

“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*

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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.

SAMUEL BECKETT / *NOT I*

What does it mean to be not Sidney Poitier? More precisely: What does it mean to be black, male but not Sidney Poitier? Or, more precisely *and* confusingly: What does it mean to be black, male but not Sidney Poitier and have, as prime social identifier, a name that proclaims this very differential status? These questions lie at the core of *I Am Not Sidney Poitier* (henceforth: *Not Sidney*). The 2009 satiric novel by African American author Percival Everett portrays the absurdly funny, crisis-ridden coming of age of the wealthy black orphan Not Sidney Poitier. The novel’s 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 sets off a sequence of ragingly racist episodes, all of which parody various filmic Sidney Poitier scenarios. In one of these, Everett changes the interracial conflict negotiated in the Poitier movie *Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner?*

(dir. Stanley Kramer, 1967; henceforth: *Guess*) into an intraracial confrontation. Here, as a victim of in-group racism in the social domain of a black upper class family, Not Sidney is marginalized not by way of overt, physically transacted racial oppression but on the basis of what Pierre Bourdieu has termed symbolic violence.¹ 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 industry in the era satirized in *Not Sidney*. Implicitly, the novel thus hints at the "post-racial" euphoria at the time of its publication, which is at odds with the growing awareness of the persistence and pervasiveness of systemic racism.

"YOU MAKIN' FUN OF ME, BOY? – NATURE BEAT ME TO THAT": TOWARD A DEHABITUALIZED READING OF RACE

Following the journey of a young black man through the geographical (Southern rural and East Coast urban) as well as social spaces (lower to upper class) of U.S. society, *Not Sidney* ironizes the idea(l) of a colorblind society that crystallized in the controversial concept of "post-race."² Having first emerged in the 1990s as the utopian promise of social progress brought about with the turn of the Millennium, the notion gained further traction when – one year before the publication of *I Am Not Sidney Poitier* – Barack Obama took the highest office in the nation and seemed to prove an unparalleled upward social mobility of minorities.

Not Sidney grows up as an outsider in a poor black neighborhood of Los Angeles. The origin of his name is as dubious as his genealogy (his fa-

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- 1 It is precisely the import of Bourdieu's approach, on which this article is based, to consider every act of racial oppression as violent in a physical, i.e., body-centered way. Although this seems to be stating the obvious, the impact of fists and words can have the same psycho-corporeal "reality" for the racialized victim.
 - 2 I draw on "post-race" not as an accurate description of sociopolitical realities, but as the epitome of a simplistic socio-historical teleology from civic equality to colorblindness.

ther remains unknown). According to his mother, it has “nothing to do with the actor at all.” As she claims, it is “simply a name she had created, with no consideration of the outside world” (7). Raised by his self-made, “eccentric” (130), and politically radical mother, he is taught to read a lot and think critically, and not surprisingly he “turn[s] out to be extremely well educated” himself (30). However, she passes away when Not Sidney is eleven years old, bequeathing 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 to live with him and his wife, the fictionalized Jane Fonda, in Atlanta, Georgia. In this private, well-situated milieu, Not Sidney’s wealth grants him access to *the* privilege of whiteness, namely disregard for (his own) skin color. Educated by an almost exclusively non-white staff (an Indian American accountant, an African American social activist home teacher and a Korean American martial arts instructor) Not Sidney is raised to be entirely *unaware* of the racial divide outside his gilded cage. The frequent 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.

Embarking on what he deems a “valuable learning experience, a rite of passage” (168), Not Sidney resolves to find his mother’s headstone in Los Angeles in order to solve the mystery of his origin. He drops out of high school after a scandalous incident of forced fellatio inflicted on him by his white history teacher Ms. Hancock, gets arrested for “driving while black” in rural Georgia and is locked away in the “Peckerwood County Correctional Prison Farm,” from which he escapes and buys his way into the historically all-black Morehouse College. 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 during the aforementioned episode in Washington DC, modeled on the Stanley Kramer movie. He has his accountant buy the TV channel NET (“Negro-Entertainment-Television,” obviously a satirical nod at BET), thus highlighting the novel’s parallelization of the “post-racial” era and the rise

of the commercialization of blackness in the 1980s.³ He enrolls in a philosophy course on “Nonsense,” taught by the fictionalized author of the novel himself, Percival Everett, only to drop out of college, too. Ironically, Not Sidney increasingly resembles the original actor, undergoing a quasi-surreal bodily transformation. His chaotic quest culminates in his solving the mysterious murder of his very own doppelganger and, passing for the ‘real’ Sidney Poitier, accepting the Academy Award for Most Dignified Figure in American Culture as the man who “sets the standard” (234).

