us to read *Glyph* as a mock-mimetic representation of Ralph's aesthetic vision. The baby, in other words, has a habit of going on a tangent, for he is constantly bored with everything he sees or encounters. Thus, the novel's plotline is frequently intersected with theoretical excursions, both in continuous text and in footnotes. The brainy baby's short attention-span and holistic perception seem to correspond with the text's fragmented composition, resulting in a veritable "source-mania." Tellingly, the baby manipulates many of the papers, novels and other texts, on which he draws (cf. Berben-Masi, 227). In this sense, Ralph's puerility betrays his playful (mis-) use of the titles and topics of sources. *Glyph*'s multi-textual composition, though overall consistently structured (notice that the pattern of chapter-division alters only slightly throughout the eight sections), borders – at times – on that particular scholarly megalomania, which Ralph, ultimately, seeks to debunk. This "wink of complicity" (Berben-Masi, 227), already implicit in the liar/time split visualized in Ralph first semiotic graph, can be read as both a gesture of transparency and provocation towards the reader to enter *Glyph*'s fictional-theoretical universe with an open mind:

$$\boxed{\dfrac{\text{signifier}}{\text{semantic clock}}} \quad \langle\!\!\overline{\longrightarrow}\!\!\rangle \quad \boxed{\dfrac{\text{liar}}{\text{time}}}$$

RALPH

graph 1 (3)

This graphic analogy between "signifier" and "liar" (as opposed to "signified") obviously suggests that language-use and its conventional communicative concerns of coherence and truth-commitment turns out to be a (temporal) matter of lying in fiction. It is this characteristic conflation of fictionality and factuality, which closely aligns Everett's project

with Roland Barthes' life-long investment in the critique of realism and, more generally, the real as myth. Ralph shows an increasing fascination for Barthes as an enigmatic thinker and esoteric language-enthusiast, who represents the critical shifts of the post/structuralist revolution like no other. Barthes' mediatory stance between semiotic inquiry and pop-cultural criticism fundamentally informs Ralph's autodidactic and anti-dogmatic approach (cf. *Mythologies*). Curiously, the baby portrays the gay critic as a notoriously French wise guy, i.e. a smoking, hyper-hetero-sexualized intellectual. Always almost making sense with what he says, Barthes constantly indulges in verbose obscurities, ending nearly each soliloquy with his signature line: "I'm French, you know." This obvious fictional veneer of stereotypical Frenchness, which camouflages Barthes' sexual identity, offers an interpretive incentive for the reader to detect the cultural logic of social categories – in this case: nationality.

What is more, Barthes emblematizes what Danto terms "the gift of incoherence," ironizing the un/intentional incomprehensibilities involved in the "sorting-out processes" of the American import of French Theory (quoted in Cusset, 2). As the expertise in and "proper" understanding of French theory served as a means of scholarly distinction, translation became a key concern in the competition over academic legitimacy. It is this conflict between eloquence and obscurity, which inspires Ralph to repurpose the theorist's notion of the "scriptor" in a conceptual amalgamation with "scribbling." The baby conceives scribbling as making "a mark that will constitute a kind of fuzzy mess that is in turn productive in the way of constructing obscurity" (108). Succeeding the (pre-) modern author and his authoritarian legacy, Barthes' "scriptor" is "cut off from any voice, borne by a pure gesture of inscription (and not of expression), traces a field without origin – or which, at least, has no other origin than language itself" ("The Death of the Author," 145-46). Ralph's "scribbling" signals the preliminary, processual and playful quality of his writing.

Glyph thus tends towards the textual "ideal" that Barthes promoted as a "writerly" text of "bliss," which programmatically promotes is own reversibility or incompleteness (cf. chapter 2). In what I conceive as the *hermeneutics of boredom*, Ralph draws on one of the affective dimensions of reading discussed by Barthes, namely ennui or boredom, a term that is also implicit in one of the narrative's chapter-subheadings ("ennuyeux"): "Boredom is not far from bliss: it is bliss seen from the shores of pleasure" (*Pleasure*, 25). Ralph is the industriously bored genius baby who makes use of its temporal and intellectual resources as (an abducted) toddler to soak in and comment on every detail of the novel's social universe. "I wondered where the window of meaning opened and what was in its place before, nonmeaning? nonsense? nondisjunction? nonfeasance? The baby was bored in the back room" (185).

Boredom, Ralph concludes, "is the baby's friend […] Boredom is not blind to anything, and certainly not to amazement," adding in a footnote: "It is finally an affirmation of everything, but an admission of nothing" (10). In this sense, it defines a state of mind that, in opposition to the status quo, provides the pivotal point of departure for future inspiration. Ralph's programmatic embrace of boredom, in the sense, reads like a counter-program to the critical mood and method of "suspicion," which, as Rita Felski has seminally argued, has emerged as the dominant scholarly sensibility in ideology critique and literary criticism, engendering novel dogmatisms in its serious and detached interrogation of texts as either inherently exclusionary or carnivalesque (*The Limits of Critique*, 19). Utterly dependent on but also extremely competent in text, Ralph seems to promote an unprejudiced if not outright naïve approach of reading in contrast to this "quintessentially paranoid […] critical stance so heavily saturated with negative emotion" (*Uses of Literature*, 3).

Often venturing into scatology, Ralph counters the self-saturated, clinical seriousness of theory with a childish compulsion for jokes, pranks and tricks in his creative celebration of self-compromising transparency. The baby's annoyed, unimpressed engagement with a host of established scholars culminates in various jokes, puns and pranks, the butts of which include Aristotle, Immanuel Kant, Gottfried Wilhelm Leipzig, Jacques Lacan, Jacques Derrida, and, last but not least, Roland Barthes himself, but also various insightful literary-didactic bits.[100] Reading against the totalizing tendencies of dogmas and disciplines, both metaphysical *and* poststructuralist, Ralph, ultimately, satirizes institutionality *as such*, what Sacvan Bercovitch describes as its inevitable result, namely a hubris of certainty. Disciplines, Bercovitch polemically argues, "tend *sui generis* toward absolutes, closure, solutions. […] They are incurable cognitive imperialists, even when they champion humility, even when they come bearing the gifts of process and tolerance. This has been true from Plato's monologic dialogues to Derrida's predetermined indeterminacies ("The Function of the Literary in a Time of Cultural Studies," 75).[101]

Ralph's self-analysis signals that the job of the critic for *Glyph* is not only already done but may ultimately be irrelevant, if not misleading. More specifically, it calls for a reader, who – with all of its idealist implications – takes up the challenge of Ralph's radical research: to read outside of the box, as it were, and approach *Glyph* as *both* the theoretical tour de force and the unconventional race critique it is without resorting to the self-affirming closure of *a* theory. This insistence on the aesthetic connection between theory and race is spectacularly foregrounded in Ralph's racial self-revelation.

Assuming Whiteness, Reading Blackness: Institutional Discourses of Race and Everett's Theoretical Re/Turn

With a characteristically Everettian move of misdirection, *Glyph* is revealed as a novel about race, which elaborately circumvents a conventional discussion of race. In the text's central coup, Ralph puts the reader on the spot:

> Have you to this point assumed that I am white? In my reading, I discovered that if a character was black, then he at some point was required to comb his Afro hairdo, speak on the street using an obvious, ethnically identifiable idiom, live in a certain part of a town, or be called a [N-word] by someone. White characters, I assumed they were white (often, because of the ways they spoke of other kinds of people), did not seem to need that kind of introduction, or perhaps legitimization, to exist on the page. But you, dear reader, no doubt, whether you share my pigmentation or cultural origins, probably assumed that I was white. It is not important unless you want it to be and I will not say more about it. (54)

After 54 pages without any *explicit* reference to race, Ralph unfolds a story of racial passing in reverse. Originating with late 19th century short and novelistic fiction, of which Charles W. Chesnutt's oeuvre is a particularly prominent example, black literary narratives of passing traditionally feature racially mixed protagonists, i.e. mulatto/a characters, who pass for white. Entering the (upper) middle-class milieu of the American society only to be tragically pulled back by the regressive forces of racism, these narratives aim to raise questions about black humanity and equality. They thus appeal to a white audience receptive to the assimilationist notion of blacks living up to whites' expectation of civil conformity and cultural sophistication. By suggesting that we "no doubt [...] probably" assumed that the text's racial ellipsis is indicative of *Glyph*'s or – by extension – any narrator's whiteness Ralph puts the reader in an awkward position. The awkwardness of this situation is signaled by the conflicting adverbial modifiers "no doubt" and "probably." Ralph's revelatory move does not provide us with an answer, obviously, but rather (re-) emphasizes the necessary responsibility of the reader to ponder those dimensions of race hidden to the (reading) eye. Could only the "unsophisticated eye which cannot read symbolically" have been blind to *Glyph*'s racial subtext (Everett "Signing to the Blind," 10)? As an insufficient yet indispensable option, Ralph's r/evocation of race puts emphasis on the problem for us (as readers and social actors) to navigate situational interactions that are not (overtly) color-coded.

However, it is not (only) Ralph's silence on the matter that makes for the novel's (initial) racial ambivalence. Theory, his move suggests, is an intrinsically white-codified discourse. The *first* step of Ralph's project is indeed to present "both black and white literary traditions on an equal footing" (Robinson, 106). The baby's strategic appropriation of (white) Euro-American theory, however, also evinces a decisive subversive character. On the one hand,

Ralph invites us to subscribe to this notion of progress, namely that (his) skin color should not be the exclusive criterion of what Ralph does here. The question, which Ralph provokes us to ponder, is not only *if* we want race to play a role or not, both in *Glyph* and in art, in general, as well as in social life. Rather, we are dared to ask ourselves *how* we can achieve a more nuanced understanding of race and its social and cultural figurations without opting for *either* one *or* the other possibility. Thus, it is the *exclusivity* of race as a criterion of aesthetic evaluation, which Everett's novel specifically challenges. Concomitantly, Ralph tricks us into retroactively affirming whiteness as default, namely as that (narrative) principle, whose dominance stems precisely from its power to conceal itself as normal, i.e. not worthy of mentioning, and – significantly – arbitrary. Ralph's snarky destabilization of the reader's comfort zone is further complicated by Everett's photograph displayed on the back of the book (that is, of the Graywolf edition). Should the "informed" reader, who at least glanced at the novel from front to back, not actually have expected Ralph to be black, based on the assumption about the consistency between a minoritized author and her fictional characters? The problem of authorial identification has been discussed by Everett both in- and outside of his fiction. In his interview with Anthony Stewart, Everett explains his motivation to use a photograph in which he "posted to look like a sixties black radical" for the first American edition of *erasure*. "I chose that on purpose because it worked with the book. But the other times, the publisher wanted a photograph … and that's why they're all snapshots … here's a photograph. I don't care. They like having photographs. They can have a photograph. And then it becomes a kind of ironic thing for me. Sure, have it. This'll confuse you. But in that particular photograph, I was twenty-two years old in that photograph, and a completely different person. And so I liked the whole thing in *erasure* of [Monk's] becoming a completely different person" (interview with Anthony Stewart, 138). Notice that Monk's (dis-) placement as a black experimental writer strongly resonates with Ralph's move (cf. *erasure* 28, 43). On the backside of *Glyph*, Everett's photograph does not specifically signal his blackness. In playing with this visual device, Everett has used a black-and-white *snapshot* in the case *I Am Not Sidney Poitier* (2009 Graywolf), in which he refrains from facing the camera, at all, thus rendering racial identification difficult if not impossible (true to the motto of this novel). Ralph's move, ultimately, problematizes the riskiness for a minoritized writer to be misunderstood. It begs the question: what if "a" David Foster Wallace would have pursued such a daunting theoretical project? What – given *Glyph*'s program – are the institutional preconditions and critical implications of such a project in the realm of *black* letters?

With its comprehensive theoretical program, *Glyph* represents the Everett's *institutional* intervention in African American literature. Thus, the text incorporates various biological (eugenics, Social Darwinism), educational and socioeconomic (higher education and class status), legal (racial profiling, mass incarceration), and academic discourses (from Critical Race Theory, Whiteness Studies, and African American literary studies).[102]

Of all the novels discussed under the rubric of race by critics of Everett's writing, *Glyph* has received the least scholarly attention. Joe Weixlmann's online-survey details a total of six studies exclusively devoted this text. While many of these studies focus on the literary-political relation between theory and race, none of them provide a comprehensive analysis of *Glyph*'s negotiation of institutional discourses of race and blackness. Neither do they approach this text from the angle of critical uplift that Ralph allegorizes. Julian Wolfreys situates *Glyph* in the poststructural continuum of theory and theoretical debate, writing a self-ironic commentary on Ralph's excessive self-consciousness (2005; 2010). Jacqueline Berben-Masi relates Ralph's conceptual and actual confinement to the prison realities of black mass incarceration, locating *Glyph* in the black tradition of protest. Timothy Mark Robinson identifies *Glyph* as a masked (neo-) slave narrative, grounding his discussion of Ralph's struggle for liberty qua literacy in Booker T. Washington's and W.E.B. Du Bois's educational projects. Michel Feith focuses on the black tradition, as well, as he writes about Everett's mixing of African American and Greek mythological trickster traditions. Significantly, this "African American" reading of *Glyph* is not a "given" but an "option."

The trap of racial optionality, which Ralph has set up und lured the reader in, severely undermines the notion that in order to move beyond race one needs (to talk about) race (in received ways). This complicates the exclusive racial focus, which Critical Race Theory (CRT) champions, for instance. In contrast to "some academic disciplines," as Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic stress, CRT is meant to combine scholarship with activism, for "it sets out not only to ascertain how society organizes itself along racial lines and hierarchies, but to transform it for the better" (3).[103] Taking up this frequent reproach to African American literary studies, namely its social disconnect, *Glyph* negotiates what Sandra Adell has termed "the social myth that literary criticism can somehow speak for the absent and unrepresented other" (118). The preeminent African American literary scholar Houston A. Baker himself has conceded to the ambivalent status of the critic as cultural commentator *and* creator, as he "*eternally become[s] and embod[ies] the generative myths of their culture by half-perceiving and half-inventing their culture, their myths, and themselves*" (8). Oscillating between the two poles of the false binary between academic elitism and social activism, Everett's novel raises

questions about what literary texts can (or should) say about extra-textual realities, in potentially contributing to their betterment, and how criticism can (help us) come to terms with this problematic referential relationship.

By erasing race and its institutionalized discourses, Ralph insinuates that the *established* modes of theorizing and criticizing race have exhausted their critical potential. Instead of offering a novel racial nomenclature, Ralph returns to the beginning(s) of African American literary criticism, both in temporal and conceptual regards. Everett's novel repositions itself in that particular historical period that Winston Napier has termed the "Onset of Theory" in African American literary discourse in the 1970s. Everett thus returns to the poststructuralist Euro-American theory-transfer, on the basis of which African American literature has been institutionalized. Ralph's reading project, hence, implicitly challenges the theoretical measures taken by African American critics to elevate black writing to the upper ranks of literary scholarship and, by extension, the American nation's canon. The most prominent members of this school of criticism are Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Houston A. Baker, Jr. These critics strategically appropriated poststructuralist theory, drawing on its sign-centered anti-hierarchical projects to counter the exclusionary tendencies of the white-male-centered frameworks of American national history and identity. They re-investigated their underlying assumptions of its un-, under- and misrepresented (black) other to argue for canon-revision as an act of cultural integration (into the American canon) and conservation (of a communal core of cultural self-representation). These revisionist struggles that supplanted the so-called "canon wars" made the nation's curricula of higher education the prime site of the multicultural contestation over "the teaching of literature [as a means of teaching] an aesthetic and political order" (Gates "The Master's Pieces," 163). Gates and his affiliates sought to resist being "'just Americans,' as Ellison might put it, [...and thus] indentured servants to white masters, female and male, and to the Western tradition" (Canon-Formation, Literary History, and the Afro-American Tradition," 29-30). Gates et al thus sought an answer to the question how "an authentic black text [can] emerge in the forms of language inherited from the [white] master's class, whether that be, for instance, the realistic novel or post-structuralist theory?" ("Authority, (White) Power and the (Black) Critic" 1987, 35). In the aftermath of the highly politicized projects of canonic inclusion *and* disciplinary incorporation, both of which fostered new ambivalences and asymmetries (see discussion), African American literature today, as Everett himself has stressed, is caught between the commercially exploited expectations of a predominantly white audience and the institutionalized indifference of a

largely nonexistent black readership (Everett "Signing," 10). It is this discrepancy in America's reading culture, on which *Glyph* focuses.

Over the course of the 20th century, the debates on African American literature, from the Harlem Renaissance on to the era of protest fiction, the Black Arts Movement and African American Studies, have continuously shifted between particularism and universalism, between a culturally specific and what Gates defines as "just" an American vision of art. With this macro-cultural concern in mind, Ralph seems to provide a sort of "objective" and comprehensive black literary self-criticism, which Alain Locke has promoted: black "life and experience in all the arts but with a third dimension of universalized common-denominator humanity" ("Self-Criticism: The Third Dimension in Culture," 60). Ralph's project recurs to the first major attempt at literary and cultural self-description and -assertion prominently associated with the Harlem Renaissance and its affiliated authors and critics. In retrospect, Locke, tellingly, compared this attempt with a cultural form of "adolescence" (Locke, 58). Ralph, in this regard, can be read as an ironic rebuttal of Locke's notion that "objective" criticism should yield "cultural maturation." True, Ralph's hyper-self-reflective analytic tour de force suggests a sort of artistic sophistication, an aesthetic advancement on the scale of form *and* content. Writing in the fault line of aesthetic universalism and racial particularism, Ralph chafes against the "black aesthetic," the notion of a race-centered cultural practice preoccupied with black self-representation, that originated in the historical climate of the Black National Arts Movement (1965-1975, hence BAM).

The BAM represents the *first* major attempt to develop *endemic* standards of African American art. It drew its "sine qua non" notion of art as social engagement from the "Black Power" doctrine dominating the 1950's and 1960's, of which it represented "the aesthetic and spiritual sister" (Neal "The Black Arts Movement," 1960). For Larry Neal and his fellow theorists and writers, the most prominent of which were Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones), Addison Gayle, Jr. and Hoyt Fuller, the "artist and the political activist are one" (cf. *Black Fire*). Taking their cue from the harsh realities of the black ghettoized minority forced to resolve to armed self-defense, the BAM interpolated themes of poetic militancy and strategically appropriated the idiom of the black working class, promoting Black art – with a capital B – as a political weapon (consider Baraka's manifesto-like poem "Black Art": "we want poems that kill"). Conceived as "soldier poets" fighting against white hegemony black artists contributed to the black aesthetic as "a system of isolating and evaluating the artistic works of black people which reflect the special character and imperatives of black experience" (quoted in Harris "The Black Aesthetic," 68).

This notion of "cultural nationalism," as a principle of expressive collectivity predicated on the shared social experience of racism across geographical spheres, necessitated a rigid program of artistic representation. Thus, Ron Karenga promoted a triadic conception of "Black Art" as

> functional, collective and committing or committed. […] All Black art, irregardless of any technical requirements, must have three basic characteristics which make it revolutionary. In brief, it must be functional, that is *useful*, as we cannot accept the false doctrine of "art for art's sake." For, in fact, there is no such thing as "art for art's sake." All art reflects the value system from which it comes. For if the artist created only for himself and not for others, he would lock himself up somewhere and paint or write or play just for himself. But he does not do that. On the contrary, he invites us over, even *insists* that we come to hear him or to see his work; in a word, he expresses a need for our evaluation and/or appreciation and our evaluation cannot be a favorable one if the work of art is not first functional, that is, useful. (6; sic)

Discrediting the universalist tendencies of the Harlem Renaissance, the *Black Aesthetic* was conceived in direct opposition to the "White Aesthetic," the tacitly accepted regime of white aesthetic standards, whose existence, as Addison Gayle polemically claimed, "[m]ost Americans, black *and* white accept […] as they accept April 15th as the deadline for paying their income tax" (92). Shedding this bias was considered a significant step towards what Ishmael Reed calls "cultural sovereignty," according to whom the BAM laid the groundwork for the expansion of the African American literary field and the multiculturalist debates (quoted in Salaam, 70).

The present-day African American critical establishment, with Gates leading the way, pursued "a subtler, much more effective way to achieve the sort of critique which the Black Arts writers were clamoring so noisily," in order to develop a theory of black literature endemic to the black tradition, ("Preface" of *The Signifying Monkey*, xi). Ralph, in turn, challenges the African American literary establishment by refraining from what Kenneth Warren has criticized as the scholarly sanctioned attempt of black literary "practitioners at transforming their high-cultural practices into vital transactions through an encounter with traditional vernacular practices" (*Black and White Strangers*, 136). The baby's refusal to speak, thus, has to be read as Everett's implicit side poke at those whom Warren has called the "vernacular critics": Gates, Jr., and Baker, Jr. It is noteworthy, in this regard, that the baby's literary sophistication serves to align him with those writers whom Gates and Baker have helped to elevate to the upper ranks of postmodern African American literature (think of Ishmael Reed or Toni Morrison, for instance). Everett's novel appears to gesture towards Gates' theoretical contributions, in particular, namely his trickster theory subsumed under "Signifyin(g)," and its most prominent notions of the "(un-)Talking Book," "the ur-trope of

the Anglo-African tradition" (*The Signifying Monkey*, 44), and the Signifying Monkey, "black mythology's archetypal signifier" ("The Blackness of Blackness," 687).

At first glance, Gates' "trickster rhetoric," Michel Feith rightly notes, seems to tie in "very neatly with Everett's predilection for puns, language games, and all kinds of linguistic travesty" (304). Yet, as Feith and Robinson stress, Everett's erasure of these conventions complicates a culturally specific notion of Ralph's literary production.[104] *Glyph* would fit the text-book definition of the (un-) Talking Book, were it not for the fact that Ralph's specific predicament presents itself as slightly different from Gates' research-guiding question: "how can the black subject posit a full and sufficient self in a language in which blackness is a sign of absence?" (*The Signifying Monkey*, 183). Ralph raises the question: how can the black writer posit a creatively autonomous authorial self in a scholarly language in which non-vernacular innovation is a sign of absence? What is more, the baby is, by all means, a trickster, who devotes his subversive energies to challenging the critical establishment that shapes conventional notions of tricksterism. True, Everett's infant critic, too, focuses on the sign (of race), implying that "a study of the so-called arbitrariness of the sign, of the ways in which concepts divide reality arbitrarily, and of the relation between a sign, such as blackness, and its referent, such as absence, can help us to engage in more sophisticated readings of black texts" ("Criticism in De Jungle," 124). In a way, Ralph also works inductively, drawing his "theory" exclusively from textual sources (cf. Gates' aim to develop a theory of African American literary criticism from the black tradition *itself*). However, Ralph does neither have (any) experience (of the outside world) nor tells his personal "black" experience (of living the rural South or urban North). He is without a (communal) past (of oppression) and, significantly, does not speak an ethnically identifiable idiom (see 17, 69, 54). In a footnote on page 54, Ralph concedes that since he "had had no experience with the outside world when first exposed to literature […a]ll idioms and vernacular were

> lost on me, and so, sadly, much of the meaning, intended or otherwise. I wondered about the language of babies and realized that I didn't even have a world of babies through which to move and call my own. I was truly without a country and in that way I understand the literature of the people with whom I share like coloration (though from what I read that coloration had extraordinary range, which seemed to go unacknowledged by what was specified as the oppressing culture). (54)

It is worth pointing out that Ralph here deals with the entire establishment of black literary theory – the grand figures of the black tradition, Gates and Baker, – in a *footnote*. So much for paying respect to the scholarly elite. Ralph is not only a stranger to the vernacular practices of Gates' Signifyin(g). He is disconnected from what Houston A. Baker has famously defined as the "blues matrix," the historically shared milieu, in which the cultural specificity of the black

expressive tradition is rooted (*Blues*, 3). The infant writer, thus, cannot be *biographically* associated with a *tradition*, the self-positioning in and critical reference to which is widely deemed a quintessential part of black literary innovation (cf. Gates notion of critical signifying). Although Glyph does not question the literary/rhetorical validity of these concepts, it implicitly criticizes their ideological implications. Specifically, it problematizes the "estrangement that vernacular-based canonical critiques of African-American literature have sought to heal with the belief that by bringing to bear the 'virtues of the vernacular,' African-American novelists (and by extension, critics) could locate their texts 'at the locus of the black neighborhood, the material home front, or the southern vernacular community'" (Warren "Black and White Strangers," 133). Rather than targeting the vernacular as a cultural idiosyncrasy of black communal life. Ralph retraces the consensual exclusions inscribed into these vernacular notions of cultural allegiance. The *only* black canonic text, which he explicitly references, is Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*. Ralph's admiration for Ellison's epoch-making opus magnum *Invisible Man*, in addition, not only highlights his commitment to the modernist ideal of "creative excellence" (cf. Everett's self-description in his interview with Sean O'Hagan, 34), but also his prioritization of the novel form as such, which, as Weixlmann has stressed, has been conventionally deemed incompatible with the socio-critical function ascribed to black writing by culturally nationalist accounts ("The Changing Shape(s) of the Afro-American Novel," 114). Ralph carefully highlights his alliance with the black intellectual tradition and further suggests an analogy between his text and other avant-gardist writers. He explicitly references a total of four African American writers, namely Zora Neale Hurston, Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin and Ishmael Reed. All of these writers, significantly, are known for their innovatory impetus and their refusal as artists to be reduced to their race.

Glyph's inter-disciplinary language-debate is staged as a horizontal and vertical in-group conflict (father vs. son and father vs. mother). It is the latter, the aesthetics-politics antagonism represented by Eve and Inflato, that prompts to the persisting gender-divide between black male and female literary practice and criticism. Thus, *Glyph* returns not only to the "onset" of theory but its "backlash," which Diane Fuss has discussed (1989). The notions that "poststructuralist Afro-American theory de-socializes and de-politicizes the text" (Fuss, 85) has most prominently been debated by black feminist critics such as Joyce A. Joyce (cf. Joyce's dispute with Michael Awkward, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Houston A. Baker, Jr. in the winter 1987 edition of *New Literary History*). In her controversial essay "Race for Theory" (1988), Barbara Christian launched a particularly strident criticism of Gates and his colleagues: "theory has become a commodity that helps determine whether we are hired or

promoted in academic institutions – worse whether we are heard at all" (67; cf. Michael Awkward's response in "Appropriative Gestures" 1988). While Gates defined his use of white Western theory as a form of "translation" predicated on mutual "transformation" ("What's Love Got To Do With It?", "Criticism in De Jungle") Baker defended his theory-appropriation by allocating these female critics' criticism to a "new black conservatism" (Baker "In Dubious Battle," 367). *Glyph* retraces the fault lines of conservatism/progressivism and particularism/universalism, along which the politically charged debates on multiculturalism have been divided. In reading against the exclusions and hierarchies of current black criticism, Ralph severely complicates the fundamental "choice" that Gates promotes: "how effective and how durable our interventions in contemporary cultural politics will be depends upon our ability to mobilize institutions that buttress and reproduce that culture. The choice isn't between institutions and no institutions. The choice is always: What kind of institutions shall there be?" ("The Master's Pieces," 163). There are two or three things about this statement, in other words, that might leave Ralph bored.

While this (subtextual) corpus of theory continues to undergird its narrative, *Glyph* transitions into its ontological section, an action-laden adventure-journey. As Ralph ventures through picaresque scenes of genre fiction, *Glyph* takes a conspicuous turn towards the mainstream of American (literary) culture. I argue that with this generic parody of the political thriller, Everett not only mocks the unreadability of his own novel. The author dares the reader to draw parallels between the novel's theoretical underpinnings and its sensationalist story. Short-circuiting the high- and low-brow dimensions of fiction, *Glyph*, thus, establishes a pop-cultural connection between black literary theory and the social world.

"The Literature of the People with Whom I Share Like Coloration": Erasing African American Literature in Ralph's Quest for Aesthetic Emancipation

As the foregoing discussion has shown, *Glyph* can and should be read as a work of African American literature. Its fundamental feature includes what Robert Stepto has defined as the "primary pregeneric myth" of African American literature: the quest for liberty qua literacy (ix). Everett's text is inscribed into the "uplift" paradigm (Dubey *Signs and Cities*, 6), combining two major thematic clusters: oppression (enslavement and incarceration) and education. A physically helpless and intellectually superior detainee and trainee, Ralph is subjected to body-centered forms of censorship and incarceration, but also of experimentation and instruction.[105] *Glyph*'s playfully emancipatory agenda, thus, combines states of confinement with stages of assignment. This double focus manifests in the generic

amalgamation of the (neo-) slave narrative and the (self-) educational essay in the vein of W.E.B. Du Bois' and Booker T. Washington's projects of uplift. It is important to stress that these two black intellectuals pursued disparate uplift projects. While both emphasized the importance of literacy and education, W.E.B. Du Bois put a strong emphasis on the emancipatory potential of culture and art (cf. *The Souls of Black Folk*). Booker T. Washington, in turn, promoted an economic notion of emancipation grounded in (hand-) craft and skills.

Self-Help, Critical Uplift and the Race Baby

Since the 1970s and 1980s, the (neo-) slave narrative has emerged as the central canonic genre. As a "modern or contemporary fictional work substantially concerned with depicting the experience or the effects of New World 'slavery'," the genre's crucial characteristic, Salman Rushdy asserts, is the thematization of the persisting presence of systemic forms of racial oppression (533). Originating with the abolitionist attempts at exposing Christian hypocrisy in slavery, the slave narratives today serve both the revisionist purpose of complicating our understanding of 19th antebellum slavery and Jim Crow racism, as well as its persisting systemic forms in the post-Civil Rights era. With core themes and motifs including national and religious hypocrisy, communal and familial survival and mnemonic trauma-coping, it exploits the affective potential of tragedy and melodrama (in social injustice and genealogical alienation) to inspire the reader's empathy. Its poetological program, thus, often centers on what William L. Andrews defines as characteristic black autobiographical discourse, namely "that freedom is not just the theme but the *sign* of Afro-American autobiography" (89). "I"-narratives such as these represent the struggle for self-authentication by a black subject that strives for liberty qua literacy.

As an Ellisonian novelist and Baldwinian race critic, Ralph ranks among the .1 percent of the aforementioned "Talented Tenth." Ralph is a "race baby" with an educational mandate, as it were, epitomizing the "element of danger and revolution, of dissatisfaction and discontent" that Du Bois identified in education (*The Souls of Black Folk*, 20). He is a radical promoter of the uplift ideal of "book-learning."

Ralph's ultimate raison d'être, and thus *Glyph*'s central concern, is the acquisition of books, specifically books of literature and literary theory. His educational struggle is reminiscent of Richard Wright's use of a borrowed library card while forging notes to trick the librarian into supplying him with books (*Black Boy*, 248). Ironically, everyone thinks that Ralph's notes are forged, at first. The baby's intellectual formation outside of its home-crib strongly resonates

with Malcolm X's prison term and concomitant book-based self-education. In this regard, *Glyph* alludes to two stereotypes crucially relating to problems of *institutional* disenfranchisement: the black convict – the pathological perpetrator – and the black high school dropout – the underperforming adolescent. Ralph's plight, too, evokes the systematic inferiorization of blacks (as intellectually limited and culturally imitative) paired with the infantilization of the black male (suggested by the racist epithet "boy"). Ralph's dependency on supplies provided by his fellow adults prompts to white patronage of (ex-) slave artists, here translated both into a nurturing bond between mother (Eve) and son (Ralph) and captor (scientists, agents) and captive (Ralph, "the subject"). The baby's increasingly difficult struggle to read and learn from *literary* books during his abduction evokes the concept of "self-help." This notion lies at the core of black emancipation and was fundamentally defined by the historical experience of subjugation and isolation in the struggle for social justice. The Black Church and other organizations committed to social solidarity and betterment can be considered as early institutional instances of a collective attempt at claiming and securing social rights and economic opportunities. Everett specifically satirizes what Martin Japtok and Jerry Rafiki Jenkins term the "post-Reconstruction notion of uplift," which predicated black social advancement on economic prosperity through assiduity and white mainstream conformity (17). The tacit imperative of racial collectivity imposed on a black cadre of intellectual, political or economic race leaders, upon whom it is incumbent to orchestrate a *unified* struggle for social justice in light of overwhelming structural obstacles, extends into the artistic realm, where black artists in their ascribed function as "race men" continue to be expected to serve as delegates for their communities, expressing the collective desire for equality. In this regard, self-help has a distinct educational and didactic undertone, with which Ralph's aesthetically ambitious project seems to fundamentally conflict. This is so, however, because Ralph sidesteps this tacit consensus that black intellectual leaders should write for the uneducated masses. Self-help, thus, implies a means of bridging the growing intra-racial disparities between the underprivileged majority and a select, well-educated middle-class circle of black men serving as leaders and intellectuals. Promoting racial progress, black art thus is to serve a higher communal purpose, to which its aesthetic strategies have to be subordinated. Social advancement qua cultural contribution always implies a certain representational transparency, in order to negotiate the institutionalized discrepancy between the author and his presupposed audience: the educationally deprived black working class (cf. W.E.B. du Bois' essay "Talented Tenth"). Rather, as Ralph seems to imply, the fate of African American literature as a functional construct of culturally collectivity fundamentally

relies on its historically institutionalized addressee: the social actor who would actually be able to make a change, i.e. to (help) realize social change, namely the white (liberal) reader.

If *Glyph* presupposes an academic reader, or, more specifically, an academic reader well-versed in black literary theory, the novel's turn towards the *mainstream* sector of American culture can be read as a *formal* mimicry of this representational protocol of racial delegation. Ralph's allegorical status as the race baby is transposed onto the aesthetic plane of genre fiction. During the text's ontological section, a cartoonish adventure story based on a formulaic thriller plot, Ralph progresses through three societal spheres: science, politics, and religion. These three stages represent what I conceive as literary *theoryscapes*. Each one features an overarching theme: abolitionism (science), nationalism (politics), and pan-ethnicism (religion). In each reading, to which Ralph is subjected, Everett experiments with conventions of black writing: liberation, self-representation, and solidarity. Supplanting this section with a theoretical subtext, *Glyph* thus provides a *low-brow-literalization* of African American literature. Tellingly, this low-brow-literalization of critical conventions is supplanted with a strong emphasis on television and popular culture (notice that Ralph is exposed to a lot of TV shows and movies in the motels, in which Dr. Steimmel and her aide Boris hide during the day to avoid the authorities).

The implication of genre fiction, of course, is that it is a commercially accessible and popular format. Mocking its own supposed unreadability and that of theory, in general, *Glyph*'s pop-cultural reading is based on that particular type of genre fiction, which, in the hands of an unexpected reading-ally, ultimately leads to Ralph's rescue.

A Writing Baby, A Sign(ify)ing Monkey, a Soldier Poet, and the Progeny of Solidarity

Ralph enters the novel's second story-section as a "motherless child," representing the archetypal figure of black genealogical uprooting through slavery prominently featured in slave spirituals. The baby's conflict-laden exposure to the social world follows a developmental trajectory comparable to a satirically condensed version of the African American history. The stages of Ralph's journey correspond with the broadly conceived literary-historical phases of abolitionism, nationalism and pan-ethnicism. The brainy baby, thus, is classified as a scientific discovery, assigned as a spy, and adopted as a surrogate child. Tellingly, Ralph's progression through the theoryscapes of African American literature corresponds with a programmatic process of re-naming.

In the realm of African American culture, the *name* bears a decisive culture-historical undertone. It evokes the nominal erasure and genealogical disconnect in enslavement. Also, it

is a topos of black self-assertion, a designator of familial linkage, cultural legacy, as well as cultural appropriation (for a detailed discussion see Chapter 3.3). Everett plays with this cultural connotation. Obviously, Ralph Townsend's name is reminiscent of *Ralph* W. Ellison (1914-1994), the widely influential figure of African American literary modernism. In addition, it *can* be read as an allusive hint to Robert *Townsend* (*1958), the black Chicago-based comedian and actor. Townsend's signature stage persona, as Mel Watkins recalls, was "dressed in natty hipster attire and, with an upper-class British accent, delivere[d] lines such as, 'I'd like to say tonight that … I haven't changed. I'm still that same old black boy from the ghet-*to*. Truly! I am…I am…I am'" (*African American Humor*, 24). Townsend's provocative parody of black progress satirized in his hipster persona's hyperbolic use of the British accent as putative marker of upper-class status resonates with Ralph's peculiar privilege – recognizing that all privilege is peculiar, polemically speaking.

In Hortense Spillers' terms, Ralph describes a particularly contentious "locus of confounded identities." Its country, as Spillers argues about the black subject, in general, "needs" it, and if it were not there, it "would have to be invented" ("Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," 65). Ralph, whose subjectivity is the imaginative site of a society-spanning conflict between the intrinsic and ascribed aspects of identity, is the victim of the "business of dehumanized naming" in what Spillers terms the "American Grammar" of racialization (69/66). Revealing "*naming* as one of the key sources of a bitter Americanizing for African persons" it is based on a rhetorical economy of familial dis-linking and cultural unmaking (73).[106] The ruling episteme, Spillers states, "releases the dynamics of naming and valuation" on the racialized black subject by way of "markers so loaded with mythical prepossession that there is no easy way for the agents buried beneath them to come clean," make it necessary to "strip down through layers of attenuated meaning" in order to "speak a truer word concerning [themselves]" (68, 65). This rhetorical economy relies on "the very same *rhetorical* symptoms of absence and denial, to embody the double and contrastive agencies of a *prescribed* internecine degradation" (66). In a systematic fashion, "Ralph Townsend" (7) is subjected to a nominal process of "Americanization" as "the subject" (57), "Defensive Stealth Operative 1369" (139), "Jamal" (132), and "Pepe" (155).

Upon his first abduction, Ralph's talents are scrutinized from the psychological perspective of Dr. Steimmel, a University of Columbia-based psychologist, who seeks to boost her slumping professional career "to uncover the secrets of language acquisition and the mechanism of meaning by cutting open [Ralph's] brain" (71). With the emphasis on psychology and psychoanalysis, Ralph's excursion through the scientific theoryscape negotiates the notion

that black literature can represent racial oppression experienced by black people, which may yield (deeper) insight into human nature and the psychological dimensions of racism. Implicit in the systematically marginalized infant writer is the notion that the societal margin grants a privileged perspective on the social center, i.e. mainstream. Ralph is being brought to a secret facility, what seems to be an "estate, hospital, sanitarium, [or] criminal retreat" (57). "If you want to put a pig's heart in a human being," Dr. Steimmel describes the place accordingly, "you do it here" (63). Ralph is kept in a lab, while being free to read as many books as he wants and write whatever he wants.[107]

The baby is re-named as "the subject" (57) and treated like an "evolutionary burst" (63) by Dr. Steimmel, who goes to great pains to keep her scientific discovery secret. To hide Ralph from the attention of other equally shady scientists such as Anna Davis, Dr. Steimmel pretends to study Ralph as a "mildly retarded, […] non-speaking toddler with exceptional manual dexterity" (71). In accordance with the racial stereotype of black *physical* excellence, Dr. Steimmel, thus, relegates Ralph's exceptional intellectual capabilities to the corporeal section of "motor skills" (ibid). According to Dr. Steimmel, Ralph does not write, but rather "*makes* letters" (73; my emphasis). This biological essentialism attains a distinctly disturbing undertone, when Boris adresses Dr. Steimmel as "*Unsere letzte Hoffnung, meine Führerin*" (ibid), alluding to Nazism and, hence, Social Darwinism and eugenics.[108]

Steimmel's attempt to interrogate Ralph as to the "first" word it remembers, encapsulates the absurd logic of black equality predicated on cultural proficiency promoted by abolitionism:

> **I don't recall.**
> "Did your parents talk to you a lot when you were first born?"
> **Not really. They talked to each other.**
> "Did you resent that?"
> **No.**
> "What would you call your first word?"
> **I don't understand the question.**
> Steimmel looked away and out the window. "There must be something you remember hearing. Even if it wasn't the first word. What was the first word you can remember making an impression on you?"
> **I don't recall.**
> "Think!"
> I thought. I thought to say milk or nipple just to pacify her, but either would have been false.
> **Iconicity**.
> "You're pulling my fucking leg."
> **Signification?**
> She stared at me and blew a smoke ring.
> **Paralanguage?**
> "Boris!" she called out.
> **Proxemics.**
> Boris appeared in the doorway.
> "Take this…this thing back to his *crib*." (77-78)

Steimmel's attempt to establish a connection between the phylogenetic roots of human language and Ralph's linguistic ontogenesis, predicated on the baby's primordial exposure to speech, alludes to the prominent case of Phyllis Wheatley and the beginnings of black writing. Ralph is judged and orally examined like Wheatley had been in 1772 before a congregation of "Boston's most notable citizens," that gave public testimony of her poetic abilities and thus secured the publication of her work (cf. Gates "Writing 'Race' and the Difference It Makes," 7). Taught and published by white patrons in order to foster the abolitionist cause of ending the "peculiar institution," Wheatley's poetic production, received by a considerable national and international white audience, served as a tool in the struggle to grant blacks a place in the "great chain of being" as *humans* (as opposed to sub-human slaves). In the Enlightenment paradigm of reason, literacy was postulated as *the* crucial sign and vehicle of civilizatory advancement. Mastering "the arts and sciences," hence, meant a facility for "reason" and thus prompted manumission, as in the case of Wheatley. This mastery was often conceived in pejorative terms of imitation (cf. Thomas Jefferson's "Notes on the State of Virginia"). Ralph, thus, partakes in the "evil game of 'Mother, May I?'," which Henry Louis Gates, Jr. describes accordingly:

> while the Enlightenment is characterized by its foundation on man's ability to reason, it simultaneously used the absence and presence of reason to delimit and circumscribe the very humanity of the cultures and people of color which Europeans had been 'discovering' since the Renaissance. The urge toward the systematization of all human knowledge (by which we characterize the Enlightenment) led directly to the relegation of black people to a lower place in the great chain of being, an ancient construct that arranged all of creation on a vertical scale from plants, insects, and animals through man to the angels and God himself. By 1750, the chain had become minutely calibrated; the human scale rose from the 'lowliest Hottentot' (black South Africans) to 'glorious Milton and Newton. If blacks could write and publish imaginative literature, then they could, in effect, take a few 'giant steps' up the chain of being in an evil game of 'Mother, May I?'" ("Editor's Introduction: Writing 'Race' and the Difference It Makes" In: *'Race,' Writing and Difference*. 8)

Ralph's struggle for recognition as a black writer is negotiated as a *corporeal* aspect of his self. The baby is a symbol for the aesthetic confinement, in which African American literature has been kept since its historical inception as a cultural project of liberation and emancipation. A baby that writes is – polemically speaking – what it would need to actually *prove* black equality based on this twisted logic of Enlightenment-based reason. In this regard, *Glyph* follows the crude proposition that blacks are *biologically* incapable of intellectual excellence, cultural originality and historical validity (cf. Kant, Jefferson, Hegel) to its (il-) logical conclusion. *Glyph*'s protagonist is a black writer *sui generis*, in other words: a *native novelist*.

As such, Everett contrasts Ralph with what appears to be, "quite literally, a Signifying Monkey" (Feith, 305). Feith is the only scholar to notice Everett's strategic implementation of black critical conventions in *Glyph*'s second story-section without further elaborating on its institutional implications. What is important to stress here, is that it is impossible for a reader who is (at least tangentially) familiar with African American literature and literary theory *not* to recognize this signing monkey as a parody of the signifying monkey. The chimpanzee "Ronald" belongs to Anna Davis, a zoologist, who wants to prove that apes are "people too." Davis intends to show that "only the differently constructed larynxes of humans, allowing for a great range of vocal sounds," makes them distinct (71). "Her ape," Ralph explains, has mastered American sign language and knows "over ninety-five signs and [can] even construct simple sentences […,] spell six five-letter words […and likes] some television shows and [detests] others," being especially fond of CNN and the weather (ibid). Davis shows a particular interest in Ralph: "That's an infant of African descent, isn't it? Are you studying the development of minority-status offspring? […] Maybe we can get your baby together with my chimp" (62).

