Naming, Not Naming and Nonsense in *I am Not Sidney Poitier*

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> En tout langage, une structure d'archi-promesse est irréductible : c'est le moment du nom, de la parole ou du titre qui depuis *son insignifiance* promet le sens ou le vrai.
>
> (Derrida, *Mémoires pour Paul de Man*, je souligne)

> We must learn to wear our names within all the noise and confusion in which we find ourselves. They must become our masks and our shields and the containers of all those values and traditions which we learn and/or imagine as being the meaning of our familial past.
>
> (Ralph Ellison, "Hidden Names and Complex Fate")

> "Then what am I?'
> 'They'll call you a colored man when you grow up,' [my mother] said. Then she turned to me and smiled mockingly and asked: 'Do you mind, Mr. Wright?'"
>
> (Richard Wright, *Black Boy*)

I am Not Sidney Poitier relies primarily on the joke of the hero being named by his mother "Not Sidney," a pun that amounts to a "negative" identity or an identity in negation and difference, that thus opens up a reflection on names and naming. Here is one of the early exchanges between Not Sidney's mother and Ted Turner, founder of TBS and CNN and one of America's wealthiest businessmen, who becomes the boy's guardian after his mother's death:

> "Tell me, Portia, just what kind of a name is Not?" [Turner] asked.
> "It's Not Sidney," my mother corrected him.
> Turner was puzzled momentarily, then nodded his big head and laughed. "Oh, I get it."
>
> (*NS*, 7)[1]

An irreverent reference to (un)naming and to being called out of one's name (Benston 1984), or even to Homer's "No Man," the text indeed stages a cynical and hilarious twist on African American nomination and its troubled history. In the wake of *Erasure*, the novel explores once again the relationship between language and being, being and meaning, as it revisits the major films in which Poitier starred[2]. It also simultaneously gestures, among others, towards Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952), Melvin Van Peeble's *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* (1971) and their picaresque plotlines[3]. In the uses

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[1] The edition used is *I am Not Sidney Poitier*. Minneapolis, Minnesota: Graywolf Press, 2009. Hereafter referred to as *NS*, followed by the page number.

[2] See Poitier's filmography above. An analysis of the novel requires that the critic views the films. For the better known, the parody works with the first reading, for the lesser known the references work as intertextual elements. Viewing the films to evaluate how they have been used is actually a critical exercise of sorts since the novel's satire operates: the films are then viewed with critical distance through the screen of Everett's fiction.

[3] The canonical novels of the genre, such as *Don Quixote* and *Tristram Shandy*, are also obvious intertexts, together with overt and covert allusions to Jonathan Swift, Lewis Carroll and Herman Melville: "I was a fighter of windmills. I was a chaser of whales. I was Not Sidney Poitier " (*NS*, 43).

and abuses of the proper name, Percival Everett finds himself in good company. Toni Morrison often resorts to this type of humor in her novels. In *Song of Solomon* (1977), to quote one instance, the major character is named Malcolm "Dead". His last name consequently makes him the butt of numerous jokes. In *Not Sidney*, the corrosive humor relies on constant wordplays, non-sequiturs and the foregrounding of the letter in the dialogues. It also rests on the comic portrayal of stock characters, such as Ted Turner and Jane Fonda, America's cultural icons *par excellence*, who appear in the novel under the guise of fictional doubles. Percival Everett "himself" (?) plays the part of a Professor of Nonsense in an autofictional *mise en abyme* of his own writing, authorship and American academe[4]. The warning at the beginning of the novel is, however, a disclaimer of this technique and a pun on the workings of negation in the novel:

> In fact, one might go as far as to say that any shared name is ample evidence that any fictitious character in this novel is NOT in any way a depiction of anyone living, dead, or imagined by anyone other than the author. This qualification applies, equally, to the character whose name is the same as the author's.

The author thus imagines himself as other, a proposition in keeping with the postmodern notion of authorship since Barthes's and Foucault's proclamation of his death. Such recourse to autofiction is a hallmark of Everett's fiction: the character of *Erasure* is a university professor named Thelonious "Monk" Ellison; Everett has coauthored a book with a colleague and quotes their fictional exchanges in *A History of the African-American People (Proposed) by Strom Thurmond, as told to Percival Everett and James Kincaid. A Novel* (2004)[5]. His latest novel to date, *Percival Everett by Virgil Russell* (2013), dedicated to his father, has his own name (or his father's name) in the title, promising to the reader a biography or a portrait of the author (or of his father). It also negates such endeavor since the author of that portrait is no other than "Percival Everett" (the name of the author on the title page) and not Virgil Russell. Blurring the autobiographical with the fictional, a means of simultaneously undermining the truth-value of autobiographical notations and anchoring the fictional unto the real, the autofictional dimension of *Not Sidney* allows for ironic distance and places undecidability at the heart of the narrative. The *mise en abyme* of the "writer-professor" works as satire; it also questions "identity" through constant duplication. Professor Everett's nonsensical repartees reverberate by contamination and undermine the novel as text while remaining faithful to Wittgenstein's notion of language games[6]. The metafictional dimension of the text constantly breaks the mimetic technique that

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[4] "Autofiction" is a word coined by Serge Doubrovsky in 1977 to qualify his novel *Fils*. Since then the word has been used in literary theory to describe a narrative where the name of the author, that of the protagonist and that of the narrator are the same whereas what happens is deemed fictional. *I am Not Sidney Poitier* is not an autofiction in the strict sense of the term. In this novel, the author appears as a major character, but not as the main narrator. See Colona and Gasparini for earlier studies of the genre, a hybrid between the autobiographical novel and autobiography. Suffice it to say here that a host of contemporary American authors resort to autofiction: Paul Auster, Bret Easton Ellis, and Philip Roth, to name a few of the better known.

