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The Treatment of Racism in the African American Novel of Satire

Schriftliche Prüfungsarbeit zur Erlangung der Doktorwürde

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To the memory of

Winston Napier

and

Wilhelm J. Fett

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I. Introduction

No tyrant, no tyrannous idea ever came crashing to earth but it was first wounded with the shafts of satire: no free man, no free idea ever rose to the heights but it endured them. It is not that men love to roll in the mud, but that they know how, out of their agony and bloody sweat, truth and beauty are forged, and no falseness may be set up in their stead. It touches their honour, and to defend it they have no sharper weapon than laughter and ridicule.¹

In light of Gilbert Cannan's brief summary of satire's function and approach, the question of why the African American community would resort to it in its ongoing struggles with racism seems all but answered. Yet, the versatile nature of satire is much more complex and elusive than the above quote suggests. From their everyday encounters with satire, most people know that it can be fierce and unforgiving, witty and ambiguous, and everything in between. One could argue that satire's manifestations are as numerous as the subjects it confronts. Such diversity of satiric guises explains the considerable amount of secondary literature the field of satire has generated over time. Countless essays and books have been written on satire and many a critical argument has been fought over satire's delicate relationships with related concepts such as comedy, irony, and wit.² Considering the sheer volume of pages contributed to the subject, one might assume the definitions of satire and its various components have been sufficiently determined. Following an assumption of this nature, one may then ask why the presence of the African American satiric novel demands a thorough revision of the aforementioned sources.

To begin with, the disparity between different definitions and conceptions of satire is not to be underestimated. Especially questions regarding satire's generic or modal nature and its didactic qualities have received much controversial attention. Furthermore, while the works of Jonathan Swift and Alexander Pope have long been viewed as the epitomization of satire, the African American satiric novelist has remained virtually non-existent in literary studies. It

¹ Gilbert Cannan, *Satire* (London: Folcroft, 1974) 13.

² The enormous amount of secondary literature the phenomenon of satire has produced will be presented and discussed in detail in the second chapter. The key works in the field are the studies by Cannan; Elliott; Feinberg; Knight; Kernan; Weisenburger; Worcester.

is thus both necessary and valuable to reconsider the scholarship satire has received in an attempt to delineate the satirist's playing field and, eventually, to arrive at a functional theoretical framework for the study of the African American satiric novel. In fact, Darryl Dickson-Carr's 2001 volume *African American Satire: The Sacredly Profane Novel* is the only monography to date that directly addresses the African American novel of satire as a distinct literary event. In analyzing the treatment of racism in the African American novel of satire, it stands to reason that the results and claims studies on eighteenth century British satire have produced as well as more recent theoretical models of satire cannot be applied inconsiderately to the African American satiric novelist, who approaches his craft from a unique social and artistic position. Suffering from an oppressive sociopolitical system, George Schuyler and his successors operate within the modern and postmodern continuum, an era often perceived as fragmented and inscrutable, to the extent that it has often united men in shared victimhood, and has revealed absolutes, such as truth and meaning, to be unstable or even non-existent.³ In this climate of skepticism and disbelief, readers can hardly expect to encounter undivided figures that embody the popular attributes so commonplace in the satiric works of Pope or Swift. It is out of question that useful clues and universal features of satire, which are crucial to any analysis of the phenomenon, are to be found in the countless studies the phenomenon of satire has generated over the centuries. However, a look at widespread notions and findings on satire justifies the need for reconsideration through the lens of the African American experience.

A case in point is Leonard Feinberg's assertion on the preeminence of amusement in satire. From Feinberg's perspective, "satire may criticize evil but the didactic elements are incidental, not primary. The essential quality is entertainment."⁴ Finding the flaw in Feinberg's statement does not demand extensive knowledge of either the importance of satire in African American discourse or the destructive power of racism. To presume that the African American satiric novelist can afford the luxury of placing entertainment first in his quarrels with racism is misguided. Furthermore, studies on formal verse satire

³ See Hans Bertens, *The Idea of the Postmodern: A History* (London: Routledge, 1996).

⁴ Leonard Feinberg, *Introduction to Satire* (Ames: Iowa State UP, 1967) 7-8.

have led to the notion that the satiric victim must not lack the faculty of conscience. W. H. Auden thus elaborates that satire commonly “flourishes in a homogenous society with a common conception of the moral law, for satirist and audience must agree as to how normal people can be expected to behave, and in times of relative stability and contentment, for satire cannot deal with serious evil and suffering.”⁵ For any society infested with racism to be referred to as homogenous is questionable at best; for racism vigorously perpetuates a hierarchically heterogeneous social and racial structure. Moreover, that racism does, in fact, qualify as “serious evil and suffering” is by no means dependent on subjective estimation. Ultimately, as the subsequent analysis of three exemplary works will reveal, it is indeed possible for a gifted artist to point satire’s thorns and barbs at such an evil as racism.

In addition, it is problematic to identify the African American author as the stiff conservative Robert C. Elliott implies in his studies on the origins of satire. Elliott contests that “the satirist, it is true, claims to be conservative, to be using his art to shore up the foundations of the established order; and insofar as one can place satirists politically, I suspect that a large majority are what would be called conservative.”⁶ To refute Elliott, one only needs to view Schuyler’s successors who remain victims of a society plagued by racism, and therefore cannot help but launch their satiric darts from the fringes of a society that produces conservative accounts of the life of its members.

Finally, a key notion in satiric criticism is summarized by Peter Thorpe, who stresses a satirist’s ambivalence by asserting that “the satirist is secretly attracted by the very target he attacks.”⁷ To argue that the African American satirist is attracted to racism, among other targets to be identified in the subsequent analyses, is controversial. It does seem plausible, therefore, that the African American satiric novelist is driven by different motives and spawned by unique sociopolitical circumstances which in turn have become the satirist’s targets. Just as every virus calls for an appropriate antidote, so every satiric target

⁵ W.H. Auden, “Satire,” *Satire: Modern Essays in Criticism*, ed. Ronald Paulson (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1971) 204.

⁶ Robert C. Elliott, *The Power of Satire* (New Haven: Princeton UP, 1960) 271.

⁷ Peter Thorpe, “Thinking in Octagons: Further Reflections on Norms in Satire” *Satire Newsletter* 7.2 (1970): 93.

demands a particular strategy of attack. One must therefore reassess the various findings on satire as they have been studied in works from different periods and cultures from the vantage point of the African American experience and its key sociopolitical dilemma: racism. However, before considering these conditions, as well as the possibilities and consequences which a fusion of satire and novel produces for the African American author, one needs a firm grasp of the nature of satire and its distinct role within African American discourse.

Therefore, the first chapter of this study creates a functional, theoretical framework, highlighting the basic workings and components of satire in general, while elaborating on the unique necessity of irony in African American culture, especially as a censor-evasion device, as well as its use in African American satiric novels. Special attention is given to the significance of certain African American tropes, such as trickster figures, rhetorical signifying, and generic black humor, and how these modes inform satiric expression. In addition, the special potential of the passer as a trickster able to destabilize racial binaries is discussed, as it yields crucial insight into the works discussed in this study. The aim of this chapter is neither to arrive at an extensive analysis of the satiric novel, nor to give an all-encompassing account of the significance of humor in African American discourse. Both of these issues have already been dealt with extensively.⁸ Thus, one can assume that the theoretical considerations of certain aspects of the satiric novel as a literary genre, along with the grounding of elusive criticism in African American culture, will yield insights into the workings of satire. It is through this specific lens that George Schuyler's *Black No More*, Charles Wright's *The Wig*, and Percival Everett's *Erasure* will be read.

Building on these findings, the second chapter examines George Schuyler's *Black No More*. First published in 1931, this piece has been hailed as the earliest African American novel of satire.⁹ As the first of its kind, Schuyler's novel proffers itself as the logical point of departure for an investigation into the field of African

⁸ For a broad analysis of African American humor, see, for instance, the studies by Gordon; Schechter; Watkins. The general nature of satire is explored, for example, by Guilhamet; Knight.

⁹ See Darryl Dickson-Carr, *African American Satire: The Sacredly Profane Novel* (Columbia: U of Missouri P, 2001) 57. Dickson-Carr refers to *Black No More* as a "double milestone" in African American literature and identifies it as "the first completely satirical novel written by and about African Americans and the first extended work of science fiction by a black author."

American satiric novels. In this work, the author simulates the scenario of “what would ensue if science provided all African Americans with access to the ultimate privilege of American society, whiteness.”¹⁰ Schuyler tells the story of an African American doctor who invents a treatment that makes transcoloration possible. Soon the Black-No-More procedure spreads throughout the country, eventually leaving the United States in chaos, deprived of its African American “other.” The discussion of this novel addresses the significance of Schuyler’s use of parody on the theme of “passing,” in which the entire African American population of the United States not only passes for white, but eventually ends up being “two to three shades lighter than the old Caucasians.”¹¹ Here, the importance of “passing” plays a significant role as a means for the author to depict a scenario in which the race construct in the United States is destabilized. Moreover, this chapter analyzes the thematic treatment of racism, especially in the context of the author’s critical dissection of social myths, such as the “American Dream,” and the status of institutionalized religion. The importance of greed in the world of *Black No More* is also emphasized, as it is a world in which countless characters are driven by the joyous “prospect of a full treasury to dip into again.”¹² The ultimate aim is to address the overarching importance of the human capacity for greed and prejudice in the novel and to expose Schuyler’s satire as anti-essentialist Marxist criticism.

The third chapter focuses on Charles Wright’s novel *The Wig*, published in 1966. Wright tells the story of Lester Jefferson, an African American who tries to fulfill his dream of entering Lyndon B. Johnson’s “Great Society” through the imitation of “whiteness” and diligence: “I might as well try the dream of working my way up. Yes, there was an opening, I was informed by a very polite Negro girl with strawberry-blond hair. First, I had to fill out an application and take a six weeks’ course in the art of being human, in the art of being white.”¹³ Ultimately, the protagonist’s attempts to simulate whiteness amount to a series of demeaning and self-destructive episodes, portraying the protagonist in rapidly changing,

¹⁰ Dickson-Carr 62.

¹¹ George Samuel Schuyler, *Black No More* (New York: Modern Library, 1999) 177. All references cited parenthetically as *BNM* in the text are to this edition.

¹² Schuyler 47.

¹³ Charles Stevenson Wright, *The Wig* (San Francisco: Mercury House, 2003) 49. All references cited parenthetically as *Wig* in the text are to this edition.

stereotyped roles. Switching restlessly from the good-hearted but dim-witted Uncle Tom to the amusing coon and the oversexed black buck, Lester does not find solace until he is castrated. To begin this analysis, the diverse stylistic implications of the first-person narrator in Wright's novel is analyzed. Special emphasis is placed on the influence of generic black humor and the resulting absence of a readily identifiable, detached satiric voice. In order to locate the author's critical targets, this chapter also examines the paradoxical actions of Wright's protagonist, especially in regard to his pursuit of "whiteness." The aim here is to expose the case of pathological "double-consciousness."¹⁴ This section gives emphasis to the role of the media and the mechanisms of representation, the political construct of the Great Society in combination with notions of the "American Dream" and the prevalence of capitalist greed. The first-person narrator in *The Wig* takes the reader into a manipulative and corruptive capitalist system that is strikingly similar to the one Schuyler targets in *Black No More*.

The final chapter takes a close look at Percival Everett's 2001 novel *Erasure*. This novel is presented as the private journal of Thelonious "Monk" Ellison, a highbrow novelist whose career is stalled with the rejection of his latest book by several publishers. Repeatedly, he is told that his art is not "black enough" for the market and that he should "forget about writing retellings of Euripides and parodies of French poststructuralists and settle down to write the true, gritty real stories of black life."¹⁵ When a black woman, with remote knowledge of African American underclass life, skyrockets into the literary world with the cliché-laden race pulp fiction "We's Lives in Da Ghetto," Monk assumes the pseudonym Stagg R. Leigh to write "My Pafology," an overdrawn, satiric attack on the bestseller. However, overestimating the intellectual capacity of his readership, Monk's satire is not received as such, but praised as a realistic showcase of African American people. Thus, the narrator is forced to embrace his alter ego and to keep the shady ex-convict, Stagg R. Leigh, alive. Eventually, Stagg's unidentified satire is awarded

¹⁴ For discussions of this central concept by W.E.B. DuBois see Shamoan Zamir, *Dark Voices: W.E.B. DuBois and American Thought, 1888-1903* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1995); Sandra Adell, *Double-Consciousness/Double Bind: Theoretical Issues in Twentieth-Century Black Literature* (Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1994).

¹⁵ Percival Everett, *Erasure* (New York: Hyperion, 2001) 2. All references cited parenthetically as *Erasure* in the text are to this edition.

The Book Award and Monk fully immerses himself in the role society held for him from the start: that of a cliché black gangster. By analyzing the struggles within the narrator's diminishing family and juxtaposing these instances of communicative problems with the dilemma of the misunderstood satirist Monk Ellison, chapter four traces Everett's epistemological concern. Similar to Schuyler and Wright, Everett does not spare intellectuals and academics from his critique, and the media surfaces as a major target in the iconoclast's crosshairs; yet, contrary to *Black No More* and *The Wig*, *Erasure's* primary target does not lie within the human capacity for greed, nor the devastating effects of politically induced assimilation, but rather with the production of racist reality through stereotyped representations.

In summary, this study examines the three novels *Black No More*, *The Wig*, and *Erasure* with regard to where their authors locate racism in the socioeconomic discourses of their times, and focuses on the satiric techniques they employ to negotiate and comment on racism. The works on which this thesis focuses are representative of the African American novel of satire as it has developed during recent decades, and they highlight a variety of ways in which satire can be modified to take on shifting manifestations of discrimination. Through close analysis, the novels complement each other as political commentaries. While Schuyler is concerned with exposing the general socioeconomic workings of the 1920s from a Marxist angle, Wright offers the reader perspective into how this oppressive machinery psychologically manipulates and corrupts the individual in the historic context of the "Great Society." Everett then elaborates on the epistemological concern that is traceable in Wright's work and addresses the role media representation plays in manufacturing those images and rigid categories which shape systematic racism. In short, this study not only highlights the versatility of satire as a rhetorical secret weapon, it also traces the ever-changing face of racial discrimination.

II. Toward an Outline of Satire

The phenomenon of satire has received ample scholarly consideration, covering most manifestations from its classical roots to its postmodern twigs and branches.¹⁶ One is thus left to wonder what it is about satire that demands a revision of these sources and precludes the application of established schemes of analysis to arrive at the aesthetic and cultural significance of the works of African American satire which lie at the heart of this study. Due to the fact that satire departs from its intentional design to be both critical and elusive, it calls for deep knowledge of those techniques in which rhetorical indirection and dissimulation may be grounded. One must also not forget that with its critical ambition, satire should not be separated from its historical milieu, as the decoding of any ironic play calls for codes found in the targeted sociopolitical subtext.¹⁷ With this understanding in mind, it is possible to peek behind the curtain of satiric indirection. It is pertinent to begin this study by initially clarifying and reassessing the nature and crucial characteristics of both satire and novel. Thus, it stands to reason that a juxtaposition of both concepts against the backdrop of the African American experience will reveal ways in which the three satirists being studied can benefit from the combined potential of novel and satire.

Basic outlines of satire often depict it as an indirect rhetorical attack with a didactic core.¹⁸ The tropes upon which this indirection may be built, however, are manifold and vary in definition. Current studies generally agree that satire is first and foremost a mindset, and, as such, pre-generic.¹⁹ Charles A. Knight states in

¹⁶ The standard works in the field that this study found most useful are the contributions by Feinberg; Griffin; Knight; and Weisenburger. The insights of these studies will be presented in the subsequent discussion of key issues in the field of satire.

¹⁷ This is also justified by the fact that satire is closely affiliated with the broad phenomenon of humor. Whether one perceives humor as merely witty and mild or sardonic and savage depends largely on the *who* and the *when* of a humorous utterance. It can make all the difference whether a joke is made at a birthday party or a funeral and if it is in-group humor (for instance among a social minority) or not. The situational context of humor determines, to a great extent, its urbane or unkind nature.

¹⁸ Indirection and moral concern are often seen as satiric prerequisites and will be addressed in more depth at a later stage in this section.

¹⁹ One of the key issues is the classification of satire as a genre. There are still critics like Robert Harris who see satire as a literary genre. In his essay "The Purpose and Method of Satire," Harris still defines satire as a "literary genre that uses irony, wit, and sometimes sarcasm to expose humanity's vices and foibles, giving impetus to change or reform through ridicule." Robert Harris, "The Purpose and Method of Satire," *Virtual Salt*, Version Date: 14 May 2001, Accessed: 9 Oct. 2006 <<http://www.virtualsalt.com/satire.htm>>.

accordance with Leon Guilhamet's study, *Satire and the Transformation of Genre*, that "it is not a genre in itself but an exploiter of other genres."²⁰ One therefore envisions satire as a transient critical attitude ready to surface in various forms of written discourse, including that of the novel.

On a fundamental level, one may think of the novel as an extensive fictional prose narrative, which is, to a greater or lesser extent, consistent in plot and character. The question then arises as to the symptoms indicating an intrusion of the "parasitic form"²¹ of satire into the novel, as well as the pitfalls and possibilities the satiric novel, as a vehicle for implicit criticism, holds for its author. In his publication *The Literatures of Satire*, Charles A. Knight dedicates sustained interest to satire's adoption of the novel form. According to Knight's study, satire is likely to erode some of the generic tenets of its host, just as it sways the novel's dominant concern with the individual to social affairs:

The consciousness of satiric characters may shift, but their shifts usually serve the satirist's need for multiple and different perspectives. Conventional novels operate by the rule that characters seem connected to themselves as they reappear in the text; satire need not be bound by that generic principle. When novels become satire, they usually do so because the centrality of consciousness dissipates, because sympathy wanes in the face of the games played between the author and the reader, or because the concern for social issues dwarfs the significance of individual dilemmas.²²

One has to be aware that even when the satiric novel appears to negotiate matters of the individual, the satirist's main distress commonly lies within the larger social, political, or cultural superstructure. Often the individual's dilemma serves primarily as a synecdochal representation of the greater ill. As Leonard Feinberg reasons, the recurrent use of synecdoche and metonymy is readily apparent as the satirist is "usually concerned with Man rather than men, institutions rather than personalities" and "repeated behavior patterns rather than uncommon acts. The satirist observes representative qualities and creates representative characters."²³ To stress this encompassing social concern, the satirist often eradicates individual traits from his characters to populate the scenery with replaceable types. One can

²⁰ Charles A. Knight, *The Literatures of Satire* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2004) 4.

²¹ Knight, *Literatures of Satire* 203.

²² Knight, *Literatures of Satire* 205. The peculiar relationship between novel and satire is treated thoroughly in the study of Guilhamet.

²³ Feinberg, *Introduction* 232.

therefore identify a change from continual interest in the individual to the negotiation of social matters as a characteristic that originated with the advent of satire in the novel. This change often comes in the form of what Knight refers to as a “dislocating shift.” Knight clarifies that this shift is “usually but not always of narrative perspective, [and] drives readers’ attention away from character and towards ideas or towards a broad analysis of society.”²⁴ Being the area where satire is allowed room to manifest itself, that space between comedy and direct invective is as delicate for the satiric novelist as it is for any satirist. The novel, however, offers the satirist a much broader canvas for social analysis than most forms of verse or prose:

The narrative form of the novel places particular weight on change in plot and on the development of character within a structure that often invites predictions as to its outcome. This form allows novels to hold together considerably more material than the usual satiric structure, while remaining, if anything, still more open in its interpretive possibilities. The length of novels allows them to frame broader representations of society than fit within satire.²⁵

Knight’s reference to a “usual satiric structure,” suggesting a purely satiric form, somewhat undermines his point of satire being a parasite, and as such, unable to exist without a host. Despite this, his argument on the extensive scope of the satiric novel is clearly valid. The satiric mode, however, does not leave its host untroubled. Not only does satire use the novel’s plot for its critical purpose, it also leaves its mark in the form of diverse disruptions. It is not uncommon for a satiric novel to feature inconsistencies in characterization and motivation, as well as fragmented or distorted plot lines.²⁶ In a number of instances, this is explained by an author’s intention to incite a prevailing mood of chaos as an accurate representation of society’s moribund condition. In other cases, however, disruptions in plot are merely the effect of an author neglecting those aspects of the novel which do not directly contribute to the satiric point.

Besides a general disjunctiveness, Alvin Kernan isolates the absence of change as a chief trait of satiric plot. In fact, many satiric novels have been confused with, and compared to, the picaresque form, because the satiric plot

²⁴ Knight, *Literatures of Satire* 224.

²⁵ Knight, *Literatures of Satire* 227.

²⁶ See John R. Clark, *The Modern Satiric Grotesque And Its Tradition* (Lexington: The UP of Kentucky, 1991) 53.

usually consists of “collections of loosely related scenes and busyness which curls back on itself.”²⁷ One must bear in mind that deviations from the scheme of plot in realist novels are in keeping with the author’s primary objective. It is in a satirist’s nature to “comment rather than narrate, criticize rather than recite. [...] In most satires it does not particularly matter in what order the events take place. The world does not change much, the satirist seems to tell us, and human beings do not progress appreciably, and the same difficulties remain.”²⁸

The satirist also uses the polyphonous form of the novel in order to consciously manipulate language and create a landscape of amplified disorder and anarchy.²⁹ For however hopeless a concern with humanity may be, the satirist remains a lover of language, and as such, unpredictable in his handling of style. As John R. Clark argues, “crippled language and turbulent style precisely mirror the defective world.”³⁰ Satire also frequently employs elements of the grotesque and the absurd as the satiric mode incites an ambiance of confusion on different strata; not only on the level of plot and style, but also structure, characterization, and character relationships. Inconsistencies with “human logic” or “common sense,” as they indicate the intrusion of the absurd or bear the distorted smirk of the grotesque, are known to serve satirists in their veiled exploration of the human condition. Insufficiently prepared for the interference of the incongruous, one might wonder whether Schuyler’s *Black No More* continues to operate within a satiric framework when the reader is introduced to white supremacists, Snobbcraft and Buggerie, darkened with shoe polish, and crashing with a plane in Mississippi to experience first-hand the tragic fate of many African Americans in this region: “Industriously they daubed each other’s head, neck, face, chest, hands

²⁷ Alvin Kernan, *The Plot of Satire* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1966) 100.

²⁸ Feinberg, *Satire* 226.

²⁹ For a concise study of Mikhail Bakhtin’s concept of the novel as a polyphonous form, which he developed mostly in his studies on Dostoevsky’s poetics, see the chapter “Bakhtin on the novel” in Simon Dentith, *Bakhtinian Thought* (London: Routledge, 1995) 42. Dentith goes to great length to explain Bakhtin’s concept of the relationship between narrator and character, with the former “renouncing the right to the last word and granting full and equal authority to the word of the characters.” Ultimately, “polyphony does not mean relativism, which grants life to the differing discourses of the characters only by failing to engage with them. Rather, the dialogue of the polyphonic novel is authentic only insofar as it represents an engagement in which, in various ways, the discourses of self and other interpenetrate each other.”

³⁰ Clark 53.

and arms with the shoe polish. In five minutes they closely resembled a brace of mammy singers” (BNM 163).

It is this portrayal of a defective world which finds expression in satire’s tendency to confront readers with predominantly pessimistic and uncertain endings. Dustin Griffin states that “satiric endings are often obtrusively open, not because the end of one story is always the beginning of another, or because literary constructions are subject to deconstructing or unraveling, but because the form and purpose of satire seems to resist conclusiveness.”³¹ In response to this, one may ask where the purpose of satire can be located, and why it defies conclusion. Feinberg, in accordance with what seems to be the majority of scholars working on the subject, traces this special purpose in a varyingly pronounced didactic nature. In order to clarify why satire’s didactic commitment is essentially incompatible with literary conclusiveness, one must regard the satirist as a teacher.³² When trying to teach students to “think,” it is the teacher’s task to only give hints to a solution, thereby enabling students to independently accomplish the final leap toward a lesson’s goal. As a crucial step in the learning process, this final task of interpreting and adding-up information should not be forestalled by the teacher. As for the satirist, one can imagine that an explicit resolution of the dilemma the author is concerned with would place a work closer to a harangue, sermon, or comedy than satire. The satirist’s positive ideal, which looms in the background of any satiric work, functions “as a rudder for the satirist” and injects “a measure of consistency into his work. The ideal itself is rarely offered openly as an alternative.”³³

In this respect, one must also consider that any explicit recipe for change and correction would increase the risk of undermining satire’s indirect approach. While readers should not hope for the author’s pristine voice to surface above the tangled meanings of ironic play and offer an explicit lesson as resolution, the

³¹ Dustin Griffin, *Satire – A Critical Reintroduction* (Lexington: UP of Kentucky, 1994) 96.

³² To render the notion of the satirist as teacher more precisely, one should add that a given satirist can only teach inductively. Generally, the satirist proceeds from a specific case study and gives implicit hints to the general rule contained in the narrative. The reader makes observations based on which she has to accomplish conclusion by analogy. A deductive approach would start with a clear outline of the generalization and thus not aid the satirist in her efforts to get her audience to think. For a more detailed outline of inductive teaching see Bruce Joyce and Emily Calhoun, *Learning to Teach Inductively* (Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 1997).

³³ Leonard Feinberg, *The Satirist* (Ames: Iowa State UP, 1963) 280.

satirist may offer implicit hints to point toward ways out of the predicament. Although the existence of such clues is not required in satire, one must analyze how different types of characters act in the face of chaos in order to discern if certain patterns of behavior could offer viable keys to the author's suggested ideal. The crucial question regarding the extent to which this ideal must remain within a greater moral discourse will be addressed following the subsequent discussion of irony and wit.

2.1 Identifying Satire: Between Wit and Invective

The very changes the satiric mode incorporates into the novel form are what qualify George Schuyler's *Black No More* as the first African American novel of satire. While Harlem Renaissance authors such as Wallace Thurman or Rudolph Fisher, to name two prominent examples of authors frequently associated with satire, widely exploit the potential of wit and irony, the form in their novels is not altered by the satiric mode.³⁴ This profound transition from self-contained narration to intrinsic didacticism indicates the transformation from the novel as host, to the generically satiric. Leon Guilhamet explains that

although modal satire, which can be found in virtually any genre, is a necessary condition for satire, it is not a sufficient one. The same is true for comic ridicule which should not be mistaken for modal satire or treated as a sufficient cause of formal satire. The essential integrants of generic satire are a combination of modal satire and variable rhetorical and generic structures which are borrowed and de-formed. The dynamic of satire transforms these components into a new generic identity.³⁵

The possibilities the novel form offers a satirist are of particular use to African American authors attacking racism. While satiric critique of racial bigotry in the context of signifying³⁶ became useful and vital shortly after the introduction of slavery into the New World, the scope which many African American satirists display in their novels is profound. Through the framework of a novel an author is

³⁴ See Dickson-Carr 46-57.

³⁵ Leon Guilhamet, *Satire and the Transformation of Genre* (Philadelphia: U of Philadelphia P, 1987) 11.

³⁶ For an analysis of the prevalence of signifying techniques in contemporary African American discourse, especially with respect to the cultural pattern of "playing-the-dozens" and Hip Hop lyrics, see Harry G. Lefever, "'Playing the Dozens': A Mechanism for Social Control," *Phylon* 42.1 (1981): 73-85.

able to negotiate racism against the backdrop of a national socioeconomic system. Furthermore, the novel's widely acknowledged capacity for sympathy facilitates the satirist's task of presenting a didactic message to the reader.

Equally engaged in conveying the satirist's message are various means of dissimulation, situated at the core of the satiric mode. Indirection is a key element of satire, for, as Kernan explains, the satirist cannot "be an irresponsible railer lashing out at anyone or anything which displeases him. But his criticism must be witty as well as moral, it must be phrased in such a way as to make its point with some elegance and sting."³⁷ Although satire's moral core demands further clarification at a later stage, Kernan hints at satire's indirect character grounded in different configurations of wit. In fact, the satirist's wit is one prime reason why people delight in reading satire.

To capture the concept of wit, in all its diversity, is a task to tackle in an entire volume; however, even general definitions illustrate wit's versatile nature as it serves the protean form of satire. The *Bedford Glossary of Critical and Literary Terms* concludes the explanation of the etymological development of the term with the assertion that "wit is now most commonly thought of as clever expression – whether aggressive or harmless, that is, with or without derogatory intent toward someone or something in particular. We also tend to think of wit as being characterized by a mocking or paradoxical quality, evoking laughter through apt phrasing."³⁸ Even such a basic definition suggests the importance of wit for a satirist as a means to camouflage stinging critique. It is crucial to take into account that a satirist is not only concerned with indirection, but is anxious to portray the ordinary in a new light in order to attract attention. Wit serves the satirist in this aim, for, according to Emil Draitser, whoever engages in the witty use of language "attempts simply to illuminate ideas and words from an unusual angle. In its purest form, wit counts on the educated reader interested in the play of words or ideas, and one who derives an aesthetic pleasure from such play."³⁹ As a playful use of language, wit can be considered hyperonymous to the various rhetorical techniques a satirist frequently incorporates into the novel in order to make its

³⁷ Kernan 8.

³⁸ "Wit," *The Bedford Glossary of Critical and Literary Terms*, 2003 ed.

³⁹ Emil Draitser, *Techniques of Satire* (Berlin: Mouton De Gruyter, 1994) 39.

impulse more agreeable on the surface level. Among these techniques are burlesque, parody, synecdoche, metonymy, allegory, and, perhaps the most prominent satiric feature: irony. Being one of the most potent and widely used weapons in an author's armory, a profound understanding of irony facilitates the analysis of the workings of any satiric piece.

Many scholars view irony and satire as overlapping, if not congruent, concepts. Historically, as Feinberg explains, the term "irony" can be traced back to the ancient Greeks, where it meant "dissimulation in speech, often in the Socratic sense of pretending to seek enlightenment."⁴⁰ Today, for reasons yet to be fully revealed, the term is commonly used in spoken English to refer to coincidence, and, much closer to its original denotation, it is employed whenever people sense a contrast between the literal and intended meaning of an utterance. For example, a person declaring that "it's ironic that I ran into my mother the very moment I was thinking about ways to avoid her"⁴¹ thus needs to be informed as to the real meaning of the term "irony," as it would be ironic indeed to implicitly criticize this random appliance of the term by exuberantly praising it as a prime example of ironic sting.

According to Douglas Colin Muecke, one essential characteristic of irony is that it operates by addressing a contrast between appearance and reality to the extent that deception becomes a prominent kin to irony, both in content and etymology: "In deception there is an appearance that is proffered and a reality that is withheld, but in irony the real meaning is meant to be inferred either from what the ironist says or from the context in which he says it; it is 'withheld' only in the weak sense that it is not explicit or not meant to be immediately apprehensible."⁴² In his *Compass of Irony*, Muecke then summarizes "the ironic" as "ways of speaking, writing, acting, behaving, painting, etc., in which the real or intended meaning presented or evoked is intentionally quite other than, and incompatible with, the ostensible or pretended meaning."⁴³ From this it follows that occurrences of irony are often betrayed by inconsistencies in the literal meaning and conflicts of belief.

⁴⁰ Feinberg, *Satire* 178.

⁴¹ In a rather far-fetched sense, one could indeed argue that the stated use of the term irony is valid, if one departs from a concept of irony as a reversal or contradiction of common expectations.

⁴² Douglas Colin Muecke, *Irony and the Ironic* (London: Methuen, 1970) 35.

⁴³ Douglas Colin Muecke, *The Compass of Irony* (London: Methuen, 1980) 53.

For that reason, readers should be attentive whenever they “notice an unmistakable conflict between the beliefs expressed and the beliefs we hold *and suspect the author of holding.*”⁴⁴ As a trope, irony is frequently employed in satire because it enables the author to articulate cutting critique under the pretense of humor. Robert Harris specifies these multiple functions of irony, stating that “it is an instrument of truth, provides wit and humor, and is usually at least obliquely critical, in that it deflates, scorns, or attacks.”⁴⁵

Irony, however, is not a monolithic concept, but entails gradations in terms of amiability and ambiguity on a scale from readily recognizable diatribe to the subtly ironic. There is a strong likelihood of readers sensing unambiguous severity when a callous murderer is referred to as humanitarian, whereas praising a person for ceaseless attempts to be punctual is more elusive; still, both examples can be filed under ironic play. With respect to this variation, Wayne Booth introduces a dichotomy useful for the present purpose; he differentiates between “stable” and “unstable” irony. According to Booth’s terminology, instances of stable irony are unambiguous to the extent that “regardless of how much difference may be revealed in peripheral associations, the central irony is read identically by every qualified reader.”⁴⁶ In the satiric context, statements that, in their distinguishable maleficent intent, border on direct abuse are frequently expressed in the form of stable irony.⁴⁷ At times, however, the ironist pays particular attention to not getting caught red-handed, and puts the readers’ intelligence and attention to a hard test. This is where authors place subtlety first, dissolving the better part of their critical intent in ambiguity. In these cases, one is dealing with what Douglas Colin Muecke calls “the Covert Ironist,” who will usually

aim at avoiding any tone or manner or any stylistic indication that would immediately reveal his irony. The closer he can get to an “innocent” non-ironical way of speaking or writing while at the same time allowing his real meaning to be detected the more subtle his irony. He must, of course, run the risk of having his irony go undetected.⁴⁸

⁴⁴ Wayne Booth, *A Rhetoric of Irony* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1975) 73.

⁴⁵ “Irony,” Robert Harris, “A Glossary of Literary Terms,” *Virtual Salt*, Version Date: 14 May 2001, Accessed: 18 Oct. 2004 <<http://www.virtualsalt.com/litterms.htm>>.

⁴⁶ Booth 235.

⁴⁷ See Muecke, *Compass* 54. Muecke’s term for this “blatancy in the ironic contradiction or incongruity” is “overt irony.”

⁴⁸ Muecke, *Compass* 56.

In such cases, a reader often senses that the literal meaning of an utterance has to be discarded, but remains uncertain as to the implied meaning. Booth refers to this form of irony as “unstable.” He outlines these instances as “ironies in which the truth asserted or implied is that no stable reconstruction can be made out of the ruins revealed through the irony. [...] The only sure affirmation is that negation that begins all ironic play: ‘this affirmation must be rejected.’”⁴⁹ The recipient of satire thus has to decide for every occurrence of irony whether the opposite of what is said is meant, as would be the case with most stable irony, or, if any possible meaning except the literal could represent a satiric point, as would most unstable irony.

In light of the indirect and often critical nature irony and satire share, steps must be taken to distinguish the marks of satire from those of irony. This is especially imperative due to the fact that works exploiting the qualities of irony have been carelessly classified as “satire.” It has yet to be clarified how much irony a text can integrate before it turns into generic satire, or if irony has to meet other prerequisites to allow for satire to find expression. According to Northrop Frye, satire enters whenever the reader is able to discern the author’s critical standpoint, as is the case when stable irony provides an unambiguous moral framework:

The chief distinction between irony and satire is that satire is militant irony: its moral norms are relatively clear, and it assumes standards against which the grotesque and absurd are measured. Sheer invective or name-calling [...] is satire in which there is relatively little irony: on the other hand, whenever a reader is not sure what the author’s attitude is or what his own is supposed to be, we have irony with relatively little satire.⁵⁰

If stable irony measures an ironic statement against the author’s clear stance, it tends to be perceived as harsher than unstable irony.⁵¹ In fact, moments of stable or overt irony border on invective, as this type of ironic play may “modulate freely and naturally into and out of direct abuse, derision, or reproach, without any

⁴⁹ Booth 240.

⁵⁰ Northrop Frye, *The Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1957) 223.

⁵¹ The problem is, however, that the act of identifying the author in a text is an extremely demanding effort. Since we are not dealing with autobiography here, the author is unlikely to speak to the reader directly. In satire, one has to engage in a thorough search for the author’s *raisonneur*, a figure embodying or representing the author’s attitude. The narrator might assume this role just as any character.

feeling of changing gear, since these will employ a similar or even the same tone of voice.”⁵²

Although stable irony is the chief form of ironic expression found in satire, the reader must be prepared to encounter varieties in tone, ranging from subtle semantic ambiguities to occasions of straight invective. Traditionally, a milder satiric tone has been associated with the works of Horace, whereas more biting satire has been linked to the style of Juvenal. In his *Introduction to Satire*, Feinberg aptly outlines this dichotomy when he notes that “in Juvenalian satire there is likely to be a minimum of humor, and in Horatian satire a minimum of criticism.”⁵³ While Horatian satire mostly relies on the power of mild laughter to target minor cases of human misdemeanor, Juvenalian satire has to incorporate a harsher tone, built on an underlining of anger, in order to effectively expose and attack dire vices. Griffin explains that, historically, “Horatians’ tended to believe that the reader would listen to Horace and be laughed or cajoled into virtue. ‘Juvenalians’ had a harder task, for one suspects that few parricides and adulterers will be moved to mend their ways by reading.”⁵⁴

For the present purpose, the Horatian and Juvenalian mode of satire are used to indicate the entrance and exit to the satiric arena. Satire begins where wit is fused with a critical perspective, and ends where wit is altogether jettisoned and the critical perspective turned into straight invective. In open abuse there is neither indirection nor ambiguity, and, as Feinberg adds, “unlike other satiric devices invective does not pretend to be something other than what it is; on the contrary, it passionately insists on being taken literally, and its effectiveness depends on the assumption that it means just what it says.”⁵⁵

As such, invective is devoid of satire’s characteristic indirection. Since it is often taken as a sign of the satirist’s unrestrained wrath, sweeping invective is frequently interpreted as a lack of detachment between satirist and satiric target, and it is this detachment that critics hold as a fundamental attribute of satire. By being highly critical, satirists abandon their elevated standing, which is crucial to

⁵² Muecke, *Compass* 54.

⁵³ Feinberg, *Satire* 4.

⁵⁴ Griffin 26.

⁵⁵ Feinberg, *Introduction* 111.

their biting attack, and descend to the world of their victims; running the risk of betraying the very traits being criticized. As Michael Seidel elucidates, “if the satirist assumes the morally insulting stance, more often than not he suffers the contamination of his own subject.”⁵⁶ Given their length and substance, and in light of the difficulty of treating the fine line between indirection and anger, one has to account for the likelihood of a satiric novel occasionally over-stepping the boundaries on the satiric playing field. Thus, moments drenched in the purely comic, as well as direct abuse, continue to appear as satiric devices, although subordinate to stable irony.

Due to the blurring between Juvenalian and Horatian satire, a reader must account for the possibility of encountering a piece of satire that cannot instantaneously be identified as undignified and merciless, or as mild and inoffensive in its critique. To allow for inconsistencies in tone, temperamental variety, and to account for the fact that it is de facto impossible to gauge the quality of “harshness” scientifically, a reader must refrain from treating the concepts of Horatian and Juvenalian satire as clearly defined, mutually exclusive categories. Instead, it proves rewarding to look for specific Horatian and Juvenalian influences instead of attempting to strictly categorize entire works of satire as one or the other. Within a single work, the satiric tone can vary between “dignified” and “offensive” or even reach the utter harshness of a lampoon. This “mutant of invective,”⁵⁷ as Gilbert Highet refers to it, enters the satiric scene whenever “the satirist sets out to destroy, even to annihilate, a victim.”⁵⁸ The existence of tonal variation in satire is of great importance because it effectively influences and regulates the work’s impact on a reader. In this respect, one has to bear in mind that any novel of satire moves along with a certain momentum or thrust. For example, a decrease in satiric thrust is perceived whenever satire tends to move from stable irony towards the uncritical and purely comic. In contrast to this, a gain in the momentum of satiric thrust is indicated by a shift from the uncritical to an identifiable critical stance marked by stable irony, or, in some cases, the author’s wrath betrayed by direct invective.

⁵⁶ Michael Seidel, *Satiric Inheritance: Rabelais to Sterne* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1979) 14.

⁵⁷ Gilbert Highet, *The Anatomy of Satire* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1972) 152.

⁵⁸ Griffin 101.

One definition of satiric momentum is the trajectory of the author's temper as it governs the tone, the quality of ironic implications, and the overall distribution of satiric features.⁵⁹ Just as it is possible for satirists to unleash an unrelenting storm of caustic satiric bile, it is possible for them to create a field of satiric quicksand; the thorns of stable irony gradually taking hold as the victim breaks through a surface of innocuous wit. An exponential increase in satiric momentum makes the impact of a satiric novel significantly more devastating than a work characterized by constant stability of ironic expression and even distribution of satiric markers. This increase in satiric momentum is caused by an emboldenment in the author's satiric voice.

2.2 The Transcending Power of Laughter

Satiric momentum is crucially linked to laughter, which is one prominent effect of a satirist's witty rhetoric. Laughter, however, is not a requirement for satire, as it is directly linked to personal preference, and also because not all forms of wit seek to incite laughter. For example, whenever satirists depart into the realm of direct invective, intentionally or in an untamed rage, they trade humor for horror, a process rarely accompanied by a reader's laughter. Therefore, it has been affirmed that in satire, "indignation acts as an explicitly moral state of mind and feeling that denies laughter."⁶⁰ A satirist's interest lies not so much with jocular laughter, but with derogative, contemptuous laughter – since it is the satirist's aim to expose their targets as despicable and essentially pitiable. Taking this concept one step farther, Wyndham Lewis identifies an element of tragedy in satiric laughter, separating this from responses to innocuous comedy: "There is laughter and laughter, and that of true satire is as it were a tragic laughter. It is not a genial guffaw nor the titivations provoked by a harmless entertainer."⁶¹

When consciously evoked by a satirist, laughter is much more than an advantageous side-effect because it holds crucial psychological implications of

⁵⁹ The term "satiric momentum" captures the idea of the author's critical mindset as the impetus behind any work of satire, constantly moving it forward.

⁶⁰ Edward A. and Lillian D. Bloom, *Satire's Persuasive Voice* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1979) 148.

⁶¹ Wyndham Lewis, *Satire and Fiction* (Folcroft Library Editions 1972) 45.

which satirists avail themselves. Those who enjoy partaking in the interpersonal phenomenon of laughter can certainly confirm that it is both uniting in its delight, as well as dividing; in other words, it creates a trench between those addressed as allies and those marked as targets. As behaviorist Konrad Lorenz explains in his work *On Aggression*, laughter “forms a bond and simultaneously draws a line. If you cannot laugh with the others, you feel an outsider, even if the laughter is in no way directed against yourself or indeed against anything at all.”⁶² Especially in an African American context, one has to note that different cultures often have different conventions when it comes to laughing. Yet, a gifted satirist has a clear vision of the objective and is able to apply laughter’s unifying effect to a specific group of people; for instance, to bring together a diverse readership, thereby transcending the racial divide in order to illuminate the irrationality of racism. It is due to these diverse benefits of laughter that the authors under study resort to satire.

In his recent volume, *The Sage of Sugar Hill – George S. Schuyler and the Harlem Renaissance*, Jeffrey B. Ferguson discloses Schuyler’s nature in all its complexity and, with regard to *Black No More*, asserts that “the publication of such a book would give Schuyler the best chance to expand his readership and thereby extend the interracial community of laughter that he worked tirelessly to construct around the black/white racial divide.”⁶³ Racism submits itself to scrutiny in satiric terms quite willingly, as ideologists appear especially prone to fall into the traps of laughter. It is common knowledge that the more close-minded people are in their beliefs, the more atrophied their sense of humor seems to be. For example, in an early study on the phenomenon of laughter, Burges Johnson reasons that “the fanatic has no sense of humor. [...] His thought and imagination run in one deep path. They do not skip about from one path to another, gaining mental shocks from

⁶² Konrad Lorenz, *On Aggression* (New York: Bantam, 1967) 284.

⁶³ Jeffrey B. Ferguson, *The Sage of Sugar Hill: George S. Schuyler and the Harlem Renaissance* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2005) 212. The use of satire to create a united community of laughter on both sides of the color line is a powerful refutation of essentialist theories of laughter. See, for instance, John Palmer, *Comedy, The Art & Craft of Letters Series* (London: Martin Secker, 1922) 5. Palmer makes the claim that the curse of Babel is not expressed through languages but through laughter, forming a serious boundary between different races: “The curse of Babel only fell among men when they learned to laugh. Laughter is the real frontier between races and kinds of people.”

sudden parallels or contrasts.”⁶⁴ Fanatics will quickly find themselves to be stigmatized outcast, as satire flagrantly puts their incapacity to laugh on proud display.