Ralph's encounter with Ronald is framed as a conspiracy-like conflict between Davis, Boris and Steimmel. Davis intends to plot the baby's second abduction by capitalizing on Boris' romantic feelings for her, while Dr. Steimmel, hitherto absent due to her worsening alcoholism incited by her failure to "dissect" Ralph, is about to enter the lab. Davis and Ronald hide under Ralph's crib. Enter Steimmel. Utterly drunk, suspecting some sort of complot in the making, the scientist threatens Ralph: "I'm going to figure you out how you work. Even if I have to literally cut open your head and peek into your brain" (85). Boris becomes a collateral damage of Steimmel's rant: "'Dr. Steimmel, you're drunk' [says her aide…] 'Oh, you determined this on your own? That's why you're the great scientist you are, Boring-is […,] when I'm done with the little bastard [Ralph], I'm going to take it upon myself to give you a spine" (ibid). Meanwhile, Ronald, Ralph surmises, "must have moved," for Davis suddenly utters the words "Shut up." Steimmel mistaking Davis' shushing for an utterance of Ralph. Ralph's note to Steimmel – "**You're mistaken. I said nothing**" (86) – helps to assuage Steimmel and prompt her departure. Ronald, afterwards, signs frantically, "but nobody was looking at him" (ibid). In retrospect, Ralph remembers the signifying monkey

> signing like crazy in the lab after Steimmel's departure. The chimp was talking, not merely using symbols in a way that suggested some purely fixed correlation between signs and objects. I thought the ape was asking what was going on. (97)

Everett has literalized the culture-mythological archetype of the signifying monkey as a *signing* monkey.[109] That Everett translates the signifying monkey's figurative expertise in double-coded discourse into sign language is a witty and quite comical literalization of the notion that the signifying monkey represents a sort of prototype of black vernacular culture. Everett, hence, transposes the expressive register of language from the field of sound onto the field of sight, implicitly aligning the ape with the baby. In absence of the *voice*, both Ralph, the radical aesthete of *writing*, and Ronald, the prototypical signer, as it were, engage in a sort of meta-critical dialogue. There seems to be a connection between baby and ape that is based on the systematic misrecognition of their linguistic potential. Nobody *looks* at Ronald, his signing activity amounts to mere mis- or non-communication. As everyone is obsessed with Ralph's muteness, in turn, the writing baby is constantly reduced to the absence of its voice. The baby's ability to *write* is never considered as a talent in its own right but as a complementary and thus subsidiary skill of Ralph's intellectual facilities. The fact that Ronald's communicative efforts, now, actually seem to exceed a trained, i.e. conventionalized combination of signs to related objects goes unnoticed by the social group. *Only* Ralph, in retrospect, suspects that Ronald's usage of signs to communicate had a *creative* quality.

The fact that Davis' utterance, mind you, could actually have been directed at Dr. Steimmel and not at Ronald, further highlights the crucial concern of this conflict that Everett stages. Thus, Ralph and Ronald, each representing two conceptions of black cultural theorization, are caught in the fault line of a scholarly debate, between two poles of a critical spectrum, one psychological (Steimmel) and one anthropological (Davis) – a spectrum, which seems to leave out many productive ambiguities. Ralph's retrospective alliance with Ronald suggests a potential re-alignment between these poles on the plane of literary writing. Against the reductive notion of an antagonistic opposition between Ralph and Ronald, and, by extension, between Everett and Gates, *Glyph* here foregrounds the necessity of assessing the aesthetic potential of literary art in the cultural context of blackness that is *not* confined to a preconceived method of scientific inquiry. That the scholars actually miss Ronald's creative rant while obsessing over Ralph's (absence of) voice suggests, once more, that this notion of representativeness – to "speak" for/about a community/"truth" – hinders a nuanced discussion about (language-based) art.

This idea that art can or should serve a specific function is further elaborated in the political theoryscape, where Ralph is abducted by the government agents Madam Nanna and Uncle Ned, both of whom are members of the "Tike Evaluation and Manipulation," TEAM team, which is supervised by Colonel Billy Joe Bob Roy, the head of the Division of Exploitation of

Potentially and Reportedly Trainable Mentally Exceptional Neophytic Tikes, DEPARTMENT Department. The mission of this DEPARTMENT department is to "detect, isolate, convert, and exploit any gifted individual, especially children for service to the armed forces of the United States of America" (107).

While Ralph remains resistant, Madam Nanna asserts that she "got him confused. He's terribly bright, but at least he's physically helpless. Sleep deprivation won't work, since he doesn't sleep. He doesn't care much about food. He loves books. He reads everything and he's very critical. He will not easily be tricked" as the agent tries to get Ralph "dependent on [her] and then we work him" (108). Strategically bored into a "weakened state" by Madam Nanna, who reads "stupid" stories to the brainy baby, Ralph is finally "fed up with her niceness." "Reeling from two pages of some story about a pig who opened a bank," Ralph snatches "the pen from the breast pocket of her uniform and wrote, beneath a picture of the pig signing a loan agreement,

> **Who the fuck are you?** If my message scared or even surprised her, Madam Nanna didn't let on. She just smiled sweetly at me and said, "We mustn't use such language." She was not frightened by me, but I was certainly frightened by her. Her response was completely unexpected, disarming, and, I felt, could only mean bad things. (101)

Echoing Ralph's first confrontation with Inflato (and Ralph's stealing of his father's pen from the latter's breast pocket), the baby's second abduction takes a turn for the worse, as he is made the subject of a (white) tutoring experiment. Madam Nanna tries to wrestle him into intellectual submission, forcing him to solve puzzles and other intelligence-related tasks while timing the toddler's progress (129-37). In addition, she reads fables "about simple-minded children and bears that talked, with improbable situations for no reason except that they were improbable," to the baby (100).

When Ralph decides to "cooperate, or at least give the appearance of cooperation, so that we could move on to whatever next stage there was," he hatches a plot to trick Nanna into believing his utter dependence on her: "**last night was a very long night   where is my Nanna?   there are noises outside   frightening noises   maybe some other men are coming to get me   Nanna brought me *The Crying of Lot 49*   it put me to sleep, but she brought it to me   i wish Nanna would not leave me**" (113). Convinced that Ralph is "the perfect spy. He can look at plans for anything and understand them, remember them. Perhaps he can even make them better" (111), nurse Nanna introduces Ralph to Uncle Ned and a special "playroom," in which Ralph is prepared for his first mission as a spy with readings concerning "computers and the security thereof" (128).

In the following, the brainy baby partakes in a test-mission by infiltrating a high-security nuclear weapon plant, the "Dionysus Missile Works" (DMW). Ironically, it is in this story-section, where Ralph's racial identity is most explicitly emphasized and exploited, serving as a guise of racially romanticized harmlessness. The baby is referred to as a "cute little pickaninny," and the "little bro" named "Jamal," the perfectly unsuspicious toddler adopted by the Jones family (Uncle Ned and Madam Nanna), while Mr. Jones is applying for a job interview as a deployment specialist of nuclear arms. Briefed with clear instructions – "*Look and memorize*" – Ralph roams about the nuclear plant to observe and memorize "any and every blueprint, document, schematic, note, or telephone number that crossed my path" (129). Succeeding in doing so, Ralph is promoted as

> Defense Stealth Operative 1369. I was no longer sleeping in the crib in my tacky little room, but in a bunk in a sterile, eight-by-eight cell with a toilet modified to accommodate my little keister and a guard just outside my door of bars. The little boy way growing up. There were no more novels for Ralph, only dry, technical, defense-oriented journals and manuals. (139)

Ralph's employment as a spy hints at the functional demand for literature by the Black Arts Movement. The brainy baby emerges as a "soldier poet," whose linguistic and mnemonic capabilities are made to serve the distinct purpose of recording and transmitting knowledge to its captors. Strongly resonating with the BAM's ideal of "poetic militancy" and (self-) defense against white hegemony, Ralph's aesthetic talents are rendered into the features of a highly efficient and dangerous "weapon," comparable to that weapon-system, which Ralph helps to infiltrate at the DMW. Ralph is treated like a classified criminal locked up in a high-security facility by the administration (consider other inmates' responses to Ralph: "'What you in for?'" and "What'd ja do? Take candy from another baby?'", 139; Colonel Bill's signature estimation reads similarly: "He reads! That's enough reason, baby or not, to kill him" 144). By translating the political project of black cultural nationalism into a cold war scenario of industrial espionage and nuclear threat *Glyph* speculates on an absurdly hyper-politicized project of black self-representation bound to succumb to the very mechanisms, against which it revolts: a cultural hegemony camouflaged under the thin layer of pluralist representation.

Transitioning into the religious theoryscape, Ralph's struggle for freedom is ironicized when he is rescued from the high-security prison by a guard, who reads "fat novels about spies and sea creatures" (140). Mauricio Lapuente, obviously, is a fan of genre fiction, which, as Everett suggests in a tongue-in-cheek fashion, seems to foster his ability to empathize with the toddler. Ralph is adopted by Mauricio and his partner Rosenda Paz, as the couple, contrary to the racial stereotype of the (hyper-) fertile latino/-a, is unable to conceive a child. "[T]he likeness of their skin color to mine," Ralph mentions, "made us a proper-looking tribe"

(146). This section's thematic negotiation of community, conceived as "tribalism," trivialized in Rosenda's and Mauricio's "wide-eyed, sloppy, indelicate adoration" of Ralph (ibid), is inscribed into both characters' surnames: "Paz" (Spanish "peace") and "Lapuente" (Spanish "bridge"). With this contrived bond of pan-ethnic solidarity, which has "no subtlety, no understatement, no refinement," Everett not only satirizes African American literature in the wider comparative framework of American minority culture (ibid). The author interpolates the theme of familial linkage, and, by extension, foregrounds slavery-related concerns of historical remembrance and cultural legacy, which are crucial in present-day African American "neo-slave narratives" and genealogical sagas. Everett ironicizes the attempt at coming to terms with uprooting and de-humanization and their structural repercussions, in other words, making "peace" with a past, whose oppressive effects haunt the seemingly emancipated present, by transposing the final stage of Ralph's cross-sectional quest into the religious realm of Catholic fundamentalism. This scene's implicit concern with the metaphysical questions of man's (and baby's) place in the order of things is parodied by the fanatic Apostolic Father Chacón. The baby's near-pedophilic abuse and exorcism by the latter, from which Ralph barely escapes, marks the culminating point of Everett's pop-cultural experimentation with African American literature:

> **"I do not understand the nature of your approach. I am young and naïve, but be warned that I am capable of accurate and detailed representation of any turn of events"** – to which the priest responds, quite hysterically – "The child is possessed! […] The devil controlled his hand and he wrote a note." (172; 180).

After the ensuing televised brawl in the churchyard, Ralph continues "living peacefully and secretly in a small coastal town [with his mother]. She now goes by the name Alice and she calls me Isadore […] I have agreed with my mother that we should keep *me* a secret" (207). His reunion with his mother is suggestive of the baby's emblematic victory of the symbolic dominance of his father. Ralph's return to (just) being a child also suggests that *Glyph* wants to remain (a work of literary) fiction and be read as such – as opposed to a theoretical tractate. The implication of this return to infancy is that in growing up, Ralph will someday be able to participate in social life on his *own* terms, bringing to bear new possibilities and challenges of aesthetic practice.

Coda: "Art Has Always Scared People"

Glyph seems to propose what Sylvère Lotringer argues about theory, namely that it "doesn't always have to be answered in kind; it can be dealt with in a 'nontheoretical' way as well, by perceiving everything as a theoretical problem." Then, the scholar claims, theory "becomes an

eye-opener and can be put to task everywhere. Everything can become an object of reflection. Everything can become political" (127).

Glyph's experiment with black literary conventions adds a political undertone to literary theory by putting it to task where it would matter most: America's prime mode of self-narration – popular culture. It is in this satiric translation of theory into genre fiction that the novel's critical gist is rooted. Simply speaking, *Glyph* insinuates that the scholarly aspiration for both literary sophistication and racial representation is very much compatible with if not conducive to market demands for readily digestible stories of cultural difference. The characteristically ambiguous final phrase of a programmatically anti-dogmatic text, *Glyph*'s conclusive punch line – "the line is everything" (208) –, hence, has to be read as pertaining to the low-/high-brow divide, too. The "line" can be read in various ways: as the line between signifier and signified, as the line of anti-metaphysical arguments, on which Ralph draws. It could even emblematize one of the prison-bars of Ralph's symbolic incarceration (cf. Berben-Masi). Above all, the line hints at the typographic line that constitutes the letter "I", the precarious denominator of narrative origination and organization. It raises the text's defining question: if literature is programmatically open for (any) interpretation, how do we as readers arrive at a consensual understanding? Where do we draw the "line" between *Glyph*'s theoretical agenda and its socio-literary criticism of the racial realities, the scholarly theorized reference to which the text persistently problematizes? Ralph does not (so much) propose an answer to this question in the form of a theory of fiction. Rather, the baby offers to read his text as a disposable program of (how to ignore) theory (cf. Wittgenstein's ladder).

Satirizing literary institutionality as such, *Glyph* raises questions as to the nature of literature, about "literariness" as such, which, as Jacques Derrida reminds us, "is not a natural essence, an intrinsic property of the text. It is the correlative of an intentional relation to the text, an intentional relation which integrates in itself, as a component or an intentional layer, the more or less implicit consciousness of rules which are conventional or institutional – social, in any case" ("Institution," 44). *Glyph* insinuates that the competition over disciplinary legitimacy in the establishment of African American literature by way of the very theory that helped to deconstruct the tacit totalizations and exclusions of the Western cultural apparatus, was carried out – to a certain extent – at the expense of a more open aesthetic vision. In the fight over literary legitimacy, expressive specificity, it seems, is often mobilized as a kind of ultima ratio of representational self-defense against cultural assimilation, so to say. *Glyph*'s breach of the divide between the scholarly and the social sphere by way of genre fiction prompts to the ultimate benchmark, in relation to which any established literary and critical account, as much

as they may claim to be socially engaged, has to be measured, namely the commercial doctrine of popularity, and, by extension, profitability. *Glyph*, after all, raises the troubling question that Kenneth Warren has posed, namely "whether the current articulations of black difference remain tenable as oppositional critical practices" ("Black and White Strangers," 136).

What, then, is the oppositional value of Ralph's radical research; what, in other words, is the emancipatory potential of theory, in general? How, more specifically, can we attempt to suture the increasing disconnect between the academic and the public sphere amidst an ongoing crisis of the very epistemological and normative basis of political dialogue and democratic life? That Ralph is a self-taught critic who depends on the book supplies of his parents' library points in the direction of a possible answer. What Glyph emphasizes is the race-related problem of educational access, which lies at the root of the institutionalized skepticism if not disregard towards black literary excellence that Everett satirizes in the words of the fictionalized Aristophanes: "art has always scared people. Art always will" (79). Finally, the novel prompts another question: What is the alternative to these canonical models? As long as race continues to cement the permanent marginalization of American minorities, it seems naïve if not misleading to dismiss the necessity of pondering the political function of art by blacks, even if established models of social engagement in literary art seem to be conducive to commercial incorporation and ideological cooptation (cf. *erasure*). Glyph's attempt at reclaiming the literary and critical terms of black writing, after all, can be read as both a demonstration of progress and regression. Situated somewhere between a literary-political manifesto and a childish prank, Ralph's project shows that the struggle for cultural emancipation is an incomplete task. It, too, suggests that this thought-experiment cannot work without considering both the emancipatory potential of theory and the ideological gravity of commercial literary forms. It is the latter, on which *erasure* specifically focuses.

THE BLACK X-PERIENCE

Invisible Intellectualism, Stereotypical Radicalism and Commercial (Self-) Exploitation in *erasure*

The only way to please a white man is to tell him a lie. What kind of education are you getting around here?
Dr. Bledsoe (*Invisible Man*)

What would you call an educated negro with a PhD?
Malcolm X

I graduated summa cum laude from Harvard, hating every minute of it.
Monk

Introduction: The End(s) of Protest Fiction

Published in 2001, *erasure* is Percival Everett's parodic requiem for protest fiction.[110] The author's (so far) most widely received and controversial novel shifts its satiric focus on race from the *institutional* to the *commercial* sector of African American literature. While *Glyph* returns to the academic advent of black writing, allegorizing its aesthetic reduction to race with a black genius baby writer, *erasure* returns to the black literary foundation of the social problem novel. In using Richard Wright's epoch-making exhortation of black debasement, *Native Son* (1940), as an intertextual foil, *erasure* offers a ragingly stereotypical parody of one of its present-day equivalents, the so-called urban bestseller *Push*, Sapphire's debut novel (1996). Its narrative culminates in the tragic irony of this adaptation's commercial success as the "real" thing. This attack on America's cultural apparatus is launched from the commercially marginalized position occupied by the middle-aged black experimental writer and humanities scholar Thelonious "Monk" Ellison. Monk's failed satiric coup not only emphasizes the self-reinforcing power of the market and, by extension, the hegemonic order. It, too, problematizes the self-absorbed tendencies of a race-conscious black intellectual elitism, in which – significantly – the novel's author ironically implicates himself. As this study argues, *erasure* is a second-order satire, a parody of protest which programmatically relativizes its own critical purpose. The text foregrounds problems on both the creative and receptive side of the literary transfer: privilege and intentionality, but also readership and responsibility. With its metafictional staging of misreading, *erasure*'s critical force crystallizes not (only) in the *attack* on this exploitative system but in the attempt to contaminate the readerly sphere with the irony that defines Monk's self-righteous struggle for (poetic) justice.

An "X" Novel: as in Satire, Malcolm and Erasure

Originally titled "How Much is That Negro in the Window?" *erasure* is a sardonic indictment of the U.S. publishing industry, in specific, and, more generally, those actors and entities complicit in the commercial exploitation of stereotypical blackness. The narrative sets off when Monk returns from Los Angeles to his childhood hometown Washington D.C. to present a paper at a conference-panel of the Nouveau Roman Society, when several familial crises necessitate his staying longer in the city. Monk's impending identity crisis takes a turn for the worse, when he learns about the runaway bestseller novel of Juanita Mae Jenkins titled *We's Lives in Da Ghetto*, a fictionalized version of Sapphire's bestselling novel *Push* (1996). This intertextual alignment is further fostered by the resemblance of *erasure*'s cover art (St. Paul, 2011), specifically the visual composition of color (red/black), with the book design of *Push*. Mae Jenkins, originally from Akron Ohio, visited some relatives in Harlem at the age of twelve "for a couple of days and that's what the novel comes from" (53). Monk is infuriated by her racial "sell-out," precisely because she – apparently – lacks the stereotypically preconceived biographical background that defines his own authorial marginalization. Turning from cultural contrarian to social satirist, Monk abandons his experimental aspirations and writes a hyper-authentic ghetto-travesty of his own, titled "My Pafology," later retitled "Fuck." This novella features Van Go Jenkins, an archetypal thug in the vein of Richard Wright's epochal black outcast Bigger Thomas, who rapes his girlfriend and winds up on the couch of a fictionalized version of the Jerry Springer show, at first, and later in custody. To his utter surprise and horror, this parodic emulation of Mae Jenkins' novel makes Monk famous. Nobody, it turns out, gets the irony.

The glowing review of the New York Times, the bestseller list of which *Fuck* soon leads, reads accordingly:

> The characters are so well drawn that often one forgets that *Fuck* is a novel. It is more like the evening news. The ghetto comes to life in these pages and for this glimpse of hood existence we owe the author a tremendous debt. The writing is dazzling, the dialogue as true as dialogue gets and it is simply honest. *Fuck* is a must read for every sensitive person who has ever seen these people on the street and asked, "What's up with him?" (260)

The "sensitive" white reading public loves Van Go's allegedly authentic tale of black depravity and its creator, the enigmatic author-celebrity "Stagg R. Leigh," whom Monk personifies in public to cover his true identity. As the deterioration of Monk's authorial integrity and sense of self increasingly shows in the narrative's fragmented composition, *erasure* concludes with the climactic irony of Monk as *Monk* being a member of the "Book Award" jury that votes *Stagg R. Leigh*'s novel as the best book of the year. The narrative ends

right at the moment, when Monk resolves to uncover his successful fraud at the award ceremony, leaving the reader in suspense about the consequences of his decision.

Erasure has been Everett's so far most widely received racial satire. Sparking controversy for its acerbic attack on both the publishing industry and the African American tradition, the novel has been met with both appraisal and criticism. The attention that the novel continues to receive largely centers on three concerns: race, identity and commodification. This holds true for both scholarly articles, dissertational discussions and a host of reviews, all of which attest to the public and academic impact of the text. Among the novel's most prominent critics is the African American scholar Houston A. Baker, who chastises Everett for his unsympathetic treatment of Richard Wright and his iconic novel *Native Son*. Remaining "unpersuaded," Baker does not "find *Erasure* (replete as it is with masculinist bravado and tongue-in-cheek anti-black-majority sentiment) to contain the redeeming grace notes proclaimed by reviewers" ("Reflections on Monk," 146). Various scholars have noted how *erasure* operates in a precarious interposition between white and black cultural paradigms. Lawrence W. Hogue, for instance, stresses Everett's use of the black trickster tradition to represent an empowered and subversive notion of black subjectivity outside of Eurocentrism's binary normativity (2014). For John C. Charles, *erasure*'s critical force derives from its appropriation of white literary discourses, which closely aligns it with what he calls the postwar African American "white-life novel," a generic model granting "greater aesthetic freedom as well as new horizons of moral and critical authority" for black writers deviating from the protocol of protest (202). Darryl Dickson-Carr has sketched the literary landscape, in the commercial sector of which Everett makes a satiric intervention with *erasure*, suggesting that the novel attests to a changing market dynamic shaping black writing ("'The Historical Burden that only Oprah Can Bear'"). Bran Yost argues that this cultural saturation with hegemonic models of blackness stems from the commercial appropriation and de-politicization of the social problem narratives promoted by the culturally nationalist projects of the 1960s and 70s. Malin Lidström Brock argues that *erasure* promotes a "transcultural awareness" of identity as multilateral and fluid, thus offering an alternative reading of blackness to multicultural models. Like various other scholars, Brock locates this awareness "on the novel's meta-structural levels" (174). According to Lesley Larkin, who reads *erasure* alongside its intertextual foil *Push*, this meta-impetus correlates with the text's programmatic emphasis on reading, a strategy which resonates with the fundamental "problem of audience *and* stereotype" (162; my emphasis).

I situate my study in the aesthetic fault line between the production- and reception-side of black literary politics. Rather than overemphasize the bilateral relation of Monk's antagonism with the literary establishment, however, I argue that the core affront of Everett's novel lies in the contagion of the readerly sphere with the intradiegetic irony of misreception. In so doing, the novel foregrounds the ambivalence between the aim and frame of satire, which is implicit in *erasure*'s central sign, the cross or cross-hair, i.e. the "X."[111]

In and of itself an ambiguous sign *and* letter, it, for one, refers to Malcolm X (1925-1965), the black American race radical, civil rights advocate and Muslim minister famous for his militant critique of the American social order. The activist promoted his last name, the nominal (non-) identifier "X," as a marker of a radically lacking identity. The sign serves to allude to the genealogical uprooting of blacks in slavery and the historical erasure of black identity by the imposition of an *Americanized* identity through the slave holder's name given to the slave. This historical erasure of black identity rings stirringly in the words of James Baldwin's assessment: "Every Negro in America has that name, the name which was on the bill of sale when he was sold and he became Mr. Baldwin's [N-word], or Mr. Jones's [N-word]. And when you became free, this was the only name you had" (interview on BBC's "Bookshelf," 14:31 – 14:50 min). The "X" thus suggests both the impossibility of an ancestral realignment, i.e. the insufficiency of an Afrocentric conception of African American identity, and the potential of black cultural self-redefinition in a radically open and self-conscious notion of African American identity. Secondly, the "X" refers to the Derridean principle of writing under erasure, or "sous rature." Leaving both the word and the mark of its crossing-out legible, this strategy emblematizes the nature of language as a palimpsestic hypostatization of an always already absent presence of original meaning. *Erasure*, hence, is crucially occupied with identity erasure, with the eradication, imposition and reinscription of social and cultural constructions of selfhood, especially with regard to hegemonic models of blackness. Nowhere does this strategy manifest more prominently than in *erasure*'s protagonist himself, who as an extraordinarily well-educated middle-class scholar combines characteristics that are stereotypically understood as both not black *and* black (at least since Bill Cosby, as it were). Which brings us to Thelonious "Monk" Ellison, the invisible man of the multicultural entertainment era.

Not Black Enough: Monk, the Invisible Man of the Multicultural Entertainment Era

Set in the mid-1990s, *erasure* centers on Monk, the emancipatory promise of the Civil Rights advancements incarnate: educational access and professional opportunity. It conducts a

thought-experiment based on the premise: what if a black writer with the intellectual excellence of W.E.B. Du Bois and the radical rigor of Malcolm X attempted to challenge the cultural order of race as we know it today? Monk's cultural revolt is, in essence, an intellectual battle fought with the means of academic scholarship. As a member of the upper middle-class, Monk grew up in a family of doctors in Annapolis. An academic overachiever, he graduated summa cum laude from Harvard. A bachelor in his mid-forties, he works as professor of creative writing at USC Los Angeles and publishes highly dense and ultimately unreadable experimental fiction, favorably refashionings of Greek mythology. Monk, too, is an outdoors- and craftsman, who fishes and knows how to do woodworking. He is fond of Gustav Mahler and Aretha Franklin. Also, he is a math-expert. It is this focus on Greek mythology, among other similarities, that makes for a conspicuous connection between Monk and the author of *erasure* himself. Like his fictional counterpart, Everett has written refashionings of the Greek myths of Dionysus (*Frenzy*, 1997) and Medea (*For Her Dark Skin*, 1990). As a fictional figure that mirrors its own creative originator, Monk can be read as the Everett's parody of his own authorial narcissism. The author, hence, ironically implicates himself in the race-conscious intellectual elitism that Monk champions.

Like Ralph, *Glyph*'s writer wunderkind, Thelonious "Monk" Ellison is a peculiar representative of privilege and elitism. This is spectacularly highlighted by his convoluted and culturally charged name. One of the prime concerns in Everett's racial satires and a key issue in African American cultural discourse, Monk's *name* suggests a (burdensome) legacy of cultural achievement. *Erasure*'s protagonist, in other words, seems to have "big shoes to fill." Thus, the accomplishments of a former artistic elite are inscribed into his nominal identifier. Thelonious Monk (1917-82), a jazz pianist and composer, was a foundational figure in bebop and ranks among the most prestigious and sophisticated musicians in the recording industry and live scene. Monk was known for his improvisational expertise, rich melodic styles abounding in dissonances and twists, as well as his signature outfit composed of a dark suit, sunglasses and a hat. His performances had an anarchic quality, as the complexity and ingenuity of his compositions starkly contrasted with his clunky, "percussive" approach to the piano, bending and deforming melodic arrangements by way of abrupt key strokes and syncopated releases. Off stage, especially in interviews, Monk was received as equally eccentric and elusive, as he famously tended toward cryptic responses. "Ellison," in turn, refers to Ralph Ellison (1914-1994), the preeminent African American modernist author, scholar and critic. *Invisible Man* (1952), his most notable work and one of the most notable works in 20th century American literature, is – tellingly – one of *erasure*'s crucial

compositional templates (see discussion). Everett mobilizes this very "American" quality of *Invisible Man* in tackling literary-political concerns of aesthetic universalism and racial particularism. The major merit of Ellison's novel, various critics have argued, is its discussion of race as a core aspect of the American cultural condition. Rather than portraying (only) the so-called African American experience, Ellison has widened the scope of his satiric investigation on the American experience, if you will.

Monk's nominal over-determination epitomizes the heteronomous forces of racial ascription, to which Monk is subjected from early on:

> "Monk," I said. "Monk?" [another black kid] laughed. "What the fuck kind of name is *Monk*?" Right at that second I didn't want to tell him my real name was Thelonious. Another guy came up and the tall one said, "Hey, Reggie, this here is, now get this, *Monk*." "Kinda looks like a monkey, don't he?" Reggie said. "What's your real name?" Clevon asked. "Ellison," I said. "That's your first name or your last name?" "Last." "What's your first name?" "Theo," I lied. (22-23)

"Thelonious Ellison" always already says too much and not enough about who "Monk" actually is, so to say. It echoes the cultural idealism, i.e. the belief in a national set of shared cultural values, which Ralph Ellison identified with his middle name "Waldo." As he seminally argued in 1964 essay, Ellison had a vexed relationship with this identifier due to its reference to one of America's high-cultural icons, namely Ralph Waldo Emerson ("Hidden Name and Complex Fate"). Houston A. Baker suggests that "no matter how 'colored' the name Thelonious Ellison sounds," this racial marking is but a ploy of an "X" novel, one that revokes the images of blackness it persistently evokes ("Reflections on Monk," 134). "Thelonious" and "Ellison" share a profound cultural resonance and striking ambiguity. Note that both names are ambiguous regarding their potential usage as *first* names. They allude to the intricate identificatory dynamics inherent in racialization, which Everett, as Baker rightly stresses, satirizes. Everett's protagonist's name "Thelonious Ellison" not only ironizes the strategy of empowerment that is usually associated with naming in African American culture (cf. discussion in chapter 3.3 on *I Am Not Sidney Poitier*). It is part of the novel's programmatic engagement with (identity) erasure in the racialization of black subjects. Everett, generally speaking, emphasizes the systematic imposition of hegemonic models of blackness on black subjects at the cost of (more) differentiated and fluid articulations of selfhood. Monk's name seems to spectacularly highlight this tacit reduction of black individuality to formulaic versions of identity often rooted in stereotypes of social precariousness and/or physical exoticization (think of the young black thug, welfare queen, or excelling athlete, for instance). In Monk's case, however, his name signals the opposite extreme: an elitist version of intellectualism, which seems to categorically complicate

identifiability and relatability (notice that Monk is ridiculed by other *black* teenagers). Tellingly, Everett's protagonist opts for his nickname "Monk," which, in turn, connotes both the racially charged expletive "monkey" (note the teenage boys' verbal ridicule of Monk and the related term of endearment "Monksie" used by his mother), as well as the spiritual or intellectual solipsism of a religious hermit. Alluding to celibacy, this nickname connotes self-control if not –chastisement (consider the clerical dictum "ora et labora"), and posits Everett's protagonist as a solitary figure lacking any communal affiliations. What is more, situated in the symbolic genealogy of Thelonious Monk and Ralph Ellison, "Monk" himself, as his nickname suggests, will not have any (creative) progeny. He stands in sharp contrast with his own hyper-sexual character Van Go. "Monk," in essence, epitomizes a dialectical dependence between pseudonymity and anonymity characteristic of present-day black artistry in the historical lineage of minstrelsy entertainment. It is suggestive of the binary quandary between isolation or degradation, the latter of which Monk ultimately faces when posing as the caricaturesque trickster Stagg R. Leigh. This public authorial performance, significantly, completes Monk's authorial self-erasure (see discussion).

Erasure's "I"-narrator, hence, would indeed be an exemplary representative of emancipated blackness, were it not for his lack of cultural "credibility." As a "blackademic," as it were, Monk is a representative of a race-conscious black intellectual elitism, who is endowed with a high socioeconomic status, a considerable amount of cultural capital and what seems to be a stellar intellect. Toward these markers of privilege, to be clear, Monk remains ambivalent, stating that he hated "every minute" of his Ivy-League education, for instance. Toward his seeming lack of the stereotypical markers of black identity, significantly, Monk remains equally ambivalent, as he ironically admits to his sucking at Basketball and dancing (1). As a hermit-like genius, who never fit in with the cool kids, as it were, Monk's elitism disconnects him from his own black community *and* the dominant society.

Putting into question the cultural basis of his blackness and the institutional foundation of his status as artist, Monk evinces a profound predilection for self-reflection, in other words, a constant urge to critically (re-) define, who he is:

> My name is Thelonious Ellison. And I am a writer of fiction. This admission pains me only at the thought of my story being found and read, as I have always been severely put off by any story which had as its main character a writer. So, I will claim to be something else, if not instead, then in addition, and that shall be a son, a brother, a fisherman, an art lover, a woodworker. […] I am Thelonious Monk Ellison. Call me Monk. (1)

With this iconic quote from *Moby Dick*, Monk presents himself as Ishmael, the narratorial companion of captain Ahab, the whale chaser.[112] Not only situates his own struggle for self-

definition at the *center* of an archetypically "American" conflict between the "internal" and "external" dynamics of identity. He also hints at the novel's pivotal problem of agency, insinuating a split in his role as narrator and protagonist of his own story. Foregrounding secondary aspects of his life as primary traits of his personality, Monk would like to (believe that he can) discard race as an identitarian criterion:

> I hardly ever think about race. Those times when I did think about it a lot I did so because of my guilt for not thinking about it. I don't believe in race. I believe there are people who will shoot me or hang me or cheat me and try to stop me because they do believe in race, because of my brown skin, curly hair, wide nose and slave ancestors. But that's just the way it is. (2)

This declarative dismissal of race highlights the ambivalence that is key in *erasure*, namely between the however well-intentioned incentive to debunk race as a social construct and the troubling persistence of systemic racism. At the same time – as his subtly ironic undertone crystallizing in his final remark shows – Monk is well-aware of the absurdity of his dilemma.[113] Monk, the paragon of black equality, is marginalized as "not black enough," while struggling with the ambivalent urge to prove the opposite (ibid). His claim for a self-defined life as a black writer, thus, seems to leave him with no viable option as to the realization of this claim:

> I felt I had to prove I was *black* enough. Some people in the society in which I live, described as being black, tell me I am not *black* enough. Some people whom the society calls white tell me the same thing. I have heard this mainly about my novels, from editors who have rejected me and reviewers whom I have apparently confused and, on a couple of occasions, on a basketball court when upon missing a shot I muttered *Egads*. (ibid)

Having missed his seventeenth shot now, so to speak, as his latest novel has been rejected by seventeen editors, Monk – to cap it all – learns that his "promotion to professor had come through" (43). His academically predicated remoteness from the "real" world, which shapes his perception as an overly intellectualist outsider, is pushed to the foreground. This is particularly obvious in Monk's reflection on his relationship with his sister, a physician, who provides medical aid – including abortions – to the poor. "In many ways," Monk concedes, "I wished I were more like [my sister]. She'd dedicated her life to helping people, but it was never clear to me that she liked them all that much. That idea of service, she got from my father, who, however wealthy his practice made him, never collected fees from half his patients" (4). While waiting for his sister in her clinic's waiting room, Monk starts chatting with a (presumably black) patient, who asks him: "'What kind of books you write?' 'I write novels,' I said. 'Stories.' Already feeling out of place, I now didn't know how to sound relaxed. 'My cousin gave me *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. She had it in a class. She goes

to UDC. I liked that book.' 'That's a really fine novel,' I said. 'She gave me *Cane*, too,' the young woman said. 'I mean, it ain't just one story and it's got them poems in it. But it seemed like one thing, know what I mean?' 'I know exactly what you mean. […] Have you gone to college?' I asked. The girl laughed. 'Don't laugh,' I said. 'I think you're really smart. You should at least try.' 'I didn't even finish high school.' I didn't know what to say to that. I scratched my head and looked at the other faces in the room. I felt an inch tall because I had expected this young woman with the blue fingernails to be a certain way, to be slow and stupid, but she was neither. I was the stupid one" (21).

Monk's peculiar scholarly mindset reflected in his narratorial idiosyncrasies shows an ironic and at times stoic, if not pedantic quality. This makes for *erasure*'s distinct satiric "tone," which oscillates between melancholy and irony. Monk remains preoccupied with "the deeper meaning in everything," if only from an ironic distance:

> It used to be that I would look for the deeper meaning in everything, thinking that I was some kind of hermeneutic sleuth moving through the world, but I stopped that when I was twelve. Though I would have been unable to articulate it then, I have since come to recognize that I was abandoning any search for elucidation of what might be called subjective or thematic meaning schemes and replacing it with a mere delineation of specific case descriptions, from which I, at least, could make inferences, however unconscious, that would allow me to understand the world as it affected me. In other words, I learned to take the world as it came. In other words still, I just didn't care. (26)

This discrepancy between his tentative dismissal of (the possibility to acquire some sort of understanding of) an overarching and binding truth and the meticulous arrangement of the narrative and its argumentative structure.[114] Monk's eventual succumbing to the demand to prove his being black enough prompts *erasure*'s key concern with *narrative reliability* and *authorial agency* (see discussion).

In a programmatic manner singular among Everett's texts, *erasure* thus renders race a primary concern in Monk's attempt to transcend it. In his attempt to problematize "that minorities do think, and write about something other than the race problem," Monk operates against the well-established demands of an entire cultural system (cf. Hurston's "What White Publishers Won't Print"). Taking up *Glyph*'s central question of race as a *cultural* category, the novel follows Monk's transition from a marginal position of invisible intellectualism to stereotypical radicalism. The novel, thus, taps into two segments of the American racial imaginary, namely the narrative of authenticity and its overlapping script of stereotyped black masculinity. Monk is situated at a precarious intersection between these hegemonic models of blackness and the multicultural dogma of diversity, which defines the societal mainstream of racial categorization.

If not proactively promoting this ideal, then Monk clearly subscribes to a universal notion of artistic freedom and cultural contribution. His aspiration after the "high-brow" standards associated with the classics of Western art seems to abide by the cultural logic of diversity, according to which every minority represents a valuable aspect of the nation's wider sociocultural whole. As Monk operates in a *white-codified* discourse (mythology; consider *Glyph*'s focus on theory), however, he ironically helps to debunk this flawed logic by very much abiding by it, as he transgresses the institutionalized fault line between (a mimetic notion of) representation and (an allegedly non-referential notion of) experimentation.

With an astonishing irony characteristic for Everett's novel, one of Monk's reviewers praises his recent work's stylistic sophistication while wondering "*what this reworking of Aeschylus'* The Persians *has to do with the African American experience*" (2; original emphasis). Published in 1991 (see his CV), Monk's novel *The Persians* is based on the eponymous drama, considered *the* oldest known tragedy whose date of production has been certified (472 B.C.). Written during the Classical period of Ancient Greece by the Greek tragedian Aeschylus, the drama is set in the Persian city Susa immediately after the Greeks' gory defeat of the Persians. As the Persian king Xerxes is about to return, the play imagines this conflict's tragic repercussions from the *Persian* perspective. It thus translates this ultimate confrontation between Greece and Persia into a tragedy about human nature as such. Critics have remained divided over the play's sympathetic insight into the Persians' fate and into the xenophobic culture supplanting the antagonism between Greece and Persia. The drama, significantly, portrays the Greeks' arch enemy, or – in other words – the Greek "other." That this antagonism resulted in moral corruption on both sides is further proven by the fact that one of the Greek military strategists, Themistocles, crucially responsible for his faction's victory, was later ousted from Athens due to his perceived arrogance. Ironically, the Greek general wound up serving in the Persian king Artaxerxes' army.

What has this tragic story about the roots and reverberations of human social conflict to do with the African American experience? Presuming that this question is asked by a *white* reviewer, and stressing that there is no such thing as *the* African American experience (but as many African American experiences as there are black people living in the U.S. – one of them being Monk), we might reply: "everything." It is this preoccupation with a fundamental sense of social antagonism in Aeschylus' epochal tragedy, which defines both Monk's *and* Everett's projects of mythological revisionism. The author's novelistic venture into Greek mythology subsumes two foundational myths of the Western canon of cultural and civilizational origin. In so doing, he unearths the historical roots of racial thinking while writing racialized versions

of these myths. What defines both of these characters discussed by Everett, significantly, is that they are situated outside of the established societal frameworks. Dionysus, portrayed in *Frenzy* (1997), is a foreign visiting-deity, a god of epiphany and frenzy, whose cult-like festivals are considered to have fostered the development of Greek theatre. Medea, whose fateful story Everett gives a new spin in *For Her Dark Skin* (1990), is the archetypal outsider tragically suffering from the hegemonic scripts imposed on her.

In *For Her Dark Skin*, Everett revisits the mythic figure Medea, master of magic yet and victim of Eros' spell. Medea is in love with Jason whom she despises. She helps Jason to kill her brother Apsyrtus and abduct the golden fleece from her father Aeetes in Colchis ("the land of darker skinned people"). She follows Jason, who took her because of her exotic nature – epitomized by her "darker skin" –, to Hellas in order to take revenge on him by killing Creusa, her father Creon and her new-born baby sons she had with Jason. Everett self-declaredly intended to complicate Medea as a fictional character and break up the traditional framing of her revengeful nature as madness:

> The Medea novel comes out of my longstanding dissatisfaction with the slant of the existing story – that the excuse for her killing her children was that his woman had gone mad. That seemed to simple. There are all sorts of other tracks. She is a hero in my estimation, and my story came out of that kernel of dissatisfaction. (Interview with Tissut et al, 80)

Medea, significantly, had been *made* a child murderess by Euripides. The novel's climactic finale rings with a profound feminist undertone, as it posits Medea's murder of her children as a deliberate act of resistance to the patriarchal system, in which she has been kept:

> "I have lifted a blade and struck [my children] a blow no less severe than the one delivered by their father," I said. "I have rendered them a service." Jason cried "Why do *you* cry?" I asked. "You are alive. You have not been burned. You have not been cut. Oh, I see – your *smile* is gone. Grieve for your smile." "You are wicked," he muttered through his tears. "No, Jason, motivated." (*For Her Dark Skin*, 152)

In *Frenzy*, Dionysus, the demigod son of Zeus and Semele, is capable of inspiring mortals with the quintessentially human state of pleasure – frenzy – while himself not being able to partake in it. With his human companion Vlepo as experiential alter ego, whom he transforms into various (non-) corporeal entities, Dionysus seeks to investigate the origin and originality of the human experience.

Both Everett and his narrator Monk are preoccupied with a fundamental if not universal notion of "otherness." His experimental work suggests that Monk, after all, is deeply invested in the investigation of the primordial principles of human sociality while concomitantly subscribing to a certain universal notion of "value of art, and the integrity of those committed

to it beyond commercial concerns" (Charles, 205). In his newest novel, which portrays Aristophanes and Euripides killing "a younger, more talented dramatist, then contemplate the death of metaphysics," Monk transposes his mythological project from tragedy onto the aesthetic plane of comedy (42; notice the reference to Aristophanes). This comedic turn seems to signal Monk's attempt to conceptualize a more humorous and self-ironic version of experimental fiction. This attempt is preempted by his protest-initiation. Recommending him to discard his high-brow aspirations, one book agent tells Monk to "settle down to

> write the true, gritty real stories of black life. I told him that I was living a *black* life, far blacker than he could ever know, that I had lived one, that I would be living one. He left me to chat with an on-the-rise performance artist/novelist who had recently posed for seventeen straight hours in front of the governor's mansion as a lawn jockey. (2)

After similar responses from seventeen editors in total, who turn Monk's newest book down because it is "'too dense' […] 'not for us' […and] 'the market won't support this kind of thing'" (61), his agent Yul puts it straight: "The line is, you're not

> black enough," my agent said. "What's that mean, Yul? How do they even know I'm black? Why does it matter?" "We've been over this before. They know because of the photo on your first book. They know because they've seen you. They know because you're black, for crying out loud." "What, do I have to have my characters comb their afros and be called [N-word] for these people?" "It wouldn't hurt." (43)

Monk's professional predicament presents itself as an either/or choice, namely that of either continuing to write highly sophisticated, critically acclaimed but ultimately unpopular experimental fiction or acquiesce in the situation dictated by the industry: to give the (white) people what they want, what they conceive as "authentic" blackness, and become a racial "sell-out," or in James Baldwin's terms a "Jeremiah without conviction."

Of this black commercial self-exploitation, the aforementioned lawn jockey performance is a particularly bizarre example. This decorative statue of a black jockey is an iconic exemplar of racial thought persisting in cultural artifacts. The racist image of the black servant, here, is trivialized through modern-day kitsch. Obviously, the disruptive potential of this (im-) posture is highly questionable. Monk's encounter with the "artist/novelist" ultimately signals that such a parodic appropriation of racial iconography is very much acceptable and presentable in polite society, as it were. This reductive notion of performance as merely (re-) presenting or "showing" race suggests that the political resonance of such a form of protest does not exceed the discursive boundaries of a casual party chat. Tragically, Monk's subsequent attempt to appropriate a racially charged discourse ("protest fiction") to challenge its cultural circulation both as a convention of self-representation and consumable difference

is bound to fail, too. His marginality, thus, takes on a profound irony, as he, indeed, holds a privileged position in relation to the societal center, on which minorities – according to the general assumption – are tacitly held to have a "better" perspective and to which they thus are able to contribute a more nuanced understanding. In "relying too heavily on a critique launched from the margins," J. Martin Favor argues, one risks

> never being able to dismantle those margins without wholly erasing ourselves; in an effort of self-preservation, marginal we must remain. In combating an oppression based on the category of 'race,' we may re-create the notion of 'race' itself and, in doing so, hazard laying the framework for a new type of essentialism that potentially reproduces many facets of the old. (Favor, 9)

Monk's transition from the invisible man to the race man of the multicultural entertainment era is based on a profound and ultimately tragic self-erasure. This gradual process of cultural absorption and commercial cooptation is based on the erasure of Monk's authorial self with the hegemonic model of a black protest writer: Stagg R. Leigh.