[5] James Strom Thurmond (December 5, 1902 – June 26, 2003) was an American politician who served for 48 years as a United States Senator. He ran for president in 1948 as the States Rights Democratic Party (Dixiecrat) candidate, receiving 2.4% of the popular vote and 39 electoral votes. Thurmond represented South Carolina in the United States Senate from 1954 until 2003, at first as a Democrat and, after 1964, as a Republican. Thormond is the father of an African American daughter whom he fathered at 22; her mother was a 16 year-old maid serving at the Thurmonds'.

[6] Everett wrote his dissertation on Wittgenstein and Ordinary Language philosophy. See Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Tractatus logico-philosophicus* (1921) and *Philosophical Investigations* (1953).

constructs the characters, the story and its plot since it foregrounds language, speech and the letter.

Although the novel brings up an array of questions underneath the apparently playful caustic revisiting of the screwball comedy, I will primarily focus in this paper on the proper name after a brief summary of the twin thematics of the gaze. An existential emptying out of what stands for identity and uniqueness, the proper name functions as a sign (of negation) in the "signifyin'" chain, but also triggers a reflection on the relation between nomination (giving a name) and identity (taking a name) in the context of signification and being. Two levels, at least, are interrogated: the psychoanalytical framework of the function of the proper name and the actual production of fiction that writing entails. *I am Not Sidney Poitier* addresses the philosophical definitions of nonsense and negation, the fraud of self-identity and the limits of language. It tests narrative coherence in a carnavalesque mode typical of the postmodern. Moreover, it debunks Hollywood's creation of the Magical Negro through a reflexive turn on Sidney Poitier's filmography.

1. The black gaze

Parallel to the enigma of his intriguing first name, the hero Not Sidney develops a special gift: he "fesmerizes" people, i.e. he stares at them so intensely that they eventually do what he wants them to do, but he can never be sure as to whether he is actually the source of this change in behavior or whether what happened, happened regardless of his intervention. Moreover, that technique does not work on everyone, leaving him humiliated since his un-fesmerized subjects wonder whether he is not insane. A pun on Mesmerism, Not Sidney's practice of Fesmerism duplicates in the realm of the visual what his negative first name performs in language[7]. It questions subjectivity. The characters are devoid of free will, mere puppets at the mercy of the hero's whims. This godlike gift is also a metonym for the power of the silver screen to turn the viewers into "zombies," creatures passively submitted to the cinematic and television industry's powerful hypnotic ideology: Ted Turner and the hero's mother actually provide a reference to that theory in the text. It also conflates Sidney Poitier's actual good looks and advantageous physique with a power of attraction comically changed into manipulation, literalized as a tool. His sex appeal makes him control others, an obvious allusion to the male gaze of film studies and to the exchange of gazes in western movie. One could say that the "male gaze'" of film theory turns into the possibility of a black stare. Typically, the white Chief policeman tells Not Sidney Poitier at the end of the novel: "You all look alike to me" (*NS*, 213), underscoring the black man's invisibility for the white gaze. This ludicrous hypnotic power is linked to the notion of the Magical Negro (see below) since Mesmer professed to heal his patients through the use of magnetic fluids. Thus faith healing, pseudo-hypnosis and the "movies" are conflated in the character of Not Sidney Poitier.

All the while the text undoes through satire Sidney Poitier's film performances. In the novel, lusty malevolent females (a white history teacher aptly named Beatrice Hancock (*NS*, 30), the black Gladys Feet at Morehouse, the jealous sister of one of his potential girlfriends, Agnes Larkin) assail Not Sidney and perform oral sex on him, at

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[7] The hero pretends to have found a book by Anton Franz Fesmer (NS, 16). He adds that "the similarity of the names was no doubt in great part responsible for Fesmer's notable lack of recognition." (*Ibid.*)

least in the case of Beatrice, a fantasy creature in a retelling of *A Band of Angels* and Agnes. These erotic scenes function to underscore the hero's sexual potential, ironically making him the passive recipient of these women's attention. These episodes also at times operate as textual crossfading (in French *fondu enchaîné*) as the subsequent sequence coincides with orgasm and allows for a retelling and reshuffling of one of Poitier's parts (cf. *NS*, 32; 72). The young black stud is the embodiment of sex, not unlike his film counterpart, who was, in a perverse way, both cast as extremely attractive physically, exuding sensuality, yet could not engage in any sexual activity, especially not with the white female protagonist. Such "passivity" is emphasized, for instance, in the scene of the Christmas dinner where Not Sidney can say that he did not have sex with Agnes[8]. In Poitier's filmography, a case in point is *A Patch of Blue* and its blind heroine: she cannot see that she is dealing with a black man and gets emotionally involved with him[9]. He eventually helps her move to a special institution where she will receive a good education, away from the squalor of her dysfunctional household. In the novel, Not Sidney explains: "I tried to repress my humanitarian thoughts of helping the poor blind girl find a school so she could learn to read" (*NS*, 76). This is exactly the opposite of what the hero of *A Patch of Blue* does. Incidentally, *Lillies of the Field* has Omer Smith, not only act as an architect, but also turn into an English language teacher to help the German Catholic nuns better integrate American society. The character of the teacher, an avatar of the Magical Negro, is another of Poitier's ascribed roles, such as in *To Sir, with Love* (1967)[10].

