Jouissance in *Damnedifido* stories by Percival Everett

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The Washington Post called Percival Everett "one of the most adventurously experimental of modern American novelists." His literary technique has been compared to Toni Cade Bambara's. Shashank Bengali[1] explains that Everett is at his deftest with the highly charged issue of race. In *Glyph* (1999), Everett waits until 50 pages into the novel to have Baby Ralph pause his stream of commentary on post-structuralism and abstract-impressionist painting to ask the reader:

> Have you to this point assumed that I am white? In my reading, I discovered that if a character was black, then he at some point was required to comb his Afro hairdo, speak on the street using an obvious, ethnically identifiable idiom, live in a certain part of town, or be called a nigger by someone. White characters … did not seem to need that kind of introduction, or perhaps legitimization, to exist on the page.[2]

It's a trick that Everett uses elsewhere in his fiction – obscuring the race of his characters or, as in *Glyph*, springing it upon readers in a way that forces them to confront their preconceptions.

In *Damnedifido*[3] published in 2004, a dozen stories exhibit Percival Everett's characteristically sardonic humour as well as a masterful command of narrative. He also creates characters that are engaging and accurate. The stories travel over a compelling landscape of settings, emotions and insights, rarely, if ever, losing sight of the need to take the reader along.

This complex collection presents the reader with an original and witty criticism of the US by exploring nonsense as what forces society to redefine itself, thus finding another meaning in the manifestations of the uncanny. *Jouissance* – as the symbolical re-appropriation of the usufruct of a property but also as pleasure – emerges thanks to story-telling and the art of fiction. The surge of desire that civilisation tries to restrain is staged in the stories, for instance through the odd relation with the Messianic other in the story "The Fix", or in the re-appropriation of symbols from Dixieland in "Appropriation of Cultures" by a black musician, or eventually through the encounter with a magical fish in "Epigenis". Percival Everett's stories exemplify the constraints of the genre, notably the condensation of time, space and language, as shown in the very title to the collection: *Damnedifido*, which is both very oral and very striking in its compressed form as the four words are artificially linked to form a neologism, a signifier in which the signs have been altered to make the signified opaque.

This analysis based upon Lacanian and deconstructionist tools intends to show in what way Everett's stories confront the fundamental division of American society in a metafictional way, constantly combining semiotics and politics. It will refer to the Lacanian concepts of real, imaginary and symbolic as the structures of the psyche that control our desires: the three orders of the inter-subjective world, as theorized by Lacan. The concept of the imaginary refers to both the capacity to form images and the

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[1] Shashank Bengali. *University of Southern California Trojan Family Magazine*. "The Wicked Wit of Percival Everett". Winter 2005. http://www.usc.edu/dept/pubrel/trojan_family/winter05/everett.html, page consulted on 03/01/11.

[2] Percival Everett. *GLYPH*. Saint Paul. Minnesota: Graywolf Press. 1999. 54.

[3] Percival Everett. *Damnedifido*. Saint Paul. MN, Graywolf Press, 2004.

alienating effect of identification with them, as in the Mirror-stage. The symbolic[4] is primarily the order of Culture and language; this is the order into which the Subject is inserted or inscribed thanks to the Oedipus complex and submission to the Name of the father. The Real is not synonymous with external or empirical reality, but refers to that which lies outside the Symbolic and that which returns to haunt the subject in disorders like psychosis.

"The Fix" and "Age Would Be That Does" exemplify the topoi of alienation and fragmentation in the American Imaginary as they promote the advent of anti-heroes whose relation to society is severed by deficiencies and some uncanny split which, originally enough, are not linked to ethnic characteristics.

Indeed Percival Everett deals not only with the issue of black identity but also with the structuring of the subject through the symbolic, that is through language and strategies of what Derrida calls *differance*. The term différ*a*nce originated at a seminar given by Jacques Derrida in 1968 at the "Société française de philosophie". The term in itself represents a synthesis of Derrida's semiotic and philosophical thinking. The writing of différ*a*nce refers to itself, because it breaks with the concepts of signified and referent. The emphasis on the theme of writing functions as an antidote against idealism, metaphysics and ontology.

Desire is thus first differed in the short stories in order to reach *jouissance*. As the re-appropriation of meaning, empowerment and sublimation of desire, it is therefore central to Percival Everett's *Damnedifido* stories and solves on the page the fundamental alienation between the black subject and the Other.