Everett's protagonist undergoes a transformation from an elitist experimenter to a caricature of a trickster, who succumbs to the heteronomous forces of the market. His performed author-celebrity seems to provide him with the power to control his public image. Stagg R. Leigh is an adaptation of the mythical black bad man Stagolee, also known as Stagger Lee or Stagolee, who, as Fritz Gysin has pointed out in concordance with Cecil Brown, represents "the transformation of a famous criminal into an authentic African American folk hero" (Gysin, web). Lee Shelton (1865-1912), a St. Louis-based owner of a nightclub and pimp, came to fame for murdering Billy Lyons, serving as myth for various musical folk forms. This trickster figure, the "bad [n-word] stereotype, became a representative of the counterculture working outside and against the white system […] a cultural and political hero, and above all a powerful archetype of the African American oral tradition" (Gysin). Combining the radical presence of a rebel with the social elusiveness of the underdog, Gysin asserts that "Monk's assumption of this illustrious name as a pseudonym for the author of his book and his performance of the part are fraught with irony and additional ambiguity" (ibid). It is important to stress that Stagolee himself is already an ambivalent figure that has been transfigured in both positive and negative ways as a despicable criminal and glorious avenger of the oppressed. Tellingly, the pseudonymous creator of "My Pafology/Fuck" is received favorably, as the editor Morgenstein is convinced that "'[t]*hat fuckin' guy's da real thing*' (222). Sporting a black nationalist look ("Black pants, black shirt, black watch cap, dark glasses, black army boots", 234), Monk as Stagg fulfils societal and commercial expectations of black masculinity, as his ominous reclusiveness and notorious reticence is perceived as a

sign of his biographical background as an ex-con. His caricaturesque performance resembles an act of (inverted) passing. Ironically, Monk passes as black (and not as white, as the stereotype of the tragic mulatto prescribes) or rather *blacker*, after having been marginalized – like Ellison's Invisible Man – as "not black enough."[115]

Monk's struggle for social visibility and artistic recognition closely aligns him with Ralph Ellison's invisible man. Invisibility, as seminally articulated by Ellison in *Invisible Man* (1950), is a metaphor for social marginality and a trope of an Americanized cultural vision of race. According to Todd M. Lieber, it "suggests the situation of a group stripped of its native culture and forced to adhere to alien standards and values while its own cultural qualities were ignored; socially it reflects the conditions of a group whose basic plight was long overlooked or pushed into obscure shadows; perhaps most significantly it embodies the complex psychological dilemmas of men without a sense of vital group identity, whose sense of individual human identity is often denied by the dominant society" (86). Everett reworks key themes and plotlines from *Invisible Man*, as it reinitiates its hypertext's synoptic discussion of the American scene and race's social and cultural figurations. Significantly, Everett supplants these poetological parallels between *erasure* and Ellison's novel with various references and iconic quotes from *Invisible Man* (cf. "Behold the Invisible," "Keep America Pure," and "How does it feel to be free of one's illusions?' […] '*Painful and empty*").

From the peripheral position of an underground room lighted by 1,369 light bulbs supplied with power stolen from the city's electric grid, Ellison's unnamed narrator recapitulates his experiences of invisibility while passing through key sociocultural stages of the American scene. After the famous "Battle Royal" episode, during which he is forced to act the black entertainer, fighting other black adolescents and giving a speech about black equality in front of his Southern home-town's white male functionaries, the invisible man is awarded a scholarship for an all-black college, reminiscent of Booker T. Washington's Tuskegee Institute. There, he emerges as the up-and-coming apprentice of the college president Dr. Bledsoe and his assimilationist agenda of black uplift. Dr. Bledsoe soon expels Ellison's protagonist for revealing the unsettling underside of black life to a white trustee. Equipped with letters of recommendation by Dr. Bledsoe, the young protagonist travels to New York City, trying to get a job in order to earn money for his eventual re-enrollment, only to find out that the college president never intended to let him back. Rather, Ellison's protagonist is being kept "running" and made to struggle with and against the American regime of race.[116] After his brief employment at a paint factory renowned for its pure white paint, the invisible man embarks upon his cross-sectional journey through Harlem's communal and political life.

Taking advantage of his oratory talent and public allure, the Brotherhood, an organization closely modeled after the Communist Party USA, hires the invisible man as a widely acclaimed spokesman. While a brutal conflict ensues between his own party and the black nationalist group headed by Ras the Exhorter, Ellison's protagonist falls from grace with his superiors, as his unrestrained rhetorical power compromises party protocol. To evade Ras' violent gang, the invisible man disguises himself with a hat and sunglasses, being repeatedly misrecognized as Rinehart, a black con-man, who operates under the guise of the gambler, briber and spiritual leader. His flight eventually takes him to the underground coal bin, where, sealed from the public, he remains in a hibernation-like isolation, as the narrative returns to its introductory present.

According to Lesley Larkin, *Invisible Man* satirizes the "'hypervisibility' assigned to black people" in the pre-Civil Rights phase (129). The text teases out the contradictory ways in which race both serves to spot and separate, but also anonymize racialized subjects. As Charles Banner-Haley claims, the novel thus "anticipated the arguments of multiculturalism" as Ellison investigated "American society's power to transform and reinvent itself" (165). Monk is emblematic for this cultural facility for self-reinvention. He is the invisible man of the multicultural entertainment era, who gets coopted as race man. As such, he renders visible the ideological blind-sides of both "high-brow" nicheness *and* commercial hyper-exposure. As his obsessive self-consciousness contrasts with the systemic misrecognition of his diverse individual talents, Monk echoes the invisible man's exploitation as a so-called credit for the race, who cannot be sure whether he is "a man or a natural resource" (*Invisible Man*, 303). Like Ellison's protagonist, Monk is

> invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me […] When they approach me they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination – indeed, everything and anything except me […] It is sometimes advantageous to be unseen, although it is most often rather wearing on the nerves. Then, too, you're constantly being bumped against by those of poor vision. Or again, you often doubt if you really exist. You wonder whether you aren't simply a phantom in other people's minds. Say, a figure in a nightmare which the sleeper tries with all his strength to destroy. It's when you feel like this that, out of resentment, you begin to bump people back. (3-4)

In translating the trope of invisibility into the multicultural paradigm, *erasure*, too, aims at investigating the sociopsychological dimensions of race beyond a reductive racial antagonism between black and white. In Baldwin's words, the text seeks to do

> something much more difficult, to find out the connection between what seemed like a pointless and gratuitous brutality and the humanity of the person who was more or less unconsciously inflicting it, because after all most people are not monsters, life would be much simpler if they were, but they are not, they do things which you are not aware of doing, and you react to it in very much the same way,

you know, you hit me and I react in that way, I want to hit you back, and it demands something else to begin to understand that there must be some level on which your pain and my pain meet. (interview on BBC's "Bookshelf," 4:40 – 5:13 min)

In Ellison's words, Everett's protagonist serves to tease out the "potentialities" "between Rinehart and invisibility" (510). Stagg R. Leigh, as I will argue in the following, is a rendition of Rinehart, a con-man of the multicultural entertainment era. Monk's coup echoes the Invisible Man's final transformation into Rinehart, who thus lives up to the ominous prophecy of his grandfather, whose dying words were to "keep up the good fight […and] overcome 'em with yeses, undermine 'em with grins, agree 'em to death and destruction, let 'em swoller you till they vomit or bust wide open" (*Invisible Man,* 16). In *erasure*, Everett speculates on what Ellison and Baldwin term "bumping" or "hitting" back, of racial resentment channeled through the aesthetic outlet of literary writing. What is fundamentally at stake in *both* novels is the political potential blackness predicated on resistance to white hegemony, the notion that putting on an act by putting on the *mask* of stereotypical blackness, i.e. by performing a concealed parodic representation of these negative images projected the racialized subject, the invisible man can operate as a "supersensitive confirmer of [his] misconceptions" in order to deceive them and potentially undermine their racial predominance (509). The crucial task of this version of "Rinehartism," one of his fellow members of the Brotherhood explains to Ellison's protagonist, "is to take advantage of them in their own best interest" (504).

What distinguishes Ellison's from Everett's invisible man, after all, is their institutional standing. In other words, Monk has a significant amount of social capital due to his academic titles and literary prestige as an experimental writer well-received in French poststructuralist and postmodern circles. Monk's characteristic dilemma boils down to the institutionalized incompatibility between an academically-predicated notion of intellectualism and a commercially sanctioned notion of black authenticity. In other words, Monk grapples with the paradox that as an African American the only way to be recognized is either to be a problem or a ham, and as a black artist and intellectual to be a protest writer. This systematic denial of black intellectual excellence, which Monk faces, is further elaborated in the novel's incorporated short story-excerpt titled "Àppropos de Bottes," which is based on a portion of Everett's short story "Meiosis" published in 1997 (169-178 in *erasure*).

"Àppropos de bottes," is borrowed from French and literally means "on the subject of boots" ("a propos de bottes"). The *OED* translates the dictum as "without serious motive, without rhyme or reason." "Meiosis," in turn, is both a biological and rhetorical term, as it means a specific process of cellular division and a rhetorical figure similar to that of the litotes. These

two titles are suggestive of the story's particular, "understated" discussion of race or, with regard to the biological connotation of its title, two-ness or, more specifically, otherness. The short story portrays a young and well-educated African American allegedly from Mississippi, who under the fabricated name Tom Wahzetepe's participates in a TV quiz show titled "Virtute et Armis." In this show, Tom is pitted against a white contestant. True to the official motto of the State Mississippi adopted during the heyday of Jim Crow in 1894, to which the show's title alludes, the match is manipulated to safeguard the white participant's victory. Against all odds of white superiority, as it were, Tom wins. For a more detailed discussion see Joe Weixlmann "Allusion and Misdirection: Himes, 'Meiosis,' and Everett's Erasure."

With Monk, Stewart concludes, Everett "demonstrates how the truly exceptional African American citizen is – paradoxically – the individual who simply wants to be an individual, a status much more available to members of America's dominant culture" ("Giving the People What They Want," 168). What makes Monk's predicament such a characteristic case in point for this paradox is the fact that he seems to share in this *white* privilege – at least to a certain extent – conceived as the liberty to realize this individuality irrespective of the economic realities of race. As an unlikely revenger of the oppressed, Monk's ambivalent relation to the putatively empowering blessings of formal equality can be read as a sign of elitist ignorance or self-conscious fatigue. He is neither exactly unaware of nor indifferent towards the systemic inequalities, of which his artistic marginalization is a characteristic example. Characteristic, because it raises troubling questions about privilege, responsibility and, more generally speaking, those institutional preconditions of what is commonly referred to as "wokeness," the awareness of inequality and, also – significantly – the precarious attempt to seek strategies for its structural remedy. *Erasure*, thus, resists to give an unambiguous answer to these concerns, as Monk's resistance to the commercial machinery of race, fails, precisely because it succeeds.

The following subchapter provide a detailed discussion of the cultural context and poetic particulars of Monk's (un-) successful satiric coup, as he "protests in plain sight" of America's "black pathology industry."[117]

Protesting in Plain Sight: Authenticity and Agency in the Black Pathology Industry

"Multiculturalism," Richard Schur concludes, "has allowed more publishing opportunities for African Americans and developed once-neglected markets. The problem, however, is that the very strategies on which writers and the publishing industry have relied to produce 'race' literature have also produced monolithic images of African American culture" ("Stomping the

Blues No More?" 205). In *erasure*, African American literature, as John C. Charles points out, is "synonymous with work that depicts black life as defined by violence, ignorance, poverty, and familial dysfunction" (206). This one-dimensional spectrum of black writing has been fundamentally shaped by the protest fiction of the early 20th century. In addition, Brian Yost claims, the 1960s and 70s black cultural nationalism has significantly helped to extend this catalogue of pathological blackness. The images and themes of communal suffering that the Black Arts Movement utilized to stir the black masses through art in order to change their social condition, Yost asserts, "became the de-politicized surface for the mainstream media's ghetto, a further and more insidious social constraint against African-Americans who wish to express complex non-traditional identities" (1314). "Everett's depiction of the black author navigating the modern publishing industry," the scholar concludes, "suggests that the Black Arts Movement's success at raising community awareness and developing literature that constantly strove to awaken the nation to the hardships of black urban life has instead saturated American culture with 'ghettoized' images of the media's black man's ineluctable struggle with total corruption" (1326). It is this dilemma between (recognizing) the necessity for raising awareness about persisting racial asymmetries and commercial demands for racial authenticity that define the artistic negotiation of this necessity as the sole purpose of artists labeled as "African American."

Approaching *erasure*'s core concern of racial authenticity from the perspective of the black exception, Stewart claims that the novel shows "how this African American exceptionalism," i.e. blacks being "viewed, for better and for worse, as representing only what *black* Americans are capable of and, perhaps more importantly, are *like*," is "put to work for American cultural, political and ideological interests through a momentum over which the individual African American has little or no control" ("Giving the People What They Want," 167/68). Darryl Dickson-Carr concurs that this commercial momentum is an important focus of Everett's racial satires, as they show "that African American literature and art have become subject to market forces in ways that they were not in the past" ("The Historical Burden," 50). This momentous trend towards mass-marketed minority art at the cost of alternate, more complex models of representation and dissent, is based on what Paul Gilroy has identified as the rise of multiculturalism as "a dominant commercial consideration" in the modern-day neoliberal nation-state (242). In a comprehensive investigation of this *commercial* machinery that correlates with multiculturalist models of identity, *erasure* focuses on both the production- and reception-side of American minority pop-culture.[118]

Firstly, the novel principally questions the notion that there is such a thing as a racial identity. It debunks what Stuart Hall has described as the myth of the "'real me'." Rather than a recoverable essence of selfhood, Hall claims, identity is contingent, fluid and – significantly – "learnable."[119] It is constituted in a dialogic interplay between subjectivity and culture, shaped by what the scholar calls the "politics of articulation" ("Minimal Selves," 45). Hall's notion of identity, Martin Japtok and Jerry Rafiki Jenkins stress, crucially implies "that the search for an 'authentic' racial self or identity is futile precisely because 'most identities that [we] have been [we've] only known about not because of something deep inside [us] the real self but because of how other people have recognized [us]'" (11).[120] Consequently, blackness articulated in exclusive opposition to whiteness (as the epitome of race's inhibiting forces) is a reduction. That such an identity, as a cultural repository of resistance, can be rendered accessible and transmissible in textual terms is *erasure*'s crucial corollary concern.

Everett is not the first writer to criticize these tacit cultural claims of racial consistency. As is the case with many other African American authors, his work and public self-positioning speak volumes as to his emphasis on the right to be recognized for his art and not (only) his race, and the economic implications of this claim:

> Standing at the mercy of the publishing industry […], African-American writers were, and in some ways still are, stuck trying to supply fictions that are palatable to American culture's tastes and expectations and that do not upset the way America wants to see black people and itself. The black reading public has never been a sizeable market, and no doubt it wouldn't matter if it were, African-Americans falling as much victim to the culture as anyone else, learning the same ways, reading the same, predictable ways, and wanting to read the same, predictable literature. The market for the novels of social protest, from Wright in the 1940s to John A. Williams in the 1970s, was mostly white, middle-class, and young. Black novels were, for lack of a better term, novel: a people's statement about black life, about being black in a racist, oppressive society. It all fit neatly into the rehearsed rhetoric of the 1960s and the 1970s. New York publishing houses were trying to find the next, blacker work. ("Foreword" in *Making Callaloo: 25 Years of Black Literature*, xvi)

Everett here hints at the *circular* dynamics inherent in the commercial apparatus of American minority pop-culture, which govern (even) those artistic variants often considered most effective with regard to their political potential, such as Hip Hop.[121] The publishing industry, simply speaking, profits by a widespread demand for a certain, i.e. "authentic" kind of black cultural difference that has been historically implanted in the American racial imaginary. The highly profitable exploitation of these reading expectations fosters a vicious cycle of cultural re-consolidation:

> Everett: That's the way we're trained to read. You step in water. Your shoe gets wet. It's not a good thing. It's not a bad thing. It's just a thing. This is the culture in

which we live. This is the way we're trained to read. It's not a good thing. It's not a
bad thing. But it's a thing. But it doesn't mean it has to remain that way.
Stewart: And yet at the same time, implicitly at least, the publishing industry seems
almost to prefer that it remains that way.
Everett: Now, see, that's a bad thing. (interview with Stewart, 124)

All of Everett's racial satires, one could argue, problematize race's power to create and
cement demarcations of difference, i.e. conceptual thresholds, which we are "trained" to
recognize, acknowledge and respond to. In the commercial realm of African American
culture, these margins or thresholds of recognition are subsumed under the rubric of the
"authentic." This category polices the boundaries of the ethnically categorizable and the
aesthetically accepted alike. The term "authenticity" denotes artistic "authority,"
"genuineness," as well as artefactual "hand-made-ness" and "uniqueness." Significantly, the
term thus tends to obfuscate its close connection to concerns of commodity, as it connotes the
absence of commercial concerns in denoting hand-made-/naturalness.

Walter Benjamin famously noted the paradoxical implications of the fact that "[t]he presence
of the original is the prerequisite to the concept of authenticity" (214). What the displacement
of the modern-day, mechanically mass-reproduced work of art from the auratic moment of its
unique creation thus complicates is the notion of cultural transmissibility, or what Benjamin
terms "tradition." Resituating Benjamin's notion in the postmodern context of social
fragmentation and cultural saturation, William Boelhower argues that

> ethnic discourse, insofar as it is intended as primordial and is dedicated to a
> strategy of recovering the so-called authentic culture of the ancestors, is actually a
> pseudo-discourse, a pathetic anthropology. In the postmodern context it is useless
> to speak of authentic as opposed to false ethnic culture, implying that only one
> deserves cultivation; it is useless to try to distinguish between existentially lived
> and symbolic ethnicity, as if the first were real and the latter were a mere sportive
> romp. Authenticity now pertains to the pragmatics of simulation rather than to a
> process of literal representation. (132)

Today, in the age of pop-cultural mass-commoditization, and specifically in so-called
minority culture, questions of "authenticity" have shifted towards the social function and
value of art. This established function of racial representation presupposes a stable notion of
"blackness" as a referentializable social reality. This presupposed pars-pro-toto relation
between the cultural particle and the racial whole, between the individual writer and her
community betrays a systematic conflation between the social and cultural dimensions of a
text and prompts to the tacitly misrecognized fact: that "authenticity" is not a referential but a
structural criterion. It, after all, designates a textual effect created by the combination of signs
and scripts (skin-color, fabric of hair, bone-structure, idiom, social milieu – cf. *Glyph*'s
catalogue on page 54).

The efficiency and profitability, with which authenticity can be simulated, i.e. faked, is a well-known secret, so to say. A case in point is the novel *The Education of Little Tree* (1976), published pseudonymously by Asa Earl Carter, a white supremacist, as an allegedly authentic autobiography portraying Forrest Carter's upbringing with his Cherokee grandparents (discussed in Gates "Authenticity," 516 ff.). Likewise, the more recent scandal of "JT Leroy," an authorial persona created by the American writer Laura Albert in the 1990s, has raised troubling questions about the ethics of literary production. Leroy was widely received as the author of semi-autobiographical fictions of child abuse, urban poverty and drug addiction. According to Peter Schneck, this particular case prompts to the "persistent cultural work done by literary forgery," highlighting the widespread *demand* for literature to construct a collectively acceptable and shareable notion of "authentic experience and identity" ("Fake Lives, Real Literature" 257-58).

In the case of Juanita Mae Jenkins, her biographical background and brief "exposure" to what according to this crude racial logic would qualify as "authentic" blackness is one case in point for the fact that a "black" text does not necessarily have anything to do with blackness (as a criterion of cultural experience, for instance). In the multicultural entertainment era, when blackness is both synonymous with entertainment and pathological underachievement, the cultural conventions associated with race have assumed an independent reality disconnected from the social realities, with which they allegedly originate and to which they are expected to refer. If these cultural assumptions can so naturally reinscribe or superimpose the social facts of race, *erasure* raises troubling questions about oppositional value of black difference predicated on resistance to white hegemonic models of racial authenticity.

The assignment of authenticity to a racial (-ized) subject or text can be conceived as the imposition of stereotypical images under what Stuart Hall calls the "gaze of Otherness" ("New Ethnicities," 345). In this regard, as Patricia Williams asserts, racism can be conceived as "a *gaze* that insists upon the power to make others conform, to perform endlessly in the prison of prior expectation, circling repetitively back upon the expired utility of the entirely known" (74). Systematically reduced to its socially rooted function of fulfilling white (liberal) demands, blackness can serve as a cultural projection surface of racial assumptions and desires, Orlando Patterson has argued. Lying "at the heart of Euro-America's conception of itself as a 'race,' as a culture, as a people, and as a nation […, blackness] is the canvas against which 'whiteness' paints itself, the mirror in which the collective eye sees itself, the catalyst in which this great mass culture explosively creates itself" (240). The extreme visibility of blackness in the (literary) marketplace seems to signal the all-defining normalcy of whiteness

and the omnipresent need to constantly create it. In other words, race, after all, seems to undermine its own classificatory consistency, as it becomes more obvious – given changing social realities and inter-racial complexities – that the term really defines everything *non-white*. White obsession with blackness, in this sense, betrays white self-obsession. *Erasure*, thus, aims at diagnosing the morbid mixture of (white) ignorance and desire that undergirds this consumer culture. In sum, the expectation of consistency between a racially marked text and its author, or its narrator, can be conceived as a form of racism that is structurally protected by a particularly powerful mechanism of differentiation, which operates under the seemingly progressive agenda of diversity. This mechanism is powerful because it conforms with a self-serving liberal and neoliberal system of social classification and economic valuation.

Erasure retraces the commercial origin of this mass-consumption of blackness. Both signaled by Monk's name and the intertextual alignment of "My Pafology/Fuck" with Richard Wright's *Native Son*, Everett harks back to field-defining debates of the 1950s and 1960s, in which writers like Ellison and James Baldwin challenged the predominance of "protest" as the exclusive criterion for the evaluation of literary works of art by blacks. Teasing out this cyclic mechanism of cultural commercialization, *erasure* highlights the *structural* disadvantage that a black writer faces in "protesting" race. It shows "how easily the market adapts any aesthetic act of protest which threatens the white hegemonic power base" (Yost, 1326). The novel, thus, represents a cautionary tale against the self-compromising qualities of protest, drawing its arguments from James Baldwin's seminal discussion of (Richard Wright's) protest fiction (in "Everybody's Protest Novel"). Baldwin famously reprimanded the protest novel as an ultimately "accepted and comforting aspect of the American scene." Any unsettling question raised in it, Baldwin stressed, is "evanescent, titillating; remote, for this has nothing to do with us, it is safely ensconced in the social arena, where, indeed, it has nothing to do with anyone, so that finally we receive a very definite thrill of virtue from the fact that we are reading such a book at all" (19). Baldwin punctured the delusion that literary art can serve as "a weapon against culturally sponsored ignorance" by using fiction "to illuminate conditions and possibilities as they affected blacks and whites in America, particularly in matters of social psychology" (Ward, 173). He identified two key concerns, namely that this functional agenda of political pamphleteering took away from the inherently ambivalent and messy business of truth-investigation.[122] Secondly, Baldwin argued, the protest novel's sociological focus was prone to reaffirm the classificatory system it sets out to challenge by reducing characters to types, thus perpetuating sociology's proclivity for

categories. Baldwin suggested that what makes protest fiction so ultimately comforting in its moralistic excess and sociological precision is its tacit obfuscation of the fact "the oppressed and the oppressor are bound together *within* the same society" (21; my emphasis). Suggesting that the circumstances, which called for and created Wright's Bigger Thomas, still somehow persist in a comparable commercial dynamic of representation, *erasure* prompts the question if anything, since then, has changed.

To be clear, Everett specifically satirizes the idea that things both have changed for blacks in the U.S. and that they have not. In *erasure*, this paradox of the changing same of race and racism has to do with its *structural* dimensions (cf. Alexander, 1). The initial title of Monk's satiric novella – "My Pafology" – alludes to what Ishmael Reed has described as the "black pathology industry" (1989).[123] "The cultural and political discourse on black pathology," meaning the tacit reinscription of social facts as racial essences and their sensationalist exploitation, Fred Moten argues, "has been so pervasive that it could be said to constitute the background against which all representations of blacks, blackness, or (the color) black take place" ("The Case of Blackness," 177). Juanita Mae Jenkins is presented as a representative profiteer of this systematic distribution of stereotypical images of blackness corresponding with this multicultural turn towards mass-marketed minority culture. The two paragraphs of her "runaway bestseller" reveal the stereotypical roster of female victimization and male misogyny, framed in a narrative of black familial failure, which encompasses an absent father, an overworked and underpaid mother and a downtrodden daughter, a victim of rape and parental neglect (28-29, 54).

"[W]hy did Juanity Mae Jenkins send me running for the toilet," Monk muses, imagining that it was

> because Tom Clancy was not trying to sell his book to me by suggesting that the crew of his high-tech submarine was a representation of his race (*however fitting a metaphor*). Nor was his publisher marketing it in that way. If you didn't like Clancy's white people, you could go out and read about some others." (214)

Monk here highlights the commercial demarcation between genre fiction and African American literature, highlighting that while the former can do without race, the latter cannot. It should come as no surprise that one of *erasure*'s "collateral" attacks, thus, include *the* black media icon who pioneered the commercial hyper-visibility of blackness. That Jenkins appears on Kenya Dunston's TV Show, who has added Jenkins' book to her "Book Club" list, signals a thinly concealed criticism of Oprah Winfrey (*1953) and her book-marketing empire. Winfrey, the entertainment mogul and first and only black female billionaire, according to *Forbes*, is one of *erasure*'s most prominent satiric targets. In the course of her career as a talk

show host of "The Oprah Winfrey Show" (1986-2011) and chairwoman and CEO of the media production firm Harbo Productions (since 1986) Winfrey acquired the movie rights of various books, (co-) producing and starring in televised adaptations of Gloria Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place* (1982, broadcast as an ABC mini-series 1989, directed by Donna Deitch, starring/produced by Winfrey), Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987, broadcast in 1998, directed by Jonathan Demme, starring Winfrey), Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937, broadcast in 2005, directed by co-produced by/starring Winfrey) and Sapphire's *Push* (1996, broadcast as "Precious" in 2009, directed by Lee Daniels, co-produced by Winfrey). This trend of medial re-distribution spearheaded by Winfrey is thematized in *erasure*, too, for Jenkins sells the movie rights of her runaway bestseller's for "something like three million dollars" (29). Winfrey's increasing interest and investment in literature was reflected in her TV show, as well, where she began to promote books in her "Book Club" (1996-2011), proclaiming the redemptive power reading (auto-) biography. Attesting to the pivotal role of Winfrey's marketing machinery in African American literature, it is worth noting that only eight years before *erasure* was published Toni Morrison was the first African American woman to win the Nobel Prize of literature. Morrison's visibility as female role model of literary achievement was significantly fostered by her features in Winfrey's Book Club (Toni Morrison's *Book of Solomon* was the October choice of the club's first year), which has helped to launch and accelerate many a career in black writing since then.

Toni Morrison, to be clear, is not mentioned in *erasure*, and there is no evidence that she is included in the group of women writers, which, represented by Juanita Mae Jenkins, is satirized in Everett's novel. It is worth noting however, that Juanita Mae Jenkins' tripartite name alludes to Alice Malsenior Walker, of whose literary work Everett has been very critical: "When I grew up, there were three black people on TV, and they were all porters. And so all that talk about the positive black role model that everyone wanted to see made sense because there was no other. In fiction as well. You had the inner-city novel, and the 'yassir boss' role model, and it was not the experience that anybody I knew had. I grew up where the Civil War started, in South Carolina, and I have never in my life heard someone say, 'Where fo' you be going?' (Laughter). So Alice Walker can kiss my ass." Tellingly, this exact sentence surfaces in Monk's creation of his abominable novella "My Pafology/Fuck" (interview with Rone Shavers, 64).

Everett's side-poke at Winfrey[124] brings a crucial aspect to the foreground, namely the gender divide between black male and female writers (and theorists – cf. *Glyph*). Everett's

"gendering of artistic control" presents Juanita Mae Jenkins as the epitome of a pervasive and powerful commercial trend (Dickson-Carr "The Historical Burden," 48): the redistribution of traditional models of black protest in "urban fiction," often in the format of (neo-) slave narratives and with the thematic structure of genealogical memoirs. This satiric attack on black women writers is, undoubtedly, one of the most controversial aspects of *erasure*. Everett has been vocal about his dismissal of writers which he deems conducive to the perpetuation of black stereotypes. Among these, as *erasure* suggests, Are Alicia Walker (and Sapphire). It is worth noting that the spectacular success of literature marketed as African American in the Post-Civil Rights era has, after all, been pioneered by the works of art by black women writers such as Toni Morrison and the aforementioned. It is equally important to stress that Everett is ultimately invested in debunking a *system* of cultural (re-) production, in short: the "Hollywood" entertainment establishment.[125] It is from this perspective that the fictional representatives of the publishing industry have to be considered, too. The names of Monk's agent Yul and Stagg R. Leigh's and Hollywood movie producer Wiley Morgenstein are recognizably Jewish.[126] That the *only* review of "My Pafology/Fuck," which is displayed in full-length in *erasure*, is written by a journalist from the *New York Times* (259-60) suggests that Monk's readership, in general, is white and liberal, given this periodical's real-life status. The true focus of *erasure*'s satiric attack on this commercial apparatus, as we have initially suggested, is Monk himself. Failing to draw the right conclusion from these women writers' projects, Monk "parodies" the tragic (and melodramatic) modes of "urban fiction" in the belief that he will be able to exercise authorial control over the reception of his novella.

The novella in the novel, "My Pafology/Fuck," travesties Sapphire's *Push* on the basis of a contrafactual reworking of Richard Wright's *Native Son*. Also, Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1987), one of Sapphire's self-proclaimed inspirations for her novel *Push*, is introduced as one of the key incentives for the creation of Monk's novella, along with the famous radio and later TV series *Amos and Andy*.[127] Monk goes to

> what had been my father's study [in the Ellison's Washington home], and perhaps still was his study, but now it was where I worked. I sat and stared at Juanita Mae Jenkins' face on *Time* magazine. The pain started in my feet and coursed through my legs, up my spine and into my brain and I remembered passages of *Native Son* and *The Color Purple* and *Amos and Andy* and my hands began to shake, the world opening around me, tree roots trembling on the ground outside, people in the street shouting *dint*, *ax*, *fo*, *screet*, and *fahvre!* and I was screaming inside, complaining that I didn't sound like that, that my mother didn't sound like that, that my father didn't sound like that and I imagined myself sitting on a park bench counting the knives in my switchblade collection and a man came up to me and he asked me what I was doing and my mouth opened and I couldn't help what came out, "Why fo you be axin?" I put a page in my father's old manual typewriter. I wrote this novel, a book on which I knew I could never put my name. (61-62)

Curiously, Monk's creative experience reads like an episode of spirit-possession, as if the very creation of the "book on which [he apparently already knows he] could never put [his] name" was a process shaped by external forces and not himself. What is striking is that Monk needs only one week to complete this novella, which, in contrast to his self-described lack of expertise in the black vernacular, features a hyperbolically vernacularized version of this idiom. Divided into ten chapters, each of which feature numerical headings starting from "Won" and proceeding to "Too," "Free," "Fo" until "Tin," this novella is included in the middle section of novel and comprises sixty-eight pages of an outrageously exoticized "black experience" (63-131). With this book, on which he knows he "could never put my name," Monk attempts to give the (white) reading public a taste of their own medicine, as it were (62).

Everett has modeled Van Go Jenkins and his hyper-authentic story in close alignment with its intertextual foil, *Native Son* (1940), from the overall theme to specific details, such as Bigger's arrest, the novel's climactic staging of Wright's protagonist's symbolic sacrifice. When, after two murders and a frenzied flight on the snow-covered rooftops of Chicago's South Side, Bigger Thomas is finally arrested by police men, "they let go of his feet; he was in the snow, lying flat on his back. Round him surged a sea of noise. He opened his eyes a little and saw an array of faces, white and looming. 'Kill that ape!' Two men stretched his arms out, as though about to crucify him" (301). "Bigger," the morphological amalgamation of "bad" and "[N-word]," is the violent, criminal exception to the "Uncle Tom"-rule of Jim Crow America. Jerry H. Bryant, hence, stresses that Bigger "is an American black man, and he hates with a virulence that Wright daringly, for the time, insists upon acknowledging" (13). The ways in which Bigger transgresses the "color-line" of segregated America is unparalleled in history of black American literary protest. He unintentionally smothers and brutally burns Mary Dalton, the daughter of his ostensibly benevolent white employers and the girlfriend of Communist Jan, after Bigger has been close to abusing her while she lay drunk in her bed.[128] Then, he kills his black girl friend Bessie Mears, because she endangers his flight from the police.[129] And finally, he is hunted down and imprisoned, denounced by the press as "Negro sex-slayer" (309) and sentenced to death.[130]

Extremely controversial and successful, Wright's final draft of *Native Son* was the first novel by a black American author to be chosen for the Book-of-the-Month Club, thus granting Wright's novel a broad public recognition. With an Introduction by Dorothy Canfield Fisher the novel received the "seal of approval" to ensure the predominantly white audience's benevolent reception of a "black" story. As stated in "How 'Bigger' Was Born," the pamphlet

that became the introduction of the reprinted edition of *Native Son* in 1942, Wright sought to prove that Bigger Thomas is to be taken seriously as a genuine phenomenon of the black experience in the United States, as a "distinct type" (8). Taking offense with this notion of representational functionality, James Baldwin famously denounced Wright's seeming promotion of black stereotypes as ultimately undermining its own moral didacticism.

"My Pafology/Fuck" completely eschews any notion of ethical instruction whatsoever. Translating *Native Son*'s white vs. black power asymmetry into a black in-group class conflict, thus exclusively centering on the *black* side of the symbolic divide of race, the novella is not so much a work of protest but of *pathology pornography*. The black thug Van Go Jenkins[131] rapes Cleona, the alleged mother of his four children – all named after pharmaceutical products (Rexall, Aspireene, Tylenola, and Dexatrina, thus alluding to the stereotype of the black crack child and the welfare queen), begins to work for the black upper-class Dalton family as a pool boy, winds up on a fictionalized equivalent of the Jerry Springer Show (the "Snookie Cane Show"), where he is accused of rape and eventually convicted for having raped the "almost white" Dalton daughter Penelope (107). The excessive sexualized violence that Van Go Jenkins inflicts on black women is not only appalling for its brutal misogyny, but because it betrays a cultural fear of black masculinity from a distinctly white (liberal) angle. Van Go is the object of fascination and abomination, whose lawless libidinousness betrays the text's positioning of a reader not only as white but as liberal, given the novella's coarse discussion of uplift:

> "You ought to think about getting back to school," Penelope say, lookin at my eyes in the mirror. "I bet daddy could help you get a scholarship to college." "What kinda schola-ship I'm gone get?" I ax. "I don't know. You're underprivileged, you've got that going for you." (103)

This prefigured white liberal reader, too, seems to be female, given the text's excessive emphasis on black sexual domination, which is suggestive of the cultural fear of the black male raping of white women. Significantly, Van Go is arrested for his near-transgression of the color line, i.e. his sexual abuse of Penelope. The novella, in other words, gives its readers what they expect and long for: black excessive sexuality contained in the racially sanctioned boundaries of black on black (sexual) violence. The text indirectly criticizes the "ultimate" taboo that *Native Son* refrained from presenting its readers: black-male-white-female (forced) sexual intercourse.

That this horrific portrayal of black depravity winds up being read as the "real" deal is *erasure*'s fundamental affront. It suggests that this stereotypical story of black depravity is a racial version of modern gothic fiction. Its sole purpose, *erasure* suggests, is to make its white

readers feel comfortable in their racial biases and cultural assumptions. Everett's unsettling achievement lies in his careful balancing between hyperbole and sobriety, between the meticulous cataloguing of the markers and devices of "authenticity" and the unsettling uncertainty about the extent to which we as its extra-diegetic readers depend on the novella's metafictional framing, which seems to help to *explicitly* mark it as a parody, in order to prevent us from reading it in this way, too. With the novella's intradiegetic misreception, the novel foregrounds not so much the target of its satiric attack, i.e. the commercial establishment, but rather the motives and means of Monk's satiric project. This interplay between the *aim* and the *frame* of the satiric attack is inscribed in the novel's single most important motif: the "X."

Satirizing Satire: Metafiction and Postmodern Parody

Erasure is a metafictional artist's novel that programmatically conflates the private and public, the "high-brow" and "low-brow," as well as the fictional and factual dimensions of writing.[132] This in-betweenness most obviously registers in the simultaneity of factual and fictional discourses, which is characteristic for Everett's fiction. It is introduced by the novel's paratextual disclaimer, the paradoxical quote from Mark Twain's *Following the Equator* (1897, 586). Twain's travelogue is a multifaceted and multi-layered social documentary, which, while ostensibly claiming historiographic facticity, incorporates various fictional stories. It, too, features such thought-provoking dicta like the one quoted in *erasure*: "I could never tell a lie that anybody would doubt, nor a truth that anybody would believe." This cryptic if not contradictory statement destabilizes the truth/lie binary, suggesting that veracity and falsehood are co-dependent components of the process and purpose of (fictional) narration. Fully grasping the epistemological potential of fiction means to consider "lies" (those aspects that are made-up) as always meant to be believed, while "truths" (those aspects that are presented as given) should always be questioned.

As Bernard Bell has pointed out, the text is Everett's "most wryly humorous and disturbingly semi-autobiographical and metafictional novel" (474). As we have noted, Everett dares us to recognize the conspicuously obvious relation between the novel's narrator and the author, between the former's struggle for literary recognition and the author's biographical background as a minoritized writer. This peculiar relationship prompts to the novel's poetic program of parody: the mirror.

Erasure presents a case in point for both variations of literary self-reflectivity that Michael Scheffel describes: "inspection" and "mirroring" ("Betrachtung" and "Spiegelung," 54). Permeating the novel's diegetic dimensions, this strategy of mirroring shapes characterial

correlations between Monk and Mae Jenkins, as well as plot-related parallels between "My Pafology/Fuck" and *erasure*. The composition of the novel at large resembles a palimpsest, a multi-layered texture of overlapping and intersecting themes and scripts. A doubly-framed text, *erasure* entails a metafictional discussion of the novella and its intradiegetic misreception. Everett's text, thus, can be read as a second-order satire, a postmodern artist's novel that incorporates a parodic piece of protest fiction. In terms of inspection, the novel features a host of comments and debates on its aesthetic status as an artifice. The arrangement of these elements constitutes a *literary-political running commentary*. The main narrative, for which Everett operationalizes the confessional mode, is based on the autobiographical discourse of the journal.[133] It is interspersed with Monk's CV, notes for novels and a short story excerpt, letters detailing Monk's father's correspondence with the English nurse, with whom he had a secret affair and a daughter (145-150). The metafictional running commentary consists of lists of keywords and Platonic dialogues between historical figures of the arts, philosophy and politics. These mini-debates oscillate between two thematic complexes: propaganda and experimentalism, the former in the case of "degenerate art" (featuring Käthe Kollwitz, Paul Klee, Ernst Barlach, Adolf Hitler and his ideological sparring partner Dietrich Eckart), which recurs to the indexing of works of art and artists by the Nazis,[134] and the latter in the case of abstract expressionism.

The abstract expressionist debate crystallizes in an exchange between de Kooning and Rauschenberg and centers on the themes of plagiarism and originality:

> Rauschenberg: Here's a piece of paper, Willem. Now draw me a picture. I don't care what it is a picture of or how good it is. De Kooning: Why? Rauschenberg: I intend to erase it. De Kooning: Why? Rauschenberg: Never mind that. I'll fix your roof in exchange for the picture. De Kooning: Okay. I believe I'll use pencil, ink and grease pencil. Rauschenberg: Whatever **(4 weeks later)** Rauschenberg: Well, it took me forty erasers, but I did it. De Kooning: Did what? Rauschenberg: Erased it. The picture you drew for me. De Kooning: You erased my picture? Rauschenberg: Yes. De Kooning: Where is it? Rauschenberg: Your drawing is gone. What remains is my erasing and the paper which was mine to begin with. **(Shows de Kooning the picture)** De Kooning: You put your name on it. Rauschenberg: Why not? It's my work. De Kooning: Your work? Look at what you've done to my picture. Rauschenberg: Nice job, eh? It was a lot of work erasing it. My wrist is still sore. I call it "Erased Drawing. de Kooning: That's very clever. Rauschenberg: I've already sold it for ten grand. de Kooning: You sold my picture? Rauschenberg: No, I erased your picture. I sold my erasing. (227-28)

Erasure is a doubly-framed text in another regard, too. It is written by an author claiming to be "far blacker" than society would conventionally acknowledge, an author who is prone to be recognized as "not black enough." Rich in intertextual references to the black tradition (from Jean Toomer, Zora Neale Hurston, to Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison), abounding in tropes (masking and passing) and conventions (middle-class elitism and low-class

underachievement), *erasure* mimics former projects of a (hyper-) self-conscious, tradition-oriented and innovation-committed literary writing. *Erasure*, thus, presents the failed attempt of a black literary artist, who tries to *erase* the concepts and conventions confining his authorial identity as an African American by emulating the empowering techniques of black tricksterism.

"In denying or refusing complicity in the marginalization of 'black' writers," Monk concedes that he

> ended up on the very distant and very "other" side of a line that is imaginary at best. I didn't write as an act of testimony or social indignation (though all writing in some way is just that) and I did not write out of a so-called family tradition of oral storytelling. I never tried to set anybody free, never tried to paint the next real and true picture of the life of *my* people. (212)

Branded as an experimental writer, whose work is incompatible with in-group and societal expectations, Monk struggles with the (dis-) placement of African American writing in the commercial and academic sectors of literary production.[135] *Erasure*'s thematization of the nouveau modern movement is striking in this regard, as it foregrounds the American scholarly mainstream, in which Monk as an high-brow ethic writer is situated, and which in the postmodern context relates to the concept of "metafiction" introduced in 1970's American criticism (cf. Scheffel, 4).

Monk antagonizes the American branch of the Nouveau Roman society and has an affair with postmodernism, as it were. He calls Linda Mallory, a fellow (white, we may assume) writer of "*innovative*" fiction (11; the italicization, we may also assume, is meant as an ironic marker of condescension), with whom he has intercourse on an irregular basis, "the postmodern fuck": "She was self-conscious to the point of distraction, counted her orgasms and felt none of them" (230). At the Nouveau Roman Society meeting in Washington, Monk presents a paper titled "F/V: Placing the Experimental Novel". This paper, which is an excerpt of a critical article that Everett published prior to *erasure* in 1999 (*Callaloo* 22.1), is a parody of Roland Barthes' seminal post-structuralist analysis of Honoré de Balzac's short story "Sarrasine" (*S/Z*).[136] Everett applies the argumentative method of Barthes' study, in which the scholar deconstructs traditional and structuralist text-approaches, to the latter's very own analysis. Thus, Everett offers the meticulous dissection of the scholarly argument "as a piece of fiction." The main thrust of this essay's anti-dogmatic agenda is to ironically exhort the necessarily reductive process of subjecting literary art to the analytic fragmentation in favor of scientific coherency and accountability.

On the side of literary production, Everett zooms in on the experimental aspirations associated with the nouveau roman. Coined by Émile Henriot in 1957, the term "nouveau roman"

defines both a movement associated with the academic revolution erupting in the continental and American humanities in the 1960s and 70s, better known as poststructuralism, and a poetic synthesis of poststructuralism's textual statutes. Alain Robbe-Grillet most prominently promoted this type of the novel form to proclaim the end of traditional modes of storytelling as having become "impossible" (*Pour un Nouveau Roman*, 1962). Robbe-Grillet and his contemporaries, most of whom were published in *Les Éditions de Minuit* alongside major French theorists like Derrida and Deleuze, drew on the avant-gardist projects of major modern writers such as Flaubert, Proust and Joyce in order to radically denounce literary conventions of realistic verisimilitude, characteral integrity and narratorial causality in favor of a playful experimentation with meaning in an excessively metafictional fashion. This turn towards "auto-représentation" was declared a programmatic aspect of the nouveau roman by Jean Ricardou, a member of the famous *Tel Quel* journal (*Pour une théorie du nouveau roman*, 1971). Everett, here, reiterates his satiric parody of not only poststructuralism but also the disciplinary "Americanization" of French Theory (cf. *Glyph*).

Monk subtly derides both this movement's epigonism (its putative re-branding of *modern* principles as *postmodern* poetic innovations) and the "serious" American academic approach to what could otherwise be conceived as an open invitation for a much more self-ironic version of self-conscious literary practice. When Monk presents the paper, he is chastised as a "mimetic hack" (18), because

> [t]hey all hated me. For a couple of reasons: One was that I had published and had moderate success with a realistic novel some years earlier ["The Second Failure"], and two, I made no secret, in print or radio interviews, what I thought of their work. Finally, however, I was hated because the French, whom they so adored, seemed to hold my work in high regard. (11)

Monk, as his story soon reveals, is implicated in this pretentious literary "innovationism," as it were, far more than he admits. The parodic performance of "F/V" haunts his newly inspired revolt against the publishing industry and its obsession with "low-brow" black urban fiction. Monk's one-time moderate commercial success, "The Second Failure," was his so-called "realistic" novel, the only one prior to "My Pafology/Fuck" that addresses race. It was

> received nicely and sold rather well. It's about a young black man who can't understand why his white-looking mother is ostracized by the black community. She finally kills herself and he realizes that he must attack the culture and so becomes a terrorist, killing blacks and whites who behave as racists. (61)

This novel's title serves as a prolepsis, for it adumbrates the "second failure," i.e. commercial success of "My Pafology/Fuck." The stereotype of the tragic mulatta (the "white-looking" mother), extremely popular in late 19th African American literature, thus makes way for the post-Civil Rights archetype of black masculinity, the pathological predator. The theme of

passing, implicit in the figure of the mulatta, resurfaces in Monk's pseudonymous persona Stagg R. Leigh, with whom Monk achieves a tragically successful act of passing for black(er). This, obviously, is not (only) an act of phenomenal passing but is predicated, rather, on Monk's capability of cultural code-switching and fundamentally facilitated by his change of name. It is this fact that – once more – betrays Monk's alignment with Ellison's invisible man and his initiation as a con-man playing by the rules of the game of American identity: "I changed my name and never been challenged even once? And that lie that success was a rising *upward*. What a crummy lie they kept us dominated by" (*Invisible Man*, 510). Monk's parodic performance does not conflict with his academic background. Quite the contrary, it is very much fostered by his expertise in both the cultural conventions of blackness *and* scholarly strategies of critique.

