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Abstract: Analyzing Percival Everett's *I Am Not Sidney Poitier* as a multi-level parody, this essay argues that the novel not only parodies its protagonist's almost namesake's filmic oeuvre but also comically engages with Everett's own writing in general, and his novel *Erasure* in particular. Through detailed discussion of these various levels of parody, the essay teases out the ways in which postblack fiction offers a different, and decidedly non-mimetic, take on issues of race and racism than its predecessors in the African American literary tradition by complicating the relationship between fiction, fictional reality, and extra-textual reality.

Keywords: Postblack art; African American literature; parody; race; narratology

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The Parody of Postblackness in *I Am Not Sidney Poitier* and the End(s) of African American Literature[1]

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> "If they can't see it's a parody, fuck them." (Percival Everett 151)

In many ways, this epigraph serves as a condensed summary of what is at stake in Percival Everett's entire fictional oeuvre: a defiant note to his critics for misreading his parodies for the real(ist) thing. Thelonious "Monk" Ellison, the autodiegetic narrator of his heavily discussed novel *Erasure* (2001), is an author of complex, postmodern fiction that is critically dismissed as it does not go together with his identity as an African American author. Therefore, he writes *Fuck,* a parody of supposedly more authentic black literature — among others Richard Wright's *Native Son* and Sapphire's *Push*, as well as *We'se Lives in Da Ghetto* by Juanita Mae Jenkins, Monk's literary antagonist in the novel. Thoroughly dismayed by the intra-textual critics' failure to recognize *Fuck* as parody — as one of them states, "It's the real thing'" (*Erasure* 290) — , Monk thus voices his disagreement as quoted. In his later novel *I Am Not Sidney Poitier* (2009), Everett explicitly parodies such acts of readerly misrecognition and, as in its precursor, playfully engages with readings that expect African American texts to always represent the real world out there and critically to respond to the role of blackness in that world. Additionally, the novel parodies Everett's own literary oeuvre not only by including a character named Percival Everett but by (inter)textually re-staging the very scene of *Erasure*'s misreading. As I will argue in my reading of the various levels of (self-)parody in *I Am Not Sidney Poitier*, the novel thus ultimately revolves around nothing but its own textuality and refuses directly to address the "real" world of race and racism out there.

Parody and Postblack Literature

This paper developed out of a contribution to a conference on the "futures of black studies," at which the current state of and the potential future developments within the critical study of African American cultural production were at stake. In this context, a discussion of postblack literature, as first developed by art curator Thelma Golden, is pertinent as the very term *post*black already indicates a futurity by pointing at least implicitly to the beyond or after of blackness. Yet the "post" of postblackness most certainly does not indicate a simple temporal relation of being after race nor does it refer to a time in which blackness and/or race can be declared passé, over, and done with. It is thus crucially different from discourses of postraciality—such as Ramón Saldívar's recent account of a post*race* aesthetics—or from what Kenneth Warren argues in his hotly debated retrospective *What Was African American Literature?* In contrast to such teleological visions of a movement toward the end of race and African American literature, postblack literature stands in an ambivalent relationship toward the complex issue of race and in a signifying/parodic relationship to the tradition of African American writing, which it continues rather than supplants. Using parody as its preferred literary mode, the postblack aesthetics's literary project, thus, marks a "signifyin(g)" revision of the African American tradition along the lines defined by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. As Gates importantly has shown, parodic re-writing has been at the heart of African American literature from the very beginning, which is also why "The Parody of Postblackness" intentionally signifies on his essay "The Blackness of Blackness" just as much as postblack literature parodically signifies on its literary precursors. Therefore, I will read the intertextual and, indeed, parodic dialogue Everett sets in motion within and between two of his novels to argue that postblack literature employs parody as one of its favorite textual strategies. Crucially, it does so in an attempt to resist a mimetic mapping of literary text onto an extra-textual social world so often applied to African American literature and thereby also complicates the mimetic nature expected of African American literature—or more precisely, the mimetic nature of much of African American literary criticism that expects texts by African American authors first and foremost to contribute to a socio-political discussion of issues of race.

Thelma Golden has defined postblack art[2] in these deliberately vague terms: "It is characterized by artists who [are] adamant about not being labeled as 'black' artists, though their work [is] steeped, in fact deeply interested, in redefining complex notions of blackness" (Golden 14). Crucial to this short-hand definition of postblackness, for me, are two things: first, postblack art refuses to be tied down by notions of what "black art" can, should, or has to do. Thus, it demands artistic freedom from having to meet

expectations often brought to 'ethnic' art and to be at liberty not always only to write about racial matters. Importantly this entails a re-negotiation of the very notion of a "black author," what he or she should write about, and how—and *that* – he or she should address issues of race. Second, however, postblack art is not blind to the realities of race and does not simply close its eyes—neither to the continued existence of racism nor to the paramount role race continues to play in all realms of American society including the field of literary studies. Vacillating between these seemingly contradictory impulses, the postblack aesthetics inhabits an ambivalent space in which "[r]edefining complex notions of blackness" becomes the central task in highly self-referential, often humorous and parodic ways. It thus speaks to the continuing importance of racial matters without letting itself be weighed down by and giving up on a humorous take on them. In other words, postblack fiction consciously refuses to be read as tightly circumscribed black literature and, more to the point, as a realistic contribution to the discussion of race and racism in the social sphere as it relishes its own fictionality quite self-consciously. Postblack art thus also destroys the assumption that texts by black artists truthfully and authentically represent 'black' realities.