In the context of satire, laughter not only draws the boundary between victims and perpetrators, but also serves as a potent means to expose insincerity and falsehood. It is commonly known that few things are more contagious, yet harder to feign, than heartfelt laughter. Lorenz elaborates that “humor is the best of lie-detectors, and it discovers, with an uncanny flair, the speciousness of contrived ideals and the insincerity of simulated enthusiasm. There are few things as irresistibly comical as the sudden unmasking of this sort of pretense.”⁶⁵ Once laughter has drawn a line between the potential audience and the target of satire, it also serves as one of a satirist’s key means of disempowering the object of attack. As soon as the recipient laughs at a person or institution, the distance that would normally keep a reader from looking down on the satirized object wanes.

On a personal level, however, the social hierarchy is not only bypassed by contemptuous laughter, but is also undermined on textual grounds. In a satirist’s obsession with synecdoche, seemingly minor flaws quickly assume catastrophic proportions as the line between disorder and chaos dissolves. Draitser mentions “stupefication” and “physiologization” as two crucial means of satiric denigration. Stupefication works by limiting a character’s mental abilities in order to be presented as one-dimensional and dim-witted, while physiologization is more harsh in that it “strips a character of all intellectual capacity; human complexity is reduced to the simple satisfaction of the two animal instincts: hunger and sexual appetite.”⁶⁶ Regardless of whether a satirist applies stupefication or physiologization, a critical reader is given a display of satiric momentum, indicating which end of the satiric spectrum a given author is operating.

In light of the crucial functions laughter fulfills in satire, it is important to consider what it is that invites laughter in the first place. After all, because it is ignorant to anticipate the reaction of a wide reading public based on one’s own response to a given passage, it is helpful to consider universal situations which

⁶⁴ Burges Johnson, “The Right Not To Laugh,” *Harper’s Monthly Magazine*, vol. 132 (1915): 783.

⁶⁵ Lorenz 285.

⁶⁶ Draitser 47.

commonly evoke laughter. In his groundbreaking work "Laughter," French philosopher Henri Bergson investigates diverse situations and expressions frequently perceived as comic and which appear to initiate laughter. Bergson concludes that these moments commonly occur in mechanical arrangements, whenever a person, or society as a whole, assumes rigid patterns of behavior which stand in stark contrast to common-sense and flexibility:

The comic is that side of a person which reveals his likeness to a thing, that aspect of human events which, through its peculiar inelasticity, conveys the impression of pure mechanism, of automatism, of movement without life. Consequently it expresses an individual or collective imperfection which calls for an immediate corrective. This corrective is laughter, a social gesture that singles out and represses a special kind of absent mindedness in men and in events.⁶⁷

Whenever laughter plays a subordinate role in satire, the question arises as to whether either a situation as depicted by Bergson is simply not given, if an author consciously attempts to evade the psychological implications of laughter, or whether his unrepressed fury has pushed him past the point of making his audience laugh. This indeed holds serious implications for the "quality" of satire, for a given satirist should never abandon their elevated stance to their own raging wrath.

That readers commonly respond to satire with laughter and pleasure demands that yet another line be drawn; namely between comedy and satire. In analyzing the three selected novels, the question arises as to how it is possible to discern instances of comedy from moments of unadulterated satire. Based on Norman Knox's claim, a key to answering this question is found in satire's pessimistic perspective: "In comedy the right side wins out and this gives the audience hope; in satire the world is convicted of failing to meet the satirist's standards, and this, the author intends, will either delight an audience that already agrees with him or shocks a blind audience into seeing."⁶⁸ While much satire exploits the psychological implications of laughter to meet its critical purpose, comedic laughter usually holds no deeper interest, except creating a unified community of laughter. David Worcester adds to this idea of satire's cynical attitude, stating that "the laughter of comedy is relatively purposeless. The

⁶⁷ Bergson 117.

⁶⁸ Norman Knox, "Norms, Moral or Other – A Symposium," *Satire Newsletter* 2.1 (1964): 16.

laughter of satire is directed toward a preconceived end.”⁶⁹ In most works of satire, this preconceived end is a didactic element which the author wraps up in humorous disguise and hopes to apply to the audience. In doing so, even potential addressees and latent targets of a satiric work may swallow the bait before they sense its sanative purpose. It is such a didactic element which has received major attention in many studies on the discourse of satire. According to Highet, satire’s emotional effects, and its purposeful laughter, not only set it apart from comedy, but also from farce, a form that contrasts with satire in that it treats laughter as an end in itself and subordinates all aesthetic purpose to such an end. Farce, therefore, “does not care what it does provided that everybody collapses into unreasoning laughter.”⁷⁰ Having addressed the function of laughter in satire and the relationship of the latter to comedy, one now has to approach the question of whether one can rightfully expect a satiric novelist to point out, or at least hint at, alternatives or solutions to the problems depicted, or whether satire inescapably centers on a stable core of moral standards at all.

2.3 The Satirist: Moralizing Without Morals

A large part of the controversy surrounding satire’s affiliation with moral standards is caused by the elusiveness and versatile nature of the term “moral.” Even in this present chapter, the term “moral” is mentioned repeatedly, but in the sense of a certain author’s opinion rather than that of a given society. In fact, this brings up the question of how one can expect a satiric work to represent values held by a majority of the society from which it emerges, let alone hereditary human moral norms, if such thing exists. Historically, it has been a satirist’s tendency to operate within the moral framework of a given society or religious discourse, which in turn gained the satirist a reputation of being “at best a conservative – and at worst a fascist,”⁷¹ to many critics. An overstated assertion of this kind seems barely tenable with regard to the African American author’s struggles with racism. Not only does the prevailing relevance of the color line severely complicate the

⁶⁹ David Worcester, *The Art of Satire* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1968) 38.

⁷⁰ Highet 154.

⁷¹ Weisenburger 21.

notion of a homogenous American society, it also implies that the African American satirist is hardly able to adhere to the moral norms which helped the larger American society obtain and enforce forms of institutionalized oppression.

In evidence of this, there has been a recent tendency to disavow the notion of satire as protective of established moral norms. *Fables of Subversion*, Steven Weisenburger's analysis of satire in the postmodern context and most notably Knight's *The Literatures of Satire* give sufficient reason to oppose the widespread notion of satire as always being moral and adhering to preconceived norms. Knight's argument applies especially to African American artists in that he brings up the significance of subjectivity to make a claim that "in conventional terms, some satire would be considered decidedly immoral, designed to violate the norms of a moral code it regards as restrictive or wrong-headed. Some satire sees morality as hypocritical or as a presumptuous effort to assert a social control to which the moralist has no right. Satire, then, is independent of moral purpose."⁷² Although satire always constitutes a literary attack, the perspective from which this attack is launched remains first and foremost a subjective one. While there are definitely satiric works which represent the morals of a certain religious or political discourse, the presence of such a moral core in satire is not imperative.

One crucial element of satire, however, is the satirist's opinion on certain matters. As Kernan explains,

satire always contains either an implicit or explicit set of values, which frequently takes specific form in judgments on such matters as what kind of food to eat, how to manage your wife and your household, how to dress, how to choose your friends and treat your guests, what kind of plays to frequent and what kind of books to read, how to conduct political life.⁷³

With regard to the set of values addressed in a work, a satirist does indeed perform as a moral authority. However, from a scholarly perspective, claiming that the satirist inescapably acts in defense of moral norms is hardly justifiable, especially considering that a common concept of morality has yet to be identified. Summarizing the futility of arguing in favor of the satirist as a guardian of universal morals, Feinberg concludes the debate by commemorating the indistinctness of the moral concept:

⁷² Knight, *Literatures of Satire* 5.

⁷³ Kernan 16.

until we have a society in which there is considerably more agreement as to precisely what morality is, we will have to admit the possibility that there are satirists who are moral, satirists who are amoral, and satirists who are immoral. [...] Yet, they all regard themselves as moral, even when they contradict each other.⁷⁴

The question remains, however, whether satirists need to offer clear alternatives and solutions to the misconduct and mores they outline. Stating that satire's "purpose [...] is perception rather than changed behavior, although change in behavior may well result from change in perception,"⁷⁵ Knight suggests that implicit or explicit instruction for change is not a requirement of satire. Yet, to account for the possibility of disparate approaches to didacticism, Weisenburger differentiates between two basic categories of satiric condemnation: "generative" and "degenerative" satire. He defines "generative satire" as a type of satire whose "purpose is to construct consensus, and to deploy irony in the work of stabilizing various cultural hierarchies."⁷⁶ In contrast to this, he refers to the predominantly postmodern phenomenon of "degenerative" satire as a much less constructive "means of exposing modalities of terror and of *doing violence* to cultural forms that are overtly or covertly dedicated to terror."⁷⁷ Weisenburger places special emphasis on the fact that degenerative satire, in its profound and encompassing attack, may not "locate any paved roads back to normality."⁷⁸ In his elaboration on "degenerative satire," Darryl Dickson-Carr comments that "within the degenerative model, virtually all hegemonies are ridiculed, often through the use of appalling grotesqueries and exaggerations."⁷⁹ According to the studies of Weisenburger and Dickson-Carr, one may envision "degenerative satire" as a type of satire which focuses on the exposition of devastating deformities, rather than offering solutions in order to lead the reader to a change in behavior.

The question arises whether the fact that an author indicates no solution inevitably precludes a desire to reform in the reader. Also questioned is if texts which adhere to the degenerative model of satire are void of an intrinsic feature that generates desire in a reader to create change. In his essay "The purpose and

⁷⁴ Feinberg, *Satirist* 25.

⁷⁵ Knight, *Literatures of Satire* 5.

⁷⁶ Weisenburger 1.

⁷⁷ Weisenburger 5.

⁷⁸ Weisenburger 143.

⁷⁹ Dickson-Carr 17.

method of satire,” Robert Harris suggests an answer to this question, reasoning that

not all satire is meant to be corrective, because satirists occasionally attack foibles or failings basic to man’s nature which cannot be changed, or for which change is unlikely. But it can be argued in reply that such satire of inexpungible vices is still corrective, for it seeks to establish proper moral attitudes toward those vices.⁸⁰

The formulation “meant to be” is of crucial significance in this context. By asserting that even works of satire which are not intentionally meant as corrective may be implicitly corrective, Harris somewhat contradicts the theory of “generative” and “degenerative” as two opposing concepts of satire.

The effects of laughter, as caused by satire, further complicate the generative/degenerative binary. For instance, since it is in accordance with human nature to avoid being laughed at, most people actively avoid the risk of being the victim of a joke. J.Y.T. Greig agrees that “laughter is usually unpleasant to its object, the later result of it may be a change in the object” and proposes that “there is only one sure way of avoiding the unpleasantness of being laughed at, and that is to avoid doing the things that laughter fastens on.”⁸¹ Simply put, by relying on the dependability of human reflex action, the satirist can be certain that the reader inescapably and in all cases will work to avoid the role of the laughing stock.

Therefore, instead of basing an analysis of satire on the specific intentions one suspects an author of holding in the creation of a text, the focus should be on the irreversible features inherent in all satire. One should concentrate on what satire effectively achieves, rather than what its originator intends it to do. Even in cases where satire is targeted at basic human flaws or unchangeable states, and where it does not explicitly offer cures, alternatives, or recipes for change, it continues to incite self-reflection and, however unlikely, a desire for change in the reader. Harris concludes that satire is inevitably didactic, “even when no definite, positive values are stated in the work as alternatives to the gross corruptions depicted by the attack.”⁸²

⁸⁰ Harris “Purpose.”

⁸¹ John Y. T. Greig, *The Psychology of Laughter and Comedy* (New York: Cooper Square, 1969) 189.

⁸² Harris, “Purpose.”

Due to the fact that the binary system of “generative” and “degenerative” satire neglects the fact that satire is didactic, Weisenburger’s terms require a slight adjustment. For example, one must work with a terminology taking into account whether a work of satire is “explicitly generative” or “implicitly generative;”⁸³ with the latter replacing the concept of “degenerative satire.” Furthermore, one must consider that a work of satire likely has more than one main target, allowing for the possibility of several secondary targets. Peter Thorpe claims to have identified what he calls a “scatter-gun tendency”⁸⁴ in satire. According to Thorpe’s view, “satire is more like a bludgeon, a rough instrument liable to injure a number of innocent bystanders as well as the central target itself.”⁸⁵ Especially in light of satire’s tendency to use typified characters rather than individuals, it is possible to delineate multilayered satiric targets. A given satiric work can thus be aimed at the stabilization of one social discourse, while launching a devastating attack on another. Every single object of the satirist’s critique requires analysis regarding its explicitly or implicitly generative treatment. While authors might point out possible correctives for some of their satiric targets, they might not offer solutions to other exposed follies. Therefore, a satiric work can be “explicitly generative” in some aspects, while being “implicitly generative” in others. This is especially true for African American satire, as the diversified concept of racism mostly infests different political and cultural spheres and is therefore inclined to incorporate a variety of targets.

This diversity in objectives is commonly reflected in complex rhetorical arrangements. Frequently instances of a fusion of satire and novel do not result in an uncomplicated satiric structure, but incorporate a number of different literary influences. Leon Guilhamet thus suggests a binary, albeit simplified differentiation, between “simple” and “complex satire:”

The pattern of simple satire extends from one basic host form to formal satire. Once additional or rhetorical structures (if the host form is rhetorical) are introduced in the process of deformation, the resulting satire is complex. Complex satire begins in the same way as simple satire, with a host structure – rhetorical, belletristic, or popular. Like simple satire, it deforms the host structure by means of modal satire, comic ridicule, and ironic

⁸³ Terminology by Prof. Winston Napier

⁸⁴Thorpe 91.

⁸⁵ Thorpe 91.

devices. The only difference is the much more elaborate use of additional genres and styles so that the form becomes preeminently mingled satire.⁸⁶

There is a seamless continuum from complex satire to the Menippean tradition. Contrary to “Juvenalian satire” and “Horatian satire,” “Menippean satire” is characterized by distinct formal aspects, rather than those of tone. The term “Menippean” has been attached to works of satire combining diverse rhetorical and literary genres. Given the notion that the term “satire” can be traced back to a meaning close to “mixed plate,” Griffin comments that “the tradition of Menippean satire – with its mixture of prose and verse, its digressions, its mingling of forms, its openness to anything new – preserves the original character of satire as *farrago*.”⁸⁷ Any analysis of a satiric novel requires looking beyond the interplay of novel and satire in order to trace potential influences of other literary modes. As pointed out earlier, satire often incorporates neighboring elements of the comic or humorous, but one must be aware that essentially any technique potentially aiding the satirist in his attack might work its way into the satiric novel; this includes different types of humor, as well as influences from other literary genres and modes. These theoretical considerations influence the method used in the analysis of the three novels explored in this study.

As satire mostly finds its target in the extra-literary context, it takes profound knowledge of this framework to arrive at the satirist’s argument. It has been said that

because of its concern with the actualities of history, satire, more than most literary forms, exists both on the level of text, appreciable aesthetically in its own terms, and on the level of experience, engaged with its audience, whether by sharing the immediate situation of its readers or by arriving at a level of general significance that bridges the remoteness of history.⁸⁸

For this reason, it is the aim of the subsequent chapters, in studying three exemplary satiric novels, to appreciate the texts as both rhetorical constructions, as well as unique reflections of the African American experience. This approach, however, demands a thorough reconstruction of each authors’ ironic ways, an analysis which, in turn, calls for a political and cultural picture refreshed with

⁸⁶ Guilhamet 11.

⁸⁷ Griffin 40.

⁸⁸ Knight, *Literatures of Satire* 6.

historical documents and biographical data.⁸⁹ The satirist actually takes this kind of knowledge for granted since, as the phrasing suggests, all ironic play constitutes a use of codified knowledge and poses a challenge to the recipient's learning. In satire, the specific key needed to decode ironic meaning is often found in the cultural and social context from which a work emerges. Wayne Booth adds special emphasis on the notion that:

in political or moral satire, the reconstruction of ironies depends both on a proper use of knowledge or inference about the author and his surroundings and on discovery of a literary form that realizes itself properly for us only in an ironic reading. To distinguish the literary context as 'internal' from the extra-literary context is thus in satire always difficult, and it may finally be impossible.⁹⁰

For this particular study's purpose, it proves rewarding to base analysis of the satiric novels on an approach which takes biographical and historical records of the novels into consideration. This method allows for the incorporation of information needed for ironic reconstruction, and accounts for the fact that satire, more than most literary forms, weaves an intricate web of literary aesthetics and historical actuality. The statement that "the referential function of satire implies an audience sufficiently informed of the context for the message to be comprehended"⁹¹ thus equally applies for both the scholar and critic of satire. For example, the works of Schuyler and Wright refer to contexts which have changed considerably over time, and thus require an adequate historical perspective. Eventually, this procedure aides in locating differences, developments, and lines of continuity in the treatment of racism in African American novels of satire from different historical periods. With these theoretical considerations in mind, it is possible to trace and discuss the African American tradition of satire. In the following subchapter, the general aspects of satire are related to the specific contexts of African American culture and literature.

⁸⁹ To be precise it has to be added that, in the following analyses, the given author is reconstructed out of his text in many ways. The theoretical perspectives from which Schuyler, Wright, and Everett negotiate racism are derived out of their novels. For reasons of elaboration and confirmation, these findings are then read against biographical and historical information.

⁹⁰ Booth 120.

⁹¹ Charles A. Knight, "Satire/Speech/Genre," *Comparative Literature* 44.1 (1992): 31.

2.4 From Signifying to Satiric Novel

Up to this point, the focus of the theoretical investigation has been on the novel of satire, momentarily neglecting the African American cultural framework. Yet, the cultural context is especially important when one considers how the prevalence of racist oppression has led the satiric mindset to flourish in African American culture, more than in other cultural discourses. In his essay “Satire’s Changing Target,” Richard Bridgman addresses the relationship between political oppression and satiric expression, asserting that “censorship, like manure, is malodorous, but it encourages growth. Nothing rouses the satiric temper faster than repression. When power seems to smother expression of opinion, it produces a hatred which in turn produces that murder by indirection we identify as satire.”⁹² As a reaction to racist bigotry, along with its gradual development from signifying to an eclectic intruder that would eventually beset the novel form, the emergence of African American satire can be considered synecdochal for the history of satire at large.

It takes profound erudition in the history of satire and its related elements in the specific context of African American discourse in order to trace influences of early rhetorical bouts with racism in the works under study. One must be aware that long before Schuyler, humor, as it informs satire, was used to confront tyranny; including that of racial oppression. It has been widely acknowledged that humor is a powerful means to attack racism, as it undermines, and essentially suspends, social hierarchies. According to Sigmund Freud’s studies on jokes in a hostile context, humor allows for a temporary circumvention and reversal, as it were, of power structures. It is therefore also fit for those oppressed to take on the ideologies and “morals” which have allowed for slavery and racism to obtain:

By making our enemy small, inferior, despicable or comic, we achieve in a roundabout way the enjoyment of overcoming him. [...] A joke will allow us to exploit something ridiculous in our enemy which we could not, on account of obstacles in the way, bring forward openly or consciously. [...] The joke will evade restrictions and open sources of pleasure that have become inaccessible.⁹³

⁹² Richard Bridgman, “Satire’s Changing Target,” *College Composition and Communication* 16.2 (1965): 86.

⁹³ Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious* (New York: Norton, 1960) 103.

In the case of the African American experience, those obstacles and restrictions which Freud mentions have been established by a system of exploitation and victimization that reaches as far back as the first displacement of Africans to American soil. The initial necessity for African Americans to articulate their detestation for their oppressors in indirect ways is grounded in the existence of hostile and inhumane conditions. Evidently, a malevolent environment implicitly encourages its victims to develop effective discursive strategies which allow for the transmission of ideas and thoughts, including critique and disapproval, under the given conditions. With regard to Africans abducted and forcibly brought to the New World, it is therefore not surprising that “many slaves adopted an obsequious social mask as an essential survival apparatus.”⁹⁴ The term “social mask” refers to a slave’s pretended loyalty and inconspicuous behavior, as a means to survive under adverse conditions. This behavior includes various rhetorical strategies related to irony, many of which fall into the broad category of “signifying.” Henry Louis Gates Jr. outlines the common nature of this plethora of devices as “the figurative difference between the literal and the metaphorical, between surface and latent meaning.”⁹⁵ The resemblance of this definition of signifying to outlines of irony is not surprising considering the fact that Gates, in his discussion of Juan Latino’s poetry, also acknowledges that the “subtle and witty use of irony is among the most common forms of Signifyin(g).”⁹⁶ This mode of “verbally putting down or berating another person with witty remarks,”⁹⁷ however, also plays a role in intertextual relationships. For, just like people, texts can signify upon one another in the form of subtle revision:

Rhetorical naming by indirection is central to our notions of figuration, troping, and of the parody of forms, or pastiche, in evidence when one writer repeats another’s structure by one of several means, including a fairly exact repetition of a given narrative or rhetorical structure, filled incongruously with a ludicrous or incongruent context.⁹⁸

As it is an effectual way to stay unobtrusive without submitting to the oppressor, one can imagine that these methods of rhetorical cloaking were

⁹⁴ Watkins 50.

⁹⁵ Henry Louis Gates Jr., *The Signifying Monkey* (New York: Oxford UP, 1988) 82.

⁹⁶ Gates 90.

⁹⁷ Mel Watkins, *On the Real Side: A History of African American Comedy* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill, 1999) 64.

⁹⁸ Gates 103.

effectively used by slaves to circumvent censorship or castigation. Since the conditions of slavery did not allow free communication among its victims, Watkins asserts that the exploited “faced not only a cruel and, for the most part, inflexible system that governed practically every aspect of their lives, but also a community of people who placed little or no value on their humanity.”⁹⁹ With Bergson’s elaborations on laughter in mind, one must note the emphasis on rigidity and stasis in Watkins’ definition of the racist system. It stands to reason that with its focus on unbending categorization and strict classification, the subject of racism strongly invites deconstruction and unmasking through humor and laughter.

Humor, however, is a rather diverse phenomenon, as it occurs not only in comic configurations, but also accompanies both horrid and farcical plot settings. If signifying or satire take on racism’s inhumane degradation of human beings, it is especially the fusion of humor and horror one must be attuned to. While African American humor has to be distinguished from generic black humor, there is a special relationship between the two which has yet to be fully disclosed. Dexter B. Gordon implicitly suggests a link of such nature by confirming that “American slavery provides the backdrop of tragedy against which African Americans developed their distinct form of humor, in which the material of tragedy was converted into comedy, including the absurd.”¹⁰⁰ Due to the importance of racism in African American discourse and its prevalence in African American humor, one can trace a peculiar fusion of wit and tragedy which is also at the core of black humor’s juxtaposition of laughter and horror. By taking on the absurd and horrible excrescences of racism, in a form witty by definition, one can observe a varyingly pronounced embrace of generic black humor in the specific novels under study.

While the techniques of signifying serve the satiric mindset, the two concepts should not be confused, regardless of similarities in the attitudes of their originators. Although there is a strong element of entertainment and enjoyment in most rhetorical play of signifying, it is often informed by a critical mindset akin to that of satire. For instance, spirituals and work songs were often stimulated by a demeanor closely related to the satiric. William Schechter explains that “music and

⁹⁹ Watkins 50.

¹⁰⁰ Dexter B. Gordon, “Humor in African American Discourse: Speaking of Oppression.” *Journal of Black Studies* 29.2 (1998): 256.

humor provided a more universal outlet for the black through the medium of what may be considered 'protest' hymns in today's vernacular – spirituals with courageous *double-entendre* lyrics that provided a small measure of comic relief from the cruelty and hardship of slavery."¹⁰¹ Watkins comments on this phenomenon, stating that many songs "provide numerous examples of veiled protest – for, as with black secular music, slaveholders tolerated sentiments expressed in song that would have been considered insolent if expressed more directly."¹⁰² With respect to the oral tall-tale tradition and work songs, Watkins notices "some interesting examples of the irony and satiric thrust of slave humor."¹⁰³ The use of such encoded discourse also holds important psychological implications. As a means to sustain the spirit of perseverance in times of plight, such verbal outlets of aggression and critique played a vital role in the everyday lives of slaves. Nancy Levi Arnez and Clara B. Anthony note that

the smile and the grin were effective weapons by which many an otherwise defenseless slave learned not only to survive, but also – in the Faulknerian sense – to endure. This guile often masked resentment and anger and a seething rebelliousness; but because the slaves were wily and the masters insensitive, the human chattels were able to fool the masters into believing that they were, contented, singing, laughing, dancing buffoons – black faced jesters. That so many whites could have been deluded for so long is damaging evidence that proves the effectiveness of the masking of their bleeding hearts by Negroes. While whites deluded themselves, "we sat at the table and grew strong."¹⁰⁴

The buffoon and the jester, mentioned en passant in the above discussion, are versions of the chief embodiment of this technique: the trickster. In African and African American communities, trickster figures continue to be very important. As central entities in oral tradition, these figures are not only related to the indirection of signifying, but also to the archetypal satiric protagonist which is closely connected to signifying techniques. In fact, Gates' theory of signifying is largely based on traditional trickster tales of a "Signifying Monkey." Through the monkey trickster's use of signifying, these tales assume subversive qualities and

¹⁰¹ William Schechter, *The History of Negro Humor in America* (New York: Fleet, 1970) 26.

¹⁰² Watkins 76.

¹⁰³ Watkins, *On the Real Side* 77.

¹⁰⁴ Nancy Arnez Levi and Clara B. Anthony, "Contemporary Negro Humor as Social Satire," *Phylon* 29.4 (1968): 339.

take the shape of “versions of daydreams, the Daydream of the Black Other, chiastic fantasies of reversal of power relationships.”¹⁰⁵

M.D. Fletcher confirms that the breadth of the trickster concept yet identifies unifying characteristics: “There is no single archetype satiric protagonist, the traditions of relevance are those of the railer; the fool; the clown; the classical comic archetypes of alazon, eiron, buffoon and agroikos; and the picaro, quixote and naïf.”¹⁰⁶ In a general sense, any character that makes wide-ranging use of deceit to outsmart his opponents and to achieve his ends could be filed under this broad term. With its essentially harmless, yet extraordinarily versatile nature, the trickster is predestined to expose the fraudulent and susceptible configurations in a given society’s discourse. It is this very capacity to infiltrate social structures, in order to excavate mores and ills, that allows the trickster to be a powerful agent in a satirist’s critical message. One can thus add the appearance of trickster figures to a list of events which are likely to accompany satire’s fusion with the form of the novel. Much of satire’s frequently chaotic settings are often triggered and initiated by a trickster figure; and since the trickster figure is also closely related to moral instruction, their appearance in satire seems just as natural. In his essay “Trickster Discourse,” Gerald Vizenor approaches the phenomenon from a theoretical angle and elucidates the importance of the trickster for a satirist’s contained articulation of bleak, and sometimes degenerative, revelations:

The trickster [...] is a sign, a comic and communal sign, and a discourse in a narrative with no hope or tragic promises. The trickster is neither the ‘whole truth’ nor an isolated *hypotragic* transvaluation of primitivism. The trickster is as aggressive as those who imagine the narrative, but the trickster bears no evil or malice in narrative voices. Malice and evil would silence the comic *holotropes*; there would be no concordance in the discourse, the narrator, characters, and the audience, would not share the narrative event.¹⁰⁷

In order to understand the trickster’s relevance in the satiric domain, one needs to know that trickster tales are frequently based on an instructive design. Historically, these narratives “in the antebellum period were required to entertain as well as provide moral instruction. But contrary to general belief, these tales did

¹⁰⁵ Gates 59.

¹⁰⁶ M.D. Fletcher, *Contemporary Political Satire* (New York: UP of America, 1987) 7.

¹⁰⁷ Gerald Vizenor, “Trickster Discourse,” *American Indian Quarterly* 14.3 (1990): 285.

not always idealize the trickster.”¹⁰⁸ To understand this latter point, one must be aware that, as a latent shape-shifter, the trickster can appear in different patterns. Frequent manifestations include the clever hero, the selfish buffoon, and the picaro. The trickster as clever hero commonly sets out to outsmart his opponents, if necessary at the expense of virtue and integrity. Orrin E. Klapp characterizes the clever hero as:

a specialist in certain kinds of roles which have the quality of impudent triumph. He may not be a good man – indeed, he is usually far from being an exemplar of virtue; nor is he outstanding as a servant of his group – patriot, defender, martyr, and so on; but in his own field he is hard to beat. He is supreme for wit, resourcefulness, nimbleness, elusiveness, deceit, impudence, and sense of humor [...]. He does not meet an opponent head-on but prefers to trick him.¹⁰⁹

While the trickster in the role of the clever hero may occasionally assume an idealized spot, there are forms of the trickster whose attempts at outfoxing his opponents are much less auspicious. Among these less successful specimen, and rooted in oral Indian tradition, is what Michael P. Carroll refers to as the “selfish buffoon” – “‘selfish’ because so much of the trickster’s activity is oriented toward the gratification of his enormous appetites for food and sex, and ‘buffoon’ because the elaborate deceits which the trickster devises in an effort to satisfy these appetites, often backfire and leave the trickster looking incredibly foolish.”¹¹⁰ With its focus on bawdy matters and a preference for failure and fiasco, the selfish buffoon is likely to inform bleaker appearances of satire grounded in dark humor.

Since the picaro makes the trickster literarily viable, the picaresque tradition often serves the satiric mindset. In fact, its roguish hero frequently imbues the satiric protagonist. Less vulgar and maladroit than the “selfish buffoon,” the picaro usually emanates from the lower social stratum and is driven by a latent inability to settle into the social structure. Matthew Hodgart outlines the picaro as a type of rogue, typically an “outsider or misfit, a bastard or a boy too intelligent for his station in life, who can find no regular occupation or fixed place in a stratified society. He is forced to move out on the road and to keep moving

¹⁰⁸ Watkins, *On the Real Side* 73.

¹⁰⁹ Orrin E. Klapp, “The Clever Hero,” *The Journal of American Folklore* 67.263 (1954): 23.

¹¹⁰ Michael P. Carroll, “The Trickster as Selfish-Buffoon and Culture Hero,” *Ethos* 12.2 (1984): 106.

both horizontally in the novel and vertically in society.”¹¹¹ Although the satirist may sacrifice centrality of character to the critical subtext, the picaro offers the potential to depict a diversified social environment. Regardless of his manifestation and the viciousness of his actions, the trickster appears likeable, for his concern lies with the common man who finds himself at the top of the social structure as the trickster inverts various hierarchies. The trickster is predestined as a trope to condemn racism since

his opponents are characteristically the great, the strong, the proud, and the cruel; he is essentially a champion of the little man, a righter of wrongs, a protagonist of democracy, an agent of comic justice. But, more specifically, he is a leveler, who reduces those who have arrogated too much power or privilege to themselves.¹¹²

While the clever-hero, selfish-buffoon, and picaro merely indicate benchmarks on the wide scale of trickster patterns, they illustrate different suits in which a trickster can appear, and to which a scholar of satire needs to be attuned. Historically, in many social discourses, trickster figures were an important means to amalgamate entertainment and instruction. Still, the trickster has a special relationship with African American cultures. In fact, the history of the African American novel, including that of its satiric offset, is indivisible from a very specific materialization of the trickster: the passer.

The act of “passing” is commonly defined as the “crossing of the color line by Americans who looked white but had some black ancestry.”¹¹³ It is hence considered the most extreme form of racial assimilation. In a society based on a binary system of racial categorization, the “passer” inevitably poses a direct threat to established racist beliefs. This threat becomes manifest by the passer’s insights into the oppressive system and the consequential “awareness that personal identities are constructed”¹¹⁴ rather than predicated on fundamental differences based on genetic disparity, as propagated by racist discourse.¹¹⁵ In consequence,

¹¹¹ Matthew Hodgart, *Satire* (London: Weidenfeld Nicolson, 1969) 218.

¹¹² Klapp 30.

¹¹³ Susan Van D'Elden Donaldson, *Competing voices: the American novel, 1865-1914* (New York: Twayne Publishers; London: Prentice Hall International, 1998) 75.

¹¹⁴ Maria Giulia Fabi, *Passing and the Rise of the African American Novel* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001) 5.

¹¹⁵ See Harryette Mullen “Optic White: Blackness and the Production of Whiteness” *Diacritics* 24.2-3 (1994): 74. In keeping with the theoretical considerations on the act of passing, Mullen comments that “the literature of passing demonstrates the actual fluidity of ostensibly rigid racial boundaries

the passer is a highly useful satiric mediator, as the trope of passing provides the author with a

means to pioneer a counterhegemonic discussion of blackness as a historically and ideologically changing construct. The passer embodies the reality of cultural difference by containing racial dichotomies: Although his or her liminality is contingent on the existence of recognizably distinct groups, it also turns what was conceived of as a natural opposition into a societal one.¹¹⁶

At this point, the crucial connection between the act of passing and the concept of “social identity”¹¹⁷ as a form of constructed “self” becomes particularly apparent. Since passer figures are mainly caught between racial binaries and find themselves oscillating between “whiteness” and “blackness,” they are likely to follow the pattern of the picaresque – the restless wanderer ransacking the social structure for a place worth inhabiting. In order to analyze the functions and implications of the African American “shape-changer” in the novels under examination, one must be familiar with the ways in which a passer complicates a certain society’s binary racial discourse, hence serving the satirist’s attack on racism.

that define the power relations of margin to center. The center exploits the energy of the margin, augmenting and renewing itself as the racially ambiguous are drawn to the self-validating power of the center to define itself as white and therefore pure, authentic, and ‘naturally’ dominant.”

¹¹⁶ Fabi 5.

¹¹⁷ For a concise explanation of the origins and key aspects of social identity theory, especially in contrast to identity theory, see Michael A. Hogg, Deborah J. Terry, and Katherine M. White, “A Tale of Two Theories: A Critical Comparison of Identity Theory With Social Identity Theory,” *Social Psychology Quarterly* 58.4 (1995): 255-269. The article stresses that “the basic idea is that a social category (e.g., nationality, political affiliation, sports team) into which one falls, and to which one feels one belongs, provides a definition of who one is in terms of the defining characteristics of the category – a self-definition that is a part of the self-concept. People have a repertoire of such discrete category memberships that vary in relative overall importance in the self-concept. Each of these memberships is represented in the individual member’s mind as a social identity that both describes and prescribes one’s attributes as a member of that group – that is, what one should think and feel, and how one should behave.” In the context of racism, social identity theory lends itself as it explicitly accounts for “large-scale attributes” such as race: “Another important source of differences between the theories is that social identity theory is about intergroup relations and group behaviour, while identity theory concerns role behaviour. Identity theory thus is focused differently than social identity theory. It concentrates on role behaviour and role identities, and does not consider in any direct sense the impact of other social attributes on self. These ‘other attributes’ are mainly large-scale category memberships such as ethnicity, sex, race, and nationality.”

2.5 Subverting (Racist) Social Identity

The term “identity” is commonly referred to as a set of features which characterizes a thing or person and, in contemporary theory, is inseparably linked to the concept of “social identity.” This approach proceeds from the assumption that individual identity can only be created through comparison to and interaction with other individuals or groups of people. Henri Tajfel defines “social identity” as “the individual’s knowledge that he/she belongs to certain social groups together with some emotional and value significance to him/her of the group membership.”¹¹⁸ The notion of personal identity as relative to social groups is indispensable to the discussion of African American satire, especially against the backdrop of racism as any form of discrimination dependent on the existence of a clear-cut “other.” Dominic Abrams and Michael A. Hogg refer to Tajfel’s concept, emphasizing that “social identity is self-conception as a group member. Social identity theory assigns a central role to the process of categorization which partitions the world into comprehensible units.”¹¹⁹

As racial categories are among these units, labelling and grouping is essential in the context of racist discourse. In any social system based on explicit or implicit racism, the identity of a character relies crucially on the strict binary distinction between one’s own racial category and an encompassing “Other.” With regard to the specificities of American racism, one has to consider Peter Rigby’s assertion regarding the reciprocity between allegedly superior and inferior categories: “The myth of the superior European (white) male on the one hand, and the constitution of the solipsistic autonomous (individual) subject (the ‘narcissistic self-admiration’) on the other, demands a diminished and humiliated ‘Other.’”¹²⁰ The trickster, as passer, is anxious to desert from the side of the stigmatized and oppressed “Other,” to infiltrate the domain of the oppressor.

Among the social effects triggered by this act is a complication of the consciousness of belonging to a specific social group; a problem which can have diverse implications for an individual. Oftentimes, “a sense of involvement,

¹¹⁸ Henri Tajfel. “Experiments in a Vacuum,” *The Context of Psychology: A Critical Assessment*, ed. J. Israel and H. Tajfel. (London: Academic Press, 1972) 5.

¹¹⁹ Dominic Abrams and Michael A. Hogg, “An Introduction to the Social Identity Approach,” *Social Identity Theory*. ed. Abrams, Dominic and Michael A. Hogg (New York: Springer-Verlag, 1990) 2.

¹²⁰ Peter Rigby, *African Images* (Oxford: Berg, 1996) 4.

concern and pride can be derived from one's knowledge of sharing a social category membership with others, even without necessarily having close personal relationships with, knowing or having any material personal interest in their outcomes."¹²¹ In the case of white racist discourse, racial differentiation was most strongly established and enforced by white society to keep African American people in a clear-cut "out-group." Hogg and Abrams explicate that, in general,

differentiation is likely to be greater on dimensions of general social value, or of particular importance to the in-group, especially dimensions on which the in-group is stereotypically positive. Thus, to the extent that the in-group is perceived as both different and better than the out-group, thereby achieving positive distinctiveness, one's social identity is enhanced.¹²²

The fact that the consciousness of belonging to a socially dominant in-group has a stabilizing or even improving effect on a person's concept of identity implies that insecurity about group membership can have quite the opposite effect. It can be inferred from the preceding discussion that both consciously and unconsciously, individuals permanently define their social positions in comparison to other individuals, and that "one is aware of features distinguishing the relevant own social category from others."¹²³ This awareness of distinguishing features is critically influenced and shaped by the mindset and value system forced on an individual by the surrounding society, or unconsciously inherited during the process of socialization. Passing plays with, and negotiates, the terms of social and personal identity.

When passers enter the scene and disguise their own heritage in an attempt to step over the color line, they embody evidence of the permeability and artificiality of the race construct. Inevitably, the concept of arbitrary racial categorization and any social identity based thereon, is precariously destabilized. With their subversive qualities fit to challenge power structures, passers proffer themselves as a means for the satirist to negotiate racism. One can imagine that especially non-heroic renditions of the trickster complement the satirist's sinister social portrayal rather well. In fact, it has been asserted that "the antiheroic remains the quintessential ingredient of satire's caustic grin and grimace."¹²⁴

¹²¹ Abrams and Hogg 3.

¹²² Abrams and Hogg 3.

¹²³ Abrams and Hogg 4.

¹²⁴ Clark 35.

2.6 Passing, Melodrama, and the Birth of the African American Novel of Satire

Having analyzed how oppression rouses the satiric mindset, how this mindset has found its rhetorical expression in different forms of signifying, and how the trickster has contributed to the rise of the African American novel, one might possibly underestimate Schuyler's literary importance. While the rhetorical element of the trickster as passer is closely intertwined with the emergence of the African American novel, it is not until 1931 that George Schuyler emerges with *Black No More*, thus creating a new sub-genre of American satire.

It is crucial to recall that the early African American novel, and novels dealing with the African American experience, were regulated much more by sentimentalism and melodrama than by satire. Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, is a prime example of how a stylized conflict between unadulterated good and pure evil enthralled a wide readership with grand emotions. To this day, the fixed interplay of villainy and virtue has informed much of the literary dealings with race in the United States. As Linda Williams asserts in her analysis of the prevalence of melodrama in the public negotiation of race,

the melodramatic playings of the race card will be best understood [...] as a story cycle brought to life by a circulating set of transmuting icons and melos pointing sometimes to the virtue of racially beset victims and sometimes to the villainy of racially motivated villains. Each new incarnation of this negrophilic/negrophobic cycle cites a previous version of the Tom or Anti-Tom story of racial victims and villains, sometimes reversing the moral polarities, sometimes simply appropriating old polarities in new ways.¹²⁵

Many African American authors, including Charles Chesnutt, Nella Larsen, and James Weldon Johnson, have used the theme of passing and that of the tragic mulatto to frame their novels in melodramatic terms; not only because the brutal rigidity of the color line was an especially important dilemma at the time, but also because these authors relied heavily on white publishing houses. Although the implicit criticism in works by these authors is not to be underestimated, novels such as Chesnutt's *The House behind the Cedars* were very much shaped by popular demand, as the tragic mulatto was a market-compatible rendition of racist reality. One need look no further than modern popular music and television shows to get a

¹²⁵ Linda Williams, *Playing the Race Card* (New Haven: Princeton UP 2001) 6.

sense of the unbroken importance of stereotypical Tom/Anti-Tom figures and melodramatic oppositions. The tenacity with which melodrama continues to penetrate the public negotiation of race is explained by Williams' assumption that

if melodrama can be understood as a perpetually modernizing form whose real appeal is in its ability to gesture toward inexpressible attributes of good and evil no longer expressible in a post-sacred era, then this quality could explain why race has been such a prime locus of melodramatic expression. For race has precisely become an 'occulted' moral category about which we are not supposed to speak, yet which, far from disappearing, has remained as central to popular thought and feeling as it was in the mid-nineteenth century.¹²⁶

As such, melodrama itself frequently becomes a manifestation of an inflexible, racist society, serving to consolidate existing racial boundaries. It is crucial to get a grasp of the nature of melodrama "as a fundamental grammar of the American race discourse,"¹²⁷ in order to fully appreciate the African American satirist's continuing significance. In fact, race melodrama is likely to appear as a target in a satirist's crosshairs. Jeffrey D. Mason states that

the essential action of melodrama is to polarize its constituents, whatever they may be – male and female, East and West, civilization and wilderness, and, most typically, good and evil. By forcing its elements apart until they seem irreconcilably disparate, and then sustaining their interdependent relationship within a shared structure, melodrama provides a paradoxical means of resolving fundamental contradictions. In other words, the melodramatic world is composed of binary oppositions.¹²⁸

Having seen how readily laughter tends to fasten on such obstinate binaries, how profoundly vice and virtue undergo questioning and redefinition in ironic play, and how little room satire gives a reader to settle safely into a text – the question of why Schuyler, like other important African American authors, resorts to the power of satire is all but answered.

As for the time when Schuyler celebrated the birth of the African American satiric novel, one can say that the Harlem Renaissance provided the necessary conditions for the phenomenon of the African American satiric novel to emerge. One defining element was the spirit of self-confidence and artistic creativity among African Americans, especially in the northern capitals of the United States, which

¹²⁶ Williams 300.

¹²⁷ Ferguson 251

¹²⁸ Jeffrey D. Mason, *Melodrama and the Myth of America* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1993) 16-17.

characterized the time following the First World War. In actuality, for those who read the signs of the time properly, the appearance of Schuyler's debut novel was hardly a surprise. In 1925, with a keen perception of the climate in the surrounding community, Alain Locke referred to the special role of the satiric mindset in African American discourse and stated that

there is poetry of sturdy social protest, and fiction of calm, dispassionate social analysis. But reason and realism have cured us of sentimentality: instead of the wail and appeal, there is challenge and indictment. Satire is just beneath the surface of our latest prose, and tonic irony has come into our poetic wells. These are good medicines for the common mind, for us they are necessary antidotes against social poison.¹²⁹

It is due to influential "Negrotarians"¹³⁰ that Locke's prediction became a reality. According to Steven Watson, the interest of these people "focused on the expressive powers they detected in the New Negro writers, and in black life itself, both urban and rural." Most importantly, however, their influence proved essential to the virtually all-white publishing industry.¹³¹ It is thanks to this cooperation between African American artists and white publishing houses that the Harlem Renaissance saw the publication of African American literature in all its fascinating diversity. Six years after Locke's prediction and on the eve of the Harlem Renaissance, caustic irony and the satiric parasite finally seeped into the African American novel to the extent that George Samuel Schuyler's *Black No More* was hailed as marking the dawn of the African American novel of satire.

In summary, one needs to recognize the multiple options and possibilities that a satiric novel holds for the dissection of racial discrimination on a grand scale. The theme of racism is especially susceptible for satiric treatment, as its rigid binaries invite sanative laughter and are likely to dissolve in ironic play. Moreover, stalwarts of the ideology are caged and exposed in their inability to laugh. One must also be prepared for the African American satiric novel to signify extensively upon the discourses of melodrama and sentimentalism. With these considerations in mind, one can now turn to the novels by George Schuyler, Charles Wright, and Percival Everett, to analyze their specific thematic and stylistic treatment of

¹²⁹ Alain LeRoy Locke, "The Negro Youth Speaks," *The New Negro*, ed. Alain LeRoy Locke (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997) 52.