Monk's strategic use of postmodern parody is significant in this regard, as it betrays his academic mindset as a literary intellectual. Parody is the art of negotiating between imitation and deviation, distinction and contiguity. Simply speaking, it defines an aesthetic form of appropriation, which, in textual terms, results in the reinscription of a hypotext's structural idiosyncrasies into the hypertext. Parody, Linda Hutcheon has argued, is "a form of imitation, but imitation characterized by ironic inversion, not always at the expense of the parodied text" (*A Theory of Parody*, 6). As such, "all parody is overtly hybrid and double-voiced" (28). "[T]ranscontextualization' and inversion," Hutcheon adds, "are its major formal operatives, and the range of pragmatic ethos is from scornful ridicule to reverential homage" (37). Parody's "central paradox" is consequently this: that in "[i]n imitating, even with critical difference, parody reinforces" (26). Although stressing the polemic potential of parody, Simon Dentith concurs that parody has "the paradoxical effect of preserving the very texts that it seeks to destroy" (36). Its characteristic effect of re-inscribing the conventions it seeks to subvert, has a particularly disastrous effect in Monk's usage of parody. The misreception of "My Pafology/Fuck" is indicative of the (intentional) ignorance of various professional entities associated with the publishing industry (agents, editors, journalists), who, obviously, neither know or care about the novella's parodic foil (*Native Son*) nor that it is intended as a parody. It is precisely this ignorance, which on the surface seems to motivate Monk's subsequent attempt at stopping or containing the spreading irony. This attempt highlights *erasure*'s didactic core, for Monk seems to subscribe to the notion that parody has some sort of pedagogical potential.

Monk's parodic project can be read as a desperate and self-absorbed measure of self-defense. Like the invisible man, he has occupied a somewhat stable albeit marginal position in the

academy. Here, Monk "possessed the only identity I had ever known, and [...was] losing it" (*Invisible Man*, 99). What seems to be at stake for Everett's protagonist, in the face of his loss of authorial agency, is his level of educational excellence, on which his authorial sovereignty and professional privilege as an upper middle-class artist is predicated. From his extremely well-educated point of view, it is inconceivable that exactly *nobody* should "get" the parodic intention behind "My Pafology," which – significantly – he even retitles as "Fuck" to further foreground the parodic intent. Characteristic for Everett's writing and *erasure*, in specific, this particular title can be read in various ways, too. Thus, Monk's act of renaming opens up another wormhole of irony, as it were. Not only does "Fuck" allude to the novella's excessive display of sexual violence. It also illustrates Monk's intention of – pardon my French – "fucking" the publishing industry with his satiric coup. Conceived as an exclamatory term used in response to an unfortunate series of events, however, it marks an additional adumbration of Monk's successful failure: "fuck," as in "damnit."

Monk resolves to send his parodic novella "straight," claiming that "[i]f they can't see it's a parody, fuck them" (132). This topos of the parody that *fails in succeeding* is the poetic epitome of Monk's "x-perience": of being absorbed by the very hegemonic models, which he seeks to operationalize against his oppressors. This approach evokes James Baldwin's seminal premonition not to model

> one's opposition to the arbitrary definition, the imposed ordeal, merely on the example supplied by one's oppressor. The object of one's hatred is never, alas, conveniently outside but is seated in one's lap, stirring in one's bowels and dictating the beat of one's heart. And if one does not know this, one risks becoming an imitation – and, therefore, a continuation – of principles one imagines oneself to despise." ("Freaks and the American Ideal of Manhood," 824)

Monk fails to anticipate the potential outcome of his parodic act, namely that he might wind up as an imitation of the protest writer he so despises: Juanita Mae Jenkins. Curiously, Monk sets out to "cynically manipulate the public in the spirit of Ellison's Rinehart," as John C. Charles notes (208). "Unlike the Invisible Man, who terminates the charade and retreats into privacy," however, "the increasingly emotionally unstable Monk stays in character" (ibid). Malin Lidström Brock, too, stresses that Monk is "unable to articulate an alternative to a multicultural perspective. [His] encounters with preconceived and essentialist notions of ethnic and racial identity end in tragedy" (174). According to Darryl Dickson-Carr, this is owed to the fact that today black authors are unable "to ignore or minimize the perils of the publishing market, to consider whether their lives and experiences will be reduced to bits of easily digestible categories. The works before us [like *erasure*] recognize this fact, even if the characters within them [like Monk] do not" ("The Historical Burden," 52-53). In Everett's

novel, this "recognition," tellingly, manifests in *formal* terms. "Through the heterogeneous and open-ended forms, rather than through the content," Lawrence W. Hogue claims, Everett "tells the reader that *erasure* cannot master meaning, cannot capture in language its subject. But in trying, it tells as good story" (104). The novel's critical force, as we have suggested, derives from its literary-political running commentary, what Lesley Larkin describes as its "tools for reading critically and identifying reader responsibilities" (162). These tools or methods, I argue, are grounded in academic scholarship.

In *erasure*, the academy is Monk's temporary solution for a quite persistent problem: money. Thus, his CV reveals a hiatus between his graduation from Harvard in 1980 and his commencement as scholar in 1988. This fact substantiates the conclusion that academia has merely been Monk's "plan B," if his writing career were to fail. In addition, the publication rate of Monk's novels has stagnated and that of his short fiction has increased since 1990. This temporal deficit, implied by Monk's turn from the time-consuming novelistic work to *short* fiction, prompts to his dilemma between institutional constraints and his high-brow aspirations. However, Monk's slumping authorial career, which echoes the stagnation in Inflato's critical (and novelistic) work, contrasts with his eventual promotion as professor at USC, which – ironically – comes through right about the time when his latest novel is rejected for the seventeenth time (43). Things start to go South drastically for Monk, so to say, when one absurdly tragic catastrophe after another erupts in his family life. His sister is shot by an anti-abortionist protester. His mother is diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease. Finally, his brother faces an expensive divorce with his wife after coming out of the closet as gay. Monk resolves to leave Los Angeles and USC to live with his mother in Washington D.C. Burdened with his sister's debt and his mother's commitment, while losing his brother's support in a quarrel over money, Monk applies at American University in Washington D.C. He reluctantly turns down the English departments offer of an awfully bad-paid "visiting thing" (58). This very point of him losing his professional "safety net" in the academy is the moment of creation of "My Pafology" and its impending commercial cooptation. It is this financial perspective, from which the creation of "My Pafology/Fuck" has to be considered, too. The novella, we get the sense, promises long-awaited financial relief. Monk's attempt at rationalizing his commercial cooptation, though in a strikingly ironic fashion, remains somewhat unconvincing if not unsettling.

Pathological Privilege? Narratorial Unreliability and Ironic Cacophony

As we have noted, *erasure* appears to be a paradigmatic piece of postmodern fiction. It incorporates its own interpretive instruments, namely the aforementioned notes for novels, the short story and the poems, letters, philosophical one-liners, and platonic dialogues of historical politicians, artists, and philosophers debating the politics of literary practice. These *archival* and *analytic* elements form a metafictional "methodology" of *inductive* reasoning. Monk's talents and sub-vocations serve as sense-making-models, for he draws on woodworking and fishing as epistemological metaphors. One such aphoristic gem pertaining to fishing, for instance, reads: "For all the aggravation a trout can cause, it cannot think and does not consider you. A trout is very much like truth; it does what it wants, what it has to" (199).

Ironically, Monk's private life starts to attain a troubling truth of its own, as it were. The gradual corrosion of his family, which Baker has titled "*My Dysfunktion: The Death of a Black Bourgeois Family*" ("Reflections on Monk," 149), reads as a paradigmatic black familial tragedy. This is especially noteworthy as Monk seeks to debunk those very themes and schemes of "urban" fiction that seem to increasingly crystallize around his own private life. Monk's private life reads like a hyper-tragic family drama in an upper-class setting comparable to that of the *Bill Cosby Show*. Monk has a strained relationship with both his brother, a dentist, who is in it for the money, and his sister, a socially engaged physician, who is in it to provide poor women with health care, including abortions. Monk's mentally moribund mother is suffering from Alzheimer's disease, while his father, in concordance with the racial cliché, is absent. Having committed suicide after several heart attacks, his father remains an ambivalent figure of paternal support and familial disconnect, hovering at the center of Monk's mnemonic attempts at self-analysis.[1] His father's favoritism[1] shapes Monk's familial and, by extension, professional alienation. Upon telling sister that "[s]ometimes I feel like I'm so removed from everything, like I don't even know how to talk to people,'" she responds: "'You don't […and] You never have. It's not a bad thing. You're just different'" (26). Monk displays a consistent sense of feeling "awkward, out of place, like I had so much of my life, like I didn't belong" (21). His troubled relation to his siblings and his mother culminates in communicative conflicts, when Monk fails to make himself understood and to make his attempts at putting himself in the place of his brother, who is being torn between his homosexual identity and his marriage, transparent. His sister's professional ethos, in turn, calls his seemingly apolitical literary aspirations into question: "[w]hile she was risking her life daily by crossing picket lines to offer poor women health care which included abortions if

they wanted, I was fishing, sawing wood, or writing dense, obscure novels or teaching a bunch of green California intellects about Russian Formalism" (3). Monk's mother, finally, is the living reminder of the ironically transparent symbolism inherent in Monk's struggle to make sense of his racialized self while discarding race.

Monk's (increasingly) vexed relationship to his own text has frequently been conceived by critics in terms of *reliability*. Not only does he develop what seems to be an identitarian disorder, a split of personality between his "high-brow" (Monk) and "low-brow" artistic self (Stagg R. Leigh). Monk's precarious status as an autodiegetic narrator makes him a characteristic candidate for an unreliable narrator. In contrast to *Glyph*, *erasure* does not categorically complicate an ontological reading of Monk,[137] even if he resembles Ralph with regard to his symbiotic dependency on his own text (to redeem his integrity as a literary writer). In *erasure*, narratorial questions of subjectivity (or rather racial awareness and un/consciousness) are intrinsically linked to epistemological questions of textuality. It is important to stress, however, that many of the novel's textual signals of un/reliability can be read in Monk's favor, as it were. His mnemonic efforts to retrace the formative events of his artistic identity, for instance, may very well be understood as a sign of credibility in the sense that Monk aims for representative transparency.[138]

His seeming loss of control over his own narrative, culminating in his novella's intradiegetic misreception, which the literary-political running commentary fails to fully explain let alone contain, appears to be a formal mimicking of Monk losing his temper over Mae Jenkins' infamous success and him failing to cope with the consequences.[139] His struggle to contain the ghetto-parody in the metafictional framework appears to be a sort of de-escalation strategy, a way of rationalizing his compromised artistic autonomy and integrity. In order to explain away the madness and absurdity erupting around him, he calls upon the intellectual and theoretical services of a wide range of the Western thinkers and philosophers, from Wittgenstein, Derrida, Horace, Tertullian, Newton and others. Consider Monk's reference of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, for instance, by way of which he tries to justify his commercial opportunism: "*medio tutissimus ibis*" ("the safest course lies in between," 245 in *erasure*; Book II Phaethon, verse 137, p. 28 in *Metamorphoses*). Monk refrains from refusing the financial gains from the publication of his novella and the motion picture rights: "Call it expediently located irony, or convenient rationalization," he concedes, "but I was keeping the money" (260). Pursuing the "safest" or most convenient course, so to say, Monk acquiesces in the situation and resolves to write an adaptation of Petronius' *The Satyricon* in response to "My Pafology/Fuck," in order to "try to construct a new novel that would redeem my lost

literary soul" (223). Meanwhile, his argumentative framework expands to ever-more abstract extra-literary phenomena. *Erasure*, thus, concludes with a seminal one-liner by Isaac Newton: "Hypotheses non fingo" ("I do not feign hypotheses"). This final remark reconnects Monk's attempt at rationalizing race with the imponderability of natural forces, in this case: gravity.

Monk seems persistently compelled to abstract from the social realities that his text is so ambivalent about addressing. His inductive impetus to find a higher truth in the racial madness that erupts around him, obviously, fails, as he proves to be deeply affected by Juanita Mae Jenkins's and his own unintended success. This is further corroborated by the fact that the meta-discourse is initiated *after* Monk learns about Jenkins. Significantly, the frequency of the list of keywords, platonic dialogues and philosophical bits increases drastically shortly before and after the publication of "My Pafology/Fuck." Monk, in other words, tries

> to distance myself from the position where the newly sold piece-of-shit novel had placed me vis-à-vis my art. It was not exactly the case that I had sold out, but I was not, apparently, going to turn away the check. I considered my woodworking and why I did it. In my writing my instinct was to defy form, but I very much sought in defying it to affirm it, an irony that was difficult enough to articulate, much less defend. But the wood, the feel of it, the smell of it, the weight of it. It was so much more real than words. The wood was so simple. Damnit, a table was a table was a table. (139)[140]

When Monk later discovers that his father has had an affair with a British nurse during the Korean War, he learns about their daughter, his half-sister Gretchen. As a sort of ironic echo of his deceased sister, to whom Monk looked up for her social activism, Monk tries to use the money from his despised novel and offers Gretchen, who turns out to be poor and in a bad living situation, 100,000 dollars in cash. This gesture of belated moral responsibility remains ambivalent, too, as Gretchen proves to be somewhat unimpressed: "Money, how about that? And that makes it all okay, does it?" (243). Monk leaves his step-sister without actually establishing a personal relationship with her. Curiously, this story-segment is connected to Monk's discovery of his father's private papers in the grey box, which his mother, who had been supposed to burn them according to his father's last wish, seemingly intended for Monk to find (144). We are, thus, provoked to psychologize or rather *pathologize* Monk's narrative structuring efforts.

In what I conceive as a *formal pafology*, the novel dares us to read the novel's metafictional commentary as a mimetic articulation of Monk's inner turmoil, of his attempt at coping with the tragic irony of his novella's misreception and the peculiar parallels popping up in his own (familial) story. The novel transposes traditional formulas of tragedy, which – significantly – inform both Monk's high-brow myths and the low-brow stories of black depravity, which he seeks to satirize, onto the aesthetic plane of form. Everett, simply speaking, provokes us to

read Monk's narrative according to the *same* reductive mimeticism, which presupposes a direct link between textual originator and narrator, that characterizes "urban fiction" and its commercial popularity. Nowhere is this more evident than in the climactic confrontation between Monk and his brother Bill shortly before the publication of "My Pafology/Fuck." In a heated quarrel, Bill chastises Monk for being insensitive, asserting that he

> was wrong to think you'd understand. Actually, I didn't expect you to at all. You're just like Father. You always were and you're growing up to be him." (214)

That this an extremely tense situation charged with negative emotions is evident in Monk's passive-aggressive disloyalty towards his brother. Notice that his increasing frustration with Bill's seeming indifference towards their mother's condition and the financial challenges it entails – Bill has been busy living his life as an openly gay man while Monk has been taking care of their mother – betrays Monk's latent homophobia. Monk, intent on leaving and eliding the argument, zones out, starting to contemplate the nature of time in mid-sentence during Bill's tirade. This explicit rupture between Bill's speech and Monk's italicized inner monologue is a ruse, a trap. Significantly, this ploy is set up *before* the novella's insane success and spectacular misreception. After this final push towards readerly disaffection for Monk, who seems to have discredited himself as the authority on the subject of emotional sensibility and moral integrity, Everett confronts us with the reality of "My Pafology/Fuck" not only making the bestseller list but being nominated for the national Book Award. In other words, we are presented with the reductive interpretation of Monk's novella that Everett has dared us to place on his own novel. With ever more absurd pathologies abounding towards the story's end – from the publishing industry's obsessive worshipping of Stagg R. Leigh to Monk's persisting faith in ratio – the pathological reading of Monk's privilege becomes fundamentally problematic.

Lawrence W. Hogue claims that "by the end of *erasure*, Everett undermines this middle-class elite persona "Monk," using the black folk hero Stagolee to signify a representation of the African American male that escapes language and categories" (102). Monk's failure and Leigh's success, however, are not mutually exclusive facets of a black writer struggling for authorial agency. To overemphasize Stagg's subversive potential as a trickster is to consider as mutually exclusive what is perfectly commensurable, namely Monk's cultural elitism and his knowledge of the cultural signifiers of blackness. Monk's failed attempt at literary protest serves to highlight the commercial decoupling of cultural difference from race itself. The novel's crucial concern, thus, is the easiness, with which authenticity can be faked, and the commercial success that such a literary fraud promises. Showing the same result in the diametrically opposed and yet unsettlingly similar projects of Jenkins and Monk, *erasure*

creates a flip-flop image of commercial complicity by presenting Monk as "an overly ironic, cynical, self-conscious and yet faithful copy of Juanita Mae Jenkins" (221). The irony, Monk concludes, 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. And I would have to wear the mask of the person I was expected to be. (212)

The aporia that Monk articulates here is probably the most striking and troubling case of ambivalence in the three novels of study. This programmatic statement encapsulates the novel's attempt at collapsing the false binaries, between which it oscillates – realism/experimentalism, commercialism/avant-gardism, complicity/autonomy – with a particularly disconcerting comicality. Monk's ultimately perplexing, because both hysterical *and* tragic downfall as an experimental writer culminates with his realization that he has become

> a stereotype of the radical railing against something, calling it tradition perhaps, claiming to seek out new narrative territory, to knock at the boundaries of the very form that calls me and allows my artistic existence. It is the case, however, that not all radicalism is forward looking, and maybe I have misunderstood my experiments all along, propping up, as if propping up is needed, the artistic traditions that I have pretended to challenge. (156-57)

This irreducible doubleness, which culminates in Monk's successful failure, is implicit in the "X," too. Houston A. Baker Jr. has pointed out that *erasure* "focuses satiric crosshairs on […] the lock - of the cage of black cultural representation in America" ("Reflections on Monk," 133). The crosshair or "X," to which Baker Jr. here refers, epitomizes *erasure*'s focus on the sign and the literary signification process, the novel's targeting of specific social and cultural realities. The "X," thus, stands for the aim of the satiric attack. However, the "X" is not only a marker, a sign of scope. With regard to its graphic symmetry, of two arrows mirroring each other, so to say, it can also symbolize a crossfade (cf. our discussion of *erasure*'s mirroring strategies). Conceived as a sign of reflection and intersection, it prompts to Monk's failed satiric coup that ironically validates Juanita Mae Jenkins' stardom and re-accentuates the commercial virulence of stereotypical blackness, which Monk, despite his remaining silent on it, has internalized and ready at hand to put it into the novella "My Pafology/Fuck" within *one* week. Finally, the "X" can also be understood as designating an open frame, which is marked by the four edges of the letter. In this sense, *erasure*'s pervasive parallels and doublings, from Jenkins' and Monk's stardom to the final award ceremony scene, which mirrors the concluding scene of "My Pafology/Fuck," ultimately serve one purpose: to imply its own

(potential) misreading. If *erasure* prefigures its own potential misreception by gesturing towards the reader and confronting her with the novella's intradiegetic misreading, this gesture is supplanted by the parallelism between Monk's father's secret letters and Monk's secret journal, which, as we can infer from the former's eventual disclosure, is bound to be disclosed and read, and (mis-) understood.

Coda: The Satirist's Apologia, or the Double Standard

Erasure showcases what Everett has stressed with regard to the occasion and potential of protest: "Social injustice is not going to go away, so if you hate social injustice and love complaining about it, then this is the world for you" (*Conversations with Percival Everett*, 65). Monk's failure to anticipate the repercussions of his self-absorbed struggle for poetic justice allows us to get a glimpse of the end(s) of protest fiction in the multicultural entertainment era.

This opportunity comes at the cost of Monk's integrity. True, *erasure* denounces both the apolitical tendencies of scholarly and writerly elitism, as well as reductive notions of the functional value of socio-literary criticism of race. In so doing, the novel "provides a well-deserved critique of the publishing industry and, by implication, the academy that has not required multiculturalism to be more demanding of writers and more sophisticated in its understanding of race," as Richard Schur has pointed out ("Stomping the Blues No More?" 216). But Monk is not the true representative of this academic complicity. Both elitist intellectual and commercial sell-out, he navigates between these conflicting camps. It is by not truly fitting in with neither of the two that Everett's protagonist serves to identify how the systemic mechanisms of recognition work. Monk shares this fate of serving as a sort of pars pro toto with Bigger Thomas. Both help to highlight a certain form of racial injustice. To reduce both characters to this sole purpose of catering to our moral self-reassurance is inappropriate. If anything, Monk should inspire us to recognize the double standard, which we tacitly uphold whenever we judge someone for a wrongdoing we ourselves are complicit in.

Making for a particularly troubling extra-textual irony, a significant portion of *erasure*'s reviews has perpetuated the very problems of essentialism with which the novel itself grapples by overemphasizing *race* as the text's exclusive concern. Everett himself has noticed this "terrible irony that this book is getting a lot of attention for the very reason that I wrote the book. Everybody is interested in the race question … instead of the book itself. The parody within the parody" (interview with Lynell George, 11). This irony became even more palatable or "real," when Everett was made an offer by Doubleday, who wanted to publish the paperback edition of *erasure* as the inaugural imprint of the Afro-American series "Harlem

Moon" (cf. Everett's interviews with Sean O'Hagan, 34; Kera Bolonik, 97). *Erasure* is about the lack of an informed readership, of a common epistemological and cultural basis that allows its readers to identify the novel in the novel as a call for outrage and the novel as a commentary on commercial (self-) compromise. That Everett's satire has both been criticized as an infamous exploitation of stereotypical blackness *and* heralded as a witty problematization of the same suggests that the novel has been successful in transposing this problematic onto the extra-textual plane of cultural politics: for satire and racial protest to be understood as such in the first place.

In concluding, it is important to stress that *erasure* remains the most problematic if not ultimately unconvincing text among the three novels under study. This has to do with Stagg R. Leigh and his potential glorification as a figure of cultural resistance. In contrast to Monk's obsessive self-reflection and -relativization, Stagg seems to suggest some sort of oppositional power in the appropriation of the black trickster tradition. In light of the systemic evil, which Monk faces, it is all too easy to gloss of Staggerlee's ambivalent history as a stereotypical bad black man, and embrace Stagg R. Leigh as a relatively potent player in an ultimately rigged game. *Erasure*'s second so-far unmentioned shortcoming relates to Everett's re-instantiation of the then-controversial antagonism between Ralph Ellison and his former mentor Richard Wright. Wright's *Native Son* is an important and forceful work of literary art that managed to distill the racial assumptions of its age in a characteristic way. This makes it a significant contribution to the cultural debates on race, even today. Everett's overly unforgiving treatment of Wright's project of protest does neither do justice to its intricacies nor its deficiencies, which both, significantly, have to be evaluated in the historical light of their context of production. As a parodic requiem for (such a variant of) protest fiction *erasure* resurrects those forms of protest, its assumptions and conventions, that die hard, as it were. The persistence of these schemes of racial thinking and literary practice, of course, is owed to the fact that, firstly, the social realities that warrant such a critical response persist. Secondly, the commercial machinery that is part of the multicultural entertainment era continues to feed (off of) a (white) demand for literary stories of stereotypical blackness. It is in *I Am Not Sidney Poitier*, where the critical force of Everett's racial satire reaches both its peak and turning point. The novel goes beyond the aesthetic confines of satire in significant ways, zooming in on the core of American mainstream entertainment – film. Tying in with *erasure*'s turn towards popular culture, *I Am Not Sidney Poitier*, thus, expands Everett's engagement with the cultural mechanisms of racial stereotyping.

THE NOT SIDNEY POITIER EFFECT

Social Mobility, Black Masculinity and Double-Negativity in *I Am Not Sidney Poitier*

We must remind ourselves that the measure of progress for those who marched 50 years ago was not merely how many blacks could join the ranks of millionaires.
Pres. Barack Obama

I'd settle for secretary of state.
John Wade Prentice Jr.

It of course helped me in not caring to remember that I was filthy rich.
Not Sidney Poitier

Introduction: To Be Sidney Poitier, Not Sidney Poitier or Both

What does the name "Not Sidney Poitier" signify? More precisely: What does this peculiar name signify as the social identifier of a young black male? Or, more precisely *and* perplexingly: What does this name signify if this young black male "look[s] for the world" like the actual actor (3)? These questions about identity, authenticity and language lie at the core of *I Am Not Sidney Poitier* (henceforth: *NSP*).[141] The 2009 satiric novel portrays the absurdly humorous, crisis-ridden journey into adulthood of the wealthy black orphan Not Sidney Poitier. The text forms a generic contrafact of the Bildungsroman, the campus novel, the picaresque novel and the comedy of manners, as its eponymous narrator struggles for (self-) recognition in an episodic rite of passage through the starkly satirized cultural scene of the 1980s and 90s U.S. Due to his peculiar name the Sidney Poitier look-alike Not Sidney Poitier sets off a sequence of ragingly racist episodes, all of which adapt various filmic Sidney Poitier scenarios. By juxtaposing the icon of benign black masculinity, Sidney Poitier, with his elusive character Not Sidney Poitier, Everett insinuates a race-based analogy between the Civil Rights conflicts at the peak of Poitier's career and the multiculturalist entertainment era satirized in *NSP*. Implicitly, the novel thus hints at the idea(l) of a color-blind society that crystallized in the controversial concept of "post-race," which gained traction when — one year before the publication of the novel — Barack Obama took the highest office in the nation and seemed to prove an unparalleled upward social mobility of minorities. The novel makes a case for both the insufficiency of idealistic notions of progress and the necessity of a more nuanced conception of the interplay between social and cultural dynamics undergirding the persistence and pervasiveness of systemic racism.

This recontextualization of the seemingly outdated Sidney Poitier scenarios challenges the reader to make sense of the racial madness erupting around Not Sidney Poitier. They are part

of a larger poetic strategy of sense-making. The "original actor" – speaking of contradiction in a contradiction-laden novel - personifies a development that reaches its (first) peak in Not Sidney Poitier's time: the commercialization of blackness. Set in the 1980s, in an intermediary historical period between *Glyph* (1970s) and *erasure* (1990s), *NSP* thus returns to the first heyday of the multicultural entertainment era and its pop-cultural sector: film. Drawing on this cultural system of reference, where questions of black representation and integration have had and continue to dominate the public racial discourse and America's cultural politics of race, the novel discusses race with specific regard to its phenomenal reality, i.e. blackness as a *visual* signifier. Nobody is more closely associated with the ambivalent nature of these concerns than Sidney Poitier, who has come to stand for both black cultural achievement and social recognition in this postwar representational revolution (see discussion).

Poitier and his televisual image provide the referential foil for the novel's thematic negotiation of social mobility, black masculinity and double-negativity. Zooming in on the prime parameter of upward mobility – class and gender – *I Am Not Sidney Poitier* represents Everett's satiric intervention in *social* discourses of blackness. Similar to *Glyph*, *NSP* presents a social (re-) integration scenario. The novel follows the journey of a young black man through the geographical (Southern rural and Northern East Coast urban) as well as social spaces (lower to upper class) of U.S. society. More specifically, it teases out the social implications of this oddly named black adolescent's ill-fated attempt at (re-) negotiating his place in society, as his nominal predisposition makes him, his significant amount of *economic* capital notwithstanding, a pariah of the most peculiar kind. If *Glyph* ponders the ir-/relevance of (black literary) theory and *erasure* the ir-/relevance of commercial aspects in African American aesthetic practice, *I Am Not Sidney Poitier* speculates on the economic aspects of race. In the following, I am first going to sketch the scholarly research and subsequently outline the novel's storyline with reference to the respective Sidney Poitier movies parodied in the novel's sequential episodes. I am then going to discuss its eponymous protagonist with specific regard to naming and negation.

Following closely behind *erasure*, *I Am Not Sidney Poitier* has received a significant amount of scholarly and public attention. The majority of reviews and academic articles focuses on the commercial and linguistic dimensions of Everett's novel. Claudine Raynaud provides a psychoanalytic analysis of Everett's novel, focusing on the proper name in order to align the novel's preoccupation with the limits of language with the linguistic imponderables of identity-constitution. In a similar vein, Sarah Mantilla Griffin operationalizes Jacques Lacan's

concept "foreclosure" to retrace the fundamental exclusionary dynamics stemming from the symbolic rupture governing Not Sidney Poitier's social experience and his search for father figures. In a form-centered analysis of what he terms Everett's "post-black" poetics, Christian Schmidt argues that *I Am Not Sidney Poitier* is a self-parody in both figural and intertextual regards in the vein of Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s Signifyin(g) theory. Rolland Murray situates Everett's novel in the cultural trajectory of what Trey Ellis has described as the "New Black Aesthetic," reading it as a "rich meditation" on the transition from (more) autonomous to commercial black artistic production in the post-Civil Rights paradigm. Murray argues that Everett's novel "throws into relief the historical experience of cultural and political absorption into the dominant order" by way of a generic duality of conventional and more liberal (academic) forms (728). Representing a black subjectivity that is neither solely based on an individualist rejection of communal identity nor on a reductive celebration of popular blackness, Casey Hayman identifies Not Sidney Poitier as a "hypervisible man," who exploits the potential for resistance to stereotypical black iconography of "techno-performative blackness." Kristin Leigh Moriah, finally, reads Not Sidney Poitier through the uplift-lens of the race man, retracing the socioeconomic "desires that propel Postracialism and the post-black aesthetic as well as their limits" (229).

In contrast to the scholarly overemphasis on black male subjectivity and agency, I focus on the receptive side of the comical misrecognition that Not Sidney Poitier incites. As the gravitational center of the confusion that the text comically celebrates, Not Sidney Poitier represents a doubly negative image of stereotypical blackness filtered through the iconic "Saint Sidney." Provoking his opponents (and thus the reader) to constantly question his subjectivity in favor of Sidney Poitier's spectacular preeminence, Not Sidney Poitier evokes their (and the reader's) commonsensical, i.e., habitualized conceptions of (stereotypical) blackness. By way of its comparative scenario (Civil Rights—multiculturalism—"post-racial" paradigm) *NSP* critically comments on the cultural consolidation of these stereotypes. In the following chapters, I seek to tease out the cultural work and pedagogical import of Everett's project, as the novel capitalizes on what I conceive as the *Not Sidney Poitier Effect*. This effect of racial dehabitualization functions by way of a sequential interrogation of the racial comfort zones across the vertical and horizontal axes of race, specifically disconnecting race and racism from economic concerns. *NSP*, I argue, can be read as a parodic entrepreneurial origin story that continually denies Not Sidney Poitier the right to find his place in the social order. Rather, it radically questions the meritocratic logic of upward mobility that undergirds dominant narratives of black "success."

The Privilege of Whiteness: Growing Up in Racial Quarantine

As "the ill-starred fruit of a hysterical pregnancy," which spans 24-months, Not Sidney Poitier grows up as an outsider in a poor black neighborhood of Los Angeles (3). He becomes the subject of a "local legend," considered by his community as "nothing less than an immaculate conception" (5). "The best I can figure," Everett's autodiegetic narrator surmises, is that

> my mother was in fact hysterically pregnant and that in month fourteen or so of that pregnancy she somehow managed to find and utilize the sexual organs of my father (a term I of course use in the strictest zoological sense), who may or may not have been Sidney Poitier, and she actually did become pregnant. (ibid)

Not Sidney Poitier has "no family" (8). His father, in accordance with the cliché, remains absent and unknown. Portia Poitier, in turn, is an "eccentric" (130) and politically radical self-made woman, whose economic acumen and cultural expertise provides the backdrop of Not Sidney Poitier's subsequent venture into the entertainment business:

> "News will be the new entertainment," she said. "Trust me, Not Sidney. It won't be enough to report it, news will have to be made. It's going to be a bad thing, but it's going to be. […] That's where we've gone. *Everything in this country is entertainment*. That's what you need for stupid people." (56; my emphasis)

Portia Poitier raises her son to read a lot and think critically: "Read. Always read. No one can take that from you. The evil picture box [her name for the television] won't make you smarter, but books will. Read. Read. Read. And then she would lock me in my room with the *Britannica*" (16). Spending the major portion of her money for "books, music, and language lessons" for Not Sidney Poitier he "turn[s] out to be extremely well educated" (6, 30).[142] Portia inspires her son to use his cultural capital for critiquing (propagandistic) whiteness such as that promoted by the TV show *Leave it to Beaver*:

> "But of course that's what the box is for, isn't it? Here is my black son sitting here in his black neighborhood watching some bucktoothed little rat and his washed-out, anally stabbed, Nazi-Christian parents." "There's a brother, too," I said, being six or so and not really understanding the tirade. "Oh, a brother, too. I see him there, an older lily white acorn fallen so close to the tree. Turn that crap off. No, leave it on. Study the problem, Not Sidney. Soak it in." (137)[143]

Leave it to Beaver, which first aired from 1957-63, remains a crucial if not the only reference for Not Sidney Poitier's understanding of whiteness and his behavior in white social spaces. The television sitcom pioneered an idealized vision of white 50's suburbia that became iconic over the course of the latter half of the 20th century. It portrays the adventures of Theodore "The Beaver" Cleaver (Jerry Mathers), a young naïve boy, at school and in his suburban neighborhood. Tellingly, Not Sidney Poitier applies this particular frame of reference to

various situations in which he is confronted with the power and privilege of whiteness on *both* sides of the color-line.

When Not Sidney Poitier is eleven years old, his mother passes away and bequeaths to him a vast amount of money from her fortunate investment in the TV company TBS, owned by the fictionalized Ted Turner. In appreciation of Ms. Poitier's loyalty to his firm the media mogul takes Not Sidney Poitier to live with him and his wife, the fictionalized Jane Fonda, in Atlanta, Georgia. "My mother," Not Sidney Poitier suggests, "was the kind of grass-roots, if not proletarian, person he wanted to imagine his media world touching, however tangentially, on his way to great and obscene wealth" (8). Not Sidney Poitier is being educated and coached by an exclusively non-white, "divers" staff. The Indian American accountant Podgie Patel helps him take care of his financial affairs. His African American social activist home teacher Betty teaches the black orphan "about Marx and Lenin and Castro and the ills of American democracy" (9). The Korean American martial arts instructor Raymond attempts to prepare Not Sidney Poitier for his conflictual encounters with bullies, during which he winds up inflicting even more harm on the young protagonist. Aside from these educational measures, Everett's protagonist is largely left to himself, free to make his own decisions in life and monetary matters. While Jane Fonda keeps busy lying at the pool, where she provides a sort of proleptic mirage of Not Sidney Poitier's subsequent sexually ambivalent interactions with white women, Turner and Betty, the latter portrayed as a caricaturesque mixture of the stereotypical black mammy and a black nationalist ideologue, the former portrayed as a jovial white Southern media "aristocrat," serve as the key persons of reference for Not Sidney Poitier. Betty advises Not Sidney Poitier to "be careful around that white man [Ted Turner…and] around whitey in general […] Young brother, young brother, you have no idea. Money be green, we be black, and the devil be white. That's all we know and all we need to know." (10) "To Turner's credit," Not Sidney Poitier adds, "even he was not comfortable with the scenario of the rich do-gooding white man taking in the poor little black child. Television was polluted with that model, and it didn't take a genius to understand that something was wrong with it" (10). Here, *NSP* makes a reference to the TV series *Diff'rent Strokes*, which aired on NBC/ABC from 1978-86. Everett's protagonist resembles the eight-year-old black boy Arnold and his brother Willis from Harlem, who have been adopted by the wealthy white Manhattan-based industrialist Philip Drummond in honor of their mother, his late housekeeper. Given Not Sidney Poitier's TV-centered social formation, this series plays an important role as a subtextual frame of reference (see discussion). That Ted, ironically,

seeks to subvert this stereotype by broadcasting it non-stop conforms with the contradictory and elusive quality of his character:

> Society, some like to call it the culture these days, shouldn't be subjected to that kind of pernicious and deleterious rubbish, the Arnold and Webster model. That's why I'm going to take over television and air that trash every day several times a day instead of only once a week. That way we'll all become desensitized to its harmful and consumptive effects by sheer overexposure. (12)[144]

In the private and well-situated milieu of the Turner home, the black orphan's wealth grants him access to *the* privilege of whiteness, namely disregard for (his own) skin color. Regularly released from this racial quarantine into the social sphere of Atlanta's suburb Decatur, the beatings he receives from kids in the formative years of his adolescence (they are confused by and frustrated with his name) instill in him an ironic indifference toward the social world in general and race-related stimuli in particular.

During Not Sidney Poitier's adventurous journey through the various social and cultural scenes of America, Everett supplants his protagonist's cross-sectional excursion with a Sidney-Poitier-movie-based running commentary. In other words, Not Sidney Poitier (re-) lives scenes from famous Sidney Poitier movies, which together form what he deems a "valuable learning experience, a rite of passage" (168). This rite of passage revolves around Not Sidney Poitier's attempt to find his mother's headstone in Los Angeles in order to solve the mystery of his identity. In the spirit of iconic picaros and literary adventurers, Not Sidney Poitier, thus, resolves to

> light out for the territory, as it were, to leave my childhood, to abandon what had become my home, my safety, and to discover myself. Most importantly I wanted to find my mother's grave and put something fitting, perhaps beautiful, on her headstone. What? I'd yet to figure that out. […] And so, this became a prophetically, apocalyptically instructive, even sibylline, moment. I was, in life, to be a gambler, a risk taker, a swashbuckler, a knight. I accepted, then and there, my place in this world. I was a fighter of windmills. I was a chaser of whales. I was Not Sidney Poitier. (43)

In contrast to Monk, the symbolic predecessor of Ishmael, Not Sidney Poitier is Ahab himself, a chaser of whales, bound to follow in Huck Finn's footpath and "light out for the territory." Just like Cervantes' *Quixote* parodies romance by way of its comically chivalric protagonist, *NSP* has Not Sidney Poitier emerge as conspicuously Poitier-esque counterpart of the actor. He drops out of high school after a scandalous incident of forced fellatio inflicted on him by his white history teacher Ms. Hancock. He gets arrested for "driving while black" in rural Georgia and is locked away in the "Peckerwood County Correctional Prison Farm." Tied to his fellow white inmate Patrice, who looks "a little like that old movie star, Tony Curtis (74; *The Defiant Ones*), Not Sidney Poitier escapes, encountering a poor and

undereducated "white trash" family living in a "shack right out of every hillbilly's origin fantasy" (60). While wondering how a "little" education might benefit the blind woman "Sis," a victim of parental abuse, and her brother Bobo,[145] Not Sidney Poitier winds up receiving another inevitable blow-job by Sis (*A Patch of Blue*). He buys his way into the historically all-black Morehouse College, where a cartoonish Bill Cosby gives his "Pound Cake" speech at Not Sidney Poitier's convocation (96-97). There, he is marginalized as being "not black enough" by the elitist fraternity of the "Big Brothers" and as being "too black" by his girlfriend's extremely class-conscious light-black parents, who change their minds upon learning about their guest's vast wealth (*Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*). Meanwhile, Not Sidney Poitier has his accountant buy the TV channel NET ("Negro-Entertainment-Television"), where the latter produces a "special about the rap music," making money hand over fist.[146] Enrolling in a philosophy course on "Nonsense," Everett's protagonist encounters the fictionalized alter ego of the novel's author himself, Percival Everett, who as the teacher of this class becomes his mentor. Dropping out of college, too, the protagonist's journey takes him to a small congregation of North Dakotan nuns, whom he helps to build a church by funding the project (*Lilies of the Field*). While Not Sidney Poitier increasingly resembles the original actor, he undergoes a quasi-surreal bodily transformation. His chaotic quest culminates in his solving the mysterious murder of his very own doppelganger (*In the Heat of the Night*). These two movies remain the final main reference in the novel's intermedial adaptation of Poitier films. Finally arriving in Los Angeles, Not Sidney Poitier passes for the "real" Sidney Poitier, accepting the Academy Award for Most Dignified Figure in American Culture as the man who "sets the standard" (234).

Who's Not on First? Naming and Negation

In a witty and characteristic double-move, the author manages to address questions of economic inequality *and* cultural stereotyping by boiling down and anchoring the racial problematic to the name. Sarah Mantilla Griffin concludes accordingly, that "one can read the dilemma of Not Sidney Poitier's life not as stemming from any of those identity categories [such as race, gender and class], but rather from a primordial exclusion based in language" (32). What defines the critical force of Everett's novel, I would argue, is of course the interlinking between the linguistic basis of Not Sidney Poitier's predicament and its social implications.

In this regard, *NSP* marks a culminating point within the subset of Everett's racial satires.[147] Spectacularly highlighted by its titular punchline, the novel marks the capstone of the author's

long-standing engagement with the name. The social and linguistic dynamics of naming are emphasized by the novel's paratextual disclaimer. Ironizing the convention of fictional self-marking in literary writing, this brief paragraph denies any reference to factual personae, adding that one

> *might go as far as to say that any shared name is ample evidence that any fictitious character in this novel is NOT in any way a depiction of anyone living, dead, or imagined by anyone other than the author.*

In and of itself a polysemous term, the multiple uses of "any" seem to cancel each other out, making this overloaded cluster of negation a contradictory proclamation of fictionality. Notice, thus, that one could very well read the part following the capitalized "NOT" as stating that "any" – meaning "each" – fictional character that nominally relates to a historical person does not do so in "any" way. Rather, they indeed relate to these "real" persona, albeit in a very *specific*, i.e. indirect or negative way, like "Not Sidney Poitier." This undecidability remains a permanent issue as it is inscribed into Not or "NOT" Sidney Poitier's name.

Everett's text is preoccupied with naming as both the primordial principle of nomination – the act of giving something a name – and ontological self-assertion – the act of claiming a name for oneself, of identifying oneself with a name (cf. Raynaud 3). The titular proclamation of (non-) identity highlights this precarious connection between identity, conceived in terms of self-identicalness, and language. Narrated through the "I"'s of a fictional character, whose very expressive basis of subjectivity is at stake, *I Am Not Sidney Poitier* - like *erasure* and *Glyph* – is situated at a curious juncture between the factual and the fictional. Everett's authorial self-insertion, thrusting issues of writing, authorship and scholarship onto the text's intradiegetic stage, is probably the most notable instance of this transfictional agenda (see discussion).[148] The novel is preoccupied with the primordial fiction of naming as such, one could say, namely the fiction of creating a name in order to constitute (one's) selfhood. "Tell me, Portia," Ted Turner asks accordingly,

> just what kind of name is Not?"
> "It's Not Sidney," my mother corrected him.
> Turner was puzzled momentarily, then nodded his big head and laughed. "Oh, I get it." (7)

"Then," Not Sidney Poitier adds, "it was my mother's turn to look puzzled. One might have thought that

> my mother imagined that our last name, rare as it was, was enough to cause confusion with Sidney Poitier, the actor, and so I was to be *Not* Sidney Poitier. But her puzzled expression led me to believe that my name had nothing to do with the actor at all, that *Not Sidney* was simply a name she had created, with no consideration of the outside world. (7)

Curiously, both readings are absolutely possible: that Portia Poitier did not think about/know of Sidney Poitier and that she chose the name in the spirit of subversiveness.[149] More importantly, the similar phrasing of this paragraph in comparison to the novel's paratextual disclaimer ("One might have thought that…") suggests the ontological grounding of this puzzle: that Not Sidney Poitier does neither know why she named him thusly nor who his father actually is. Simply speaking, we readers are encouraged to read Not Sidney Poitier's name as a fundamental concern of identity, as representative of the nature of racial ascription *as such*.

Of course, Not Sidney Poitier's nominal connection with the actor relates to a topos in African American culture, which Everett here repurposes. The long-standing tradition of choosing an iconic or culturally resonant name or title as one's own (first or second) name is a strategy of self-assertion and empowerment that stands in contrast to the foundational dehumanizing act of re-naming, which Orlando Patterson seminally defines as the "second major feature of the ritual of enslavement" (54). In Not Sidney Poitier's case, the name, "the verbal sign of his whole identity, his being-in-the-world as a distinct person," as Patterson argues, becomes not only a burden of cultural achievement (cf. Monk). It is (the negated version of) an extremely powerful signifier of blackness, which, over the course of the narrative, is gradually cleared of its racial meaning as the novel's programmatic quandary – who is Not Sidney Poitier? – is constantly reiterated, almost as if in a ritualized exorcism of race, and proven to be unsolvable, undecidable. Not Sidney Poitier's identity continues to be dubious throughout the novel. Its inconclusive climax leaves the reader in doubt as to the protagonist's status as either Not Sidney Poitier or not Sidney Poitier, as well as dead or alive, for that matter (cf. Schmidt 116).