I. Jouissance of the Other: the fragmented Imaginary

In the allegory "The Fix", D.C. sandwich shop owner Doug Langley interrupts the savage beating Sherman Olney is receiving at the hands of two thugs, who may, in fact, be government agents. Sherman, as the reader quickly learns, has an exceptional gift. He fixes things. All things. Anything. Mechanical things, emotional things, parking tickets, and as it turns out, restores a dead woman to life. His only explanation: "Fixing things is easy. You have to know how things work." While a benefit to many, Sherman's gift does him no good at all, as the story's conclusion shows.

"The Fix" is ambiguous in its polysemy: a fix is a tricky situation, a drug intake, and a repair. It encapsulates a negative and a positive meaning, like Plato's pharmakos, being both the poison and the cure. It highlights the notion of addiction in American materialism and the pernicious circle in which the protagonists will be trapped by providing an antidote that could prove more lethal than the original flaw.

Percival Everett seems to orchestrate a post-modern parody of romanticism, notably in the use of the Doppelgänger because the surnames of the two protagonists bear the same number of syllables and build an echo due to the assonance on the ending. But deconstruction stems also from the incongruity of the references to army tanks and aircraft in their first names (Sherman and Douglas).

The "hero" is Sherman Olney, a strange Messiah-figure who mostly performs an archetypal function: he is the One, the Saviour, the man who can heal objects and human-beings. Although he can repair anything he touches, his characterisation is

[4] SYMBOLIC ORDER (Lacan): The social world of linguistic communication, intersubjective relations, knowledge of ideological conventions, and the acceptance of the law (also called the "big Other").

superficial, flat. His absence of interiority, his lack of desire, emphasize his perpetual state of melancholy. He is defined by his gift without any psychological insight. The only physical feature provided is the skinniness of the man. He is described as an actor on a stage. The only access to his personality, as in any drama, is achieved through direct speech and the spectacular repercussion of his actions on people. There is an omniscient narrator and no internal focalisation on Sherman: “

Sherman Olney crumpled to the ground, moaning and clutching at his middle, saying he didn’t have it anymore.”(4)

He first appears as a fallen hero: he lies on the ground, victimised, beaten, and physically diminished in this very graphic self-protecting posture. The atmosphere evokes that of a film noir with prevailing darkness and cold as pathetic fallacy, and mystery and anguish interspersed with reality effects such as the reference to police brutality through the objective correlative of the phone book used to beat up prisoners. The mysterious “it” stands for the McGuffin[5] in the story, some desired object that dark enemies are determined to catch hold of and which must be preserved by the hero. Its undefined quality highlights its symbolical representation as a signifier for desire and the failure of language to qualify it.

Although he can “fix” anything, thus modifying the structure of objects and human-beings, restoring them to their original state, he paradoxically appears to be untouched by the scope of his miracles. He stands as the archetype of otherness, the stranger, “l’étranger” but also as the spectacular representation of the uncanny.

> Two weeks later, Sherman had said nothing more about himself, responding only to trivial questions put to him. He did however repair or make better every machine in the restaurant. He had fixed the toaster oven, the gas lines of the big griddle, the dishwasher, the phone, the neon OPEN sign, the electric-eye buzzer on the front door, the meat slicer, the coffee machine, the manual mustard dispenser, and the cash register. (13)

The ordinariness of the objects repaired, the accumulative effect brought by the asyndeton, the endless list of the trivial uses of an extraordinary gift, add to this feeling of theatricality and this plastic performance of the absurd. The practical effect of his magic is performed on the stage and his territory is limited to the shop, thus creating a unity of space: “

Still, his presence was disconcerting as he never spoke of his past or family or friends and he never went out, not even to the store, his food being already there, and so Douglas began to worry that he might be a fugitive from the law.” (13)

This view of Sherman by Langley is immediately verbalised by Langley’s wife who directly complains that he never leaves the shop.