¹³⁰ Zora Neale Hurston's term for white supporters of the Harlem Renaissance.

¹³¹ Steve Watson, *The Harlem Renaissance* (New York: Pantheon, 1995) 97.

racism. This analysis reveals peculiar stylistic features which, in their use, function, and constellation of effects are particular to the African American novel of satire. More importantly, however, it exposes the writers under scrutiny as authors at odds with many established critical notions of a satirist, such as that of an artist “motivated by the aesthetic desire for self-expression far more than by the ethical desire for reform.”¹³²

¹³² Feinberg, *Introduction* 9.

III. Dismantling the Capitalist Machinery: George Schuyler's

Black No More

3.1 The Birth of the African American Novel of Satire

One may rightfully ask whether it is justifiable to identify George Schuyler's 1931 novel *Black No More* as the birth of the African American novel of satire. After all, it is true that the satiric mindset had played a crucial role in African American communities long before George Schuyler arrived on the literary scene. Literary critics, such as Mel Watkins, have thoroughly investigated the critical function of humor in African American discourse, exploring the vital function of satiric forms of expression in times of oppression.¹³³ In the preceding chapter, one could observe how songs and sermons were frequently used as vehicles of satiric critique. Furthermore, tales based on the tragic mulatto theme often made use of implied social commentary; however, these stories did not usually engage the larger oppressive apparatus. Due to this, it is important to remember that in such narratives, "irony appears repeatedly, but usually as a device to garner sympathy for mixed-blooded protagonists seeking their proper place in society; it was seldom employed to ridicule the inherent absurdity of the system that perpetuated the irrational black-white schism and social pretense."¹³⁴ It was not until Schuyler's *Black No More* that the satiric mode flourished in the African American novel and that irony became targeted at the greater socioeconomic superstructure. As the subsequent analysis reveals, Schuyler's satiric critique is not incidental but intentional; every artistic aspect of the novel is clearly subordinated to the satiric salvo the work intends. In order to expose the socioeconomic implications of racism and those benefiting from it, Schuyler created the backlash of a world in which whiteness is universally attainable.

After a short preface on scientific advancement in the field of human bleaching, *Black No More* delves into the third-person narrative of Max Disher, a witty, underclass Harlemit who is frustrated by the repeated rejection he receives from light-skinned women. When an African American doctor, Junius Crookman, discovers a process that can turn blacks into Caucasians, chaos ensues as America is quickly robbed of its ethnic minority. Among the first to take advantage of the

¹³³ See Watkins, *On the Real Side*; Schechter.

¹³⁴ Watkins, *On the Real Side* 410-411.

treatment, the newly bleached Max Disher assumes the identity of Matthew Fisher. He not only marries the girl of his dreams, but also infiltrates, and eventually ends up spearheading, the racist Knights of Nordica organization. In the meantime, racial leaders and organizations fear unemployment and soon join forces in order to bring Crookman's Black-No-More enterprise to a halt. Despite this resistance, the African American community steadily diminishes in an ever-growing Caucasian population, leaving the economy in panic over the loss of exploitable second-class citizens, low-wage labor, and racism as strike-breaker. Schuyler ends the novel on a wryly pessimistic note: a "racist order," with a reversed color-caste system, is implemented once it is discovered that the newly bleached African Americans are now a shade lighter than the original Caucasians.

Through *Black No More*, as well as his article "The Negro Art Hokum,"¹³⁵ journalist and author George Schuyler earned his reputation as an adamant disbeliever in the idea of race. Refusing to acknowledge any difference between blacks and whites, Schuyler's "lively deflation of the assumptions that issued from advocates of both sides of the racial myth give him a unique standing as a black satirist."¹³⁶ This exceptional artistic position was cemented by the fact that *Black No More* was the first fully-developed African American novel of satire. In reference to the work's incorporation of science fiction, Dickson-Carr refers to *Black No More* as a "double milestone in African American literature. It is simultaneously the first completely satirical novel written by and about African Americans and the first extended work of science fiction by a black author."¹³⁷ In light of the work's value of originality, it is not surprising that this novel has garnered positive reviews over the decades. As Jeffrey Ferguson notes, "in its own time *Black No More* made a reputation similar to the mainly positive one that it has

¹³⁵ George Samuel Schuyler, "The Negro-Art Hokum," *Double-Take: A Revisionist Harlem Renaissance Anthology*, ed. Venetria K. Patton and Maureen Honey (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 2001); See Ferguson 183-185. The article is largely responsible for Schuyler's reputation as a thorn in the side of the Harlem Renaissance. Here, Schuyler challenges the existence of African American (and in general racial) art. As Ferguson notes, it is due to "The Negro-Art Hokum" that "if students of black literature recognize George Schuyler for nothing else, they know him as a notorious naysayer to the general ideological thrust of the Harlem Renaissance."

¹³⁶ Watkins, *On the Real Side* 415.

¹³⁷ Dickson-Carr 57.

today. Many readers appreciated it for its liberating qualities, with some enthusiasts even hailing it for ushering in a new kind of black literature.”¹³⁸

Despite this praise, there have been some mixed responses to the novel, as the author’s satiric intent has not always been clearly understood. Some critics have assigned a subordinate role to the novel’s didactic element, placing the work in a predominantly comic context. For example, Guy Johnson stresses that “there are many good laughs in the book, but one grows a little tired of the continual straining toward comedy.”¹³⁹ In addition, *The New York Times* praised the novel’s interesting fantasy, but questioned Schuyler’s talent as a satirist:

The idea is ingenious, that of turning Negroes into white men and women by the simple process of a three days’ stay in the hospital of a doctor who has discovered the disease that will turn the trick, but its elaboration into fiction lacks originality and edge. Satire is made of sharper metal than Mr. Schuyler possesses. Often, instead of turning his knife to cut, he turns it into a trowel and slaps it on thick with the broadside.¹⁴⁰

Today, Schuyler’s artistic and journalistic achievements are often overshadowed by his controversial political career.¹⁴¹ Schuyler, whose socialist stance is traceable in *Black No More*, later joined the far-right, protested the public attention Martin Luther King¹⁴² was granted, and eventually became a member of the arch-conservative John Birch Society. As Ferguson muses, “no one really knows exactly why Schuyler, who claimed to be a socialist well into the 1930s, shifted during the 1940s from a leading voice on the left to one whose words would make

¹³⁸ Ferguson 219.

¹³⁹ Guy B. Johnson, “Black and White,” *Social Forces* 10.1 (1931): 127.

¹⁴⁰ “‘Rich and Strange’ and Some Other Works of Fiction,” *The New York Times* 1 Feb. 1931.

¹⁴¹ The most thorough analysis of Schuyler’s profession and influence is given by Jeffrey B. Ferguson. For a brief outline of Schuyler’s controversial career as author and journalist, see George Goodman Jr., “George S. Schuyler, Black Author,” *The New York Times* 7 Sept. 1977. It is telling that when Schuyler died on August 31, 1977, the death notice in *The New York Times* puts emphasis on the fact that the late George Schuyler was best known “for pungent conservative positions that clashed with those of nearly every major spokesman of the civil rights movement of the 1960’s.” For a biographical outline of George Schuyler issued from a conservative angle, see Michael Judge, “Justice to George S. Schuyler” *Policy Review* 102 (2000).

¹⁴² See Ferguson 3. One could argue that Martin Luther King serves as Schuyler’s blueprint for various racial leaders lampooned in *Black No More*. Ferguson quotes the author with a comment indicative of the contempt with which Schuyler came to regard King. He not only questions King’s social achievements, but also accuses him of greed and craving for recognition: “‘Dr. King’s principal contribution to world peace has been to roam the country like some sable Typhoid Mary infecting the mentally disturbed with perversions of Christian doctrine and grabbing fat lecture fees from the shallow-pated.’”

a red-baiter like Westbrook Pegler urge whites to ‘read this Negro.’”¹⁴³ Although the shifting political views of Schuyler do not constitute the center of this present chapter, his politics resonate throughout the following analysis.

After an initial discussion of the critical use of “passing,” the attempt of light skinned African Americans to step over the color line and pass for white, it is possible to address the importance of science fiction in the satiric novel, and eventually, to negotiate the overarching significance of capitalist greed. The analysis will show how racism, in Schuyler's satire, serves as a cog in the capitalist machine: working in tandem with adjacent, similarly purposed instruments. In this analysis, archetypal American social myths such as the American Dream, the concept of the “self-made man,” and eventually the notion of the United States as a melting pot of cultures will then be scrutinized. After tracing this encompassing range of Schuyler’s satiric targets, the final part of this section discusses ways in which the author manages to assail his objective in its breadth.

3.2 Bridging the Racial Divide

Before it is possible to elaborate on Schuyler’s satiric targets, his mode of operation, and other characteristics of the novel, it is necessary to address the importance of passing as both a theme, and as a satiric stratagem, in *Black No More*. In keeping with the general tendency of satire to take thematic aspects to the absurd, Schuyler’s novel treats the change of racial identity in a highly exaggerated fashion. Accordingly, it is virtually impossible to apply a conventional definition of passing to the type of passing which occurs in Schuyler’s novel. For example, narratives based on this theme usually highlight the affliction inherent in the passer’s condition, namely that of being caught oscillating between a binary opposition of black and white, and the resulting futility to achieve a stable identity.¹⁴⁴ For Schuyler, there are no restrictions on which particular group of people may cross the color line. On the contrary, as he introduces the possibility of transcoloration, he enables even the most stereotypical, African American characters to alter their racial identity. Although *Black No More* addresses the

¹⁴³ Ferguson 5.

¹⁴⁴ See Fabi.

chemical bleaching of complexion, the term transcoloration does not fully capture these acts of transformation. As an example, because the newly bleached characters struggle to conceal their black heritage, an element of trickery, along with the threat it poses to the racial divide, is ever-present in the novel. In fact, both trickery and the threat to the color line are central to the theme of passing.

Yet, due to Schuyler's play with *reductio ad absurdum*, passing is not confined to cultural mobility between the adjacent areas on both sides of the color line. Instead, the concept is magnified to such a degree that it encompasses mobility from the remote sphere of cliché black life, all the way to outspoken white supremacy. This is enhanced to the extent that virtually the entire African American population not only passes for white, but eventually ends up being "two to three shades lighter than the old Caucasians"¹⁴⁵ (*BNM* 177). Protagonist Max Disher fully embodies this radical treatment of race travel, as he temporarily trades his existence as a generic, underclass Harlemit, for that of a renowned white supremacist.

It should thus not be surprising that the initial reason behind the protagonist's act of passing deviates significantly from traditional aspirations which have influenced people to cross the color line. Arthur Paul Davis alludes to one of the most prominent motives for people to engage in a change of racial identity when he states: "first of all, there was economic motivation. When almost every job of any consequence in the white world, including those of street-car conductors and street cleaners, were closed to the Negro, it was only natural for those who could pass to take advantage of their color."¹⁴⁶ In contrast to Davis' statement, however, Max's motivation does not primarily stem from material gain or social advancement. Rather, his initial interest lies in the access to an extended marriage market and the ability to approach the girl of his dreams. As the

¹⁴⁵ See de la Pena. The notion that racial transformation through advanced technology could lead to skin tones exceeding existing grades of paleness is not exclusive to Schuyler's novel. Rather, around that time this vision was frequently purported in newspaper articles and magazine stories on the issue of artificial bleaching of humans.

¹⁴⁶ Arthur Paul Davis, *From the Dark Tower: Afro-American Writers (1900 to 1960)* (Washington: Howard UP, 1974) 97.

narrator¹⁴⁷ explains, this is due to the fact that Max shares “a weakness rather prevalent among Aframerican bucks: [...] yellow women” (*BNM* 4). This deviation from the theme’s traditional use is grounded in Schuyler’s intent to create a highly stereotypical African American. He does so by confronting readers with the idea of the “happy-go-lucky,” sexually driven Negro; a stereotype fueled with racist bigotry. In this way, the author ironically inverts established racist beliefs, openly “playing on the familiar refrain of white commentators,” and the widespread notion that, as Jane Kuenze further explains, “regardless of their talk about civil-rights, the real goal of African-American agitation is the right to marry white men and especially women.”¹⁴⁸ Readers lacking the ability to understand these statements within a satiric framework are inclined to confuse the author with his target. The act of passing for sexual reasons, which readers encounter in *Black No More*, is a parody of the conventional passing scheme. Although traditional aspirations, such as social amelioration and subsequent material gain, do enter Max’s life during the story, they do not dictate his actions. He makes no secret of the fact that he is strongly attracted to light-skinned females, and that his primary plan is to “just play around, enjoy life and laugh at the white folks up his sleeve,” in a “fooling Cap’n Chalie”¹⁴⁹ tradition (*BNM* 29).

As a former member of the oppressed African American community, masquerading as a white supremacist, Max is well aware of the danger which every passer poses to racist belief systems, and also to racists’ identities. To show this understanding, he openly explains to his fellow whites: “what we want is a status quo” (*BNM* 87). In accordance with the general attributes of characters stepping over the color line, Max poses an immediate threat to the binary racial discourse of his time because he embodies the arbitrariness of racial division. This threat is then elevated by having Dr. Crookman’s Black-No-More enterprise literally “rob

¹⁴⁷ As the current analysis is about to reveal in more detail, the novel is characterized by a peculiar relationship between “narrator” and “author” which also finds expression in the seemingly interchangeable appliance of the terms. In *Black No More*, the narrator is the central entity articulating the author’s stance against which the corrupt events are measured. It is in the narrator’s ironic comments that racists are lambasted, ideologists denounced, and greedy leaders submitted to contemptuous laughter.

¹⁴⁸ Jane Kuenz, “American Racial Discourse 1900-1930: George Schuyler’s *Black No More*,” *Novel. A Forum on Fiction* 30.2 (1997): 185.

¹⁴⁹ See Davis 97.

white society of its black minority race.”¹⁵⁰ It is in keeping with satire’s intimate affiliation with exaggeration and overstatement that Schuyler does not settle for just one character infiltrating the world of white supremacy, but rather paints a grotesque picture of civil commotion, caused by a mob waiting to get the treatment:

In front of the sanitarium milled a half-frozen crowd of close to four thousand Negroes. A riot squad armed with rifles, machine guns and tear gas bombs maintained some semblance of order. A steel cable stretched from lamp post to lamp post the entire length of the block kept the struggling mass of humanity on the sidewalk and out of the path of the traffic. It seemed as if all Harlem were there. As the two friends reached the outskirts of the mob, an ambulance from the Harlem Hospital drove up and carried away two women who had been trampled upon. (BNM 25-26)

Nearly the entire African American population crosses the color line until the line between African Americans and Caucasians is obliterated.

Significantly, *Black No More* is only marginally concerned with the psychological implications which the act of passing has on an individual. Rarely, and without extended elaboration, does the narrator allow Max’s reveries that “he felt at home here among these black folk. Their jests, scraps of conversation and lusty laughter all seemed like heavenly music. Momentarily he felt a disposition to stay among them, to share again their troubles which they seemed always to bear with a lightness that was yet not indifference” (BNM 27). This lack of psychological depth in dealing with racial identity, however, need not be mistaken for an authorial flaw. More accurately, it must be considered in the context of a genre-specific simplification and the author’s general treatment of the race construct. Throughout his life, Schuyler tirelessly built on his notoriety as an avid supporter of the idea that race was anything but an artificial, man-made construct. His autobiography, *Black and Conservative*, concludes with the candid assertion that “at best, race is a superstition. There will be no color war here if we will and work not to have one, although some kind of color line there may always be, as there is elsewhere in the world.”¹⁵¹

¹⁵⁰ Peplow 77.

¹⁵¹ George Schuyler, *Black and Conservative: The Autobiography of George S. Schuyler* (New York: Arlington House, 1966) 352.

It stands to reason that any extended elaboration on the inner turmoil of those undergoing Crookman's treatment would considerably undermine Schuyler's conviction regarding the hollowness of race as a construct. However, not only do the narrator's occasional comments on the psychological connotations of passing reflect Schuyler's own attitude, they also have another desirable effect: their scarcity hinders the reader from considering a change in race as a fully developed psychological theme, such as one might find in James Weldon Johnson's novel *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, or Charles Chesnutt's *House Behind the Cedars*. The author breaks with the African American literary tradition as part of his broad attack on capitalism. In *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, for instance, Johnson presents the story of a character who is driven by his social surroundings to pass for white in order to climb the social ladder. Although not limited to a single individual, Nella Larson's 1928 novel *Passing* shares a similar focus. To a white readership, Larson's novel demands that the ways in which its community applies pressure, both implicitly and explicitly, on people of color be questioned, while at the same time it inspires compassion for the passer. Taking a different approach, Schuyler's "rejection of race as a legitimate social concept"¹⁵² shows that he prefers to focus reader's attention on the satiric critique, rather than using a theme of change in racial identity. At this point, it is essential to differentiate between passing as a central theme and its function in *Black No More*: namely, as the substructure of a gedanken-experiment, and thus as a means to instigate a study of human nature. In this way, Schuyler's satiric approach to passing inevitably incorporates certain peculiarities.

One such fundamental characteristic of Schuyler's radical approach to passing is the fact that he directly confronts readers with the possibility that they, too, may unknowingly be passers. The entire plot is based on the anti-essentialist notion that there is basically no such thing as "pure blood," and that a historical tracing of family trees eventually leads back to a single nexus of different cultures and ethnicities. Schuyler implicitly asks readers whether they are more certain of their heritage than the characters in his novel – most of which are unable to locate their ancestry more than two generations back, and who must eventually accept

¹⁵² Watkins, *On the Real Side* 415.

their varying degrees of mixed origins. To emphasize his argument, Schuyler populates his book with characters who cross the color line in both directions, to the extent that the entire concept of a racial divide appears downright absurd. Republican campaigner Walter Williams, one of Schuyler's characters, illustrates this penetrability of the color line, as he "had passed for a Negro for years on the strength of a part-Negro grandparent and then gone back to the white race when the National Social Equality League was forced to cease operations" (*BNM* 133). Readers are confronted with a capitalist society where racial identity is reduced to a mere price tag. Accordingly, there are practically no personal interests that are considered too sacred to be bought or sold. The protagonist finds himself in a world in which characters abruptly change shapes, names, and convictions for the sole purpose of profit. Doctor Shakespeare Agamemnon Beard is just one example of a character undergoing re-creation in the confusing racial frenzy: "The Down-With-White-Prejudice-League was founded by one Karl von Beerde, whom some accused of being the same Doctor Beard who had, as a Negro, once headed the National Social Equality League" (*BNM* 178). This marginalized treatment of racial identity as having no cultural substance, clearly reflects Schuyler's personal conviction that "the Aframerican is merely a lampblack Anglo-Saxon,"¹⁵³ as he declares in his notorious essay "The Negro-Art Hokum." Schuyler's knowledge aids in a clearer understanding of the ridicule and parody of racial passing that he presents in *Black No More*.¹⁵⁴ As for the novel's plot, the inflated treatment of passing allows Schuyler to flesh out his basic satiric fantasy.

The incorporation of Dr. Crookman's Black-No-More invention, as a means to bridge the color line, is a cornerstone in depicting a discriminative society deprived of its essential core; namely visible differences in skin color, which form the basis of a strictly binary racial discourse between African Americans and Caucasians. Integration of racial passing is necessitated by the author's intention to simulate a scenario of "what would ensue if science provided all African Americans

¹⁵³ Schuyler, "The Negro-Art Hokum" 37.

¹⁵⁴ One could indeed make the case that *Black No More* implicitly lambastes the literary tradition of the "passing novel." Since these works commonly dwell on the enormous psychological implications of race, they somewhat contradict Schuyler's notion of race as having no significance beyond the skin. An attack of this literary practice through *Black No More* would thus be in keeping with Schuyler's mindset.

with access to the ultimate privilege of American society, whiteness.”¹⁵⁵ So far, one has seen how Schuyler uses passing to arrive at a model of U.S. society deprived of a racial “other.” Having removed physical differences as the ostensible and widely acknowledged foundation of racial hatred, Schuyler places himself in a position which allows him to dissect the deeper roots of racism, its implications, and its *raison d’être* in a capitalist society.

3.3 Satiric Estrangement

As the subtitle proposes, the action of *Black No More* is set in the time between 1933 and 1940. Certainly, Schuyler’s choice to place his novel’s action in the near future for his contemporary readership is intentional. By setting the novel outside his immediate time-period, the author is able to create satiric distance and veil his critical ambitions. Since readers have no reason to doubt the novel’s account at this point, one rightfully expects a narrative remote in time and therefore unrelated to the author’s immediate sociopolitical surrounding. The act of contriving a satiric veneer behind which an author can seek refuge from backlashes and counter-charges, is especially delicate; too much indirection inevitably impairs the critical thrust, while a lack of indirection opens the author up to criticism. In Schuyler’s case, parts of his critique are aimed at his immediate surroundings, and for this reason, his readers should have no trouble grasping the work, nor mistake the setting as dystopic. Yet, this has caused the novel to become subject to just that, as some critical attention has interpreted the work in terms of science fiction and dystopia.¹⁵⁶ However, considering the discourse of race and technology in early twentieth century America, one must ascertain that the novel’s concern with racial transformation was much less fictitious and remote for Schuyler and his readership than it may seem from a contemporary perspective.

To account for the element of science fiction present in the novel, Schuyler adds a short preface to anchor the events he depicts. In this note, Schuyler

¹⁵⁵ Dickson-Carr 62.

¹⁵⁶ See Benjamin S. Lawson, “Impossibility fiction – George Schuyler and the Fate of Early African-American Science Fiction,” *Impossibility Fiction: Alternativity, Extrapolation, Speculation*, eds. Derek Littlewood and Peter Stockwell (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1996).

mentions the serious scientific background of the Black-No-More procedure described in his work. The narrator explains advancements made in the field of racial transformation, and tries to reason that a change of skin-color “could be brought about by glandular control and electrical nutrition” (*BNM XX*). For today’s readers, the information about the first successful attempts of racial transformation, with the prospect of Japanese people being able to become blonde Norsemen, considerably raises the threshold for absurdity. Without the preface, one would feel inclined to consider the novel a remote dystopia and conceive of the action depicted as utterly absurd and in no way representative of social processes of its time. In this case, the critique the author intends to articulate would be completely ineffective, as satire always calls for an informed readership, capable of decoding unstable ironic implications grounded in socio-cultural settings. For those living in the United States at the dawn of the Harlem Renaissance, however, a vision of technological advancement paving the way for racial transformation hardly seemed farfetched. Even before Schuyler’s *Black No More*, fin-de-siècle newspapers and magazines sensed public receptiveness to the issue and began publishing lurid stories of human physical transformation. In her recent article “‘Bleaching the Ethiopians’ – Desegregating Race and Technology through Early X-ray Experiments,” Carolyn Thomas de la Pena explains how the media commonly ran “sensationalist stories claiming that X-rays and radium were actually turning black skin white. From New York to Georgia to California readers of local papers learned, in great detail, that men of science had ‘bleached’ even the darkest black skin.”¹⁵⁷

Before the narrative of Max Disher starts, Schuyler strategically places an important dedication as an introduction to the author’s satiric design:

This book is dedicated
to all Caucasians in the great republic
who can trace their ancestry
back ten generations
and confidently assert that there are no
Black leaves, twigs, limbs or branches on
their family trees¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁷ Carolyn Thomas de la Pena, “Bleaching the Ethiopians – Desegregating Race and Technology through Early X-ray Experiments.” *Technology and Culture* 47.1 (2006): 29.

¹⁵⁸ George Samuel Schuyler, Dedication, *Black No More* (New York: Modern

This provocative dedication fulfills several tasks crucial to the novel's function as satire. First, in devoting his work to the "proud white citizen," Schuyler delineates one of the targets of his critique. In fact, it is possible to arrive at a fairly concrete outline of Schuyler's objective by replacing the words "dedicated to" with the term "targeted at." For those carelessly approaching the novel, the irony dripping from this dedication is fragile, elusive, and unstable. One can make the case that Schuyler uses the short address as a decoy, then sits back and waits for the novel to fulfill its purpose in one of two ways: for the ardent race-lover to either sense the trap and blush in the face of the impossible task of tracing a "pure" ancestry, or, probably even more effective, for bigots to feel charmed in light of so much ardor and therefore swallow the satiric hook. However unlikely this scenario may be, one should not set limits on the simplemindedness of those who Schuyler addresses. While the opening words might cause a smile at first glance, their significance comes crashing down on readers as the novel gains satiric momentum. For racial essentialists who feel addressed by Schuyler's dedication, the effect of being farther drawn into the novel are downright devastating; for it is not until the concluding pages that the narrator reveals his wrath.

Yet, although convicted racists are initially presented as the satirist's target, it is a vast oversimplification to assume *Black No More* is solely a satiric critique of racism. As Mel Watkins asserts, the novel clearly offers Schuyler an occasion to attack "racial bigotry, false racial pride, and a raft of scarcely veiled racial leaders."¹⁵⁹ What Watkins is referring to, however, is merely the surface layer of a novel which actually turns out to be a sweeping socialist blow against far more issues than just that of racial discrimination. Questions of where *Black No More* locates its primary and secondary targets, and *how* the novel approaches these objectives, are addressed in the subsequent discussion.

Library, 1999).

¹⁵⁹ Watkins, *On the Real Side* 415.

3.4 The Color of Money

“At last the sanitarium was ready for business. Huge advertisements appeared in the local Negro weeklies. Black Harlem was on its toes. Curious throngs of Negroes and whites stood in front of the austere six-story building gazing up at its windows” (*BNM* 14). With the depiction of the immediate success of Crookman’s Black-No-More treatment, Schuyler describes the power of prevailing social constraints which were driving African Americans to give up their racial identity in order to escape oppression and injustice: “A lifetime of being Negroes in the United States had convinced them that there was great advantage in being white” (*BNM* 37).¹⁶⁰ Although race is an ever-present factor in the world of *Black No More*, the learned Dr. Crookman objects that there is “very little information on the subject” of race relations in the United States (*BNM* 11). For readers, this casual remark is important because it instantly raises the question of why there is no data concerning the idea of race. In fact, Crookman’s comment is the first indication of where Schuyler’s reasoning is heading: namely, arguing that there are strong interest groups benefiting from, or even fully dependant on, the racial divide in the United States. The significance of this divide is stressed right from the onset of the novel, as the protagonist and his companion Bunny are out and about in the Harlem club scene, on the lookout for preferably “yellow women” (*BNM* 4). Darryl Dickson-Carr comments on this specific passage, stating that “the disproportionate premium Max and Bunny place upon ‘yellow,’ or light-skinned black, women simultaneously recalls the problem of the interracial color-caste system, which was highly pronounced, strict, and overt in the early twentieth century, and acts as one signifier of the pervasiveness of essentialist racist constructions.”¹⁶¹ That said, Schuyler’s understanding of racism goes well beyond the negotiation of oppression in the context of a binary racial discourse, by entailing gradations of intra-racism. To exemplify this, at an early stage in the

¹⁶⁰ See Mullen 75. With regard to *Black No More*, Mullen contests that “the satire assumes that all African-Americans, if given the chance, would choose to be white, although of course whiteness in this instance cannot be separated from its synonyms: freedom, equality, opportunity, privilege.” However, one must not interpret the events in the novel outside the sphere of satire. Since satire traditionally embraces the distorted, overstated, and inflated at the expense of details and differentiation, it is not surprising that Crookman’s invention in *Black No More* pushes society toward the brink of collapse.

¹⁶¹ Dickson-Carr 63.

novel, the narrator explains the uppity attitudes of “yallah women” toward dark-skinned men and later mentions the mix of jealousy and suspicion with which octoroons¹⁶² are received among people of darker complexion (*BNM* 1, 27). In his encompassing critique, the narrator successfully depicts a similar color-caste system among the white population. Those members of the Anglo-Saxon Association of America, who can “trace their ancestry back almost two hundred years,” consider themselves “the cream of the white race” and therefore do not want to do business with the “generically” supremacist “Knights of Nordica” (*BNM* 119). Schuyler makes it very clear that he is not siding with any party in his critique. Rather, he is anxious to expose racial bigotry in its diverse manifestations. He then goes on to depict a range of “practical” functions which racism holds for various economic purposes, as he abolishes diversity of skin color.

Southern newspapers are initially horrified and allude to the “horrible potentialities” of Crookman’s discovery, asserting that: “Day by day we see the color line which we have so laboriously established being rapidly destroyed”¹⁶³ (*BNM* 31-32). Not only does this excerpt explicate the notion of race as an arbitrary construct, it is the very reason for this concern about the “loss of race” the author is anxious to expose. Schuyler is therefore attempting to shift his readers’ attention from the notion that “if there were no Negroes, there could be no Negro problem,” to realizing how numerous economic mechanisms rely upon the existence of the color line (*BNM* 35). A main profiteer in institutionalized discrimination is revealed in the description of the racist “Knights of Nordica” organization. Henry Givens, the self-proclaimed leader, is shown as an utterly dim scoundrel who “had finished the eighth grade in a one-room country school” (*BNM* 81). In order to reveal the full extent of a racist’s ignorance, Schuyler resorts to stupefaction, and strips the man of virtually all mental ability. When he first encounters Max Disher disguised as an anthropologist, the narrator describes how Givens reads “over the definition of the word twice without understanding it, and then cutting off a large

¹⁶² A racial category which was historically used to refer to people who had one-eighth African American ancestry.

¹⁶³ See de la Pena. Up to the late Harlem Renaissance, widespread fear among white people in light of technological advancement rendering possible the permeability of the race construct was much more than a remote nightmare. De la Pena outlines how media reports fuelled the fear of an impending loss of the privilege of whiteness and its positive connotations of physical and intellectual strength.

chew of tobacco from his plug, he lean[s] back in his swivel chair to rest after the unaccustomed mental exertion” (*BNM* 49). The target group of Givens’ organization is not composed of a socially diversified group of diehard racists, but of “the lower stratum of white working people: hard-faced, lantern-jawed, dull-eyed adult children, seeking like all humanity for something permanent in the external flux of life” (*BNM* 52). This passage suggests the narrator’s ambiguous position toward the working classes. While they do not escape his biting commentary unscathed, his description is not without an understanding of those who have been misled. Schuyler explicitly expresses his belief that it is especially the deprived lower-classes who suffer from a serious dearth of orientation and purpose, that are prone to fall for the doctrine of discrimination. The author suggests that racism functions as a bait to exploit and control the masses. This notion is supported by the presentation of Southern workers: “The mill hands kept so busy talking about Negro blood that no one thought of discussing wages and hours of labor” (*BNM* 99). Although there is no textual evidence for the assumption that the leaders in *Black No More* do not believe in their own dogma, confidence in racial essentialism is not the mainspring of their actions.

Henry Givens is representative of most racial leaders in the novel in that he is driven less by ideological interests than by the joyous “prospect of a full treasury to dip into again” (*BNM* 47). Similar findings are reported from the other side of the color line. Dr. Beard publishes articles on the dilemma of racism for large sums of money. Dr. Joseph Bonds, head of the Negro Data League, garners “many fat checks. For his people, he [says], he want[s] work, not charity; but for himself he [is] always glad to get the charity with as little work as possible.¹⁶⁴ For many years he [has] succeeded in doing so without any ascertainable benefit accruing to the Negro group” (*BNM* 71). In a strikingly similar fashion, Mr. Santop Licorice has been “very profitably advocating the emigration of all the American Negroes to Africa. He had not, of course, gone there himself and had not the slightest intention of going so far from the fleshpots, but he told the other Negroes to go” (*BNM* 74). As these examples illustrate, there is often a conflict between the personal beliefs

¹⁶⁴ *Black No More* as a roman à clef and the deeper significance of the figures in the novel will be addressed at a later stage.

and experiences of these characters, and the moral sensibility they publicly profess.

Racial concern thus functions as a product that is sold to the ignorant masses, both readily and profitably. This growing insight is an essential part of the novel, as it continually motivates the protagonist's actions. As Michael Peplow notes, Max "feels no pity, especially when he realizes that each white character he encounters is stupid and greedy for money and/or power."¹⁶⁵ Contrary to Peplow's comment and in accordance with Schuyler's misanthropic vision, as well as his rejection of race as a determining factor, virtually all characters who participate in the "business venture" of the color line are striving for wealth and authority, regardless of their skin color. Dickson-Carr succinctly summarizes this encompassing perspective by asserting that "each end of the political spectrum uses African Americans for its own enrichment and would not in fact exist without the continued presence and suffering of black people."¹⁶⁶ In the world of *Black No More*, an appetite for wealth and a pursuit of political power emerge as the main motifs in human misbehavior, and also as the primary targets of Schuyler's satire. Even Max's marriage to Helen Givens is negotiated chiefly on financial grounds, as she softens toward him only "when he [is] able to boast a million-dollar bank account" (*BNM* 79). Therefore, it comes as no surprise that organizations and individuals with seemingly conflicting and contradictory interests join forces to bring Crookman's enterprise to a standstill and re-gain control.¹⁶⁷ In a desperate attempt to stop Crookman and save his lucrative Back-to-Africa Society, Santop Licorice decides to turn to racist leader Henry Givens. When Licorice's assistant asks, "but he's a nigger-hater, isn't he," Licorice successfully soothes her concern with financial reasons (*BNM* 77). On both sides of the racial dichotomy, open concern for racial culture serves as a veil for actions which are normally "not entirely unprofitable" (*BNM* 64). Even in places where genuine resentment resides,

¹⁶⁵ Peplow 69.

¹⁶⁶ Dickson-Carr 65.

¹⁶⁷ In an interview with Ishmael Reed, Schuyler is explicitly asked about his critique of civil rights organizations in *Black No More*. He supports the idea that "civil rights groups really thrive on the misery" and explains that "they profit on the grief, although since they make a profession of it, they cannot acknowledge that there are others who do not, who do not give a damn. Some of the very masses that they're trying to win over don't care. They're not as frightened as many of the so-called leaders and spokesman." Ishmael Reed, "George S. Schuyler, Writer," *Shrovetide in Old New Orleans* (New York: Doubleday, 1978) 198.

there are no personal objections so rigidly held that they cannot be easily re-shaped by bribery. Hence, Crookman's assistant Hank Johnson confidently observes of the opposing racists: "Even these crackers tone down when Ah talks bucks" (*BNM* 61). Accordingly, influential organizations on both sides of the color line have equally strong interests "that Dr. Crookman and his associates be arrested and their activities stopped at once for the good of both races" (*BNM* 72). In the context of Schuyler's critique, "the good of both races" implies the financial wellbeing of a negligibly small group of racial activists who consequently happen to be of high social rank (*BNM* 72). Yet, the author goes further in his condemnation, stressing that certain people essentially depend upon the existence of racial division as a self-contained economic tribe. Making extensive use of physiologization and stupefication, Schuyler claims that there is a group of people "too incompetent to make a living except by preaching and writing about the race problem" (*BNM* 87). In the end, ideologically opposed groups join forces in their fight to maintain the color line, until it becomes blatantly obvious that the author is eager to expose racism as a side effect of human greed. This argument had already been hinted at by Schuyler in "The Negro Art-Hokum." In the article, Schuyler openly refuses to acknowledge the emergence of distinct African American art in the United States. Instead, he refers to the economic significance of the racial divide, stating that one benefit of the myth of racial essentialism is that it produces "patriots who flood the treasury of the Ku Klux Klan."¹⁶⁸

In *Black No More*, however, the author not only exposes racism as a profitable business venture, but also sheds light on its economic implications from the perspective of the working class. Without access to cheap labor as a result of social inequality:

Politicians and business men shuddered at the thought of such a tragedy and saw horrible visions of old-age pensions, eight-hour laws, unemployment insurance, workingmen's compensation, minimum-wage legislation, abolition of child labor, dissemination of birth-control information, monthly vacations for female workers, two-month vacations for prospective mothers, both with pay, and the probable killing of individual initiative and incentive by taking the ownership of national capital out of the hands of two million people and putting it into the hands of one hundred and twenty million. (*BNM* 104)

¹⁶⁸ Schuyler, "The Negro-Art Hokum" 39.

One should also note a distinct Marxist attitude, which resonates in a plea for the redistribution of capital. Moreover, this passage gives a detailed account of basic rights and services, granted or denied to citizens of the United States, based on their social class. As a result, Southern industry begins to dwindle as Crookman turns the entire population into Caucasians, subsequently removing the African American scapegoat whom the working masses blame for their plight. In addition, the economy is burdened with having to equal the standards of living:

Hundreds of wooden railroad coaches, long since condemned as death traps in all other parts of the country, had to be scrapped by the railroads when there were no longer any Negroes to jim crow. Thousands of railroad waiting rooms remained unused because, having been set aside for the use of Negroes, they were generally too dingy and unattractive for white folk or were no longer necessary. (*BNM* 102)

The necessary renovation of real estate and public institutions, the adjustment of wages, and the subsequent explosion of taxes end up throwing the country into turmoil. Underpaid workers find themselves in the lowest stratum of society, as the black minority steadily diminishes. In order to keep the masses in check, fear of, and hatred for, a minority is fed to the public in order to create a common social scapegoat for the working class to blame for its dilemma; this is so the masses do not accuse those in charge who, in their greedy ways, exploit and manipulate the common people. Having formerly been subjugated by the system, Max Disher is quick to implicate racism and class struggle as he recalls the words of a Negro street speaker who proclaimed “that unorganized labor meant cheap labor; that the guarantee of cheap labor was an effective means of luring new industries into the South; that so long as the ignorant white masses could be kept thinking of the menace of the Negro to Caucasian race purity and political control, they would give little thought to labor organization” (*BNM* 44). According to Schuyler, racism functions as both a red herring and a narcotic, spread through propaganda, which, as Jacques Ellul points out, effectively agitates social anxieties, fanning racial hatred as it “points out enemies that must be slain, transforming crime into a praiseworthy act.”¹⁶⁹ These anxieties are stimulated for a special purpose: to keep the lower classes divided and distracted from the real cause of their plight.

¹⁶⁹ Jacques Ellul, *Propaganda: The Formation of Men's Attitudes* (New York: Vintage, 1973) 152.

It is increasingly apparent that Schuyler is eager to shed light on a class issue which is concealed as, and hidden under, racial concern. For all its use of science fiction, as well as its leaning toward utopia/dystopia in order to establish satiric detachment, Schuyler's work fully resonates with the time in which it was written. In fact, *Black No More* emphasizes a social divergence which was especially striking during the 1920s. James Warren Prothro refers to this period of American history as a time when "the nature of man [was] so squarely built upon the doctrine of the elite that the superior few and the inferior many scarcely appear[ed] to belong to the same species. Disparities in natural endowments reach[ed] such an extreme that the masses and the elite [were] characterized more by their dissimilarities than by their common humanity."¹⁷⁰ In *Black No More*, racism serves as a vehicle to distract from this socially unjust condition, in order to allow the status quo to reign. Thus, as Schuyler points out, the color line is not upheld by deep-seated racist beliefs inherent in society, but externally fortified by the enormous economic significance first established with the emergence of slavery. In his analysis of the novel, Dickson-Carr comments on this prevailing link between race and economy in the United States:

The United States is completely unable to break free of its long history of policies, laws, and social rituals upholding white supremacy for the simple reason that racial equality is inherently unprofitable. The rise in financial and social stature of Max and Crookman demonstrates, to an absurd degree, precisely how much can be gained from racial essentialism and, furthermore, how many Americans are eager to exploit those same essentialisms.¹⁷¹

However, Schuyler's satire not only reveals racism as a capitalist tool, it also raises awareness of how it is distributed to the common people. The author especially hints at the role of the media as a means to regulate public opinion. Radio stations spread the racist blather of Henry Givens, newspapers report falsehoods about the two presidential candidates, and the working class is effortlessly manipulated by "14-point, one-syllable word editorials" (*BNM* 79). As far as racism as a social phenomenon is concerned, readers face a bittersweet insight: influencing public opinion is a rather effortless task, and many

¹⁷⁰ James Warren Prothro, *The Dollar Decade: Business Ideas in the 1920's* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1954) 210.

¹⁷¹ Dickson-Carr 69.

manifestations of racist prejudice are parroted phrases, rather than deep-seated convictions. As Max “quickly [sees] that these people would believe anything that was shouted at them loudly and convincingly enough,” readers learn that public opinion can be influenced just as easily in an opposing direction, by the same means (*BNM* 54). In the society surrounding *Black No More*, racism thrives most maleficently in those characters who are governed by stupidity and incompetence. Therefore, no direct judgment is passed onto the working classes: they are presented as simply uneducated and morally disoriented.

On a surface level, *Black No More* can be considered explicitly generative in its dealings with racist stereotypes. Schuyler suggests that the widespread affliction of racist thinking could be hoisted by its own petard: propaganda. However, the root of the dilemma the author addresses, specifically the various manifestations of capitalist greed, is grounded in human nature. Hugh M. Gloster therefore identifies a key implication of Schuyler’s novel as follows: “human beings, regardless of pigmentation, are fundamentally the same under the skin.”¹⁷² In his critical comment on the relationship between African American literature and concerns of class, Amiri Baraka takes a similar stance, summarizing Schuyler’s strand of critique when he elaborates on the implications of racism and capitalist greed:

The material base of racism, which allows it to exist as other than a ‘bad idea,’ is monopoly capitalism. Its material base before the Civil War was the slave system and developing capitalism. The destruction of monopoly capitalism will allow the conditions to exist in which we can begin to destroy racism and chauvinism, but no such conditions can ever exist under capitalism.¹⁷³

While Schuyler offers no solution to the problem, his open portrayal of the dilemma, via satiric humor, is likely to instill a distinct desire in readers: the desire to distance themselves from the grotesque, the utterly foolish, and the ridiculed. In this respect, the novel is implicitly generative and does not contain quite as bleak of a vision as Howard Faulkner suggests. For Faulkner, “Schuyler’s satire is clearly not one which aims at improvement; the human race is hardly worth the effort. Rather he will be content if [...] readers lose their illusions, accept the impossibility

¹⁷² Hugh M. Gloster, *Negro Voices in American Fiction* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1976) 190.

¹⁷³ Amiri Baraka, “Afro-American Literature & Class Struggle,” *Black American Literature Forum* 14.1 (1980) 10.

of change, and learn to profit from other's weaknesses."¹⁷⁴ In fact, clearer solutions would ultimately undermine Schuyler's socialist perspective, precisely because he discards the role of intellectual instruction in favor of posing probing questions. As Ferguson explains, Schuyler "implicitly rejected the idea of the black intellectual as someone who should stand above the black masses as a race expert," and rather "conceived of the black intellectual as an agent provocateur."¹⁷⁵ Having exposed Schuyler's positioning of racism as a cog in the capitalist machine, it is now possible to discern adjacent instruments similar in function. In their distinct psychological and social roles, as means to regulate and influence the middle and lower classes, archetypal American social myths, such as the American Dream, the concept of the "self-made man," and the notion of the United States as a melting pot of cultures, are portrayed as corresponding components in a greater economic mechanism.

3.5 Demystifying the "American Dream"

From the wide range of notions and interpretations commonly embodied in the concept of the American Dream, it is especially the aspect of social mobility, and the model of the self-made man which is most relevant in a discussion of Schuyler's novel.¹⁷⁶ Schuyler's specific concern lies with the myth of unparalleled social mobility. Jim Cullen, for one, asserts that, "like the American Dream broadly construed, this one of the good life exists in a series of variations. The most common form was cast in terms of commercial success."¹⁷⁷ At least for the white population, this phenomenon was more than a remote myth, as "the credo seemed

¹⁷⁴ Howard J. Faulkner, "A Vanishing Race," *CLA Journal* 37.3 (1994): 285. It stands to question if satire ever grows out of desolation and hopelessness or if there must be the least bit of optimism left in an artist to engage in satire. For if an author senses no hope to cure, why would he resort to the witty didacticism of satire; which, as we have seen, is always at least implicitly generative.

¹⁷⁵ Ferguson, *Sage* 33.

¹⁷⁶ See Esmond Wright, *The American Dream: From Reconstruction to Reagan* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1996) 403. The overall vagueness of the American Dream, especially with regard to different ethnic groups, is illustrated by Esmond Wright's introductory statement that "it was the dream of all immigrants, whatever the color of their skins, and had been from their beginnings. For blacks, it had and has a legion of meanings, as the careers of some of its major exponents witness."