Playfully engaging the fiction of Ralph Ellison, Richard Wright, and intertextually invoking his own literary oeuvre, Everett's *I Am Not Sidney Poitier* signifies upon the history of African American literature and can fruitfully be read as a parody of it. Following Hutcheon, I use parody not in the narrow sense of "ridiculing imitation" (*A Theory* 5) but as a term to describe "complex forms of 'trans-contextualization' and inversion" (15). Parody, then, is "repetition with critical distance, which marks difference rather than similarity" (6) as it, at times comically, invokes other texts and thereby re-situates them in different contexts.[3] Importantly, parody consists of a play between texts rather than linking text to the world outside as we "need to restrict its focus in the sense that parody's 'target' text is always *another work of art or, more generally, another form of coded discourse*" (16, my emphasis). Hutcheon strictly differentiates parody from satire as the latter is "both moral and social in its focus and ameliorative in its intention" (16). Put differently, satire points outside of the text at the world rather than 'simply' spinning around its own textual nature as parody does. And it is as parodies that Everett's novels deliberately point at other texts—and thus remain "intramural" in the taxonomy suggested by Hutcheon (5, 43).[4] More broadly speaking, in truly postmodern fashion, these texts refuse to simply mirror the world outside as they multiply textual refractions in order to undermine the ways in which fiction can ever be said to provide a clear mirror image of that world. Through the literary use of intertextual re-cycling, so Hutcheon's argument, parody participates in the human "fascinat[ion]" with the "ability of our human systems to refer to themselves in

an unending mirroring process" (*Narcissistic* 1). Installing a variety of such intertextual, sometimes literal, mirrors into his works, Everett's novels also play with the classic mirror scene as one of the founding tropes of African American literature. Yet whereas these by now traditional instances—whether in Charles Chesnutt, W. E. B. DuBois, James Weldon Johnson, or Nella Larsen—entail a confrontation with one's putatively real identity and one's racialized visibility or lack thereof, Everett's parodic mirrors yield nothing but distortions and inversions and, in fact, mirror images of other texts. Not only is a mirror image, in a sense, already a parody in its own right as "repetition with critical distance"; ultimately, these multiplications of representations question the truth and validity of what is being mirrored in these parodic refractions and destabilize, in fact destroy, notions of mimetic representation much more broadly.

A fitting exemplification of such parodic mirroring can be found in *I Am Not Sidney Poitier*'s parody of *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* (1967), in which Not Sidney watches himself in the mirror while receiving oral sex from Agnes Larkin, the evil sister of his love interest Maggie. Not only does the novel include a double here that does not exist in the parodied hypotext, but the parody changes the racial set-up of the movie as the family to whom the black protagonist comes for dinner is light-skinned black rather than white.[5] During this episode, Not Sidney ponders his difference from Sidney Poitier, who "would never have appeared in a scene like this one" (142). Thereby, he marks the novel's awareness of its parodic nature as it self-consciously points to the parodied original. Through this self-aware rendering of the parody, Everett's novel functions as a meta-parody that thematizes the very difference between original and copy, even if the sign that marks this difference is as crude and banal as the simple "Not" of its protagonist's name. By way of its protagonist's Not, the novel *ad nauseam* plays with notions of "absence" and "presence," as Gates has argued for African American fiction more generally (cf. "The Blackness" 696). And since this play is so obvious and in your face as the Not has to be spoken whenever its protagonist is directly addressed, *I Am Not Sidney Poitier* gives this device another turn of the screw. If it is Ishmael Reed's "most subtle achievement […] to parody, to Signify upon, the notions of closure implicit in the key texts of the Afro-American canon" (Gates, *The Signifying Monkey* 226-227), then Everett's novel adds yet another layer of parody by constantly promising closure in the guise of a final negatory Not. Yet Not Sidney's identity as negative double remains precarious throughout and by the end of the novel it is anything but clear who he really is—dead or alive, Not Sidney Poitier or not Sidney Poitier.[6] Focusing on the novel's parodic mode—rather than its satiric function—, then, my claim is that the novel's multi-faceted mirroring and parodying strategies complicate a reading of it as straightforward satire of any real world phenomena. Rather, the novel

relishes its own textual play and doing so claims for African American fiction the freedom not to care; or, as Monk Ellison put it: "'If they can't see it's a parody, fuck them!'" (*Erasure* 151).[7]

Preposterous Impostors—Unnatural Narratives and Six Degrees of Sidney Poitier

In 1983, a young black New Yorker named David Hampton chose to "become" David Poitier, allegedly the son of Bahamian actor Sidney Poitier, in an initially successful attempt to trick rich New York socialites by preying on their desire to be associated with the movie star.[8] What started as a "hoax" and a "scam" (cf. Goudsouzian, Witchel), turned into a phenomenon that came to be called "Six Degrees of Separation" when playwright John Guare used it as inspiration for his 1990 play of this very title. Its title references the so-called "small world phenomenon" (cf. Barabási), which states that every human being can be linked to every other human being in the world via six people—the trick is "to find the right six people" (81), as Ouisa Kittredge, one of the protagonists of Guare's play, words the central dilemma. In the context of the play, this phenomenon is used to thematize questions of family, estrangement, but also of racial identity in the late 20th-century United States. And while the play remains ambivalent as to whether or not the fake-Poitier is after human warmth or personal monetary gains, the central interest of the play is the quest for something real—real friendship, real attachments, and real family relations—in a world brimming with fakes, the search for substance in a world of surfaces. Ironically, the only real thing Ouisa encounters in this play is the impostor who claims to be the son of Sidney Poitier.