Sherman can also be analysed as a tragic hero endowed with a supernatural power which is also his tragic flaw, because it alienates him from the human race. While performing more and more miracles, his popularity increases and is even extended to

[5] Hitchcock "[We] have a name in the studio, and we call it the 'MacGuffin'. It is the mechanical element that usually crops up in any story. In crook stories it is almost always the necklace and in spy stories it is most always the papers". Interviewed in 1966 by François Truffaut, Alfred Hitchcock illustrated the term "MacGuffin" with this story: It might be a Scottish name, taken from a story about two men in a train. One man says "What's that package up there in the baggage rack?", and the other answers, "Oh, that's a McGuffin". The first one asks "What's a McGuffin?" "Well", the other man says, "It's an apparatus for trapping lions in the Scottish Highlands". The first man says, "But there are no lions in the Scottish Highlands", and the other one answers, "Well, then that's no McGuffin!" So you see, a McGuffin is nothing at all.

marital counselling. It reaches a climax with the hyperbolic description of the crowd waiting for him after he brought a woman back to life.

He has no alternative but to escape, as he explains to Langley in a very melodramatic scene, his eyes filled with tears, as he defines himself as the empty sea. "

The masses of people pressed in from either side. Sherman stepped over the railing and stood on the brink, the toes of his shoes pushed over the edge.
'Don't!' they all screamed. 'Fix us! Fix us!'"(24)

"Age Would Be That Does" can be seen as a parody of "The Old Man and the Sea". Old and short-sighted Rosendo Lapuente mistakenly kills his sister's dog and then, with his long-sighted friend Mauricio Rocha, after blaming a cougar spotted in the area for the disappearance of the dog, decides to go and hunt the animal to prove to their relatives that they are still able to achieve great things. But as they stop in the mountain, a highly comical scene presents their inability to identify the animal which sits right next to Mauricio. They decide to go back home fully satisfied by the fact they are the only ones who have managed to come that close to the lion.

The two protagonists of this story are mainly characterised by a physical deficiency which triggers misunderstandings, grotesque situations but is also what motivates action.

As Rosendo Lapuente is short-sighted, his friend, Mauricio Rocha is long-sighted, building a mutual dependence in the two men's friendship. Their complicity is thus established by this physical need to merge their abilities for their weaknesses to remain invisible to the rest of the world: "The men also shared vision; that was how they saw it. Mauricio claiming to see things some distance away and Rosendo saying he could focus on things up close." (80)

Yet, although they believe their secret is well kept, dramatic irony first stems from the fact that everyone in the area knows about their deficiency: "When anyone saw the blue Datsun parked at the canyon opening or any place near the mountain, the word was spread to steer clear of the forest." (81)

Driving episodes in the short story allow the narrator to provide the reader with a comic show, as the characters' near blindness is a graphic theatrical device of this absurd quest since they walk and drive in circles.

This flaw fuels their picaresque adventures as they decide to go and hunt the lion in the mountain after a mock-epic journey. Killing the dog is thus the first incident eventually leading to the events in the mountain where they fail to see the lion, but realize its presence through another sense, smell, and come to the conclusion that their endeavour is a success: "We were closer to the beast than anyone else. You were near enough to smell the lion's breath." (89)

Rosendo and Mauricio are anti-heroes, ageing men who refuse to acknowledge their weaknesses and whose obstinacy raises situational humour and nonsense. Their errors are spectacular and theatrical: "Rosendo, who had not noticed his friend's movement, also did not notice that the cougar was now sitting in his friend's place." (86)

The scene is a source of dramatic irony as the reader is fully aware of the mistake while Rosendo asks the lion to apologise for belching. Instead, Mauricio, who is relieving himself behind the trees believes that he has been too noisy. The power of this comic short-story lies in the call to a synaesthetic experience to fully apprehend the final scene, and also in the narrative tension brought by the merging of visual references in a written text.

"The Fix" and "Age Would Be That Does" both demonstrate how, through a displacement of the notion of hero, Percival Everett's stories explore the relation of American society to the Other, either the spiritual one, or the sensuous one. They stage the fundamental gap which took place physically, in the Imaginary and the fragmented perception of the self in the mirror, but also symbolically in the advent of the subject whose nonsensical language points at an essential void.