With Not Sidney Poitier at its center, *NSP* explores the intricate cultural implications of Ralph Ellison's notion of the name and its function in American society:

> We must learn to wear our names within all the noise and confusion of the environment in which we find ourselves; make them the center of all of our associations with the world, with man and with nature. We must charge them with all our emotions, our hopes, hates, loves, aspirations. They must become our masks and our shields and the containers of all those values and traditions which we learn and/or imagine as being the meaning of our familial past. ("Hidden Fate," 148)

Not Sidney Poitier's name makes him a linguistic conundrum, a walking punch-line, if you will. Forced to function as an involuntary stand-up comedian, who is bound to become the pun of his own joke, he causes a homonymy-based confusion between the capitalized nominal element of his name and the negative particle "not." While the reader is necessarily *in* on this joke, Not Sidney Poitier's name is interpreted by his white and black opponents as an act of

sassiness, as if making fun of them. This form of homonymic confusion is a text-exclusive form of comedy. It alludes to Jacques Derrida's notion of *différance*, the infinite postponement and redirection of meaning one can only access and comprehensively investigate in text. Consider Everett's play with another variant of this homonymic comedy:

> "Then what is your name?" [Robert] asked. "My name is Not Sidney," I said. "Not is a part of Not Sidney's name," Maggie said. "Knot with a k?" he asked. "Not with a k," I said. "That's what I said," he said. "N-O-T," Maggie said. "Sidney?" "Not my name is not Sidney. My name is Not Sidney. Call me Not Sidney." (139-40)

This play on Not Sidney Poitier's name closely resembles Abbott and Costello's famous skit "Who's On First." Their comedy routine, which they performed in the 1930s on their radio and TV series "The Abbott and Costello Show," became an iconic feature of the medial spectacle of baseball. Usually adapted to a specific baseball team, the sketch, in essence, centers on Abbott's attempt to help Costello identify the names of all players. Exchanging these names and nicknames with word-combinations that can be interpreted as non-responsive answers to Costello's questions – the name of the first baseman is "Who," for instance-, the sketch plays on the ambiguity of the utterance "Who's on first(?)" as a question ("Which person is the first baseman?") and answer ("The first baseman is 'Who'").

In the same vein, Not Sidney Poitier's name induces an infinite interrogation loop, undermining any ascriptive attempt at identification:

> "What's your name?" a kid would ask. "Not Sidney," I would answer. "Okay, then what is it?" "I told you. It's Not Sidney Poitier." "Ain't nobody called you Sidney." "No, it's Not Sidney." The boy would make a face, then look at his friends and say, "What's wrong with him?" And I would say, I always thought in a polite and nonthreatening way, "Nothing's wrong with me. My name is Not Sidney." This would be about the time the first punch found the side of my head. (13-14).

This cyclic misrecognition is the defining principle of Not Sidney's being persistently marginalized as the black 'other.' Generally speaking, it epitomizes the novel's complication of the essentialist view of race that results in stereotypically fixing human difference. With specific regard to its linguistic core, this aporia represents the split between signifier and signified, and thus hints at the text's language-centered race critique (see discussion).

"By the time I was in high school," Not Sidney Poitier concludes,

> it was common knowledge, or at least it was no secret, that I lived at Ted Turner's house. To my teachers my name was odd, but to my classmates I was Sidney or Not Sidney or something other than Sidney. My *real* name became a mystery to be solved for many. Still, I was beaten often, but now in an attempt to have me give up that bit of prized information, namely my name." (29)

In its cross-sectional survey, the novel offers us various naïve readings of Not Sidney Poitier's name.[150] Ted Turner, for instance, calls the protagonist by his quasi-nickname "Nu'ott," a term of endearment inflected with a Southern accent of white liberal patronage. The correctional officials in Peckerwood County, Georgia, in turn, call Not Sidney Poitier "Sidney Poitier," as if there was no difference between the two. In other words, they still live in the year 1958, meaning: in the era of segregation (48). Not Sidney Poitier's first stop on his cross-sectional excursion, thus, leads him through the fictional scene of rural Peckerwood County, modeled after the setting of the movie *The Defiant Ones*, which came out in 1958. Chained to each other, the black inmate Noah Cullen (Sidney Poitier) and the white John "Joker" Jackson (Tony Curtis) embark upon a tumultuous flight from detainment initiated by an accident of their prison-truck. Struggling to cooperate with his white counterpart, Poitier emerges as a saint of reconciliation in this dramatized interracial conflict. It was this movie, Sharon Willis stresses, that made Sidney Poitier "Sidney Poitier," the actor and icon of benign blackness.

Venturing into the upper-class domain of the light-black Larkin family, Not Sidney Poitier's name is mocked as "some kind of ghetto nonsense" (131). One cannot, in a habitualized attempt at linguistic economization, reduce Not Sidney Poitier's name to a nickname ("Nu'ott") or even its "first" part (Not Sidney) without taking away from the singularity and comical duplicity of this particular nominal combination.[151] This is a specific problem that various critics have underemphasized if not neglected. The intradiegetic variations of Not Sidney Poitier's name, too, represent (mis-) readings of an essentially un-readable name: "Not (Sidney Poitier)," championed by Ted (page), Morris (page), and Robert (page); "Not Sidney (Poitier)," promoted by Portia Poitier and various others; as well as "(Not Sidney) Poitier," used by Not Sidney Poitier's fellow inmate Patrice and Professor Everett ("Potay," e.g. 58; "Poitier," e.g. 167).[152] This linguistic variability ironically highlights the inherent insufficiency of Not Sidney Poitier's name as a positive or affirmative proclamation of selfhood. In this sense, Not Sidney Poitier's name also resonates with the race-related disprivileging of black job seekers whose names, because they are (stereo-) typically associated with African-Americans, trigger their rejection in written applications. However, Everett suggests a linguistic loop-hole for Not Sidney Poitier to escape his nominal dilemma. This loop hole, significantly, has to do with a different national tongue. Upon his way to the Academy Award ceremony, Not Sidney Poitier's chauffeur at the airport in Los Angeles asks him with a British accent: "'Are you not Sidney Poitier?'" (231). This communicative opportunity allows Not Sidney Poitier to reply with the affirmative statement: "I am." This

incident represents the culminating point of a sequence of interpersonal encounters, which hint at a more nuanced understanding of his name:

> Morris laughed when I told him my name. "What kind of stupid-ass name is Not?" he said. "My name is Not Sidney." "Excuse me, Not *Sidney*. I'll say you're not Sidney." What was meant as an insult would have been a glancing blow at best, if I had cared. But what Morris Chesney had done was articulate what no one else ever had. He had said what probably everyone else meant to say but couldn't come up with, or wouldn't. He had pointed out to me that not only was I Not Sidney Poitier, but also that I was not Sidney Poitier: a confusing but profound and ultimately befuddling distinction, one that might have been formative or at least instructive for a smarter person. (92)

Indirectly addressing the reader by means of the tongue-in-cheek description "a smarter person" Everett presents us with a similar linguistic challenge, when he has the waitress Diana Frump inquire about Not Sidney Poitier's name. Here, Everett plays with the negation of a negation ("is it?" – "Not"), as Diana asks Not Sidney Poitier: "'Your name's not Sidney Poitier, is it?' What a question she had put to me without even knowing what she was doing, and so I answered truthfully the question she didn't know she was asking. 'It is'" (183). Allowing for the affirmation of his name and, by extension, his identity, the final incident with the British cab driver gestures towards the postcolonial context of Britain, suggesting that Not Sidney Poitier's racial predicament is specifically American.

> In an interview Everett has given us further insight into the specificity of race in America: "the most segregated city in the entire United States is not in the South: that's Chicago, Illinois; and the only place in the whole United States where I have ever been called a '[N-word]' is Cambridge, Massachusetts. I grew up where the Civil War started but no one ever called me a '[N-word]' there, though I know my father was. This is what America means to me." (interview with Mills and Lanco, 92)

Everett's investigation of the signifier Sidney Poitier attests to his interest in this specific interdependency between blackness and (white) American national self-understanding, whose historical, economic and psychological dimensions decidedly differ from the colonial connection between European whiteness and its black 'other.' Thus, Not Sidney Poitier functions like a kaleidoscope of concerns cohering around white American obsession with blackness: the enslavement and genealogical uprooting of Africans, the economic exploitation and systemic disenfranchisement of blacks, the moral guilt and sexual attraction projected onto the black body, as well as the cultural and commercial dimensions of these historical, social and psychological issues.

This elusive Not-Sidney-Poitier-Ness prompts to negation as a thematic and structural motif in *NSP*. As a fictional character, Not Sidney Poitier has an inherently negative identity, an identity that is predicated on the negation of a culturally circulated and racially sanitized

image of blackness. Put simply, Not Sidney Poitier is always forced to respond to any identificatory interrogation with a negation: "I am not" - namely Sidney Poitier. In other words, his name is reduced to the characteristic and problematic feature of the name: its referential function. Without (invoking) Sidney Poitier, Not Sidney Poitier's name would mean absolutely nothing. What exactly, then, is this latent meaning that Everett's protagonist pushes into the foreground? His name activates various assumptions and clichés associated with Sidney Poitier as a good-looking, well-educated, well-mannered and benign black man – in short, the antithesis of white American fear of black masculinity. Not Sidney Poitier's dubious name, thus, evokes an iconic actor, whose spectacular presence has been fundamentally defined by irony, if not contradiction, itself.

Iconic Irony: Sidney Poitier and the "Pedagogical Negro"

Sidney Poitier is an icon, a common place, and a trope. The Bahamian actor (*1927) occupies a particularly prominent spot in the collective memory and cultural imaginary of post-segregation America. In an unparalleled singularity and centrality, Poitier has come "to personify *the* Black Man on screen" during a period of transition in the racial politics of U.S. popular culture (Leab, 223). Not only did he embody a decisive diversification of on-screen images of blackness but changed the role of the black male in the U.S. cultural consciousness by way of a vast array of groundbreaking "firsts." For the very first time a black male artist received a tremendous popularity among a mass white audience, star-like fees, and, in 1964, the Academy Award in a leading role (for *Lilies of the Field*). Poitier achieved this at a time when films first "began cautiously to broach the subject of 'race' as problem," as Stuart Hall recalls (*Representation*, 24). Aram Goudsouzian argues that Poitier's rise to stardom has been intrinsically connected to "[t]he civil rights movement [that] had shaped the contours of Poitier's career. Nonviolent demonstrations for black equality had forged a culture in which his image resonated, and his movies had engendered racial goodwill" (2). In fact, Poitier's spectacular allure, which manifested both visually and economically, in terms of his movies' box-office success, attested to the increasing demand for "harmonic" and ultimately "safe" models of blackness by a mainstream white audience. A "safe black man, a sort of cultural eunuch," Poitier came to be known as "'Saint Sidney'" (Watts, 289). Poitier, thus, became a catch-phrase associated with this representational turn in race-related cinema.

Henry Louis Gates, Jr. remembers the movie that implanted Poitier's saintly image in the minds of Americans, *Lilies of the Field* (1963), and "established Poitier as a significant presence in postwar cinema: noble, selfless, saintly. When I saw the movie, at thirteen, I was moved to tears. It was the perfect civil-rights vehicle for its moment. Its message to white

America was practically telegraphed: We are a friendly and kind-hearted people, we are good citizens" (*Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Black Man*, 169). This tremendous impact on the psyche of American viewers across the racial divide has been discussed by Sharon Willis. For black viewers, the scholar states, Poitier "relieved the representational vacuum produced by a cinemascape that offers no individuated black characters who are not drawn directly from minstrel traditions." For white spectators, in turn, "this appearance registers racial difference at the manageable level of a singular individual" (*The Poitier Effect*, 22). His "iconic usefulness – particularly, though not exclusively, to white liberal discourse" made Poitier a powerful projection-figure of white desires for racial reconciliation (201). This "usefulness" situates Poitier in the representational lineage of the "Magical Negro" (cf. *Variety*'s description of Poitier as "the useful Negro," quoted in Goudsouzian, 4).

This projection-figure has been repurposed and redefined throughout Poitier's filmic career. In *The Defiant Ones* (1958), Noah Cullen (Sidney Poitier, henceforth unmentioned) flees from a detention camp with his white fellow inmate (played by Tony Curtis), sacrificing himself for the latter by jumping off the train that would have guaranteed his successful escape from the pursuing police posse. In *Lilies of the Field* (1963), Homer Smith helps a small cohort of East German catholic nuns to build a chapel for their small-town congregation, giving them English lessons, too. In *A Patch of Blue* (1965), Gordon Ralfe quits his job as a journalist to help the blind white victim of abuse Selina D'Arcey (Elizabeth Hartman) to go to a school for the blind in order to get an education. Falling in love, the interracial couple literalizes the liberal ideal of "color-blindness." In *The Heat of the Night* (1967), Officer Virgil Tibbs investigates the murder of a wealthy industrialist named Phillip Colbert, who had moved from Chicago to rural Mississippi (Sparta) to build a factory. In this Southern scene of lingering racism, the crime plot supplants a systematic investigation of white racist assumptions. The focal point of this cathartic struggle is Tibbs' local partner and local officer in charge, the white Chief Gillespie. In *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* (1967), Dr. John Wade Prentice, Jr., a renown black physician and humanitarian activist, falls in love with the young white Joanna Drayton, daughter of a rich liberal San Francisco-based family. Giving Joanna's parents a 24-hour-limit to consider approving of their marriage, the Draytons are forced to reconsider and live up to their liberal ideals. Two dream episodes not discussed in the above synopsis, during which Not Sidney Poitier travels back in time to the historical era of slavery, are based on the Sidney Poitier movies *Band of Angels* (1957) and *Buck and the Preacher* (1972). Another dream episode adapts *No Way Out* (1950), in which Poitier

gave his cinematic debut. As Dr. Luther Brooks, Poitier plays a black physician, the first at his county hospital, who treats white patients while being confronted with their racist views. Echoing what Frantz Fanon famously described as "magical Negro culture," the "Magical Negro" has become a prominent stock character in contemporary Hollywood cinema.[153] Ostensibly promoting social progress predicated on racial solidarity, this "'magical' or spiritually gifted Black leader character," Cerise L. Glenn and Landra J. Cunningham stress, betrays a systematic "reinvention of old Black stereotypes."[154] Reminiscent of the Uncle Tom, the Mammy or jezebel, this character does not represent "authentic racial harmony" but white-imagined black subservience (135). Of its fundamental ethical function Kwame Anthony Appiah has provided one of the first major discussions. Many a manifestation of what Appiah calls "the good Negro" has been constructed along the lines of "the noble good-hearted black man or woman, friendly to whites, working-class but better educated than most working class Americans, and oh so decent […, touching] each white life he heals" ("'No Bad Nigger'", 80). When "one white character […] is going through a crisis," Appiah thus concludes, "it's the good sense of this black saint that pulls him through" (81). Wondering about this figure's origins, Appiah harks back to Sidney Poitier, musing if it signals

> the return of Poitier in Stanley Kramer's *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* (1967), the black man who is too good to be true, because only a truly superior black man could turn the possibility of marriage to Hepburn and Tracy's daughter into a genuine ethical dilemma? (Poitier certainly took the Saint to brilliant extremes; in James Goldstone's *Brother John* (1971), he literally plays an angel.) (82-83)[155]

Appiah relates this black "Saint" to "the tradition of the superior virtue of the oppressed" rooted in white racial guilt (cf. the topos of the "Noble Savage"). "Is there," the scholar asks,

> somewhere in the Saint's background a theodicy that draws on the Christian notion that suffering is enobling? So that the black person who undeserving suffering in the American imagination can also, therefore, represent moral nobility? Does the Saint exist to address the guilt of white audiences, afraid that black persons are angry at them, wanting to be forgiven, seeking a black person who is not only admirable and lovable, but who loves white people back? Or is it simply that Hollywood has decided, after decades of lobbying by the NAACP's Hollywood chapter that, outside crime movies, blacks had better project good images, characters who can win the NAACP's "image awards"? (83)

Appiah has left these rather provocative questions unanswered, suggesting that "Saint Sidney" has been a white-black imaginary co-creation, after all.

In contrast to "magical Negro" types, Poitier's roles, Willis explains, "remain crucially distinct for their emphasis on pedagogy rather than on sacrifice or magical intervention […redefining] the 'magical Negro' into a paragon of respectability whose mission was to educate well-intentioned white people to understand and accept racial equality" (5). Ironically, the success of Poitier's pedagogical project, Willis argues, "depended on his white

pupils not having to work or think to win his approval," (4). Sidney Poitier, I argue, can be conceived as the *Pedagogical Negro*. His reconciliatory function contrasts with the more "passive" quality of martyr-like suffering and magical inspiration,[156] as his films often feature explicit if not "extreme" moments of racial instruction. Tellingly, this morally charged racial pedagogy relies on the obfuscation of the real implications of the movies' racial argument. Consider the awkwardly crude pedagogical moment in *In the Heat of the Night*, for instance, when Chief Gillespie debunks Officer Tibbs as being implicated in the very racial stereotyping from which he so spectacularly suffers. Tibbs falsely suspects the white Southern cotton-aristocrat Endicott of having committed the murder of the Northern industrialist Philip Colbert, being driven by what seems to be a blind racial rage.

Willis has synthesized this peculiar mixture of pedagogical and psychological traits in what she terms the "Poitier effect." According to Willis, Poitier's impact has been symptomatic of

> enduring fantasies that shape popular white-authored representations of race. It represents a dream of achieving racial reconciliation and equality without any substantive change to the 'white' world or to 'white' culture, and, especially to white privilege. This story of change without change conforms smoothly with fantasies of 'color blindness,' imagining a world where difference makes no difference. As it repeats stories of rapid, magical, seamless transformations of white consciousness – where we never really see what difference this change is going to make, the Poitier effect is bound to reassure. The Poitier effect, I want to argue, functions as a defense, or a compensatory gesture, averting or deflecting the possibility of a kind of critical thinking that would involve a serious reciprocal interracial change, instead of offering a fantasy of racial understanding and 'assimilation' that requires no effort on the part of white people. (5)

With what Willis describes as a "characteristic vagueness" (47), Poitier's movies have created versions of him as a redeemer-figure, who offers a comforting stability and moral authority as an antidote to the political instability and racial tensions dominating the historical period of their release. Significantly, Poitier's career spans the entire transitional period from late "Jim Crow" on to the Civil Rights legislation and the subsequent social changes in the educational, political and domestic spheres of U.S. society. Notice, thus, that his films negotiate crucial concerns of racial equality: educational access, professional opportunity and "miscegenation." "Undergirded by powerful affective charges and delivering cathartic payoffs," Poitier's cinematic characters serve as racial mediators and catalysts of social change geared towards *white* viewers, specifically those with liberal views (21). In what has appeared to be a defense mechanism of white liberal self-re-assurance,[157] Poitier's roles have been rendered *sexless*, solely capable of platonic relationships with white (!) women; presented as restricted to the *private* domain of social interaction; and, as Willis stresses, as *passing*, for they remain without social ties and personal history, bound to leave the world they have been sanctioned

to change. Based on these misrepresentations, these scenarios of interracial reconciliation provide discussions of racial politics in a peculiarly apolitical fashion. They promote explicit moral instruction about race while bracketing (many of) the troubling realities of race out of the filmic frame. Thus, they send a distinctly *ironic* message freighted with "glaring contradictions" (Willis, 52). Unsurprisingly, Poitier's movies often sparked controversial responses from its black audience, as their inconsistencies remained most visible from a marginal perspective. Reminiscing the huge black turnout at a theatric performance of *Raisin in the Sun* featuring Sidney Poitier, James Baldwin describes this fault line between black artists and their communities:

> they were there because the life on that stage said something to them concerning their own lives. The communion between the actors and the audience was a real thing; they nourished and recreated each other. This hardly ever happens in the American theater. And this is a much more sinister fact that we would like to think. For one thing, the reaction of that audience to Sidney and to that play says a great deal about the continuing and accumulating despair of the black people in this country, who find nowhere any faint reflection of the lives they actually lead. And it is for this reason that every Negro celebrity is regarded with some distrust by black people, who have every reason in the world to feel themselves abandoned. ("Sidney Poitier," 56)

Poitier has been the gravitational center of a host of ironies that cohere around his image. These contradictions, which his movies try to contain by way of at times spectacularly implausible constellations and logical twists, stem from what Goudsouzian calls the "paradox of his 'Negroness'" (4). This paradox has to do with the tension between Poitier's televised image and his iconic presence as a *black* and *male* actor, which his movies have attempted to resolve by keeping him in a "predictable and restricted orbit of consumption" (Willis, 22).[158] James Baldwin has been among the most emphatic advocates and acute observers of Poitier. In his article published in *Look* in 1968, Baldwin stresses that as a black performer Poitier faced the problem of "truthfully reflected" blackness, which, as Baldwin argues, is antithetical to the dominant "fantasy of American life." This puts the black artist in

> a rather grim bind. He knows, on the one hand, that if the reality of the black man's life were on the screen, it would destroy the fantasy totally. On the other hand, he really has no right *not* to appear, not only because he must work, but also for all those people who need to see him. ("Sidney Poitier," 56).

Poitier spectacularly countered the cultural fear of the aggressive, sexually predatory black male. As Stuart Hall points out, his roles were "almost sexless" in their absolutely non-threatening allure (*Representation*, 241). On the other hand, his image was sexually codified, as he was in fact a "sex symbol," as Baldwin stresses, "though no one dares admit that" ("Sidney Poitier," 58). Keith Harris concludes that "Poitier's masculinity hinges upon the tropological transformations of racialized masculinity (the black man) into a figure of honor,

dignity, sacrifice: Black masculinity and the battle for recognition and respect is a trial, a redemptive struggle to find and overcome the shortcomings of whiteness" (68). Poitier's characters thus achieved an ethical authority that surpassed the dominant "Tom-dom" in early American cinema by often being paired with white partners (62). In *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* (1967), for instance, this partner is Matt, who, as the white, liberal newspaper editor and patriarch of the upper-class Draytons of San Francisco, stands in as proxy for the nation's collective catharsis in a phase of profound social crisis (notice the movie's year of release). Matt's 23-year-old daughter Joanna (Katharine Houghton) and the renowned black doctor John Wade Prentice Jr. (Sidney Poitier) intend to get married. Upon meeting their son-in-law-to-be Matt and Christina Drayton (Spencer Tracy, Katharine Hepburn) are challenged to live up to their ideals of tolerance and integration on which they raised their daughter. Matt's sanctioning of the young white-black couple Joanna and John—who, as he idealistically argues, "happen to fall in love and happen to have a pigmentation problem"—marks the climactic resolution of his internal ethical conflict around which the plot coheres. In this regard, John Wade Prentice Jr.'s (Sidney Poitier) very name seems to symbolize the movie's idealization of a sociocultural pilot project, a white-monitored interracial test-run exemplified by John and Joanna's marriage. Thus, John Wade Prentice is the "apprentice," as it were, the to-be-examined beneficiary of a socially emancipated, ethically upright white American society. This the movie did in the very year of the Supreme Court's *Loving v. Virginia* decision that legally sanctioned interracial marriages. Only shortly prior to the movie's release, interracial marriage was still illegal in 17 of the 50 American states.

In contrast to his contemporary Harry Belafonte, an equally successful black actor, who often portrayed more openly sexual characters, Poitier provided a potentially assimilable if not adoptable black man. "The fact that Harry Belafonte makes as much money as, let's say, Frank Sinatra," Baldwin stresses accordingly, does not

> really mean anything in this context. Frank can still get a house anywhere, and Harry can't. People go to see harry and stand in long lines to watch him. They love him onstage, or at a cocktail party, but they don't want him to marry their daughters. This has nothing to do with Harry; this has everything to do with America." ("The Uses of the Blues," 74)

In the case of Poitier, this has been different. As "Pedagogical Negros," his roles come with a certain level of status that sharply contrasts to "Magical Negros" often rooted in a lower-class milieu (cf. Hughey, 544). Most of his roles never fall short of the (upper) middle-class status of a construction worker, journalist, police officer or doctor.[159] These professional occupations, some of which are directly connected to education and knowledge-production and, significantly, (public) service, betray a striking sense of privilege. Poitier's personae, in

other words, are always already situated in the upper ranks of the white societal mainstream, into which they are supposed to be integrated. John Wade Prentice, Jr., is a particularly striking example in this regard. John owns a lot of symbolic capital, consolidated in his doctoral degree from Harvard, for one, that is derived from his work in the prestigious profession of medical science. This capital, determining his successful participation in the social competition over legitimacy and recognition, is especially useful in supplanting his claim to establish himself in the upper-middle-class domain of the Daltons' social sphere. "Even" Noah Cullen (*The Defiant Ones*) shares a certain respectability, as he had been a married land-owner prior to his conviction for assault and battery (with the intention to kill), as someone tried to take his property away from him.

This is why *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* is a particularly important intermedial foil for *NSP*. Willis concurs that *Guess* holds a special position within Poitier's filmic corpus:

> Eroticism and "miscegenation" come here packaged in a consumable form: there is no lust, no dominance and submission within this couple. This version of the Poitier icon has gained perhaps the most enduring traction within the collective cultural psyche and has helped to perpetuate in popular culture many of the contradictions the film displays. (50)

The centrality of *Guess* and its themes of interracial harmony and love (and thus *physical* interaction) is further substantiated by the fact Not Sidney Poitier's fictional life begins in the exact year when Sidney Poitier, the star-like figure of black masculinity, is born, so to say. Not Sidney Poitier's birthday coincides with the premiere of three movies in 1967: *In the Heat of the Night* (dir. Norman Jewison) and *To Sir, with Love* (dir. James Clavell), and, above all, Guess *Who's Coming to Dinner* (1967; dir. Stanley Kramer), all of which made Poitier the top box-office star of that year. Recapitulating the peculiar circumstances of his own conception, namely his mother's "hysterical pregnancy" lasting 24 months, and the "urban legend" that cohered around it, Everett's protagonist states that he "was two [years old] in 1970" (4). Had he been born after nine months his birthday would have been in 1967.

The "threat" of his sexuality, Keith Harris has stressed, "is contained in class, effeminacy, and morality in the image of Poitier as sexual passivity" (69). The racial education of whites is thus exclusively allocated to the alleged supra-bodily realm of the intellectual, for which class serves as metaphor. Ultimately, Poitier's roles remain isolated both in their blackness and male sexuality. His characters' interpersonal encounters starkly contrast with the collective dimensions of the then pressing political debates around equality. Kept in a state of continual intermediacy, Poitier's roles remain ultimately unchanging and transitory in their reconciliatory function. His films, indeed, "need him to be constitutionally incapable of development or change, since he has to serve to *cause* change" (Willis, 49). These movies

betray a profound investment on the part of their makers in offering a means of *controlling* or *managing* racial debate in the emotionally freighted and politically sanitized framework of racial melodrama. It is in *Guess*, significantly, where this ambivalent mixture of racial pedagogy and melodramatic excess reaches its apex.

This racial melodrama, often evoking images of black suffering and self-sacrifice, "sometimes taking the form of romantic love," Willis muses, "seems to be the ultimate instrument of pedagogy, and it obviates the need for ideological argument. Affection, and the intimate scenes of instruction it promotes, seems to require melodramatic strategies. Poitier's characters consistently sort out the good from the bad in encounters where he teaches white people – whether innocent victims or tormentedly misguided – to liberate themselves from the social or ideological prison of their contexts" (*The Poitier Effect*, 36). In *Lilies of the Field*, Homer Smith (Sidney Poitier) literally teaches the cohort of German nuns the meaning of "blackness" as a phenomenal quality and social marker. Meanwhile, Smith "assists" the nuns in building a church for their congregation, thus conforming with the "help"-function of the "Magical Negro" figure. *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*, in turn, represents a particularly bright facet of this pedagogical spectrum, as it extensively centers on the Drayton family's struggle to *consciously* reflect on their own racial bias. Dr. John Wade Apprentice Jr. (Sidney Poitier), "oh so decent" and extremely well educated, is a particularly "helpful" counselor in this project of self-interrogation.

Poitier, for Baldwin, is a cultural phenomenon that attests to a concerted effort at evading or whitewashing reality, "the reality of pain, of anguish, of ambiguity, of death" ("The Uses of the Blues," 78-79).[160] It is the fact that Poitier somehow succeeded at "escaping" his films' framework, as Baldwin suggests, that makes him such an intriguing and contradictory figure. Thus, he managed to "smuggle" in the racial "reality," from which his fictional worlds were so rigorously and dubiously cordoned off ("Sidney Poitier," 51; 56). This subversive subtext, which Baldwin reads in (-to) Poitier's movies, defines his "unique political symbolism" (Goudsouzian, 1). Everett retraces and unearths these latent ironies and hidden contradictions, like he has done with regard to Strom Thurmond, the late South Carolinian Senator, who has been known for his pro-segregation agenda (cf. *A History*). Strom Thurmond (1902-2003) was once famous for being the oldest- and longest-serving senator in U.S. history. He had been a member of the senate from 1954 until 2003, first as a Democrat and from 1964 on as a Republican. While an opponent of integration, Thurmond, as Everett himself stresses, "never was really an evil man, though the results of his actions often were. Interestingly – though I am not saying it really means much – there's no instance (at least that I know of) of his being

recorded or marked as having used the [N-word], and I suspect he wouldn't have. I don't see him as hating black people. He just liked white people a lot more than he liked blacks." Everett's scathing satire *A History* forces us to complicate the stereotypical conception of Thurmond as the very role model of white supremacy, much like he provokes us to reconsider the seeming iconic consistency of Poitier as the stereotypical good black man (Interview with Mills, Julien and Tissut, 82). Poitier, too, is an extremely complex figure in American racial discourse. It is this complexity, this "reality," that Everett self-declaredly interrogates: "I was interested in the icon of the palatable black man in the '60s or '70s," Everett states in an interview with Drew Toal, stressing that Poitier was interesting to him precisely because he was such a "complicated" persona, "politically outspoken in public, and eminently 'safe' onscreen" ("The Tipping Poitier" 163).

The Not Sidney Poitier Effect: Black Masculinity, Pedagogical Absurdity and the Logics of Double-Negativity

Everett investigates Sidney Poitier as a signifier that has been culturally institutionalized as a shortcut to non-threatening, white-mainstream-compatible black masculinity through his elusive counterpart Not Sidney Poitier. If on the surface Sidney Poitier personifies white liberal America's favorite black (future) son-in-law (cf. *Guess*), i.e. an ultimately safe, because sexless and de-politicized version of a black male, Not Sidney Poitier represents his postmodern antipode, an awkward and notoriously perplexing, because excessively self-conscious and oddly (un-) relatable but very attractive black male adolescent caught between two stools, as it were. Not Sidney Poitier, in other words, is the reverse revenant of America's "Native Son" couched in the cultural cloak of Sidney Poitier.[161]

Casey Hayman situates Poitier at the starting point of "an evolving situation in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries in which black subjects in general increasingly must articulate their subjective identities within the context of a flood of mass-mediated (and often stereotyped) images of blackness" (139-40). This flood of images, Orlando Patterson stresses, has merged into a monolithic amalgamation of black manhood based on "the athlete, the gangster rapper, and the criminal into a single black male persona" (277). This hegemonic vision of the black male body, whether exoticized as athletically excellent, violently predatory or sexually hyper-virile, lies at the root of the containment-efforts undergirding stereotypical representations of black masculinity. In this regard, Sidney Poitier could be allocated to what Clyde Tailor polemically describes as the "Disneyish gallery of Black malehood." These stereotypical portraits stem from the "mythogenic" quality that Tailor ascribes to the black

male body as the highly contested corporeal site of both *projected* and *generated* fictions of race.[162] With the "uneven odds of the game" to their favor, however, Tailor argues, the world

> more quickly fastens on Huck's Jim, Uncle Tom, [Robinson Crusoe's] Friday, Little Black Sambo, or Uncle Remus […] than on home-grown figures like High John de Conquer, Brer Rabbit, John Henry, Shine, or Stackolee." (169)

Neither being Sidney Poitier nor exactly the "opposite," Not Sidney Poitier is situated at a precarious intersection between myth and counter-myth. E. Lâle Demitürk asserts the Everett's protagonist "signifies a counter-discourse to whites' stereotypes of blacks, deemed as deviant in normative spaces. He is denied a subjective performance of black masculinity because he is always shadowed by the Poitier image imposed on him" (89). Not Sidney Poitier's "reality is not truly his […] All along he is nothing but the white man's project/script, […while being] punished for not being Poitier, who stands for the normative white constructions of idealized blackness" (104). One could also argue, however, that Not Sidney Poitier is punished for not not being Sidney Poitier, so to say. What really seems to lurk behind his bizarre self-negating name, then, are statements such as these: "I am (not) a high school dropout," or "I am (not) a thug or a future convict," which, ironically, he actually *is* or is going to be over the course of the narrative. Everett's protagonist thus evokes "the Tupac Shakurs, Allen Iversons, 'Pookies,' and Nushawn Williamses of the world," who, according to Mark Anthony Neal, have been made "the reason why the black man has failed. They are 'criminals' – trash – who listened to and made violent music, defiled black women, smoked crack, made fun of homosexuals, and had unprotected sex with minors" (*New Black Man*, 3).[163] Given the cultural stereotyping of the black male as pathologically bad, i.e. ultimately unworthy of social integration, Everett's protagonist's name prompts implicit nominal combinations such as these: "Not Nushawn Williams" or "Not Bigger Thomas." Tellingly, Not Sidney Poitier has a peculiarly disruptive effect on his upper-class light-black counterparts, as he triggers what Neal describes as black elites' fear of being pulled back into "the abyss of black male demonization" (*New Black Man*, 7, cf. Kobena Mercer "Endangered Species, 75).

In contrast to Poitier's roles' seemingly neutral presence and pedagogical import, Everett's protagonist thus ironizes what Toni Morrison has famously identified as one of the "duties" of black figures in (white) American cultural discourse. Born from an original white American fantasy of blackness, the "Africanist persona," whose varying reincarnations Morrison retraces in the literary tradition of American national self-narration, signal the subliminal attempt at "exorcism, reification and mirroring" of white fears and desires (*Playing in the Dark*, 39). Nicole Fleetwood claims that this mirroring-function informs the notion of "the

visual sphere […] as a punitive field […] in which the subjugation of blacks continues through the reproduction of denigrating racial stereotypes that allows whites to define themselves through the process of 'negative differentiation'" (13). For Maurice O. Wallace, this differentiation betrays a "contentious homosocial rivalry over patriarchal prerogatives (e.g. freedom, power, history, wealth)," in which the black male body is emasculated and "comes to embody the inverse picture necessary for the positive self-portrait of white [male] identity" (32; cf. *erasure*'s discussion of black commercial hypervisibility as a mirror of the white liberal self-reassurance industry).

Not Sidney Poitier epitomizes this principle of negative self-mirroring. He is a doubly-negative image of stereotypical *good* blackness that makes him stereotypically *bad*: a high school/college dropout, an ex-con, a promiscuous seducer of white damsels, an entertainment mogul, a "saintly" charity-donor and, finally, Sidney Poitier himself.[164] Everett meticulously sketches his central character as an innocent and naïve, but very well educated and handsome black adolescent. Not Sidney Poitier's narratorial mindset, evident in his idealistic belief in education and his insensitivity or (initial) ignorance towards the social gravity of race, is fundamentally impaired by his social inexperience. Echoing Ralph's literary encapsulation, Not Sidney Poitier has been raised on 1960's and 70's TV series and movies. His cultural "diet," we are encouraged to infer, includes shows such as *Leave it to Beaver*, *Diff'rent Strokes* (1978-86), but also *Sanford and Son* (which aired from 1972-77) and *The Jeffersons* (1975-1985). These latter TV series spearheaded the first major rise of black-centered comedic formats. His TV-centered identity-formation radically postpones and relegates his racial education to the story's latter cross-sectional part, where outside of his home at his mother's house and later the Turner's residence he is forced to renegotiate his place in the social order. Consider Not Sidney Poitier's belief in education with Drummond's proclamation in the first episode of *Diff'rent Strokes*:

> "Boys, listen, I am going to open a whole new world for you, I'm gonna see that you have the same advantages that I had growing up. You're going to go the best schools, the finest schools, where you can learn about things like art and music. […] You're gonna have to go to school, study hard, and become solid citizens." (*Diff'rent Strokes*. Episode 1, Season 1)

Opting for "Psychology maybe or philosophy" as majors Not Sidney Poitier seems to be driven by an interest in the psychological and philosophical questions of human life irrespective of economic concerns (85). Everett's protagonist continues to reflect on the didactic purpose of his cross-sectional quest: "Some part of me (whether generous or not, I don't know) tried to convince the rest of me that there was something to be learned from the color-challenged Larkins" (163).

Not Sidney Poitier's use of language and his extensive cultural expertise show his wit – oftentimes hilariously so, while he struggles to stay out of the trouble that his name incites. As an attractive young man, Not Sidney Poitier, looks "for the world like Mr. Sidney Poitier" (3). He is characterized by other characters as "tall and dark like him" (37), and, significantly, as "extremely handsome" (121) by women. The latter fact makes for several grotesque sexually ambivalent episodes of quasi-forced fellatio. What all of these encounters have in common is that Not Sidney remains passive, ironically echoing Sidney Poitier's sexlessness on screen. With this motif, Everett has devised a sexual metaphor of America's obsession with the black male 'other' that foregrounds the bizarre aspects of this socio-psychological relation. Rather than being lustful sexual encounters, these instances of oral intercourse are all about power, as Not Sidney Poitier is being coerced into an isolated state of (dis-) pleasure by his female counterparts, who remain vague figures of uncanny attraction. Not Sidney's Poitier-esque appearance and linguistic proficiency contrast with his clumsy behavior (as opposed to Poitier's spectacular bodily presence and 'timing' onscreen) as a stoic of sorts. His ironic indifference is severely troubled over the course of the narrative, interestingly, re-emphasizing Not Sidney Poitier's social involvement in *NSP*'s fictional universe, as opposed to the novel's overarching disintegration of plot and the backgrounding of setting, as well as the (stereo-) typification of characters (cf. the stock-characters Ted Turner, Jane Fonda and others). Everett, thus, reemphasizes the social dynamics of the latter's involvement in his social environment, as his central aim is to *keep* the reader pondering the potential import of Poitier on present-day racial realities, to keep us engaged in his challenging language-centered thought-experiment whose complexity is based on its productive, humor-centered balancing of comedic absurdity and social resonance.

Everett's novel strategically capitalizes on the absurdity erupting around his peculiarly named protagonist, exploiting what I conceive as the *Not Sidney Poitier effect*. Taking Willis' conception of the "Poitier effect" as a point of departure, this effect defines the categorical racial misrecognition and marginalization described above. If Sidney Poitier's effect was to reassure and reconcile, Not Sidney Poitier persistently disrupts any expectation for some sort of mutual understanding, let alone reconciliation. The "Not Sidney Poitier effect" describes, in essence, the intensification of and centering on the ironies hitherto pushed to the margins of Poitier's televised image. A particularly comical aspect of this effect of puzzlement and akwardness is Everett's protagonist's facility for fesmerization, which he has learned from studying the work of an Austrian psychiatrist named Anton Franz Fesmer (16). This is an obvious riff on the hypnotic method termed "mesmerism," which defines a state of

consciousness involving an increased attentional focus and enhanced susceptibility to suggestion. Not Sidney Poitier is able to manipulate others into a submissive state by way of a gestural performance involving a raised eye-brow and unflinching eye contact. This special ability, a visual enhancement of Not Sidney Poitier's name's intriguing obscurity, only works infrequently, though; its effect cannot be systematized. Reminiscent of the quasi-hypnotizing allure of the filmic figure Poitier, Not Sidney Poitier's fesmerism also prompts to the Western stand-off, a filmic trope of one-on-one combat, which the two antagonistic gunslingers initiate by suspensefully staring at each other (cf. Hayman and Schmidt).

In *NSP*, Poitier's social compatibility, which has been crucially predicated on a certain notion of privilege, is consistently undermined. For Not Sidney Poitier, each interpersonal encounter bears the risk of a frustratingly confusing and possibly dangerous social conflict. Everett's protagonist persistently flies

> with confusion always parallel to me, and a whole internal chase at my rear. The one matter that was not confusing to me, but seemed to escape all others, was the fact that the only thing that was certain to become obsolete, would necessarily become wearied and worn, was the truth. I knew this in spite of the *truth* that I had had little truck with the *truth* in my life. It was not that I considered myself a resident in a den of lies, but rather that my history was shrouded and diced and soaking wet with hysteria and contradiction. (28-29)

Resonant with a sense of purposelessness of human existence and the futility of coming to terms with this (lack of) purpose, *NSP* is invested in a specific conception of absurdity. Considered in basic humor-related terms, absurdity defines a state of affairs or mode of experience involving a certain overabundance of nonsense, or – vice versa – the spectacular absence of reason (-ability). As such, absurdity is fundamentally concerned with *logic*, as is Everett's overall project. Not only does the text center on a quest for or chase after the "truth," the narrative account of which is not necessarily futile but incredibly contradiction-laden. In a characteristically Sisyphean manner (cf. Albert Camus' epochal essay), Not Sidney Poitier is persistently punished without exactly knowing why or at least not knowing how this punishment might yield some sort of deeper insight into the racial conflict incited by his name.[165]

This combination of purposelessness and punishment, but also nonsensicality and ludicrousness, strongly resonates with the absurd as a literary-historical complex in the context of European postwar literature. In fact, the absurdist underpinning of Everett's novel allows for an intertextual connection between *NSP* and one specific literary text by an author associated with the literary-historical complex of the absurd: *Not I*, Samuel Beckett's 1979 play, which is part of his later dramatic work. Beckett's one-act monologue centers on a

mouth that articulates its negated subjectivity in third person to a silent, shapeless auditor. This paradoxical dialogue is Beckett's metaphor for the insufficiency of the ideologically imbued system of language in constituting identity. Beckett's central acting or narrating unit is a mouth, the physical remainder of a woman who has been marginalized and silenced all her life. In a traumatic eruption of speech at the age of seventy this woman has been mysteriously reduced to her corporeal organ of speech, with which she or rather "it" now soliloquizes her life-story of subjugation. Thus, this "mouth" is not an (fictional) individual or persona. Notice, for instance, that in the script of the play "MOUTH" is written in capital letters without even an implicit article "a." Rather, MOUTH is the paradoxical embodiment of the social (dis-) figuration of language. Resonating with the physiological processes of both giving birth and vomiting, MOUTH ex-presses words in-between moments of breathing, existing only through speech that is not her own: "imagine!...words were coming…a voice she did not recognize…at first…so long since it had sounded…then finally had to admit…could be none other…than her own" (408).

Like Beckett's paradoxical protagonist Not Sidney Poitier is inserted into a linguistically predetermined system, stuck with means of self-articulation that categorically contradict identification. Whereas MOUTH protests against the alienating forces of its linguistic state of subjection by rejecting the social identifier "I," Not Sidney Poitier is constantly pushed back to the reflect on the original paradox of his being: the linguistic invalidity of his name and, thus, the incompatibility of his identity with conventional models of self-identicalness. Both Beckett's and Everett's acting and narrating units represent figural entities whose fictional status as ontological beings is severely complicated if not obviated. Not only does Everett's absurdist alignment with Beckett hinge on the problematization of the performative link between language and subjectivity. It also highlights the problematic nature of art as a politicized practice, for which Beckett's radical aesthetic experiments are famously known. Hence, both MOUTH and Not Sidney Poitier constantly provoke the problem of agency. Like MOUTH, struggling to come to terms with its traumatic transformation, thinking it has been punished "for no particular reason", Not Sidney Poitier's punishment appears unjustified and, ultimately, nonsensical.

This punitive impetus to make Not Sidney Poitier suffer for something he has little or no power over emblematizes Everett's ironic riffing on the principle of blaming the victim and the "culture of poverty" debates.[166] What *NSP* thus presents is a sort of *blaming the privileged victim* scenario. Born into a state of economic exuberance, which is ironically prefigured by his belated birth, i.e. his entering the social world "too" fully developed, as it were, Everett's

protagonist is the test object in a speculative test-scenario for which money serves as the key variable. He passes through the crucial institutions of societally regulated socialization: high school, college – and prison. Significantly, he returns with similar results every time. He is policed and brutalized, harassed and exoticized, in short: racialized. In this regard, that Everett's novel can be read as an episodic experiment on a black billionaire that seeks to provide a satiric-comical answer to the question: is money, i.e. socioeconomic status, the solution to racial inequality? Though he is persistently punished for being unaware of race, Not Sidney Poitier – curiously – fares relatively well, as he benefits from a certain immunity to physical harm characteristic for comedy. Remaining rooted in the satiric figure of the naif, Not Sidney Poitier emerges as a picaro, whose vagabonding and subversive nature Everett ironizes. Simply speaking, Not Sidney Poitier is an involuntary subversive, who, due to his very name, is *forced* to unsettle the racial order. Everett's protagonist only reluctantly plays along with the events rather than *always* deliberately shaping their outcome. This paradox of involuntary subversiveness marks the agential core of the novel's absurd humor.

This absurdity correlates with the novel's extensive negotiation of nonsense, which – significantly – is explicitly marked by Everett's fictional alter ego's educational agenda. Through the eponymous "Professor of Nonsense," the fictionalized author Percival Everett, the actual author teases out another aspect of the text's linguistic running-commentary, pondering the possibilities of what Ludwig Wittgenstein famously described as nonsense ("Unsinn"). Rather than terming the absence of meaning, nonsense can include philosophical propositions or other linguistic irregularities. What separates nonsensical from senseless combinations of words ("sinnlos") is their grammatical integrity: while the latter are located outside of language, the former operate within the limits of grammar, since they can be negated, Wittgenstein argues. "If grammar says that you cannot say that a sound is red, it means not that it is false to say so but that it is nonsense – i.e. not language at all. Therefore I cannot say that sounds have properties which colours have not, because I should then have to be able to say significantly that colours have properties which they have not. To call a thing a colour is to say it obeys certain grammatical rules. […] Grammar circumscribes language. A combination of words which does not make sense does not belong to language. Sense and nonsense have nothing in common. By nonsense we mean unmeaning scratches or sounds or combinations" (*Wittgenstein's Lectures: Cambridge, 1930-1932*, 47-48). Over the course of his scholarly career, Wittgenstein has kept a close relation to nonsense as a concern of intellectual inquiry. As stated in his later Philosophical Investigations (1954), Wittgenstein defined the pedagogical purpose of his philosophical project "to teach you to pass from a

piece of disguised nonsense to something that is patent nonsense" (*PI* Sec. 464). In his first and seminal tome *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1921), Wittgenstein famously posited the philosophical potential of his argument as being dependent on the reader to recognize it as nonsensical, using its insights as "steps – to climb up and beyond them" (*Tractatus*, 6.54, 162).