Everett’s satire presents an episodic experiment on a black millionaire: Not Sidney 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: misrecognized. This punitive impetus emblemizes Everett’s ironic riffing on the principle of blaming the victim and the “culture of poverty” debates. Not Sidney thus can be conceived of as a privileged victim who, due to his very name, is *forced* to unsettle the racial order. This paradox of involuntary subversiveness marks the core of the novel’s absurd humor, which, as I will discuss below, productively complicates the social scope of the satire.⁴ Thus, his name is

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- 3 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.
 - 4 *Not Sidney* experiments with a humor-based configuration of incongruity and nonsensicality that aligns it with *the Absurd*, as the paratextual reference to Samuel Beckett’s 1973 one-act play *Not I* is meant to show. Like Everett’s protagonist, Beckett’s acting unit, the mouth of a woman who soliloquizes her life-story of subjugation reduced to the corporeal function of her speech organ, is inserted into a linguistically predetermined power system, against which she revolts by refraining from using the pronoun “I.” Everett’s absurdist alignment with Beckett hinges on the problematization of the performative link between language and subjectivity as well as of art as a simplistically politicized practice. Aiming, above all, at debunking the misappropriation of language as a means of establishing meaning as naturally dominant, the Absurd can be conceived of as relating to symbolic violence in approaching racism not as a linear-hierarchical but rather as an inherently ambiguous, relational process of social domination.

interpreted by his white and black opponents as an act of sassiness, or making fun of them, for it 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?’” (13). This cyclic misrecognition is the defining principle of Not Sidney’s being persistently marginalized as the black Other; it epitomizes the novel’s complication of the essentialist view of race that results in stereotypically fixing human difference.⁵

The re-contextualization of the seemingly outdated Sidney Poitier scenarios challenges the reader to make sense of the racial madness erupting around Not Sidney. Though he is persistently punished for being unaware of race he actually fares moderately O.K. This discrepancy, which fosters the satiric humor in the first place, as well as the incongruity between Not Sidney and Sidney Poitier make the novel a particularly productive example of what Glenda R. Carpio has called “incongruity humor.” Carpio defines this so far understudied type of African American humor as the “playing of ‘what if’ games [...] that momentarily reconfigure habits of mind and language,” which has the function to challenge social normativity (6). Seemingly incongruent with the original Sidney Poitier, Not Sidney, as E. Lâle Demitürk asserts, “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). Provoking his opponents (and thus the reader) to constantly question his subjectivity in favor of Sidney Poitier’s spectacular preeminence, Not Sidney 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) *Not Sidney* critically comments on the institutionalization of these stereotypes. Yet, it does not exhaust its satirical potential with that. Rather, zooming in on Poitier as a cross-cultural icon, the novel presents a language-centered thought experiment that challenges

5 I am drawing on Mustafa Emirbayer’s and Matthew Desmond’s definition of race as “a symbolic category based on phenotype or ancestry and constructed according to specific social and historical contexts, a category that is misrecognized as natural” (51). By the “fixing” quality of stereotypes I mean, essentially, the fixing of human difference in readily accessible categories.

us to question our conceptual safe spots on *both* sides of the symbolic divide of race. More specifically, it also brings us to reflect on the receptive preconditions for critically negotiating the social and the literary sphere. This particular aspect ties in with Everett's critique of reductive conceptions of literary writing in general and writing labeled as "African American" in particular.