Percival Everett's *I Am Not Sidney Poitier* adds another level of signification to this small world phenomenon as rendered in Guare's play, as he not only includes a Poitier-lookalike but continuously has him parody Poitier's movie roles while at the same time increasingly putting doubt on the question whether or not he really is (Not) Sidney Poitier. The title of the novel already gives away the central joke of the text: it is the first-person tale of the novel's eponymous picaresque hero, Not Sidney Poitier. His name is intended to indicate that he, in fact, is *not* Sidney Poitier despite the fact that he is the famous actor's spitting image and, as the novel progresses, even more and more closely resembles him. As part of its multi-leveled parody, the novel stages several episodes taken precisely not from the *life* of the actor but from his repertoire of acting *performances*, presenting Not Sidney live his way through the roles portrayed by his famous lookalike and thereby parodically restaging some of the most iconic African American movie scenes of the 20th century. Thus, the novel playfully engages with

the discrepancy of the real and its mediated copy until it is no longer clear who is fake and who is real—or, more to the point, if this distinction is tenable at all. By way of his very name, the one word that needs to be written again and again to identify its protagonist, Not Sidney is the living mark of identity and difference or, in Gates's terms, "absence" and "presence." The protagonist's very name—*the* central identifying mark of an individual— inevitably and ineradicably links him to another person without whom his name stops meaning anything. That is to say, Not Sidney is linked to *the* black actor—an icon of African American achievement in the realm of popular culture—and thus synecdochically stands in as the ultimate double, condemned never to be the real thing, and, being a mere negation, without Sidney would be nothing.[9]

In order to further complicate mimetic readings of Not Sidney's story as that of Sidney Poitier, the novel uses a variety of "unnatural" (Richardson in Herman et al. 20-25) devices that make it impossible for its readers to "naturalize" (Nielsen, "The Impersonal" 141; "Naturalizing" passim; Alber, Nielsen, and Richardson 8-9) its narration or narrator. These texts are "unnatural" in that they do not make sense when read as if they were real stories told by real people as the literary characters' many contradictions simply do not add up to a coherent image of a real person. As a form of such unnatural narration, Everett's novel refuses to be read as the expression of a clearly identifiable, let alone race-able, (black) author.[10] Importantly, the novel's unnatural qualities stand in the way of reading the narrator as if he were a real human being, seeing that he simply does not make sense as such (e.g. over the course of the novel he unrealistically ages from being 17 in the beginning to standing in for the well-aged Poitier of around 70 in the novel's final pages even though the novel clearly does not cover 50 years' time). As narratologist Brian Richardson importantly states in his critical discussion of Phelan and Rabinowitz's rhetorical model of narration, characters are not like real human beings, nor are "narrators […] rather like human storytellers" (Herman et al. 21). Moreover, he extends Phelan's taxonomy of the various dimensions of literary characters and supplements the "synthetic category" with "an antimimetic aspect that provides for the appearance of truly unnatural figures" (135) such as metafictional or metaleptical characters, both of relevance for my discussion of Everett's texts. Especially in unnatural narrations such as *I Am Not*, literary characters are not so much mimetic images of real human beings but, rather, complicate such seemingly straightforward mimetic mirroring of reality in fiction. By installing characters into the novel that simply cannot be mistaken for 'real people' while simultaneously suggesting and almost enforcing these very comparisons, Everett's parody consciously pulls out the rug from under its readers' feet as it dares us to read the characters as if they were what the novel (almost) claims they are, only to undermine these

assumptions throughout. In the most extended intertextual parodic play, *I Am Not Sidney Poitier* includes a character who shares the author's name, Percival Everett, and who thus fills the "fourth dimension [of character components], the intertextual" on Richardson's model of unnatural characters (Herman et al. 132). It is this character — who is metafictional (as creator of novels), metaleptical (as author, who appears inside the diegesis), and intertextual (as he is linked to *Erasure* and its intratextual reviews) — who most clearly explodes the boundaries of mimetic representation and naturalizing readings.

Dead Ringers and Naïve Readers in *I Am Not Sidney Poitier*

I Am Not Sidney Poitier is the story of Not Sidney, foster child of media mogul Ted Turner, whose name, actually, "had nothing to do with the actor at all, [...] *Not Sidney* was simply a name [his mother] had created, with *no consideration of the outside world*" (7, my emphasis). Already at this early stage in his life — in both the narrator's and the novel's gestation period, so to say — the connection between creating a name, i.e. a fiction, and the "outside world" is broken or, to be more precise, is less straightforward than one might be wont to assume. If the link of reference of a personal name is broken, how can a complex construction like a novel — or any characters therein — be said to *mean* anything? Of course, the irony of all of this is that Not Sidney turns out to look exactly like Sidney so that the most arbitrary of signifiers — the name — stands in a non-arbitrary relationship to its signified. In what follows, Not Sidney undergoes a classically picaresque journey through the netherworld of both American racism and the filmic oeuvre of his not-quite-namesake: He is handcuffed to a white, racist fellow-prisoner à la *The Defiant Ones* (1958), encounters a blind girl reminiscent of *A Patch of Blue* (1965), and is the unwanted dinner guest at the Larkins' as discussed above. Throughout these episodes, Not is repeatedly confronted with who he is — and who he is not — or, more precisely, with expectations of who he is and should be. In a scene not grafted from a Poitier movie, he buys his way into Morehouse College in Atlanta, where he encounters one professor "Percival Everett." The novelist's namesake mistakes him, of all people, for "Harry Belafonte" (87) almost as if he were saying that all black people "look alike," as a white policeman literally will do later in the novel (213). Repeatedly, it is this character who increases Not Sidney's confusion about his identity: "'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'" (102). As much truth as may lie in these words, only a page earlier the character Everett has undermined his own authority by stating "'I'm a fraud, a fake, a sham, a charlatan, a deceiver, a pretender, a crook'"