¹⁷⁷ Jim Cullen, *The American Dream: A Short History of an Idea That Shaped a Nation* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2003) 59-60.

justified by the facts.”¹⁷⁸ This was especially true in the 1920s, the period from which Schuyler’s novel emerged, and which produced countless specimens of the prototypical American social climber – at least on one side of the racial dichotomy.

Charles R. Hearn comments on this specific period in American history:

America was viewed as a prosperous utopia where the opportunities for self-made success were virtually limitless. It was an atmosphere in which writers for popular magazines poured out success stories, business-men were national heroes, and Christ was paid the ultimate compliment when Bruce Barton called him “the founder of modern business.”¹⁷⁹

America celebrated its nouveau riche, and it was not long before the phenomenon was exploited and propagated in magazine stories. The population’s belief in social mobility was fostered by the mass marketing of the American Dream as a reference point of national identification. The “self-made man” was coined “the legendary hero in America.”¹⁸⁰ Commonly, this concept has come to define a person who has “achieved success in any work without benefit of external advantages, one who [has] risen from obscurity on the strength of personal merit.”¹⁸¹ In order to develop an understanding of how Schuyler undermines the social myths of both the American Dream and that of the self-made man, it is necessary to consider briefly the fundamentals of how American success stories are presented by the media.

Frequently, these stories adhere to a simple scheme according to which success, often chiefly negotiated in economic terms, enters the life of an assiduous and loyal citizen. Based on the “conventional rags-to-riches myth,” these narratives “pander[ed] to the dreams of the reader by showing how success can come even to the most humble.”¹⁸² Not only are social climbers often presented as persons of a modest nature, traditionally they are also honest people with sincere ambitions. As Hearn explains, “if a character gets ahead in some worthwhile occupation, his success is generally a sure sign of his virtue. Rarely is a character portrayed as both successful and morally imperfect.”¹⁸³ Proceeding from this notion of the “Dream of

¹⁷⁸ Cullen 69.

¹⁷⁹ Charles R. Hearn, *The American Dream in the Great Depression* (Westport: Greenwood, 1977) 24.

¹⁸⁰ Irvin G. Wyllie, *The Self-Made Man in America: The Myth of Rags to Riches* (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1954) 6.

¹⁸¹ Wyllie 9.

¹⁸² Hearn 29.

¹⁸³ Hearn 30.

Upward Mobility,"¹⁸⁴ as well as that of the self-made man, one can see how Schuyler takes pains to reverse the established scheme in order to juxtapose the widespread myth with what he considers to be closer to the actual truth. The following analysis of the examples of economic success and social amelioration in the novel helps to clarify this argument.

The first example is found in the development of Reverend Alex McPhule, the self-proclaimed leader of a new faith, who is representative of many careers depicted in *Black No More*. In his case, pretended religious conviction serves as a veil for his hypocritical, lecherous ways. In its obvious artificiality, McPhule's alleged career signifies heavily upon the stereotypical narrative of spiritual rebirth which many religious leaders, including modern-day televangelists, claim as crucial parts of their biographies:¹⁸⁵

An angel of God had visited him one summer evening in Meridian, he told them, when he was down sick in bed as the result of his sinning ways, and he had told him to reform and go forth into the world and preach the true faith of Christ's love. He had promised to do so, of course, and then the angel had placed the palm of his right hand on Rev. McPhule's forehead and all of the sickness and misery had departed. (*BNM* 166)

On a most basic level, the placement of exuberant Christian love within the context of a racist mayhem cannot escape ironic inversion. It is Schuyler's intention to illustrate how these hypocritical myths, more often than not, deviate from reality and how seldom the basic ingredients of "virtue" and "diligence" are actually found at the heart of these narratives. As observed in the careers of racist leaders, heads of minority organizations, and politicians throughout the novel, the tale of Reverend McPhule's religious triumph is a mere invention, and is undermined by his deeds.

In a search for other manifestations of the American Dream and the self-made man, readers stumble over the aforementioned Henry Givens, leader of the racist Knights of Nordica organization. He "had come originally from the hilly country north of Atlanta. He had helped in the organization of the Ku Klux Klan following the Great War and had worked with a zeal only equalled by his

¹⁸⁴ Cullen 70.

¹⁸⁵ For a summary of the scandals in the world of televangelism between 1987 and 1988, some of which clearly resemble the contrast between public prayer and personal practice Schuyler addresses in *Black No More*, see Tom W. Smith, "Poll Trends: Religious Beliefs and Behaviors and the Televangelist Scandals of 1987-1988," *The Public Opinion Quarterly* 56.3 (1992).

thankfulness to God for escaping from the precarious existence of an itinerant saver of souls" (*BNM* 46). Although his material and social gains are significant, in the final analysis, Givens cannot be associated with the notion of the American self-made man. In fact, it is in this character that Schuyler delivers his strongest critique of the concept. Givens is portrayed as a selfish criminal whose economic success weighs heavily on the backs of a naïve public, a society stunned by the popular myths glorifying social ascension of the humble and virtuous, and convinced of the sincerity of the social climbers. When the former Reverend proclaims that "the common people are the salt of the earth," (*BNM* 52) the double-entendre in the context of gross exploitation should not go unnoticed. Givens is well aware that "if it hadn't been for the common people [he] wouldn't have been able to get [his] house and to send [his daughter] off to school" (*BNM* 52). Exploiting others, by means of deception and deceit, he manages to usurp the position of a public leader.

Schuyler deals another direct blow to the mass marketing of this questionable legend of success in his depiction of the media coverage during the presidential election. The two candidates, President Goosie and Reverend Givens, are eager to exploit the positive connotation of the self-made man, and try to reveal themselves to the public as hard-working, righteous citizens. During their campaigns they are advertised as follows:

Long articles appeared in the Sunday newspapers extolling the simple virtues of the two great men. Both, it seemed, had come from poor but honest families; both were hailed as tried and true friends of the great, common people; both were declared to be ready to give their strength and intellect to America for the next four years. (*BNM* 130)

In his portrayal, Schuyler is concerned with the discrepancy between the commonly spread notion of the self-made man, and how that myth translates into reality. In this specific case, the irony is stable to an extent that there is very little ambiguity, only a thin veiling which hides both candidates' true natures as greedy rogues. Mass marketing of the myth is portrayed as a powerful capitalist tool, used to keep the exploited masses in line, and also to prevent the community from questioning its leaders. Max avails himself of these powerful possibilities when he uses an implicit remark on the American Dream to end a strike at a mill in South Carolina. He does this by reminding the workers that "they were citizens of the

United States” and “that America was their country as well as Rockefeller’s” (*BNM* 95). One can assume that, deceived by their faith in social mobility, average citizens dare not condemn the success of social climbers, as they hope to join their ranks in the future. Traditionally, the propagandistic effect of marketing these legends is not to be underestimated, for, as Hearn asserts, the view “that virtue, ambition, industry, and ability rather than self-interest, superior strength, and cunning are the keys to success is piously believed.”¹⁸⁶ In *Black No More*, Schuyler is anxious to remove the mythological air from personal success stories, and to highlight a different reality behind the concept, an idea in accordance with the author’s pessimistic view of man.¹⁸⁷

Initially, readers are inclined to label Max Disher a specimen of the traditional American self-made man, as he appears to take full advantage of the nation’s legendary opportunity for upward social mobility. From the exploited black underclass, Max makes his way up to a life with “plenty of money, almost unlimited power, a beautiful wife, good liquor and the pick of damsels within reach” (*BNM* 149-50). Moreover, he becomes a respected leader and is even “granted” the archetypal American act of recreating one’s identity when he starts a new life as Matthew Fisher. Max’s metamorphosis from Disher to Fisher is an obvious social success story. Being a trickster figure, however, Max’s role as a representative of the traditional self-made man is problematic. The main ambitions behind his social tour de force are grounded in pleasure and fun, rather than economic gain, which he eventually receives as a byproduct of his newfound status. The methods Max employs are trickery and deceit, instead of the hard work and virtue required of the self-made man. Furthermore, his success, however enjoyable, comes at a price. The rigorous abandonment of his identity must be considered a necessity, rather than an option for him. Significantly, Max is not only required to deny his racial background, he has to openly fight it by declaring that there is “no question in American life more important than that of preserving the integrity of the white race,” in order to arrive at the fleshpots of the white society (*BNM* 47). This implicit statement, emphasizing the significance of the color line

¹⁸⁶ Hearn 34.

¹⁸⁷ See Schuyler, *Black and Conservative*.

for the realization of the American Dream, is reinforced by the depiction of Dr. Junius Crookman and his surroundings.

In a world populated by tricksters, it appears that Crookman stands out as a guardian of sincerity and honesty. Like a fixed star, he remains invariable in his identity and ideas, while his surrounding society engages in a mystifying cycle of transformation and recreation. Notwithstanding his telling name, Crookman does not possess a double-identity, and has no interest in a change of racial sides whatsoever.¹⁸⁸ Despite the fact that he remains mostly passive throughout the novel, enacting only a few select moments of active agency, Crookman's invention gives him a particular looming presence throughout the course of events. Remaining largely aloof from the chaos, Crookman stands in the tradition of the scientist as cultural hero.¹⁸⁹ In this way, the novel should not be negotiated primarily in terms of science fiction, as the figure of Crookman as master agent "simply furnished Schuyler a convenient means of dealing with the psychological and social dynamics of the old African-American (and American) theme of the 'tragic mulatto' and 'passing,' passing now artificially induced on a massive scale."¹⁹⁰

However ironic the narrator's assertion is that Crookman himself already "belonged to the Negro aristocracy," the learned doctor can be identified with the American Dream. His enterprise to bring "chromatic democracy" to the United States initially depends on financial support to catapult him into the ranks of the richest Americans (*BNM* 44). In their radical ascension up the social ladder, however, Crookman's success story is overshadowed by that of his helpers. His

¹⁸⁸ See Thomas de la Pena. The incorporation of an African American doctor as a key agent in the novel can be read as an implicit comment on widespread racial anxieties. As Carolyn Thomas de la Pena mentions, African American folk culture betrays widespread fear among African American people of white scientists abusing people of color for violent experiments. One could make the case that a narrative of colored people flocking to a white rendition of Dr. Junius Crookman would have appeared rather absurd to Schuyler's immediate readership and thus undermined the work's satiric sting.

¹⁸⁹ See Martin Arrowsmith, "The Scientist as Hero" *American Quarterly* 15.3 (1963). One could argue that Crookman is Schuyler's key dramatic agent, well comparable to a Claire Zachanassian in Friedrich Duerrenmatt's play *The Visit*. Just like Claire falls into the rural arena to prove the manipulative and corruptive power of money, Crookman makes available the ostensibly divine command over whiteness to a racist society. Once the proposal is made, both sit back and oversee the inevitable consequences. Like Duerrenmatt in his play, Schuyler constructs a gedanken-experiment, also concerned with the control capital wields over the human species, but primarily "extrapolating hypothetical results of blacks becoming white."

¹⁹⁰ Lawson 95.

assistants make their way up the social hierarchy, despite their dark complexions (*BNM* 35). The careers of these characters are largely devoid of deception, fabrication, and there are no elements of sacrificing their identities whatsoever. Although there is bribery involved, their achievements rely on hard work and the offering of a product the market demands. Among Crookman's companions who eventually end up "richer than Rockefeller inside of a year" are Chuck Forster and Hank Johnson, both representing the traditional notion of the American Dream of social mobility, and examples of the archetypal self-made man (*BNM* 33). Chuck Foster is described as "the son of a Birmingham barber, he had enjoyed such educational advantages as that community afforded the darker brethren; had become a schoolteacher, an insurance agent and a social worker in turn" (*BNM* 33). Hank Johnson is an even stronger example of social ascension as he has risen up from the depths of a criminal and deprived past:

Hank Johnson [...] thought back over his rather colorful and hectic career. To think that today he was one of the leading Negroes of the world, one who was taking an active and important part in solving the most vexatious problem in American life, and yet only ten years before he had been working on a Carolina chain gang. Two years he had toiled on the roads under the hard eye and ready rifle of a cruel white guard; two years of being beaten, kicked and cursed, of poor food and vermin-infested habitations; two years for participating in a little crap game. (*BNM* 33)

Schuyler goes to great lengths to make his claim very explicit: there are two choices for African Americans longing for social and economic accomplishment. The first is to jettison virtue, exploit the lower classes, and live off of the fruits of racism. The second option is the way of the virtuous, as pursued by Crookman and his helpers. This latter option leads inevitably to the destruction of the color line and the destabilization of the race construct. According to the satiric exaggeration in *Black No More*, African Americans must cause change directly, and make their money from the immediate disintegration of the racial divide. In suggesting this, the author is saying that American society cannot live up to its promise of the universal "American Dream," so long as a strict racial division is upheld. At the same time, Schuyler also stresses the notion that prominent examples of the phenomenon are oftentimes no more than exceedingly glorified acts of gross deception.

Black No More can be considered thematically adjacent to the literary critique that was issued against the glorification and instrumentalization of social myths, especially during the late 1920s:

The Depression experience [...] produced a number of novels and dramas in which a direct frontal attack on the myth of success is the central theme. In these works one finds a deliberate, unequivocal, sometimes impassioned, often embittered attempt to expose the absurdity, the danger, the viciousness, and the hollowness inherent in the dream of material success.¹⁹¹

Although Hearn comments on the importance of authors such as James T. Farrell, John Steinbeck, or Nathanael West in the context of critical realism, Schuyler's condemnation of feeding the traditional myth of success is also a striking aspect of *Black No More*. While it is debatable to what extent satire, even in its harshest and most palpable form, can be considered a means of *direct* attack, the damage which the author inflicts to those targets, by employing subtle techniques of condemnation, is no less devastating than a straight-on confrontation would be.

In his contained critique, Schuyler not only undermines the idea of the steady improvement of the individual, the attainability of success, and the dream of liberty and equality, but also the notion "that immigrants of different nationalities, different ethnic stock and different religious affiliations can be fused into a new nation, that is, the conviction expressed in such different historical mutations as the idea of the Melting Pot or the idea of Multi-Ethnicity."¹⁹² Schuyler considerably corrupts the image of the United States of America as a melting pot for a culturally diverse group of people, by showing how much the nation's economy depends on ethnicity, and thus social heterogeneity. Observed from this angle, assimilation runs counter to the interests of the ruling class. According to the American society portrayed by Schuyler, the country does profit from its ethnically diversified population, but by encouraging strict racial division rather than working toward social unity. In fact, the novel suggests an answer to the question of what would happen if there were a real process of homogenization and "melting" of cultures; it would mark the death of a fruitful branch of economic activity. The author seems

¹⁹¹ Hearn 165.

¹⁹² Peter Freese, *The American Dream and the American Nightmare* (Paderborn: Universitaet-Gesamthochschule Paderborn, 1987) 20.

to side with Carl Degler's proposal of the "Salad Bowl," as it argues in favor of prevailing cultural heterogeneity:

Contrary to the conception implied by the figure of the melting-pot, American civilization has not been homogenous and uniform; even today it is diverse and pluralistic. The evidence is all around us: in the varieties of languages, of foods and restaurants, of religions and festivals, of newspapers and books, of costumes and dances, of literatures and theaters. Though some immigrant habits and mores are undoubtedly lost in America, others are not; and they remain, not fusing into a new cultural synthesis but persisting as living remnants of many cultures, spicing and enlivening the broader stream of American life.¹⁹³

While Schuyler would doubtlessly support Degler's notion of the salad-bowl, he would certainly deny the existence of cultural diversity in the American art scene and stress the overarching importance of social heterogeneity to various economic aspirations.¹⁹⁴ Departing from these considerations on the treatment of racism and social myths in *Black No More*, it is questionable if the novel really contains the outspoken "plea for assimilation, for mediocrity, for reduplication" and "for faith in the (white) American dream,"¹⁹⁵ Charles R. Larson claims in the foreword to the 1970 edition.

3.6 Between Marxism and Misanthropy

It is possible to identify Schuyler's satire as a socioeconomic critique with distinct socialist leanings. Due to the fact that Schuyler's main objective lies within the universal weaknesses and failings of man, which the author tackles with degenerative satire, his account stands in contrast to his socialist optimism and is distinctly misanthropic in nature. Neither social strata, nor ethnic or racial membership offer shelter from the author's caustic critique of humanity. Yet, while the working masses by no means walk away unscathed in Schuyler's misanthropic attack on the human capacity for greed and prejudice, the author, in this case, does offer the potential for sympathy. The audience at racist rallies include "young men,

¹⁹³ Carl N. Degler, *Out of Our Past: The Forces that Shaped Modern America* (New York: Harper & Row, 1984) 322.

¹⁹⁴ For a detailed account of Schuyler's rigorous rejection of the emergence of any form of art in the United States other than "American," see Schuyler, "The Negro-Art Hokum."

¹⁹⁵ Charles R. Larson, "Introduction to *Black No More*," *Black No More*, by George Samuel Schuyler (New York: Macmillan, 1970) 9.

aged before their time by child labor and a violent environment” and “the middle-aged folk with their shiny, shabby garb and beaten countenances” (*BNM* 53). Workers are depicted as “a sorry lot,” impoverished and exploited, driven by the instilled misbelief in the eventual social ascension of hard-working and virtuous citizens (*BNM* 94). While not entirely innocent in the capitalist and racist workings of society, the working class appears to suffer disproportionately and beyond what its members deserve. An intimate connection between racism and social myths, as a means of capitalist exploitation, becomes increasingly evident in the following passage:

The great mass of white workers, however, was afraid to organize and fight for more pay because of a deepset fear that the Negroes would take their jobs. They had heard of black labor taking the work of white labor under the guns of white militia, and they were afraid to risk it. They had first read of the activities of Black-No-More, Incorporated, with a secret feeling akin to relief but after the orators of the Knights of Nordica and the editorials of *The Warning* began to portray the menace confronting them, they forgot about their economic ills and began to yell for the blood of Dr. Crookman and his associates. (*BNM* 81)

According to these depictions, racism is applied to the lower classes as a decoy for the creation of a common concept of the enemy and to prevent the unification of the lower social stratum on both sides of the color line. The capitalist entrepreneur only has to keep in mind that “nothing should be dearer to [the working masses] than the maintenance of white supremacy” and to blind their eyes with the unattainable goal of social ascension (*BNM* 95).

In his conviction that racism is used to sustain economic revenue, Schuyler deviates significantly from established socialist theories and refutes the argumentation brought forth by conservative neoclassical economists.¹⁹⁶ In keeping with Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels in *The Communist Manifesto*, this school holds that “competition among employers in the labor market eliminates racial differences in wages and drives employers who refuse to hire blacks out of business. Capitalism is thus seen as the best cure for racial discrimination”¹⁹⁷ as

¹⁹⁶ see Milton Friedman, *Capitalism and Freedom* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1962). Reich refers to the studies of Friedman to illustrate the point brought forth by conservative neoclassical economists, namely that racial inequality is unlikely to persist in a capitalist economy.

¹⁹⁷ Michael Reich, *Racial Inequality: A Political-Economic Analysis* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1981) 78.

Michael Reich summarizes.¹⁹⁸ Schuyler seems to disprove such a tendency, suggesting interdependency between racism and capitalism, thus anticipating the economic “divide-and-conquer” theory as formulated by Reich. In his close analysis of racial inequality in the economic system, Reich implicitly illustrates Schuyler’s avant-garde stance when he reasons how capitalists benefit from worker stratification. He goes to great lengths to argue that “a class conflict view of the economy, in which racial inequality works to divide and weaken workers and reduce their strength relative to capitalists, does accord not only with a logically coherent theory, but with historical and econometric evidence as well.”¹⁹⁹ There is also considerable agreement between Reich and Schuyler regarding the means employed by capitalists to maintain heterogeneity among those in the working class. Just like Schuyler in *Black No More*, Reich refers to the cultural myth of the American Dream as similar in function to racial prejudice and discrimination. Reich asserts that the real-world examples of Horatio Algiers “are exceedingly few in number in relation to the size of both the working class and small capitalists, but they may play a significant role in replenishing the ranks of the capitalist class.”²⁰⁰ More importantly, however, Reich stresses that these few paradigms are sufficient to nourish the myth, and crucial to the economy, as “they generate powerful aspirations for upward mobility among the remainder of the population and sustain the hope among many workers that hard work and initiative will result in such economic success.”²⁰¹ Like Schuyler in *Black No More*, Reich puts racism into perspective and positions it as a cog in the machinery of a capitalist economy. Racism is displaced as the primary target when “capitalism” becomes visible in the crosshairs of Schuyler’s satiric critique. This notion is supported by Schuyler’s treatment of the ruling classes, in particular those in academia.

¹⁹⁸ Although the *Communist Manifesto* does not explicitly address racial discrimination, the following passage on the merging of gender roles very much suggests such an encompassing social homogenization under the pressure of capitalism: “The less the skill and exertion of strength implied in manual labour, in other words, the more modern industry becomes developed, the more is the labour of men superseded by that of women. Differences of age and sex have no longer any distinctive social validity for the working class. All are instruments of labour, more or less expensive to use, according to their age and sex. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* (London: Penguin, 2004) 13.

¹⁹⁹ Reich 164.

²⁰⁰ Reich 190.

²⁰¹ Reich 190.

In its comprehensive account of social ills, *Black No More* discharges substantial critique of the academic arena and the characters who represent intellectuals. Schuyler seems to suggest that scholars play a key-role in the racist workings of society, and is determined to expose academics as quixotic charlatans. An early and comparatively mild example of this can be found in the ironic depiction of Crookman. In this passage, for instance, he is said to be entirely unaware of the real nature of man as “he had come very little in contact with the crudity, coarseness and cruelty of life (*BNM* 35).” This neglect of human nature, coupled with the subsequent misinterpretation of the race problem, explains why Crookman is resolved to eradicate the problem of racism through the use of his transcoloration-enterprise. While Crookman may be naïve in his vision, other intellectuals in the novel are accused of a much harsher delinquency in more stable terms. A readily understood critique is given in the portrait of Dr. Bonds. In his greedy ways, Dr. Bonds is busy

collecting bales of data to prove satisfactorily to all that more money was needed to collect more data. Most of the data were highly informative, revealing the amazing fact that poor people went to jail oftener than rich ones; that most of the people were not getting enough money for their work; that strangely enough there was some connection between poverty, disease and crime. (*BNM* 71)

The implied critique that academics earn their elevated social positions with hollow studies brushed up with elaborate rhetoric, continues throughout the novel whenever a character with a doctoral degree enters the stage. Among these is the statistician Dr. Samuel Buggerie. Buggerie is introduced as “the author of several books” who contributes frequently to “the heavier periodicals” (*BNM* 121). Among his works, the narrator cites *The Fluctuation of the Sizes of Left Feet among the Assyrians during the Ninth Century before Christ* and *The Incidence of Psittacosis among the Hiphopa Indians of the Amazon Valley and Its Relation to Life Insurance Rates in the United States*. With his absurdly irrelevant studies, Buggerie is exposed as an entirely ineffectual academic. The narrator’s caustic glare, however, aims at intellectuals at large who share the same greed as the average citizen, praise commonplace findings and are therefore associated with “those who [loaf] for a living” (*BNM* 122).

Apart from showing academics as owing their wealth and titles to pointless research, Schuyler also assigns them a role in maintaining the racist order. When

people finally learn that those who undergo Crookman's treatment turn out to be exceptionally pale, scientists become eager to re-establish a racist system. For example, Dr. Cutten Prodd enters the scene and is introduced as someone who made himself a name with "a book proving that all enduring gifts to society came from those races whose skin color was not exceedingly pale, pointing out that the Norwegians and other Nordic peoples had been in savagery when Egypt and Crete were at the height of their development" (*BNM* 178). In an even more direct fashion, anthropologist Professor Handen Moutthe²⁰² concludes his research among the palest citizens with the conviction that "they were mentally inferior and that their children should be segregated from the others in school" (*BNM* 178). In this manner, academics are portrayed as eagerly working to restore institutionalized racism.

Also, in keeping with the mindset that identifies racism as a capitalist tool for the ruling classes, the narrator repeatedly exposes religion along the lines of Marxist thought, as a capitalist device. Delos McKown comments on the function of religion in Marxist ideology and outlines it as "a powerful device whereby the ruling class manipulates the working class. While the gods are at first merely the creation of alienated consciousness, once established, they compound fear and confusion, lend their sanctity to exploitive interests and become profoundly conservative forces."²⁰³ Accordingly, in Schuyler's novel, a local preacher addresses a disgruntled crowd of workers in order to calm the masses down. His speech summarizes what Schuyler appears to understand as the "real Christian and American way of settling the difficulties" between workers and their bosses (*BNM* 98). The clergyman assures the assembly that the "employers are interested, just as all true Americans are interested, in the welfare of their fellow citizens, their fellow townsmen. [...] They are always planning ways to make conditions better for [the working people]" (*BNM* 99). An even stronger example of the persuasive power of religious rhetoric is cited when Henry Givens uses spiritual oratory to make a crowd amenable to his exploitive ideas at a racist meeting:

²⁰² In keeping with most figures in *Black No More*, Schuyler uses a telling name, the amount of which defies explicit mention of every single one.

²⁰³ Delos B. McKown, *The Classical Marxist Critiques of Religion: Marx, Engels, Lenin, Kautsky* (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1975) 18.

Yuh can't slow down on Jesus now. He won't be satisfied with jus' one ole measly song. Yuh gotta let 'im know that yuh love 'im; that y'er happy an' contented; that yuh ain't got no troubles an' ain't gonna have any. Come on, now. Le's sing that ole favorite what yo'all like so well: "Pack Up Your Troubles in Your Old Kit Bag and Smile, Smile, Smile." (*BNM* 54)

As illustrated by these examples, its sedative and controlling effect qualifies religion as another pillar supporting social and racial oppression. Moreover, in the form of Reverend McPhule and ex-evangelist Henry Givens, Schuyler conspicuously places two exaggerated examples of religious hypocrisy on display. In fact, the depiction of the entire Givens family emphasizes the obvious paradox inherent in a family embracing the rhetoric of Christian love, while simultaneously living off the precious crops of racial hatred. One example is Mrs. Givens, who is afraid of young people taking their eyes off God when, in fact, she "had a reputation among her friends of not always stating the exact truth" (*BNM* 51). The novel is entirely void of any instance invoking religious sincerity or truthfulness. The fact that Schuyler presents a socialist critique of society, in which racism is depicted as an incidental outgrowth of capitalism, is strongly supported by the author's biography.

In contemporary literary discourse, Schuyler is mainly remembered for his later years when he drifted to the far political right and even joined the arch-conservative John Birch Society. *Black No More*, however, was published in 1931 and there is sufficient evidence that the author fleshed out the basic outline of the story long before the novel was published. As Stacy Morgan claims, "Schuyler sketched out the basic plot of *Black No More* as early as 1925 in a 'Shafts and Darts' *Messenger* column."²⁰⁴ By the time his novel was published, the author was still committed to the socialist cause. James O. Young notes that "Schuyler entered the decade as a self-proclaimed radical and ardent opponent of all race nationalism and separatism. He had long been an active critic of the capitalistic system."²⁰⁵ It was not until late 1932 or early 1933 that he abandoned socialism and "declared all-out war on the Communist 'phrasemongers.'"²⁰⁶ In light of these facts, the disclosure of an underlying socialist tendency in *Black No More* fits the picture

²⁰⁴ Stacy Morgan, "The Strange and Wonderful Workings of Science: Race Science and Essentialism in George Schuyler's *Black No More*," *CLA Journal* (March 1999): 350.

²⁰⁵ James O. Young, *Black Writers of the Thirties* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1973) 86.

²⁰⁶ Young 87.

most scholars paint of the author and is further supported by the novel's anti-essentialist standpoint.²⁰⁷ This stance is remarkable as Schuyler was unquestionably ahead of his time, not only as the author of the first African American novel of satire, but also from an anthropological perspective.

Starting in the novel's opening dedication, the author makes a case against racial essentialism, as well as against the notion that it is possible to discern clear-cut race boundaries. In *Black No More*, this thought is articulated by the studies of Dr. Buggerie, which reveal indivisible racial intermixture. Considering satiric exaggeration, even the arch-racist Henry Givens turns out to be "only four generations removed from a mulatto ancestor" (*BNM* 143).²⁰⁸ In his thinking, as it is expressed in the novel, Schuyler implicitly anticipates the anti-essentialist theories of scholars such as anthropologist Franz Boas. Key aspects of this American avant-garde's major findings often resonate in Schuyler's work. At the forefront of the criticism which countered racial essentialism through science, Boas was eager to disprove biological causes to cultural diversity. In light of the striking parallels between Schuyler's novel and Boas' arguments, one wonders whether Schuyler had access to these studies, the larger part of which were printed after *Black No More* was published: "It is easy to show that racism has no scientific standing. It is based fundamentally on two misconceptions: the one, the confusion of heredity in a family and heredity in a population; the other, the

²⁰⁷ See Cornel West, "Marxist Theory and the Specificity of Afro-American Oppression," *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Carry Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1988) 19. Since there are diverse concepts of racism in the discourse of Marxism, it is useful to take a closer look at Marxism in order to locate Schuyler's perspective as it is expressed in the novel. Cornel West identifies four major Marxist conceptions of African American oppression. In *Black No More* and in keeping with his outspoken anti-essentialist beliefs, Schuyler represents the second grouping which "acknowledges the specificity of Afro-American oppression beyond general working-class exploitation, yet it defines this specificity in economic terms." West's scheme adequately captures and explains Schuyler's economy-centered point of view as it is expressed in the novel.

²⁰⁸ See Mullen 72. By revealing the "black" roots of "white" families in the novel, Schuyler exposes individual acts of passing as a crucial process in the social production of whiteness. As Mullen asserts, "the usual mechanism of passing, which I take as a model for the cultural production of whiteness, requires an active denial of black identity only by the individual who passes from black to white, while the chosen white identity is strengthened in each successive generation by the presumption that white identities are racially pure. Passing on an individual level models the cultural production of whiteness as a means of nation building and as a key to national identity. Just as the white-skinned African-American becomes white through a process of silencing and suppression, by denying, 'forgetting,' ignoring, or erasing evidence of African ancestry, so does the 'pure white' family constitute itself by denying kinship with its nonwhite members, as the racially diverse nation claims a white European identity by marginalizing its non-European heritages."

unproved assumption that the differences in culture which we observe among peoples of different type are primarily due to biological causes.”²⁰⁹ In his work, Boas goes on to comment on the significance of interbreeding, coming to the conclusion that: “the claim that any type represents a pure race, essentially different from all others, with all members having the same characteristics, is quite untenable.”²¹⁰ This school of thought constitutes the basis for Schuyler’s entire novel. Schuyler’s constructivist position is openly expressed in Crookman’s theories about language:

In the South you can’t tell over the phone whether you are talking to a white man or a Negro. The same is true in New York when a Northern Negro speaks into the receiver. I have noticed the same thing in the hills of West Virginia and Tennessee. The educated Haitian speaks the purest French and the Jamaican Negro sounds exactly like an Englishman. There are no racial or color dialects; only sectional dialects. (*BNM* 14)

Functioning as Schuyler’s *raisonneur* in this passage, Crookman gives the reader a valid defense of social constructivism and environmentalism with language serving as a metonym for race. Some scholars see Schuyler’s anti-essentialist argument undermined by assumed contradictions in the novel. The fact that Max feels that “Negroes [...] were much gayer, enjoyed themselves more deeply and yet they were more restrained, actually more refined,” and that he finds himself overwhelmed by the desire for the “happy-go-lucky, jovial good-fellowship of the Negroes” deserves special attention (*BNM* 43). Referring to these passages, Stacy Morgan comments that “while the events of Schuyler’s novel generally bear out this anti-essentialist stance toward race and identity, certain moments in the text suggest a profound ambivalence on the part of the formerly black characters who have undergone Crookman’s treatment.”²¹¹ While Morgan does not see a direct contradiction on Schuyler’s part, it is important to consider the entire novel in a satirical context. As in the case with Max’s and Bunny’s sexism and their desire for light-skinned girls, readers should be cautious when interpreting given passages outside of the satiric construct. The author’s primary intent is to confront his readers with contemporary stereotypes and with a racist mindset they might identify with. Furthermore, the passages cited above reflect constructive cultural

²⁰⁹ Franz Boas, *Race and Democratic Society* (New York: Augustin, 1945) 30.

²¹⁰ Boas 33.

²¹¹ Morgan 340.

conventions rather than essentialist thinking. These are prime examples illustrating the daunting task readers of satire face. For they must constantly keep track of the techniques and tropes the author employs to dissect his subjects, and continually make decisions about what is to be taken literally and what requires decoding. In *Black No More*, there are diverse mechanisms at work regulating the novel's effect on readers. Especially in the face of a wide array of objectives, the author implements different techniques to strengthen his criticism and its impact on the reader.

3.7 Subverting Propaganda

Among the more prevalent peculiarities of Schuyler's novel is its twofold subversion of propagandistic discourse. Twofold, as the author negotiates the corrosive workings of propaganda thematically, but also uses satire's qualities as an inherently subversive form to expose the manipulative nature of biased rhetoric. As to the former, early on in the novel one is able to observe the author's ironic treatment of stereotypes. Repeatedly, characters comment on the consequences of undifferentiated perception and deliberate stereotyping. For example, Crookman reminds his comrade Hank Johnson of the "considerable exaggeration about the contrast between Caucasian and Negro features," and emphasizes the role of "cartoonists and minstrel men" in the distribution of such clichés (*BNM* 15). Schuyler stresses the importance of the fear tactic of propaganda when he discloses how unrelated and untrue elements are utilized to create a greater nightmare scenario. In the grotesqueries of the novel, the Democratic camp is anxious to fight the Republicans with a campaign of denunciation, "connecting them with the Pope, Black-No-More and anything else [they] can think of" (*BNM* 113). In keeping with Schuyler's encompassing critical scope, the Republicans are no less cunning in their own use of propaganda as they "sought to dig up some scandal against Givens and Snobbcraft but were dissuaded by their Committee on Strategy which feared to set so dangerous a precedent. There were also politicians in their ranks who were guilty of adulteries, drunkenness and grafting" (*BNM* 139). Eventually, the Democratic campaign turns out to be more successful since their "propagandists and publicity men [...] had so played upon the fears and prejudices

of the public that even the bulk of Jews and Catholics were wavering and many had been won over to a support of a candidate who had denounced them but a few months before" (*BNM* 139).

The narrator continually stresses the general usefulness of persuasive yet hollow rhetoric to sell ideas. Max instantly blinds Givens with "his best salesman's croon" while the latter and Reverend McPhule seduce the masses with their ever-persuasive trait of "eloquence" (*BNM* 47). A prime example of Schuyler's subversion of hollow rhetoric, in combination with his supreme wit, is given in a passage where Dr. Beard signifies heavily upon the elaborate rhetoric of W.E.B DuBois. At a meeting, Beard declares: "I want to tell you that our destiny lies in the stars. Ethiopia's fate is in the balance. The Goddess of the Nile weeps bitter tears at the feet of the great Sphinx. The lowering clouds gather over the Congo and the lightning flashes o'er Togoland. To your tents, O Israel! The hour is at hand" (*BNM* 67). While Schuyler is fervent in his general disclosure of stereotyping, his special target lies within journalism. Sybil Smith, female reporter for *The Scimitar*, informs readers that bribery and forced intimacy can make for "the basis of a rattling good story for tomorrow's paper" (*BNM* 21). It is therefore not surprising how Max, "from the vantage point of having formerly been a Negro, [...] was able to see how the newspapers were fanning the color prejudice of the white people" (*BNM* 44). Continually, the media is presented as a corrupt mouthpiece for fascists and other extremists. It is also crucial to note that throughout the story, the press not only "generally followed the crowd," but rather "led it" (*BNM* 132) – all made possible by a naïve public under the unwavering and almost tragic impression that "newspapers wouldn't lie" (*BNM* 174).

However, Schuyler's attack on propaganda is more encompassing than a simple discussion of the issue in narrative terms. Rather, he exploits satire's subversive potential in order to undermine propaganda. A key characteristic of satire which is of particular importance in an African American context is the fact that it can be considered a "form that indicts form."²¹² Weisenburger further elaborates that "the satirical novel is, in contrast to the realistic novel, a form for subverting the discourse strategies an ideology would use to legitimize its

²¹² Weisenburger 139.

power.”²¹³ This statement becomes even more plausible when one considers the rhetorical tools of ideological discourse, as exemplified by those used in propaganda. As with any form of persuasive discourse, it is the propagandist’s aim to “sell” an idea or conviction to the readership. The originator, however, can only expect people to instantly “buy” his content when it is presented as instantly relevant, plausible, and elementary. An effective means to achieve this end is simplification – in the satiric context also referred to as “*reductio ad absurdum*.” According to Dickson-Carr, the intention behind the use of this trope is “to strip a complex situation of any contradictory information to score a rhetorical point by manipulating the reading audience’s emotions and prejudices.”²¹⁴ Alfred Lee sees similar techniques at work in propaganda, the creator of which neglects elaborate differentiation and “seldom deals in shades of gray, in maybes and perhapses. In his language, everything tends to become black *or* white, good *or* bad, yes *or* no.”²¹⁵ Propaganda, just as satire, “reduces complex institutions to simple caricatures.”²¹⁶

During this process of reduction, complex and multi-layered issues are reduced to the degree that only those facts which might persuade the readership are highlighted. If not directly simplified, then facts are frequently disfigured, often resulting in “parody, in which the victim’s style is imitated and distorted.”²¹⁷ The overall consequence is highly biased discourse and, as in the case of propaganda, a means of manipulation, which is often portrayed as factual information. Specific facts and information are either deformed or omitted altogether. Referencing this, Harris considers “distortion” one of a satirist’s major tools and defines it as “changing the perspective of a condition or event by isolation (separation from its ordinary surroundings), or by stressing some aspects and deemphasizing others.”²¹⁸ For people who are not part of the code-sharing community, the resemblance between propaganda and satire brings about a danger of confusing

²¹³ Weisenburger 140.

²¹⁴ Dickson-Carr 27.

²¹⁵ Alfred M. Lee, *How to Understand Propaganda* (New York: Rinehart, 1952) 57.

²¹⁶ Griffin 168.

²¹⁷ Booth 123.

²¹⁸ Harris “Purpose.”

one with the other.²¹⁹ With regard to this likelihood, Dickson-Carr states that “unfortunately, in many cases, ‘reductio ad absurdum’ may also become a tool of demagoguery since, by definition, it necessarily avoids complexity in favor of elision.”²²⁰

The fact that satire and propaganda use, to a certain extent, some of the same rhetorical means such as reduction, exaggeration, caricature, and parody, is one of the very reason why the former is always implicitly targeting and ridiculing the latter. While demagoguery is in many cases nothing to approve of, it is essential to analyze closely the consequences of satire and demagoguery using similar techniques. In this regard, Dickson-Carr specifically attacks Schuyler’s *Black No More* and Ishmael Reed’s *Reckless Eyeballing*:

When, for example, Ishmael Reed critiques mainstream feminism in his novels of the 1980s and 1990s [...] he frequently reduces feminism to a grotesquerie and focuses upon an individual feminist’s ideological failings rather than considering the fact that “feminism” [...] has always been subject to conflicting, contradictory voices; there is no single voice of feminism. Schuyler and Reed, therefore, are guilty of creating precisely what African American satire tends to condemn: ideological positions that do not allow for the possibilities of diversity.²²¹

In his above statement, Dickson-Carr blames Schuyler for making use of “reductio ad absurdum.” While there can be no doubt that Schuyler simplifies the dilemma of racism in many ways, one needs to be cautious when accusing the author of approving of these positions. Rather, one can argue that quite the opposite is the case. In order to clarify this argument, it is expedient to recapitulate one of the main considerations of both the satirist and the propagandist. Leonard William Doob asserts that the propagandist, just as the satirist

knows that many phenomena are much too intricate and subtle to be grasped by laymen. To have individuals comprehend his aim and to arouse within them the necessary related attitudes, he may simplify his situation in such a way as to give them the feeling that they have understood what heretofore has appeared to be a mystery.²²²

²¹⁹ The special relationship between satire and propaganda is illustrated by the fact that, frequently, those attacked by satire try to denigrate the rhetoric onslaught and undermine the credibility of its originator through association with propaganda and demagoguery.

²²⁰ Dickson-Carr 26.

²²¹ Dickson-Carr 27.

²²² Leonard William Doob, *Propaganda: Its Psychology and Technique* (New York: Holt, 1935) 97.

By implementing techniques of demagoguery, Schuyler creates awareness for, and implicitly admonishes, the manipulative power of propaganda rather than justifying or supporting it. It is thus important to note that *Black No More* is no exception, but that it, implicitly, as with most satire, teaches readers within the code-sharing community to be alert to political manipulation, as found in specific types of persuasive discourse. The raising of awareness for the workings of manipulative language is considered to be among the sanative effects of satire. The fact that satire often shows stylistic features characteristic of propaganda and demagoguery is especially important in the context of African American criticism. *Black No More* is a prime example of the notion that African American satire often deals with racism as a prevailing social and political dilemma. In fact, *Black No More* is implicitly mocking and ridiculing racist propaganda, while at the same time dealing with it on a stylistic level. The oversimplified and distorted picture of “race” which is spread by racist propaganda is used to expose and lambaste the very grotesqueries of racist discourse and to submit them to contemptuous laughter. This is where Weisenburger’s previous point of satire subverting the discourse strategies of ideologies is especially important, because, as in this case, most African American satire is set in an ideological context.

To achieve its goal, satire calls for a reader to view the events depicted from a critical distance. This is particularly true given the novel’s acknowledged potential for eliciting sympathy from the reader, which would in turn weaken satire’s critical thrust. To counteract the possibility of identification, Schuyler employs certain “estrangement effects.” In dealing with propaganda, Schuyler goes beyond showing how it is used by racists and politicians to influence public opinion. Although the technique of simplification and stereotyping in a satiric context implicitly sharpens readers’ awareness of manipulative features unique to written discourse, Schuyler goes to great lengths to make this point even more explicit. In fact, his characters directly comment on these pitfalls in language. In the first chapter, Crookman states that “there is no such thing as Negro dialect, except in literature and drama. It is a well-known fact among informed persons that a Negro from a given section speaks the same dialect as his white neighbors” (*BNM* 14). Significantly, in his description of Max and Bunny, the author suggests there is such a thing as a characteristic African American dialect. For the reader, these open

contradictions are a strong reminder that literature does not have to represent facts and that it is crucial to remain actively critical of such messages. Schuyler also emphasizes that literature makes use of common clichés that often lack accurate proof, justification, or even implement untruths. At a later stage when Max updates his friend Bunny on the events that have taken place in his life, Bunny replies, “this sounds like a novel” (*BNM* 85). Readers are immediately inclined to join the conversation with the reply, “but it is a novel!” *Black No More* is interspersed with rhetorical elements of this nature in order to counteract the reader’s uncritical immersion in the text, and thus ensure critical distance between the reader and the satiric work. Through the implementation of these “estrangement effects,” the author advises his readers to increase their attention regarding the possible differences between reality and the reality presented in the novel. The overarching function of these comments on the nature of written language is to remind readers to question what they read and to stay “informed” (*BNM* 14). Having identified the broad perspective from which Schuyler engages racism, the next question which arises is how he manages to assume such an encompassing narrative scope.

3.8 Beyond Picaresque: *Black No More* as “Socially Referential Satire”

While clarification and modification are necessary, Schuyler’s *Black No More* can be said to function as an encyclopaedic work of art, and by association, as an “encyclopaedic satire.”²²³ The novel introduces readers to a striking variety of

²²³ See Weisenburger 199-204. The notion of “encyclopaedic narrative” as a “type of narrative fiction that foregrounds all those signs of mutual ‘knowledge’ of the reference world, knowledge as a cultural construct in full ideological regalia”²²³ is too encompassing a definition to be applied to Schuyler’s novel. In fact, Edward Mendelson limits the genre of “encyclopaedic narrative” to a select list of seven works, including Goethe’s *Faust*, Joyce’s *Ulysses*, and Dante’s *Commedia*. Thus, modifications and restraints have to be made in order to make the “inadequately determined”²²³ concept of “encyclopaedic satire” applicable and useful in the discussion of *Black No More*. In Mendelson’s article on “encyclopaedic narratives,” one is faced with a rather exclusive definition of the term. In his view, every “encyclopaedic narrative” is a literary milestone, the author of which must be “one whose work attends to the whole social and linguistic range of his nation, who makes use of all the literary styles and conventions known to his countrymen, whose dialect often becomes established as the national language, who takes his place as national poet or national classic, and who becomes the focus of a large and persistent exegetic and textual industry comparable to the industry founded upon the Bible” (Mendelson 1271). The question arises as to whether an “encyclopaedic narrative” has to “render the full range of knowledge and beliefs of a national culture,” or if key aspects of the definition also apply to texts which are exceedingly referential in certain spheres (Mendelson 1296).

social arenas covering varied social and regional locations. By largely following Max Disher on his social tour de force, the narrator gives a detailed cross-section of society, which includes a wide range of socially, ethnically, and geographically diverse areas. In actuality, the author neglects consistency of time and agency, choosing instead to arrange his critique along a scattered plot line that is fragmented beyond the limits of the picaresque. While *Black No More* is clearly no “encyclopedia of literary styles,”²²⁴ there are crucial parallels and connections which provoke an analysis of the model of “encyclopaedic satire,” as based on the notion of “encyclopaedic narrative.”