As a (self-declared) successor of black authors such as Ralph Ellison and Chester Himes, who ventures into various generic and thematic terrains – in the novelistic vein of Samuel Butler, Mark Twain, Samuel Beckett, and Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. (to mention but a few) – the Los Angeles-based novelist, poet, critic, painter, and USC professor Percival Everett makes a simple but important distinction: He does not stand *for* but *in* the tradition of African American literature and literary theory. He frequently stresses the problematic categorization of his (satiric) writing as "experimental." Instead he claims: "[E]very novel is experimental. There's no such thing as an experimental novel" ("Teaching Voice" 54). If anything, his writing can be considered experimental precisely because it is based on the productive interplay of story and the (often self-reflective) ways of its telling, which makes for its multi-conceptuality in the first place. *Not Sidney* thus can be conceived of as exemplary for Everett's experimental engagement with the possibilities of literature, specifically with respect to his critical negotiation of race and its sociocultural realities.⁶

Investigating Poitier as a signifier that has been culturally institutionalized as a shortcut to non-threatening, white mainstream-compatible black masculinity, Everett's impetus is based on what Anthony Stewart has identified in Everett's public political problematization of his birth state North

6 Like most of Everett's satires, *Not Sidney*'s conceptual configuration is based on the generic contrafactum of the *Bildungsroman* and the picaresque novel: a paradoxical protagonist, i.e., an inherently problematic figure of identification, and a (pseudo-)picaresque plot, i.e., an episodic, non-linear, simplified adventure story. These form the basic narrative framework of an often sign-theoretical, language-philosophical, and overall self-reflective project that, essentially, aims at dehabitualizing the reductive use of language as a shortcut to meaning, be it on the level of individual literary texts, literary history, or wider cultural discourses.

Carolina's racist legacy, namely paralipsis (189).⁷ Echoing the rhetorical tactic of misdirection, the novel revives the racial legacy of Sidney Poitier by his counter-character Not Sidney. Poitier, the racial representative of a seemingly bygone era, signifies a development that reaches its (first) peak in Not Sidney's time: the commercialization of blackness in the multiculturalist entertainment era. Generally, Everett's paraliptic project ironically appropriates various concerns and conventions of African American culture and literature.⁸ Obviously, *Not Sidney* draws on the black tropes of naming and genealogical dislocation. What is more, Not Sidney complicates the vernacular paradigm of tricksterism famously synthesized by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. in *Signifying Monkey*. Far from being a trickster who plays with language to compete in micro-social power games, Everett's protagonist is an involuntary subversive, who only reluctantly plays along with the events rather than deliberately shape their outcome. That the reader is encouraged to make sense of Not Sidney's humorously harmless punishment can be read as another deliberate deviation from the melodramatic mode dominating the canonical genre of the (neo)-slave narrative, with which Not Sidney's narrative shares the quest for freedom from racial oppression in the self-authenticating form of autobiography. What, finally, makes Everett's intermedial re-negotiation so unconventional and complex is that Not Sidney is not just not Sidney Poitier. Rather, both figures share a consistent inconsistency, as it were.

Having come "to personify *the Black Man on screen*" (Leab 223) during the post-WWII re-negotiation of the representational politics in U.S. popular culture, Sidney Poitier not only embodied a decisive diversification of on-screen images of blackness but changed the role of the black male in

7 Thus, Everett's investigation of Sidney Poitier echoes his engagement with the Republican, pro-segregationist South Carolinian senator Strom Thurmond in *A History of the African-American People (proposed) by Strom Thurmond as told to Percival Everett and James Kincaid* (2004). Everett's scathing satire forces us to complicate the commonsensical conception of Thurmond as the very model of a racist white supremacist much like he provokes us to reconsider the seeming iconic consistency of Poitier as the stereotypical good black man.

8 Not Sidney's name, one could even argue, echoes the race-related disprivileging of job seekers whose names, because they are (stereo-)typically associated with African-Americans, trigger their rejection in written applications.

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 (240). On the one hand, his on-screen characters combined all the characteristics of cultivation that catered to the white liberal fantasy of the good black male citizen worthy of integration into mainstream society, thus countering the cultural fear of the aggressive, sexually predatory black male. As Hall points out, Sidney Poitier was “almost sexless” (241) in his absolutely non-threatening allure. On the other hand, the image of the acting Poitier was, as James Baldwin stressed, sexually codified, as he was a “sex symbol [...], though no one dares admit that” (58). Retracing the “Poitier effect” in her same-titled study, Sharon Willis identifies “unmanageable” tensions and ironies such as the sexual subtext as the crucial constituents of Poitier’s spectacular “extraordinariness” (23). Whereas “in his comforting returns” he “remains the same from role to role, just as his characters remain unchanged despite the dramas that develop around them” (40), the movies seem to have not been able to contain him “despite their accommodationist rhetoric” (23). It is this consistent inconsistency, i.e., the stability of his role and the contradictions implicit in his cultural appeal that Everett self-declaredly interrogates.⁹

Not Sidney 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 charged 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. Being “extremely well educated” (30), Not Sidney’s use of language shows his wit – oftentimes hilariously so, while he struggles to stay out of all the trouble that his name incites. Not Sidney’s Poitier-esque appearance and linguistic proficiency contrast with his clumsy behavior (as opposed to

9 “I was interested in the icon of the palatable black man in the ‘60s or ‘70s,” Everett stated 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).