(101). Later in that conversation, professor Everett gives him a further piece of advice: "'And be yourself'" (123), the ultimate counsel in the politics of authenticity, meaning to say, do not try to be someone—or something—you are not, which, of course, is difficult for somebody whose very identity revolves around who he is Not. Despite his rejoinder's surface naivety, "'Who else would I be?'" (123), Not's question raises the important issue of who or what he can be *but* himself. Not only his role as Sidney Poitier-look-alike makes him—and us—question his identity; particularly as a fictional character, this interrogation also highlights the problematic notion of reading this character as mimetically representing somebody else, namely a real-life person (whether Sidney Poitier or not). As if this were not enough, Everett ends this pep talk by saying that Not looks "'more like Sidney Poitier than Sidney Poitier ever did'" (124), an obvious contradiction in terms: How can a 'copy' look more real than the original? Asked differently, what happens to an original if it can be substituted—even excelled—by the look-alike?

More and more, Not Sidney grows into the character of Sidney Poitier, just as he repeatedly drops the Not from his name, introducing himself simply as "Sidney Poitier" (183, 212). Complications ensue, however, when Not has to identify a corpse that looks "just like me. He looked exactly like me, a fact that was apparently lost" (211) on everybody else in Smuteye, Alabama, where Not is enacting a parody of Homer Smith in *Lilies of the Field*. And not only is the corpse Not Sidney's lookalike, he was also apparently trying to help build a chapel for a group of nuns himself, thus acting as a parody of Not Sidney's parody of the original Poitier movie. Ironically, nobody understands the parody and misreads both original and copy, Not Sidney and his dead look-alike, as the real thing, locating the only link between them in their shared blackness: "'You all look alike'" (213), as a police officer informs him. Again, Not—and his literally dead ringer—are being reduced to their blackness and the two most stereotypical roles available for black characters, that of murder victim and murderous criminal. And not only the police officers misread both Not Sidney and his double; Not Sidney himself comes to reason "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). Demirtürk reads this episode as Not Sidney's becoming legible only *as* Sidney Poitier; his blackness can only be recognized as long as it fits into pre-fabricated molds of recognition. What she calls "*familiar blackness*" (89–90) references Poitier's role as the deferent and submissive, non-threatening black character that made him famous. And certainly Not Sidney—just like Sidney—operates entirely under the "white man's script," as Demirtürk writes (104), as it is the scripts of Mr. Poitier's movies that determine Not Sidney's reality; scripts written by white screen-writers for a

presumably predominately white audience. Yet the presentation of these rapidly multiplying cases of mistaken identities points into a slightly different direction: Not Sidney's experiences are taken much too lightly by the novel's narration as to warrant such a highly politicized reading. Not Sidney tells his own story precisely *not* as a dirge or a lament but rather in the form of comedy. Ultimately, and it serves us well not to forget this, Not Sidney operates precisely *not* under a white man's script but under that of a black one: Percival Everett as "encoding entity" of the parody (cf. Hutcheon, *A Theory* 84–99). Moreover, as a first-person narrator Not Sidney obviously also operates under his own script. If we additionally consider the intertextual link to *Erasure*—so much so that Everett is both encoding entity of and parodied target within *I Am Not Sidney*—and remember that Everett not only is the author of both novels but also a character within Not Sidney's story, the relationship between world and text and between literary representation and represented world gets fuzzier and fuzzier. Therefore, I think we jump too short if we reduce the novel's wild-firing attacks to being singularly directed at normative constructions of acceptable blackness.

As discussed above, parody points at other texts rather than at other worlds, and for this mirror game to work it is of paramount importance that its readers are able to recognize it as parody—and both of Everett's novels stage what happens when this recognition fails. In her analysis of parody as metafiction, Rose has shown how it fictionally stages "the clash between the worlds of fiction and reality" (72) and that parody's most powerful tool to fold such self-referential, metafictional, and self-conscious criticism into its narrative is the inclusion of "naïve readers, who, because they are unable to clearly distinguish the two worlds, cannot cope with either" (72). Including Ted Turner as such a naïve reader of—of all texts—Everett's *Erasure* into *I Am Not,* the latter folds its own author's experiences into the fictional world so that neither the character Everett nor Turner, it seems, are able "to clearly distinguish between" text and world. Or, rather, Everett as encoding entity of the parody consciously folds them into one another so as to make it impossible to read the former as simply representing the latter: "'Didn't you write a book called *Erasure*?'" (*I Am Not* 225), asks Ted, adding that he did like the "'novel in the novel. I thought that story was really gripping. You know, true to life'" (226). In a deadpan voice, Everett replies: "'I've heard that'" (226), thus echoing precisely *not* the real reviews of *Erasure* (which celebrated it for its critical erasure of race and racial representation). Rather, Everett's reply refers to the intra-diegetic reviews that *Erasure*'s intra-diegetic author Monk Ellison, writing under the pseudonym Stagg R. Leigh, received for his parody of naturalistic black writing, *Fuck*. Through this metaleptic mixing of diegetic levels, *I Am Not Sidney Poitier* complicates the relationship between textual and 'real' world and doing so