George Pitcher describes Wittgenstein's philosophical notion of "disguised nonsense" as having

> a surface air of plausibility and naturalness about it, so that it can take in even a sensible man. It has the semblance of sense. But when one examines it carefully and follows out its consequences, its inherent absurdity becomes manifest. Wittgenstein is still as concerned as ever to exorcize nonsense from philosophy; he wants to cure us of the puzzlement, the deep disquietude, it engenders in our soul. But now he also *uses* it like a vaccine that cures us of *itself*. He may, for instance, describe some state of affairs that, according to a certain harmless-looking view or picture which he is criticizing, ought to be perfectly unexceptionable: but in fact the alleged state of affairs is radically odd, inherently absurd. The hidden nonsense is thus uncovered. (592)

Precisely in its rampant absurdity, *NSP* seems to be motivated by a peculiar didacticism. Part of the novel's successful negotiation of experimental profundity and social credibility rests on the frequent commenting of the narrating I on the narrated I's naiveté, which is inherent in Not Sidney Poitier's status as autodiegetic narrator. This is evident in the novel's repetitive pattern of picaresque narration and its specific focus on film as a pop-cultural apparatus. Like *Glyph* and *erasure*, *NSP* routes its satiric message of racial criticism through a cultural reference system: theory, fiction and film. Everett, thus, re-connects the *social norms* informing Not Sidney Poitier's racial discrimination with the *cultural scripts*, the stereotypes and constellations, which have helped the former's societal consolidation. Not only does the novel root every problem of social interaction and racial debasement in language and the linguistic domain of the name. It routes its comically coded message through the symbolic circuit of the Poitier movies. Like his iconic namesake, Not Sidney Poitier is a passing figure, a vagabonding revelator who serves to render something visible, namely the racial order, the structural realities shaped by the cultural logic of race. Everett's protagonist, too, seems to be structurally compelled to stay the same in order to inspire social change (cf. Willis' assessment of Poitier). This pedagogical function, obviously, is reduced to absurdity. If anything, Not Sidney Poitier serves to debunk the implausibility and inconsistency of the social system which race serves to cement. As the narrative progresses from (more) overt, physical forms of racial oppression and violence to subliminal or covert acts of discrimination and marginalization, Not Sidney Poitier helps to debunk racial common-places, unearthing a host of ambivalences and ironies, in other words: *double*-meanings. Tellingly, the dystopian

moviescapes, in which he roams, are peopled by historical and fictional doubles, and are decorated with "intertextual, sometimes literal, mirrors" (Schmidt, 116). Radically destabilizing consistent notions of identity, history and reality, the second section of the novel thus is fundamentally invested in uncovering and highlighting the social ambiguities of race.

Everett's authorial self-insertion is the most prominent example of the novel's play with and on ambiguity, double-ness and double negativity. The fictionalized version of the novel's author, who as English Professor hosts a class titled "Nonsense," in which Not Sidney Poitier enrolls, becomes an important leading if not father figure for the protagonist.

Not Sidney Poitier increasingly turns to Professor Everett for advice and guidance during his cross-sectional quest. "I would call Professor Everett to see if he could offer any good argument for my staying put. Why I held his opinion in any regard was beyond me, but I did. […]'Why should I remain in college?' 'You've got me,' he said without a pause. 'That's the best you can do?' I said. 'How much money do you have?' 'More than I know what to do with,' I said, honestly. Everett sighed. I could hear him lighting his cigar. 'I suppose you could remain in school for the sex. I hear there's a lot of it. Or not.' 'What about an education?' 'Hell, you can read. You know where the library is.'" 164-65. Compare: "[M]aybe because you're a *professor*, I thought you'd try to talk me into staying.' 'It's a bitch, ain't it? The things we assume'" (166). In personal matters, Everett's fictional double coaches his protagonist, too. Prior to the latter's first encounter with his girlfriend's parents, Everett states: "'And be yourself.' 'Who else would I be?' 'I don't know. You might decide all of a sudden that you're Sidney Poitier. You're not, you know. Though you do look alarmingly like him'" (123).

What is more, the fictionalized Percival Everett becomes a sort of meta-fictional (self-) commentator. Everett, Not Sidney Poitier claims, "unnerved me, but his nonsensical rambling became a sort of entertaining white-noise sound track to everything that I pretended or perhaps hoped would entify, crystallize or coalesce at some point into something vaguely useful or at least coherent, however shapeless" (118-119). Through his fictional double, Everett manages to place a variety of self-ironic comments on authorship and storytelling:

> "Listen, Mr. Poitier, I'm going to hip you to the truth. I'm a fraud, a fake, a sham, a charlatan, a deceiver, a pretender, a crook." "You mean, it's all meaningless?" "I didn't say that." Would you say that?" I asked. "No, wouldn't say that either." "Then you were saying something in class." "Technically. My mouth was moving and I was making sounds." He paused and looked at my face. "You know what I see when I look at you?" "No." "I see Sidney Poitier." "But…" "I know, I know, you're Not Sidney Poitier and also not Sidney Poitier, but in a strange way you are Sidney Poitier as much as you're anyone." (101-102)

That the satiric novel *erasure* appears in *NSP* – when the character Ted Turner mentions to the fictionalized Percival Everett that he liked the novel in the novel ("My Pafology / Fuck") better than *erasure* itself (226) – makes for a good laugh, given this novel's un-/successful satiric coup:

> Ted looked at Everett's face. "Percival Everett. Didn't you write a book called *Erasure*?" Everett nodded. "I didn't like it," Ted said. "Nor I," Everett said. "I didn't like writing it, and I didn't like it when I was done with it." "Well, actually, I loved the novel in the novel. I thought that story was real gripping. You know, true to life." "I've heard that." (226)[167]

This particular dialogue features a curious meta-meta-discourse on *erasure* and on Everett's own authorial status, as it were. If Everett's fictional alter ego, the author *inside* the author's work, suffers from the same form of misrecognition as Monk in *erasure*, the author Everett roaming the reality "outside" of *NSP*, thus implicates himself in the potential mis-reading of this particular novel. This peculiar break of *NSP*'s fictional frame underlines how deep Everett's engagement with the possibilities of aesthetic representation runs.

Everett's authorial self-insertion as the eponymous "Professor of Nonsense" (notice the allusion to Don DeLillo's Professor of Hitler Studies in *White Noise*, 1985) is a distinct variation of the doppelgänger motif that prominently figures in the novel's characterial roster of doubles. The poetic potential of such an author-based doppelgänger in American minority literature has been prominently realized by Philip Roth.[168] In *Operation Shylock* (1993), Ulla Haselstein describes the "false" Philip Roth as challenging the narratorial authority and intradiegetic status of the novel's original "I"-narrator, who, by the former's controversial public performance, is provoked to adopt a specific "diasporistic" stance. The creative splitting of Roth's authorial persona into fictional doubles thus serves as a metafictional strategy to foreground characteristic contradictions inherent in contemporary, diasporic Jewish identity (209). The power balance between the "true" and the "false" Roth, which gradually tilts in favor of the former, prompts the question of authorial agency. It is this self-ironically contrived attempt to reclaim control over the narrator's own literary discourse, Ulla Haselstein concludes, in which the doppelgänger motif serves to preempt a one-dimensional discussion of authorial identity and political liability.

Centering on a racialized character who is beset by conflicting racial scripts, Everett's novel, too, evokes similar concerns, as it intervenes in a discourse dominated by commercially circulating images of blackness. The novel debunks these hegemonic models of "authentic" blackness by suggesting that Not Sidney Poitier begins to "look more like Sidney Poitier than Sidney Poitier ever did," as Professor Everett himself ironically notes (124). What Everett here does is to present his protagonist as a "copy" of Sidney Poitier that is more "real" than

the original actor. This, to be exact, is the flawed logic of authenticity reduced to absurdity: that in re-presenting the true nature of the original the copy has to retrieve and (re-) define its essence, the implication being that the copy is a somewhat "better" or "purer" rendition of this essence.

Coined by Jean Paul, the motif of the doppelganger figures prominently in various literary types, genres and periods. In the literary-historical perspective, the doppelganger has been closely affiliated with the Gothic genre, where it frequently represents a sign of danger or death, as it threatens the authority and integrity of the original self (cf. Faurholt). Generally speaking, it is a fictional device of figural duplication, which according to Gry Faurholt subsumes two types, the duplicated and the dissociated self (web, 2009). The first, sometimes termed alter ego, is an identical double whose semblance of the original character often exceeds natural likeness. The second variation can represent a fragment of a character's personality (think of Mary Shelley's monstrous Frankenstein, or Dr. Jekyll's diabolical Mr. Hyde). As a figure of repression, it marks a nexus of the inacceptable and illicit, incomprehensible and irreconcilable, often charged with demonic or horrific qualities. As a figure repetition and contrast, it ultimately undermines self-identical notions of identity. "The central premise of the doppelganger motif," Gry Faurholt claims, "poses the paradox of encountering [and experiencing] oneself as another; the logically impossible notion that the 'I' and the 'not-I' are somehow identical" (web, 2009). The motif serves to articulate a split of the self, often with psychological connotations of social alienation and repressed difference. This notion of a loss or lack of a centered and consistent basis of subjectivity in modern (-day) society has been seminally shaped by Sigmund Freud's study of the "Uncanny" (1919). In this sense, the double represents the precarious desire for self-integrity and (inter-) personal reconciliation (cf. Jacques Lacan's notion of the "mirror stage"), i.e. the struggle between the ego and the id, in basic Freudian terms, or the (uncontrollable) surfacing of specific repressed emotions and thoughts. It is as the unconscious manifestation of this struggle against the normative forces or laws, to which the subject is subjected, that the doppelganger has been credited with a subversive potential. This potential, however, is subjected to semantic changes correlating with the historical period of its literary utilization. "[I]ts effective presence," Dimitris Vardoulakis concludes accordingly, "is not reducible to any pragmatic context nor to any single historical narrative" (9).[169]

If, as Christian Schmidt points out, Not Sidney Poitier "already" has an unstable identity to begin with, his ontological precariousness is further fostered by the appearance of his dead doppelganger or "dead-ringer." Everett, according to Schmidt, plays on the colloquial

synonym of the doppelganger, namely the "dead-ringer" (123).[170] Upon inspecting his dead doppelganger in the morgue, Not Sidney Poitier states that he looks "exactly like me, a fact that was

> apparently lost on Donald and the Chief [with whom Everett's protagonist tries to solve the mystery of this murder in the vein of *The Heat of the Night*]. I wanted to say "That's me." The thought of saying it was strange feeling and scary. My chest was tight, and my ears were ringing. I was lying in the chest, and yet I wasn't. I said, "I don't know him." I was lying, I thought. (211)

His dead doppelganger is a curious literalization of Not Sidney Poitier's split racial self, a de-ontologized version of the black body reduced to its phenomenological presence. Almost like a skin he has shed, his dead doppelganger announces and concludes Not Sidney Poitier's transformation into Sidney Poitier: "I thought that if that body in the chest was Not Sidney Poitier, then I was not Not Sidney Poitier and that by all I knew of logic and double negatives, I was therefore Sidney Poitier. I was Sidney Poitier" (212). With this additional turn of the screw, as it were, Everett allows for the possibility of Not Sidney Poitier to actually *be* Sidney Poitier. This climactic transformation serves to highlight what Everett teases the reader to ponder from the very beginning of Not Sidney Poitier's cross-sectional quest: that being black in America equals living up to the image of Sidney Poitier (or not).

Navigating Poitiertopia: Ultra-Racist Authorities, Noble Rednecks, Light-Black Blue Veins and Color-Ignorant Albinos

The moment Everett's protagonist enters Peckerwood County, Georgia, he is already marked and named as Sidney Poitier by the white authorities. He is racialized as an "uppity [N-word]," who, according to the ultra-racist Officer George, has been caught "sassin' an officer of the law, which around here is the same as resistin' arrest [...,] speedin' and failure to stop immediately when I turned on my light. And then there's bein' a [N-word]" (47-48). With the West (namely Los Angeles, California, where he plans to find his mother's tombstone) continually hovering in the background as the mythic destination of America's democratic promise, Not Sidney Poitier embarks upon his confusing if not dubious "rite of passage" into the heartland of what we can call *Poitiertopia*, the confusion-laden, "perception-warping, soul-twisting, badlands of race and class" (Oscar Villalon, Web 2009).

Its moviescapes are filled with anachronisms, anthropomorphisms and other temporal, spatial and logical inconsistencies. Building a sort of intermedial palimpsest, this filmic subtext inscribed into the social scenery of the novel suggests that *NSP* is fundamentally invested in highlighting the ideological force of stereotypical images and scripts of blackness as they encroach upon the interpersonal realities of the social world. This is an important aspect, as

absurd and surreal elements increasingly shape the distorted and refracted panorama of race and class in Poitiertopia. These elements, significantly, serve to blur the lines between social spaces and the symbolic framework of the racial order. The social environment, spatial surroundings and figural entities together form a seemingly homogenous whole. Poitiertopia, thus, is not a geographical place but a socio-symbolic space representing the American cultural condition as such.

Contrasting Not Sidney Poitier's elusiveness, his fellow fictional characters seem to serve as mere staffage. Thus, the white authorities of the state Georgia are all named George (cf. the cop arresting and the judge convicting Not Sidney Poitier, 48). Not Sidney Poitier's fellow prison inmate, to whom he is chained, bears the name "Peckerwood" (52). When in the underclass domain of the blind Sis and her brother Bobo, whose cabin Not Sidney Poitier describes as "an Andy Warhol parody of *American Gothic* […] of a cul-de-sac at the end of Tobacco Road, he concedes that "[t]hese were sad people, and for the world I wanted to think of them as decent. Perhaps they were decent enough, but the place that made them was so offensive to me that all who lived there became *there*" (first emphasis mine, 75).[171] Not Sidney Poitier believes in living what he deems the American way of life, buying into the myth of the "pursuit of happiness" granted by the allegedly archetypical American ideal of unrestricted social mobility. Tellingly, Not Sidney Poitier is preoccupied with the prime parameter of this notion of upward mobility – education. He believes in the reasonableness of having a proper education, of getting the real "college experience" by joining a fraternity and living in student dorms rather than affording a much more luxurious abode. Curiously, he has an ambivalent perspective on his own extraordinary socio-economic status and its influence on his enterprise. He buys a used Toyota for his journey but spends 325,000 Dollars to buy his way into college. Meanwhile, his monetary means grow exponentially: "'Our network is a big success, a major success. We are making money foot over fist.' 'Great, more money.' 'I detect sarcasm. Am I to understand that you want no more money?' 'Does it really make a difference?' 'All the difference in the world […] You're not very American" (164). Not Sidney Poitier's attempt at getting rid of his money only attests to his continual clinging to this ideal of social advancement predicated on education:

> my impetuous, abrupt, and inexplicable desire to assist the forlorn sisters had nothing to do with a god, religion, a sudden onset of a messiah complex or/and certainly not my own (perhaps, sadly needed) salvation. It had simply to with a newfound and fairly ironic way to spend my ridiculously easy-to-come-by money. (185)

Above all, he wants to celebrate Thanksgiving and participate in *the* American ritual of celebratory communion – despite his mother's disapproval of this event as "one big glorious

lie to put a good face on continental theft" (153), as Not Sidney Poitier imagines her argue in retrospect.

The episodic progression broadly follows the chronology of the movies' production – beginning with *The Defiant Ones* (1957), the movie that consolidated Poitier's image as the benign black male – and culminates in returning to Poitier's Oscar decorated *Lilies of the Field* (1963) at the end of the novel. This sequentialization correlates with the overall progression of Not Sidney's encounters from overt, physically transacted racial violence to subliminal, ambiguous forms of oppression. This progression, significantly, applies to the *main* narrative of Not Sidney's autobiographical account, i.e., his active involvement in his social environment. His dreams, as meta-reflective elements, are excluded from it. The *Guess* episode marks the peak of this progression from overt, physically transacted forms to ambiguous and subliminal manifestations of racial violence. Not Sidney Poitier, here, struggles severely to maintain his ironic indifference, becoming "sadly, irritatingly, horrifyingly observant of skin color and especially my own" (138). Translating the antagonism of white and black in Sidney Poitier's era to light-black and black in Not Sidney Poitier's fictional world, the *Guess* episode problematizes the latter's internal struggle to cope with his being marginalized as the dark-black Other by his class-conscious, light-black opponents. What is more, the *Guess* episode takes a central position in the novel because it centers on that particular socioeconomic stratum, in which the newly rich media mogul Not Sidney Poitier – according to the meritocratic logic of upward social mobility – "should" be situated.

This narrative section culminates with an instance of black in-group racism in the social sphere of what E. Franklin Frazier termed the "black bourgeoisie." Negotiating black in-group racism as an ambiguous, double-bound form of social debasement, Everett's novel ties in with what the movie never shows: the interracial confrontation of the family dinner. It retraces the reverberations of the happy ending's conciliatory silence by forming a provocative epilogue to the film's eponymous ellipsis. This ellipsis allows for an unchallenged notion of social progress that manifests in Matt Drayton's idealization of white-sanctioned integration and white-monitored political debate as answers to racism's threat to the civic cohesion and moral integrity of a de-segregated U.S. society still deeply divided by race.

The predication of racial integration on interracial love epitomized by Matt Drayton's cathartic monologue is, obviously, problematic, as it is conceptualized at the expense of several simplifications.[172] The most significant one is John's status as an acclaimed doctor, which, despite his foregrounded cultivation, is what actually makes him a suitable candidate

for the upper-class Draytons. What is more, the anticipated societal opposition to John and Joanna's interracial union is only tangentially associated with several white characters, namely one friend of Christina's. Rather, this antagonism is ascribed to the family's black servant Tillie and John's black father, a retired mailman, and his petty bourgeois *amor fati*: He has self-declaredly bent over backwards to allow for his son to have a better life. Joanna's transgression of the social taboo of white-black miscegenation, in turn, is camouflaged by her feminine-codified naiveté and good-heartedness. Also, why should so distinguished and attractive a black man as John Wade Prentice Jr. actually come up with the idea of marrying such a strikingly shallow white damsel such as Joanna, after all? Whereas the movie suggests that love, or mutual recognition, is able to transcend the borders of race, said episode in Everett's novel, as I sought to show above, renegotiates all of these three issues: socio-economic mobility (rooted in Wade's status as high-achieving doctor), black in-group racism (rooted in Wade's father's *amor fati*), and "color-blind" love (rooted in Joanna's naiveté). *NSP*'s *Guess* episode ironically literalizes this very notion of symbolic transcendence not only by transposing the interracial conflict into an intraracial conflict, thus bridging the symbolic intraracial border. It also relocates the overtly articulated and (tele-) visually observable confrontation into the realm of the symbolic, i.e., into the subtextual script of Not Sidney's encounter with the Larkins.

Ironically, very much like John Wade Prentice, Not Sidney Poitier meets his girlfriend's parents to find himself at first challenged and then acknowledged as the perfect son-in-law-to-be. He has been invited by his girlfriend Maggie to meet her parents and bringing their relationship to the next level on the pretext of celebrating Thanksgiving together, despite having been informed that Maggie's "family is slightly class-conscious […] h]ell they're snobs" (119). However, Maggie has really brought Not Sidney to antagonize her overbearing parents Ruby and Ward in her attempt at post-adolescent rebellion. She plans to use the darkly complected Not Sidney Poitier as a "wedge" between herself and her lightly complected, race-obsessed parents (141). As if in an absurd adaptation of a passing melodrama in the vein of Charles Chesnutt, the Larkins predicate their pride of belonging to an elite racial caste of almost white but still distinctly (light-) black conservative progressivists by way of a twisted notion of social Darwinism. This notion manifests in Ward's passion for the *idea* of hunting as "a demonstration of man's primacy in the order of nature" (133) and his fable for stuffed animal heads. The Larkins' overall repudiation of pro-black social support as allegedly undermining their self-achieved exceptionality is revealed when he asserts, "I'm nothing but an American. I'm no needy minority," thus expressing his pride of having worked his way up

from "dirt poor Alabama to Yale" (137) to being one of D.C.'s top lawyers. Maggie's mother heads a conservative think tank with the intention of getting rid of "the welfare system because it keeps black people down," stopping "gay rights because it endangers the family structure and keeps black people down," and abolishing "affirmative action because it teaches special preference and that keeps black people down" (128), as Maggie explains to Not Sidney Poitier. The Larkins display a starkly caricatured variation of what Frazier denounced as the black bourgeoisie's pathological inculcation of white oppression: "the repressed hostilities of middle-class Negroes to whites are […] directed […] inward toward themselves. This results in self-hatred, which may appear from their behavior to be directed towards the Negro masses but which in reality is directed against themselves" (186). According to Frazier's controversial account, the black bourgeoisie "suffered spiritually not only because they were affected by ideas concerning the Negro's inferiority, but perhaps even more because they had adopted the white man's values and patterns of behavior [… thus developing] an intense inferiority complex" (124). Loic Wacquant has provided a thorough discussion of this seeming collective inferiority complex. After receiving a decisive boost from the legal sanctioning of formal equality, the black middle class, Wacquant points out, suffered from the sharp economic downturn of the 1980s and the discontinuation of affirmative action policies. These policies were "henceforth perceived as handouts violating the very principle of equity they claim to advance," as the sociological scholar Loic Wacquant stresses. Rather, as Wacquant argues, working-class communities "remain the main victims of ongoing economic restructuring, [for] it is among the middle classes that the anxiety – and shame – over downward mobility reaches its apex." (*Punishing the Poor. The Neoliberal Government of Social Insecurity*, 56).

It is the Larkins' outward display of their high socio-economic status, for Frazier a "symptom" of the black bourgeoisie's whiteness-related inferiority complex, to which Not Sidney Poitier initially responds with an uneasy fascination with the ornate décor of the rooms and the splendor of colors at display in them, the color red in particular. He stresses the "heavy red drapes" (126) and the resultant darkness in the anteroom, as well as his difficulty "to take a step without staring down at" the carpet and "the expanse of red [that] was, if not disorienting, unsettling" (127). The omnipresence of the color red – or as Not Sidney calls it, "crimson" (127) – can be read as a proleptic leitmotif, hinting at the Larkins' obsession with skin color, i.e., the (alleged) exceptionality inherent in their light-blackness. In fact, they appear to conceive of themselves as members of a genetically privileged light-black "bloodline," as one of the dinner guest's, the Reverend Golightly, reveals in his mealtime

prayer: "Thank you for our fine homes and our nice clothes and for money. Thank you for our lineage, our good blood, and our distance from the thickening center [of non-light-black blacks]" (159). Not Sidney Poitier deals, unconsciously, with the implicit contrastive conflict between his own dark-black skin color and the predominantly dark colors of his surroundings, its absorption in the dark, dimly lit rooms, as a problem of orientation. The dark red, crimson-colored carpet makes him feel as if it was pulling the rug out from under his feet, compelling him to constantly "watch his step." His social debasement thus translates into an association of spatio-symbolic dislocation. His guest room is stuffed with stuffed animals that represent Maggie's mother's making up for the lack of the most important unaffordable luxury of her poor childhood (this ironically correlates with Ward's stuffed "real" animals). These absurdly kitschy, because literal tokens of their social self-idealization ironically echo the Draytons' extensive display of modern works of art in *Guess* as an alleged sign of their cultural sophistication and open-mindedness. In this room, Not Sidney Poitier sits "on the bed and [feels] suddenly like [he] ought not" (128). Troubled by the kitschy regalia he notices small bells, which make him recall the forced fellatio incident with his white history teacher Ms. Hancock, who was especially fond of this decoration item. He quickly gets up from the shiny golden bedspread, leaving it "smooth as if it had never been touched" (128). He associates the former, unsettlingly weird pseudo-sex scene with his present situation in the kitsch-crammed, golden bed, a sort of symbolic site of his (physical) liaison with Maggie, of which her parents, as he grows more and more aware, strongly disapprove. Whereas he had felt as if being absorbed in the crimson-colored darkness of the downstairs, the golden spread seems to highlight his dark skin color and thus reflect (his recognition of his) black masculinity as compromising the racial purity of the Larkins.

Not Sidney Poitier's entry into the upper-class society of the Larkins marks his first encounter with a race-centered socio-economic elitism that is not solely based on money but on ancestry and heritage, both of which he lacks. This further fosters his unconscious recognition of (skin) color as *the* exclusive constituent of the Larkins' light-black racial identity – which he associates with the spatio-symbolic structuration of their private domain – or in fact, with racial identity as such. Significantly, Not Sidney Poitier's only quasi-conscious strategy of making sense of his encounter with the Larkins is to imagine Ward and Ruby as Ward and June Cleaver of the mid-century TV sitcom *Leave it to Beaver* (137), adding that everything, too, "sounded rather Faulknerian to me" (136).[173] Using this comedic-didactic show about a *white* American suburban family as a cultural frame of reference ironically reinstates the Larkins' naturally legitimate, whiteness-centered dominance.

Upon meeting him in person, Maggie's parents are disappointed by the young black man accompanying their daughter and, unsurprisingly, are stupefied by his name, which, as Ward later suspects, is "some kind of ghetto nonsense, no doubt" (131). Ruby, who is first to meet Not Sidney, takes an uneasy interest in his skin color and tells her husband that it is "just so dark" (131). Just like Bigger Thomas, Richard Wright's epochal black outcast in *Native Son*, Not Sidney Poitier accidentally overhears their conversation, which corroborates his recognition of displacement: "It hadn't occurred to me, but now it did that the Larkins were all very light in complexion. It hadn't dawned on me that I should have noticed or cared" (131). Already fully aware that Maggie's parents disapprove of him because of his dark complexion, Not Sidney Poitier then meets the patriarch of the family, Ward Larkin, and imagines hearing him concluding his casual welcome small talk with "boy," *the* verbal epitome of black emasculation. That Not Sidney Poitier hears this derogatory appellation without it actually having been uttered shows that he, despite his seemingly race-neutral socialization in the Turner domain, *anticipates* his own ostracization when imagining hearing racial slurs. "Boy" not only echoes his experiences in the South, where white, ragingly racist policemen and prison guards frequently made use of this appellation while brutalizing him. He, too, seems to have been exposed to this form of verbal racial abuse during his childhood in a poor neighborhood of Los Angeles, about which the reader knows next to nothing. This lacuna in his protagonist's social profile further ties in with Everett's provoking the reader to ponder the implications of Not Sidney Poitier's social background in his stereotype-activating and -complicating experiment.

Increasingly taking offense with the Larkins' racist elitism, Not Sidney Poitier, significantly, confides *not* in Maggie but in Violet, the family's black servant. Not Sidney is inclined to call her a "servant," whereas he describes her as the family's "housekeeper" in Maggie's company because he feels the former description to be "more correct but less appropriate" (127). Having been raised by Ted Turner's staff, Not Sidney considers Violet an ally in the hierarchical color confrontation since they both "are pretty much the same color" (155). Violet rejects his proposition, stating that she is "milk chocolate and [he's] dark cocoa, dark as Satan" (ibid) and stressing: "Listen, boy, Mister and Missus have worked too hard [… to] have a black boy like you come around Miss Maggie" (154). Whereas on the conscious level Not Sidney Poitier is able to pinpoint Violet's absurd, Stockholm syndrome-like mindset ("This is not the antebellum south and you're not a house slave" 155), his confiding in her in the first place illustrates his unconscious acknowledgement of skin color as a defining factor in the racial order of the Larkin's private domain. Evidently, the logic that undergirds what

Not Sidney describes as the "bizarre game" of pigmentation[174] (156) is that whiteness is the racial default, whose social dominance manifests in its very power to obscure its dominance and thus is naturalized as *the* seemingly self-evident standard, in relation to which all other races are marked. Not Sidney Poitier is essentialized as the counterpart to the Larkins' class-conscious elitism that hinges on their paradoxical pride in their light-blackness and their allegedly superior status as almost-white, i.e., almost sufficiently American.

When the Larkins find out about their guest's enormous wealth and his status as a media mogul, Ward and Ruby reconsider their antipathy toward Not Sidney Poitier and try to beguile him, hoping to succeed in integrating him into their social ranks as Maggie's future husband. However, Not Sidney Poitier, who has once again overheard them, undermines their plotting by way of his unexpected position of power. During the celebratory dinner, Agnes, in her attempt at pissing off her sister Marie, gives a foot job originally intended for Not Sidney Poitier to Reverend Golightly's albino son Jeffrey, while the former gives a ragingly (intra-) racist Thanksgiving speech, thanking the Lord for "our fine homes and our nice clothes and for money. Thank you for our lineage, our good blood, and our distance from the thickening center" (159). Not Sidney Poitier describes this wildly comical mélange accordingly: "It was all so absurd. I expected the wall to wiggle in and out of focus and change color at any second. Yet, I couldn't seem to rise to leave" (156). The slightly dim-witted color-ignorant albino Jeffrey, a symbolic antipode to the Larkins' elitist obsession with skin-color, emerges as an unlikely ally in Not Sidney Poitier's attempt at giving his light-black oppressors hell, which Professor Everett himself has encouraged to do. Making for a climactic finish, while Jeffrey has his very own beneath the table, as it were, Not Sidney Poitier debunks the pillar of their racial pride – their anti-affirmative action stance. This is a sort of climactic point in *NSP*'s satiric argument, as it pertains to the meritocratic logic of upward mobility *without* the societally sanctioned aid of affirmative action that the Larkins epitomize. In accordance with his idealistic belief in (self-) education, Not Sidney Poitier makes an excellent point upon asking the family patriarch Ward, "'[h]ow many black students were there at the time'" of his application to Yale. "'There were three of us,' he proudly said. 'And you three had better grades than all the rest of the black students who wanted to go to Yale?'" (161). By turning the tables on them, Not Sidney Poitier creates a powerful moment of racial dehabitualization: "You people almost had me hating you because of your skin, but I've caught myself. […] I don't hate you because you're light." (162).

"The Man That Sets the Standard": Sidney Poitier Revis(it)ed:

I Am Not Sidney Poitier is not the only case in point for the persistence of Sidney Poitier's spectacular presence in the present-day cultural moment. A particularly troubling if not appalling rendition of the Magical Negro/Uncle Tom slave-figure, the movie *Same Kind of Different as Me* (2017; dir. Michael Carney) features the black homeless ex-convict Denver Moore who helps the white Hall couple to heal their broken marriage. Tapping into the pedagogical potential of the cultivated black role model the movie *Green Book* (2019; dir. Peter Farrelly) has reinvented and exploited the Sidney-Poitier-prototype to widespread commercial success and critical acclaim. Set in the immediate pre-Civil Rights phase, the comedic drama centers on world-class pianist and musical savant Don Shirley (played by Mahershala Ali), who inspires if not indoctrinates the low-class Italian American bouncer (played by Viggo Mortenson) to break with his latently racist patterns of behavior and thinking. Jordan Peele's extremely successful film *Get Out*, in turn, not only repurposes the trope of the young (potential) black son-in-law but adapts the interracial scenario of *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* (2017). In his directorial debut, Peele, known from the widely influential comedy series *Key and Peele*, adapts the interracial theme from *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*. His movie portrays the young black photographer Chris Washington who joins his white girlfriend Rose Armitage to visit her parents. At her family's countryside estate, Washington is subjected to an absurdly horrific psycho-hypnotic treatment by Missy Armitage in order to prepare him for a neurosurgical experiment performed by Dean Armitage. Sedated and physically helpless, Washington is to serve as the bodily vessel for a rich white patient, whose whole personality is medically transplanted into the former's body. Literalizing the fantasy of body inhabitation, Peele's movie comically articulates the white obsession with the black body as the exoticized corporeal site of authentic racial otherness.

Everett's negotiation of black in-group racism complicates the notion that today, in the putative "post-racial" moment, racism manifests in significantly different, i.e., increasingly ambiguous (intraracial) and subliminal (non-physical) ways, than it did in the 1960s. Yet, it also problematizes the notion of the very opposite being true. Everett's paraliptic preoccupation with Sidney Poitier, probably *the* most (mis) recognized cross-cultural figure of race relations in the post-war U.S., serves to debunk the safe spots on *both* sides of the symbolic divide in U.S. society. So, what makes (Not) Sidney Poitier such a productive focal point for an inquiry into race and its present-day realities, after all? Given the novel's date of publication and its thematic core of social mobility, it is hard not to think of Barack Obama, whose political appeal, one could argue, stems from his sharing several characteristics with

Poitier, such as his striking rhetorical talent and (televised) bodily presence. The recontextualization of Sidney Poitier qua Not Sidney Poitier is narrativized as a fictional experiment: What if Sidney Poitier has remained *the* prevalent safe spot of black male subjectivity? Harking back to our initial set of questions and taking them at face value, what does it mean to be a black male, to look "for the world" like Sidney Poitier and be named "Not Sidney Poitier"? It means that in a culture, which commercially exploits individual artists and socially pathologizes entire urban communities, categorizing black subjectivity along the lines of "Not-/Sidney-Poitier-ness" is as hilariously absurd as it is troublingly tautological.

Coming Home from Satire

It makes sense to consider *I Am Not Sidney Poitier* as the culminating point of Everett's post-millennial satires of race, not only because the novel represents the author's most recent and full-fledged satiric intervention in its *present-day* discourses. In the comparative perspective, *NSP* can be considered as the most convincing case study of Everett's novelistic treatment of race, for it ties the racial problematic of identity to the (challenge of reading his elusive protagonist's) name. In comparison, *erasure*'s critical efficacy leaves a great deal to be desired. Due to its high-low-brow split along the characterial lines of Monk and Stagg R. Leigh, readers are tempted to sympathize with or idolize the trickster persona and underestimate or miss its caricaturesque quality. *Glyph*, in turn, is probably Everett's most audacious project inasmuch as it offers a radical vision of aesthetic innovation at the cost of readerly accessibility.

Irrespective of the reader's theoretical expertise, I would argue that in *NSP* there is simply no way around (at least beginning to grasp) the problem of language and its referential function (-ality) when following Not Sidney Poitier through the dystopian scenery of Poitiertopia. It is this loop of nominal misrecognition induced by the protagonist's name, which defines the subversive character of Everett's novel and, concomitantly, its satiric shortcomings. Caught in the conceptual echo-chamber of Sidney Poitier's cinematography, where not only social and cultural but also symbolic and spatial dimensions coalesce into an absurd diegetic whole, we can no longer clearly discern between the aim and the frame of the satiric attack. After all, this is what remains the contested but crucial parameter of satire: the *attack*, i.e. the artistic targeting of an idea, individual or institution, however indirect the referential relationship between satire and its aim may be. Whenever we encounter any racist wrongdoing in *NSP*, however, we are constantly forced to reflect on how exactly it came to the foreground and why. The imposing omnipresence of Sidney Poitier blocks any stable sense of extra-textual reference, reflecting back on our own readerly assumptions about what defines as blackness (or not) instead.

By radically foregrounding the ascriptive force of race in imposing stereotypical images of both *bad* and *good* black masculinity on Not Sidney Poitier Everett posits his protagonist as the black everyman. He serves as the elusive stand-in for the experiences of blacks in the contemporary U.S. cultural paradigm at large. If being black in America, as we remember James Baldwin argue, always bears the risk of being subjected to the projection of habitualized images of stereotypical blackness onto oneself by one's (white) others, Not

Sidney Poitier's absurd fate boils down to not being oneself, or never being *just* oneself but being defined by what others (don't) see in you:

> I have learned that my name is not my name. It seems you all know me and nothing could be further from the truth and yet you know me better than I know myself, perhaps better than I can know myself. My mother is buried not far from this auditorium, and there are no words on her headstone. […] I stand like a specimen before these strangely unstrange faces, I know finally what should be written on that stone. It should say what mine will say: **I AM NOT MYSELF TODAY**. (*NSP*, 234)

The racial erasure that *NSP* showcases seems to be a permanent condition, but also one that opens up possibilities of confusion and, thus, subversion.

It is at this point that a few final remarks are due concerning our treatment of Everett's black characters. Their perplexing experiences in the American paradigm of race foreground three crucial concerns: a) the regressive force of racism, b) the problem of the right response to it and, by extension, c) the role and responsibility of the reader.

Everett's peculiar protagonists bring out the worst in their respective social communities, radically pushing those racial assumptions and animosities into the foreground that (seem to have) otherwise remained covert. Racism, in Everett's stories, is a reactionary problem, in the truest sense, for it keeps returning. Oddly enough, his protagonists have a particularly disruptive effect on the racial order when remaining silent or passive. Of course, they are not simply victims of the racial regime. Although in Not Sidney Poitier's case, for instance, this repetitive if not punitive display of racial oppression is most evident. Their boredom (Ralph), ironic indifference (Monk) or naiveté (Not Sidney Poitier) towards race, after all, raises troubling questions as to the right response to racial oppression, in general. If there is some specific didactic value to Everett's writing it stems from his putting the reader in a position of advantage, daring her to make sense of the racial confusion that erupts around his protagonists. To conceive his protagonists as autodiegetic avatars is neither to diminish the value of their fictional experiences nor to suggest that racialized black subjects, in general, are categorically incapable of counter-hegemonic acts, let alone integrity of self. For Everett, questions of identity and agency are crucially connected to the cultural logic of race and its context-dependent uncovering, after all. As we have seen in the text-analytic chapters, Ralph, Monk and Not Sidney Poitier manage to create profound moments of power-destabilization. In these moments of outspoken resistance – think of Ralph's racial self-revelation, Monk's ghetto-parody, or Not Sidney Poitier's rant at the Larkins' Thanksgiving Dinner –, Everett has his protagonists let their opponents choke on their own racial misconceptions. Thus, they help to highlight the inconsistencies of a social system whose main effort goes into concealing and

normalizing these inconsistencies. It is in these moments that Everett's central aim shows: to debunk an ideological system that – by the twisted logic of its institutionalized mechanisms of social domination and cultural incorporation – reduces *itself* to absurdity. At this point, precisely, we can draw parallels to the current political scene and some of the medial and cultural phenomena correlating with it.

If at first glance Obama's election seems to have discredited satire, in terms of its moral and social justification in light of the spectacular progress he personified, Donald Trump's presidency has made it more difficult and easier at the same time. While the 45th U.S. president has been the "easy target" of many a televisual parody or newspaper column, humorists and comedians continue to grapple with the fact that Donald Trump may very well be the text-book definition of self-satire, making it impossible to give another turn to the screw, as it were. However, judging from the vast array of satiric treatments of Trump, this often does not seem to be their primary purpose, after all. Often lacking in critical acerbity, many sketches and segments are but comedic rituals of self-consolation. Their overabundance in liberal-leaning televisual formats attests to the deeper psychological dimensions of the widespread need to cope with a seismic caesura felt across the established American political and cultural landscape. It seems prudent to consider this decisive shift both in terms of continuity and rupture. If anything, Trump personifies the culminating point of a long-standing tendency in American media and political culture, which Portia Poitier so acutely anticipated. If the news have long become the prime entertainment format, politics has become reality TV.

It is telling that during these persisting turbulences in the American nation's political climate in the aftermath of Trump's election Everett has frequently returned to his 2007 satire *The Water Cure* when giving public lectures or readings. This satire is an Everettian novel of protest inasmuch as it formulates a violent struggle, in the truest sense, for justice. Marking a (-nother) peak in Everett's post-millennial project of racial satire, this text negotiates vigilante justice in the format of a confession of a black romance writer who abducts and tortures his daughter's putative white murderer. Its aesthetic radicalism, evidently inspired by the U.S.'s "War on Terror" and the brutal and perfidiously noninvasive interrogation method of waterboarding, euphemistically described as "The Water Cure", translates into a rampant indictment of language (ab-) use to sugarcoat or silence unpleasant truths. For the protagonist, one such truth is the impossibility of justice in a culture that intrinsically compromises its own democratic ideals.

In contrast to its stirring theme, the novel features an ominously cool and rational protagonist.

Ishmael Kidder, the novel's autodiegetic narrator and black writer of romance fiction, is a self-declared "stupid fuck" in "a nation of stupid fucks" (12). Kidder's sarcastic self-implication in his country's hypocrisy betrays a profound skepticism towards democracy and (literary) art's potential for its advancement. The thinly veiled attack on George W. Bush, the representative of the "War on Terror" regime and the highly contentious Iraq invasion (2003), is juxtaposed with the inflationary use of the derogatory denominator "stupid fuck," which insinuates the democratic principle of the rule of the majority as a collective liability, which in Bush's case, ironically, was an extremely close call. Accordingly, Kidder considers himself guilty by association, presenting himself as a symptom of this pervasive cultural pathology. He "too" is a "stupid fuck," or, to pick up on Everett's allusion to Langston Hughes's famous poem, he "too sing[s] America[n hypocrisy]". This topos of revolt, the inherent risk of self-compromise, is supplanted by several intertextual references, ranging from Molière's comedy *The Misanthrope* (1666), cited four pages earlier ("Ce n'est que jeu de most, qu'affectation pure", 8) to the poem "I, Too", Hughes' poetic response to Walt Whitman's poetic anthem of the American nation, "Song of Myself" (1892). Kidder's aspirations as a dissident echo the struggle of both the aristocrat who exposes his own caste's abuse of language to make nice (*Misanthrope*) and the black poet who denounces his oppressors by claiming his voice in the nation's cultural canon ("I, too"). *Cure*, thus, is a confession, a Jeremiad, but also a revenge fantasy, which – significantly – is articulated by a black narrator torturing a *white* man.

The Water Cure is an extremely sinister variant of satire, which inflicts what Anne Laure Tissut has termed a "violence of form" on its readers ("A Blind Read," 2). Everett's painstaking disfiguration of syntactic and morphological unities, which goes hand in hand with his deconstruction of Western models of thought and reason at large, mirrors Kidder's torturing of the putative perpetrator, whom he often addresses as "Art" or "W." The language of the novel form itself, here, becomes the symbolic site of a decisive aesthetic caesura. If form, as we have argued, has become an important means for contemporary American writers of color to reflect on the discursive idiosyncrasies of the present-day cultural paradigm, *The Water Cure* announces or prefigures the ultimate exhaustion if not very violent end of form as the prime site of the artistic contestation for aesthetic autonomy and innovation. Obviously, this ending remains contradictory, for Everett here tests the limits of formal experimentalism by carrying it to new extremes. While in *NSP*, which by all means qualifies as a realist narrative (that borders on surrealism), the novel's symbolic system – i.e. its form – is dissolved into the pop-cultural medium of film, *Cure* explores theory as an aesthetic vehicle of formal experimentation for the last time within Everett's post-millennial novels of racial

satire.

Since the publication of *NSP*, race, humor and satire have continued to surface in Everett's novels. However, nowhere does in nearly such a strident and consistent fashion as in the three texts discussed in this study. Be it with regard to genre (*Assumption* 2011, a detective novel portraying a black deputy in his declining years), story-telling as such (*Percival Everett by Virgil Russel* 2013, an experimental narrative co-narrated by a son and his dying father), or specific geographical and cultural landscapes (*So Much Blue* 2017, a painter's memoir set in El Salvador), Everett has continued to venture into novel fields of fiction. If, as Rachel Greenwald Smith argues, the "increased pluralization" of the contemporary literary scene, "both in terms of form and identity, is likely to continue" ("Afterword: The 2000s after 2016," 387), it seems safe to assume that Everett will remain an exceptional pioneer of this trend.

His 2019 book of poetry further suggests that Everett will continue on this aesthetic path of thematic diversity and formal hybridity. *The Book of Training by Colonel Hap Thompson of Roanoke, VA, 1843, Annotated From the Library of John C. Calhoun*, for instance, is the most recent publication that evinces the same satiric spirit that his post-millennial satires share. In paraliptic fashion characteristic for Everett's project, this travesty of a historic document makes a powerful statement about modern-day racism by retracing its origins, namely the "training" of slaves in the 19th U.S. As a slave-owner's guide for the "training" of slaves it entails instructions and ideas for how to ensure the obedience of blacks in servitude. In other words, it details the brutal physical and psychological subjugation of slaves. These horrible deliberations, which are framed by the remarks of John C. Calhoun, the famous American statesman and proponent of slavery, who admires and subscribes to the awful propositions of slave-instructor Colonel Hap Thompson, are camouflaged in poetic verses. Here, form plays a pivotal role in reinforcing the moral gravity of the issue and the impact on the reader. Charged with the cultural prestige of civilizatory progress, poetry as style and genre functions as a metafictional framing that problematizes not only the potential of art to represent and potentially disrupt social reality. It also foregrounds our very own biases in denying our being complicit in these very realities. The literary text creates a disturbing balance between poetry and brutality, between progress and human debasement, prompting to the troubling fact that in the age after Obama, we are left to make sense of a social reality that remains very much "beset by racial contradictions and paradoxes," as Desmond and Emirbayer have put it.