2. Not naming, naming "Not"

The recurrent questions about the narrator's identity and his name amount to a comic of repetition with as many puns on his not being Sidney Poitier or rather on his being "Not Sidney Poitier". This pun is actually at times only perceptible to the reader through the use of the capital letter "N" and the actual spelling N-O-T as opposed to the lower case, thereby illustrating Derrida's remark on *différance*, spelt with an "a", that can only be perceived in writing. Homophony creates a confusion that writing only, in both creating difference and differing meaning, dissipates:

> "What's your name?" a kid would ask.
> "Not Sidney", I would say.
> "Okay, then what is it?"
> "I told you. It's Not Sidney".
> "Ain't nobody called you Sidney?"
> "No, it's Not Sidney".
> The boy would make a face, then look at his friends and say: "What's wrong with him?'
> And I would say I always thought in a polite and nonthreatening way.
> "Nothing's wrong with me. My name is Not Sidney". (*NS*, 13)

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[8] Such attitude calls to mind Bill Clinton's "I did not inhale" and the Monica Lewinsky scandal, the subject of Philip Roth's *The Human Stain*.

[9] In Richard Wright's *Native Son*, the mother's heroine is also blind, which allows for the confusion (she cannot see that Bigger Thomas is black), but also serves as a metonym of the black man's visibility/invisibility in white culture, a trope at the heart of Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952). In the latter, dreams also feature as a modality of the narrative.

[10] In his autobiography, Poitier reports this controversy in chapter 6 and concludes: "I think it's too easy for anyone not a participant in the cultural clashes of that era to unfairly dismiss films such as *Guess Who's Coming Dinner*, forgetting how revolutionary they were in the context of their times." (2000, 119).

Everett goes so far as to explore the homophony of "not" and "knot" as another source of misunderstanding and an exploration of nonsensical language games (Wittgenstein):

> "Then what is your name?" [Robert] asked.
> "My name is Not Sidney," I said.
> "Not is a part of Not Sidney's name," Maggie said
> "Knot, with a k?" he asked.
> "Not with a k," I said.
> "That's what I said," he said.
> "N-O-T," Maggie said.
> "Sidney?"
> "Not my name is not Sidney. My name is Not Sidney. Call me Not Sidney."
> (*NS*, 139-140)

His adoptive father Ted Turner pronounces his name with a thick drawl that turns it into "*Nu-ott*": "I imagined that he considered Not to be an actual name and couldn't believe it would be simply the single syllable it was. So, it came out *Nu'ott*, the same way god became *ga'awd* for the evangelist on the street in downtown Decatur." (*NS*, 11). This instance draws attention to the name as sound, the materiality of the proper name, lost in the simple "not" of negation. It also playfully points to God's name as the unnamable, the unutterable. At school, the child is not called by his name, but by ridiculous and contradictory nicknames that stress his monstrous birth or contain alliterations that draw on the poetic function of language:

> […] as a tyke I was seldom called by my odd name Not Sidney, but instead I was tagged *Elephant Boy* and on occasion *Late Nate* and once *Ready Freddy* by a boy   who had moved to Los Angeles from Ohio. That one never did make sense to me.   (*NS*, 5)[11]

As psychoanalyst Gérard Pommier explains, the nickname should function better than a proper name since the subject acquires it, in the case of a positive trait, at the cost of overcoming incredible danger. Yet, he adds: "The nickname lacks the ballast of what is given as one says adieu, and is handed down by he who acknowledges his mortality" (2013, 168, my translation)[12]. In high school, the narrator uses his name to attract female attention: "My *real* name became a mystery to be solved for many. Still, I was beaten often, but now in an attempt to have me give up that bit of prized information, namely my name." (NS 29). These moments when the narrator must clarify his identity, or simply tell his name, punctuate an otherwise extremely tenuous plotline where the hero matures not so much to manhood as to fusing with his namesake Sidney Poitier. To sum up his progress, he goes from being Not Sidney Poitier to being "Sidney Poitier", at least in the eyes of the others: the book ends on him receiving an award at a Hollywood film ceremony and announcing what he wishes should be written on his mother's and subsequently on his own tombstone: "***I AM NOT MYSELF TODAY***" (*NS*, 234). Ordinary language and metaphysics (being/death) are fused in the double meaning of the formula that illustrates Wittgenstein's theory of the limits of language and philosophy. His speech also acknowledges the following puzzling epiphany:

> "I came back to this place to find something, to connect with something lost, to reunite if not with my whole self, then with a piece of it. What I've discovered is that this thing is not here. In fact, it is nowhere. I have learned that *my name is not my name*. It seems you all know me and

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[11] This is a reference to the series of children's books, *Ready Freddy* in which the child hero is bullied.