II. Symbolic *differance*

When asked about the puzzling title of the story "Age Would be that does", here is the message Percival Everett sent me:

> I certainly don't have the authority to say what the title really means. But I can say that the "would" in the title possibly refers to a wish, as in "would that you were here." But there is more a little desire to approach nonsense in the title, nonsense requiring always more attention to structure and expectation that those statements we consider sensical. (e-mail from Percival Everett to Isabelle Van Peteghem – November 14 2007)

Indeed, from the beginning, the text seems to display a deconstructionist will to highlight the gap between the written text and the spoken word at the basis of the theory of *différance*. It sounds meaningful when spoken aloud but its syntactic structure is utterly nonsensical. The title thus contains the first optical illusion. The second stems from the plot itself and the spectacular representation of the gap.

The scene is probably set in New Mexico, as geographic features and the references to Albuquerque indicate. Percival Everett uses the natural landscape as a vast signifier of American wilderness, as a stage where uncanny experiences can occur. Human beings are pictured as lonely creatures losing and then finding themselves on the open and spectacular of an American stereotyped stage, identified through subtle hints at towns, rivers, mountains.

The two men have to rely on each other for directions when they drive but the reader knows how unreliable their sight is, which leads to situational humour and absurd events when they walk in circles in the woods. The isotopy of sight is omnipresent in the story, and operates as a polysemic signifier both for the physical ability in its active meaning, from the character's position and the theatrical performance, the spectacle, the show in its passive sense, as viewed by the reader.

The scenery in the area is, unfortunately, monotonous, thus deluding: "They found Mauricio's blue Datsun down the road, got in, and after a moderate amount of time, found the mouth of some canyon." (85)

Mauricio and Rosendo find their way by spotting "some" canyon mouth and following it up or down to enter a territory where they can convince themselves they are still great hunters. The determiner "some" states the impossibility to specify accurately the location because precision is not relevant here. It is not an identified place. The mouth of the canyon, like the stage of the theatre, operates as a clear boundary between fiction and reality in the story. It functions as a metadramatic device inviting the reader to enter the fantasy created by the protagonists within the very text of the short story. To hunt the lion, they follow an "arroyo", which is the gully of an ephemeral stream usually dry. They need this verticality to achieve their quest and nature provides them with this visible route. Their physical elevation and their isolation from the rest of the human world lead them to a nonsensical world of high deeds and male boasting: "They

wondered about things, asked questions like: Did state troopers shift their pistols from hip to hip to avoid being lopsided?" (88)

The intrusion of the lion is only perceived through the men's senses, first hearing as one of them mistakenly thinks it is Mauricio belching and then smelling as Rosendo understands, when he smells his friend's breath, that he actually heard the lion. The situational *differance* is here rooted in the delay caused by the mistake, and the gap between the reader's awareness and the characters' delusion leads to dramatic irony and a theatrically baroque climax: the blending of the trivial physical human actions of belching and urinating and the indifferent and odd presence of the lion joining the pair to rest for a while, before disappearing into darkness.

Another optical illusion in the short-stories is obtained by the baroque use of animals which deceive human beings and alter their perceptions. The lion in "Age would be That Does" and the trout in "Epigenis" are endowed with human attitudes or characteristics. It creates grotesque situations in which the protagonists try to communicate with beasts: "But on the end of the leader is the cricket and with it is an enormous trout, much larger than the stream should accommodate, much larger than any trout should be." (147)

"Epigenesis" tells the story of a man called Alan Turing who goes fishing and catches a big trout which utters the word *epigenesis*. He releases the fish and goes back home. He tries to talk to his wife Barbara about this strange encounter but she does not take him seriously. He goes back to the creek and he meets the same fish which asks him to take it home. On the way, Alan explains his frustrating sex life and his feeling of emptiness. As he reaches home, he runs to tell his wife to come and have a look at the passenger seat. He explains that their life is no longer satisfactory. But the trout has disappeared and has been replaced by a small dead fish. The story ends on Alan telling his wife he loves her.

The short-story, applying some rules of the fantastic genre, opens on a very detailed and highly realistic description of fishing and movement on the surface of water. Then the bizarre interrupts this normal situation underlined by the use of the comparative and the repetition of "larger" and of the modal "should". "Should" refers to the normative frame of reference of Turing, the hero and to his awareness that, clearly, this fish does not match his expectations. This discrepancy or *differance* leads to a dramatic expression of fear, as Turing is physically shaken by the event: "Turing shakes his head, wants to cry, his hands trembling, dropping his rod while his heart stalls, he hears clearly a word, its syllables, it must be a word and the word is **epigenesis**." (148)