Poitier's spectacular bodily presence and 'timing' onscreen) as a stoic of sorts. His inculcated ironic indifference is severely troubled in the *Guess* episode where, interestingly, space and Not Sidney's practical involvement in it are key, as opposed to the novel's overarching disintegration of plot and the backgrounding of setting, as well as the (stereo-)typification of characters (including Not Sidney). For a sociologically informed literary analysis Bourdieu's theoretical dyad of symbolic violence and habitus can serve as an interpretative prism to zoom in on the social nuances of Not Sidney's negotiation of his own 'place' in the racial order. Whereas Everett creates Not Sidney *not* as a conventional character but as a figurative test-device, Bourdieu's body-oriented, relational approach to human sociality allows us to focus on the author's characterological re-complexification of Not Sidney. Reemphasizing the social dynamics of the latter's involvement in his racial environment, Everett's 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 imaginative absurdity and social credibility.

THIS BIZARRE GAME OF COLOR: SYMBOLIC VIOLENCE IN BLACK IN-GROUP RACISM

Guess Who's Coming to Dinner? is special within Sidney Poitier's array of cinematic works, for it stages a white-black miscegenation scenario in the year of the Supreme Court's *Loving v. Virginia* decision that legally sanctioned interracial marriages. The renowned black doctor John Wade Prentice Jr. (Sidney Poitier) and Joanna (Katharine Houghton), the 23-year-old daughter of the white, liberal, upper class Draytons, want 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. Translating the antagonism of white and black in Sidney Poitier's era to light-black and black in Not Sidney'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. The

episode culminates with an instance of black in-group racism in the social sphere of what E. Franklin Frazier termed the “black bourgeoisie.”

Symbolic violence, Bourdieu contends, is “every power which manages to impose meanings and to impose them as legitimate by concealing the power relations which are the basis of its force” (Bourdieu and Passeron 4). With an entire academic career of sociological scholarship and critical thinking devoted to the attempt of understanding why “the established order, with its relations of domination, its rights and prerogatives, privileges and injustices, ultimately perpetuates itself so easily” (*Masculine Domination* 1), symbolic violence, as the power which epitomizes the social mechanisms of this perpetuation, has often been pointed out as Bourdieu’s key concept. It is valuable for a critical engagement with the social processes inherent in racial oppression and stereotyping, for it extends W. E. B. Du Bois’s epoch-making notions of the “color-line” and the “double-consciousness.” Drawing on Bourdieu’s theory we can conceive of the symbolic divide between black and white (and its ideological and individual, psycho-sociological institutionalization) as fundamentally formative for the establishment of the social order of U.S. society, precisely because it allows us to move beyond several problematic dichotomies. These comprise consciousness and unconscious, consent and coercion, but also those of the individual and the institutional, the dominated (i.e., those who are allegedly exclusively affected by racial oppression) and the dominant (i.e., those who effect that oppression). Reconsidering all of these as interrelating rather than self-contained spheres of human sociality we are able, with Bourdieu, to arrive at the fundamental insight of the body as the primordial site of social action and interaction:

The effect of symbolic domination (sexual, ethnic, cultural, linguistic, etc.) is exerted not in the pure logic of knowing consciousness but in the obscurity of the dispositions of habitus, in which are embedded the schemes of perception and appreciation which, below the level of the decisions of the conscious mind and the controls of the will, are the basis of a relationship of practical knowledge and recognition that is profoundly obscure to itself. (*Pascalian Meditations* 170-71)

Not Sidney reacts to the unspoken discrimination by his girlfriend’s parents, who dismiss him as potential son-in-law because of the dark *shade* of his skin color, and to the spatial structure of their decadent mansion in a

bodily-rooted way: He is urged to constantly, quasi-consciously reflect on the material composition of the house's interior space, unconsciously associating it with the particular sphere of the social order in which, as he recognizes, he illegitimately roams.