also makes it impossible to naturalize its narrator and/or author. This is the dilemma that both 'Monk' Ellison—the narrator of *Erasure*—and Percival Everett—the author of *Erasure* and *I Am Not Sidney Poitier*—face: being read only mimetically as natural representations of blackness even if their complex fictional creations refuse such readings.[11] Including one, arguably two, naïve readers of *Erasure* within *I Am Not*, the latter novel thus adds its own, albeit fictional, commentary on the problematic ways in which African American literature is being read and (mis)recognized. And even though Ted Turner could be read as a symbolic representation of a white racist, Everett's own response to this serves as a salient reminder that this is not just an issue of white misrecognition but takes on the more general question of how to read African American literature and also stands as a critical interrogation of that very concept.

In addition to the character Percival Everett, *I Am Not Sidney Poitier* lines up a number of such naïve readers in its diegetic world and paints equally unflattering images of them. Doing so the novel reveals itself as self-parody and metafictionally takes on the vagaries of representation as they misread Not Sidney in just the way we, as real readers, are prodded to misread the novel as black criticism of white misrecognition. Moreover, these naïve readers—such as the Sheriffs in Smuteye—entirely fail to understand the complexity of Not Sidney's relation to his almost-namesake and are literally blind to the nuances of his individual personality. These readers are naïve precisely in that they fail to recognize the imitation and routinely misread Not Sidney for Sidney, the parody for its hypotext, so to say. At least in part, then, the parody is on such naïve readers who willingly and consciously mistake the fictional for the real. Indeed, all the characters in the novel are naïve readers in the sense that they participate in Not Sidney's re-enactment of Sidney Poitier movies but nobody ever seems to notice. While most characters are aware of Not Sidney's likeness to the famous actor, nobody, including Not Sidney himself, ever remarks on the fact that their very actions are taken from his filmic oeuvre. Of course, this can be read as a criticism of the lack of knowledge of and respect for the cultural work of black actors such as Sidney Poitier, who are known as specimen of black success but whose actual work—let alone their true identity—remains unknown, unnoticed, and underappreciated. As much as *I Am Not Sidney Poitier* thus offers a trenching critique of the ways in which black fiction and movies are being read, it also offers its own parody of that critique by including the supposed creator of this parody into its own text, incorporating Percival Everett as just one of many of the naïve readers in this novel. Right on cue, Not Sidney installs himself as a similarly "naïve reader who, like Don Quixote, takes the fictional world to be 'true,' in the sense of being an accurate reflection of the external world" (Rose 108) in his own story by linking himself to none other than Don Quixote. As he states:

"I was a fighter of windmills. I was a chaser of whales. I was Not Sidney Poitier" (43). More than just a naïve reader, however, Not Sidney also is a parodist himself, albeit an unwitting one, as his life *is* a walking parody of Sidney Poitier's filmic life.[12] In multiple ways, then, Not Sidney functions as a performer and writer of parody and doing so makes us aware of how understanding and perceiving work more generally, as we are constantly faced with the doubleness that his titular Not flaunts right in front of our eyes. And as the novel includes not only an author-figure by the name of Percival Everett but directly parodies his literary oeuvre and its possible misreading, Rose's reminder that "in self-parody the function of meta-fictional parody to reflect upon its own medium is pre-eminent" (97) certainly is timely.

Not Sidney then takes on the task of solving the "murder of the doppelganger of Not Sidney Poitier" (218), thus having moved from the position of copy to that of the new original himself. Now, the dead body is no longer the lookalike of Sidney Poitier, famous actor, but of Not Sidney Poitier.[13] The fact that Not Sidney is—and is not—dead immediately evokes the expression of the dead ringer for a person's lookalike.[14] For one, a (dead) ringer is someone who "strongly resembles another," as the *Merriam-Webster* defines it; a definition that is intriguingly close to parody as a genre in Hutcheon's sense. A ringer, however, is "one that enters a competition under false representations," an impostor or fake. Etymologically, it derives from and refers to "a horse entered fraudulently in a race under a false name to obtain better odds in the betting." In an interview with his one-time collaborator James Kincaid, Everett himself provides an interesting link between this idea of fraudulent imposition and racing as he plays with the semantic multiplicity of race: "It's when two or more people, dogs, horses or cars try to get to a distant point as fast as they can" (Kincaid 378). From this angle, race itself is the biggest imposition and the fact that Not Sidney is the dead ringer for the famous black actor then implies that, etymologically speaking, he is "fraudulently entered" in a race he should not be in. Neither is he a horse, nor is the race we are talking about a footrace—or a hoofrace, for that matter. No, our dead ringer is an unwitting impostor in the rat-race of American racial discourse, a reluctant participant in the quest for the real thing, of which he is expected to be an (exact) carbon copy. Here, the parodic play with original and copy cuts the mimetic link that expects black texts to present dead ringers of blackness in truly postblack fashion.