"Epigenesis" has several meanings. It first refers to the development of an organism, which would here be the spectacular size of the trout that has managed to grow in such a limited place, a larger than life creature, a hyperbolic construct. But the word also conveys a philosophical meaning through its etymology. *Genesis* means creation, birth, and the prefix *epi-* corresponds to "after" but also an idea of overlapping, of superposition indicating a second layer of interpretation. It is the original creative impulse that is the source of human development and within the story, the formation of the word results in Turing's defining anew what matters in his life. According to spiritual evolution, humans build upon that which has already been created, but add new elements because of the activity of the spirit. Humans have the capacity, therefore, to become creative intelligences—creators. For a human to fulfil this promise, his training should allow for the exercise of originality, which distinguishes creation from imitation. When *epigenesis* becomes inactive, in the individual or even in a race, evolution ceases

and degeneration commences. Turing becomes aware of his petrified existence, notably because of the dullness of his sex-life, and ultimately refuses to play his part.

> Giant fish aren't supposed to swim in small water, in holes that should not be, deep and invisible until one is over it; yet he wonders what would have happened had he stepped into it unknowingly. How many people had? But then it seems stupid to curse the creek when the fish had talked, when the fish had so rudely changed his life. (149)

The word uttered by a fantastic animal leads Turing to question the emptiness in his life and also to re-create communication with his wife Barbara. The most uncanny scene is performed when the fish, saying that Turing is not happy, tells him to bring it home with him and that they have, in the confined space of the car, an absurd conversation where Turing does most of the talking to evoke his frustrating life. Anthropomorphism is complete with the accurate description of the position of the trout:

> The trout fills the passenger seat. Its head presses against the armrest of the door. Its tail brushes against Alan Turing's thigh. Its eye is pointed toward the roof.
> 'Tell me about your wife,' the trout says. (155)

This theatrical description, in its minuteness, adds to the gap between objective reality, as represented by the armrest, the roof, the seat which make up this dramatic setting, and the fantastic personification of the trout who behaves like a psycho-analyst. Nonsense generates dialogue in the story even if a climax is reached when Turing fails to show to his wife the talking trout which has metamorphosed into a tiny dead fish on the passenger seat. This graphic deflation of the animal, the symbolic reduction to an empty signifier is compensated by the awakening of Alan to his true self and his will to cling to his love for his wife.

Epigenesis points to the fundamental misunderstanding and miscommunication between individuals as language fails to convey meaning and bridge existential gaps. Fragmentation can also be entailed by the return of repressed history and the ironic erasure of racial politics can be re-appropriated by Everett to promote a jouissance of the Real.

III. Percival Everett's literary *jouissance*

> Southern trees bear strange fruit
> Blood on the leaves
> Blood at the root
> Black bodies swinging in the southern breeze,
> Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees.[6]

With the story « The Appropriation of cultures », Percival Everett tackles an explicit identity claim while displaying an ironic reappropriation of the symbolic order, thus disrupting a racist archetypal southern society and perverting the world of signifiers. The return of the repressed manifests itself by the resurgence of a discriminatory legacy, the strange fruit sung by Billie Holiday hanging from the majestic trees in Dixieland. "The Appropriation of Cultures" operates as a deconstruction/reconstruction of symbols deeply embedded in the culture of the American South and its ultra-conservative values. Everett endows his protagonist with his favorite tools – irony, humor, artifice – as the latter turns the Confederate flag into a

[6] Extract from *Strange fruit* d'Abel Meeropol, (Lewis Allan), sung for the first time by Billie Holiday in 1939.

Black Power symbol while laying African American claim to the Southern anthem, "Dixie". Thus the archetypal "trickster" figure triumphs over his bigger, stronger adversary by getting him to psychologically relinquish treasured icons of Southern white superiority and by playing on that very myth.