The ways in which Not Sidney recognizes his being out of place, of not belonging in the social sphere of the Larkins' home in Washington, D.C. attests to his habitus, his inculcated schemes of perception and recognition of the social order. His reaction resonates with what Du Bois once stated when reflecting on the wider historical reverberations of racial oppression in the U.S.: "we were not facing simply the rational, conscious determination of white folk to oppress us; we were facing age-long complexes sunk now largely to unconscious habit and irrational urge" (296). In the *Guess* episode, which marks the peak of the narrative's episodic progression from overt, physically transacted forms to ambiguous and subliminal manifestations of racial violence,¹⁰ Not Sidney struggles severely to maintain his ironic indifference. Becoming "sadly, irritatingly, horrifyingly observant of skin color and especially my own" (138) he proves to have cultivated a habitus of an oppressed of the oppressed. The episode thus forms a climactic micro-section in the novel's episodic experiment, subsuming two variants of symbolic violence. The first consists in Not Sidney's reaction to his socio-spatial environment, the second in his interaction with the patriarch of the family, Ward Larkin.

Ironically, very much like John Wade Prentice, Not Sidney 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

10 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.

on the pretext of celebrating Thanksgiving together. Although having been informed that Maggie's "family is slightly class-conscious [...] Hell they're snobs" (119), Not Sidney accepts the invitation because of what Bourdieu has termed *illusio*, the belief in the purposefulness of one's engagement in the everyday social competition of societal life. Not Sidney believes in living what he deems the American way of life, in the validity of the multicultural promise of emancipation qua cultural contribution,¹¹ hoping to find his own place in society.¹² 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 (94).¹³ 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 imagines her argue in retrospect. 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 as a "wedge" (141) between herself and her lightly complected, race-obsessed parents. 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'

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- 11 This notion, obviously, is complicated by his implicit cooptation by the entertainment industry as the owner of the TV channel NET and the protégé of the media mogul Ted Turner.
 - 12 Part of the novel's successful negotiation of imaginative absurdity and social credibility rests on the frequent commenting of the narrating I on the narrated I's naiveté, which is inherent in Not Sidney's status as autodiegetic narrator.
 - 13 Not Sidney 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. In the end, he resolves to help a group of Pentecostal sisters to build their new church as a "newfound and fairly ironic way to spend my ridiculously easy-to-come-by money" (185).

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. Thus, the Larkins display a starkly caricatured variation of what Frazier identified 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).

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 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 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. In his guest room – which 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” animals¹⁴ – Not Sidney 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 (bodily) 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 (proleptically) reflect (his recognition of his) black masculinity as compromising the racial purity of the Larkins.

“[I]t is through this material inclusion—often unnoticed or repressed,” Bourdieu argues, “and what follows from it, the incorporation of social structures in the form of dispositional structures” that a person acquires “a practical knowledge and control of the encompassing space” (*Pascalian Meditations* 30). In the case of Not Sidney, this incorporation of social structures, which shapes his peculiar feeling of displacement, seems to have been stalled in the entrepreneurship-centered domain of the Turner home, where his pecuniary means granted his however exceptional membership of this micro-community. Not Sidney’s entry into the upper-class society of the Larkins marks his first encounter with a race-centered socio-economic

14 These absurdly kitschy, because literal tokens of their social self-idealization ironically echo the Draytons’ extensive display of modern works of art in *Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner* as an alleged sign of their cultural sophistication and open-mindedness.

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'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). The fact that he refers to this comedic-didactic show about a *white* American suburban family further hints at Not Sidney's (un-)conscious recognition of 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, Not Sidney 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) Thus already fully aware that Maggie's parents disapprove of him because of his dark complexion, Not Sidney then meets the patriarch of the family, Ward Larkin, and imagines to hear him concluding his casual welcome small talk with “boy,” *the* verbal epitome of black emasculation. That Not Sidney hears this derogatory appellation without it actually having been uttered hints at his habitus, that “practical sense for what is to be done in a given situation—what is called in sport a ‘feel’ for the game, that is, the art of *anticipating* the future of the game, which is inscribed in the present state of play” (Bourdieu, *Practical Reason* 25). Not Sidney, 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. It seems to have been implemented in his habitus 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's social background in his stereotype-activating and -complicating experiment.