I Am Not Sidney Poitier and the End(s) of African American Literature

Even without his signature "Not," Not Sidney would still not be Sidney Poitier but in his role as a fictional character, at most, a *representation* of his famous namesake. In this respect, Everett's novel employs a similarly banal yet intriguing representational device as does René Magritte's (in)famous pipe.[15] Over and over again, the novel drives this point home by staging increasingly absurd encounters and plays on his strange name so that the point of the parody precisely lies in highlighting its own artificiality. Through the inclusion of inter-/intratextual and inter-/intradiegetic self-parodying of his own novel about the treacherous nature of racial representation—i.e. *Erasure*—Everett showcases the vagaries of representation in similarly glaring ways as does Magritte's pipe and thus clearly aims at the nature of fictional representation rather than just going for a cheap laugh. As such, the novel's absurd humor mimics the absurdity of any expectation that a literary character could be anything *but* an invention. As a general interrogation of the ways in which literature can ever mimetically represent anything, *I Am Not Sidney Poitier* allows its readers to "read the dilemma of Not Sidney Poitier's life not as stemming from any of those identity categories, but rather from a primordial exclusion *based in language,*" as Griffin argues (32, my emphasis). In addition to her claim that the novel "forces a consideration of the place of the body—including the racialized body—in the creation of reality" (32), however, it is important to point out that it also questions the very possibility of doing so fictionally. Complicating the relation between fiction and reality by folding the latter into the former and vice versa, the question remains: to what extent does the novel's construction of parodic doubles pertain to the "creation of *reality*" (Griffin 32, my emphasis)?

This relationship of fiction to social reality is crucially at stake in the novel, one dimension of which certainly has to do with the role of blackness, both within the filmic oeuvre of Sidney Poitier and within the life story of Not Sidney. In one respect, Not Sidney's name directly links blackness to "negativity," as it stages one exemplary black life as always already being denied full participation, not only legally and politically but as an ontological exclusion from humanity expressed by the ultimate rejection of the Not. As Jared Sexton, Frank B. Wilderson, Christina Sharpe—to whom I owe the reminder to connect Not Sidney's name to the notion of negativity—and other Afro-Pessimist scholars have argued, blackness is always already constructed as the non-normative other of whiteness, a form of life that is considered un-human, sub-human, or even "monstrous" (Sharpe), always refused full status of and participation in humanity. In this sense, the "Not" marks the ever-present difference of blackness. Partially in this vein, Demirtürk reads the novel as a critique of the frames of white

(mis)recognition that refuse black literary characters to be read and understood on their own terms rather than in the guise of what she calls "familiar" blackness. While such readings certainly are warranted, my own approach takes the novel's parodic mode more seriously and focuses on the ways in which Everett's novel critically "trans-contextualizes" (Hutcheon) these debates in full parodic force, urging us as readers also to read the novel through frames that exist outside the purview of race. More generally speaking, I remain hesitant to expect each and every black text always to position itself critically with respect to current social issues of race and racism. After all, as I argue in my *Postblack Aesthetics: The Freedom to Be Black in Contemporary African American Fiction*, postblack art consciously claims the freedom from having to respond always—and single-mindedly—to racism. By installing a variety of 'real,' fictional, and above all naïve readers into his novel, Everett also folds critical response to black writing more generally into the plot of his novel. The inclusion of deliberately naïve readers, thus, not only marks the novel as parody but serves as a provocative textual strategy of establishing and addressing a particular readership. Moreover, since the novel hinges on the very rejection of its titular Not, the "truth" of the novel lies in the very parodic, trans-contextualizing negation of readerly expectations of what this text—*as* an African American text—may or may not do.

For the study of postblack literature more broadly, this has wide-ranging ramifications as it necessitates an approach that neither is simply celebratory of African American literature as a subversive counter-discourse by default nor one that views African American literature as a unitary project to begin with (as Warren does in order to read it—and declare over—*as* a literature). For me, three things are important when reading the novel and/as postblack literature: First, we need to pay very close attention to it *as* a work of art first and foremost, rather than reading it as straightforward political statement about the current state of American race relations. Therefore, we need to do justice to its formal playfulness, innovative literary devices, and intertextual references rather than restrict ourselves to single-mindedly thematic readings of it through the lens of, for example, critical race theory. Equally importantly, however, we also need to acknowledge that the two seemingly distinct realms of art and politics are inextricably interwoven, especially when dealing with African American literature in light of the continuing power of race today.

Second, we need to be careful not to read the novel predominantly mimetically. As (self-)parody and a form of unnatural narration, it does everything it can to destroy any simple referential relationship between text and world and thus refuses to be read as a realistic portrayal of contemporary black life. Insisting on its titular Not, the novel self-consciously problematizes its own status *as* fiction and we would gravely restrict its artistic

depth if we denied its play with absence and presence, affirmation and negation, and simply tried to map it onto the persisting racial regime of our contemporary, extra-textual reality.

Third, and finally, we should not make the mistake and read novels of the postblack aesthetics as being first and foremost, let alone 'only,' about race as this is the very assumption against which the aesthetics defines itself. Therefore it is paramount *not* to bring to these texts too narrowly conceived preconceptions of and expectations about what black literature is, can, or should do, even if we do so with the best of intentions.[16] This includes the concession that in many of these fictional texts blackness no longer is a life-or-death-issue but a potential source of parody.