Whereas protagonist Daniel Barkley[7] is about to play with his jazz band in a pub in South Carolina, several drunk students from a fraternity ask him to play *Dixieland*. To everyone's surprise, and although shaken by the racial tension which revives painful memories, Daniel starts to play the song though altering it with great subtlety:

> He sang it slowly. He sang it feeling the lyrics, deciding that the lyrics were his, deciding that the song was his. *Old times there are not forgotten*… He sang the song and listened to the silence around him. He meant what he sang. *Look away, look away, look away, Dixieland*. (92)

The words of the song, typographically identified by the italics first stand out on the page, then are gradually integrated within the character's discourse. He appropriates the anthem by slowing down the rhythm and savouring the text: he thus imprints his own mark, his voice, the one of the black man who does not look away but who resists by sending back to the white other his deformed image. The repetition of the pronoun "he" reinforces the symbolic empowerment of a territory, the monumental and oppressing South which returns constantly because it is over-determined by fantasy. It is not only a geographic place but a true chronotope[8], to use Bahktin's terminology, and the manifestaion of the Lacanian *real*[9]: the real is best understood as *that which has not yet been symbolized*, remains to be symbolized and even resists symbolization[10]. The real is the state of nature from which we have been forever severed by our entrance into language.

The South is therefore the archetype of a golden age for some or a nightmarish vision for others which also stands as the place where conflict has to be solved as it symbolises the topos of the original trauma.

Daniel Barkley however, knows that he has another highly transgressive deed to accomplish so as to complete this process of reappropriation of history and to solve the fundamental conflict at the core of African-American identity: he has to benefit from the usufruct of this legacy by entering in possession of another sacred symbol, the confederate flag.

Jacques Lacan developed his theory of *jouissance*, which is a legal term in French meaning possession or tenure, from the notion of usufruct, the right of enjoying a thing, the property of which is vested in another, and to draw from the same all the profit, utility and advantage which it may produce, provided it be without altering the substance of the thing. Therefore, enjoying the property is an appropriation that rests on a primary expropriation: the White as the other must relinquish his rights on that

[7] Daniel is the central protagonist of the Book of Daniel. According to the biblical book, at a young age Daniel was carried off to Babylon where he became famous for interpreting dreams and rose to become one of the most important figures in the court.

[8] Bakhtin, Michael. *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*. Transl. by C. Emerson and M. Holquist. Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 198: Literally, 'time-space'. A unit of analysis for studying texts according to the ratio and nature of the temporal and spatial categories represented. The distinctiveness of this concept as opposed to most other uses of time and space in literary analysis lies in the fact that neither category is privileged; they are utterly interdependent. The chronotope is an optic for reading texts as x-rays of the forces at work in the culture system from which they sprang (425-425).

[9] Lacan, Jacques. Le Séminaire, Livre XI, *Les quatre concepts fondamentaux de la psychanalyse*. Paris : Éd. du Seuil, coll. « Points ». 1973. 64.

[10] Fink, Bruce. *The Lacanian Subject – Between language and Jouissance*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. 1995. 25.

property. For the Blacks to enjoy the usufruct of history, they have to symbolically dispossess the Whites of their claims.

Jouissance implies desire and transgression of the Law of the Father, as well as the disrupting of order. There is a shift from object to subject. And the first *jouissance* for the black artist is therefore the appropriation of the language of the totemic white father, as exemplified by the theory of the *signifying monkey*, to borrow Henry Gates Jr.'s trope[11].

Daniel goes back home pleased with himself after his show in the bar and feels free to go on with his life of idleness as he has been bequeathed some money from his mother and his aunt and does not work at all. Of course this detail is highly revealing of the character's specific situation as he constantly challenges the black stereotype: he stands as an original trickster figure because of his social status that does not position him as a conventional victim of segregation.

Yet his symbolic and historical legacy starts to haunt him and manifests itself through an obsessive dream in which he attends the battle of Gettysburg that was the turning-point in the Civil War since it marked the beginning of the Confederates' defeat: "He fell asleep and had a dream in which he stopped Pickett's men on the Emmitsburg Road on their way to the field and said, 'Give me back my flag.'" (93)

The use of the possessive adjective « my » clearly indicates the process of appropriation of the symbol and signifies the spectacular empowerment of the black subject.

The young man first decides to buy a pick-up truck that is also a signifier for redneck America and as a sign of supplementary transgression, he gets a Dixie flag sticker. A very funny scene takes place when the owners realise that he is black ("I couldn't tell over the phone." 96). As they offer to peel off the sticker, he refuses:

> 'I was just lucky enough to find a truck with the black-power flag already on it.'
> 'What?' Travis screwed up his face, trying to understand.
> 'The black-power flag on the window. You mean, you didn't know?'(100)

Daniel clearly inverts the signified by fighting the traditional white supremacist meaning of the flag and resorts to humour as a powerful sign of rebellion. Resilience can set up in thez rupture and the loss of preconceived references. Metamorphosis occurs thanks to the process of desacralisation of an emblem that is then re-sacralised.