In *Black No More*, different social spheres signify an “extensive use of synecdoche”²²⁵ and are subject to “reductio ad absurdum” because there are clear limits to the areas and minutiae of social life that a narrative can be expected to include. For instance, the social sphere of the racist Knights of Nordica in *Black No More* is not meant to represent one particular racist group. It is a place without specific traits, populated by types – even though some of these types are caricatures of real people. The idea that *Black No More* is characterized by an episodic plot, coupled with the fact that the novel’s agency lies mostly within a trickster figure, suggests classifying the work as a picaresque novel. However, Frederick Monteser notes that “the mere existence of a picaresque personality is not sufficiently unusual to place a work in that category.”²²⁶ Stuart Miller’s outline of the picaresque plot as a shifting sequence governed predominantly by chance and chaos doubtlessly applies to Schuyler’s novel as “the infinite possibilities of the picaresque plot express total openness. Since there are no limitations of probability, the door is left open to the fantastic, the improbable, and even the weird. The picaresque plot expresses an intuition that the world is without order, is chaotic.”²²⁷ The world Schuyler creates in his novel is characterized by utter chaos as the diminishing racial divide and the subsequent dwindling economy cause a chain reaction which throws the entire American society off-balance. While *Black No More* has distinct features similar to a picaresque novel, it is essential to

²²⁴ Mendelson 1269.

²²⁵ Mendelson 1269.

²²⁶ Frederick Monteser, *The Picaresque Element in Western Literature* (Tuscaloosa: U of Alabama P, 1975) 6.

²²⁷ Stuart Miller, *The Picaresque Novel* (Cleveland: P of Case Western Reserve U, 1967) 10.

distinguish between the latter and the genre of “satire.” Ulrich Wicks draws a line between both concepts on the basis of the degree of realism. According to Wicks’ definition, “satire portrays subhuman grotesques enmeshed in chaos. Picaresque presents a protagonist enduring a world that is chaotic beyond ordinary human tolerance, but it is a world closer to our own experiential one, or ‘history,’ than are the worlds of romance or satire.”²²⁸

Severe problems surface when classifying Schuyler’s satire with its correctional intent as a traditional “picaresque,” especially when one considers that a picaresque is commonly not based on a corrective intent on the part of the author. As Monteser notes, “the picaro is concerned with survival in a hostile world, the author with telling a good tale, and usually neither is sociologically or didactically inclined.”²²⁹ The fact that the picaresque form is usually not didactic does not mean that it is entirely unable to negotiate sociopolitical affairs. Rather than being satiric in a conventional sense, many picaresque stories “create a commentary upon the social mores of the society in which the picaro lives.”²³⁰

Yet Schuyler centers his novel on a plot which is not primarily episodic, but rather socially referential in an all-encompassing way. This satiric intent behind his implementation of this characteristic feature goes beyond the aim of creating disorder and chaos. To account for and clarify these claims, one must consider the central aspects in which Schuyler’s work meets the concept of “encyclopaedic narrative.” According to Mendelson’s definition, “encyclopaedic narratives” serve the double function of satire and prophecy. This effect results from the notion that such works predict “events that are, in reference to the book’s action, in the unpredictable future, yet the action itself is close enough to the moment of publication to allow the book to refer to the immediate conditions of its readers’ lives.”²³¹ This does hold true for *Black No More*. Although the novel is set in the near future for Schuyler’s original readership, the narrative of Dr. Crookman’s skin treatment can be perceived as more remote in time. The fundamental problems addressed in the novel, however, include some of the most vexing sociopolitical

²²⁸ Ulrich Wicks, *Picaresque Narrative, Picaresque Fictions: A Theory and Research Guide* (New York: Greenwood, 1989) 42.

²²⁹ Monteser 6.

²³⁰ Dickson-Carr 35.

²³¹ Mendelson 1270.

dilemmas of Schuyler's contemporary social order. Schuyler depicts a capitalist society that uses racism, religion, and social myths as economic tools. In keeping with Mendelson's definition of "encyclopaedic narrative," *Black No More* does incorporate absurdly inflated events, some barely imaginable for the contemporary readership of the 1930s, while the underlying concern addresses current issues being faced in Schuyler's own society.

The question arises as to the result Schuyler achieves through this incorporation of an encompassing range of social spheres. The answer to this question can be derived from Mendelson's preceding elaborations. Through the inclusive treatment of social spheres in his satiric work, the author achieves two important effects. First, the novelist manages to refer to the immediate conditions of an extremely diversified group of people. Schuyler allows a highly varied readership to find their respective arenas in the vast social landscape depicted, thus enabling them to see how it is influenced and corrupted by racism. Second, in terms of disparagement, the use of "social cataloging" enables the author to launch a layered critique that penetrates the core of human nature without losing its immediate sociopolitical relevance. While Schuyler manages to attack diverse manifestations of capitalism and to reveal the vast grotesquery behind it, he also expresses a grim vision of man. In this way, Schuyler is able to account for the fact that "racism may range from the individual and personal to the systemic, extending into all levels of American social and economic spheres."²³² Since it is the author's intention to reveal the significance of racism in capitalism, and to expose the consequences of greed, he has to address varied forms of the dilemma in order to be effective in his attack. While the constraints of the satiric genre force Schuyler to trade the specific for the general in many respects, the creation of a socially referential structure enables him to elude the satire-specific simplification and reduction in his plot. Rather than creating a single synecdochal social scenario in order to refer to an overall dimension of racism in society, the author makes sacrifices as far as consistency of agency goes and leads the plot through an almost encyclopedic variety of social spheres.

²³² Dickson-Carr 32.

However, despite central parallels to the concept Weisenburger introduces, the implementation of the term “encyclopaedic” is too far-reaching to be applicable in this context. In spite of the effects Schuyler manages to achieve through the introduction of a gamut of social spheres, he clearly does not “articulate a unified and total vision of the world.”²³³ Although the concept of encyclopaedic narrative is not applicable to Schuyler’s work without modification, it does help to understand the author’s peculiar handling of plot and setting and the novel’s culturally transcendental nature; for one crucial effect of the novel’s social diversity necessitated by the author’s targeting of mores rooted in human nature is the inevitable neglect of cultural specificity.

For all its interest in man, one may indeed question the cultural relevance of *Black No More*. In their article “The Black Aesthetic in the Black Novel,” Melvin and Margaret Wade address the fundamental relationship between culture and artist. To clarify the issue of the “Black Aesthetic,” they introduce a dichotomy between art “which emphasizes abstracted forms from the culture, and art which emphasizes abstracted content from the ideological component of that culture.”²³⁴ The point of departure for any analysis of African American novels, therefore, is where artists locate the models of form for their art. However, with regard to a set of novels, including Schuyler’s *Black No More*, the Wades suggest a third category – that of transcendental art. According to their definition, “in the transcendental work of art, the action of characters tends to be representative of the motivations of people of any cultures; the movement of plot tends to be suggestive of ideas which are widespread in their influence across cultural lines. The transcendental work of art, then, is not peculiarly reflective of any culture.”²³⁵ For the satiric novel, this distinction should be looked at from the vantage point of content rather than technique. If the author’s primary concern lies within human flaws on which different socio-political mores proliferate, as is clearly the case with *Black No More*, the work is likely to fall into the category of “transcendental satire.” One must

²³³ Ronald T. Swigger, “Fictional Encyclopedism and the Cognitive Value of Literature,” *Comparative Literature Studies* 12.1 (1975): 352. See also Mendelson 1268. Mendelson’s concept of “near encyclopaedias” does not apply in this context either, since these works differ from “encyclopaedic narratives” only in that they “fail to occupy a crucial and originating role in their cultures.”

²³⁴ Melvin and Margaret Wade, “The Black Aesthetic in the Black Novel,” *Journal of Black Studies* 2.4 (1972): 393.

²³⁵ Wade 406.

consider, then, the thrust with which the satirist advances to human nature to disclose whether man is stripped of socio-political circumstance altogether, or if his misconduct is bound to specific cultural conditions. As far as the socio-political concern of Schuyler's novel goes, it is rooted in an African American context. As a roman à clef, the work goes after many prominent institutions and contemporaries of the author, and therefore demands knowledge of certain historical information in order to be decoded. However, as far as *Black No More* is a negotiation of human weakness, its encompassing perspective penetrates deep enough to rid its critical point of all cultural specificity. It is due to this concern with a seemingly static human nature, that the author ends the novel on a rather pessimistic note.

3.9 Beyond Cultural Specificity

In light of *Black No More's* bleak ending, many scholars conclude that "if one were to characterize the work in classical terms, it would be called Juvenalian satire."²³⁶ The term "Juvenalian satire," however, does not sufficiently describe Schuyler's unique treatment of his targets, and it fails to capture how *Black No More* generally functions as a novel of satire.

In order to analyze where *Black No More* draws its satiric impact from, it is necessary to consider the distribution of satiric features, with special emphasis on the changing ironic mode. The light narrative style of the first two chapters is both witty and humorous in its depictions, however, there are no signs of indignation. In this way, even people whose positions are denounced might get drawn into the novel, not fully realizing that they are being targeted. Initially, the author relies largely on unstable irony that can be easily overlooked. The first example of this subtlety is the novel's subtitle: "being an account of the strange and wonderful workings of science in the land of the free, AD 1933-1940."²³⁷ Despite the rather

²³⁶ Davis 105.

²³⁷ The subtitle has not been incorporated in the 1999 Modern Library Edition. See J. Lee Greene, *Blacks in Eden: The African American Novel's First Century* (Charlottesville: UP of Virginia, 1996) 99. In her chapter "The Machine-Made New Negro: Schuyler's Matthew Fisher," Greene argues that "the subtitle is a parodic comment on early Euro-American narrative accounts of life in the New Eden. From the perspective of the novel's blacks, the image of America as a New Eden parallels the wilderness image colonists in the Northeast reflected in their accounts of life in the New World and

obvious paradox in this statement, readers not familiar with or naively unaware of the prevalence of racism in the African American context will not realize the irony implied in the author's use of the expression "land of the free."

At the beginning of the novel, parodies and caricatures of various public persons and institutions from Schuyler's era populate the narrative and position it – for the reader readily identifiable – in a context of humorous discourse. As far as the first subtle traces of critique go, the use of highly stereotypical types as a form of synecdoche instantly mark the novel as satire. Readers get the idea that the author's attention is focused on institutions rather than individuals. For example, Schuyler presents Max Disher and Bunny Brown as generic "gay blades in black Harlem" (*BNM* 4). Although both fought for America during the war, they feel they must turn white in order to feel "like an American citizen" (*BNM* 29). In keeping with highly prejudiced racist discourse, both of them "swore there were three things essential to the happiness of a colored gentleman: yellow money, yellow women and yellow taxis" (*BNM* 4). The use of stereotypes, however, is not confined to the characters of Max and Bunny. The entire club scene relies heavily on clichés. Black entertainers serve as the amusement for a multicultural group of "blacks, browns, yellows, and whites chatting, flirting, drinking; rubbing shoulders in the democracy of night life" (*BNM* 5). Through the eyes of the stereotypically sexist Max and Bunny, women are degraded to material goods and, after a certain time, they eventually "all get old on the job" (*BNM* 5). These common satiric features of reduction and hyperbole, however, do not give sufficient reason to file the work under "Juvenalian" satire, as they do not regulate the tone's harshness. Due to the initial subtlety of the ironic implications used, it is likely for readers to feel inclined to perceive the caricatures and parodies as humorous, but there is hardly any indication that the author is about to launch a devastating satiric attack.

As Schuyler introduces readers to race leaders and fascist institutions, he is increasingly impatient to connect the ironic implications to his readers. Once the plot reaches the political arena and characters and institutions including Marcus Garvey, W.E.B. DuBois, and the Ku Klux Klan disclose their identities under absurdly inflated features, the novel becomes clearly identifiable as a roman à clef.

therefore counters the image Southern whites generated of the New World as a topographical paradise."

Particularly in his character depictions, Schuyler employs irony to highlight contradictions and paradoxes in capitalist society. One example is Dr. Crookman, who “was what was known in Negro society as a Race Man. He was wedded to everything black except the black woman – his wife was a white girl with remote Negro ancestry” (*BNM* 35). A second example is the owner of a hair-straightening shop, “a successful enterprise engaged in making Negroes appear as much like white folks as possible [...] had recently been elected for the fourth time a Vice-President of the American Race Pride League” (*BNM* 39). While Schuyler’s exposition of absurdities makes for a light and humorous tone, this causes it to appear unrepresentative of the brutish barbs found in the Juvenalian mode.

As Schuyler’s protagonist immerses further in the capitalist workings of society, it is noticeable that the author pays increasing attention to the “stability” of his irony. Consequently, *Black No More* picks up satiric momentum. The first signs of the mercilessness which is commonly associated with Juvenalian satire appear in the description of the racist “Knights of Nordica” organization. The depiction of racist leader Henry Givens and his dim-witted family is particularly destructive. The head of the family has to get polysyllabic words “straight ‘fore [he goes] talkin’ too much about [them]” (*BNM* 49). Likewise, their daughter Helen strongly resembles her parents in this regard as “any form of mental effort, she complained, made her head ache” (*BNM* 51). Mrs. Givens, who “had probably once been beautiful [...] was a devout Christian,” but surprisingly, “her spouse had made bitter and profane comment concerning her virginity on their wedding night” (*BNM* 51). Now that the narrator has his sight set on one of his main targets, the gap between what he literally states and what he implies widens, and his wrath becomes increasingly rigorous. While the ironic implications in the initial sections of the novel can possibly be overlooked, Schuyler is now less vague in his expression of disapproval. The fact that there can hardly be a feeling of ambiguity about these depictions marks the irony as essentially stable.²³⁸ This harsh form of irony is upheld in the criticism of race leaders and institutions on the African American side, including Dr. Shakespeare Agamemnon Beard:

²³⁸ See Booth 48.

For a mere six thousand dollars a year, the learned doctor wrote scholarly and biting editorials in *The Dilemma* denouncing the Caucasians whom he secretly admired and lauding the greatness of the Negroes whom he alternately pitied and despised. In limpid prose he told of the sufferings and privations of the downtrodden black workers with whose lives he was totally and thankfully unfamiliar. (*BNM* 65)

The novel's tone rapidly grows more severe and approaches its peak in the middle of the final section as Schuyler goes on to describe Alex McPhule. The Reverend "held private audiences with the sick, sinful and neurotic in his little cabin. [...] The majority of his visitors were middle-aged wives and adenoidal and neurotic young girls. None departed unsatisfied" (*BNM* 167-68). Schuyler is evidently aware that there is always a chance of readers not recognizing the connotations implied in ironic discourse, as, for instance, the sexual implication in the latter example. To rid even the most naïve readers of their agreement with the literal meanings in *Black No More*, the author moves the narrative beyond the harshest form of satiric critique: the lampoon. Wayne Booth comments on this possibility of readers consenting with the literal meaning of ironic discourse under complete ignorance of any underlying implications, stating that "once moment of agreement is established, it takes a fairly rude shock to break it."²³⁹ Schuyler delivers this massive shock in the description of the lynching scene:

The two men, vociferously protesting, were stripped naked, held down by husky and willing farm hands and their ears and genitals cut off with jack knives amid the fiendish cries of men and women. [...] Some wag sewed their ears to their backs and they were released and told to run. [...] The two victims, not dead yet, were picked up, dragged to the stake and bound to it, back to back. Little boys and girls gaily gathered excelsior, scrap paper, twigs and small branched while their proud parents fetched logs, boxes, kerosene and the staves from a cider barrel. [...] Proudly their pastor looked on. This was the crowning of a life's ambition. [...] He was supremely happy. (*BNM* 175-76)

In its unrelenting and open viciousness, this lynching scene operates outside the satiric spectrum and is even amplified by being "a horrible parody of a true religious celebration."²⁴⁰ The burning of racists by racists, in an excess of authority and voracity, demands no further interpretation from readers, and ultimately unveils *Black No More* as a work with a specific critical intent. It is significant that

²³⁹ Booth 78.

²⁴⁰ Peplow 75.

after the carnage, McPhule “thrust[s] his hand into his pocket and [feels] the soothing touch of the hundred-dollar bill he [has] extracted” from his victim. In an allegorical fashion, the author summarizes his objective: the (self-) destructive power of the human capacity for greed and ideology. One can easily visualize the satiric progression of the novel as a wrecking ball gaining speed and finally crashing into its objective, which was clearly marked in the opening dedication. Those who originally felt sincerely addressed as proud lovers of their race, now find themselves metaphorically burning on a pyre, surrounded by a crazed mob. At this stage, Schuyler’s work approaches – and even momentarily trespasses – one of the limits of satire, as the author is trading humor for wrath and brutality. As Frye recalls, “attack without humor, or pure denunciation, forms one of the boundaries of satire.”²⁴¹ It is this same departure into the fields of invective that brought the novel some negative responses. Journalist H.L. Mencken, himself an acclaimed master of satire who held much of Schuyler’s journalistic work in high regard, found fault with *Black No More*’s lack of satiric detachment: “Unable to see much purpose or restraint in Schuyler’s cuts against other blacks or in the lynching scene near the end of the satire, Mencken could only conclude that its author had failed to overcome his racially motivated attitude of resentment and had thus managed to infect where he intended to inoculate.”²⁴²

However, even Schuyler’s momentary disregard for the rules of satire does not change the fact that *Black No More* qualifies as a powerful and explosive satire. Having identified the role of racism as a capitalist tool, and touting the media as sustaining theories of racial essentialism, the novel indeed challenges discriminative claims on race and contemporary workings of representation; during Schuyler’s early career,

typical of this racialized regime of representation was the practice of reducing the cultures of black people to Nature, or naturalizing ‘difference’. The logic behind naturalization is simple. If the differences between black and white people are ‘cultural’, then they are open to modification and change. But if they are ‘natural’ – as the slave-holders believed – then they are beyond history, permanent and fixed. ‘Naturalization’ is therefore a

²⁴¹ Frye 224.

²⁴² Ferguson 219.

representational strategy designed to *fix* 'difference', and thus *secure it forever*.²⁴³

Thematically, the suggested reading of this novel, as laid out in the present chapter, exposes *Black No More* as a powerful threat to the essentialist system which Stuart Hall outlines above. Stylistically, one may rightfully conceive of the workings of *Black No More* as an exponentially increasing curve. The horizontal axis marks Max's gradual immersion in the mechanisms of society; the corresponding rise in harshness of satiric expression is represented on the vertical axis. While the ironic expressions in the early chapters are rather subtle, Schuyler employs more stable irony as Max begins his infiltration of the racist scene, until finally no more ironic decoding is needed to unmask the work as a satiric critique. It is thus not so much Schuyler's "ability to walk that fine line between Horatian lightheartedness and Juvenalian despair,"²⁴⁴ than his skill to gradually move the work from jaunty airiness into utter desolation that makes *Black No More* effective in its critique. Ultimately, the concluding revelation of the "new whites" being even whiter than the former whites, and the subsequently ensuing reversed color-caste system, contains Schuyler's pessimistic claim that "human nature has a depressing habit of remaining the same."²⁴⁵

²⁴³ Stuart Hall 245.

²⁴⁴ Peplow 72.

²⁴⁵ Davis 106.

IV. Inside the Capitalist Machinery: Charles Wright's *The Wig*

4.1 The Erosion of Certainty

Originally published in 1966, Charles Wright's second novel emerged in an American society that was, politically, shaped by President Lyndon B. Johnson's ambitious design to create the "Great Society" and, artistically, under the influence of Black Arts aesthetics. While the Black Arts Movement is commonly pictured as related to "the African American's desire for self-determination and nationhood,"²⁴⁶ Johnson and his political agenda are characterized by an attitude of "energy, goodwill, resourcefulness, enterprise, optimism, inventiveness, and exaggerated faith in self."²⁴⁷ These circumstances combine to fashion Wright's protagonist and first-person narrator in *The Wig*.

The novel chronicles the story of Lester Jefferson, a young and desperate Harlemit determined to enter the Great Society via diligence and unswerving optimism. Perfectly aware of the restrictive nature of the racial divide, the protagonist bleaches his hair to move closer to the privileged white world. However, neither a career as a rock and roll singer, nor a demeaning stint as a chicken man for a fast-food company help him improve his social position. On the contrary, the more demeaning his jobs, the more identifiable Lester becomes as a member of an oppressed and exploited minority. Increasingly obsessed with both his hair and his prostitute lover, The Deb, Lester's efforts to advance amount to a turbulent sequence of misadventures, rendered grotesquely distorted and chaotic by his confused mind. Restlessly oscillating between stereotypical roles,²⁴⁸ such as that of the good-hearted but dim-witted Uncle Tom, the amusing coon, and the oversexed black buck, Lester does not find solace until he is finally castrated and deprived of his pathogenic aspiration to get ahead.

²⁴⁶ Bernard W. Bell, *The Contemporary African American Novel. Its Folk Roots and Modern Literary Branches* (Amherst: U of Massachusetts P, 2004) 133.

²⁴⁷ Doris Kearns, *Lyndon Johnson and the American Dream* (London: André Deutsch, 1976) 64.

²⁴⁸ See Schechter 35. A brief outline of these racist stereotypes, their cultural origins, and their pervasiveness is given by Schechter. He comments that "the stereotype Negro as a comic individual has persisted on a national scale to the present day. These stereotypes were the contented slave, the wretched freeman, the brutal Negro, and the exotic primitive. It appears to be one of the efficacies and functions of a stereotype that it facilitates the adjustment for those who may have little or no contact with the group portrayed by the stereotype. In this sense, the antebellum image of the Negro became the standard for the rest of the country as later reflected in the various art media and forms of communication."

Despite the fact that, as Eberhard Kreutzer confirms, “Wright takes up where the Harlem Renaissance satirists left off with such assimilationist fantasies as George Schuyler’s *Black No More*,”²⁴⁹ *The Wig* has received little scholarly attention.²⁵⁰ For one, Wright never attained exceptional visibility in the sphere of African American literary criticism.²⁵¹ Another reason may be that Wright was not a prolific writer, and unlike Schuyler, he was not a controversial public figure. Yet, the main reason for the lack of scholarship on *The Wig* may be its grounding in the nature of the Black Arts Movement, which is generally not thought of as a breeding ground for African American satire. One may rightfully think that an artist operating within an atmosphere of growing self-confidence in the African American community of the time would not need to resort to subversive literary tactics such as satire, which usually enters the scene when power structures are firmly established and must be confronted covertly or indirectly. Indeed, what characterizes much of the African American writing from Wright’s time is an approach that “envisions an art that speaks directly to the needs and aspirations of Black America.”²⁵² Wright’s novel, on the other hand, discards this common tendency, instead using satire, which, by definition, refuses to speak to its audience directly, preferring to make its point with sophisticated wit. It is therefore not surprising that Joe Weixlmann refers to Wright’s approach in *The Wig* as decidedly “atypical of the Afro-American fiction of that era.”²⁵³

This may be the reason why *The Wig* has spawned confusion among its readers, some of whom found the apparent portrayal of a dim black trickster quite

²⁴⁹ Eberhard Kreutzer, “Dark Ghetto Fantasy and The Great Society: Charles Wright’s *The Wig* (1966),” *The Afro-American Novel Since 1960*, eds. Peter Bruck and Wolfgang Karrer (Amsterdam: B.R. Gruener, 1982) 163.

²⁵⁰ The most comprehensive discussion of Wright’s novel can be found in Max F. Schulz, *Black Humor Fiction of the Sixties: A Pluralistic Definition of Man and His World* (Athens: Ohio UP, 1973). Also see Kreutzer. A brief introduction to the author and his work is given in Frances S. Foster, “Charles Wright: Black Black Humorist” *CLA Journal* 15.1 (1971).

²⁵¹ For a short biography of Charles Wright and critical commentary on his three novels *The Messenger* (1963), *The Wig* (1966), and *Absolutely Nothing to Get Alarmed About* (1973), see the introductory comments in Charles Stevenson Wright, “Interview,” *Interviews with Black Writers*, ed. John O’Brien (New York: Liveright, 1973) 251.

²⁵² Bell 133.

²⁵³ Joe Weixlmann, “Charles Stevenson Wright,” *Dictionary of Literary Biography, Afro-American Fiction Writers After 1955*, Vol. 33 (1984) 290.

untimely for the prevailing social circumstances.²⁵⁴ Among the few positive responses to the novel, Conrad Knickerbocker's review praises Wright's pessimistic, satiric vision: "Mr. Wright's style, as mean and vicious a weapon as a rusty hacksaw, is the perfect vehicle for his zany pessimism. [...] Like all good satirists, he sees no hope. His jibes confirm the wounds no Great Society will ever salve, and his laughter has no healing powers. 'The Wig' is a brutal, exciting, and necessary book."²⁵⁵ Unfortunately for Wright, Knickerbocker's enthusiasm has not been shared by many critics. Frank Campenni, for example, criticizes the work's unbalanced distribution of comedy and morbidity, deeming *The Wig* a step back for Wright after his much acclaimed debut novel: "If *The Messenger* seems like a patch-quilt of styles and moods, *The Wig* is more consistent in tone and mood, but regrettably so. For Wright's second novel goes all-out as black comedy, but despite its wildness it is more black, or malicious, than comic."²⁵⁶ Kreutzer laments the novel's uneven elaboration of divergent episodes, and criticises Wright's "lack of artistic economy."²⁵⁷

Even worse for the author than mixed reviews, however, was the fact that many literary circles simply ignored the novel.²⁵⁸ As Weixlmann elaborates, "not only were most of the reviews that *The Wig* received mixed, many influential

²⁵⁴ See Frank Campenni "Charles (Stevenson) Wright Bibliography - Charles Wright Comments" <<http://biography.jrank.org/pages/4848/Wright-Charles-Stevenson.html>> Accessed 8. June 2007. Wright acknowledges the dedication with which he worked on *The Wig* and the disappointment at America's inability to receive the novel for what it was supposed to be: "*The Wig* was my life. And as I write this on a night of the last week in April of 1971—I have no regrets. Let me explain: A year after the publication of *The Messenger* I was thinking of that folkloric, second novel, and began a rough draft of a novel about a group of Black men, very much like the Black Panthers. But, in 1963, America was not ready for that type of novel, nor were they ready for *The Wig*."

²⁵⁵ Conrad Knickerbocker, "Laughing on the Outside," rev. of *The Wig*, by Charles Wright, *The New York Times*, 5 March 1966: 25. Also see O'Brien 255. In the interview with John O'Brien, Wright explicitly acknowledges that Knickerbocker was among the few people who approved of the novel. With regard to *The Wig* and his sympathy toward Knickerbocker, Wright states: "I occasionally receive a letter from someone who understood it. The best review of it was by the late Conrad Knickerbocker in *The New York Times*. He was a man I admired for many years. When I was a messenger I used to think, if I ever publish a novel, I would like him to review it."

²⁵⁶ Campenni.

²⁵⁷ Kreutzer 164.

²⁵⁸ See Ishmael Reed, "Introduction to *The Wig*," *The Wig*, by Charles Wright (San Francisco: Mercury House, 2003) VII. In his foreword to the 2003 edition, Reed condemns the ignorance with which great parts of the literary world received Wright's novel and identifies a reason for so much reservation in Wright's innovative stylistics: "This was a leap-about, stream-of-the-unconscious book. Accustomed to the discontinuity of television, where the narrative is constantly interrupted, I wasn't confused at all by Wright's manner of writing. But it seems the critics of the day were confused, and many chose to overlook *The Wig*'s unique merits."

periodicals, most notably *Publisher's Weekly*, failed to review the novel."²⁵⁹ It is likely that the mixed responses to the novel seriously impaired Wright's future ambitions as an author, leaving him with only three published full-length works.²⁶⁰ Not only has Wright retained a low profile in the African American literary scene, he was unable to make a name for himself in the sphere of satire. While many critics have identified his debut novel, *The Messenger*, telling the story of a drag queen bike messenger, as sociopolitical commentary, its existentialist subtext defies sustained satiric critique.²⁶¹ Since *Absolutely Nothing to Get Alarmed About*, the one full-length work by Wright that followed *The Wig*, is a journal that "forgoes the guise of fictionist,"²⁶² the story of Lester Jefferson is Wright's only novel of satire – although it is not easily exposed as such.

To begin with, one can make the case that by breaking down the novel's satiric structure, through laying bare its sociopolitical concern, *The Wig's* primary objective can be identified as closely intertwined with the disquietude expressed in *Black No More*. Both satires engage a greedy and oppressive socioeconomic machinery, in which racism is just one cog in a greater exploitive apparatus. The following analysis of *The Wig* reveals a specific concept of racism closely related to politics of assimilation, which resonates in a distinct stylistic approach to satire.

In order to validate these claims, it is useful to start with a discussion of the specificities brought about by the novel's use of first-person narrative perspective. The work's obsession with the protagonist and his confused consciousness as reflected in Lester's jumbled memories eventually points to the issue of "double-

²⁵⁹ Weixlmann 290.

²⁶⁰ For a short biographical outline and brief analyses of Wright's three published novels, see A. Robert Lee, "Making New: Styles of Innovation in the Contemporary Black American Novel," *Black Fiction: New Studies in the Afro-American Novel Since 1945* Ed. A. Robert Lee (London: Vision, 1980) 239-243.

²⁶¹ For an analysis of Wright's approach to existentialism, which to a certain extent also informs *The Wig*, see W. Lawrence Hogue, "An Existentialist Reading of Charles Wright's *The Messenger*," *MELUS* 26.4 (2001): 113-145.

²⁶² O'Brien 245.

consciousness.”²⁶³ Thoroughly analyzing the narrator’s consciousness is of importance since crucial aspects of Wright’s satiric concern are grounded in the causes behind Lester’s confusion. A subsequent step then calls for an investigation into the roles the media and the racial politics of the Great Society play in the novel. Finally, the concepts of entropy and generic black humor lend themselves in the final investigation of the novel’s peculiar interplay of didactic mission and stylistic subtlety. However, it stands to reason that any analysis of this novel should begin where readers first find themselves: immersed in a confused mind.

4.2 Lester Jefferson: The Broken Authorial Lens

As a reader approaching Wright’s novel, one immediately recognizes its apparent differences from Schuyler’s work. Max Disher, the clever hero taking over key moments of agency in *Black No More* to dismantle a racist apparatus gives way to Lester Jefferson, a selfish buffoon, corrupted by media images and an unyielding faith in cultural myths. In the wake of the peculiar protagonist and narrator comes significant stylistic variation, which clearly distinguishes the two novels. The trustworthy third-person narrator of *Black No More*, who guides readers safely through the narrative of the learned doctor on his quest to solve the race problem, has vanished. The superior birds-eye-view of a world dissolving in turmoil, which governs *Black No More*, is abandoned as the macrocosm turns into a microcosm, and readers abruptly find themselves trapped inside a confused mind. The plot, partly ill-motivated and clearly subordinated to the satiric intent in Schuyler’s novel, now resembles a sheer profusion of disorganized scenes. Wright brings readers directly into the psyche of twenty-one year-old Lester Jefferson, and then purposefully refuses to offer orientation or direction; there are no pristine

²⁶³ As Campenni notes, confusion, chaos, and the grotesque are not exclusive to *The Wig*, but also influence Wright’s two other novels: “The literary output of Charles Wright has been slight in volume and promising, but not always effective, in practice. Wright’s three small “novels” are each the size of Nathanael West novels, and they reflect the same mordant wit, yearning despair, and surrealistic lunacy of vintage West. Wright’s world, however, is essentially a race-twisted society of black grotesques, of crippled lovers and dishwasher poets whose lives of wine, whores, and junkie-songs spell slow murder in white America.”

authorial comments of a *raisonneur* who penetrates the entropic vision the reader is faced with.

Moreover, Wright apparently aims his satiric darts at a different concept of racism than Schuyler. Unlike in *Black No More*, the reader neither comes across racist politicians nor outspoken white supremacists; there is no Ku-Klux-Klan and no bigoted evangelical fanatics. One may thus assume that the author's concern with racial discrimination is entirely encoded within the consciousness of the protagonist. In fact, the novel's obsession with Lester Jefferson makes one wonder to what extent *The Wig* manages to strike beyond the layer of the individual to articulate the implicit sociopolitical concern that lies at the heart of all satiric expression. To account for Lester's dominance in *The Wig* and his function as a nexus of different strands of satiric critique, it is necessary to refer to certain excerpts from the novel more than once, in order to illuminate key passages from multiple angles.

In the protagonist's "own private motion picture," one is exposed to an overwhelming flood of disjointed impressions, images, and sensations (*Wig* 51). No detail seems to escape Lester's all-encompassing perception, resulting in a plethora of close-up impressions where nouns and verbs are commonly specified by adjectives and adverbs. The peculiarity of the first-person perspective is observable directly from the beginning. For as readers find themselves immersed in Lester's mind, they witness the protagonist scrutinizing his room, zooming in on "fungus-covered ceiling pipes" and "cockroach acrobatics" (*Wig* 1). Recording everything that meets his eyes, Lester's experience is closer to unfiltered recording than selective observation. Despite the fact that the plot mainly progresses linearly, the unsorted flow of minutiae causes a distinct sense of fragmentation. Lester's mind goes astray often enough that his universe resembles a patchwork of severe attention deficit disorder. His perception moves freely, roaming from the outside to the inside, impetuously leaping through time and space, predictable only in its unpredictability. One of several illuminating examples of the immediacy of Lester's perspective, is when he finds himself in his room, bemoaning his lover's rejection, and planning his future against the backdrop of his cultural heritage:

Darkness, symbol of life, arrived. I was naked and alone, clutching a patched gray sheet, lamenting *The Wig's* first encounters with destiny. But there was the fat-back sensation of meeting *The Deb*, and the glorification of what I

had always referred to privately as ‘my thorny crown,’ The Wig itself. I turned uneasily on the sofa bed, wary of the night guard of cockroaches. ‘Happy Days Are Here Again,’ I whistled softly, thinking of The Wig and trying to make myself feel good and then, Lord – my own private motion picture flashed on: memory. I remembered Abraham Lincoln, who had died for me. I remembered the Negro maid who had walked from Grapetree, Mississippi, to Cold Spring Harbor, Long Island, and was flogged for being too maidenly fair. (*Wig* 50-51)

As shown in the above passage, straight narrative is rare as Lester’s observations are interspersed with leaps in time and place, including digressions into fantasy, drug experiences, and the surreal. Given the novel’s concern with the rigidity of the color line, the inflexibility of an underlying monolithic race construct is highlighted against the background of structural disintegration. No matter which physical or psychological direction Lester chooses, he never manages to escape the restrictive nature of a racist system. Significantly, the excerpt quoted above indicates how Lester’s own thought of bettering his condition leads to racial contemplation.

Yet, as confused as the protagonist’s perspective on life may be, it is possible for attentive readers to discern basic governing principles shaping Lester’s vision. Through close analysis, it is possible to look beyond the notion of the protagonist as exclusively concerned with the emulation of “whiteness,” and to outline his consciousness in its confusing complexity. Ultimately, it is possible to diagnose a pathogenic case of double-consciousness in the protagonist.

In this respect, important clues can be derived from W.E.B. DuBois’ comments on the history of the “American Negro” in his essay “Of Our Spiritual Strivings.” According to DuBois, the African American citizen “simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American, without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of Opportunity closed roughly in his face.”²⁶⁴ Yet, this is exactly what Lester Jefferson experiences. Not only do the doors to social accomplishment remain firmly shut for him, his attempts to rise up assure him the scorn of his fellow citizens: “The fat woman spat tobacco juice at my shoes, and a blond Alice-in-Wonderland type urinated in a plastic sand bucket and tried to splash me. Her mother applauded” (*Wig* 164). Every attempt to reconcile his racial heritage with his national identity fails,

²⁶⁴ DuBois 17.

exemplified by the time the protagonist is denied unemployment insurance: “I looked foreign and spoke almost perfect English” (*Wig* 8). Neither his employment as a waiter, nor his awkward efforts to make a living as a tap-dancer promise much success. Having realized that the goal DuBois outlines is virtually unattainable, that he cannot enjoy the benefits of being American when he is a black man, Lester becomes willing to trade parts of his racial heritage in order to escape ostracism and gain access to the opportunity of social improvement. Instead of improvement, however, the protagonist unconsciously engages in self-destruction.

In an analysis of the particular identity of African Americans in the society of the United States, DuBois mentions specific consequences of feeling like “an outcast and a stranger in [one’s] own house.”²⁶⁵ This strong impression of social exclusion is manifest in the protagonist of Wright’s novel. In Lester’s cognition, he, as well as Harlem as a place of African American culture, are seemingly excluded from the greater American society: “It was now morning all over America. It was also morning in Harlem” (*Wig* 151). Regarding the consequences of such a distinctive sense of social ostracism and discrimination, DuBois elaborates that

the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world, - a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity.²⁶⁶

What Wright does in his novel, then, is experimentally evaluate the consequences of the dilemma outlined by DuBois. This experiment reveals a powerful and far-reaching threat: that of modifying one’s own self according to how one is perceived by his surroundings; and it is this danger to which Lester falls prey. Not only does he see himself through the eyes of “the other,” he takes pains to emulate the “other.” In a satiric context, then, Wright’s disproportionately absurd tale can be read as an evaluation of double-consciousness through the prism of one of satire’s most prominent techniques: *reductio ad absurdum*.

²⁶⁵ DuBois 16.

²⁶⁶ DuBois 16-17.

4.3 Reductio Ad Absurdum: Double-Consciousness Revisited

As satire commonly avoids shades of gray and thematic complexity to make its sting poignant and comprehensive, one can expect it to also strip Wright's subject off some of its density. Indeed, the story of Lester Jefferson gets hold of the theme's most memorable characteristics and inflates them considerably; reducing double-consciousness to a powerful desire to assimilate, accompanied by an increasing self-hate. Having seen that it is de facto impossible to merge what Davis refers to as the "two separate spheres of existence for black people"²⁶⁷ in the United States, Lester attempts to move closer toward whiteness. While his bleached hair stands synecdochally for his physical sacrifice to a racist system, his emulation of the oppressor is not confined to physical change, but also includes a change of mindset. To be more precise, in Lester's attempts to infiltrate the white world, he continually assumes stereotypical roles suggested to him by his racist surrounding. While it is the hero's proclaimed goal to attain and impersonate whiteness, Lester repeatedly betrays an awareness of the role racist discourse holds for him as a person of color; to the extent that his world is presented to readers as a pantheon of racist stereotypes. This development is even more surprising as Lester starts out eager to escape association with racist labels and to strip off stereotypical behavior patterns.

A casual remark betrays the protagonist's alertness to racist stereotypes and his relief of not adhering to such simplifying categories. This comment comes after the successful bleaching of his hair, when Lester declares that he "hadn't felt so good since discovering last year that [he] actually disliked watermelon" (*Wig* 11). In the novel's satiric context, readers need to be aware that the significance of the cited passage clearly goes beyond an expression of food preferences. The

²⁶⁷ Davis 204.

image of the African American as devouring copious amounts of watermelon²⁶⁸ and chicken has been rendered mostly in terms of “Sambo” or the “coon,” highly prejudiced images “presenting the Negro as amusement object and black buffoon.”²⁶⁹ In order to gain a grasp of Lester’s fear of falling into prejudiced categories, it is important to address the “coon” image in more detail. One popular screen-rendition of the coon was the Pickaninny, “a harmless, little screwball creation whose eyes popped, whose hair stood on end with the least excitement, and whose antics were pleasant and diverting.”²⁷⁰ The figure of Pickaninny Jim played a crucial role in perpetuating racist stereotypes, such as that of the watermelon man. Watkins quotes a joke particularly reflective of Pickaninny’s stereotypical image as a “coon,” portraying the picture of the witty chicken- and watermelon eater:

“Seems to me,” said Mammy Chloe, “dat sometimes you’d rather sleep than eat.”

“Speck I would,” answered Pickaninny Jim. “Cause when I’s asleep I’s liable to dream about fried chicken an’ spare ribs an’ watermelon – an’ I ain’t seen no such dinner as dat in a long time.”²⁷¹

Lester’s comment on his dislike of watermelon is strategically placed in an effort to separate him from the cliché coon image. The relief he feels when acknowledging his dislike of watermelon seems to equal a feeling of liberation from the constraints of prevailing stereotypes. Yet, while he is desperate to avoid falling into the “coon” or “Sambo” categories, Lester has a hard time avoiding other stereotypes.

²⁶⁸ See William H. Higgins, “Boxing’s Sabo Twins: Racial Stereotypes in Jack Johnson and Joe Lewis Newspaper Cartoons, 1908 to 1938,” *Journal of Sport History* 15.3 (1988): 253. The pervasiveness of racist stereotypes and how they have found their way into the system of public media is outlined by William H. Higgins’ studies on the representation of the two African American boxers Joe Lewis and Jack Johnson in newspaper cartoons. He explains that “each appeared in American newspaper cartoons as personifications of the Sambo stereotype. Both boxers were depicted as ignorant, uncivilized brutes who dressed up in loud, bright colored clothing, wore gawdy jewelry and spoke in ungrammatical minstrel dialect. Despite their wealth, Johnson and Louis were depicted as chicken stealers and crap shooters by American cartoons. Watermelon and fried chicken were the staples of their diets. And both men, who displayed an uncommon sense of courage and self-motivation during their boxing careers, were ridiculed as being lazy, razor-toting, fearful Sambos.”

²⁶⁹ Donald Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, & Bucks – An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films* (New York: Continuum, 2001) 7.

²⁷⁰ Bogle 7.

²⁷¹ Watkins, *On the Real Side* 206.

Especially in his handling of gender roles and sexual intercourse, the protagonist assumes a behavior pattern in keeping with the racist image of the violent black “buck.” In his analysis of the representation of African Americans in films, Donald Bogle explains that “bucks are always big, baadddd niggers, oversexed and savage, violent and frenzied as they lust for white flesh.”²⁷² Dealing with his prostitute girlfriend, The Deb, Lester implicitly betrays a grasp for the prejudiced image of the oversexed and wild African American²⁷³ as it prevails in white racist thinking. Apparently aware of the significant power the clichéd black brute has over women, Lester imagines how his original hair, symbolizing his genuine African American nature, might enhance his male authority over his lover: “If I had my own natural kinky hair, ‘my thorny crown’²⁷⁴ (a most powerful weapon, I suddenly realized), The Deb wouldn’t be switching her tail around, acting so high and mighty, she would have known by the texture of my hair that I was a mean son of a bitch. I’d have made her eat dirt” (*Wig* 110-11). Momentarily mourning the loss of his racial marker, Lester feels inclined to switch back to the role of the misogynic black brute. In a later passage, readers even find the protagonist daydreaming violent sexual images: “Sweet brown girl, I’ll become a magician for you. Sweet brown girl. Bulldozing between your thighs” (*Wig* 53).

The notion that Lester is identifying with the discriminatory role of the sexually-driven and “often gratuitously vicious, black character”²⁷⁵ is strongly emphasized by the depiction of the aggressive sexual intercourse he has with The Deb. At one point, Lester admits that “driven by passion such as [he] had never known, [he] tried to ram [his] tongue down The Deb’s throat” (*Wig* 108). Shortly after this incident, he behaves even more ferociously, exposing his lusty urges to the fullest: “‘Scream,’ I laughed. ‘Scream your fucking head off. I’ve got you covered’” (*Wig* 108). The next time the protagonist has sexual intercourse with the prostitute, he resorts to physical violence: “I kicked her lightly on the chin, she fell back on the floor. I jumped off the bed. Ready, at attention. She whimpered. I

²⁷² Bogle 13-14.

²⁷³ See Gustav Jahoda, *Images Of Savages: Ancients [sic] Roots of Modern Prejudice in Western Culture* (London: Routledge, 1999) 70.