Other than satire, which is aimed at criticizing society at large, parody points to other texts—it remains "intramural" in Hutcheon's terms—, which is why my reading aligns with her distinction between "literary parody and social satire" (*A Theory* 78). As she forcefully reminds us, parody's

> transgressions ultimately remain authorized—authorized by the very [literary] norm it seeks to subvert. Even in mocking, parody reinforces; in formal terms, it inscribes the mocked conventions onto itself, thereby guaranteeing their continued existence. It is in this sense that parody is the custodian of the artistic legacy, defining not only where art is, but where it has come from. (75)

As such, parody is *the* ideal vehicle of postblack art in that it re-contextualizes 'black' art without ridiculing it. And here it is important to remind us of the "neutral ethos" (62) of parody, in which the parodied text is not necessarily the target of the parody's barbs at all. On the one hand, parody thus "guarantee[s] [African American literature's] continued existence" and serves as "custodian of [its] artistic legacy," while on the other hand it also—by consciously playing with its very foundations—extends the reach of what is possible, showing "where [it] has come from" and imagining places where it could go. Parodying Sidney Poitier-movies, the literary works of Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, and Percival Everett himself, the latter's novels playfully engage with, and thus ultimately re-inforce, the literary tradition out of which they emerge.[17] As I argue, this lies at the heart of Everett's literary project as much as it defines a postblack aesthetics more widely understood. In consequence, if we take the novel serious *as* parody, *I Am Not Sidney Poitier,* indeed, has the "power to renew" (Hutcheon, *A Theory* 115) the ways in which African American literature speaks to and about contemporary issues, including those concerning race. It does so without simply dismissing race as a central topic at the same time as it also unmasks overly narrow notions of what African American literature can or must (not) do.

As double-, perhaps even multi-coded discourse, Everett's novel stages the "very paradoxical essence of parody" entailed by the "ambivalence set up between conservative repetition and revolutionary difference" (Hutcheon, *A Theory* 77) and thus ultimately strengthens and re-affirms black cultural expression by parodying its traditions. Through its complex re-negotiation of and encounter with its hypotexts, this novel undermines any notion of "black writing as a collective undertaking" (Warren, *What Was* 116) as much as it urges its readers not to read it as such either. In this respect, texts of the postblack aesthetics respond to the restrictive lens through which they are viewed if we read them *as* African American fiction. Therefore, *I Am Not Sidney Poitier* self-consciously thematizes these very expectations, by including its own scene of misreading in the discussion between Turner and Everett, and reveals them as simplifications. As it thus gestures to what lies beyond—*post*—blackness, postblack fiction truly is and remains African American literature. The parody of postblackness, then, reminds us at every step of the way that the postblack—as Golden originally stated—"may be the new black" (14) but black it remains, or as Langston Hughes already knew: "I don't have to do nothing but eat, drink, stay black, and die"—even if, in Everett's parodic play with original and copy, it will not be entirely clear who it is that actually dies in the end.

Coda

Fittingly for such a playful, parodic text, Everett's novel does not end with death after all but with an award ceremony on the stage of Los Angeles's Shrine Auditorium, where the protagonist—*as* Sidney Poitier—is awarded the "Most Dignified Figure in American Culture"-award (234). In his acceptance speech, addressed to the auditorium of narratees and us as implied readers, (Not) Sidney states: "'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'" (234). In this, the closing shot of *I Am Not Sidney Poitier*, Everett's novel about the dead ringer of Sidney Poitier, re-stages not only the life of his movie-star-lookalike but also parodies Everett's own writing—namely, the closing shot of *Erasure*. That novel ends with its protagonist 'Monk' Ellison on a similar award stage, staring into the camera and exclaiming: "'Egads, I'm on television'" (*Erasure* 294). Really being neither Monk Ellison nor Stagg R. Leigh, he might as well have said "I AM NOT MYSELF TODAY" (*I Am Not* 234).

Notes

1   Many thanks to Carsten Junker and Marie-Luise Löffler for editing this issue and for organizing the controversial but productive "The Futures of Black Studies"-conference out of which this contribution emerged. In addition to the critical respondents at this conference I want to thank Jennifer Ho, who encouraged me to move this discussion of parody out of my "Postblack Unnatural Narrative" and turn it into an article of its own.

2   For an extended definition of my understanding of postblack art and a reasoned explanation as to why I spell "postblack" without the hyphen used by Golden, cf. chapter 1 of my *Postblack Aesthetics.*

3   *Erasure* includes a full-fledged, 80-page embedded parody of *Native Son*, entitled *Fuck*; this parody is written by the novel's first-person narrator Thelonious Ellison, whose name obviously parodies the author of *Invisible Man*, and whose narration is filled with extended references to this literary precursor, particularly in its final pages.

4   If they use their parody for satiric purposes, novels such as *Erasure* can best be read as "degenerative satires" as defined by Weisenburger. As I argue in "Dissimulating Blackness," "in degenerative satires of blackness, what is being dissimulated is not an underlying reality but 'only' other texts" (160).

5   Even though the novel never explicitly states that the Larkins are black, it becomes fairly obvious that they are a very conservative family of light-skinned blacks, who, however, share the anti-black prejudices voiced by the family Drayton in the movie. Therefore, I disagree with Demirtürk's reading of them as white racists (cf. 97-99).

6   On a more literal level, Not Sidney's name of course also invokes the "Blackness of Blackness"-text from *Invisible Man*, as he embodies its "Black Is an' Black Ain't…"-refrain, simultaneously being and not being Sidney, thus trickster-like evading any type of fixed identity. As Gates argues, this sermon—and Reed's play on it—"critique the received idea of blackness as a negative essence, as a natural, transcendent signified; but implicit in such a critique is an equally thorough critique of blackness as a *presence*, which is merely another transcendent signified" (237). This is precisely what is at stake in Everett's novel as it refuses to present blackness as either a clear presence or absence.