This ambivalence, which is characteristic for Everett's aesthetic agenda at large, as I have sought to illustrate, implies the possibility of a reconciliation or approximation between aesthetics and politics, between the theoretical aspirations and the satiric concerns of the author's texts. All of the three texts under study imply this possibility, as they end with a climactic show, a carnivalesque grand finale, in which Everett gestures towards the wider public context of his satiric interventions, bringing together protagonist and his fictional counterparts, art and society, fiction and reality. These peculiar encounters are framed in terms of representation, for they are all televisually staged and broadcast. With this final emphasis on mainstream American culture, Everett's texts end on a characteristic note of ambivalence. They give expression to the imperative of thinking both: art's characteristic break from and necessary engagement with those cultural frameworks that define its occasion and critical potential, in the first place.

1 Newport, Frank. "Americans See Obama Election as Race Relations Milestone." *Gallup*. November 7 (2008). Accessed on http://www.gallup.com.

2 The white liberal journalist Jim Hoagland declared race as the primordial parameter of democratic advancement, labeling the entire electoral process of 2008 the "post-racial election" (*The Washington Post*, 2008). The white conservative commentator Lou Dobbs, in turn, proposed to appreciate the emerging "post-partisan, post-racial society" as a new phase of political opportunity unhindered by racial and other biases (Lou Dobbs). Focusing on the election's sociopolitical implications African American and American journalists Gerald Early and Matt Bai pondered the seeming end of the "black American narrative of victimization" and "black politics" altogether (*The New York Times Magazine*; *The Chronicle of Higher Education*). The Asian American journalist Hua Hsu, in turn, proclaimed "the end of white America" as a long-term demographic trend (*The Atlantic*). The white liberal host Chris Matthews certainly took the utopian promise of "post-race" to extremes when he claimed he "forgot" that President Obama was black during the latter's State of the Union address (*MSNBC*).

3 A comprehensive compilation of publications referencing "post-race" exceeds the textual limits of this study. This is a brief overview: Tim Wise (2010). *Colorblind: The Rise of Post-Racial Politics and the Retreat from Racial Equity*. Michael Tesler, David O. Sears (2010). *Obama's Race: The 2008 Election and the Dream of a Post-Racial America*. H. Roy Kaplan (2011). *The Myth of Post-Racial America. Searching for Equality in the Age of Materialism*. Michael Tesler (2016). *Post-Racial or Most-Racial? Race and Politics in the Obama Era*. Martell Teasley, David Ikard (2010). "Barack Obama and the Politics of Race. The Myth of Postracism in America." *Journal of Black Studies* 40.3. Anna Holmes (2015). "America's 'Post-Racial' Fantasy." *The New York Times Magazine*. Shelby Steele (2008). "Obama's Post-Racial Promise." *Los Angeles Times*. Richard Purcell (2013). "Trayvon, Postblackness, and the Postrace Dilemma." *Boundary* 2 40.3. Jimiliz M. Valiente-Neighbours (2015). "Beyond 'Post-Race Paralysis': Creating Critical Dialogue on Race in the Obama Era." *Sociology of Race and Ethnicity* 1(2).

4 Obama's farewell speech accessed on https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/farewell (June 22, 2018). Cf. his pre-presidency speech on race in Philadelphia on March 18, 2008: "I have never been so naïve as to believe that we can get beyond our racial divisions in a single election cycle, or with a single candidacy." "Barack Obama's Speech on Race." *New York Times*. March 18, 2008. Accessed on http://www.nytimes.com/2008/03/18/us/politics/18text-obama.html. In his autobiography, *The Audacity of Hope: Thoughts on Reclaiming the American Dream* (2006), Obama articulates his commitment to "a vision of America finally freed from the past of Jim Crow and slavery" (231).

5 With race and gender as complementary determining factors of societal life class has emerged as an important focal point of present-day racial scholarship. This study relies on the basic understanding of class as a socially shared framework circumscribing an individual's (sense of) being in and (economic) means of acting in the social environment.

6 The December 2016 report of the Bureau of Justice Statistics shows that the incarceration rate of U.S. residents aged 18 or older was five times higher for blacks (1.745 per 100,000) than for whites (312 per 100,000) in 2015. E. Ann Carson, Elizabeth Anderson. "Prisoners in 2015." 10. This long-standing trend is based on a vicious circle of poverty and penalization that results in the civic exclusion of offenders by withdrawing their voting rights and inhibiting their chances for employment, which are often severely slim to begin with due to educational deficiencies and racial prejudices. The permanent disenfranchisement of blacks in the so-called "prison industrial complex" has been cemented by Bill Clinton's "Three Strikes Bill" (1994) and has been recently debunked as owed to Richard Nixon's "War on Drugs," which strategically targeted blacks by heavily criminalizing drug-related offenses, often relating to heroin. Compare: LoBianco, Tom. "Aide Says Nixon's War on Drugs Targeted Blacks, Hippies."

7 The U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission's 50th anniversary report "American Experiences versus American Expectations" (2015) estimates the participation rate of African Americans in the job category "Executive/Senior and First/Mid Level Officials and Managers" at 6.77% (2013). Apart from the significant inflow of blacks into the higher levels of the labor market after the Civil Rights legislation in the 1960s the report shows that the rate remained constant at around 5 to 6 percent and even declined during the 2000s.

8 Throughout this study, I speak of race and racial difference as primarily referring to the difference between blackness and whiteness. This is owed to the racialization of *black* subjects satirically investigated in Everett's novels. I refrain from placing the term between quotation marks because as much as it is an arbitrary category lacking any biological basis the main aim of our inquiry is precisely to retrace how its ideological force manifests in mental *and* material structures.

9 Obama's impact on the political and cultural scene recurs to both his impressive bodily presence and oratorical skills and his skillful use of modern-day media and entertainment platforms. Careful, not to come across as "too" black, especially in speech and bodily bearing, Obama selectively staged his blackness during several televised

events, increasingly so towards the end of his two presidential terms. Among his iconic "performances" are his "mic-drop" at the White House Correspondents' Dinner in 2016 and his cooperation with the comedy duo Key and Peele for the "Obama Anger Translator" routine, which explicitly made fun of Obama's "civilized", i.e. non-aggressive conduct.

10 A particularly disturbing case in point is the arrest of the black scholar Henry Louis Gates for disorderly conduct after having been suspected by the Cambridge, Massachusetts, police of committing a possible break-in (into his own home). Responding to this controversial case of racial profiling by chastising the white arresting police officer James Crowley as acting "stupidly," Obama caused a nation-wide outrage over his putative favoritism of blacks. When he later apologized for his remarks as badly "calibrated" the issue had already become a full-fledged media scandal. Other incidents, which illustrate the racial tensions that cohered around Obama, include the so-called birther movement and the Obama-Wright controversy.

11 Appiah identifies a tension between "postmodernism," a culture-historical term describing the transcendence of modernism, and "postcoloniality," which he describes as designating a *condition* of cultural production that defines the distribution of African artworks through the international channels of pop-culture. While the gesture of "space-clearing" characterizes both, "postcoloniality" does not describe the transcendence of coloniality but rather a brand of consumable ethnicity. This "postcolonial" imaginary is inhabited by a scholarly and literary cadre of African "compradors," who, as Western-trained representatives of their local cultures, from which they are institutionally disconnected, are "always at the risk of becoming otherness machines." "The Postmodern and the Postcolonial." 157.

12 Many scholars have argued that this racial legacy recurs to the cultural nationalism of the 1960's and 70's, specifically with regard to the Black Arts Movement and the establishment of the first Black Studies departments (cf. discussion on *erasure* in chapter 3.2). Gene Andrew Jarrett, for instance, relates the default *social* reading of African American literature to the latter's need of disciplinary self-justification by way of a constant centeredness on race. *Representing the Race*. 6.

13 This minority-centered re-articulation of the notion of America as a national amalgamation (cf. the maxim "E Pluribus Unum" included in the Great Seal of the United States) has had famous precursors, from J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur, who saw the American as a new amalgamated human, to Ralph Waldo Emerson, who described America as an "asylum of all nations."

14 Infrequently used in multiculturalist discourse, the metaphor of the "salad bowl" has been used as a counter-concept to the "melting pot."

15 For a detailed discussion see Paul C. Taylor "Post-Black, Old Black." 628-30. Compare Ytasha L. Womack's *Post Black: How a New Generation is Redefining African American Identity*.

16 Reed, the preeminent black literary satirist, has deployed "post-race" as a shibboleth of strident in-group criticism, or "house business." For Reed, the concept serves as a cussword against a form of black elitism that promotes race-neutrality and meritocratic values among the putatively under-performing poor. Zooming in on the controversial arrest of Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Reed claims "[g]iven the position that Gates has pronounced since the late eighties," Reed ironically concludes, "if I had been the arresting officer and post-race spokesperson Gates accused me of racism, I would have given him a sample of his own medicine. I would have replied that 'race is a social construct' – the line that he and his friends have been pushing over the last couple of decades." Reed has reiterated his criticism of Gates's elitism, i.e. the tendency to blame the victim, i.e. poor blacks, and relegate racism to matters of black pathological masculinity in a discussion of Barack Obama and the "Fallacies of the Post-Race Presidency." *The Trouble With Post-Blackness*. 220-242. Identifying the same in-group discrimination with the "post-race president [who] needs to be schooled on dependency [of poor blacks]", Reed calls Gates the "second-most-powerful post-race advocate today next to the president."

17 The title of Saldivar's pending volume (*The Racial Imaginary: Speculative Realism and Historical Fantasy in Contemporary U.S. Ethnic Fiction*), in turn, shows that the scholar has since dropped the controversial term.

18 Everett's work has been widely made accessible by a society dedicated to cataloging and critically discussing the (already) extensive corpus of his artistic legacy, namely "The Percival Everett International Society." This scholarly community is organized by both American and European academics, among others, the society's president Prof. Anthony Stewart (Bucknell University), former president and database executive Prof. John Weixlmann (St. Louis University, emeritus), and the author's French translator Anne-Laure Tissut (Rouen). As of now, a total of eleven books by Everett have been translated into other languages (French, Italian, Spanish, Russian and German), attesting to the author's increasing viisbility in European countries. For more information: http://www.percivaleverettsociety.com.

19 See also Keith B. Mitchell. *Perspectives on Percival Everett*. Claire Maniez, Anne-Laura Tissut. *Percival Everett: Transatlantic Readings*. Claude Julien, Anne-Laure Tissut. *Reading Percival Everett. European Perspectives*. Joe Weixlmann. *Conversations with Percival Everett*. For further reference, see the *Callaloo* (2005), *Canadien Review of American Studies* (2013) and *African American Review* (2007 and 2019) special editions on Everett. In 2013, the French scholars Anne-Laure Tissut and her colleagues hosted an international conference on Everett in Rouen, France, at the l'Équipe de Recherche Interdisciplinaire sur les Aires Culturelles (ERIAC). The contributions and essays can be accessed here:

https://journals.openedition.org/transatlantica/6305?lang=en. There is another volume of papers from the 2019 session of this conference to be published soon.

20 Everett has been a politically outspoken writer critical of race and its divisive power. The most prominent example of his criticism of race is his public criticism of the Confederate flag on the State Capitol of South Carolina in 1989 at the Verner Awards ceremony (for a short discussion of this incident see: Hinshaw, Dawn. "Rebel Flag over Capitol Offends Artist," *The State*, May 4, 1989). With specific regard to his reductive reception as a writer of African American literature, consider Everett's response to a review in the New York Times Book Review ("The Color of his Skin," June 6, 2004). Everett's self-presentation in interviews further attests to his attempt to frame his work from the perspective of aesthetic autonomy. Everett's "aversion to self-promotion," which Joe Weixlmann discusses in his introductory comments in the first compendium of interviews given by Everett (2013, xi), has slowly given way to a more frequent engagement in public discussions of his work. The author's public self-presentation has been consistent with his artistic stance expressed in his work. Eager to elaborate on questions about artmaking, sometimes in extensive detail, Everett often remains reluctant to respond to simplistic or leading questions about race and his authorial approach to it.

21 *God's Country* (1994) is narrated through the "I" of the white racist low-life Curt Marder, who seeks the help of the narrative's hero, the black tracker Bubba. *Cutting Lisa* (1985) and *Walk Me to the Distance* (1987), for instance, completely lack any racial specification. So does *American Desert* (2004), which only hints at race through one particular setting-location, namely an African Methodist Episcopal Church.

22 Suggesting that the narrative of black victimization has supplanted the canonic construction of African American writing, Charles R. Johnson has leveled a particularly strident attack on the scholarly establishment for being complicit in the perpetuation of "'official' stories and explanations and endlessly repeated interpretations of black American life [...that] can short-circuit direct perception of the specific phenomenon before us" (2008).

23 For this universalist notion of black aesthetic value, Countee Cullen, for instance, was sharply criticized by Langston Hughes. Hughes chastised Cullen for his alleged aesthetic assimilationism, as his wanting "to be a poet – not a Negro poet'" allegedly attested to the "desire to pour racial individuality into the mold of American standardization, and to be as little Negro and as much American as possible" ("The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain," 1311). Jean Toomer, in turn, opted against his editor to include his racial identification from the book cover of *Cane* (1923).

24 In *Figures in Black* (1987), the preeminent African American literary scholar Henry Louis Gates, Jr. circumscribes four key critical approaches: "the Black Aesthetic" (cultural nationalism), "Repetition and Imitation" (formalism, structuralism), "Repetition and Difference" (poststructuralism) and "Synthesis" (the black vernacular).

25 His professional portfolio as a literary artist with an impressive resume as taught and teaching writer, fiction editor and judge, literary critic, cultural commentator and painter, suggests that Everett shares in a certain privilege of many contemporary writers of not being (exclusively) dependent on the monetary outcome of one's publishing efforts. Since his first publication Everett has opted for small, author-oriented publishing houses like Graywolf in Minneapolis, Minnesota, because "they keep you in print longer, they treat you better, and they talk about literature instead of money" (interview with Rone Shavers, 70). Turning down a lucrative deal offered to him for the paperback rights to *erasure* further attests to his non-commercial stance. Toward the marketing mechanisms of authorial celebrity-cult, thus, Everett has remained indifferent. In interviews, the amount of which has steadily risen over the past two decades, Everett is very open about his aesthetic agenda. He has been keen on stressing that, above all, he is interested in language and the potentialities of literary signification. According to his scholarly profile, Percival Everett's main academic areas of interest are critical theory and creative writing. Compare: https://dornsife.usc.edu/cf/faculty-and-staff/faculty.cfm?pid=1003237.

26 The publication of Anthony Stewart's book-length project, tentatively titled *Approximate Gestures: The Infinity of Bothness in Percival Everett's Fiction*, is forthcoming.

27 For the scholarly study of this particular area Michael Johnson's work has been of signal import. See his chapter "Looking at the Big Picture. Percival Everett's Western Fiction." In: *Hoo-Doo Cowboys and Bronze Buckaroos. Conceptions of the African American West.* 186-211.

28 I have excluded from this segment of racial satire the novel *A History of the American (proposed) by Strom Thurmond, as told to Percival Everett and James Kincaid* (2004). Like *Grand Canyon, Inc.*, a parabolic portrayal of a redneck gun-nut buying the Grand Canyon, *A History* decidedly differs from the other novels. The epistolary novel portrays the late and longest serving South Carolinian senator Strom Thurmond's attempt to write a revisionist account of (his "own") African American history with the help of the fictionalized authors Percival Everett and James Kincaid. Famous for his pro-segregation stance, but also known for his philanthropic impetus of fostering black uplift, Thurmond is a striking example of Everett's interest in ambivalent figures (and constellations) in racial discourse. As an epistolary novel, *A History* has an entirely different poetological setup, however, lacking the narrative unit(y) of (a central) character and plot. Another satiric novel with a similar focus on contemporary American culture, *American Desert* (2004) does merely imply that its protagonist Theodore Street, a hyper-alive zombie-everyman, *could* be black. Street is killed in a car accident on his way to his own suicide attempt. After his severed head is knitted back onto his torso, he rises from the dead at his own funeral, causing a medially exploited sensation, whose society-spanning dimensions Everett investigates. Finally, I do

not discuss *The Water Cure* (2007), a novel about vigilante justice and torture strongly resonant with the war crimes committed in Iraq (2003-2011), in which race *does* play a role, albeit in a parenthetical sense. Ishmael Kidder is a black romance writer, who seeks to avenge the brutal murder and raping of his twelve-year-old daughter Lane. He abducts and tortures the putative perpetrator in the basement of his mansion, using the so-called interrogative technique "the Water Cure," better known as waterboarding, which in causing a state of horrific pain and panic that equals a near-drowning experience leaves absolutely no mark on its victim.

29 Among the most remarkable examples of Everett's extensive and unconventional reworking of the black tradition is his novel *Zulus* (1990). In this daunting project, which to this day remains severely understudied, Everett combines an extensive linguistic riff on or ode to African myths and traditions with a profoundly unsettling post-apocalyptic vision of human sociality, corporeality and the devastating repercussions of war. The novel centers on Alice Achitopel, a white 260-pound government clerk who is the last fertile woman on earth. For a detailed discussion see Keith B. Mitchell. "Writing (Fat) Bodies: Grotesque Realism and the Carnivalesque in Percival Everett's *Zulus*."

30 Bourdieu has developed his notion of the field as a relational update of the Marxist notion of class. As a conceptual metaphor, it betrays a game-metaphoricity. Often comparing it to an "arena," Bourdieu posits the field as a site of social competition or interplay, in the truest sense, based on a tacitly acknowledged set of "rules" of what is possible or thinkable in a given situational context. These rules are incorporated into the agents' *habitus*. Bourdieu often circumscribes this habitus as a "feel for the game." It is the pivotal principle of this social dynamic, as it terms the embodied knowledge of socio-symbolic practice. The dimensions of a field are congruent with the reach of the effects of the capital distributed in it. The respective fields of a society (political, economic, cultural) overlap, according to Bourdieu, as the field-specific types of capital can be exchanged in order to achieve effects in other fields. As a sort of meta-capital fed from all of the other currency sources, *symbolic capital* can be used to achieve effects in the supra-field of power.

31 This competition of agents in a given field is based on an *interrelational* dynamic. For Bourdieu, "[t]he literary or artistic field is a field of forces, but it is also a field of struggles tending to transform or conserve this field of forces. The network of objective relations between positions subtends and orients the strategies which the occupants of the different positions implement in their struggles to defend or improve their positions (i.e. their position-takings), strategies which depend for their force and form on the position each agent occupies in the power relations." *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture.* 30.

32 Charged with notions of progress and rupture, avant-gardism both connotes artistic advancement and marginality. Aside from its semantic roots in military jargon, the term bears a somewhat problematic cultural ballast due to its association with European aesthetic movements of modernism (Symbolism, Cubism, Futurism, Surrealism, Dada). Fred Moten has seminally observed the problematic co-constitutive dependency between the (historical) avant-garde and blackness, as the former tends to reinscribe a certain notion of primacy of Western standards of aesthetic excellence and obfuscate the exclusion of its non-white *others* (*In the Break*, 31 ff.). Since the formation of African American literature as a scholarly investigated and commercially marketed cultural practice, many by-now household names of the African American canon have been associated with avant-gardism. With cross-cultural, transracial, or even "post/racial" themes avant la lettre (Charles W. Chesnutt, James Weldon Johnson, George S. Schuyler's *Black No More*, Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*), as well as formal foci of generic mixing and poly-discursivity (Jean Toomer, Zora Neale Hurston), these authors in this by no means comprehensive list have been (considered) artistic pioneers in their respective literary periods.

33 "[C]ontrary to critical claims on their stronger grip on the referent," writers such as Everett, Madhu Dubey claims, "pointedly depart from realism in order to signal the difficulty of positing a clear social function for the novel. In the specific case of African-American literature, realism had served as the preferred vehicle for protesting racial inequality through the long historical trajectory stretching from the antebellum slave narratives to the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s. With the attainment of formal equality at the end of the Civil Rights Movement and the diminishing force of political solidarity cemented by race, the move away from realism by the 1970s signaled the exhaustion of the model of social engagement that had thus far impelled African-American fiction (2015, 37; cf. *Signs and Cities* 2001). Dubey's intervention is part of the ongoing scholarly attempt at (re-) vitalizing form as an integral aspect of race critique while challenging the aesthetic hegemony of what Gene Andrew Jarrett terms "racial realism" (*Deans and Truants*, 7 ff.). In the context of history and historiography, A. Timothy Spaulding has prominently diagnosed realism as complicit in "a potentially oppressive obfuscation of the past" of slavery and racial oppression that postmodern slave narratives seek to counter by way of non-mimetic forms (*Re-Forming the Past*, 5). Philip Brian Harper synthesizes these anti-realist tendencies under the rubric of "abstractionism," attributing a defamiliarizing potential to the self-conscious distancing of art from reality, to which, as Harper stresses, it bears an inherent relation of abstraction (*Abstractionist Aesthetics*, 2 ff.). Lesley Larkin, in turn, argues that "the dialogical and metatextual characteristics of language and writing must be approached not as abstractions but rather in relation to material, social, and political contexts" (13). This critical urge to reconcile a sense of community and social materiality with formal experimentation becomes problematic when considering that, as Dubey stresses, "postmodern literary theory most readily embraces those texts that give readers a secure handle on black racial difference

while catering to sophisticated appetites for formal complexity [..., providing a] synthesis of aesthetic indeterminacy and racial essentialism, allowing us to have our cake and eat it too" (*Signs and Cities*, 10).

34 This list of writers largely follows Paul Beatty's anthological collection of works of African American humor in *Hokum* (2006). It is worth stressing that this group of authors is, by no means, homogeneous. What unites them, in accordance with Anthony Neal's notion of the "Post-Soul" generation of African Americans growing up after the epochal Civil Rights transition, is the fact that their artistic coming-of-age is influenced by the social realities of segregation not through personal experience and memory but through the epistemological modality of history. Positioned in different literary fields (poetry, theatre and novelism), each writer puts a different emphasis on humor and satire. The writing of Paul Beatty, for instance, draws far more consistently on the satiric mode than, say, Suzan-Lori Parks' poetic oeuvre. Grouping these writers and their texts under the rubric of "African American literature," in turn, owes to the fact that their *writing* reflects on race-related social and literary codes and conventions, and not necessarily their own individual racial identities.

35 The anthological and critical works of Darryl Dickson-Carr (*The Sacredly Profane* 2001, *Spoofing the Modern* 2015), and Derek C. Maus and James Donahue (*Post-Soul Satire* 2014), as well as Glenda R. Carpio (*Laughing Fit to Kill* 2008), Mel Watkins (*On the Real Side* 1994, *African American Humor* 2002) and Paul Beatty (*Hokum* 2006) attest to an increasing academic focus on literary satire and humor respectively.

36 Warren's disciplinary critique, Glenda R. Carpio observes, has been widely misrecognized or de-emphasized. Too often, the preeminent scholar of African American humor claims, Warren's intervention has been falsely conceived in literary-historical terms, as a call for a re-periodization of African American literature. Rather, the problem, Carpio claims, "is not with the concept of resistance per se but rather with what it obscures." "What Comes After African-American Literature?"

37 With regard to his literary-political stance, Everett is much closer to Kenneth Warren. Gates systematically chafed against the aesthetic program of the Black National Arts movement in order to establish his culture-mythological notion of black literary criticism. Warren, in turn, has intervened in the disciplinary debates of the 1990's from a cross-cultural (compare his discussion of race and realism in *Black and White Strangers*, 1993) and literary-intellectualist vantage point. His re-evaluation of Ralph Ellison and the prevalent critical (mis-) appropriations of the latter's aesthetic agenda for both particularistic and universalist concerns (*So Black and Blue*, 2003) further suggests this analogy.

38 Gates' focus on African American expressive culture as a *sign-praxis* expands the applicability of his approach to even so spectacularly experimental a fiction like Ishmael Reed's, which encapsulates the quintessence of Gates theory: the eclectically appropriative, ever-subversive figurative language-play that defines Signifyin(g). Tellingly, Gates has redefined paradigmatic postmodern techniques (irony, parody, intertextuality) as "always already" *black* by connecting Ishmael Reed's project with the musical form of Bebop (cf. Sedlmeier "Allegorie," 539).

39 Seeking to singularize *and* contextualize black expressive culture in the wider American cultural and critical (disciplinary) framework, it is important to point out, that Gates, but also Houston A. Baker, have been harshly criticized by other African American scholars for their strategic appropriation of *white* Euro-American theory.

40 To be absolutely clear, I am referring to the three texts *under study*, here. True to its thematic focus on Craig Suder, who is a fan of the Jazz icon Charlie "the Bird" Parker, Everett's novel *Suder*, for instance, is fundamentally informed by the author's rendition of a Jazz aesthetic that is defined by improvisational and experimental traits. This aesthetic champions a poetic polyphony of themes and motifs that evokes notions of the absurd and surreal.

41 Notice that Everett specifically thematizes slavery only in an intermedial dream sequence in *I Am Not Sidney Poitier*. This dream episode is based on the Sidney Poitier movie *Band of Angels*, an interracial melodrama about passing set on a Kentucky plantation during the American Civil War (63-72). That this specific historical reference is doubly embedded in a dream modeled after a movie further illustrates Everett's focus on the overarching frameworks of reference that define our means of coming to terms with race and racial oppression. See discussion in chapter 3.3.

42 This differentiation is consistent with Darryl Dickson-Carr's postulation of the trickster and the picaro as the two most important figures in African American satire. Dickson-Carr, too, emphasizes the similarities between these two figures, contending, however, that "the primary difference between the figures from different cultures is that Western figures tend to operate in a linear continuum, while Native American, African, and Aboriginal trickster figures inhabit a circular universe. *The Sacredly Profane*. 33-34.

43 His emergence in the "high"-literary form of the novel, Bakhtin argues accordingly, attests to the trickster's significance as one of the many corollary components of satire's coalescence with the novel form. Emerging as the preeminent literary medium of the modern age, the picaro-trickster serves to orchestrate the chaotic and confusing fictional configuration of story and the modes of its telling vis-à-vis the crisis of social totality and human subjectivity.

44 Since its transatlantic expansion, the picaro has undergone a phase of moral de-subjectification, often surfacing in the symbolical shape of the confidence man, Blackburn argues (24). Discussing Herman Melville's fictional engagement with the prototypical "American" con-man in *The Confidence Man*, Ralph Ellison describes "those who are not assigned and restricted to predesignated roles in the hierarchical drama of

American society" as prone to act as "a self-confident man or woman who is engaged in projecting a second self and dealing with the second selves of others," rendering an absurd version of "[t]he American creed of democratic equality." "An Extravagance of Laughter." 630.

45 I take my cue from Marcel Cornis-Pope's essay "Rethinking Postmodern Liminality: Marginocentric Characters and Projects in Thomas Pynchon's Polysystemic Fiction." He uses the term "marginocentric" as a label to describe the subversive potential of liminal arrangements of characters and settings.

46 In *Of Grammatology* (1967), Derrida focuses on *speech* as the primordial repository of this original and universal signified crystallized in "phonocentrism"). In contrast, *writing* has been historically marginalized as a "dangerous supplement," i.e. an intrinsically flawed and potentially misleading derivative of an oral discourse giving expression to and encapsulating original meaning. This opposition is important for our discussion of *Glyph*.

47 Bhabha's study, in this regard, reads like a blueprint of postcolonial text-analysis, as he draws his notions and concepts from his reading of the works of contemporary ethnic literary artists, including – most prominently – the novels of an African and African American writer: Toni Morrison (*Beloved*, 1987) and Nadine Gordimer (*My Son's Story*, 1990). While Everett shares a certain cross-cultural scope with the artistic case studies that Bhabha adduces, it would be problematic to conceive it in terms of "hybridity," a term, which – given its terminological baggage from biological and genetic discourses – too closely relates to identity-*centered* conceptions of representation.

48 This plurality relates to the semantic idiosyncrasies of literary language, which intrinsically tends towards self-referentiality. In his foreword to the second edition of *Opera Aperta*, Eco thus concedes that the model of the open work has a greater applicability to those literary works that evince an "autotelic" structure (*Das Offene Kunstwerk*. 14). Everett's texts exploit this poetic possibility to a varying degree. See text-analytic chapters.

49 Generally speaking, these models of closure in the Western literary tradition define strictly symmetrical forms that abide by the Aristotle's normative approach to various poetic concerns (character-development, plot-structuration and certain key strategies of storytelling such as denouement and catharsis).

50 Positing universal compositional characteristics of satire for a comprehensive analysis of literary texts, the New Critics helped to establish satire as a complex literary form. Yet, generally speaking, they tended to de-emphasize the socio-political impetus inherent in the satiric impulse by obscuring its referential relevance in the historical-empirical confines of text-immanent interpretation. David Worcester's famous proclamation of satire as an antiquated aesthetic mode, (*The Art of Satire* 1940), which was scholarly consensus, was later contradicted by Alvin B. Kernan's *The Plot of Satire* (1965) and Ronald Paulson's *The Fictions of Satire* (1967) promoted the persistence of satire in modern literary projects. Paulson and Robert C. Elliot (*The Power of Satire: Magic, Ritual, Art*) allocated satire to the anthropological realm of magic and myth. Among the most extensively referenced representatives of the American literary branch of satire-theory are John Dryden, David Worcester, Northrop Frye, Robert C. Elliot, Leonard Feinberg, Gilbert Highet, Alvin B. Kernan and Ronald Paulson; among the more recent Steven C. Weisenburger, Charles A. Knight and Ruben Quintero. In the field of African American literature Darry Dickson-Carr's recent publications and contributions (*The Sacredly Profane*, *Spoofing the Modern: Satire in the Harlem Renaissance*; cf. "Afterword: From Pilloried to Post-Soul: The Future of African American Satire;" *Post-Soul Satire. Black Identity After Civil Rights*. Ed. Derek C. Maus, James J. Donahue) spearhead the contemporary scholarship on satire.

51 Bakhtin's seminal study *Rabelais and His World* has fundamentally influenced the modern-day conception of humor as a folkloristic form connected to the carnival and the grotesque. Retracing the presence of laughter in Medieval ritual festivities as a pivotal power of social subversion and cohesion he argues against the elitist legacy of classicism of humor's denigration to the lower spheres of society and aesthetic practice since the Renaissance. Thus, he reads Francois Rabelais' satiric novels *Gargantua and Panagruel* (1532-34) as a climactic instant of "grotesque realism" based on what he calls the "material bodily principle", which offered a universally inclusive vision of liberty and truth in laughter.

52 Thus, the interpretation of irony can be considered as a process of identifying both the literal meaning and the implied meaning of a related ironic message and the possible positions towards both meanings. Hutcheon *Irony's Edge*, 11). After all, it is important to stress that irony is about identification, in both senses of the term: the reader's (successful) identification of irony serves to foster his identification with what is related. While ironic signification can, in turn, also be a form of displaying discursive sovereignty Hutcheon stresses that the "signals or markers that are encoded or decoded to establish" the process of ironic interpretation are "culturally specific." Hutcheon *A Theory of Parody*. 97-98.

53 According to Frye, satire ranges from "[a]ttack without humour, or pure denunciation [and] humour without attack, the humour of pure gaiety or exuberance" ("Satire," 76). In his seminal critical study, *The Anatomy of Criticism* (1957), Frye posits a similar analogy between satire and irony, the former of which he terms "militant irony" (223). "Sheer invective or name-calling ("flyting")," Frye states, "is satire in which there is relatively little irony: on the other hand, whenever a reader is not sure what the author's attitude is or what his own is supposed to be, we have irony with relatively little satire" (ibid).

54 Breinig explains that ironic speech claims to say something while claiming something quite different, possibly the very opposite. Fictionalized satiric speech, in turn, claims to relate something without relating to

something (external to the diegesis) while simultaneously claiming to relate to an extant something (in the non-diegetic sphere). *Satire und Roman*. 72.

55 In contrast to Genette's concise specification of parody (and its related devices) Margaret Rose defines parody in broad intertextual terms as an epiphenomenon of metafiction (*Parody/Metafiction: An Analysis of Parody as a Critical Mirror to the Writing and Reception of Fiction*, 1979; *Parody: Ancient, Modern and Post-Modern*, 1993). In the parodic interplay between hyper- and hypotext, Rose claims, the fictionality of (both) literary texts is foregrounded, thus creating a *new* fiction (-al message about literariness as such). Simon Dentith (*Parody*) offers a historically comparative and generically broadened definition of "parodic cultural forms" based on an updated conception of parody's polemical thrust in both its formal and political impact. For a discussion of Linda Hutcheon's approach to parody see discussion on *erasure*'s use of postmodern parody in chapter 3.2.

56 "Satire ist ästhetisch sozialisierte Aggression […] Damit ist nicht gemeint: sublimierter Aggressionstrieb (was alles mögliche sein kann), sondern wirklich vorhandene, am Text ablesbare Aggression." Brummack. 282.

57 "[P]ostmodern satire is stuck with the very simulacra of the knowledge it so distrusts – stories. This is why the satirist often turns metafictionist and parodist, seeking out 'intramural' and self-referring ways of striking at the aesthetic rules hemming us in." Weisenburger, 5. Heuer asserts that the (increasingly) problematic alignment of recipient and satire necessitates the re-examination of the textual methods of meaning making themselves. "Wo die unproblematische Möglichkeit zur Allianz zwischen Satire und Leser fehlt, müssen auch die Methoden der Bedeutungsbildung mit reflektiert werden." *Satire und Postmoderne.* 28.

58 Linda Hutcheon identifies the postmodern momentum of cultural re-negotiation in "'the presence of the past' […] Its aesthetic forms and its social formations are problematized by critical reflection. […] Herein lies the governing role of irony in postmodernism" *A Poetics of Postmodernism*. 4.

59 Critics widely concur in stressing the importance of considering the author's intention for satire. This project refrains from differentiating between the image of the author and a distinct category of his "second self", i.e. an "implied author", to borrow from W.C. Booth. If anything, the problematic authorial disposition in satire demands an (even more) open conception of the "real" implications that the author's image and imagination can have (cf. *The Rhetoric of Fiction* 1961).

60 In both of Mel Watkins' two seminal studies (*On The Real Side* 1994; *African American Humor* 2002), the preeminent African American humor-scholar provides a thorough and extensive survey of the traditional roots and cultural circulation of black humor, from minstrelsy to stand-up comedy in the multicultural age. The white obsession with black comedy is particularly evident in the rise of black comedians in the present-day entertainment industry, a trend that Richard Pryor, Eddie Murphy, and Whoopi Goldberg, but also Bill Cosby, as well as Dave Chappelle, Chris Rock, and more recently Reggie Watts and Jerrod Carmichael personify. Notwithstanding the groundbreaking achievements regarding racial integration in contemporary American culture, it is telling that the so-called "white Oscars" debate, for instance, which inspired a growing public and critical awareness and appraisal of major box office productions including *non-white* and *non-male* (main) roles, has taken center stage in public discourse only a *few* years ago. As the most recent and most successful example, Marvel's *Black Panther* (Marvel & Disney) has been heralded as the *first* (and highest-grossing) Marvel movie (of 2018) with a predominantly black cast, attesting to the fact that the struggle for equal representation of blacks in American mainstream culture, which originated with the pioneering filmic performances of Sidney Poitier and the likes in (the aftermath of) the era of segregation, is far from concluded.

61 Dave Chappelle's famous refusal of a lucrative deal with Comedy Central is a case in point. Chappelle quit his massively influential televisual series "The Chappelle Show" in 2005 in order "to make sure I'm dancing and not shuffling" and avoid becoming a "sell-out" in supplying the masses with ultimately comforting racial humor. "On the Beach with Dave Chappelle."

62 As a distinct lexical category of American English, "humor" is too broad and vague a term to specify these modes and moves, after all. Thus, it is crucial to distinguish between the understanding of humor as a basic denominator of that which causes laughter and humor in its explicit conception as the comic, on which this analysis draws. This concept allows for a more precise *and* comprehensive understanding of the comic nuances, which, while often eliciting laughter, are not "funny" in the conventional sense. Connected to absurdity and grotesquerie, these moments of laughter provide cognitive conflicts of comic collapse, which leave us readers perplexed about the reasons of our laughter and their wider contextual implications.

63 Denoting both a mode of expression and communication (i.e. to be funny), as well as a mindset (i.e. to have a sense of humor, to be good-/ill-humored) the popular understanding of humor as the cause of laughter associated with a state of amusement and elation recurs to medieval physiology. According to this affective systematization, emotionally intemperate individuals were believed to suffer from a misbalance of their body fluids (lat. *umor* liquid, fluid). Thus, the "humours" of yellow bile, black bile, phlegm and blood were allocated to the tempers of a bilious, melancholic, phlegmatic and sanguine individual. Humor's physiological association based on this medical taxonomy of human temperament (i.e. mood-swings) was slowly superseded by a notion of humor as an internalized state of mind or feeling, and thus valued as a sign of originality, creativity.

64 Theories of "superiority," while often dealing with political, gender or ethnic jokes as their primal object of inquiry, emphasize the function of humor as a process of indirection in articulating an aggressive laughter directed *at*, i.e. against an allegedly inferior "other" onto which one's own fear of inferiority is projected.

65 Immanuel Kant has famously described laughter without using the term *incongruence*, stating that "[s]omething absurd (something in which, therefore, the understanding can of itself find no delight) must be present in whatever is to raise a convulsive. *Laughter is an affect arising from a strained expectation being suddenly reduced to nothing.*" *The Critique of Judgment.* 161.

66 Laughter, for Henri Bergson, is an effect of cognitive correction of a form of "mechanical inelasticity" (15). He conceives the (anti-) normative aspect of humor in terms of the incongruity between "the mechanical encrusted upon the living," whose sudden resolution can be conceived as a complementary aspect of *any* comic matter (39). Stereotypes, in this sense, can be seen as fixed or inelastic constellations "clashing with the inner suppleness of life" (45). *Laughter. An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic.* For Joachim Ritter, who provided the first major update of the incongruity and degradation/superiority theories of humor (1941), laughter emerges from a contrastive conflict with the norm of society and reason. Based in feelings of joy and amusement, however, it does not relegate the invalid, unreasonable, and ludicrous to the negative counter-dimension of the valid, reasonable, and sincere. Rather, laughter gives expression to the implication of the norm and its negation in the grand totality of life. "Über das Lachen."

67 Freud explains: the pleasure "in jokes has seemed to us to arise from an economy in expenditure upon inhibition, the pleasure in the comic from an economy in expenditure upon ideation (upon cathexis) and the pleasure in humor from an economy in expenditure upon feeling." *The Joke and Its Relation to the Unconscious.* 149.

68 "Das mag auch ein Grund dafür sein, weshalb es seine Reihe von Spielarten des Komischen gibt, die wir im allgemeinen als Formen des Komischen bezeichnen, wie Witz, Satire, Ironie und Humor. In ihnen ist dem Komischen als Kipp-Phänomen eine jeweils bestimmte 'Fassung' gegeben, und das heißt, die kollabierenden Positionen, die die Konstellation des Komischen ausmachen, sind einer gewissen erwartbaren Regulierung unterworfen. Dadurch wird der Grad der Überforderung herabgesetzt, die der Rezipient durch Komik erfährt. […] Die Kettenreaktion zusammenbrechender Position in der Konstellation des Komischen läßt sich durch unsere [emotionalen und kognitiven] Vermögen nicht mehr auf den Nenner bringen, und folglich befreien wir uns aus dieser Überforderung durch Lachen. Indem wir so diese Zusammenbrüche zum Unernst erklären, befreien wir uns nur insoweit von ihnen, als wir dadurch die geschwundene Distanz wieder herstellen, die zur Verarbeitung des Phänomens notwendig ist; oftmals erfolgt im Lachen selbst bereits diese Verarbeitung." "Das Komische: Ein Kipp-Phänomen." 401-402.

69 The comic is a pervasive poetic feature in Everett's project. Aside from the texts already mentioned in this study, *God's Country* is a revisionist Western that claims the Western as genre and the West as mythic topography for an African American experience erased from the American cultural imaginary. To a lesser degree, *Suder* (1983), Everett's debut novel, draws on comic forms with a satiric and surreal inflection. In contrast to the prevalent character-constellation of the white cowboy-hero and his racialized side-kick *God's Country* features the black tracker Bubba who is hired by the white low-life Curt Marder, the novel's I-narrator, to track down the abductors of his wife. Also, the central conflict does not occur between white Westerners (settlers or soldiers) and "Indians" but between Marder and a group of *white* raiders. The novel features a fictionalized version of Colonel George A. Custer, who protests what he refers to as the "Emasculation Declaration" by wearing women's clothes (127-28).

70 As Everett's race critique crucially centers on the black body as the corporeal site of racial subjugation, his texts frequently feature moments of grotesque physicality. Consider Not Sidney Poitier's ambivalently passive subjection to quasi-forced forms of fellatio, for instance. As a mute baby inspiring awe and fear, Ralph, too, has a grotesque effect on others. In this sense, these scenes of the grotesque comply with its general definition, namely the body-centered violation of nature's laws and taxonomies, with the specific aim of challenging culturally consolidated binaries of human sociality. In so doing, they thrive on the awkward and uncanny effects of the unfamiliar intruding that general state of affairs conventionally termed "normalcy." Everett's use of the grotesque, however, has nothing to do with deformation or mutilation, meaning markers of physical perversion meant to induce terror and horror. It, thus, seems unreasonable to regard the grotesque as a category of its own within Everett's poetic program and, rather, consider it a corollary aspect of his investment in absurdity specifically when the (black) body is involved.

71 "Es gehört bekanntlich – im Unterschied zur schlichten Polemik, Rüge, Invektive – wesentlich zur Satire, daß sie ihren Gegenstand durch Verformung erkennbar macht; das Satirische besteht in den verschiedenen Verzerrungs-, Verkürzungs-, Übertreibungsverfahren, denen die gemeinte Wirklichkeit nach den Modellen der Metonymie, der Synekdoche, der Hyperbel unterworfen sind. Die Satirische Darstellung beruht auf dem Prinzip der transparenten Einstellung. Aus solcher Relation des Präsentierten zum Repräsentierten resultiert doch hauptsächlich die Komik, und diese Komik läßt sich anstandslos mit der Ambivalenzerfahrung im Sinne [Helmut] Plessners, mit dem Erfassen der Geltung des für den Ernst Nichtigen im Sinne [Joachim] Ritters vereinbaren. Die Einheit von Gegensinnigem als Grund der Ambivalenzerfahrung liegt in der Interferenz von

Ausgefallenheit und Vertrautheit, von Abständigkeit und Kommensurabilität, von Verschiedenheit und Identität." "Zur Korrelation zwischen Satirischem und Komischem." 412-13.

72 This (co-) production of the literary text by its author and reader, then, suggests a notion of *genre* as both a *tradition*, a protocol of literary production, and a *technique*, meaning the formal implementation of this protocol. Sharing a unique receptive precondition with other literary text-models, the novel offers a "communicational contract" between the author and the reader. As its "textual repertoires and strategies simply offer a frame within which the reader must construct for himself the aesthetic object," the novel, Iser claims, provides a systematized incompleteness to enable this imaginative co-creation. *The Act of Reading*. 107.

73 As a comparatively recent literary phenomenon, the novel has taken a central position in literary practice, criticism and commercial distribution. Both the most widely institutionalized *and* inconsistent genre in the modern-day literary sphere, writers and scholars have grappled with the definitional dilemma that has characterized the novel since the beginning of its rise in the age of modernity. Henry James' famous estimation of the (18th century) novel as "a loose baggy monster" reverberates with the persisting problematic of classifying this format of narrative prose, which is associated with so-called "high" or "serious" conceptions of literary writing and, despite or precisely because of its pervasive (mass-) popularity remains charged with hopes of moral correction and cultural emancipation. This is not only evident in the modernist promotion of the novel as an art-form potentially capable of countering the culturally erosive effects of commercial mass-production. The notion that literary art, in general, and novelistic writing, in specific, can be utilized for racial reform by providing an artistic means of identifying and empathizing with a black subject struggling for social justice has been fundamentally important, if not originally constitutive of African American literature conceived as a collective cultural endeavor (cf. *The Signifying Monkey*, 140).

74 The novel has been considered a characteristic product of the dramatic shift coinciding with its emergence from unified and hierarchical notions of the world order towards the social decentering and diversification defining modernity. Georg Lukács has famously argued that the novel is a particularly well-suited medium for "the expression of this transcendental homelessness" (*The Theory of the Novel*, 41). If the novel was the quintessential medium of (its) modern time, the novel possesses an inherent potential for subversion and destabilization, Mikhail Bakhtin argues. In contrast to the "complete genres" of the classical canon (epic, drama, poetry), especially the mythical, monolithic and "official" quality of the epic, Bakhtin considered the novel as a "genre-in-the-making" (*Dialogic Imagination*, 11). This is what, according to Bakhtin, makes the novel a paradigmatically *modern* literary phenomenon with a distinct *social* core: it emerged during a historical phase of crisis and change: the collapse of the pre-industrial world order (and its normative vision of social totality) and the advent of modern society. Consequently, Bakhtin argues, the novel has retained this newly intensified antagonism between the individual and society and its technological and civil dimensions (the rise of mass-production and of the middle-class) inasmuch as it represents an aesthetic culmination point in the attempt to re-consider and re-define man's being in the social world.