²⁷⁴ The religious imagery exploited repeatedly throughout the novel to express the enormous command The Wig as a symbol of whiteness has over the protagonist will be addressed at a later stage in more detail.

²⁷⁵ Watkins, *On the Real Side* 195.

mounted her right on the floor. She sighed and patted my forehead. I sighed. Irritable, I also frowned. 'Let's cut the James Bond bit. Let's get this show on the road'" (*Wig* 167). Although readers are never certain to what extent the protagonist's account fuses reality and imagination, the validity of Lester's narrative is secondary; what is most important is the psychological dimension, and the fact that he pictures himself in such role configurations. However, it is not only Lester who implicitly identifies with the role of the black brute; he gets pigeonholed by his own surroundings in a similar manner.

The protagonist's course strongly suggests that his behavior is a constant process of adapting to the expectations of others. When Lester and his friend Jimmie get into a taxi, the driver, apparently driven by purely stereotypical thinking, initially identifies the two as happy-go-lucky blacks. Ignorant of the serious roots behind forms of artistic expression developed under the constraints of slavery, the driver welcomes the two with an array of common stereotypes: "But you people are the greatest. You have so much soul. And how you can sing and dance. You must be the happiest people on the face of the earth" (*Wig* 70). Becoming increasingly unsure of his initial estimation of his two colored passengers, the driver is certain to identify the two figures in his backseat as aggressive and mean thugs. After the passengers have taken their seats, the driver applies the widely dispersed image of the dangerous African American brute to Lester and Jimmie: "I'm scared to death. I know you gonna take my leather straps and chains and beat me up. I know you gonna make black-and-blue marks all over me and take my money" (*Wig* 71-72). In expectation of a mugging, the driver begs his two bemused passengers to clobber him "and get it over with" (*Wig* 72). One could argue that the protagonist's violent and misogynic attitude toward The Deb is merely a reflection of the images and expectations society holds for young African American men. The idea of the protagonist alternating between several stereotypical roles is sustained by the hero himself acknowledging the act of role-playing, when he feels "ready to assume [his] lover-boy role" (*Wig* 45). While his sexual relationship with The Deb highlights Lester's vicious and unrestrained side, his unbending faith and optimism, in light of the exploitive sociopolitical apparatus acting upon him, positions Lester next to another stereotypical rendition of blackness: the cliché Uncle Tom figure.

Lester's attempts to participate in the Great Society are characterized by dogmatic faith in American society, its political system, and numerous cultural myths advocating the nation's allegedly unparalleled opportunity for accomplishment. This combination of calm contentment in the face of gross inequality renders Lester a modern-day Uncle Tom; referencing the good-natured plantation worker who never gets dejected or revolts, but even in the face of apparent exploitation remains "docile, childlike, [and] contented."²⁷⁶ Strikingly, when Jimmie complains about the sudden ending of his career as an actor, Lester advises him: "You could always pick cotton in Jersey" (*Wig* 33). Offended at the thought of working on a plantation after his successful years in show business, Jimmie declines just to hear Lester declare in cliché terms: "What the hell do you think I was doing last summer? *Where* do you think I got the money for the fried chicken I brought you on Sundays?" (*Wig* 34). Wright combines the symbolism of the plantation as a place of exploitation, and fried chicken as a racist simplification of African American cravings, to illustrate the degree to which his protagonist is caught up in contradictory expectations: as a U.S. citizen working to contribute to the success of the Great Society, and as an African American who must remain in his position and serve as a racial "other." In the course of the story, Lester repetitively betrays behavior patterns commonly associated with the cliché Uncle Tom figure. Eventually, Lester's attempt to leave stereotypes behind, while implicitly betraying awareness for them, is crucially inverted with his last attempt to rise up and participate in the Great Society. Studying different job offers, he makes a momentous decision:

So I threw the employment directory out of the window and made up my mind to see The King of Southern-Fried Chicken. I would become a chicken man. It wasn't work in the real sense of the word. The pay was \$90 for five and a half days, plus all the chicken you could eat on your day off. Not many young men lasted long with the Fried Chicken King, but I'd stick it out until I could do better. At least, I consoled myself, the feathers were electrified." (*Wig* 137)

Ultimately, Lester finds himself in the position of an advertising icon, dressed up as a chicken, and an object of acrid public ridicule. Fleeing from the image of the watermelon man, Lester embraces the very cliché he is so anxiously trying to leave

²⁷⁶ Watkins, *On the Real Side* 71.

behind. Impersonating a chicken in an utterly degrading employment, people are quick to conclude that the employee is “black as coal” (*Wig* 139). In light of the desperation and helplessness put on display by his new job, even The Deb, as the only person who is ever tempted to fall for the protagonist’s act of whitening, comes to the conclusion: “I know what you are – you’re a Nigger” (*Wig* 140). Still, his faith in his “white dream” remains undaunted as he resorts to impersonating another figure in the gallery of bigotry, namely that of Tom. Disgraced by people guessing whether he is “pushing pot,” “deaf and dumb,” or merely an exotic party gimmick, Lester remains steadfast in his faith in the social apparatus and attests: “All in all, it had been a rather interesting day. Things were looking up. My ship was at last docking, and *I* was safely guiding her into port” (*Wig* 139-140). Using the ship metaphor exploited repeatedly throughout the course of events, the protagonist remains obedient and optimistic even in the face of public humiliation; thus approximating the role of passive and dim-witted Tom: “Always as toms are chased, harassed, hounded, flogged, enslaved, and insulted, they keep their faith, n’er turn against their white massas, and remain hearty, submissive, stoic, generous, selfless, and oh-so-very kind.”²⁷⁷

As to the possibility of Lester becoming the nexus of various contradicting stereotyped roles one wonders how it is possible for these simplified notions of blackness to prevail in the first place. In fact, it was Alain Locke who, during the Harlem Renaissance, predicted the demise of such stereotypes and was certain that African American migration into the Northern capitals of the United States would force people to acknowledge African American culture in all its diversity. Certain that these developments would eventually lead to the eradication of simplistic concepts of blackness, Locke asserted that

this is what, even more than any ‘most creditable record of fifty years of freedom,’ requires that the Negro of to-day be seen through other than the dusty spectacles of past controversy. The day of ‘aunties,’ ‘uncles’ and ‘mamies’ is equally gone. Uncle Tom and Sambo have passed on, and even the ‘Colonel’ and ‘George’ play barnstorm roles from which they escape with relief when the public spotlight is off. The popular melodrama has about played itself out, and it is time to scrap the fictions, garret the bogeys and settle down to a realistic facing of facts.²⁷⁸

²⁷⁷ Bogle 6.

²⁷⁸ Locke 4-5.

With respect to Lester Jefferson's struggle to become successful, it seems as if Locke's prediction was overly optimistic. Lester's case of double consciousness, his approximating the expectations of others while developing considerable self-hate, exemplifies the longevity of racial stereotypes. The melodramatic oppositions and simplified models of perception which Locke addresses exert considerable influence over Wright's protagonist.

As acknowledged earlier, Wright's use of satire to portray an African American striving for a new self-consciousness and self-determination, is exceptional. Lester's effort to escape the tormenting influence of double consciousness through focusing on his American identity, however, is quite in keeping with the tenor of much African American writing from Wright's time. In his elaborations on the aesthetics of Black Arts and Black Power, Bernard Bell refers to Larry Neal's studies on the Black Arts Movement, putting emphasis on the fact that most writing of the time "was aimed at the destruction of the double consciousness described by DuBois."²⁷⁹ Examining Wright's novel from this angle, one can conclude that while the author's choice of technique may be extraordinary for its time, his concern fits the overall conditions rather well. As a matter of fact, the present analysis of Wright's targets and technique supports the notion that the novel "encapsulates a familiar theme within an unaccustomed covering."²⁸⁰

What makes *The Wig* special, then, is its use of satire, for this enables the author to fuse his protest with psychological analysis. That such achievement is extraordinary and deserves special accent is highlighted by the assertion that the literature of the time "has been aimed at consolidating the African-American personality. And it has not been essentially a literature of protest. It has, instead, turned its attention inward to the internal problems of the group. [...] It is a literature primarily directed at the conscience of black people."²⁸¹ Wright manages to focus on the conscience without neglecting his didactic mission. The question remains, however, why Lester assumes conflicting patterns of behavior, along with why it is that racist clichés have been able to survive. One factor which might not

²⁷⁹ Bell 133.

²⁸⁰ Weixlmann 290.

²⁸¹ Neal qtd. in Bell, *Novel* 135-136.

only be responsible for the protagonist's entropic "channel switching" of perceptions, but also for his complicated consciousness, is the ever-present manipulative influence of media images.

4.4 Mass Media Manipulation

In Wright's critique of the role and function of the media in a racist consumer culture, the music industry, the movie business, print media, and corporate television are all portrayed as strategic instruments in the dissemination and fortification of racist stereotypes. They are shown as being jointly responsible for the oppression of ethnic minorities. Planning a career in the music business, Lester and Jimmie have to face deep-seated racist stereotypes. When they first meet the frustrated musician referred to as "The Duke" in order to get their careers off the ground, the two experience how racist stereotypes have reshaped the narrative of music history. Informed of Jimmie and Lester's career plans as rock and roll singers, The Duke remarks not without derision: "Colored rock 'n' roll singers. That's a laugh. Sure you boys ain't trying to go white on me?" (*Wig* 64). Here, the novel implicitly comments on the recognized fact that the media, more often than not, has been reluctant, if not intentionally unwilling, to credit African American culture for its crucial contribution to the emergence of this new and highly successful type of music. In fact, the mass media had been anxious to conceal the roots of rock by trying to sell this style of music as a predominantly "white" achievement. In reality, however, it was not until the second wave of rock music that the style was crucially shaped by white artists. As Reebee Garofalo ascertains,

the second wave of rock 'n' roll performers to hit the charts were white. These were the rockabilly artists Elvis Presley, Carl Perkins, Gene Vincent Jerry Lee Lewis, and Johnny Cash and their country cousins, the Everly Brothers and Buddy Holly. Their music was widely regarded as an amalgam of rhythm and blues and country and western, the first tradition being upheld by black artists, and the second by predominantly white ones.²⁸²

²⁸² Reebee Garofalo, "Crossing Over: 1939-1992," *Split Image. African Americans in the Mass Media*, ed. Jannette L. Dates and William Barlow (Washington: Howard UP, 1993) 75.

In the world of *The Wig*, the first wave of rock and roll music, along with its foundation in African American culture, is kept largely invisible. Lester and Jimmie experience how African American cultural accomplishments are claimed by the dominating social system and how artists are restrained and controlled by institutionalized inequality. The effects of this tendency were by no means restricted to the time of the Civil Rights Movement, but are observable to this day, with Elvis Presley being hailed the king of rock music. From an American perspective, it has been widely acknowledged that Presley's title should rightfully be awarded to his African American forerunners: "were it not for the dynamics of racism in our society, the man who would most likely have been crowned the 'King of Rock 'n' Roll' was the son of a carpenter from St. Louis – Chuck Berry."²⁸³ However, denying the cultural roots of rock music offers just one subtle outline of Wright's objective.

When Lester and Jimmie meet Mr. Sunflower Ashley-Smithe, A&R of Paradise Records, they learn the hard lesson that individuality and creativity are not in demand, and that the music industry is only interested in exploiting African American talents according to established stereotypes. With a firmly fixed conception of artistic expression that African Americans can come up with, the manager asserts: "Let's see if you're colored" (*Wig* 81). When the two fail to meet his expectations, Ashley-Smithe does not resort to specific personal criticism but rather excoriates the two for failing to live up to a common stereotype: "You are both a disgrace to your colored brethren *and* to this great republic! Why, you poor sobs can't even carry a tune" (*Wig* 83). Wright sheds light on capitalist norms that started to surface in the music industry as soon as music turned into a professional business; norms that have yet to be fully eradicated. Referring to the time between the World Wars when commercial jazz and blues became popular, William Barlow gives an overview of the practices that emerge as targets in Wright's novel:

The cultural biases inherent in the business practices of the managers and producers who controlled the race record operation created a series of obstacles that confronted black musicians even after they signed with a record label. The inability of the industry's hierarchy to appreciate blues, gospel, and jazz as anything other than entertaining modes of music popular among a lower socioeconomic class of citizens reinforced their stereotypical

²⁸³ Garofalo 73.

understanding of African American music and its creators. Very few were able to recognize that gospel, jazz, and blues were a family of musical art forms with long-standing, cherished folk traditions. This cultural blind spot often worked to compromise the artistic careers of black musicians and performers who managed to secure employment in the industry. They quickly discovered that their employers had preconceived ideas about how they should sound, and even look.²⁸⁴

In accordance with Barlow's critique of the discriminatory practices in the music industry, Wright makes it very explicit that the sole way for an artist to be successful, in such an arrangement, is by appealing to the greater white society. An African American artist is thus forced into the role of Sambo, the self-sacrificing black entertainer sold to the pleasure-seeking white masses. This notion is expressed most openly by Ashley-Smithe, who makes no secret of the fact that he is primarily looking for cliché performers readily sellable to the white public. He openly asserts: "I've worked hard to help my colored brethren and fortunately you've got what the white people want" (*Wig* 80). The thought of African American people having to sell themselves in roles adhering to racist stereotypes is further sustained by Wright's treatment of the film industry.

Along the same lines as the critique launched at the music industry, events in the novel suggest that the film industry also takes measures to support a discriminative society that allows systematic racism to prevail. Among these techniques is the creation of racist role configurations which cast African Americans in humiliating roles. The protagonist's friend and ex-Hollywood actor Little Jimmie Wishbone is presented as a former instrument of the industry to substantiate these prevailing racist stereotypes. While Jimmie prides himself on his previous existence as "a movie star of the first rank," Wright gives evidence for the assumption that Wishbone's entire career was based on self-denigration (*Wig* 62). The screenplay lines he quotes from his films are characterized by preconceived notions of black social dialect and black inferiority. With lines such as "No sur. Me caint weed nor wight to save muh name...'," significantly from a picture called *The Educated Man*, "he made the whole country laugh" (*Wig* 63).

²⁸⁴ William Barlow, "Cashing In: 1900-1939," *Split Image. African Americans in the Mass Media*, ed. Jannette L. Dates and William Barlow (Washington: Howard UP, 1993) 52.

As his success is tied to the demeaning role of the dim-witted national laughing stock, Jimmie's career resembles a custom in Hollywood that was especially pronounced up to the mid 1970s. A widespread theme, commonly exploited for "white" laughter, were the clumsy endeavors of black people to mimic what they seemed to identify as "white" behavior, simultaneously highlighting alleged black primitivism and white superiority. In her analysis of the "Andy 'n' Amos" show, a situation comedy in blackface aired from the 1920s to the 1950s, Jannette L. Dates notes that "white writers used to draw laughs at the expense of the black 'predicament' – implicitly, that black people want to be white or, at the best, to act as they believe white people act. However, blacks are depicted as obviously ill-equipped to achieve that end."²⁸⁵ One can argue that through Lester's grotesque attempts to better his condition by learning "the art of being white," *The Wig* signifies heavily on the humiliating portrayal of African Americans on television shows (*Wig* 49). Lester himself is caught up in the role of a pitiable impersonator of whiteness, exploited and eventually driven to castration by discriminative surroundings. Unlike the television shows *The Wig* signifies on, however, the novel's tragic backdrop defies jocular laughter on the part of the reader. It apparently does not matter to Jimmie that his audience laughs as he ridicules and denigrates the entire African American population.

As is the case with most satire, Wright's satiric concern is deeply rooted in historical fact. The scarcity of jobs in the entertainment industry, combined with the prevalence of predefined roles that were shaped by the demands of a racist market, are what drives Jimmie into his career, and was also a very real problem for African American actors. As Ash Corea mentions,

one question that must not be avoided is why African Americans agreed to portray themselves and their race in such a demeaning manner. The answer is simple: job opportunities. African American actors were overwhelmingly excluded from TV and film except as infrequent guest stars on variety shows or as 'walk-ons' (usually in the role of house servants); very rarely were they stars in filmed or live drama.²⁸⁶

²⁸⁵ Jannette L. Dates, "Commercial Television," *Split Image. African Americans in the Mass Media*, ed. Jannette L. Dates and William Barlow (Washington: Howard UP, 1993) 287.

²⁸⁶ Ash Corea, "Racism and the way of Media," *Questioning the Media – A Critical Introduction*, ed. John Downing (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 1995) 356.

Jimmie pursues the one way he can earn a living in the entertainment industry. In his roles, he always plays characters modeled on white racist thinking, either when representing the hopeless alcoholic and potential criminal “on skid row” or the faceless former slave signing his name with a rubber stamp and an X (*Wig* 42). Thus he was never able to use his artistic influence to fight the surrounding racist system, but, rather, was complicit in reinforcing institutionalized racism. Jimmie stands as an exemplary figure for many actors of the time when the movie business was drenched in systematic discrimination. Thomas Cripps elucidates how black roles figured into systematic racism and explains that “a good black role became one that confirmed the enduring system and the place of white people in it, so that any deviant black role leached through the surface only as a sort of Freudian slip.”²⁸⁷ Yet, the fact that most black roles participated in a racist system does not necessarily infer an openly racist intent behind such screenplays.

As a matter of fact, those directors who tried to dissociate themselves from racist stereotypes often rigorously inverted common clichés and thus unintentionally created grossly simplified movie representations of African Americans. John and Catherine Silk argue that even those film-makers who were anxious to break with the tradition of racist stereotypes during and after the Civil Rights Movement mostly portrayed African Americans in terms of widespread clichés:

However, there were a few films, other than those with all-black casts, which featured blacks like Sidney Poitier and Harry Belafonte in leading roles. Uncertain how to proceed when departing from the pre-war stereotypes, screenwriters and directors produced yet another – black characters so selfless that no one could object to them on the grounds that they were demeaning, or accuse the film-makers of racism.²⁸⁸

In the case of Jimmie Wishbone, a career of hapless manipulation within a racist system finally takes its toll on the former actor, as he seems to be immersed in submissive roles. While he frequently indulges in memories of his glorious past, he is also quick to introduce himself with the undignified line: “I is Little Jimmie Wishbone from Aukinsaw” (*Wig* 42). However, as dim-witted and mindless as

²⁸⁷ Thomas Cripps, “Film,” *Split Image. African Americans in the Mass Media*, ed. Jannette L. Dates and William Barlow (Washington: Howard UP, 1993) 143.

²⁸⁸ Catherine Silk and John Silk, *Racism and anti-racism in popular culture: Portrayals of African-Americans in Fiction and Film* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1990) 160.

Jimmie was cast in his movies, he does reveal awareness of his delicate political function as a former black actor. Indicating an understanding of his role in the sociopolitical superstructure, he explains to his friend Lester: “I worked for the government, man. I kept one hundred million colored people contented for years. And in turn, I made the white people happy” (*Wig* 34). The significant degree to which such degrading representations of African Americans informed public opinion, and thus figure into the creation of social reality, is traceable in the novel. Just as the taxi driver who asserts confidently that he “never knew a colored person that didn’t have a fine singing voice,” the doctors Little Jimmie consults to check for ulcers perceive of African Americans in accordance with widespread racist stereotypes (*Wig* 73). In keeping with the movie roles Jimmie played, the doctors inform him of his racial inferiority:

Time and time again the doctors had explained to him that Negroes did not have bleeding ulcers nor did they need sleeping pills. American Negroes, they explained, were free as birds and animals in a rich green forest. Childlike creatures, their minds ran the gamut from Yes Sir to No Sir. There was simply no occasion for ulcers. (*Wig* 31-32)

However, one does not have to go farther than Jimmie’s immediate surroundings to identify the novel’s most powerful example of the manipulative power held by media images. Among those characters kept contented by movie roles, such as those played by Jimmie, is Lester Jefferson. Completely unaware of Jimmie’s function in a racist system, Lester describes his friend as a former cultural hero: “In his heyday, he’d been unique: a real person, an offbeat hero. Now he was only a confused shadow” (*Wig* 36). Yet, Lester’s perception is not only shaped by movie impressions, but in general by the system of public media in a capitalist society.

The degree to which the protagonist is influenced by the media is observable throughout the novel, as Lester repeatedly refers to magazine articles or television shows as his major source of information. Preparing for his career in the music business, he notes: “‘Stars are always collected and cool.’ It was something I had read in a gossip column. I liked the sound: collected and cool” (*Wig* 77). The *Amsterdam News* informs the protagonist about the latest trends, including “that polar-bear rugs [are] obsolete” (*Wig* 37). Occasionally, Lester directly articulates how much he relies on media images and secondary experiences. He is confident that if his father had been prophetic, he would have

instructed him from behind the morning paper about his inevitable social ascension: "I've seen those damn ads and motion pictures. I know how fathers act at the breakfast table" (*Wig* 28-29). Similarly, Lester's permanently pregnant acquaintance, Nonnie Swift is concerned about her child being born into the "unchained slavery" of Harlem (*Wig* 15). Due to her lack of first-hand experience, Lester deems it likely that this anxiety stems from her having "[seen] it and heard it all in the movies" (*Wig* 16).

It is important to note, however, that the influence of the media on Lester Jefferson goes beyond the dissemination of information. It is largely responsible for the protagonist's peculiar way of perceiving the world. In the protagonist's mind, impressions are frequently rendered according to media images, translating every perception into a media event. Readers find Lester smiling "lightly, like a young man in a four-color ad," Miss Sandra Hanover striking "a *Vogue* pose," and his girlfriend moving her legs "like those butch fruit cowboys on television" (*Wig* 27, 21, 111). But Lester is not the only person under the influence of media images. Miss Sandra Hanover constantly renders her own behavior along the lines of television celebrities such as Bette Davis, Miss Scarlett O'Hara, and Vivien Leigh (*Wig* 20). It stands to reason that the ever-present images of celebrities and social-climbers stimulate Lester's continuation down a pointless path. With respect to the pervasiveness of the American Dream concept in the media, Sut Jhally and Justin Lewis delineate the controlling media apparatus which keeps Lester firmly on his course, by claiming that "these pictures from the 'American Dream' are paraded in front of us in sitcoms and drama series night after night. In television land, everybody, or everybody with an ounce of merit, is making it."²⁸⁹ Eventually, the combination of media manipulation and capitalism holds severe consequences for the protagonist.

Lester is constantly chasing mirages which are unattainable for him. His dreams of self-realization are rendered in terms of celebrities and status symbols, his ultimate dream involving financial freedom and working social relationships. Physically, he pictures himself with "Dizzy Dean arms, mak[ing] an effortless Jesse

²⁸⁹ Sut Jhally and Justin Lewis, "Affirming Inaction: Television and the New Politics of Race," *Marxism in the Postmodern Age: Confronting the New World Order*, eds. Antonio Callari, Stephen Cullenberg, Carole Biewener (New York: Guildford Press, 1995) 135.

Owens leap, lung[ing] like Johnny Unitas” and imagines club-women with “Edith Lances bras” (*Wig* 120, 57). It is on the basis of media images that Lester comprehends how his vision of social amelioration can only be realized by a change of outer appearance. Accordingly, it is in a commercial hair straightening product that he believes he has found the key to social breakthrough. The sales clerk assures him that “with this, you may become whatever you desire” (*Wig* 8). Lester’s expectations are reinforced by the bold-lettered promises on the product’s packaging: “The red, white, and gold label guarantees that the user can go deep-sea diving, emerge from the water, and shake his head triumphantly like any white boy. This miracle with the scent of wild roses looks like vanilla ice cream and is capable of softening in sufficiently Negroid hands” (*Wig* 10). Lester’s futile endeavor to rise up and gain the status of an equal citizen illustrates how a capitalist culture can benefit from discrimination by simply presenting unattainable desires, and then offering products as alleged ways to attain such dreams.

This particular presentation of the American Dream as universally attainable and African Americans as simple-minded and socially inferior people is indirectly responsible for Lester’s convoluted consciousness. He seems to be guided by these schemes, with his entropic mind changing channels in rapid sequence; as a consequence, he finds confirmation in his conviction that African Americans have no choice but to assimilate to white standards, or remain in the lowest social stratum. Furthermore, it can be argued that the protagonist’s aggressive and disproportionate sexuality is also merely a reaction to preconceived media images such as magazine reports about “a sexual outrage” caused by the Negro youth (*Wig* 51). The author indicates that the distribution of prejudiced and utterly denigrating representations of African Americans leads to an affirmation of racist stereotypes in the white population, as well as a growing feeling of inadequacy among ethnic minorities. Apparently, it is this feeling of inferiority which amplifies Lester’s urgent desire to inscribe himself into the dominant white narrative. While Jimmie feels certain that all he did with his movies was to keep “one hundred million colored people contented for years” and that he at the same time “made the white people happy,” Lester’s contradictory actions which show the protagonist restlessly alternating between stereotyped

behavior patterns suggest profound negative consequences for African Americans (*Wig* 34). At the same time, it is possible to identify profiteers in this cycle of sustained discrimination.

The portrayal of the music and film industries proposes that African Americans are not respected as individual artists, but instead are used to nourish and exploit common racist stereotypes. There are several instances in the novel which suggest that Wright is insistent on disclosing the absurdity of African Americans having to side with the oppressor and mold themselves to the very clichés which victimize them, in order to survive in a capitalist economy. This assumption is supported by Lester's encounter with the owner of the Black Disaster Diner. As soon as the owner identifies Lester as African American, he is forced to leave the restaurant:

“I am the owner and I refuse to serve you. All you spicks and niggers are the cause of my troubles.”

“If that's the way you feel about it,” I said.

“Git out,” the tall man shouted. His whole body trembled. “You people are ruining me. I've been in business twenty years and the white people have loved me and I've been happy.” (*Wig* 162)

By attempting to appeal to the wealthy white middle class, the owner of the diner has found a way to make a living in a racist system. His career mirrors Jimmie Wishbone's “successful” time in the film industry. The well-off white middle class dictates the diner's policy, turning the place into a showcase of racist stereotypes, as suggested by the name “Black Disaster Diner.” Along the lines of Jimmie's time as an actor, the owner of the diner fully submits to the demands of his oppressors. Furthermore, events in the novel suggest there is a small group of wealthy African Americans who are respected by the racist system for their economic value. Another example is the taxi driver who categorizes Lester and Jimmie according to established racist stereotypes, only calming down once Jimmie and Lester describe themselves as members of the brass section from Tin Pan Alley. The driver seems to distinguish the two as specimens of the economically useful African American and what keeps him from resorting to violence is not sympathy for his fellow countrymen, but financial considerations, as he “wouldn't wanna do nothing that would fuck up the economy” (*Wig* 71). Such reading of the text supports the notion that Wright is concerned with articulating the greed of a social community that

values economic gain over humanity and employs stereotyped representation to maintain racial hierarchies. Through Lester, readers explore a world in which financial interests override all humanitarian assets. In this respect, *The Wig* resembles the socioeconomic picture drawn by Schuyler in *Black No More*. After all, there are striking parallels between the role financial factors play in Lester's life and its social importance according to Schuyler. Considering the novel's date of publication, it is also important to negotiate the capitalism and greed in *The Wig* within the framework of the Great Society, or, perhaps more appropriately titled, "The Greed Society."

4.5 The Greed Society

"We are citizens of the richest and most fortunate nation in the history of the world. One hundred and eighty years ago we were a small country struggling for survival on the margin of a hostile land. Today we have established a civilization of free men which spans an entire continent. [...] The path forward has not been an easy one. But we have never lost sight of our goal – an America in which every citizen shares all the opportunities of his society, in which every man has a chance to advance his welfare to the limits of his capacities."²⁹⁰

The above quote is exemplary of the rhetoric which Lyndon B. Johnson used to introduce his ambitions for presidency which spanned the time between 1963 and 1969. Among the president's central concerns was a political vision of equality and prosperity for the broad public in the United States. Borrowing heavily from the atmosphere of glaring optimism and limitless hope that radiated from Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal agenda, which Johnson experienced during his later college years, he approached America's most vexing problems with confidence and strong character. In order to incite hope among the people, Johnson's political rhetoric exploited the positive connotations of the American Dream and was characterized by bold proclamations to the nation.²⁹¹ One has to be familiar with the quality and pervasiveness of Johnson's pledge of a better life for obedient citizens in order to

²⁹⁰ Lyndon B. Johnson, "Total Victory over Poverty," *The Failure of American Liberalism after the Great Society*, ed. Marvin E. Gettleman (New York: Vintage, 1971) 181.

²⁹¹ See, for instance, Kearns.

grasp the specific political climate which serves as a backdrop for Lester Jefferson's actions.

Johnson's general vision of the United States as a land of opportunity, as it resonates in his previous quote, delivers a wide range of promises to diverse social and ethnic groups. Important aspects of his political vision, which was termed the Great Society, include the abatement of both poverty and racial inequality. For every predicament Johnson appeared able to identify a solution, turning his model of the Great Society, as it were, into a political all-purpose tool. Doris Kearns' outline of the President's program demonstrates the wide range of this concept, held together, as it were, only by its encompassing pledge to improve:

The Great Society would offer something to almost everyone: Medicare for the old, educational assistance for the young, tax rebates for business, a higher minimum wage for labor, subsidies for farmers, vocational training for the unskilled, food for the hungry, housing for the homeless, poverty grants for the poor, clean highways for commuters, legal protection for the blacks, improved schooling for the Indians, rehabilitation for the lame, higher benefits for the unemployed, reduced quotas for the immigrants, auto safety for drivers, pensions for the retired, fair labelling for consumers, conservation for the hikers and the campers, and more and more and more. None of his fellow citizens' desires were, Johnson thought, wholly beyond his ability to satisfy.²⁹²

Enchanted by such an opportunity to get ahead, Wright's protagonist fully buys into the idea of the Great Society as a comprehensive materialization of the American Dream. In fact, the protagonist's futile attempts to become a part of the Great Society constitute the basic plot for Wright's novel. Repeatedly, Lester stresses his ambition to take part in the broad upward movement predicted by the President: "I was dreaming, not of a white Christmas, I was dreaming of becoming part of The Great Society" (*Wig* 138). Johnson's political agenda, however, not only aimed toward the attainability of success and improvement, but its rhetorical strategy propagated the necessity and obligation of each and every individual to reflect their own social position and to fight poverty in their immediate surroundings. This idea of the Great Society as a strategy to enact social change by way of the broad public, is captured by Marshall Kaplan and Peggy Cuciti. In *The*

²⁹² Kearns 216.

Great Society and Its Legacy, Kaplan and Cuciti place emphasis on Johnson's plan as a stimulus to trigger a positive chain reaction of self-help and social improvement:

Its goal was to provide an opportunity for full participation in American political and economic life so that all might have a share of its abundance. Poverty in the midst of plenty was deplored and the federal government assumed primary responsibility for achieving change. Residents of the "other America" were to be pulled out of the "cycle of poverty" so that they might become an integral part of the national community.²⁹³

This idea of "pulling" socially marginalized individuals into the dominant social narrative plays a crucial role in Wright's novel, for it gives direction to the protagonist's actions. As a matter of fact, the point of departure for Lester's diverse endeavors of social amelioration is not only a feeling of opportunity, but, first and foremost, one of obligation, fanned by his impression that "everyone seem[s] to jet toward the goal of the Great Society, while [he] remain[s] in the outhouse" (*Wig* 7). Lester constantly articulates his belief in the concept of the Great Society, and that the "Amen train to success"²⁹⁴ actually exists as a catapult on which he, too, can embark (*Wig* 57). The unrelenting hope exhibited by the protagonist reflects conventional American optimism through which the successful few are not condemned in their abundance, but worshipped as role models. Kearns outlines this mindset, as it can also be found in Wright's protagonist, and confirms that

the prosperity of others – even the most outrageous luxuries of the very wealthy – did not inspire envy or thoughts of revolution. They were a spur to their own progress. They saw not the dusty, shabby homes in which they were presently living, but the shiny new homes they would build when their labor was rewarded with economic success.²⁹⁵

Proceeding from the assumption that it is this politically induced sense of social obligation that stimulates the protagonist's actions, it is helpful to draw parallels between *The Wig's* satiric critique and that articulated in Schuyler's novel. If *Black No More* is Schuyler's simulated experiment to explore the core workings

²⁹³ Marshall Kaplan and Peggy L. Cuciti, Introduction, *The Great Society and Its Legacy*, ed. Marshall Kaplan and Peggy L. Cuciti (Durham: Duke UP, 1986) 2.

²⁹⁴ See Kreutzer 155. Kreutzer comments on the symbolic significance of the given passage and states that "the subway is a particularly potent – and traditional – symbol in this context. The A-train connects Harlem and downtown Manhattan as a subversive vehicle in both directions: providing access to an enclave of hidden pleasures as well as an escape route from the dark ghetto. When the invitation to take the A-train is transmogrified into a sarcasm about the 'A-men train to success' it undermines a black accommodationist attitude."

²⁹⁵ Kearns 61.

of a discriminative society, *The Wig* may be interpreted as a gedanken-experiment as well. Wright introduces readers to an individual scenario of what ensues if a marginalized party follows the idealized political concept of the Great Society. Due to the fact that Wright sets up a first-person narrator and his individual fate in the American sociopolitical structure, the author's satiric critique is articulated solely through the hero and his actions. Determined to "work like a slave," the protagonist plots his claim on the American Dream (*Wig* 7).

Lester's attempt to realize his personal success story through the virtues of diligence and industry can be considered a direct response to the "success scheme" which had been distributed to the African American community during that time. As civil-rights advocate Stokely Carmichael and political scientist Charles Hamilton assert in *Black Power*, "the black community was told time and again how other immigrants finally won acceptance: that is, by following the Protestant Ethic of Work and Achievement. They worked hard; therefore, they achieved."²⁹⁶ Carmichael and Hamilton elaborate that for propagandistic purposes, those responsible for the distribution of these myths often consciously omitted the fact that these success stories were more often than not preceded by severe arguments on diverse sociopolitical stages. To secure the profitable albeit unjust status quo, African Americans "were not told that it was by building Irish Power, Italian Power, Polish Power or Jewish Power that these groups got themselves together and operated from positions of strength."²⁹⁷ Lester embodies this unawareness, because he never operates from a position of strength and self-confidence, but rather one of insecurity and obedience. In *The Wig*, the notion that the protagonist is lured into submission by the promise of the American Dream, and cunningly exploited by the sociopolitical apparatus, is supported by Lester's awareness of people in the public eye. Therefore, it is important to keep in mind that the celebrities frequently spoken of in Lester's reports are mostly traditional models of the American Dream of success.

Crucially influenced by an ever-present rhetoric of success and ascension, Lester sticks firmly to his path, which eventually turns out to be part of a vicious

²⁹⁶ Stokely Carmichael and Charles V. Hamilton, *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation in America* (New York: Vintage, 1967) 51.

²⁹⁷ Carmichael and Hamilton 51.

circle. The protagonist does not despair or lose faith in the alleged progress of the diligent, but is certain that virtually any occupation could lift him out of his plight. After his painful rejection by the entertainment industry, the protagonist aims decidedly lower for his future ambitions: "I was destined for a higher calling. Perhaps not Madison Avenue or Wall Street. No. A real man-sized job. A porter, a bus boy, shoeshine boy, a swing on my father's old Pullman run" (*Wig* 85). With his unbending work ethic, Lester tries to make his degrading occupation as a chicken man the launch pad for his career. While he is making an effort to rid himself of his social and racial origin through perseverance and chemical bleaching, his humiliating job marks him unambiguously as a member of the oppressed and socially outcast minority. One can assume that the denigrating employment as a chicken impersonator betrays Lester's helplessness and leads to public astonishment, as pedestrians exclaim: "Jesus! What some people won't do for money" (*Wig* 140). Furthermore, people draw conclusions about the nature of the employee and ascertain that "he's white but I bet if you plucked those feathers off of him you'd find out he's black as coal" (*Wig* 139). Despite the fact that Lester is concealed under a costume, he is still identifiable as a member of a socially marginalized group. In almost allegorical fashion, the chicken costume as a social and, to a certain degree, racial marker neutralizes The Wig's desired effect of social amelioration: "I'd planned to touch up my hair with Silky Smooth because the hood of the chicken costume had pressed my curls against my skull. But for the moment Silky Smooth had lost its groove" (*Wig* 141). Ultimately, as Lester comes to realize that his various attempts to recreate his identity have failed, his forlorn situation begins to dawn on him and he thinks: "all that stuff in the papers and no one knew who I was. Impersonating a chicken, cackling, I was alone" (*Wig* 152). At least for the attentive reader, the protagonist's dream of "becoming part of The Great Society" turns out to be a nightmare (*Wig* 138). In this way, it becomes apparent that Wright's dystopia is thematically akin to Schuyler's *Black No More*.

4.6 The Socioeconomic Machinery at Work

For readers attempting to classify Wright's novel as satire, it is valuable to trace the author's stance and the perspective from which he submits his targets to ironic inversion. In this respect, one cannot afford to neglect the significance of narrative perspective. As noted earlier, the reliable third-person narrator who increasingly resorts to stable irony to safely guide readers through the mad world of *Black No More* is nowhere to be found. Still, irony plays just as important a role in *The Wig* as it does in Schuyler's novel. The quality and nature of the irony situated at the core of *The Wig*, however, differs remarkably from that found in *Black No More*. The irony involved in *The Wig* is, for the most part, structural, as it relies on the reversal of readers' expectations.²⁹⁸ Recipients readily recognize that Lester cannot be trusted and that his account repeatedly gives strong evidence to doubt his report.

Among such evidence and in stark contrast to the protagonist's African American heritage is Lester's use of right-wing metaphors to describe his inner state. Readers encounter Lester walking "Nazi-proud" toward the heart of Harlem, and bidding his friend farewell with "clansmen goodbyes" (*Wig* 35, 69). When hallucinating under the influence of marijuana, the protagonist is described as feeling powerful "like Hitler" (*Wig* 90). Eventually, the protagonist is deprived of virtually all his mental capacity when he encounters a beggar who describes himself as a runaway slave. Convinced of the man's sincerity, Lester reports: "I got the fifty from my suit-coat pocket and gave it to the man – not because I was frightened or generous or worried about sleepless nights – I gave the man the fifty because he looked like a slave. I knew he was a slave. I have a genius for detecting slaves" (*Wig* 101). Again, Lester's mental reports are undermined by his deeds. After several setbacks and repeated denigration by a racially prejudiced system, he fails to realize that he himself is a slave to capitalism, while at the same time claiming to possess a shrewd eye for spotting the exploited. Confused by the

²⁹⁸ It turns out fairly early on in Wright's novel that any attempt to trace literal irony and investigate whether there are differences between the things Lester states and what he really means are in vain. The reader realizes that Lester's perspective is not governed by the sophisticated criticism of someone removed from the chaos, castigating a moribund world with contemptuous irony. As a matter of fact, quite the opposite is true. Making use of physiologization, Wright abandons Lester to a system that he can neither understand nor seriously challenge. He is thus never in a position to punish an unjust system with biting irony.

paradoxical observations of an African American white supremacist, readers are strongly urged to probe beneath the unreliable narrator in an effort to uncover the author's intent.

The ironic implications of the first-person narration are highly unstable and thus easily overlooked throughout the novel. To analyze Lester's account for ironic implications, readers must possess the same knowledge as the author. In order to be decoded, Lester's report demands an understanding of African American culture, and to a certain extent, global race relations. An example of the instability of irony that results from this vast amount of presupposed knowledge can be found in the following passage, which is taken from a conversation between the protagonist and his friend Jimmie Wishbone, while walking through New York:

Presently, Little Jimmie would see the legendary Apollo Theater, its lobby a bower of plastic out-of-season flowers, shuttered and forlorn, due to the management's judgment (bad) in booking a string quartet from South Africa. This had shocked the entire city. The Mayor held a press conference. [...] They mourned the loss of Negro music. (*Wig* 36)

In order to detect the absurdity of the depicted situation, one has to be aware that during the time of apartheid, a South African orchestra would invariably be composed of white musicians. This passage is exemplary of how Wright handles irony in the novel, as a concept which should be understood in the sense of implied meanings, rather than a reversal of the literal meaning given. While these forms of irony are unstable, the search for stable irony remains largely without result. The biting use of stable irony demands a certain cunning and mental power which Wright does not grant to his protagonist. While Schuyler's narrator reports from an elevated position and not without arrogance follows the demise of a racist system and submits racial leaders and greedy hypocrites to ironic critique, Wright chooses a different approach. The satiric targets in *Black No More* are, especially toward the end of the novel, readily identifiable in ironic implications; Wright's critique, however, remains entirely implicit. In fact, one can make a case for the novel being an enormous understatement of the power of social conditioning. One may then ask why Wright, rather than Schuyler, reverts to this technique.

Robert Harris's explanation of "understatement" as a satiric technique offers valuable clues to answer this question. Harris states that the implementation of understatement "is useful in cases where the evil is already so great that it can

scarcely be exaggerated.”²⁹⁹ In *Black No More*, Schuyler sets out to implicitly demonstrate the negative disposition of man, showing how different sociopolitical phenomena serve to satisfy human greed for power and money. To achieve such an objective in its full breadth, he makes broad use of genre-specific generalization. Thus, the novel never zooms in on an individual, and character traits are only important as far as they resemble the author’s pessimistic outlook on human nature. This reduction and scaling down of society in order to launch an encompassing critique of mankind forces Schuyler to resort to overstatement in order to present the ensuing chaos and its diverse causes on a similar scale. Conversely, Wright implicitly suggests the harmful effects of his satiric targets for the greater society by focusing on one specific individual: Lester Jefferson. The psychological conflicts and the sheer madness residing in this character as the result of the social ill the author identifies could hardly be overstated. One could thus argue that the immediate portrayal of a single victim necessitates Wright’s broad use of understatement. One must then keep in mind that the protagonist’s fate serves as a synecdochal tale on which the author’s sustained critique of the Great Society is imprinted.

Lester’s futile struggle to better his social situation and to lead a life that lives up to the political rhetoric of the time fails altogether. His downward trajectory is accompanied by a permanent pursuit of economic success on the one hand and affluent pleasure on the other – as he finds it epitomized in the celebrities that govern his perception. It can be asserted that Wright addresses a very real problem as the media discourse of the time propagated precise notions as to how success should be expressed and enjoyed. Cornel West summarizes this strand of critique, arguing that

the civil rights movement permitted significant numbers of black Americans to benefit from the American economic boom – to get a small, yet juicy piece of the expanding American pie. And for most of those who had the education, skills, and ingenuity to get a piece, mass culture (TV, radio, films) dictated what they should do with it – gain peace of mind and pleasure of body from what they could buy. Like any American group achieving contemporary middle-class station for the first time, black entree into the

²⁹⁹ Harris, “Purpose.”

culture of consumption made status an obsession and addiction to stimulation a way of life.³⁰⁰

Through Lester Jefferson's tragic fate, Wright articulates how this obsession influences the lives of many people for whom success is out of reach. But Wright's criticism also holds a challenge for its readers, since the question regarding the severity with which the satirist brings forth his claims is not easily answered.

For the novel's critics and recipients, it is hard to identify whether Wright's critique follows a Juvenalian or a Horatian attitude. Departing from a definition of Juvenalian satire as being harsh in tone to attack dire vices, one could rightfully claim that any satiric work targeting racism inescapably betrays Juvenalian traces; *The Wig* would be no exception. Lester's castration puts a violent and bleak end to his continual switching between racist stereotypes. He cannot be the oversexed black brute anymore, but must settle for the role of an impotent black servant caught in a system infested with racism. He has come full circle, for, as West elucidates, "the dominant myths draw black women and men either as threatening creatures who have the potential for sexual power over whites, or as harmless, desexed underlings of a white culture."³⁰¹ On a figurative level, however, the symbolic significance of the impossibility of procreation epitomizes the inevitable death of an entire culture. Wright, by doing so, suggests that steps toward socially and racially encompassing welfare will never be achieved by a political agenda based on rigorous integration, since, as Wright exemplifies through his protagonist, assimilation into a system characterized by systematic discrimination essentially encourages and supports racist thinking. Therefore, the sociopolitical apparatus, as described by Wright, is a vicious circle for social outsiders: while racism and the aligned practices of discrimination put pressure on marginalized people to assimilate to the dominant social sphere, their efforts to do so strengthen racist structures.

The affirmation of racist values firmly shuts the door to economic and social success for members of minority groups altogether. One can contend that the moment Lester tries to attain acceptance as a human being by becoming white, he is engaging in his own dehumanization. Linguistically, this notion finds

³⁰⁰ West, *Race Matters* 55.