[12] The nickname is a part of the proper name and corresponds to a psychic function that it shares with the symptom (Pommier 2013, 168).

nothing could be further from the truth and yet you know me better than I know myself, perhaps better than I can know myself." (*NS*, 234, my italics)

The cynical turn of Everett's novel, following from *Erasure*, its effacement of identity and its critique of "authenticity," exposes and explodes identity as simulacrum precisely at the site of the proper name. The exceptional status of proper name is troubled and the possibility that it should not be given any more value in the signifying chain than common names lurks with every confrontation. Everett plays here not so much on erasure than on arche-writing: an original violence inscribed in the name: what is proper and self-present is written and erased at once (Derrida 1967, 159)[13]. Not Sidney is indeed defined in relation to Sidney Poitier, his uniqueness already shattered by the necessary reference that there is such a man as "Sidney Poitier." The name reads both as Not Sidney with a space, followed by Poitier: (Not Sidney) Poitier, but also as a negation of the full assemblage of surname and name: Not (Sidney Poitier), a third possibility being: Not (Sidney) Poitier, with Sidney working as a middle name:

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

The narrator's being is also negated by the fact that, if he is not Sidney Poitier, the question arises as to who he is indeed. The novel shows that he cannot not be Sidney Poitier, as if the "destiny" inscribed in the name had to be fulfilled. The proper name functions as an injunction to carry on the lineage, to bear the weight of inheritance. The presumed uniqueness of the individual and the privileged link between the word and the referent in the case of the proper name are the source of comedy in the novel: proper names proliferate. At college, two characters called Morris, his roommate, and Maurice, another Big Brother, are part of the hero's journey. The homophony fuses their separate identities and points to Lacan's theory of the untranslatability of the proper name (see below). Towards the end of the novel, the hero meets several characters, all named "Schrunchy," and wonders about the connection between the two: "How many Schrunchys are there?" (*NS*, 209).

The text and the reading belie the narrator's explanations quoted earlier that his mother did not intend the connection: the more the novel progresses, the deeper the confusion between Not Sidney and Sidney Poitier. As seen earlier, the confusion is not only linguistic: it also plays itself out in the visual realm. At the end of the story, Not Sidney faces his own coffin in an ultimate spin on identity and death and a reliance on logic and grammar to ground "being":

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[13] Jacques Derrida's reflection on names runs through a number of his texts. In "The Teaching of Nietzsche" Derrida affirmed the double and divided name of his parents (one dead and one living). In *Limited Inc*. he played language games with his own name. In the section "Envois" of *The Post Card* he displayed his mock signature. In "Aphorism Counterculture" he considered Juliet's question: "What's in a name?" In "Passions: an Oblique Offering" he analyzed the fallacy of names and in "Pas" he envisioned that a name can make the person disappear (*pas-de-nom).* For this list, I have relied on Ionescu 2011, 59-69. A full analysis of the links between Derrida's thinking and Everett's writing lies beyond the scope of this essay.

> As we stepped out of the makeshift morgue, I thought that if the 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. (*NS*, 212)

Double negatives logically add up to an affirmation. Yet the pun here is the obvious reference to Black English in which double negatives do not amount to affirmation, but belong to the grammatical logic of the vernacular. It is also a way of destabilizing the very notion of identity as ontologically grounded in the gift of the proper name. In this case, identity is derived from language and subjected to it; it is a game of logic ("therefore"). At the same time, one understands that it cannot be reduced to a language game.

3. The logic of the proper name and the Name/No-of-the-Father

At the beginning of the novel, the narrator explains the story of his name:

> I never knew the story of my name. One might have thought that my mother imagined that our last name, rare as it was, was enough to cause confusion with Sidney Poitier, the actor, and so I was to be *Not* Sidney Poitier. But her puzzled expression led me to believe that my name had nothing to do with the actor at all, that Not Sidney was simply a name that she had created, with no consideration of the outside world. She liked it, and that was enough. (*NS*, 7)

Pommier explains that the first name is the choice of the mother, a gift. The child must in turn take his/her name, make it his/hers. The text plays with philosophical references to Wittgenstein and to Wittgenstein's master, mathematician, logician and analytical philosopher Bertrand Russell who needed to posit a definition of the proper name that would not undermine his theory of language. The controversy around the status of the proper name in language involved Saul Kripke, Sir Alan Gardiner and Bertrand Russell (Holland 1998). Russell was led to refute the exceptional status of the proper name in order to salvage his project to construct a system of logical propositions and to get rid of paradoxes which all had a feature in common: self-reference and reflexivity. To him, the proper name is ultimately a description. He goes back to the Bible and Adam's nomination to prove his proposition:

> What pass for names in language, like "Socrates", "Plato", and so forth, were originally intended to fulfil this function of standing for particulars, and we do accept, in ordinary daily life, as particulars all sorts of things that really are not so. The names that we commonly use, like "Socrates", are really abbreviations or descriptions; not only that, but what they describe are not particulars but complicated systems of classes or series. A name, in the narrow logical sense of a word whose meaning is a particular, can only be applied to a particular with which the speaker is acquainted, because you cannot name anything you are not acquainted with. You remember, when Adam named the beasts, they came before him one by one, and he became acquainted with them and named them. We are not acquainted with Socrates, and therefore cannot name him. When we use the word "Socrates", we are really using a description.   (Russell 2009, 29)