7   Clearly, parody is one of the preferred literary devices employed by texts of the postblack aesthetics. Examples include Mat Johnson's *Pym*, an extended parodic re-writing of Poe's *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*; Trey Ellis's *Platitudes*, a novel that stages a textual competition between a parody of a female African American author writing in the vein of Alice Walker and/or Toni Morrison and a more postmodern-minded male author; or Paul Beatty's *The White Boy Shuffle*, which, among other things, parodies the structure of the slave narratives.

8   Sidney Poitier does not have a son named David; this fact, however, went unnoticed by most of the victims of the con-man. In Guare's play, the impostor uses the name "Paul Poitier."

9 In his biography of the 'real' Sidney Poitier, Goudsouzian observes the following: "In [Guare's] play […] Paul says that Poitier has no real identity, only the experiences of his fictional characters. Just as Poitier blurred the line between image and reality for political ends, so does Paul for personal gain. Both Poitier's icon and Paul's hoax are masks that satisfy white expectations." (367). Indeed, in the play Paul says that "My father, being an actor, has no real identity" (30). And he continues: "But he has no life — he has no memory — only the scripts producers send him in the mail through his agents. That's his past" (31).

10 For the most concise introduction to and discussion of unnatural narratology, cf. Alber, Nielsen, and Richardson. For "naturalizing" readings and its complications, cf. Nielsen. As I argue in "Postblack Unnatural Narrative," *I Am Not Sidney Poitier* employs a variety of narrative devices to undermine readerly attempts to naturalize its narration as well as it complicates the assignment of textual authority to a clearly identifiable, let alone race-able, author(ity).

11 While the character Percival Everett's dead-pan answer that he has "heard that" before serves as a meta-fictional comment on this very irony, within the logic of the novel it could also be read as a matter-of-fact statement by the character Everett, who, as we should not forget, cannot simply be equated with his extra-textual namesake either.

12 Not only does Not Sidney thus engage in a wild-goose chase for (perhaps) unattainable goals as do his intertextual forebears Don Quixote and Captain Ahab. Indeed, he becomes more than just a naïve reader of their fiction and turns into an active parodist even if his parodic act, of course, is not necessarily to be taken at face value either, given that he also echoes the final words of Huck Finn. Stating in that same passage that he'd better "light out for the territory" (43), Not Sidney here mimics the perhaps most famous unreliable narrator in American literature, which goes to show that his parody is untrustworthy, too, and certainly not to be taken at face value.

13 The novel thus also includes a whodunit-subplot and lends itself to a comparative reading with Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo* (1972) as a signifying revision of crime fiction. Similarly, Hutcheon lists the "detective story" as one of the "four models" at the "diegetic level […] favored by metafictionists as internalized structuring devices which in themselves point to the self-referentiality of the text" (*Narcissistic* 71).

14 Obviously, the fact that Not Sidney Poitier, the narrator of his own story, may or may not be dead, can also be read in connection with Barthes's famous declaration about the death of the author, even though here both "death" and "author" remain doubtful. Griffin reads the novel through the lens of Lacanian psycho-analysis and his concept of "forclusion" or "foreclosure" and claims that seeing his own dead double implies that Not Sidney has become, in fact has been from the beginning, "psychotic" (29). Demirtürk, on the other hand, argues that Not Sidney is actually being "killed at the end, and becomes his double, Poitier" (87). Different from Demirtürk's and Griffin's readings, I read this as a scene of unnatural narration and neither psychologically explain it nor try to naturalize Not Sidney as a real human being. As character of an

antimimetic novel, Not Sidney is simply different from a "real human being." In a related reading of the ending of *Erasure* that also pays close attention to that novel's narrative presentation, Ridley disagrees with readings of Monk's final "Barthesian, authorial death" (109) by pointing out that "it is Monk, not Stagg, who transcribes *Fuck* into the journal and who, *through* the journal, is still trying to control his bastard's novel's public reception" (109).

15 Thanks to one of Sabine Sielke's graduate students at the University of Bonn for reminding me of the similarities between Everett's novel and Magritte's *La Trahison des Images*, which both explicitly state that they are not Sidney Poitier or a pipe, respectively, but, rather, artistic representations thereof.

16 In *What Was African American Literature*, Warren reminds us of Gates's discomfort with subsuming African American literature only under "'the race's war against racism'" and of his critique of such an approach as a "'dead end for black literary studies'" (qtd. 15; cf. 14-17). For Warren, reading it only through this narrow lens is what *made* it into *a* literature—and it is here that I disagree with his diagnosis as this very lens continues to be applied today. Therefore, even on Warren's own terms, African American literature is far from over. In "The End(s) of African American Studies," Warren similarly questions and criticizes the "belief that black studies can provide us with some access to the inner thought of some collective black subject or black community" (643) and comes to the following conclusion: "Rather, because scholarly inquiry stands as one of the ingredients from which 'authentic' beliefs are constructed, we need to examine how the world we inhabit has been shaped in some part by the myriad efforts of scholars to understand it" (652). Arguably, this very self-reflexivity stands at the heart of Everett's literary oeuvre.

17 Rather than ridiculing or making fun of its hypotexts, Everett's parody playfully invokes and thereby pays homage to them. Therefore, I disagree with Baker's quite critical reading of *Erasure*'s embedded novel as a "minstrel reduction of Richard Wright" (145) and his concomitant critique that Everett's novel lacks a "contestatory politics of art" (149).

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