³⁰¹ West, *Race Matters* 119.

manifestation in the transformation of a living organism to a lifeless and artificial wig. Accordingly, although the agenda of the Great Society appears to include the advancement of African Americans, “it cannot do so by the very nature of this nation’s political and economic system, which imposes institutional racism on the black masses if not upon every individual black.”³⁰² In the case Wright makes against integration and the power of social conditioning, his novel represents a widespread critique that was launched against the model of the Great Society, especially from an African American perspective. As Carmichael and Hamilton emphasize,

“integration” as a goal today speaks to the problem of blackness not only in an unrealistic way but also in a despicable way. It is based on complete acceptance of the fact that in order to have a decent house or education, black people must move into a white neighborhood or send their children to a white school. This reinforces, among both black and white, the idea that ‘white’ is automatically superior and ‘black’ is by definition inferior. For this reason, ‘integration’ is a subterfuge for the maintenance of white supremacy.³⁰³

In the proposed context of Wright’s critique, the protagonist’s castration symbolizes what Carmichael and Hamilton predict as the inevitable consequence of assimilation, namely the “abolish[ment] of the black community.”³⁰⁴ Yet, although Lester’s tale takes unfortunate turns for him, he is not a generic rendition of the “black fool.”

The wrong depicted by the author only resides in Lester as far as his willingness to conform is concerned, the corruptive machinery as the author’s main target cannot be found within Lester, for it transcends the individual. In light of the social conditions existing in the world of *The Wig*, it is understandable why the author commented in an interview on the protagonist of his second novel with the words: “if anyone needs understanding and sympathy, it’s him.”³⁰⁵ Lester Jefferson is clearly not a representation of “the black fool,” but rather a victim of the conditioning of prevailing sociopolitical circumstances of his times. In order to achieve economic gain, the Great Society offers him two alternatives: either to

³⁰² Carmichael and Hamilton 51.

³⁰³ Carmichael and Hamilton 54.

³⁰⁴ Carmichael and Hamilton 55.

³⁰⁵ Charles Stevenson Wright, “Interview,” *Interviews with Black Writers*, ed. John O’Brien (New York: Liveright, 1973) 251.

engage in the futile struggle to attain “whiteness,” or to become a collaborator in the systematic exploitation of his own racial sphere, delivering “what the white people want,” just as his friend Jimmie Wishbone did (*Wig* 80). Wright is eager to expose that both options are equally fatal in that they result in the same dilemma and inevitably lead to an affirmation of rigid racial division.

Near the end of the novel, it is suggested that Lester is aware that he is caught in the prevailing socioeconomic machinery, manipulating him to the degree that his only option is to lament his isolation: “I’d go on living by myself in my small airless room. I’d continue to be a trapped person, and if I ever got to heaven, I’d ask God one question: ‘Why?’” (*Wig* 152). For attentive readers, it is possible to find the answer to Lester’s query: while the white world never embraces the pathetic “passer,” his pursuit of assimilation distances him from the better part of the fellow African Americans in his surroundings. In this respect, it is essential to acknowledge the significance of Lester’s abandonment of his cultural identity in a time when “dashikis, Afros, and other external affirmations of the natural self measured nationalist identity and acceptance of an African heritage.”³⁰⁶ Close reading suggests, however, that the author’s critique of social conditioning is not confined to a context of race relations.

A striking characteristic of Wright’s novel is the recurring theme of artificiality. Readers are introduced to a world of wigs, false teeth, false bosoms, fake fingernails, lipstick facades, and sex changes. This idea of man as Wright presents it in the novel and as Lester apparently absorbs it from the media is characterized by enormous pressure to conform to the guidelines of a consumerist culture, degrading every human being to mere product status. Max Schulz declares in *Black Humor Fiction of the Sixties*:

The inner man is equivalent to his external appearance, which in turn is the sum of the interchangeable products he uses. In a society beset by a dissociation between dated ideals and immediate reality, between the myth of individuality and the submission to anonymity, between the desire to be an instrumental member of a group and the pressure to fit within every statistical mean, there unavoidably engenders tension and anxiety.³⁰⁷

³⁰⁶ Watkins, *On the Real Side* 432.

³⁰⁷ Max F. Schulz, *Black Humor Fiction of the Sixties: A Pluralistic Definition of Man and His World* (Athens: Ohio UP, 1973) 97.

The novel most potently underlines Schulz's assessment with the character of Miss Sandra Hanover. Greatly influenced by the media and commercial role-models, she is a prime example of fluidity and instability of identity in a consumer culture. Under "two layers of female hormone powder," this character hides her – or *his* for that matter – past as "ex-Miss Rosie Lamont, ex-Mrs. Roger Wilson, née Alvin Brown" (*Wig* 19). The degree to which the social importance of physical appearance has corrupted and depersonalized Sandra becomes evident in the following statement: "I was born and raised in Brooklyn. Now I got to take treatments twice a week because they think I is queer and come from the South. Why, everybody knows I'm a *white* woman from Georgia" (*Wig* 24). In a sense, Lester Jefferson and Miss Sandra Hanover suffer from the same problem, the dehumanizing pressure exerted by a sociopolitical system through the evocation of unattainable cravings. The regulative command of the media is ever-present in the novel and not only crucially affects the protagonist's perception of the world and guides his actions, but is also expressed in grotesque terms when the reader is informed by Lester that "human hair rugs" are declared "in" by "The Society of American Interior Decorators" (*Wig* 37). Considering the protagonist's pathological confusion, it becomes increasingly apparent that Lester's universe is not as far removed from the world of *Black No More* as it initially seemed.

The preceding analysis has focused on the idea of Lester Jefferson as caught up in the exploitive capitalist workings of the Great Society. This socioeconomic apparatus shows striking parallels to, but also crucial differences from, the oppressive machinery which George Schuyler exposes and depicts in *Black No More*. Although Lester Jefferson is primarily a symbol of the destructive implications these socioeconomic processes hold for the individual, the machinery depicted by Schuyler is permanently looming in Lester's depictions. In both novels, the American Dream and the promise of social amelioration are ever-present, but factually never attainable for people of African American origin. Just as the working classes in *Black No More*, Lester does not despair, but is continually given encouragement by his firm belief in the dogma of the American Dream. Newspapers and television shows flood the public with celebrities and status symbols, in order to make sure that people's belief in, and craving for, social ascension does not wane. In turn, the economy benefits by finding workers for the

most degrading and low-paid employment for there are sufficient amounts of people such as Lester, who are convinced that such occupations are not a way into an exploitive vicious circle but just a necessary first step on the road to accomplishment.³⁰⁸ Max Disher's successful rise to power in *Black No More* reveals openly the manipulative force responsible for Lester Jefferson's fate; readers thus come to understand "the degree to which attaining power in America's racial climate depends upon the individual's desire to sacrifice racial or ethnic identity and assimilate white standards."³⁰⁹

What Wright sets out to highlight obviously transcends Dickson-Carr's estimation. For Lester sacrifices his racial identity and it neither leads to the attainment of power nor to a rise in social status. Quite the opposite is true. As Lester is never accepted as an equal citizen by the surrounding society and rejected as a race traitor by his fellow Harlemites, Wright fathoms the deep chasm that lies between the alleged racial binary. Ultimately, only a select group of African Americans are granted success; those willing to play along and hold up institutionalized racism, vilify their racial identity, or else aid others in shedding their racial heritage altogether, such as the Crookmans, Johnsons, Wishbones, and the owner of the Black Disaster Diner.

Schuyler's overarching satiric target, the human capacity for greed, also plays a significant role in *The Wig*. For instance, the protagonist learns that even love is a matter of money when The Deb informs him about her "no finance, no romance" policy (*Wig* 49). Just as Max, Lester realizes that he is caught in a world in which "the only passion worth suffering for is a passion for hard, cold cash" (*Wig* 146). One may argue that this becomes the very reason why Lester senses relief after his castration: without the capacity for love, he is no longer dependent on money and thus manages to break out of capitalism's vicious circle.³¹⁰ The notion of Lester Jefferson as a depersonalized, impotent creation of the same

³⁰⁸ See Lee 241. A. Robert Lee identifies Wright's economic critique as similar to the critical commentary brought forth by authors such as Herman Melville, Mark Twain, and Nathanael West. According to Lee's reading of *The Wig*, "in lambasting America's entrepreneurial myths, and their debasement of human life, Wright joins older company, like Melville, Twain and Nathanael West, in decrying a major betrayal in America's promise to its people."

³⁰⁹ Dickson-Carr 142.

³¹⁰ See Kreutzer 147. Kreutzer interprets the novel's concluding scene in rather drastic terms as he asserts that Fishback "cauterizes [Lester's] penis, and thus relieves him of the strain of being more than what he is – a kinky, impotent 'nigger.'"

socioeconomic mechanisms Schuyler depicts in *Black No More* is strongly supported by Schulz's assessment of *The Wig*. Schulz agrees with the notion of Lester as a mere product of his sociopolitical surroundings and argues that "Wright underscores how much an assemblage of props and falsehoods, yet another product in a consumer economy, is the conformist protagonist in a conformist society, how much he is both a statistical sum of social abstractions and a packaged product of his consumer economy."³¹¹ Schulz sticks to the metaphor of the machinery and its product, ultimately concluding that Wright's protagonist is, throughout his diverse employments, "always the same self-deprecating American Negro, sold on the promise of the Great Society but frustrated in his effort to join it."³¹² What Wright depicts in *The Wig* is a magnified rendition of the circumstances which Davis marks as responsible for the complicated consciousnesses of African Americans by stressing that "one is expected to conform to American values but is prevented from enjoying the fruits of doing so."³¹³ That there is a consciously established socioeconomic mechanism of oppression and exploitation related to this phenomenon is implicitly supported by Jimmie Wishbone's assessment that, during his days as an actor, he felt like "one of the big wheels in the machine" (*Wig* 69).

4.7 Entropic Satire

The Wig's objectives and its employed satiric techniques are complexly interwoven as most of Wright's satiric targets are encoded within Lester's confused perspective. With the protagonist's account resembling a jumbled collection of episodes interspersed with interior monologue and commentary, readers might initially be at a loss to negotiate such chaos. In such a case, valuable help is found in the arena of physics, whose findings have repeatedly informed philosophical thought. Borrowing from thermodynamic theory, contemporary philosophy provides with entropy "a metaphor for the crumbling of ordered systems, the breakdown of traditional perceptions of reality, the erosion of

³¹¹ Schulz, *Black Humor Fiction* 101.

³¹² Schulz, *Black Humor Fiction* 99.

³¹³ Davis 25.

certainty.”³¹⁴ In the following, the concept of “entropy” proves functional to explore the downward aggravation of anarchy and the perpetuating psychological imbalance in Lester.

As a passer, however maladroit and ineffective, Lester epitomizes the concept of entropy, for the mulatto’s futile attempt to settle in a binary society plagued by racism inescapably leads to decay and depression. One can claim that the protagonist’s growing confusion resembles the increase of entropy in the universe at large. This connection between Lester’s outlook on life and the concept of entropy is illuminated by Robert Wiener’s assertion that the evolution of modern societies generally authenticates the concept of entropy on an anthropological scale:

We are immersed in a life in which the world as a whole obeys the second law of thermodynamics: confusion increases and order decreases. Yet, [...] the second law of thermodynamics, while it may be a valid statement about the whole of a closed system, is definitely not valid concerning a non-isolated part of it. There are local and temporary islands of decreasing entropy in a world in which the entropy as a whole tends to increase, and the existence of these islands enables some of us to assert the existence of progress.³¹⁵

According to the second law of thermodynamics, to which Wiener refers, the amount of energy in the universe has been constant from the beginning whereas the total entropy has been ever-increasing.³¹⁶ As a result, whenever energy is transformed in its state, for instance through conversion into work, there will be an increase in entropy since one inevitable by-product is energy no longer convertible into work. Jeremy Rifkin elucidates that “whenever a semblance of order is created anywhere on earth or in the universe, it is done at the expense of causing an even greater disorder in the surrounding environment.”³¹⁷ The concept

³¹⁴ Patrick O’Neill, *The Comedy of Entropy: Humour/Narrative/Reading* (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1990) 8.

³¹⁵ Robert Wiener, *The Human Use of Human Beings. Cybernetics and Society* (New York: Da Capo, 1950) 36.

³¹⁶ For a rather concise history of entropy from its origin in thermodynamics to its recent prominence as a post-essentialist and post-modernist metaphor for collapse and chaos, see John R. Clark and Anna Lydia Motto.

³¹⁷ Jeremy Rifkin, *Entropy. A New World View* (New York: Viking Press, 1980) 6.

of entropy can be outlined as a gauge of disorder, a “measure of the amount of energy no longer capable of conversion into work.”³¹⁸

The course of Lester Jefferson from an aspiring young social climber to an impotent rendition of racist stereotypes resembles the growth of an entropic system. The energy he musters to create structure and meaning in his life leaves him in an increasingly entropic condition. Drained of his vigor and hope by degrading jobs and repeated disappointments, Lester eventually finds himself burned-out, isolated, and disorientated. This lack of direction is communicated through both sequential disorder and jumbled thoughts. The fourth chapter of *The Wig* captures this disarray well. Initially, it portrays Lester and his friend Jimmie Wishbone out in the streets with the protagonist dwelling on Harlem and the frustration inherent to the place, recalling the Hollywood career of his friend, the demise of the Apollo Theater, and the craze for “human-hair rugs” in rapid sequence (*Wig* 37). Lester’s steady drift toward a bleak ending, however, is grounded in the protagonist’s endless and nervous alternation between two poles he attempts to reconcile, symbolizing whiteness and affection: “The Wig” on the one hand and “The Deb” on the other. A closer look at how these two key entities give meaning to the protagonist’s actions will reveal how Wright’s novel negotiates entropy entirely within the individual.

“The Wig,” introduced in a preliminary author’s note as Negro slang for “hair,” stands synecdochally for the protagonist’s pursuit of whiteness. Being a citizen of the United States of America, Lester seems convinced that it is his mission to rise from his momentary plight and to join the ranks of the social climbers. As in Schuyler’s *Black No More*, the specific notion of the American Dream as the “Dream of Upward Mobility”³¹⁹ is of special significance. Lester openly articulates his faith in this concept and simultaneously betrays awareness of the restraining nature of the color line by stating: “I might as well try the dream of working my way up. Yes, there was an opening, I was informed by a very polite Negro girl with strawberry-blond hair. First, I had to fill out an application and take a six weeks’ course in the art of being human, in the art of being white” (*Wig* 49). This passage not only illustrates the self-deprecating attitude through which

³¹⁸ Jeremy Rifkin 35.

³¹⁹ Cullen 70.

Lester equates humanity with whiteness, it also suggests that the protagonist is aware that shedding his racial origin and the subsequent adoption of white values is a prerequisite to better his social condition.

To create a basis for social advancement, the protagonist embarks upon the chemical treatment of his hair. The application of the long-lasting Silky Smooth Hair Relaxer marks the rebirth of Lester Jefferson, a young and hopeful man eager to leave Harlem behind to conquer the Great Society: “I’m gonna make the big leap. I’m cutting out” (*Wig* 16). The consistent capitalization of “The Wig” throughout the novel suggests a divine quality given to the protagonist’s shiny hair.³²⁰ This notion is strongly sustained by Lester’s general perception. Convinced of his improved impression on his surrounding, Lester is confident of his hair’s supernatural command and that ultimately, “The Wig would speak for itself, a prophet’s message” (*Wig* 19). Accordingly, Lester associates his attempt at simulating whiteness with a mere reaction to an official decree. The world as it is sold to him and as he eventually comes to see it is a white place that rewards rigorous assimilation with limitless social mobility:

I felt pride seep into my pores. I was part of this world. The Great White Father had spoken. His white sons were carrying out his word. His black flunkies were falling in line. The opportunity for Negroes to *progress* was truly coming. I could hear a tinkling fountain sing: ‘I’ll wash away your black misery – *tum-tiddy-diddy-tum-tee-tee.*’ Yes. Wiggged and very much aware of the happenings, I knew my ship was just around the bend. (*Wig* 37)

As Lester surrenders his future to his colored hair, “The Wig” gradually takes over the role of a savior and guiding idol. Convinced that “‘The Wig is gonna see me through these troubled times,’” Lester resorts to passivity and witnesses the effect his new acquisition has on his surrounding (*Wig* 17). With his hair allowing him access to the dominant social sphere, the protagonist is more and

³²⁰ See Robert P. Sedlack, “Jousting With Rats: Charles Wright’s *The Wig*” *Satire Newsletter* 7 (1969) 38. Sedlack’s analysis focuses entirely on one episode in the novel, namely when Lester is called to the apartment of his acquaintance Nonnie Swift to fight rats. While Sedlack comments primarily on the use of mock heroic in this passage, he also traces Biblical allusions in the episode which anticipate Lester’s end: “If Lester is ignorant, Wright is not, and shortly after this passage, when Nonnie proclaims, ‘Your true glory has flowered. [...] Samson had his hair and, by god! You got your Wig,’ he prepares us for the conclusion of the novel. There this Biblical allusion is picked up when Lester’s wig is shorn, not to destroy the hero’s strength, but to symbolize the self-degradation and impotence of the black man who tries to live according to white standards – a consequence that the reader has become aware of through the book, though Lester himself fails to recognize until the end when his head is shaved and a red hot steel rod is jabbed into his penis.”

more anxious to observe responses to “The Wig” in order to see where his new scalp guides him. Most of these reactions are decidedly negative and serve as benchmarks for the protagonist’s downfall. Mrs. Tucker calls Lester a “young punk” while Nonnie Swift bashes the “race-traitor” in more drastic terms: “You curly-headed son of a bitch. You’ve conked your hair” (*Wig* 15-16). Unable to assess such feedback properly, the protagonist still feels certain that “The Wig’s sneak preview could be called successful” and continues on his course (*Wig* 27). It becomes more and more obvious that Lester’s role is one of a seismograph tracking and recording reactions to “The Wig.” This role contrasts sharply with the part played by Max Disher in *Black No More*, a strenuous trickster manipulating his surrounding at will. It can be asserted that in comparison, Lester Jefferson is granted much less agency than Max Disher.

While the latter is eager to infiltrate a rigid and dehumanizing system in order to shake the exploitive apparatus to its foundations, agency in *The Wig* is distributed differently. Lester fulfils the role of an observer, not acting on his surroundings but rather being acted upon. This lack of agency adds a distinct air of tragedy to the text, as impotent and paralyzed Lester flows with the stream of events, unable to dictate his fate. While “The Wig” serves as the hero’s visible concession to a racist system, Lester’s emulation of “whiteness” is not confined to physical appearance. The conking of his hair is accompanied by the protagonist’s subscription to the racist mindset of his oppressors. A feeling of being “reborn, purified, anointed” and “beautified” exalts the bleached protagonist and causes a distinct change in perspective (*Wig* 12).

Simultaneously, Lester struggles to acquire the work ethic of the stereotypical American self-made man: “I am an American. That’s an established fact. America’s the land of elbow grease and hard work. Then you’ve got it made. Little Jimmie, I’m gonna work like a son of a bitch. Do you hear me?” (*Wig* 34). While his simplified blueprint of social ascendancy matches widespread myths, it thoroughly neglects “race” as a determining factor in a discriminative society. As he strives to infiltrate the white world Lester consciously and subconsciously confirms his belief in white supremacy and absorbs racist thinking. The grotesque extent to which the protagonist immerses himself in white culture is reflected by the color metaphors through which he perceives his surroundings.

Frequently the protagonist associates his despondent situation with blackness, blending his complexion and his condition into an oppressive state of darkness he is eager to break away from. Eager to unburden himself of his racial heritage, Lester is certain that “the black clouds would soon recede” (*Wig* 8). Reminding himself of his bleak past he repeatedly links his racial origin to darkness, as in “those dark days – when the sun refuses to shine” (*Wig* 28). Accordingly, he proclaims: “My hair will not go ‘back home,’ back to the hearth of kinks and burrs” (*Wig* 28). In keeping with the protagonist’s notion of his gloomy past, he pictures his desired future in opposite terms until he eventually has to acknowledge the inescapability of his situation and finds himself lamenting the demise of a “bright dream” (*Wig* 142).

Much more specific and significant to Lester’s immersion in white racist discourse, however, is his perspective on racial minorities. Shortly after his attempted leap out of destitution via low-paid labor, Lester sheds parts of his heritage in the form of his hair and perceives his surroundings through the eyes of a white racist. Although there is only one questionable case in which he is mistaken for a white man, indicatively when dealing with a prostitute, Lester begins to feel like a part of the dominant social sphere immediately after the treatment of his hair: “I’ve taken the first step. All the others will fall easily into place” (*Wig* 18). The protagonist no longer identifies with the African Americans surrounding him, but rather observes from an elevated position of a superior outsider. He condemns his Creole acquaintance Nonnie Swift with the assertion “you’re always putting the bad mouth on people. No wonder *you* people never get nowhere. You don’t help each other. You people should stick together like gypsies” (*Wig* 16).

One should therefore not mistake Lester for an impartial observer, for he reiterates the very racist mindset that forces him to shed his heritage in the first place. Lester’s belief in white supremacy appears steadfast throughout the novel. With his newly gained sense of belonging to the controlling social narrative, his peculiar judgment of his social surrounding reveals a sense of self-confidence, and also superiority toward people of African American ancestry. When he first encounters the kinky-haired character referred to as The Deb, he asserts: “I had never felt such sweet desire and I was grateful for the power and glory of The Wig” (*Wig* 46). Accordingly, his assessment of the African American A&R manager

Ashley-Smithe is characterized by a subtle dislike of his physical appearance. He refers to the skin of this person as having “the color of bittersweet chocolate – chocolate that looked as if it had weathered many seasons of dust, rain, and darkness, chocolate that had not been eaten, but simply left to dehydrate” (*Wig* 78).

This negative depiction of the African American manager also points to the protagonist’s enormous potential for self-hate, as this is not the only instance where Lester discloses his strong aversion to black bodies. With regard to his own face, he meditates on why his parents had not done something to change the shape of his nose: “No, it’s not a Bob Hope nose, no one could slide down it, although it might make a plump backrest. If my parents had been foresighted, I would have gone to bed at night with a clothespin on my nose” (*Wig* 27). Here, Lester implicitly acknowledges the connection between whiteness, social status, and his own vulnerability to buy into racist ideology. Cornel West explicates the connection between racist oppression and black self-hatred as it can also be identified in Wright’s protagonist. West explains that

much of black self-hatred and self-contempt has to do with the refusal of many black Americans to love their own black bodies – especially their black noses, hips, lips, and hair. Just as many white Americans view black sexuality with disgust, so do many black Americans – but for very different reasons and with very different results. White supremacist ideology is based first and foremost on the degradation of black bodies in order to control them.³²¹

The protagonist’s derogatory judgment of blackness insinuates the manipulative influence of the established racist system. Lester’s strong belief in white supremacy is displayed when a taxi driver complains about “the Harlem riffraff [...] causing all the trouble” and finds acceptance and understanding in Lester who affirms: “I know, I know” (*Wig* 71, 73). In this scene, it becomes especially apparent that it is not Lester’s ambition to contribute to the social rise of the African American population per se, but rather to distance himself from this social sphere and to side with the dominant racist system. The most extreme marker of the protagonist’s vigorous racist belief in white supremacy is articulated when Lester cogitates about African Americans “and *other* racially sick people” (*Wig* 122).

³²¹ Cornel West, *Race Matters* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994) 122.

However, “The Wig” as a powerful symbol of the longing for whiteness is not the only factor crucially influencing the protagonist’s course. There is a second regular in Lester’s jumbled mind and just as “The Wig” magnified in status through constant capitalization: his prostitute lover The Deb.

The protagonist feels drawn to the kinky-haired prostitute because she soothes his aching loneliness. Being a synecdochal representation of love and affection, The Deb wields considerable influence over Lester: “Lord, a piece of my lonely heart and hot hands telepathically grabbed her bosom. We were on the same wavelength” (*Wig* 45). Referring to “wavelength” and communication, this passage emphasizes the protagonist’s longing for a less isolated social condition. The notion that The Deb stands for more than a single character is strongly underlined by how Lester imagines his bright future. His personal American Dream primarily involves money and love; and while the former finds representation in a luxurious car as a status symbol, the latter is cast in terms of the looming presence of The Deb: “I closed my eyes and saw my Deb behind her own plate-glass window, spoon-feeding Lester Jefferson II – Little Les, while, twenty floors below, I polished the Mercedes with Mr. Clean” (*Wig* 71). In a decisive moment, however, Lester experiences the intricate connection between interpersonal love and social success. This insight grows in the protagonist when he has to learn that his prostitute lover is, first and foremost, interested in money rather than love and affection. Lester implicitly acknowledges his double-bind situation when he reflects his tragic position and realizes: “Being only an average young man, living in a terrible age, cuffed by ambition, and now in love – I could only press her against me and hope” (*Wig* 130). Lester then comes to the conclusion that he is caught in a world in which the primary determining factor is money and the sole obsession worth suffering for is economic gain (*Wig* 146). This insight plays a key role in the protagonist’s downfall as his path to complete social and physical impotence is anticipated by an increasing inability to communicate and the subsequent failure of his social relationships.

From the beginning, it was the protagonist’s declared desire to break out of his isolated state and to establish interaction with the surrounding world. It is in the novel’s fourth sentence that Lester first laments a lack of “connections” – a term reoccurring in the protagonist’s mind and one of the novel’s central motifs. In

the third chapter, his optimistic reveries about social accomplishment are abruptly interrupted by his epiphany that a lack of a “solid connection” is holding him down (*Wig* 29). When Lester does establish contact with other people, as in the case with his friend Jimmie Wishbone or his prostitute lover The Deb, communication is superficial and ephemeral. The entrapment Lester ultimately feels as an African American in a racist system is solely reflected on the inside, and he admits only to readers the excitement inherent in his attempt at passing: “The sensation, the idea of flight, the sensation of being free, that had been wonderful” (*Wig* 52).³²² Likewise, his deep inner turmoil, his tormenting isolation, and sadness in face of the fact that “no one knew who [he] was” is only articulated to the reader but rarely to other characters (*Wig* 152). Moreover, one must acknowledge that just like Max Disher, Lester Jefferson does not qualify as a true passer. He does not attempt to consciously reconstruct his identity as a white man on the strength of white ancestors and a light complexion. Rather, he is anxious to emulate “whiteness” and to sacrifice whatever it takes to correspond to the image of the glorified white self-made American. Yet, in his failed attempts at fighting his agonizing situation, his condition only deteriorates until he eventually faces the disillusioning questions: “But why go on? Why try to explain? Was there anyone to hear me?” (*Wig* 154).

With social ascension and its subsequent material gain inseparably linked to whiteness and achievement in turn regulating love or loneliness, Lester comes to realize the desperate situation he is in. The protagonist’s final act of sacrifice to the racist system, the act of cutting off “The Wig,” indicates the end of the protagonist’s struggle to achieve. Based on such a reading of the text, the concluding scene marks Lester’s liberation from a rat race in which he would never be allowed to succeed. Very much aware of the passer’s futile struggle to achieve, Mr. Fishback assures Lester: “you’ll feel better after I cut off The Wig” (*Wig* 174). While the prospect of the protagonist remaining on the fringes of society is

³²² See Mullen 77. Lester Jefferson’s attempt at passing is quite different from the race-change performed by Max Disher in *Black No More*. While Max is engaging in a conscious effort to deceive his surroundings, Lester is more innocent in that he merely wishes to better his social standing. This attempt to step over the color line is closer to common notions of passing. In this respect, Mullen recalls that “passing is not so much a willful deception or duplicity as it is an attempt to move from the margin to the center of American identity.”

certainly pessimistic, one may argue that it is this radical disillusionment that brings Lester's entropic mind to rest: without the capacity for love, Lester is no longer dependent on money to spend on his prostitute muse, manages to break out of the vicious capitalist circle, and thus asserts with relief, "I'm beginning to feel better already" (*Wig* 176).

4.8 Entropy on the Inside

Since entropy has found recognition in communications theory, it lends itself as a way to capture Lester's demise. To use the phrasing of John R. Clark and Anna Lydia Motto, the concept "postulates in a system increased static and disorder until communications break down."³²³ At first glance, the notion of perpetuating chaos seems to apply to the fragmented world which readers face in Wright's novel. With every disappointment, Lester's attempts to climb the social ladder become more despairing, causing increased confusion in the protagonist's mind. Lester seems to inhabit a disorganized social system bound to collapse into pandemonium. This implies that, in the long run, a racist system with its fanatic reliance on order and structure is eventually doomed to dissolve into chaos, for every initiation of order inescapably comes with disorder in its wake. This notion, however, is strongly undermined by the plan perpetuating Lester's actions on the one hand and the reasons for his failure on the other.

The primary motivation behind Lester's actions is mapped out clearly from the novel's opening. The protagonist sets out to take his claim to the American Dream, which he initially renders in terms of "pretty girls, credit cards, charge accounts, Hart Schaffner & Marx suits, fine shoes, Dobbs hats, XK-E Jaguars, and more pretty girls" (*Wig* 7). Willing to invest diligence and virtue, Lester is anxious to recreate his identity and start over, always steadfast in his conviction that "it could happen: rebirth in this land" (*Wig* 71).³²⁴ The prime motivation behind his

³²³ John R. Clark and Anna Lydia Motto, "Running Down & Dropping Out: Entropy in Modern Literature," *Studies in Contemporary Satire: A Creative and Critical Journal* 10 (1983): 10.

³²⁴ See Harry L. Jones, "Black Humor and the American Way of Life," *Satire Newsletter* 7 (1969): 1. With his steadfast belief in the American society, Lester Jefferson qualifies as the "assimilated middle class Negro" outlined by Jones. Jones stresses that "he has lost his real black roots, and he

ceaseless efforts to escape racial bigotry and discrimination can be located in a deprived past. Recalling the time after his father's death, Lester states "I vowed that I would learn to write and read, to become human in the name of my father. The Wig wasn't just for kicks. It was rooted in something deeper, in the sorrow of the winter when I was ten years old" (*Wig* 23). Restricted by a discriminating community, however, Lester neither finds acceptance in the white world nor is granted access to economic success. Every attempt to shed his racial heritage is smashed against the adamant principles of a bigoted system. The following outline of Lester's career plans illuminates how his course turns into a downward spiral.

The protagonist's initial attempts to "better his condition" fail altogether (*Wig* 17). Instead of money and respect, he only manages to gain public ridicule and humiliation by "masquerade[ing] as a silent Arab waiter in an authentic North African coffeehouse in Greenwich Village" or "tap-danc[ing] in front of the Empire State Building" (*Wig* 8). These throwbacks and disappointments, however, do not take away his faith in the Great Society and the seemingly inevitable social ascension of the diligent and virtuous, although doubts do grow in him as to whether he can fully shed his ethnic background and assume the identity of a white man. He revises his faith in the American Dream of personal re-creation, pondering: "or was such a birth only an exit from the womb, not a door to the future?" (*Wig* 71). Dedicated to start a career in the music business, Lester has a clear notion of his goal which involves

Champagne supper clubs, call girls, paying off bellboys and the police. A million hysterical teenagers screaming, clamoring for your autograph, a strand of your curly hair, a snotty Kleenex, a toothpick, a bad cavity filling, a pawnshop diamond ring, and all because a few parents were child-oriented. And now *I* was part of the racket! (*Wig* 81)

Significantly, the record company's officials do not seem to be looking for an individual artist. Their ambition to sign a stereotypical representative of the African American community is exposed in the A&R's intention to find out if Lester is truly "colored" (*Wig* 81). The fact that Lester does not resemble a marketable African American type gains him severe disapproval. Since he is not qualified for the music industry, the A&R from Paradise Records subconsciously categorizes

fails to see that the disparity between preachment and practice in America is one of the most painfully hilarious facts of black existence."

him under “Harlem riffraff” and blames him for dishonoring his people and being a disgrace to “this great republic!” (*Wig* 83). Ultimately, Lester begins to realize that he is in a no-win situation. Making diverse efforts to rid himself of his social and racial origin through determination, every degrading job marks him unmistakably as a member of a subjugated minority. The protagonist’s dream of “becoming part of The Great Society” turns out to be a disaster (*Wig* 138). His pathetic attempt at emulating whiteness puts his destitution on open display; and it is this nervous misery that manipulates Lester’s vision, distorting everyday perceptions to the grotesque. Paralyzed by entropy, the world as he perceives it is in a moribund state and on the brink of anarchy. The protagonist’s entropic vision, however, does not indicate the confusion in the surrounding world, quite the opposite is the case. Lester’s absolute frustration and inability to attain his goals precisely mirror the unbending and dehumanizing inflexibility of a society infested with bigotry.

The world is entropic for Lester as its unyielding categories do not allow him any room to settle down, instead forcing the unsuccessful trickster into the role of the picaresque, a restless wanderer in search of a place to find peace. If it was the world with its rigid racial grouping that was disintegrating, Lester’s ambitions would not be as bleak and doomed to fail as they turn out to be in the novel. The protagonist’s quest for order and orientation results in excessive disorder and uncertainty. Accordingly, it is not an entropic world staggering toward its ultimate demise, but only *his* world; the impending cataclysm is a personal one. The entropy inherent in Lester Jefferson, however, invites the absurd, the incongruous, and the iconoclastic, fused within a satiric framework into that amalgamation of humor and horror referred to as “black humor.” In fact, one may contend that an analysis of the basic nature of black humor yields clues to the general attitude of the author and thereby anticipates contextual features in *The Wig*.

4.9 Black Satire

First published in 1966, *The Wig* emerged during a heyday of the artistic expression known as “black humor.”³²⁵ Commonly the term is associated with an emotionally unsettling intermix of morbid themes and elements of the ludicrous. In his article “Toward a Theory of Black Humor,” Max Schulz offers a basic outline of the thought which was most prominent in the United States, stressing that it is useful “to recognize that black humor is a phenomenon of the 1960’s, comprising a group of writers who share a viewpoint and an aesthetics for pacing off the boundaries of a nuclear-technological world intrinsically without confinement.”³²⁶ According to Schulz’s assessment, there is not only an intricate connection between entropy and black humor, the originator of black humor is also concerned with the presentation of a given person’s struggles to settle into their surrounding society. Art informed by black humor frequently investigates “individual efforts to realize oneself in relation to the outer world, with the focus less on the individual than on the world of experiences, less on the agony of struggle to realize self than on the bewildering trackless choices that face the individual.”³²⁷ *The Wig* shares these traits of black humor for the author is concerned with presenting a character meandering toward the dominant social narrative. In agreement with Schulz’s estimation, Wright sheds light on the protagonist’s inner struggle on his quest to succeed in a world he is unable to properly negotiate; the novel’s emphasis, however, lies on the choices Lester faces and the implications these choices hold for his development.

Black humor informs Wright’s satiric design.³²⁸ Lester Jefferson resembles the common black humor protagonist in many ways. For one, the setbacks he

³²⁵ See Kreutzer 145. Kreutzer contests that Wright’s novel “justifies our interest because it brings together some of the most prominent literary tendencies of the sixties within a black context. Thematically as well as technically it reflects a period stirring with the revived awareness of the social environment and set on new approaches in dealing with it.”

³²⁶ Max F. Schulz, “Toward a Definition of Black Humor,” *Comic Relief: Humor in Contemporary American Literature*, ed. Sarah Blacher Cohen (Urbana: U of Illinois P) 17.

³²⁷ Schulz, “Definition of Black Humor” 18-19.

³²⁸ See Hamlin Hill, “Black Humor: Its Cause and Cure” *Black Humor: Critical Essays*, ed. Alan R. Pratt (New York: Garland, 1993) 342. Analyzing Wright’s novel in the context of satire proposes that the disfigured grin of black humor does not inescapably weaken the satire’s didactic mission. To account for the phenomenon’s versatility and the likelihood of black humor informing different forms of literary expression, there has been a recent tendency in criticism to explain the phenomenon as a technique rather than a form. Hamlin Hill positions black humor outside the scope of formal constraints and vigorously proclaims that “defining it in terms of the modern

suffers apparently do not cause him to move toward desolation or permanent misery; rather, every disappointment he experiences makes him engage in a new attempt at claiming his American Dream. Due to this characteristic, Lester can be considered a typical representative of the black humor protagonist, as these characters traditionally do “not despair [...] nor [do they] remain aloof, dismissing society with cold imperviousness. [...] Rather, [they] worr[y] about [their] place in it.”³²⁹ Yet, black humor not only informs the narrative through the protagonist’s resilience; there are also thematic issues which position Wright’s novel in the context of black humor.

While Wright’s protagonist is aware of his position as an African American citizen in the social “outhouse,” he, often wittily, worries about his place in the white society he is so eager to enter (*Wig* 7). One can make the case that this humorous treatment of social predicaments not only marks the novel as influenced by black humor, but also as distinctly African American. According to Watkins, “the black humor tap of perceiving societal contradictions as a joke is not far removed from the African-American community’s stoic perception of racist absurdity as humorous.”³³⁰ As a technique, black humor is frequently fuelled by basic human defects, grinning while exposing mankind in its shabby vulnerability just to confront the reader with contradictory emotional stimuli. Sex and death are two frequent subjects of black humor; both of which are prevalent in Wright’s novel. Through the first-person perspective, readers are directly exposed to sexual intercourse, the protagonist’s night-time masturbation, even contemplation about his penis-size. One of the strongest informants of black humor in the novel comes in the shape of Mr. Fishback.

It is chiefly through the necrophilic funeral director that Wright presents a world entirely devoid of moral standards or sanctity. The reader finds Fishback innocently explaining his morbid sexual preferences: “They brought this big fat mama in and I didn’t even have a chance to bang her. Terrible to see them go into the ground before you get what you want” (*Wig* 172). In passages such as this one,

pessimistic novel is wrong, because it cannot be sustained for the length of the novel.” With this assertion in mind it is possible to set out to identify to what extent influences of black humor inform Wright’s satiric design.

³²⁹ Schulz, “Definition of Black Humor” 23.

³³⁰ Watkins, *On the Real Side* 433.

Wright is ardent to play with readers' responses, hoping to maneuver his readership into a position in which "our emotional and intellectual reactions become confused; this in turn disturbs our certainty of moral and social values and challenges our sense of a secure norm."³³¹ The contradicting emotional reactions triggered in the reader accompany the literal depiction of the hostile absurdity of modern life. By acknowledging the ways in which black humor informs Wright's novel, one indeed must be cautious to not exempt *The Wig* from its corrective purpose and its satiric undertaking. As Wes G. Gehring emphasizes, black humor tends to trespass the boundaries of satire since its message frequently is "that there is no message, so audience members had best steal a laugh before they are too dead to do even that."³³² Having seen how *The Wig* exploits black humor as a trope, one can presume that it must be possible to detect stylistic means which keep black humor's pessimistic attitude from striking generic roots and thus help to pave the way for satiric critique. Among the most prevalent of these features is a tragic subtext that is developed beyond the scope of black humor's pessimism and which preserves Lester from entirely falling into the role of a madman.

While black humor is generally thought of as closer to tragedy than comedy, it does not discard its ambivalent play to fully abandon itself to one or the other. *The Wig*, however, is characterized by a strong leaning toward the former, which is in keeping with the novel's satiric design. A methodic finesse that enables Wright to establish a tragic subtext in his satiric novel is the absence of an interfering narrator. Rather, the author grants readers an uninterrupted immersion into first-person narration. Lester's human nature is occasionally highlighted by the intermittent portrayal of his emotional state. The light and humorous style of his inner report invites the reader to classify the protagonist as a one-dimensional fool, engaging in a permanent trial and error game of social ascension. Occasionally and unpredictably, however, the tone of the depictions changes to brutal realism. Momentarily, bawdy subject matter and farcical elements are dropped altogether to highlight the protagonist's human experience. Examples include the

³³¹ Mathew Winston, "Humour noir and Black Humor," *Veins of Humor*, ed. Harry Levin (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1972) 273.

³³² Wes. G. Gehring, *American Dark Comedy – Beyond Satire* (Westport: Greenwood 1996) 2.

protagonist's reveries about his family. Lester picks up this train of thought in a tone of morbid black humor, remembering that his "father had learned to read and write extremely well at the age of thirty-six. He died while printing the letter z for [him]" (*Wig* 23). Yet, a few lines further, there is a distinct change in tone: "[...] for my mother and I had to hunt for coal that had fallen from trains along the railroad tracks. Like convicts hiding in an abandoned farmhouse, we sat huddled in our ramshackle one room. My mother read to me by the candlelight" (*Wig* 23). Such personal confessions not only expose the hero's sullen past, they also contrast sharply with the witty style of conversation and dialogue.

As an effect of black humor informing the novel, these variations in tone preclude unambiguous emotional responses to the novel and cause the readers' smiles to virtually freeze on their faces. This shock stems from the sudden revelation of the protagonist's humanity: "Lonely, I often leave my airless room on Saturday night, wander up and down 125th Street, dreaming of making it, dreaming of love" (*Wig* 35). All of a sudden, the protagonist, who is mostly cast in terms of the foolish clown, exhibits sincere human emotions. Lester's futile attempts to gain acceptance as a valuable human being in society are absurdly comic and tempt readers to negotiate the protagonist solely in terms of comedy and entertainment. As outlined in the chapter on theory, however, there is a fundamental difference between the laughter of comedy and that of satire: while the former is considered an end in itself, the latter is used to topple power-structures and social hierarchies in order to pave the way for cunning critique. The traces of humanity that sporadically crop up in Lester and interrupt the black humor undertones suggest the author's concern to portray his protagonist as human and thus slightly deviate from the common protagonist inhabiting worlds of black humor: the madman. As Mathew Winston stresses, "the madman is a central figure in grotesque black humor; his lack of rational thought and his mannerisms are comical, but his insights into a disjunctive and chaotic world is frightening."³³³

To categorize Lester as a madman, however, would, to a considerable degree, counteract empathy; and it is empathy that urges readers to look beyond the protagonist's whimsical façade to explore the reasons for his social failure, and

³³³ Winston 283.

to ultimately arrive at the novel's satiric targets and the author's corrective intent. Moreover, it is not madness the reader finds in Lester, but an unwavering faith in American social myths inflated to grotesque proportions. The protagonist believes what he is told and sold by his surroundings and is eager to contribute his share to the rise of the social system he believes in so unswervingly. The motivations for his continuous trial and error are thus grounded in reason and logic rather than an unreasoned frenzy. Especially against the background of Wright's intended social and racial concern, it would be inadequate to place *The Wig* entirely in the sphere of black humor. While the latter mode treats social disorder as essentially meaningless,³³⁴ it is Wright's concern as a satirist to expose the entropic confusion oppressive socioeconomic processes generate in an individual. In light of the author's corrective intent and how this intent regulates the novel's thrust, it is advisable to conceive of *The Wig* as a novel of satire with distinct traces of black humor encoded in an entropic vision.

The combination of a critical intent and the mode of black humor offers crucial possibilities for the author, but simultaneously brings about a significant challenge for readers. Black humor enables Wright to abandon his protagonist to a merciless world and to highlight the diverse forces as they manipulate Lester on his path. For "with Black Humor, choice poses the primary difficulty. This is the consequence of a shift in perspective from the self and its ability to create moral ambience through an act to emphasis on all the moving forces of life which converge collectively upon the individual."³³⁵ The problem for readers comes in the form of the absence of a readily identifiable satiric voice which would reside in a place detached from the chaos. Any search in the protagonist for a sincere satiric voice is destined to fail, as Lester is more of an agent of black humor than of satire. As Schulz states, "the black humor protagonist is not [...] an authorial lens for analyzing the real, corrupt object of the satire."³³⁶ Throughout the novel, elements of tragedy make for a graspable satiric tone, despite the fact that the plot continually delves into darker grounds.

³³⁴ Schulz, "Definition of Black Humor" 19.

³³⁵ Schulz, *Black Humor Fiction* 7.

³³⁶ Schulz, "Definition of Black Humor" 24.

The Wig progresses steadily toward dark humor. Not only do references to death and sex increase toward the end of the novel, the full extent of the novel's black humor mode is revealed in the final scene which depicts Lester's castration. The novel's black humor gets increasingly morbid, as it were, as Lester approaches his castration. Eventually, it reaches its climax with Fishback's order, when he asks Lester to "think of something nasty and get an erection" (*Wig* 175). Ultimately, Wright not only chooses a considerably different approach to satire than Schuyler, he also confronts his protagonist with a very different scenario. Unlike the African American population in *Black No More*, Lester Jefferson cannot change his skin color. Instead of undergoing transcoloration, all he can do is engage in a feeble step toward whiteness. In this way, Wright is able to focus on the individual victim of a discriminative machinery which is too intricate to comprehend from the perspective of the oppressed.³³⁷ Thus, the careers of the two Harlemites Max Disher and Lester Jefferson are very different. Whereas Max lives his American Dream to the fullest while debunking a criminal and oppressive sociopolitical system, Lester's way leads from hope to desolation and defeat. The question arises as to whether the author offers implicit or explicit solutions to the problems he is depicting.