Increasingly taking offense with the Larkins' racist elitism, Not Sidney, significantly, confides *not* in Maggie but in Violet, the family's black servant.¹⁵ 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" (155) 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 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 pigmentation¹⁶ (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 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 and try to beguile him, hoping to succeed in integrating him into their social ranks as Maggie's future husband. However, Not Sidney, who has once again overheard them, undermines their plotting. He debunks the pillar of their racial pride – their anti-affirmative action stance – by turning the tables on them at the final climactic Thanksgiving dinner scene:

15 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).

16 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's struggle.

"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).

"A MAN THAT SETS THE STANDARD": SIDNEY POITIER REVIS(IT)ED

Everett's satirical impetus hinges on what Terry Rey phrases thus: "only where there is distinction can there be domination" (55). The Thanksgiving Dinner episode is but one example of how *Not Sidney* investigates institutionalized structures of meaning along the lines of race, gender, and class to challenge those consensual conceptions that are accepted by the dominant and the dominated alike. The intermedial adaptation of *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner?* is remarkable for its negotiation of black in-group racism as an ambiguous, double-bound form of social debasement, during which Not Sidney's own racial formation is reflected in his habitus of an oppressed of the oppressed. That his birthday coincides with the premiere of the movie in 1967¹⁷ further attests to the import of this episode for Everett's re-contextualization of Sidney Poitier for his particular version of a dehabitu-alized reading of race.

Along with his other two movies of 1967, *In the Heat of the Night* (dir. Norman Jewison) and *To Sir, with Love* (dir. James Clavell), *Guess* made Poitier finally and fundamentally famous, establishing him as the benign black male in the U.S. cultural imaginary. Not Sidney's fictional life thus begins in the exact year when Sidney Poitier, the star-like figure of black masculinity, is born, as it were. 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.¹⁸ This ellipsis allows

17 Recapitulating the peculiar circumstances of his own conception, i.e., his mother's "hysterical pregnancy" lasting 24 months and the "urban legend" 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.

18 The movie concludes shortly after Matt's monologue, fading out the subsequent conversations of the guests at the dinner table while playing the soundtrack song "The Glory of Love" (by Billy Hill, sung by Jacqueline Fontaine).

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.

As Keith M. Harris concludes in his study *Boys, Boyz, Bois*, "Poitier's masculinity [...] hinges upon the tropological transformations of racialized masculinity (the black man) into a figure of honor, dignity, and 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" (62) in early American cinema by often being paired with white partners. In *Guess*, 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. His 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 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-centered U.S. society.

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.¹⁹ 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.²⁰ The "threat" of Poitier's black male sexuality, Harris

19 These simplifications resulted in the film taking "a well deserved critical beating," as Daniel J. Leab points out (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.

20 Speaking with Bourdieu, John owns a lot of cultural capital (consolidated in his doctoral degree from Harvard, for one) that is derived from his participation in the competition over professional legitimacy in the prestigious profession of

stresses, “is contained in class, effeminacy, and morality in the image of Poitier as sexual passivity” (69). The racial redemption of whiteness is thus exclusively allocated to the alleged supra-bodily realm of the intellectual, for which class (and the Draytons’ position in the upper section of it) serves as metaphor. 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 naïveté 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 colorblind or “post-racial” love (rooted in Joanna’s naïveté). Thus, *Not Sidney*’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.

That the satiric novel *Erasure* appears in *Not Sidney* – 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 that the continuation of conventional debates on race and black identity by critics made for a peculiar receptive irony of this satire that actually satirizes (an unsuccessful) satire (on race). Yet, it also stresses how deep Everett’s engagement with the possibilities of aesthetic representation runs. *Not Sidney*, as I tried to illustrate above, aims

medical science. This capital, because of the medical field’s interrelation with the supra-field of power, is especially easily transferrable into economic capital.

first and foremost at challenging the critical preconditions of reflecting sociocultural realities (in literature). His 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 (intra-racial) 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., questions the safe spots on *both* sides of the symbolic divide in U.S. society.

What makes (Not) Sidney Poitier such a productive focal point for an inquiry into race and its present-day realities? 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 (televisual) bodily presence. The re-contextualization of Sidney Poitier qua Not Sidney Poitier is narrativized as a fictional experiment: What if Sidney Poitier still is *the* prevalent safe spot of black subjectivity? And, taking this question at face value, what does it mean to be a black male and *not* Sidney Poitier, after all? 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.

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