75 Realism describes an epistemological mode prevalent in a wide range of philosophical, political and cultural discourses. In the literary sense, the term does not designate an essential state or mode of reference but a set of specific rules of representation particularly associated with 19th century novelism. Its close kinship with the novel is owed to the novel's foundational affinity with the everyday and ordinary lives of the non-aristocratic masses of the emerging middle-class. Everett subverts central statutes of realist storytelling. They puncture the ideal of detail as circumstantial information creating the illusion of verisimilitude. Also, they complicate aspects of probability and plausibility inherent in the notion of a "true to life" depiction of incidents and issues. Finally, they break with mimetic notions of textuality that presuppose a referential linearity between text and context, i.e. that a literary text can "point" to extratextual realities. Roland Barthes has debunked this realist representation as an "effect," a "referential illusion," whose aesthetic force stems from a peculiar disconnect between signifier and signified. In modern literature, this effect is created by functionalizing a seeming plethora of details, which, in implying a direct link between signifier and referent, bypass a signified, whose *absence* "becomes the very signifier of realism" (148). Modernism's "unavowed verisimilitude" contrasts with classic conceptions of the real that presupposed an opposition between verisimilitude (the lifelike) and "concrete" reality, the latter's self-sufficiency appearing "strong enough to belie any notion of 'function'." "In the ideology of our time," Barthes concludes, "obsessive reference to the 'concrete' (in what is rhetorically demanded of the human sciences, of literature, of behavior) is always brandished like a weapon against meaning, as if, by some statutory exclusion, what is alive cannot not signify – and vice versa" (146). "The Reality Effect" 1968.

76 Elizabeth Deeds Ermarth has pointed out that this lingering elevation of realism as the ultimate criterion of art has been supplanted by a "history of philosophy in which the term *realism* still indicates a kind of Reality Quotient, an indication that presumes the existence of a timeless Reality or stable truth that informs and accounts for appearances and that even presumes a distinction exists between 'reality' and 'appearances.' Such constructions of 'realism' may be traced back through the empiricist tradition of the 17th century, but also as far back in Western philosophy as the Scholastic Realists of the Middle Ages and to Plato." "Realism." *The Encyclopedia of the Novel*. 1072.

77 In the sense of "free-play" declared by Derrida as the antithesis of logos ("Structure Sign, and Play," 352), Everett's playful engagement with the novel bears strong resemblance with what has become a postmodern

convention: the breaking of frames and boundaries in an excessively self-conscious focus on structure (or "surface" in the Jamesian sense), as a cultural symptom of an increasingly diversified and fragmented society lacking a shared vision and experience of the world. In light of the "increasing difficulty to point out an encompassing aim for a society which has become more and more differentiated functionally," Lourens Minnema diagnoses the "recent Western scientific [and social] interest in play as a phenomenon and as a metaphor [as] characteristic for the way in which contemporary (post)modern culture sees itself: as play without a transcendent destination but not without the practical necessity of rules agreed upon and of (inter) subjective imagination, as a complex of games each one having its own framework, its own rules, risks, chances, and charms." "Play and (Post)modern Culture." 38-39.

78 The term *postmodern* here is conceived as a general periodizing concept, owing to the fact that it represents the widely acknowledged cultural reality of a decisive shift that has thrown the category of modern(ism) into crisis (cf. Jean-Francois Lyotard's famous notion of the "incredulity toward metanarratives," 1979; xxiv). Not only does Everett often reference (the works of) classic postmodernists such as Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. and Thomas Pynchon in- and outside of his fiction. These writers represent the core-roster of influences in his formation as a writer in the 1970s - 1980s (cf. his interview with William W. Starr, 20). That this characteristic "both-and-ness" of Everett's writing has been labeled both "post-postmodern" or in line with a new "new sincerity" prompts the problematic nature of our impulse for categorical consistency, both with specific regard to Everett's novels and contemporary literature, in general. Two prominent examples relating to Everett's work, Thomas Pynchon's *V* and Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse Five*, by no means promote an apolitical program of ironic indeterminacy. The most prominent attempt to challenge postmodernism's literary predominance, David Foster Wallace called for a "post-ironic" paradigm-shift ("Fictional Futures"). Emerging as a curious kind of self-fulfilling prophecy, "post-irony" – a concept that Wallace needed to distinguish himself from postmodernism, as his works seem to abide so conspicuously by this label's literary principles – was eagerly embraced by literary historiography. Often used synonymously with "new sincerity," the concept of the "post-postmodern" has been recently complemented by the notion of "meta-modernism." Subsumed under this label, various scholars have proclaimed a return of modernism as an aesthetic paradigm in contemporary literary practices, especially in the postcolonial context (cf. David James and Urmila Seshagiri's widely influential essay "Metamodernism: Narratives of Continuity and Revolution." 2014).

79 Significantly, the "postmodern critique of 'identity'," hooks suggests, can be relevant for a "renewed black liberation struggle," granted it helps to "reconstruct grounds for *collective* black liberation struggle" across economic and cultural camps (my emphasis). As the mass-success of black culture in the mainstream markets of cultural consumption, according to West, forces black artists to navigate the blurry line between artistic "crossover" and "de-Africanization" (396), bell hooks considers "creative writing" as "most reflective of a postmodern oppositional sensibility – work that is abstract, fragmented, non-linear narrative," which, as she stresses, (still) lacks a societally significant audience.

80 I have chosen Baldwin's quote on the *visual* dynamics of racialization as a reference-point for Ralph, a black baby that allegorizes African American literature. Ralph's *blackness* remains invisible to the reading "eye" (at first glance). See discussion.

81 The paratextual citations are taken from the following sources in order: Du Bois quoted in Henry Louis Gates, Jr. *Figures in Black: Words, Signs and the 'Racial' Self*. 166. Alain Locke. "Objective Self-Criticism." 60. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism*. 132. Amiri Baraka. "Black Art." 1943. Percival Everett. *Glyph*. 163.

82 Ralph's physiological precondition is based on the split between his corporeal limitations and his exceptional cognitive capabilities. The baby shares infants' unmitigated receptiveness to the world, i.e. their instinctive affinity for learning, experiencing external stimuli in a holistic fashion. However, Everett's protagonist is subjected to both the forces of the physical world (gravity and the order of magnitude, as well as mischievous adults) and its own body deficiency: immobility, incontinence, toothing, fatigue, psycho-emotional instability and crankiness. He has reduced control over his own body functions, above all, his motor-skills. Concerning deictic communication, he is able to nod and point at things irregularly. He is equally incapable of (fully) controlling his facial expression. Importantly, however, Ralph is able to move his fingers so as to *write*.

83 Investigating the disciplinary dynamics of "discursive formations" in modern-day knowledge-production and –regulation Foucault, in the case of Natural History, explains the taxonomic impulse as the scientific incentive to classify and categorize the elements of the natural world, including man himself. Compare: *Archeology of Knowledge*. 155, 174, 180. This "taxonomic science of beings on the basis of their visible characters" fundamentally influenced racial categorization and thinking, as Dorinda Outram explains. *The Enlightenment*. 75. The episteme implicit in these taxonomic systems subsumes "the total set of relations that unite, at a given period, the discursive practices that give rise to epistemological figures, sciences, and possibly formalized systems." *Archaeology*. 191.

84 Ralph here harks back to Plato and his famous "theory of forms," the classical solution to the problem of universals. Plato conceived of reality in a bifurcated way, differentiating between a material sphere of sensory perception and an immaterial dimension of universal knowledge encapsulated in what the philosopher called "forms." These essential properties, among which are goodness, beauty, are real yet immaterial, mind-

independent entities that structure reality and define the human modalities of knowledge, in contrast to which the sensorily experienced world represents a mere "shadow." In what he calls a "kind of self-erasure," Ralph seeks to allow "words to present themselves as what they were, referring to nothing other than their being" (9). In a Derridean manner, Ralph insinuates that spoken language contributes to the institutionalization of ideas (such as tableness) by naturalizing an allegedly stable and linear link between a referent ("table") and its referred-to object (a particular table). See discussion in subsequent chapter.

85 Language defines the formation of the self in its interaction with these symbolic structures (customs, laws, and traditions) not as a *vehicle* of articulation but as a *medium* of human self-expression and -consciousness. According to Lacan, it is constituted in that "locus" of otherness, which the mother *first* represents, namely the "Other" (cf. *Seminar III*). With his famous dictum of the unconscious being "structured like a language" (cf. *Seminar XI*, 20) Lacan posits the language of the unconscious "as structuring the social laws of exchange, as a symbolic pact […,] the single paradigm of all structures" (Evans, 97).

86 Ralph's lack of speech leads his father to conclude: "'Maybe he's mildly retarded.' 'Maybe, he's just stupid,' my mother said and so stationed herself in my thinking as the brighter of the two. I smiled my baby smile at her, unnerving her on a level that her speech kept her from knowing" (7).

87 Ralph's theory of fictive space corresponds with the section-titles' spatial metaphoricity (cf. "The Straight and Narrative," for instance. This symbiosis between geometrical and intellectual space culminates in the novel's concluding punch-line: "The line is everything" (see discussion).

88 Consider the Graywolf edition's book cover, accessible on: https://percivaleverettsocietydotcom.files.wordpress.com/2016/09/13f-glyph-us-paper.jpg.

89 This particular reading of Ralph as a human guinea pig, as it were, is visualized in the book cover of the French translation (Paris, Actes Sudes, 2008; trans. Anne-Laure Tissut), accessible on the homepage of the Percival Everett International Society: https://percivaleverettsocietydotcom.files.wordpress.com/2016/09/13e-glyph-french-cloth.jpg

90 Ideally, Plato argued, beauty should be an objective quality of being rather than an experiential effect. Postulating an intrinsic correspondence between beauty, truth and goodness, the philosopher saw art as an imitation of nature and the poet as a third-degree imitator dependent on divine inspiration (by God or the Muses), who represented man's apperception of the objective reality of nature. Elevating poetics to a discipline of the arts, Aristotle defined it as a craft with rules, whose prime purpose is mimesis and whose prime effect is catharsis.

91 Ralph's artistic skill set resonates with the Renaissance ideal of (cultural) rejuvenation and reorientation towards Antiquity for the propagation of new standards in society and art: "It might be said of me that I am a throwback to the Renaissance, not insofar as I am particularly accomplished in several areas or even one, but because I create not as an act of expression, but rather to exercise my craft, whether poetic or not" (73).

92 In specific, Ralph personifies the Romanticist creative concerns of autonomy, individuality and solipsism. Its specific association with literature (poetry) recurs to the German Romanticist era and the Sturm und Drang moment, in specific. Since then, the term is associated with both positive and negative appositions such as creativity, spontaneity, originality and autonomy, lack of tradition and inconceivability.

93 Specifically, with regard to the decoding of God's Word made flesh in *Jesus*, Ralph echoes the messiah's immaculate conception. Also, consider Mo's name "Eve," the "earth mother," for instance. *Glyph*'s potential allegorical reading is signaled in Ralph's reference of the Curse of Ham, which thus, significantly, prefigures his racial self-revelation twelve pages later: "Knowledge of my ability to see the world caused my father to act as if he were the drunken Noah at the end of the ark's voyage and I, Ham. But there were no Shem and Japheth to hide his nakedness." (32).

94 Based on a mimetic notion of art, humanist hermeneutics focused on literary texts as portraits of fictional characters resembling real human beings based on their onto-experiential perception, offering, in a mirror-like fashion, reflections on society and the Zeitgeist, as well as human nature more generally.

95 Ralph alludes to Reader Response Theory and its European and Anglo-American variants of reader-oriented criticism, specifically Wolfgang Iser's concept of textual "blanks" as the constitutive incentive for textual interpretation. Consider Ralph's remarks: "In fact, attempts at filling my articulatory gaps with a kind of subtext, though it might prove an amusing exercise, will uncover nothing" (31).

96 Consider Ralph's hilarious four-liner on Speech Act Theory's pragmatic conception of communicative language-use: "'*Killed she was, with an illocutionary ax.*' '*She didn't have a chance, I heard.*' '*Done as soon as said, it was.*' '*Say it isn't so.*'" (180)

97 *Glyph* is a conspicuously paradigmatic postmodern satire. It incorporates various conventions associated with this broad denominator of culture and cultural practice. Ralph's rant against the "-isms" and divisions of modern-day Western thought, is loaded with shibboleths, schemes and themes all deemed postmodern "classics": frame-breaking (mise-en-abyme; cf. Ralph's reference of the Möbius topology on page 177), intertextuality ("citationality;" cf. Kristeva's notion of the "mosaic"), pastiche (Jameson: "blank parody") and irony. Ralph even alludes to Fredric Jameson's notion of "depthlessness"/"superficiality": "My meaning is surface" (31).

98 Ralph's mock-poststructuralist version of binary-dissection reads accordingly: "no other reading than the one I intend is possible and I defy any interpretation beyond my mission. To seek that meaning is to serve and work with my system. This is my language and only mine, my units, my pieces, my game. However […, like] all stories, any of these I offer here has another side" (163, 168). The "basic steps of the ontological argument for the existence of god," Ralph states, "are easily described: a) assume: a being such that none greater can be conceived does not exist. b) being such that none greater can be conceived is not a being such that none greater can be conceived. c) therefore: a being such that none greater can be conceived exists. That's it. I will not quarrel with the argument, offer objections to its form, premises, implicit assumptions, or its mission. I will only ask that you entertain further: **a) assume: Ralph does not exist. b) Ralph is not Ralph. c) therefore: Ralph exists**" (28-29). Putatively proving the existence of God by way of a logical twist, ontological arguments such as the one above presuppose existence as an a priori, i.e. as a predicate. This circular logic inevitably leads to a reductio ad absurdum, which Ralph ridicules by proving his own existence. This argumentative method was later reiterated by René Descartes, whose famous dictum "cogito ergo sum" figures prominently in Everett's writing, too. Everett's repurposing of the Cartesian Cogito ridicules the modern western conception of the autonomous subject, whose consciousness (of itself and the world) is grounded in self-sufficiency and self-transparency. Ralph's contrafactum of the cogito reads "taedet me ergo sum" ("I am bored therefore I am," 10).

99 These terms include différance, pharmakon, unties of simulacrum, supplement, bedeuten, spacing, ennuyeux, libidinal economy, peccatum originale, ens realissimum, causa sui, supernumber, seme, ephexis, incision, "bridge," Vexierbild, vita nova, degrees, anfractous, ootheca, tubes 1…6, donne lieu, umstände, exousai, derivative and subjective-collective. In the very last section, significantly, "différance," the *first* subheading of the preceding chapters, is replaced by "difference." The section-titles include in sequential order: "Deconstruction Paper," "A Plot With A View," "Pronounced Articulations," "Figures and a Pair of Graphs," "The Straight and Narrative," "Lost in Place," "The Period is the Point" and "Shades are Just Dark Glosses".

100 Ralph's thought-provoking aphorisms include the following: "the shortest distance between two meanings is a straight ambiguity," 106; "there is no such thing as digression," 127; there is no such thing as a non sequitur," ibid; "there is only authorial intrusion," 128.

101 Bercovitch's criticism of disciplinary inertia, to be precise, is part of his intervention in the moment of consolidation of cultural studies in American Studies. Promoting "open dialogue in the humanities," he seeks to retain "the literary" and its hermeneutic heritage in the scholarly spectrum of academic inquiry.

102 One could even relate Ralph's training and assignment as a spy to the military legacy of black soldiers fighting for the very country that denied them their basic human and civil rights (think, for instance, of "The Varnum's Regiment," the Civil War's famous 54th black regiment, and the African American soldiers stationed in Europe during and after the Second World War).

103 Critical race theory (CRT) was initiated by a group of scholars of law in the late 1970s, most notably Derrick Bell, the first tenured African American professor at Harvard law school, and the white SUNY-Buffalo teacher Alan Freeman. Bell and Freeman promoted racial reform against the increasing political and public retreat from race-centered concerns. Rooted in legal scholarship, CRT today terms an interdisciplinary framework of radically race-centered scholarship in areas as diverse as law- and policy-making, education, economics, historiography, biology and culture. Among the movement's most prominent members are Kimberlé Crenshaw and Richard Delgado, as well as its associated contributors Stuart Hall and Henry Louis Gates Jr. The collective's common concern, E. Nathanial Gates states in his 1997 anthology, is to investigate the *structural* dynamics of racism by problematizing "current racial categories and representations of contemporary social and cultural others [that] derive their status as self-evident 'common-sense' from what we know to be a biological fallacy, [and reveal how these] depassed, yet culturally resonant, naturalistic notions of 'race' continue to be pressed into the service of new projects of representation and cultural construction." *Critical Race Theory. Cultural and Literary Critiques of the Concept of 'Race.'* Viii.

104 In chafing against black cultural nationalism, Gates argued that since the Civil Rights turn African Americans "lacked any instrumentality of ideological analysis, beyond the attempts of the Black Power and Black Aesthetic movements, to *invert* the signification of 'blackness' itself. Recognizing that what had passed for 'the human,' or 'the universal' was in fact white essentialism, we substituted one sort of essentialism (that of 'blackness') for another. That, we learned quickly enough, was just not enough." Gates and his colleagues updated this nationalist essentialism with the strategic essentialism of the vernacular, which, in Gates' case, allows for a culturally specific account of blackness rooted in the cultural practice of figurative language-use itself. "'What's in a Name?' Some Meanings of Blackness." 138.

105 Ralph echoes the black victims of scientific abuse in the Tuskegee experiments (1932-72). Former President Bill Clinton's formal apology to the black men exploited in the U.S. Public Health Service's syphilis study in 1997 could be considered as one of *Glyph's* contextual side marks.

106 Hortense Spillers, to be clear, focuses on the black *female* subject to retrace the peculiar cultural dynamics of "unmaking" promoted by these racial rhetorics of Americanization. These dynamics manifest most prominently in stereotypical ascriptions of pathological black kinship (cf. Spillers' discussion of the Moynihan Report and its *matrimonial* model of the dysfunctional black family). This systematic denial of familial "belongingness," Spillers argues, was necessary to cement the permanent degradation of the black captive body

in the hegemonic relation of property, which originated with the Middle Passage, where "the captive personality did not know where s/he was, we could say that they were the cultural 'unmade,' thrown in the midst of a figurative darkness that 'exposed' their destinies to an unknown course. […] We might say that the slave ship, its crew, and its human-as-cargo stand for a wild and *unclaimed richness of possibility* that is not interrupted, not 'counted'/'accounted,' or differentiated, until its movement gains the land thousands of miles away from the point of departure. Under these conditions, one is neither female, nor male, as both subjects are taken into 'account' as *quantities*. The female in 'Middle Passage,' as the apparently smaller physical mass, occupies 'less room' in a directly translatable money economy. But she is, nevertheless, quantifiable by the same rules of accounting as her male counterpart" (my emphases). "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe." 72.

107 Mimicking the black "con," Ralph begins to work out in order to get stronger leg muscles for his future attempt at running away: "In my crib, I did deep knee bends while holding onto the rails. Just standing, bouncing, and walking around the confines of my cage I felt new strength and better balance" (70). Imagining the toddler plot his escape in a stereotypical prison-scenario (of physical exercise) adds to the grotesque comicality that undergirds Ralph's ontological excursion.

108 While Dr. Steimmel promotes a modern-day version of psychoanalysis, which Everett contrasts with the Doctors Kiernan, who represent the modern origins of psychotherapy and its bizarre pseudo-scientific offshoots. Precisely, the Kiernans subscribe to the holistic notion of mental disorder as a medical disease, to be cured by subjecting patients to near-death experiences. Thus, they believe "that a return to the thinking of the eighteenth century was the path to doing away with mental disorders, believing as they did that all madness, and they insisted on calling it madness, was due to the absence of reason" (71).

109 Curiously enough, this study coincides with the passing of Koko the signing gorilla, whom we might think of as the historical foil for Ronald. In addition to a substantial number of signs that her instructor Francine Patterson taught her, Koko was able to comprehend various words of spoken English. The gorilla's facility for syntax – i.e., the recursive component of language – remains disputed, however.

110 The paratextual quotes are from these sources in order: Ralph Ellison. *Invisible Man*. 139. Malcolm X quoted in Michael Phillips. "North Texas' Black Art and Literature During the 1920s and 1930s." 30. Percival Everett. *Erasure*. 1.

111 Printed on the book cover of the 2011 Graywolf Edition (St. Paul), it divides the text into eighteen sections, each of which is introduced by a sequential number. Smaller textual units, in addition, are subdivided by the "X" in pairs of three.

112 For a reader, who is as well-read as Monk, the narrator's offer to call him by his middle name proves to be an adaptation of *Moby Dick*'s narrator's signature introductory phrase: "Call me Ishmael." Everett, thus, presents Monk as a type of survival artist like Ishmael, who joins Captain Ahab on his iconic quest to hunt the white whale Moby Dick. This hunting for "whiteness," which in Melville's novel represents the archetypal unknown, enigmatic, and unwritten, in *erasure* relates to Monk's struggle for mastering the *narrative* means to recount and make sense of his life (-story).

113 "That's just the way it is" has to be read as a conspicuous pop-cultural reference to Bruce Hornsby's hit "The Way It Is" (1986) and 2Pac's cover "Changes" (1998), which serves, in addition, as a contextual marker of *erasure*'s culture-historical context.

114 While we readers may share this reflexive approach to race, we are provoked to ponder Monk's struggle as a case in point for the immense difficulty of negotiating such a constructivist outlook on race with its empirical effects.

115 At his first official reception with the Brotherhood, the Invisible Man encounters Brother Jack's aide Emma, who asks her superior: "'But don't you think he [the Invisible Man] should be a little blacker?' […as the Invisible Man thinks to himself:] 'So she doesn't think I'm black enough. What does she want, a black-face comedian? Who is she, anyway, Brother Jack's wife, his girl friend? Maybe she wants to see me sweat coal tar, ink, shoe polish, graphite. What was I, a man or a natural resource?'" *Invisible Man*. 303.

116 After his unsettling Battle-Royal experience, the Invisible Man dreams about a letter – echoing the "official-looking" document detailing his "scholarship to the state college for Negroes" – in an envelope with an official state seal, which in engraved golden letters states: "Keep This [N-word]-Boy Running" (*Invisible Man* 32-33).

117 My repurposing of the figure of speech, "to hide in plain sight," here hints at Monk's attempt to write a stereotypical "black" ghetto story so preposterously contrived that his audience *has to* notice its brutal irony covered beneath what he conceives as a thin layer of faked authenticity.

118 Gilroy describes multiculturalism as a "master narrative," which subsumes three types: "corporate, commercial, and oppositional." *Between Camps*. 241. In essence, *erasure* denounces any political notion of "multiculturalized" resistance to hegemonic frameworks of selfhood and group-belongingness to counter their assimilative force of normalizing heterocultural citizenship.

119 The learnable forms, in which race attains meaning in social and literary contexts, are highly situation-dependent and can - by implication - be manipulated, if not reversed. Being black in America means, Everett claims accordingly, means "you're exotic in certain places and certain times. You're exotic if you're in New York and you're brown and you happen to be a Cheyenne Indian. But if you're black, 'you're not exotic, we're used to you.' You're exotic in that awful way if you show up at a fancy party and you're the only black person

there. But on the street, you're not exotic. And the same would be true of white Americans who wander into a party full of black people. But they're not exotic. They're simply out of place. And that's how it's perceived, *by everyone*. It's a wonderfully f*cked up culture we live in." Interview with Anthony Stewart. 124. My emphasis.

120 Japtok and Jenkins, here, quote from Stuart Hall's essay "Ethnicity: Identity and Difference." 1989. *Becoming National: A Reader*. Geoff Eley and Ronald Grigor Suny (eds.). New York: Oxford University Press, 1996. 344.

121 Similar to that protest fiction discussed by Everett here, the music products of black Hip Hop artists are consumed by a largely white, middle-class audience.

122 James Baldwin retraces this strategy of pamphleteering, often articulated in sentimentalist fashion, to Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, which he deems as an arche-text of the protest tradition. Her book, Baldwin argues, "was not intended to do anything more than prove that slavery was wrong; was, in fact, perfectly horrible. This makes material for a pamphlet but it is hardly enough for a novel; and the only question left to ask is why we are bound still within the same constriction. How is it that we are so loath to make a further journey than made by Mrs. Stowe, to discover and reveal something a little bit closer to the truth?" "Everybody's Protest Novel." 14-15.

123 In this article, Reed refers to the "industry" of news reporting, chastising The New York Times as "a black pathology supermarket," concluding that the "only difference between white pathology and black pathology is that white pathology is underreported." "The Black Pathology Biz."

124 "Side-poke" is really putting it mildly given Everett's rebuttal of Oprah's commercial monopoly on literary promotion: "Oprah should stay the fuck out of literature and stop pretending she knows anything about it, in the same way that people should stop giving any credence to book reviews on Amazon.com. And people should get educated so they can read all sorts of things and have their lives and society become richer." Interview with Rone Shavers. 64.

125 Everett's attack prompts pressing concerns about satire as a gendered aesthetic practice. In the historical perspective, African American satire can be considered as a male-codified discourse. This, obviously, raises questions about power, privilege and the cultural dynamics undergirding this strategy of criticism, which characteristically transgresses borders of taste, propriety, and loyalty. In chapter 2, I have attempted to answer some of these questions that relate to institutional status, cultural capital and economic means.

126 The name of Monk's Random House editor, Paula Baderman, suggests a (German-) Jewish ancestry, too.

127 *Amos and Andy*, widely considered an American entertainment classic, was launched as a Chicago-based radio show in 1928 on WMAQ. As a spin-off from an earlier version titled *Sam and Andy*, the show featured comic skits set in Harlem that centered on the black characters Amos and Andy scripted and performed by the white hosts Freeman Gosden and Charles Correll. Aired as a nightly radio serial between 1928 and 1943, and as a weekly comedy series between 1943 and 1955, it was televised from 1951 until 1953 on CBS, eventually featuring an all-black cast. The show's extensive use of black dialect and stereotypes has added to its controversial status as a commercial adaptation of traditional minstrel forms of racial humor.

128 Critics widely agree that his first murder of Mary Dalton is unintentional, since Bigger did not plan to kill her. When the blind Mrs. Dalton enters Mary's room Bigger tries to keep her from detecting his presence. The Daltons, who behave as benevolent patrons of blacks, own the South Side tenements where the Thomas family lives. The fact that Mr. Dalton participates in what is today known as "redlining" - keeping the rents up, so the black tenants such as the Thomas family are forced to stay and suffer where they are - is one of the ambivalences which make Wright's narrative so disturbingly powerful. Rape and the novel's inherent allusion to it is probably *the* most controversial issue of *Native Son*. The narrative makes no definite allusion as to whether Mary would have consented to have intercourse with Bigger or not: "She tossed and mumbled *sleepily*. He tightened his fingers on her breasts, kissing her again, feeling her *move toward him*." *Native Son*. 116. My emphasis. It is important to bear in mind, too, that "rape" itself is a highly problematic term - it is difficult to speak of Bigger raping Mary when in fact his whole life constitutes an act of rape. Above all, Wright challenges the most fundamental common held view of Jim Crow America: the fear of black male and white female miscegenation.

129 Merciful death or murder? Again, it seems inappropriate to adhere to a consistent category of either sort. Bigger kills Bessie for he could not have escaped with her. Concomitantly, Bigger spares her the suffering and the fear that he has to bear thenceforth.

130 Significantly, *Native Son*, which resembles a detective story after all, is told from the perspective of the perpetrator rather than from that of an investigating character. Indeed, Wright seems determined to force the reader to identify with the psychological anguish of this murderer, almost to the point of a literary Stockholm Syndrome, as it were. Officer Britten and attorney Buckley, the representatives of the political authorities, are unthinkable as protagonists simply because Wright's concern is not with the crime, it is with what the crime does to Bigger.

131 The name "Van Go Jenkins," obviously, is a difficult one to unpack. For one, it clearly alludes to the Dutch painter Van Gogh, who inflicted violence on himself and cut his own ear in a conflict with the French artist Paul Gauguin. Related to Monk's protagonist, it is this bizarre mixture of madness and method that undergirds Van Go's unrestrained virility and ultra-authentic "realness," which, however, seems to lack any creative impulse but

rather results in pathological depravity. In contrast to his first name's connotation, Van Go suggests a fundamental ignorance towards the wider cultural complexity of humanity and society.

132 The conception of metafiction applied in this book is orientated towards Werner Wolf's discussion of aesthetic illusion. Focusing on its capacities of undermining illusion, Wolf defines metafiction as subsuming various intra-fictional strategies that establish a secondary discourse about the narrativity and fictionality of a text and literature, in general. "Metafiktional sind binnenfiktionale metaästhetische Aussagen und alle autoreferentiellen Elemente eines Erzähltextes, die unabhängig von ihrer impliziten oder expliziten Erscheinung als Sekundärdiskurs über nicht ausschließlich als histoire bzw. (scheinbare) Wirklichkeit begriffene Teile des eigenen Textes, von fremden Texten und von Literatur allgemein den Rezipienten in besonderer Weise Phänomene zu Bewußtsein bringen, die mit der Narrativik als Kunst und namentlich ihrer Fiktionalität [...] zusammenhängen" (sic). *Ästhetische Illusion und Illusionsdurchbrechung in der Erzählkunst*. 228.

133 The paradoxical premise of autobiographical discourse, namely the autobiographer's death presupposed by the imperative of biographical totality, has a long-standing history in black letters (cf. Gates *The Signifying Monkey*, 235). It is based on the reductive alignment between the narrating "I" and its authorial originator. It alludes to the autobiography of *the* iconic race radical, namely Malcolm X. Monk's preparation for the (impending) eventuality of his demise and the disclosure of his journal ("I cannot know the time of my coming death [...]ince however, I will be dead"; 1) echoes Malcolm X's ominous proclamation: "[i]t has always been my belief that I, too, will die by violence. I have done all that I can to be prepared." *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. 2.

134 With this reference to Nazism and the Nazis' systematic banning and eradication of so-called "degenerate" art, Monk adds a particularly bitter undertone to his experience of "categorical" violence inflicted on him as a writer reductively labeled as "African American."

135 Upon entering a bookstore-chain, Monk "went to Literature and did not see me. I went to Contemporary Fiction and did not find me, but when I fell back a couple of steps I found a section called African American Studies and there, arranged alphabetically and neatly, read *undisturbed*, were four of my books including my *Persians* of which the only thing ostensibly African American was my jacket photograph." 28.

136 *Erasure* is intertextually related to Balzac's *Sarrasine*, too, as Monk's struggle as a writer is defined by his inability to (pre-) estimate the symbolic repercussions of his (artistic) actions. Like Sarrasine, he is equally ignorant of the cultural logic undergirding the sociocultural discourse, in which he is invested, and in which he becomes the victim of cultural clichés concerning art and identity.

137 Given *Glyph*'s specific scenario, Ralph's "babiness" does not so much provoke questions of reliability but of knowability and representability. In other words, asking whether Ralph is reliable or not means to miss the point of Everett's experiment. Thus, it is more productive to ask what we could or would see "differently" if perceiving the world of ideas, people and bad weather – in Ralph's words – through the eyes of a baby. This, too, holds true for Ralph's belated racial self-revelation, which, after all, is an exercise in racial re-thinking, meant *not* to destabilize Ralph's narratorial integrity but the reader's habitualized reading expectations.

138 Notice that after saving his mother from a dangerous "episode" on the lake, during which Monk nearly drowns, Marilyn "helped me to my feet and I think I actually coughed up some water." 169.

139 The drastic impact of Mae Jenkins' success on Monk is further highlighted by the fact that it not only affects his *professional* but also *private* life. Notice that Monk, thus, breaks up with Marilyn because she read *We's Lives In Da Ghetto* and – significantly – thinks it's "pretty good." 187.

140 This allusion to Gertrude Stein's iconic dictum of the rose is indicative, once again, of Everett's preoccupation with language and its referential imponderabilities.

141 This chapter entails portions of my article titled "You People Almost Had Me Hating You Because of the Color of Your Skin": Symbolic Violence and Black In-Group Racism in Percival Everett's *I Am Not Sidney Poitier*" published in *Power Relations in Black Lives. Reading African American Literature and Culture with Bourdieu and Elias* (ed. Christa Buschendorf, Bielefeld: Transcript, 2018). The paratextual citations are taken from: Barack Obama. "Remarks by the President at the 'Let Freedom Ring' Ceremony Commemorating the 50th Anniversary of the March on Washington." Sidney Poitier as John Wade Prentice, Jr. *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*. Percival Everett. *I Am Not Sidney Poitier*. 43.

142 The resulting irony is not lost on Not Sidney Poitier: "My mother's insistence on my reading as much as possible made me bored in school. I never imagined that I was terribly bright, but I turned out to be extremely well educated" (30).

143 Consider his dubious encounter with his white history teacher Ms. Hancock as she tries to engage in oral intercourse with him: "'I don't know about this, Miss Hancock.' I took a step back. If I had only added a 'gee' in front of my statement, I could have been completely the cliché I felt like – Beaver Cleaver getting a hummer" (35). When Not Sidney Poitier meets his extremely class-conscious light-black parents-in-law-to-be, he "came to imagine them as Ward and June Cleaver," Beaver's parents (137).

144 Everett's novel, after all, very much reads like an absurd adoption fantasy of America's young black male other. Consider, for instance, that Not Sidney Poitier is an orphan and in search of (his) family and the origin of his peculiar identity. His episodic cross-sectional encounters, thus, have a strong connotation of adoption, as they foreground themes of family, philanthropy and group-belongingness. A particularly characteristic case in point

for the prominence of white liberal narratives of black adoption is the movie *The Blind Side* (2009), which portrays the rise of the black adolescent Michael Oher, who, after being adopted by the white Southern Tuohy family, achieves a stellar rise from poverty to the National Football League as an offensive lineman for the Baltimore Ravens.

145 "These were sad people, and for the world I wanted to think of them as decent. Perhaps they were decent enough, but the place that made them was so offensive to me that all who lived there became *there*. I wondered how a little education might benefit them, but I came to the same conclusion. Well, sort of a conclusion, as I hadn't reasoned toward it at all. I believed they were all ego, but hardly conscious." (75)

146 This is an explicit satiric nod at BET highlights the novel's parallelization of the "post-racial" era and the rise of the commercialization of blackness in the 1980s. BET was founded in 1980, at the beginning of the decade that saw the rise of one of the wealthiest and most widely influential African American figures in the U.S. entertainment industry: Oprah Winfrey.

147 This estimation is further substantiated by the fact that the novel has been the most recent text to engage with race and its post-Civil Rights realities in a satiric way, so far.

148 This play on and with the name, which in his racial satires so extensively and deliberately blurs borders of fiction and fact, prompts questions about the author's own name and authorial persona. Although such an attempt seems dangerously prone to the same reductions and assumptions associated with the celebrity-centered cult of (African American) authorship that Everett ('s fiction) so adamantly undermines, *I Am Not Sidney Poitier* seems to explicitly call for such an investigation.

149 Compare: "'Tell me, is your name really Not?' 'Not Sidney,' I corrected her. 'Not Sidney.' 'That's what my mother named me.' 'It's quite an interesting name.' If you say so.' 'May I ask, is your father Sidney Poitier?' 'No.' I answered quite definitely, […] but I also had no idea who my father was." 84.

150 Each of these readings fails to grasp the linguistic complexity of Not Sidney Poitier's name. Together, however, they provide a comprehensive spectrum of the nuances of his nominal peculiarity.

151 "I imagined," Not Sidney Poitier muses, that Ted Turner "considered Not to be an *actual name* and couldn't believe it would be simply the single syllable it was. So, it came out *Nu'ott*, the same way god became *ga'awd* for the evangelist on the street in downtown Decatur" (11).

152 "'I don't even like yer name. Potay.' 'That's fine by me.' 'You makin' fun of me, boy?' he asked. 'Nature beat me to that,' I said." (58). In addition, Not Sidney Poitier is called various incomprehensible nicknames, some of them sexually suggestive: "Elephant Boy," "Late Nate," "Ready Freddy" (5).

153 Reflecting on the Afrocentric notion of "Négritude" by Léopold Sédar Senghor, Fanon first embraces and later dismisses this model of black culture: "Had I read that right? I read it again with redoubled attention. From the opposite end of the white world a magical Negro culture was hailing me. Negro sculpture! I began to flush with pride. Was this our salvation?" *Black Skin, White Masks*. 93.

154 Among Hollywood's most recent reiterations of this figure are *The Green Mile* (1999), *The Family Man* (2000), *The Legend of Bagger Vance* (2000), as well as *The Matrix Trilogy* (1999-2003).

155 Appiah adds that *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* is "quaint in part because it seems to defer too much to racist assumptions, so that, by our standards, it simply cannot succeed in the cultural work it mapped out for itself as an argument against prejudice. But it can hardly be thought that its being in this sense racist – laced with evidences of the racial condescension of its cultural producers and the audiences they imagined – establishes that it will encourage racism now." "'No Bad Nigger'." 84.

156 Heather Hicks has provided a thorough discussion of the distinct *economic* connotations that such black magical assistance can acquire. In movies such as *Unbreakable* (2000), black magical characters "clearly are not friends [of whites]. Nor are they saints. They are ghosts, or, at least, tips of a historical iceberg jutting into the present. And, as such, they are provocateurs, forcing latent troubles into the light of the day. The films themselves drip with nostalgia: nostalgia for the era of superman, for the 'simpler' times when white men's authority was less assailable, when Capra's George Bailey could be sure he had made the right decision in foregoing his own dreams for his family and community. Yet along with this nostalgia comes the haunting presence of other lingering histories: black men systematically excluded from public, paid work because of the threat to white male hegemony they might pose if they had economic power. So in these films they emerge as if from another dimension, 'magical' not only, as Farley suggests, because their daily lives are a mystery, but because their very means of existence are a mystery. What powers them must be magic, the films imply, because it cannot be the simple dollars and cents that keeps the rest of America moving." "Hoodoo Economics: White Men's Work and Black Men's Magic in Contemporary American Film." 51. For a comprehensive survey of Hollywood movies reinventing the racial topos of the magical black man see Audrey Colombe. "White Hollywood's New Black Boogeyman."

157 Willis identifies peculiar instances of racial repression, displacement and condensation in Poitier's movies, as they abound with "ironies that suggest unconscious effects, […while] Poitier's own compulsive repetition as an idealized 'good object' seems to signal the return of the repressed" (21). These movies are haunted by the very racial realities they so ambivalently address (see discussion on next page). Tapping into and giving expression of what she calls "defensive fantasies" of a white liberal racial unconsciousness. They represent "Hollywood's contribution to a white cultural compulsion to find – and stabilize – a reliably 'good' black object,

a figure that represents both reassurance and reparation" (22). They thus "work toward a fantasmatic reparation of racial conflict, replaying essentially the same drama of reconciliation to offer idealized resolutions that must repress political and material violence around race in the real world" (ibid). *The Poitier Effect*.

158 It is important to stress, though, that over the course of his career, Poitier responded to criticism by taking on roles that presented seemingly less sanitized black male characters, who were embedded in more markedly "black" contexts (of music, for instance, associated with his co-star Abbey Lincoln, a black Jazz singer, in *For Love of Ivy*, 1968; dir. by Daniel Mann) or more "aggressively" protest racism (*In the Heat of the Night* 1967).

159 Social class is an extremely controversial concern in the U.S. While some accounts differentiate between varyingly diverse strata of America's class structure in terms of wealth, education and professional standing, there are some that categorically deny the existence of class as a social category in the traditional sense of Marxist theory.

160 "Ask yourself," Baldwin suggests in conclusion, why "liberals are so delighted with the movie *The Defiant Ones*. It ends, if you remember, when Sidney Poitier, the black man, having been chained interminably to Tony Curtis, the white man, finally breaks the chain, is on the train, is getting away, but no, he doesn't go, doesn't leave poor Tony Curtis down there on the chain gang. Not at all. He jumps off the train and they go buddy-buddy back together to the same old Jim Crow chain gang. Now this is a fable. Why? Who is trying to prove what to whom? I'll tell you something. I saw that movie twice. I saw it downtown with all my liberal friends, who were delighted when Sidney jumped off the train. I saw it uptown with my less liberal friends, who were furious. When Sidney jumped off that train they called him all kinds of unmentionable things. Well, their reaction was at least more honest and more direct. Why is it necessary at this late date, one screams at the world, to prove that the Negro doesn't really hate you, he's forgiven and forgotten all of it? Maybe he has. That's not the problem. *You* haven't. And that *is* the problem." "The Uses of the Blues." 77-78.

161 Maurice O. Wallace states that *Native Son* may be "the locus classicus of the problem of black male spectacularity in American prose." *Constructing the Black Masculine*. 34.

162 "Black men are densely mythogenic, the object of layered fictions produced by others. […] And like other mythogenic people [to whom Tailor allocates other minorities such as Jews], Black men are, as if in self-defense, prolific generators of self-descriptive legends." Tailor concedes, however, that there is a "reductionist tendency to suppose that the brilliant music and other art in the vicinity are a sociological 'by-product' of the crucible where Black and male intersect. But the stance, the defiance, the poised arrogance must partly be figured as counter-myth." "The Game." 169.

163 Neal's observation echoes Thelma Golden's seminal assessment that "[w]ith the help of print and television media, black men have become symbolic icons for the nation's ills. They personify rampant criminality (Willie Horton), perverse promiscuity (Wilt Chamberlain [and Nushawn Williams]), sexual harassment (Clarence Thomas), date rape (Mike Tyson), and spousal abuse (O.J. Simpson)." "My Brother." 22.

164 Characteristic for the sign-theoretical depth and cultural scope of Everett's writing, Not Sidney Poitier refers to the idiosyncratic form often associated with black vernacular discourse: the double negation - e.g. "ain't no."

165 In *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942), Albert Camus has laid the philosophical groundwork for what later came to be known as the absurdist movement in European literature and theater.

166 In the age of Trayvon Martin and Eric Garner, Not Sidney Poitier's case rings with a particularly bitter undertone, as it prompts to the continuing series of (police) shootings and beatings of unarmed black male adolescents and adults that are part of a ritualized series of encounters between blacks and the authorities.

167 Notice the subtle signal of fictional negation inscribed into the capitalization of Everett's novel *erasure*, which, according to the author, should be written in lowercased letters.

168 Other notable writers utilizing an overt or implicit double of their authorial self in their writing include Kurt Vonnegut (*Slaughter House Five*), but also Dante Alighieri (*The Divine Comedy*) and Francois Rabelais (*Gargantua and Pantagruel*). In the realm of cinema, Alfred Hitchcock has been famous for his cameo appearances in his own movies.

169 In *The Doppelgänger: Literature's Philosophy* (2010), Vardoulakis attempts to recuperate the doppelganger from its psychological over-use, reclaiming instead its deeply ontological and thus philosophical quality. As a resisting presence, this figure is neither bad nor good, the scholar claims. Rather, "it is the element of formal relationality that structures the subject's ontology." 3.

170 Christian Schmidt points out that this connotative meaning helps to foreground the game- or race-like dynamic of Not Sidney Poitier's picaresque quest of racial misrecognition. Thus, the word "dead-ringer" also designates a race-horse fraudulently smuggled into a contest.

171 When in the upper-class domain of the Larkins' home, Not Sidney Poitier reiterates this impression: "they had all blurred together for me, even Maggie." 140.

172 These simplifications resulted in the film taking "a deserved critical beating," as Daniel J. Leab points out (1975, 230). Following the peak of his career in 1967 Sidney Poitier's image as race negotiator became increasingly unpopular with both white and black audiences, as Leab furthermore stresses.

173 Everett here specifically hints at William Faulkner's Southern gothic novel *Light in August* (1932). Faulkner's text is an important hypertext, for it features the racial themes of hybridity and miscegenation. One of its central characters, Joe Christmas, is an orphan of mixed race, raised by whites, who at the age of five had

been deported to a "[N-word] orphanage" led by the Presbyterian priest McEachern. Christmas, who passes as white but suspects that he has black ancestry, is implicated in the brutal murder of the white Joanna Burden, the daughter of Northern abolitionists, with whom he has had an affair. Upon being arrested, he is shot and castrated by a state guardsman. The novel's use of and play with the name and naming resonates with Everett's project: "'Did you ever hear of a white man named Christmas?' the foreman said. 'I never heard of nobody a-tall named it,' the other said. And that was the first time Byron remembered that he had ever thought how a man's name, which is supposed to be just the sound for who he is, can be somehow an augur of what he will do, if other men can only read the meaning in time. It seemed to him that none of them had looked especially at the stranger until they heard his name. But as soon as they heard it, it was as though there was something in the sound if that was trying to tell them what to expect; that he carried with him his own inescapable warning, like a flower its scent or a rattlesnake its rattle. Only none of them had sense enough to recognise it." 33 (sic.).

174 That most of the characters bear color-related names further attests to the productive interplay of the starkly (stereo-) typified conflict-scenario and the social complexity of Not Sidney Poitier's struggle.

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Hiermit versichere ich, Johannes Kohrs, die vorliegende Dissertation unter Angabe aller wissenschaftlichen Hilfsmittel und Hilfen selbständig verfasst zu haben. Die Arbeit wurde nicht schon einmal in einem früheren Promotionsverfahren angenommen oder abgelehnt.

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Ort, Datum Unterschrift