Thus, it follows that the proper name can only be given to somebody who is alive; it marks a link with the living. In Lacanian terminology, the proper name is then a sign (a mixture of the imaginary and the real), rather than a signifier. Its function is comparable to that of an index; it represents something for somebody, whereas the signifier represents the subject for another signifier. Contrary to Russell, Lacan posits a specific status for the proper name that excludes it from the signifying chain. He thus affirms: "What sets a proper name apart despite its small appearances of farm-out transactions […] is that from one language to another it maintains itself in its structure"

(1961, my translation). Lacan's elaboration on the proper name (1960-61) finds its way in "The Subversion of the Subject and the Dialectic of Desire in the Freudian Unconscious" and is further qualified in *Seminar IX* on identification in order to account for what he then calls the paternal metaphor. When Lacan speaks of the status of the signifier of lack in the Other, he refers to the proper name. Contrary to the other signifiers, this signifier is linked to *jouissance*. It points to the Other's incompleteness. In the novel Poitier figures the absent father:

> I had no reason to suspect that Sidney Poitier was my father, but I also had no idea who my father was. I knew nothing about the man, whether he was a man or a basting syringe. Nothing. I'd asked my mother a couple of times during my short years with her about him, but her answers were either so vague and confusing as to be useless or no answers at all. (*NS*, 84)

Lineage is interrupted. The Name /Not of the Father—Lacan's famous pun on the incest taboo as "*le Nom/Non-du-Père*"—is here displaced on the first name: Not Sidney. Yet the text simultaneously asserts that the absent Poitier is everywhere. He is present in the necessary plotlines of his movies that make up the novel and his social persona overwhelms the I narrator. The other characters recognize him and keep telling Not Sidney that he looks like the actor until he himself becomes enthralled by the coincidence in the mirror:

> No matter how they scrubbed, they looked nothing like Sidney Poitier, but I looked just like him and so they stared. They stared at Sidney Poitier's face in the mirror and I stared at it too. The face was smooth, brown, older than I remembered, handsome. The face in the mirror smiled and I had to smile back. (*NS*, 191)

Like the name that is imposed from the outside, the image in the mirror forces identification in a marked twist on the psychoanalytical mirror stage. His reflection is Not Sidney. Throughout the novel, the other character's names are also the source of satire. Mr. Clapper, the principal from his high school, "had been made hard and tough by years of dealing with abuses to his name" (NS, 37). The nuns' names from *Lillies of the Field* are impossible to pronounce and add up to a hilarious list: Irenaeus, Origen, Eusebius, Firmilian, and Chrysostom (NS, 171). They are jokingly renamed Oxygen and Firmament (*NS*, 184). In other words, the novel explores the many functions of the proper name: a warrant for identity, the locus of appropriation and the seal of lineage along the fathers' line. Taking the father's name is also an act of parricide: Not Sidney Poitier dies many (fake) deaths.

4. Parodic plotlines: fiction and motion (pictures)

The very iconization of Sidney Poitier as the epitome of the token black actor in a lily-white Hollywood is the butt of Everett's satire. Sidney Poitier played different parts, but was at the end indistinguishable from these different characters. Popular memory refers indeed to the actor rather than to the characters he embodied, with the notable exception of Mister Tibbs. Poitier was also accused of playing Uncle Tom and catering to white taste when he accepted these roles, his friendship with black cultural icons, such as Harry Belafonte, notwithstanding[14]. All these elements enter into the connotations at play in the use of the proper name: the erasure of the character by the bodily "presence" of the actor. At the same time, the actor's name, his celebrity and

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[14] Poitier produced the film *Buck and the Preacher* in which both actors star and which is featured as a dream sequence in the novel (*NS*, 174-180), interrupting a parody of *Lillies of the Field*.

stardom, do not give access to Poitier the private man. This other "screen," the screen of fame, is reverberated in the novel through various characters who bear the names of celebrities (Ted Turner, Jane Fonda, Bill Cosby, Liz Taylor), but are given a role both like and unlike the one they have in "real" life. Ted Turner's actual nickname, "The Mouth of the South," could account for the character's colorful speech and drawling Southern accent. Jane Fonda, Turner's wife in "real" life, is a cardboard character exercising in the vicinity when Not Sidney is staying at Turner's. She and her niece "Wanda Fonda," who is attracted to Not Sidney, ultimately end up "fesmerized" by him: he controls them though his intense stare, although the reader understands that Not Sidney's desire to see Jane's bare breasts corresponds to her own exhibitionism. Hence one can always doubt as to whether what he achieved was the result of his special gift or because Jane Fonda wanted it. This undecidability corresponds to this core undecidability of his identity.