Daniel laughs at Travis' bewildered face and at his stunned girlfriend's: "You should have seen those redneck boys when I took 'Dixie' from them. They didn't know what to do. So the goddamn flag is flying over the State Capitol. Don't take it down, just take it. That's what I say. (99)

Daniel enjoys the new signifier now endowed with black symbolism and gradually expropriates the whites of the Dixie flag while deconstructing the tricky function of the sign that can be subverted and adapted to everyone's discourse. He can savour the

[11] Although the lion claims to be king of the jungle, everyone knows who the real king is: it is the elephant. The monkey, fed up with the lion's roaring, decides to do something about it. He insults the lion publicly and at length—his "mama" and his "grandmama, too"—and when the lion grows angry, the monkey shrugs that he is merely repeating what the elephant has been saying. Furious, the lion heads out to challenge the elephant, who impassively trounces him. The monkey either gets away with his deception or does not, but in any event he is a success at "signifying." Gates, Henry Louis Jr.. *The Signifying Monkey – A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 1988. 56.

provocation that his new vehicle epitomises as he displays it around the town, at first upsetting Blacks and Whites before setting a new trend:

> And after the emblem was used to dress the yards and mark picnic sites of black family reunions the following Fourth of July, the piece of cloth was quietly dismissed from its station with the U.S. and State flags atop the State Capitol. There was no ceremony, no notice. One day, it was not there.
> *Look away, look away, look away…* (103)

Daniel's story is a clear example of deconstruction in two stages as analyzed by Jacques Derrida: first the reversal stage to extinguish the power struggle, then the neutralization stage to break free from binary logic[12].

White southern symbols reappropriated by the Blacks ironically enable the narrator to free the black subject in Percival Everett's stories. The South, thanks to the process of metafictional and symbolic usufruct, is no longer conceived as the symptom of an overwhelming legacy. The fundamental alienation entailed by slavery and then by decades of segregation can eventually be erased by literary creation thus marking the advent of an inversion in power dynamics.

"The Appropriation of Cultures" also refers to Everett's personal political commitment to fight inherited prejudice. Indeed, in 1989, he was invited to address the South Carolina State Legislature, but during his speech he refused to continue because of the presence of the Confederate flag, thus touching off a controversy that ended with the flag being removed from the Capitol building some years later.

Conclusion

Percival Everett's stories go beyond the constraints of the genre to achieve new significance, thanks to the condensation of time, space and language, as shown in the very title to the collection, the compressed "damnedifido". "The Fix" is ambiguous in its polysemy: a fix is a tricky situation, a drug intake, and a repair. Similarly, "Age Would Be That Does" is an odd title too: the syntagmatic organisation of the phrase is puzzling and as with the title to the collection, poses a challenge to the reader, a need to utter the words to find the appropriate sentence stress, rhythm, and decode the meaning and untie, unbind the compact and enigmatic titles.

The extensive use of dialogues in « The Fix" and in "Age Would Be That Does" reduces distance between the reader and the characters as there is no interior monologue, no inner focalisation, no free indirect speech. There is no narrative filter acting as a guiding voice between the protagonists and the story, the plot is literally staged. Therefore discourse is set in the unwritten and the implicit space, that of decoding and interpreting visual signs, objective details, absurd situations.

"Epigenesis" operates on a reflexive level as creation is used as a metafictional device in the title which questions the creative process and in the story itself with the intrusion of the uncanny reconciling the hero with his own reality and vindicating himself as a subject at last.

As in most short stories, Percival Everett resorts to the common use of a final twist. Yet, in these four pieces, the ending is open and the conflict is not fully solved in the end. They all end on direct speech, on the expression of the characters' desire or

[12] Derrida, Jacques. *Plato's Pharmacy.* in *Dissemination*. trans. Barbara Johnson. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. 1981. 61-84.

frustration. And this feeling is passed on to the reader. The excipits prolong the mystery. As action stops and the curtain falls on the narrative, the reader is left with questions about the ultimate meaning of creation and the boundaries of story-telling. All the world of Percival Everett is a stage indeed.

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