The scathing humor of the narrative relies heavily on intertextual references to movies in which Sidney Poitier starred. Some of them are part of narrative sequences when the hero dreams (cf. *NS*, 177-180). The oneiric quality of these passages goes to explain the lack of realism, the breaks in logic and the overlaps of seemingly absurd episodes. *The Defiant Ones* (1958) is the first narrative thread that the novel closely follows with dialogues borrowed from the script of the movie itself. Two escaped convicts from a chain gang, one white and one black, must make do with that situation of interdependence. Although Marlon Brando was the director's choice, Tony Curtis eventually played the white character. A reference to the actor is actually present in the novel. Referring to his partner, John "Joker" Jackson in the film, Not Sidney (Noah Cullen in the film) says: "First he is not my friend. I don't know. Somebody might think that he looks okay. He looks a little like that old movie star Tony Curtis." (*NS*, 74). In that episode, the novel mixes the plot of *The Defiant Ones* and that of *A Patch of Blue* (1965). The white convict sleeps with a blind "Sis" from the latter movie instead of the boy's mother. In *Not Sidney*, "Sis" explains that she was not born that way, but that her mother threw a flask at her (*NS*, 72). In the movie, Rose-Ann, the prostitute mother, aimed the liquid at her husband and accidentally disfigured and blinded her daughter Selina, who is raped by one of her "boyfriends." The humor relies on the discrepancy between the original script and Not Sidney's rendering of his adventures, a rewriting that works as parody. Similarly, the retelling of *A Band of Angels* makes up for a long dream sequence (*NS*, 63-72) replete with anachronisms (the choir sings Bob Marley's "I Shot the Sheriff "[1973]), lewd dialogue and remarks about the ensuing incongruity. Not Sidney as Raz-Ru is "wondering what [he] was doing in a dream that certainly was not [his] own" (*NS*, 68).

Guess Who's Coming to Dinner (1967) finds the hero as a very dark man in an upper class black family in D.C. as opposed to the white San Francisco household of the original movie starring Spencer Tracy and Katharine Hepburn[15]. The denouement has Not Sidney explain that he slept with his putative girlfriend's sister and overheard conversations between the family members. They initially thought him too dark for their fair skinned daughter, but changed their minds when they found out that he was rich. The satire is aimed at black bourgeoisie, colorism, and the materialism of the upper classes regardless of skin-color. In fact, Not Sidney's closeness to Ted Turner, who is his stepfather, reverses the politically correct indictment of white upper classes in

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[15] Interracial marriage was still illegal in 17 states when the film was released. *Loving v. Virginia* put an end to that restriction on June 12th, 1967.

ideologically conscious black novels. In *Not Sidney*, these ideologues are present as secondary characters (cf. the protagonist's mother, Portia Poitier's pragmatism and business acumen, his teacher Betty's revolutionary idealism, Ted Turner's mastery of the workings of capitalism, Percival Everett's references to Habermas and Althusser).

In the Heat of the Night (1967) and *They Call me Mister Tibbs* (1970) are two of these cinematic intertexts that the reader deciphers as the plotline unfolds, when he/she does not anticipate on the narrative. The pleasure of the text relies heavily on prior knowledge of the movies. In this case, Everett has the character who bears his own name, Professor Everett, ask Not Sidney to play the part played by Poitier in the film:

> "Have you ever seen *In the Heat of the Night*?
> "No."
> "A beautiful love story, that movie. Let me hear you say 'They call me Mr. Tibbs'".
> "They call me Mr. Tibbs," I said.
> "No, say it as if a crab is biting your ass, as if someone is peeling an unpleasant and undesired memory from your core, as if you're feeling a little bitchy, as if you might be gay but even you don't know". (*NS*, 124)

Everett's acting directions which bear on the name (here a reference to the title "Mister" that was not used for blacks in the South) also include an allusion to Uncle Tomism (the "love story" between the white and the black character) and to a contemporary reading of the sexual dynamics at work in the repeated pairing of black and white men. Indeed, the homoeroticism is obvious when one chooses to focus on it; it is also a staple of Hollywood's hackneyed attempt at picturing racial equality.

5. The Magical Negro

Lillies of the Field (1963) is used as the last main reference in the hero's final progress interspersed with a dream sequence that follows the script of *Buck and the Preacher* (1972). In the film Homer Smith builds a chapel for German nuns, thus fulfilling his dream to be an architect and leaving open the question of whether his intervention was God's doing or his own manly, or should I say human, achievement. More then the other films quoted, *Lillies* relies heavily on the figure of the "Magical Negro" who saves or rather redeems the other, the white character, through his goodness. In the film, Omer Smith is literally fighting to have his efforts recognized when Mother superior insists that it was God himself who sent him to them. Introducing the distance of quotation, Everett's text debunks it and forces the reader, when he/she watches the movie, to critique its content. In a 1964 essay, "The Uses of the Blues," James Baldwin attests that the film's reception was double, depending on the audience:

> I saw the movie downtown with all my liberal friends, who were delighted when Sidney jumped off the train. I saw it uptown with my less liberal friends, who were furious. When Sidney jumped off that train, they called him all sorts of unmentionable things. […] Why is it necessary at this late date, one screams at the world, to prove that the Negro doesn't really hate you, he's forgiven and forgotten all of it? Maybe he has. That's not the problem. *You* haven't. And that *is* the problem. (63)

The "Magical Negro" is a stereotype that, although emerging in fiction, has been staged in Hollywood productions time and time again, down to contemporary endeavors such as *The Green Mile* (1999) or *The Legend of Bagger Vance* (2000). It relies on attributing to the black character a mystical dimension, thereby erasing his own

subjectivity: he is the white man's helper and savior. He contributes to greater self-awareness for the latter and reveals him to himself. He is usually cut off from his community, a loner, an orphan, de-historicized (Hicks 2003; Colombe 2002). Not Sidney is also cut off from his fellow men, an orphan; his classmates bully him when a child because of his first name. He ends up living alone at Turner's Atlanta property surrounded by black maids and black teachers. His outward appearance underlines the character's out-of-the-ordinary status. Poitier is always impeccably dressed even when building the chapel and bricklaying in *Lillies of the Fields*. In the western *Duel at Diablo,* an immaculate Poitier, a horse breaker and a veteran from the Buffalo Soldiers, dons a silver vest when the other characters' plights are gruesomely pictured, complete with bloody wounds, burnt bodies and graphic war scenes between the Apaches and the Cavalry. The Magical Negro's exceptionalism doubles the exceptional status of the proper name in the signifying chain.

The hero's denial that he is not Sidney Poitier is thus refuted by his finding himself in parts that are indeed Sidney Poitier's roles. By creating a hybrid text out of several plots that are intertwined, the novel also explodes the illusion of fiction that the silver screen perpetuates and reiterates with each movie. The link between these films of Sidney Poitier's body/presence is re-affirmed in this way and the "casting" dissolves. At the same time, the pun on the name highlights the fact that the actor Sidney Poitier is actually cast in these roles to play and replay the part of the "good" nigger. The films in which he starred explored racial tensions within the ideological limits of the Hollywood film industry and America's own resistance to improving racial relations. What *I am Not Sidney Poitier* brings to the fore is the hypocrisy of productions that pretended to advance the race problem within constraints that precisely undermined that endeavor. In other words, the postmodern twist goes hand in hand with the political indictment of racial categories. One could say that Everett is "undoing race" *à la* Judith Butler since the hero's "performances" are constantly qualified by the fact that, according to the narrative, he is Not Sidney Poitier[16]. One must think together racial categorization and its negation, race and not race. Hence irony and carnavalization are the modalities of the text that functions through repetition at several levels. The large number of films that the text mobilizes, doubled by the hero's progress as repetition through denial, plays out the performativity of race. Not Sidney's wealthy background makes him nonetheless fall prey to white supremacists, to the police, etc. in a series of episodes that stages the ordinary racism of American society. Focalization makes the reader see the event from the point of view of a presumably naïve narrator who, because of his privileged background, had not anticipated these misadventures. For instance, he happens upon a KKK meeting complete with a burnt cross ritual (*NS*, 195). When he goes to the bank to cash a large amount of money to give it to the nuns, Deputy Horace arrests him. He also calls him a nigger (*NS*, 203) and suspects him of having committed a murder. Not Sidney consequently ends up in jail. So does Professor Everett in an ultimate narrative twist: the writer is trapped by "racial" categories in a domino effect that follows the plot of *In the Heat of the Night.*

6. Nonsense

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[16] Butler states that gender "is a practice of improvisation within a scene of constraint." (1)

As a Professor of Nonsense, Percival Everett sits in an office decorated with portraits of James Joyce and Terry McMillan. High modernism and the limits of meaning that *Finnegans Wake* constantly puts to test in its mixture of over 40 languages is juxtaposed to the writer of best-selling African American female fiction such as *Mama* (1987), *Waiting to Exhale* (1995), *How Stella got her Grove back* (1998). Percival Everett is here gesturing towards postmodernism and its leveling of high and low art, its reliance on popular culture and its reversal of the value attributed to it. He also pokes fun at American academia and the canon wars, a subject already present in *Erasure*. Alongside its attack on "racial" identity, exemplified by the movie industry's creation and use of the image of Sidney Poitier, the novel explores nonsense: i.e. not the negative of meaning, but the very possibility of creating meaning and the riddle of language. Ludwig Wittgenstein firmly distinguished between non-sense (*Unsinn*), such as philosophical propositions, and what stands outside of sense and is devoid of sense (*sinnlos*), such as tautological and contradictory sentences. He also made a distinction between non-sense and the absurd. In an interview with Anne-Laure Tissut, Percival Everett indeed stated: "No one is surprised to find that he or she is reading a fiction. There is no trap there. The trap is in the meaning, the making of the meaning, the idea that meaning can be made." (Maniez et Tissut, 2007, 186). In the novel, in dialogue with Everett, Not Sidney is indeed puzzled by the Professor's logic. Everett tells him: "Have you ever known me to say anything? Well, anything that matters? Listen, just remember that nothing puts you at an advantage like knowing what someone is thinking when they don't know you know what they' re thinking. Do you know what I'm telling you?" (*NS*, 149). Meaning cannot be made as Derrida points out in the quotation from the epigraph. Everett also works at reaching the same conclusion. Nonsense is here the product of the threading of heterogeneous elements. For instance, Bill Cosby's infamous commercials for Pudding Pops (cf. his speech to the Morehouse students, *NS*, 96-97) are woven into the texture of the novel with the acclaimed *Guess who's Coming to Dinner*. Not Sidney's misfortunes at Morehouse parallel Ralph Ellison's nameless hero's sojourn at a Tuskegee lookalike institution in *Invisible Man*. His falling prey to various sex-starved white and black women who use him as the black "buck" of their fantasies ironically echoes Van Peeble's Sweet Sweetback's sexual odyssey. These are just a few examples.

The novel also debunks the making of meaning in the letter itself. In his dialogues with Not Sidney, Ted Turner fails to make sense, jumps from one idea to the next and seems to be watching the letters that make up the words on the page, conflating speech and writing:

> "I'll take their stale old crappy shows and air them again and again until they sit in people's heads like jingles."
> "Jingles?"
> "I need a new pair of Weejuns. And I want to apologize again about this abstruse arrangement. Boy that's a lot of *a*'s in one sentence." (*NS*, 12)

The narrator and the omniscient narrator often reflect on their own practice in self-reflexive remarks on language that distract the reader form the realistic plotline. Betty, his private teacher, explains apropos Ted Turner: "He's precisely the kind of pestilential, poisonous, pernicious parasite I'm talking about. She often gave in to some inexplicable and strange, but I thought quaint alliterative urge." (*NS*, 10). In the middle of the adventure whose plot parallels *The Defiant Ones*, Not Sidney explains: "I needed Bobo and therefore I needed Patrice, that was my conclusion, with a *therefore* and

everything." (*NS*, 75). Such a reflection alludes to the connecting words that are the subject of reflection of logicians and philosophers concerning the structure of language and its relation to thinking. At one point Not Sidney exchanges with Percival Everett who has a limp: "Did you hurt your leg playing sports?"/"Stepped in a gopher hole. A stupid thing to do. I wasn't looking. Now I always look. Of course, I'm speaking metaphorically. Whatever that means." (*NS*, 88). The Professor is apt at pointing out contradictions in Not Sidney's use of language:

> "May I ask you a question?"
> You just did, and I might point out that you did so without asking. What does that tell you?'
> "I don't know."
> "You're troubled, Mr. Poitier." (*NS*, 112)

This contradictory sentence in terms of logic (asking a question about being allowed to ask a question and thus doing away with the initial permission) is part of everyday language. It shows how speakers engage in complex manipulations without actually being aware of them. The very spelling of the name does not escape the novel's self-reflexive turn: Diana insists that her name is written with one "n" (*NS*, 222). Not often spells his odd name to disambiguate its meaning. Yet the name also reverberates throughout the text in what amounts to a language grid: From Not to NET (Negro Entertainment Networks, *NS*, 115) to nut (a qualifier for Professor Everett's lunacy, *NS*, 116). Thus the novel is not so much about what happens to the hero as to what language does, does not do, and cannot do. Access to the world, knowledge, and ontology are the deep subjects of an otherwise apparently farcical comedy.

Conclusion

I am Not Sidney Poitier brings the exploration of meaning and satire to a point of no return, on the brink of dissolution. Although the novel could be dismissed as a mere linguistic *tour de force*, the reader's enjoyment relies on the recognition of the various allusions in a dialogue with the writer. Its debunking of the racial dynamics at work in the casting of Sidney Poitier go hand in hand with the wit, the logic pushed to extremes of the "original" situation of the film scripts. The text thus creates itself, spinning pun upon pun until the last one. The reader's pleasure is function of his/her anticipation— *Assumption,* with a pun on "assuming" and transcendence," is the title of Everett's 2011 experimental thriller— of the situation in which the hero finds himself once he/she has deciphered the way in which the text works. As may be expected, Percival Everett defends himself from charges of didacticism: "When I started writing, I did it because I wanted to make art and now I understand that arts and politics are inextricably bound and that they can affect the world in really small ways and hope that something good happens. But I never have a message …" (Birnbaum, 2003). *Not Sidney* does not depart from that agenda: its postmodernism brings together irony, play on words, the dissemination of meaning and an attention to the letter, with a critique of late capitalism, consumerism, advertising, the entertainment industry, television networks, Hollywood movies, in the context of racial, class and gender dynamics[17]. Yet it escapes closure.

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[17] In his article "Signing to the Blind," Everett explains his own difficulties with Hollywood when Norman Lear considered his 1963 *Suder* for adaption.

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Lillies of the Field. Dir Ralph NELSON. United Artists (1963).
A Patch of Blue. Dir. Guy GREEN. Metro-Goldwin-Mayer (1965).
Duel at Diablo. Dir. Ralph NELSON. Cherokee Productions (1966).
Guess who's Coming to Dinner? Dir. Stanley KRAMER. Columbia Pictures (1967).
To Sir, with Love. Dir James CLAVELL. Columbia Pictures (1967). British film.
In the Heat of the Night. Dir. Norman JEWISON. United Artists (1967).
For the Love of Ivy. Dir. Daniel MANN. Palomar Pictures (1968). The story was written by Sidney Poitier with Robert Alan Arthur.
They Call me Mister Tibbs. Dir. Gordon DOUGLAS. United Artists (1970).
Buck and the Preacher. Dir. Sydney POITIER. Columbia Pictures (1972).