Like Schuyler, Wright does not propose correctives to the human capacity for greed and conformity. In his presentation of a society where personal advancement inescapably leads toward adaptation to the dominant social narrative, the author offers no direct ways out of the dilemma. However, Lester's learning process, only faintly indicated by some casual remarks, reminds readers to negotiate the events depicted through the character of Lester Jefferson. His development into a castrated laughing stock, spit upon and berated by his surroundings, exemplifies how little can be gained from playing along in a discriminative system and engaging with the oppressor. In a rare moment the

³³⁷ See Michael Dummett, "The Nature of Racism," *Racism in Mind*, eds. Michael P. Levine and Tamas Pataki (London: Cornell, 2004) 31-32. The course of Lester Jefferson teaches the protagonist a tough lesson in the workings of racist oppression. The essence of racism and the very insight Lester has to learn the hard way is aptly summarized by Dummett who clarifies that "racist attitudes are almost always backed by widely erroneous beliefs about the Others as a group. Above all, the hostility is cruelly based on something the Others have no power to change. Insofar as the Others are brought to suspect that it may have some foundation, which, tragically, they sometimes are, it goes to the heart of their identity: they and all those from whom they come, are irreparably inferior."

protagonist reflects this insight as he admits to himself: “My own impersonation had caused the death of a bright dream” (*Wig* 142). In the face of the problem, readers might be left with a desire to change and to no longer be part of the oppressing mechanism; thus, Wright’s treatment of the issue is implicitly generative. Yet, a close reading of the novel does suggest subtle traces of explicitly generative satire and a possible way out of the predicament.

Near the end of the novel, Lester witnesses an extreme case of domestic violence. With the unhesitating assistance of a policeman, a mother attacks her son because “he doesn’t want to go to a segregated school” (*Wig* 158). With the backing of the executive representative, the mother savages and eventually kills her child: “Silently, I watched the mother slam the nightstick against the boy’s head. The boy’s mouth opened and fell to the sidewalk. Blood flowed from his nostrils and lips. ‘Mama,’ he sighed, and closed his eyes” (*Wig* 159). For Wright’s contemporary society, this occurrence is a powerful symbol of the corruptive command the sociopolitical system holds over the individual. The dissenter who does not adhere to the strict binary racial division is silenced by both the authorities, and his own social environment. For future generations, however, this scene suggests a ray of hope. Since the belief in white supremacy is presented as absorbed during socialization, the author suggests that critical education could affect the essential destabilization of the race construct. It is thus possible for attentive readers to trace timid steps toward multiculturalism in Wright’s satiric novel. For Wright’s original readership, however, such a reading and interpretation of the text was superseded by the dominance of issues related to Black Arts aesthetics.

As Wright negotiates his objectives through the protagonist and submits a discriminative system to satiric critique, the deeper symbolic significance of the protagonist’s hair comes into focus. As Watkins notes, “in its vernacular use, ‘wig’ not only means ‘hair’ but also ‘mind or mental state.’”³³⁸ Thus, the ambiguity of the title not only points toward Lester’s visible sacrifice to a racist system, but also to his adoption of a new way of thinking. Having seen the extent to which the story of Lester Jefferson transcends the individual, how it comments on double consciousness and politics of assimilation one may claim that Wright’s novel is a

³³⁸ Watkins, *On the Real Side* 433-34.

powerful example of what Robert C. Elliott asserts on the fertility of satire; namely, that “an attack by a powerful satirist on a local phenomenon seems to be capable of indefinite extension in the reader’s mind into an attack on the whole structure of which that phenomenon is part.”³³⁹

³³⁹ Elliott, *Power of Satire* 271.

V. The Epistemology of Race: Percival Everett's *Erasure*

5.1 Monk Ellison: The Construction of Reality

Some thirty-five years after Charles Wright's *The Wig* challenged readers and contemporaries during the Black Arts Movement, satire as a means to articulate subtle critique is now a popular art form. Whether it is magazine articles, radio programs, or TV shows, the proliferation of critical messages cloaked in humor has carved a permanent niche in the media. To explain the modern popularity of satire, it is useful to look back at its origins. In 1963, African American actor and writer Richard Pryor began his career as a stand-up comedian.³⁴⁰ It can be argued that, for African Americans, comedy represented one of the few platforms to challenge prevailing attitudes of discrimination. As Robert Staples and Terry Jones emphasize, "being an entertainer has been one of the few accessible means of attaining success for American blacks."³⁴¹ What is noteworthy in this context is that Pryor's domain was not mindless mirth, but sharp satire; much of his interracial joking was driven by sociopolitical concern.

By the turn of the millennium, Pryor's work, as well as that of the ensuing generation of black comedians, has had both a positive effect on the negotiation of race relations, and has popularized the satiric mode. With the rise of standup comedy, humorists including Eddie Murphy, Dave Chappelle, and Chris Rock began to use satire as an increasingly powerful weapon.³⁴² Such artists are clearly aware

³⁴⁰ See Lawrence E. Mintz, "Standup Comedy as Social and Cultural Mediation," *American Quarterly* 37.1 (1985): 71-80. Mintz gives a detailed analysis of the structural components of standup comedy and their cultural origins. For a thorough analysis of the career of Richard Pryor and his influence on contemporary racially concerned satire, see Watkins' chapter "Pryor and Thereafter" in *On the Real Side*.

³⁴¹ Robert Staples and Terry Jones, "Culture, Ideology and Black Television Images," *The Black Scholar* 16.3 (1985): 19.

³⁴² See Watkins, *On the Real Side* 563-565. Watkins emphasizes the key role of Richard Pryor in paving the way for a new generation of African American comedians and popularizing comedy at large. He stresses that "Pryor's ground-breaking unveiling of genuine African-American folk humor had led to an explosion of more authentic black comedy in nearly every media outlet." Watkins also gives a detailed account of Eddie Murphy's background and career on stage and television. He makes it very clear that Murphy's early work was much closer to comedy than Pryor's satiric voice and that many of Murphy's action movie roles such as in the *Beverly Hills Cop* trilogy epitomized stereotyped black "macho" roles. For an African American perspective on the controversy surrounding much racially concerned satire, such as that of Chris Rock or Dave Chappelle, see the title essay in William Jelani Cobb, *The Devil and Dave Chappelle and Other Essays* (New York: Thunder's Mouth, 2007) 247-254. Cobb goes to great length to highlight the connection between Richard Pryor and Dave Chappelle, mentions Pryor's explicit approval of Chappelle's work, and even refers to the latter comedian as "the inheritor of the mantle held by the late Richard Pryor" (248).

of laughter's potential and seem "to understand that humor is most effectively used when it not only amuses but also unmask[s] the illusions of the hoodwinked or deceived, anyone mesmerized by their own wishful vanities or the biases of their peers."³⁴³ Much of the comedy produced by these artists offers critical social commentary and betrays awareness that "the ability to set oneself firmly against the grain, to perceive wrongheaded proscriptions and speak out against them has always been the cornerstone of socially relevant comedy."³⁴⁴ Coinciding with the rise of critical comedy, the phenomenon of "political correctness"³⁴⁵ swept over the Western world, establishing rigid restrictions on the use of humor, and thereby created the perfect conditions for satiric target practice. Although the satiric mode was still alive and well, racism had lost nothing of its urgency. In short, these factors produced a supreme climate for a racially concerned satirist, such as Percival Everett, to thrive.

Percival Everett, who divides his time between an English professorship at the University of Southern California and his career as an artist, is a prolific writer whose list of publications includes some thirteen full-length works among other publications, exceeding the collective output of novels from George Schuyler and Charles Wright.³⁴⁶ Everett is a writer whose work is impossible to pigeonhole. From his sinister science fiction novel *Zulus* in 1989 to numerous works of short fiction and his most recent venture into the Western fiction tradition, *Wounded*, Everett has bolstered his reputation as one of the most versatile representatives of

³⁴³ Watkins, *On the Real Side* 581.

³⁴⁴ Watkins, *On the Real Side* 581.

³⁴⁵ See Norman Fairclough, "Political Correctness': The Politics of Culture and Language," *Discourse & Society* 14.1 (2003): 17-28. Also see William McGowan, *Coloring the News: How Political Correctness has Corrupted American Journalism* (San Francisco: Encounter Books, 2002).

³⁴⁶ For an outline of Everett's career and output see Bernard Alger Drew, *100 Most Popular African American Authors: Biographical Sketches and Bibliographies* (Portsmouth: Libraries Unlimited, 2006). Drew gives an encompassing biographical outline of Everett's life and artistic career and puts special emphasis on the fact that the author is extremely versatile and "thrives on changing themes and styles."

his craft.³⁴⁷ Trent Masiki reasons that, “given the length and breadth of Everett’s career, it is hard to imagine how the editors of the *Norton Anthology of African American Literature* (1997) and the *Oxford Companion to African American Literature* (1997) managed to overlook him.”³⁴⁸ Up to his 2001 publication *Erasure*, satire had been a term rarely used in combination with Everett. In *Erasure*, as will be shown in the subsequent analysis, Everett draws on the tradition of African American satire and transforms it to create a new form of the African American novel of satire as a poignant answer to the contemporary racial discourse.³⁴⁹

The novel comes in the form of a private journal by the highbrow African American author Thelonious “Monk” Ellison.³⁵⁰ Ellison is frustrated with the repeated rejection of his latest book project by the publishing industry and is suffering from the social pressure to focus on “black” style and subject matter. When Juanita Mae Jenkins publishes a race pulp-fiction called *We’s Lives In Da Ghetto* and it skyrockets on the bestseller charts, Ellison creates the pen-name Stagg R. Leigh to write a satiric parody on the bestseller. But because his parody *My Pafology* is not identified as such, Stagg R. Leigh’s work becomes a runaway success, praised for its allegedly authentic representation of black life.

As the summary implies, a key concern of Everett’s satire lies within the system and politics of representation. It is due to this objective that *Erasure*

³⁴⁷ See Sven Birkerts, “The Surreal Thing,” rev. of *A History of the African-American People (Proposed)* by Strom Thurmond, by James Kincaid and Percival Everett, *New York Times* 7 Oct. 2001. In his review of Percival Everett’s most recent satiric collaboration with James Kincaid, Birkerts outlines the diversity of Everett’s artistic work as an author. He notes that “Everett has said in interviews that he does not like to repeat himself, and indeed, his 12 previous novels range from the apocalyptic futurism of “Zulus” (1990) to the Western water-rights misadventures of “Watershed” (1996). His last novel, “Erasure” (2001), yet another dalliance with an outré premise, proposed the fantastical success of a novel, “My Pafology,” by a black writer named Stagg R. Leigh, whose prose took racist stereotyping right around the bend. The publication of Everett’s two new books, “American Desert” and “A History of the African-American People [Proposed] by Strom Thurmond,” the latter written with James Kincaid, confirms his standing as one of the wilder of our wild-card satirists.” Birkerts’ review gives more detailed insights into Everett’s recent work which, however, would go beyond the scope of the present chapter. Another summary of Everett’s work is given in James Sallis, “The Audacious, Uncategorizable Everett,” *Boston Globe* 14 July 2006.

³⁴⁸ Trent Masiki, “Irony and Ecstasy – A Profile of Percival Everett” *Poets & Writers, Inc* 33.3 (2004): 36.

³⁴⁹ A thorough discussion of Everett and his work is given by Masiki. Also see Drew; Birkerts. For critical commentary on *Erasure* see Bell; Berman; Deb; Strecker.

³⁵⁰ As the nickname “Monk” suggests, the name Thelonious Ellison is a conflation of two major black artist of the twentieth century: the composer and jazz-pianist Thelonious Monk and African American writer Ralph Ellison. As such, it puts emphasis on Ellison’s intellectual nature.

assumes a particular position within the canon of African American satiric novels. The critical reactions the novel has generated suggest that Everett has indeed managed to dissect his target. Reactions to Everett's first entry into the sphere of the satiric novel have been favorable. *Erasure* has repeatedly been praised for its deft handling of satire and its "brilliant and incisive anger."³⁵¹ According to Siddhartha Deb, the novel exemplifies Everett's exceptional control over the satiric mode and resonates with the author's "acute sense of literary form and the ways in which it can be used to express the rebellious nuances of superficially fragile lives. *Erasure* may be an indictment of the derivative nature of contemporary American culture, but it is also one of the most original and forceful novels to have emerged from America in recent years."³⁵² Similarly, in her review for the *New York Times*, Jenifer Berman praises *Erasure's* cunning wit, proclaiming that "with equal measures of sympathy and satire, it craftily addresses the highly charged issue of being 'black enough' in America."³⁵³ *The Telegraph* acknowledges that "Everett's scalpel-like prose can anatomise his subject" and notes how the novel's "self-consciously cerebral style precludes mass-appeal, but produces intellectual satisfaction."³⁵⁴ In light of so much agreement regarding the novel's qualities, it is not surprising that Bernard W. Bell assigns a special place for *Erasure* within the scope of Everett's artistic career, as he boldly asserts:

A provocative satire on the impact of the publishing industry on the authority, authenticity, and agency of autonomous, non-conventional contemporary African American novelists in particular and on the double-consciousness of middle-class African Americans in general, *Erasure* is probably Everett's most wryly humorous and disturbingly semi-autobiographical and metafictional novel.³⁵⁵

Bell's acclaim for the book is certainly to the point. However, his assessment also hints at challenges *Erasure* holds for readers of satire and idiosyncrasies

³⁵¹ Trey Strecker, rev. of *Erasure*, by Percival Everett, *The Review of Contemporary Fiction* 22.2 (2002): 228.

³⁵² Siddhartha Deb, "How Black Is It?" rev. of *Erasure*, by Percival Everett, *Times Online*, Accessed: 21 Jan. 2007 <<http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/incomingFeeds/article750148.ece>>.

³⁵³ Jenifer Berman, "Books in Brief: Fiction; Enuf Pafology," rev. of *Erasure*, by Percival Everett, *New York Times* 7 Oct. 2001.

³⁵⁴ Gangsta Trap, *The Telegraph*, Accessed: 22 Jan. 2007 <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/arts/main.jhtml?xml=/arts/2003/03/23/boeve23.xml>>.

³⁵⁵ Bernard W. Bell, rev. of *Erasure*, by Percival Everett, *African American Review* 37.2/3 (2003): 474.

which call for critical assessment within the specific framework of the African American satiric novel. For instance, in contradistinction to some of its reviews, it must be explained why the particular relationship between narrator and author causes some of the novel's satiric sting to come across as elusive. Another issue which must be assessed is why the diversity of targets makes it difficult, at times, to identify the work's major underlying didactic mission. Finally, a close analysis of *Erasure's* narrative structure will be negotiated in terms of the specificities of the novel as a satire.

A helpful context for the discussion of specific achievements of *Erasure* is provided by the conventions of Menippean satire. Usually texts in this tradition are associated with openness to stylistic variation; most satirists in the Menippean tradition have "adopted the dialogue as a form."³⁵⁶ By choosing a journal form, *Erasure* is highly heterogeneous in style and plot. While the main plot lines deal with family-related problems on the one hand and the narrator's shift from a publicly neglected author of highbrow fiction to a misunderstood satirist on the other, *Erasure* is interspersed with seemingly incoherent fragments of the author's novel ideas and excerpts.³⁵⁷ Most of these excerpts are in dialogue form and feature celebrities from various centuries and artistic spheres. Be it Joyce, Wilde, Rothko, Resnais, Derrida, or Wittgenstein, there is no discernible logic to explain the figures appearing in these mostly short interludes of dialogue.³⁵⁸ While most critical responses have neglected stylistic idiosyncrasies and have focused chiefly on the novel's main plot, it can be shown that a juxtaposition of key passages from Monk's story with excerpts from his novel is indispensable for a proper understanding of the novel and will also help clarify the novel's specific satiric approach. In light of the *Erasure's* complex Menippean structure, a summary of the work's main plot will facilitate the understanding of and orientation within the subsequent analysis.

³⁵⁶ Griffin 40.

³⁵⁷ See Trevor Lewis, rev. of *Erasure*, by Percival Everett, *The Sunday Times* 18 Jan 2004. Not all reviewers have read the plot of Monk's family life as a crucial element of *Erasure's* satiric commentary. In *The Sunday Times*, Trevor Lewis praises the novel for being "deftly weighted between touching family tragedy and amusing cultural critique."

³⁵⁸ The interludes in dialogue form are characterized by a consistent omission of first names. This raises the novel's satiric challenge as *Erasure* demands considerable presupposed knowledge and calls for profound erudition on the part of the reader in order to contextualize these fragments.

With a humorous tone, the narrator introduces himself and points to a feeling of insecurity and awkwardness that accompanies his personal confessions:

My name is Thelonious Ellison. And I am a writer of fiction. This admission pains me only at the thought of my story being found and read, as I have always been severely put off by any story which had as its main character a writer. So, I will claim to be something else, if not instead, then in addition, and that shall be a son, a brother, a fisherman, an art lover, a woodworker. If for no other reason, I choose this last, callous-building occupation because of the shame it caused my mother, who for years called my pickup truck a station wagon. I am Thelonious Ellison. Call me Monk. (*Erasure* 1)

While the opening paragraph serves as a first trace of the protagonist's wit, it is also an indirect reference to his complicated family relationships. The avid woodworker and fly fisherman Thelonious Ellison is facing major transformations within his family. Simultaneously, his career as a writer is stalled by the repeated rejection of his latest manuscript. His private problems and artistic tribulations coalesce in the space Monk occupies within the Ellison family. As the sole artist in a renowned dynasty of doctors, Monk is in a strange position, witnessing the developments of his relatives and the dissolution of his family from an alienated and emotionally detached perspective.

Monk's deceased father haunts him when he learns his father had a mistress which resulted in a newly discovered half-sister, Gretchen. The narrator's brother, Bill, laments ongoing struggles with his ex-wife after he comes out as homosexual and his sister, Lisa (also referred to as Yvonne in the novel), is shot by pro-life activists for performing abortions. These events leave the narrator increasingly unable to cope with his mother's struggle with Alzheimer's disease. Artistically, things are not going well for him, either. The rejection of his fiction by several publishers for the sole reason that the author is allegedly "not black enough," coupled with the tremendous success of Juanita Mae Jenkin's race-laden pulp-fiction *We's Lives In Da Ghetto* prompt Monk to write *My Pafology* (*Erasure* 43). Under the pen-name Stagg R. Leigh, Monk launches a biting parody on the Jenkins novel. As his angry response is misread by the public, *My Pafology* is not received as the challenging insult it is intended to be, but is praised for its allegedly authentic representation of African American life. It becomes an instant commercial success, leaving Monk a wealthy man with the uncomfortable feeling of having sold-out his artistic abilities for commercial success.

The complete text of *My Pafology* is included in the middle section of *Erasure*, where it is divided into ten chapters and takes up sixty-eight pages. It is this text which gives *Erasure* the form of a frame narrative, a structural trait which has far-reaching consequences for the author's satiric design. The frame narrative allows Everett to give a detailed account of the fate of Monk Ellison as a misunderstood artist. By including the unabridged text of *My Pafology*, Everett gives readers both a precise impression of the rhetorical strategies employed by Monk in his satire as well as a juxtaposition of these features with the effects they have on the audience.

However, the most crucial reason why *Erasure* lends itself to analysis in terms of an innovative treatment of racism in the African American novel of satire is the work's profound concern with the nature, construction, and proliferation of "race" as a viable concept. It thus takes the psychological concern governing Wright's novel to new lengths and helps to grasp racism's changing manifestations as they are reflected in different satiric designs. The novel's affiliation with the workings of representation, through which race as a social category is created, marks Everett's work as the most epistemologically concerned of the three books under consideration. Moreover, since the novel also addresses the unexpected rise to fame of Stagg R. Leigh and simultaneously highlights the fate of the misunderstood satirist Thelonious Ellison, *Erasure* can be read as a powerful example of the potential and pitfalls of satiric forms of expression. In order to develop and underscore these interpretive claims, this chapter dissects the novel's major elements as entailed in Everett's satiric critique, and negotiates them against the backdrop of the preliminary theoretical considerations mapped out in the opening chapters.

5.2 Talking the Talk: The Demise of a Family

Communication is a major theme in Everett's satiric design. It is important since issues of understanding and misunderstanding reflect the novel's fundamental epistemological concern. In a departure from other satires, Everett uses a round figure as narrator. It is in the development of the character Monk Ellison that Everett negotiates the politics of representation and it is in the

protagonist's psychological depth that the nature of communication is constantly interrogated. It stands to reason, then, that a typified protagonist would not have served Everett's satiric design sufficiently.

Communicative problems can be traced repeatedly in the narrator's encounters with his mother and siblings. Early on in the novel Monk informs readers of his father's death and the lasting impression his father's well-attended funeral had on him. With wry humor the narrator recalls:

My father's funeral had been a simple, yet huge, somewhat organic event in Northwest Washington. The street outside Episcopal church my parents never attended was filled with people, nearly all of them teary-eyed and claiming to have been delivered into this world by the great Dr. Ellison, this in spite of most of them being clearly too young to have been born while he was still practicing. I as yet have been unable to come to an understanding or create some meaning of the spectacle. (*Erasure* 4)

Monk's concluding remark on his lack of understanding for the scene is important as it points to the crucial role of communicative issues within the Ellison family. When Monk is visiting Washington to read a paper at a meeting of his literary circle, the Nouveau Roman Society, he uses the opportunity to pay a visit to his sister Yvonne who is practicing at a clinic in the city. When Monk attempts to inform Yvonne of the reasons for his stay in Washington, he is under the strong impression he is not getting through to her: "Yvonne looked at me as if my words were getting lost in the space between us. She nodded her head without looking directly at me and went back to her work on the desk. I felt awkward, out of place, like I had so much of my life, like I didn't belong" (*Erasure* 21). Monk repeatedly refers to feeling alienated from his family, which, on a basic level, is expressed through his being the only person committed to the humanities in a house of medical doctors. The narrator's ambivalent attitude toward his family also surfaces in interactions with his needy mother.

When his sister considers the possibility of Monk permanently moving to Washington in order to spend more time with his sick mother, the narrator must confront his own emotional incompetence. Guiltily he admits his incapacity to harbor caring and social thoughts toward his mother. Once more straining to communicate with Lisa, Monk acknowledges his state of isolation and declares: "I was feeling awful, like a failure, letting both my sister and my mother down. Living in my own little bubble I had never thought about these things. I felt myself

sinking" (*Erasure* 28). The narrator increasingly realizes his secluded position within his family and the ever-present inability to communicate with his sister. Eventually, being confronted with a group of violent protesters in front of Lisa's clinic, he calls into question his role as a sibling. Becoming conscious of how insufficiently he has lived up to the role of the protective brother, he notes: "The picketers were back. They spotted Lisa and began to shout at her. 'Murderer! Murderer!' they said. I got out and walked with her through the line and to the door, realizing as I did so that she did it alone everyday, that I wasn't there to be the protective brother, that she didn't need me" (*Erasure* 29). Monk reveals these feelings only to the readers of his journal while the conversations within his family remain ephemeral and superficial, suggesting a distinct inability to communicate naturally on the part of the narrator.

While these incidents can be regarded as minor episodes within the family dynamic, the overarching importance of such communicative problems is underscored by what Monk thinks of his parents. When the narrator examines his ongoing problems to establish lasting relationships, he concludes that his callous upbringing is to blame. He complains about the distance between himself and his parents, explaining: "they formed a unified front against which we kids collided and bounced off. They were not outwardly affectionate, though the three of us were evidence of some touching. Indeed, I thought they were decidedly distant, cool to one another. An attitude that would seriously impair my attempts at relationships later" (*Erasure* 152).

Indeed, one can argue that communicative problems play a major role in Monk's dysfunctional relationship with his parents. Time and again the narrator not only laments an inability to express himself to his family, but also quarrels with his effort to properly negotiate what his parents and siblings try to tell him. This notion is captured succinctly in a scene where Monk is uncertain what his sick mother has attempted to communicate to him over a cup of tea. The narrator is disturbed and gets not only to contemplate the mental state of his mother, but also the nature of language at large. His incapacity to communicate within his family prompts him to realize that

anyone who speaks to members of his family knows that sharing a language does not mean you share the rules governing the use of that language. No matter what is said, something else is meant and I knew that for all my

mother's seeming incoherence or out-of-itness, she was trying to tell me something over tea. The way she had mentioned the smoke in the living room twice. Her calling the blue box gray. Her easy and quick capitulation to what it was she and her cronies actually did at their meetings. But since I didn't know the rules, which were forever changing, I could only know that she was trying to say something, not what that something was." (*Erasure* 32)

These dwellings on the fluid character of language accompany the protagonist's reflections on the dilemma of miscommunication throughout the novel. One could make the case that the narrator's theories on the nature of language are supplemented by a short dialogue between the philosophers Ludwig Wittgenstein and Jacques Derrida.³⁵⁹ While only the last names are stated, it stands to reason that Everett is alluding to these two thinkers. In the conversation, Wittgenstein asks Derrida if he knew why Bach had to sell his organ:

Derrida: I don't know. Why?

Wittgenstein: Because he was baroque.

Derrida: You mean because he composed music marked by an elaborate and even grotesque ornamentation?

Wittgenstein: Well, no that's not exactly what I was getting at. It was a play on words.

Derrida: Oh, I get it. (*Erasure* 191-192)

This dialogue not only serves as an example of *Erasure's* play with presupposed knowledge, but it is also an ironic inversion of the reader's expectations. By having poststructuralist Jacques Derrida, an authority on meaning in language, unable to grasp Wittgenstein's pun, Everett makes a witty point on the instability and arbitrary nature of meaning in language. Furthermore, these statements are a part of the novel's overall concern with the creation of meaning through the representation of signifiers as it influences the protagonist's interaction with his family. The alienation and emotional distance which Monk feels from the rest of his family does not only affect Monk and his sister and mother, but also wields considerable influence over his connection with his brother Bill.

Following Bill's announcement that he is gay, he goes through legal problems and a severe personal struggle with his ex-wife. When Monk learns about his brother's fractured family life and the efforts he must make to see his

³⁵⁹ See Henry Staten, *Wittgenstein and Derrida* (Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1984).

children, the narrator realizes his family is dissolving in front of his eyes. Contemplating his father's death, his mother's sickness, and the assassination of his sister by pro-life activists in rapid sequence, Monk interprets his brother's jumbled life as just another weakening piece of a crumbling family, while simultaneously reflecting on his own helplessness:

For the first time I sat back and watched the destruction of my family, not a weird or unnatural thing, indeed it was more natural than most things, but it was a large portion to swallow. My father was dead for several years. My sister was recently murdered. My mother was slipping away on her kite of senility. And my brother was finally finding himself, I suppose, but seemingly losing everything else in the process. I wouldn't use the cliché that I was the captain of a sinking ship, that implying some kind of authority, but rather I was a diesel mechanic on a steamship, an obstetrician in a monastery. (*Erasure* 159)

As with his mother and sister, the relationship between Monk and Bill is characterized by an inability to communicate. When Monk tries to persuade his brother to join him in visiting their mother after her first night in a nursing home, the poor communication between the two triggers the narrator to question the nature of the language they share: "I watched his lips and realized I understood nothing he was saying. His language was not mine. His language possessed an adverbial and interrogative geometry that I could not comprehend. I could see the shapes of his meaning, even hear that his words meant something, but I had no idea as to the substance of his meaning. I nodded" (*Erasure* 213). Here, Monk's theoretical inquiries into the formation of meaning, as the suspected root of his communication problems, become apparent. These problems are not confined to the narrator's familial situation, but affect almost all of Monk's social interactions. Some formative childhood experiences which the narrator recalls figure into his difficulties with verbal expression. Recalling the uneasiness he felt every time he was confronted with allegedly stereotypical "black" behavior patterns, Monk remembers some of his odd encounters with informal speech:

I could never talk the talk, so I didn't try and being myself has served me well enough. But when I was a teenager, I wanted badly to fit in. I watched my friends, who didn't sound so different from me, step into scenes and change completely. 'Yo, man, what it is?' they would say. 'You're what it is,' someone would respond. It didn't make sense to me, but it sounded casual, comfortable and, most importantly, cool. (*Erasure* 166-167)

The lasting nature of Monk's struggle with language surfaces when the narrator, akin to his childhood experience, has to reply to an informal greeting. When Marilyn Tilman, whose uncle Monk knew, introduces him to another friend, the narrator is faced with the informal greeting "What's up, brother?" Immediately, Monk's mind starts to race as he tries to map out a response: "what was the proper response to a *what's up*? Should I say, *Nothing's up*, which would imply that I had no good reason for being there? I couldn't say *Several things are up*, because I would then be obliged to say what those things might be" (*Erasure* 179). These instances of miscommunication can be read as the narrator's questioning the conventional formation of meaning. These moments are also important to the novel's function as satire because they anticipate Everett's critical commentary, by extending into the relationship between the author Thelonious Ellison and the world, eventually predicting Everett's epistemological negotiation of race. After all, the most consequential misunderstanding for the narrator's development is that between the satirist Stagg R. Leigh and his readership.

5.3 *My Pafology*: Between Parody and Satire

The preceding paragraphs reveal how the protagonist's struggle with communication leads him to question the workings of verbal communication. The significance of these dwellings on language is not limited to the boundaries of the protagonist's family, but is closely linked to Monk's investigations into the creation of meaning/reality by means of the representation of signifiers. This concern points to the theme of race and racism in *Erasure* as it also governs the narrator's most fundamental communicative dilemma: that between the satirist Monk Ellison and his readers. Before it is possible to analyze the deeper significance of *My Pafology* against the backdrop of the satiric negotiation of racism, it is helpful to briefly recapitulate how *My Pafology* figures into the plot of *Erasure*.

As Monk Ellison's newest manuscript is continually rejected, he grows increasingly infuriated by the tremendous success of Juanita Mae Jenkins' cliché-laden book *We's Lives In Da Ghetto*. Featuring teenage promiscuity, pregnancy, unreasoned violence, and brutish primitivism, Jenkins' novel implicitly ascertains

various racist beliefs of alleged black backwardness, as a synopsis of the work clearly implies:

The story begins with Sharonda F'rinda Johnson who lives the typical Black life in an unnamed ghetto in America. Sharonda is fifteen and pregnant with her third child, by a third father. She lives with her drug addict mother and her mentally deficient, basketball playing brother Juneboy. When Juneboy is killed in a driveby by a rival gang, the bullet passing through his cherished Michael Jordan autographed basketball, Sharonda watches her mother's wailing grief and decides she must have some voice in the culture. Sharonda becomes a hooker to make enough money to take dance classes at the community center. In tap class, her athletic prowess is noticed by the producer of a Broadway show and she is discovered. She rises to the top, buys her mother a house, but her limitations catch up with her and she comes plummeting back to earth. (*Erasure* 39)

It is not only the tremendous commercial success of the novel, but, above all, the uncritical reception of the work which triggers Monk to create an artistic reaction to the bestseller. It is especially the presentation of demeaning, stereotyped African Americans under the pretense of sincere art that angers Monk. No one seems to take offense at the vivid portrayal of racist clichés such as the representation of black people as inescapably oversexed, athletic, and dim-witted.³⁶⁰ In response to this, Monk creates the pen name Stagg R. Leigh and writes *My Pafology*, a biting parody of Jenkins' book. The only direct reference to the Jenkins novel is the protagonist's name Van Go Jenkins. In order to lambaste the work, Monk resorts to a common satiric technique: *reductio ad absurdum*. He pushes the novel's racist stereotypes to an extreme, inflating promiscuity, violence, sexism, and barbarism to grossly distorted proportions. However, Monk's satire not only signifies on the thematic aspects of the Jenkins novel, but also parodies its most striking stylistic features. From the chapter numbers on, the novel is written in highly exaggerated African American vernacular and assumes the form of a grotesque pantheon of racist stereotypes.

Stagg's protagonist introduces himself with the telling line: "My name is Van Go Jenkins and I'm nineteen years old and I don't give a fuck about nobody, not you, not my Mama, not the man. The world don't give a fuck about nobody, so why should I? (*Erasure* 66). Representing the one-dimensional image of the black

³⁶⁰ For a concise outline of racist stereotypes of blackness and how such clichés have been inverted through different forms of humor, see Watkins, *On the Real Side*.

ghetto brute, Van Go lives with his mother and has four children by four different women. In order to get her son off the street, Van Go's mother arranges a job as a driver for a wealthy black family. In an act anticipated by the story's insistent emphasis on Van Go's unrepressed sexuality, Van Go rapes the daughter of his employer. The protagonist's formulaic animal existence qualifies him to be put on display on a television talk show, where he is spotted by police. A chase ensues, eventually leaving the protagonist surrounded by officers: "I get kicked again while I'm bein pulled to my feet. But I dont care. The cameras be full of me. I on TV. I say, 'Hey, Mama.' I say, 'Hey, Baby Girl. Look at me. I on TV'" (*Erasure* 131).

Even this short summary of the text conveys how rife *My Pafology* is with racist stereotypes of blackness. Monk makes broad use of physiologization, stripping his protagonist of all mental ability in order to create a vicious underclass creature. Accordingly, Van's children do not bear classical names but references to different pharmaceuticals, namely Aspireene, Tylenola, Dexatrina, and Rexall. While his mother is cast in the derogatory role of faithful black Mammy, Sambo's female counterpart, Van Go embodies a variety of racist stereotypes. For the most part he resembles the vulgar and oversexed black brute, callous and driven by animal instincts. The effect of Monk's extensive use of *reductio ad absurdum* is almost pornographic vulgarity. Similar to the part occasionally played by Lester Jefferson in *The Wig*, readers frequently find Van Go in the role of the black hoodlum: "Think she something, fuckin round wif that ol' rich nigger. Got her though, stuck her one and creamed on that couch. Fuck wif me" (*Erasure* 80). Monk goes to great lengths to portray Van Go as an overly cruel monster, a rendition of the American nightmare of the black rapist.³⁶¹ Lusting for violent intercourse, Van Go recalls the raping of one of his acquaintances: "You remember how good that shit was, the way she whimpered, like she be crying, like it hurt. Nigger be hurtin a pussy. Fuck school. She ain't gone be no nurse. She ain't gone be nuffin" (*Erasure* 70). Whenever Van Go reflects his forlorn situation, the narrow limit Monk has set on his mental capacity becomes apparent: "I go home and I get in bed wif my clothes on and my knuckles be sore as shit. I look up at the peeling paint on the ceilin and think about my babies. I hate my babies. I loves my babies. I hates my

³⁶¹ See Dennis Rome, *Black Demons: The Media's Depiction of the African American Male Criminal Stereotype* (London: Praeger, 2004).

babies. I loves my babies. I hates..." (*Erasure* 82). These excerpts exemplify how Monk reduces African American vernacular to a very limited and base means of communication throughout the entire text of *My Pafology*. He underscores this point by having his characters repeatedly take turns at swearing "fuck you" for several lines (*Erasure* 68, 95).

As should be evident from the synopsis of the text, *My Pafology* makes extensive use of signifying. This form of critical intertextual revision, outlined in more detail in the theoretical considerations, constitutes the backbone of Monk's satire; and it largely depends on the readers' understanding the signifying in the text to properly trace the work's satiric nature. In keeping with Gates' concept of the trope, Monk's text signifies on other works by borrowing textual structures and placing them within an incongruous setting. The complexity of *My Pafology* resides in its multilayered approach to signifying. Within the novel *Erasure*, the text signifies on Juanita Mae Jenkin's novel *We's Lives In Da Ghetto*; however, it also points outside the boundaries of *Erasure* by implicitly referencing Richard Wright's *Native Son* (1940), one of the key texts of African American literature in the twentieth century. While one can argue that *My Pafology* signifies on an entire vernacular tradition, and on the sphere of ghetto pulp fiction in general, it revises and borrows most extensively from the works of Jenkins and Wright. Analyzing the signifying strategy within Monk's work reveals the author's critical intent behind the text. Eventually, it turns out that the defining moment of miscommunication between Monk Ellison and his audience resides in his readers' failure to properly identify the work's signifying nature and thus arrive at its objective.

The great extent to which *My Pafology* signifies on the Jenkins novel is obvious. First, because readers are granted a close look at Monk's motivation to attack the text, and second, because summaries and excerpts from *We's Lives In Da Ghetto* illustrate the close proximity between the works of Monk and Jenkins. Repeatedly, readers witness Monk's adverse reactions to Jenkins' ghetto fiction: "I closed the book and thought I was going to throw up" (*Erasure* 29). Thematically, as well as structurally, Monk borrows key elements from Jenkins' text such as teenage promiscuity, ghetto violence, and the use of heavy vernacular. As with Monk's satire, the Jenkins novel delves right into clumsy and ungrammatical spoken language: "My fahvre be gone since time I's borned and it be just me an' my

momma an' my baby brover Juneboy. In da mornin' Juneboy never do brushes his teefus, so I gots to remind him. Because dat, Momma says I be the 'sponsible one and tell me that I gots to hold things togever while she be at work clean dem white people's house" (*Erasure* 28-29). However, to classify *My Pafology* merely as a critical revision of the Jenkins novel would exempt Monk's work, and essentially *Erasure* in general, from its satiric purpose, which calls for a critical attitude pointing outside of the text, implicitly referencing its historical context.

A crucial part of Monk's critique embedded in his work *My Pafology* is inscribed in his revision of Richard Wright's novel *Native Son*.³⁶² To those readers familiar with Wright's bestselling novel, the degree to which Monk's text exploits the narrative of Bigger Thomas does not go unnoticed. Like Bigger Thomas in *Native Son*, Van Go Jenkins lives with his faithful mother and gets an occupation working for a wealthy family named the Daltons. However, while the Daltons are a white family in *Native Son*, they are a black family in *My Pafology*. Bigger and Van both eventually get to drive the Daltons' daughter and her boyfriend through the nightlife of the city. Bigger is politely asked by his white upper-class passengers to show them a decent African American restaurant: "Look, Bigger. We want one of those places where colored people eat, not one of those show places."³⁶³ Monk's novel signifies on this passage by using the same contextual arrangement and filling it with much more informal language. Thus, Van is asked by his black passengers in cliché vernacular, referencing stereotyped signifiers of alleged black simplicity such as chicken and drugs: "Take us to the hood and we can shoot some hoops and then maybe score some weed and eat some chicken" (*Erasure* 102). Ultimately, both Wright and Monk have their protagonists take their passengers to a place called "Ernie's." The Dalton daughter and her boyfriend get increasingly drunk. Back at the Dalton mansion Bigger carries the drunken girl into her room. He is afraid he might be discovered by the blind mother late at night and accidentally kills the girl when he tries to silence her with a pillow: "Bigger held his breath. Mary mumbled again; he bent over her, his fists clenched in fear. He knew

³⁶² For insights into the critical motivation that spawned *Native Son* see Richard Wright, "How 'Bigger' Was Born," *Native Son* (New York: Perennial, 2001); Houston A. Baker, "Racial Wisdom and Richard Wright's *Native Son*," *Critical Essays on Richard Wright*, ed. Yoshinobu Hakutani (Boston: Hall, 1982); Edward Margolies, *The Art of Richard Wright* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1969).

³⁶³ Richard Wright, *Native Son* (New York: Perennial, 2001) 69.

that Mrs. Dalton could not see him; but he knew that if Mary spoke she would come to the side of the bed and discover him, touch him.”³⁶⁴ Monk confronts his protagonist with a similar situation.

While Van consciously rapes the girl, he does not kill her. Comparing the depiction of the situation in both novels foregrounds the extent to which Monk signifies on the work of Wright by borrowing elements of plot while turning the protagonist into a rude, oversexed and aggressive brute: “I’m in the shadow with Penelope and then I see the woman got this white cane. Shit, the bitch be blind. I almost laughs out loud. But my mouth is still on Penelope’s mouth and she be kissin me now. She don’t know who the fuck I is. The blind bitch walk on away and back into the house. And I be into it now” (*Erasure* 108). Throughout *My Pafology*, Monk uses first-person narration in order to portray Van’s primitivism with shocking bluntness. In keeping with satire’s function as an intellectual challenge for readers, Monk never openly discloses his use of *Native Son*, leaving the implicit reference as a test for both the fictitious readership of *My Pafology* and those of *Erasure*. It is important to note that Monk’s critical revision of Wright’s novel entirely erases *Native Son*’s psychological depth and critical political commentary.³⁶⁵ These features fall prey to *reductio ad absurdum*, as satire commonly avoids shades of gray. Having seen the critical intent that gives impetus to such acts of signifying, one is indeed at the root of Monk Ellison’s dilemma. Monk alias Stagg submits the texts of Jenkins and Wright to critical revision for a specific satiric purpose. Underestimating the pitfalls of satire, however, the satirist Stagg R. Leigh suffers from his readership’s inability to perform ironic inversion in order to disclose the critical function of the text.

³⁶⁴ Richard Wright 84.

³⁶⁵ For a thorough analysis of the politics in *Native Son* see the chapter “Richard Wright’s Critique of Nationalist Desire” in Anthony Dawahare, *Nationalism, Marxism, and African American Literature Between the Wars: A New Pandora’s Box* (Mississippi: U of Mississippi P, 2003). Also see William J. Maxwell, *New Negro, Old Left: African American Writing and Communism Between the Wars* (New York: Columbia UP, 1999).

5.4 Ellison's Satire: The Author and the Audience

The question arises as to where the misunderstanding that exists between the artist Monk Ellison, here operating under the pen name Stagg R. Leigh, and his readership can be located and how this misinterpretation informs the novel's concern with racism. In order to fully answer this question, it is necessary to analyze the satiric nature of *My Pafology*. As stated earlier, the text signifies profusely in the fashion of a parody on the African American literary tradition.³⁶⁶ Yet, signifying is just one device in Monk's arsenal of satiric techniques. One can assert that through the implementation of *My Pafology* and by focusing on the narrator's transformation from Monk Ellison into Stagg R. Leigh, *Erasure* calls attention to the possibilities and dangers which satiric forms of expression hold for their creators. Simultaneously, the novel highlights the greater mechanisms forcing African American art into stereotyped patterns of representation.³⁶⁷

Monk never refers to *My Pafology* as satire, but as parody. However, the narrator admits that he wrote the text for a special purpose and that it is not meant to be a work of art, but rather a device with an instructive intent. Considering the distinct quality of his creative work with paint, wood, or words, Monk reflects on the nature of his parody:

Only appearances signify in visual art. At least this is what I am told, that the painter's work is an invention in the boundless space that begins at the edges of his picture. The surface, the paper or the canvas, is not the work of art, but where the work lives, a place to keep the picture, the paint, the idea. But a *chair*, a chair *is* a space, is its own canvas, occupies space properly. The canvas occupies spaces and the picture occupies the canvas, while the chair, as a work, fills the space itself. This was what occurred to me regarding *My Pafology*. The novel, so-called, was more a chair than a painting, my having designed it not as a work of art, but as a functional device, its appearance a thing to behold, but more a thing to mark, a warning perhaps, a gravestone certainly. It was by this reasoning that I was able to look at my face in the mirror and to accept the deal my agent presented to me on the phone that evening. (*Erasure* 208-209)

³⁶⁶ However, there are different forms of parody, spawned by different artistic intentions. The imitation of a work of art or a particular style can be created for the sole sake of humor and entertainment, but it can also be propelled by a satiric mindset. In the latter instance, the parody does not only use its host for the purpose of humor, but it disassembles and attacks the very forms it mimics. The events in *Erasure* suggest that such is the aim behind the parody in *My Pafology*.

³⁶⁷ See Ferguson.

In this passage, the narrator's profound interest in the formation of meaning/reality through the representation of signifiers, the same concern that informs his familial problems, surfaces in a different context – namely, with regard to the meaning and influence of art. Monk is able to publish the book without feeling guilty by assuring himself of *My Pafology's* critical purpose. And while he does not refer to the work as satire, the guise of parody and the narrator's critical intent mark it as such, as they contribute two satiric prerequisites: indirection and didacticism. Repeatedly, Monk betrays rage and anger and the desire to criticize as the driving emotions behind his writing.

In order to clearly identify Leigh's writing as satire, one must trace the author's socio-political concern. In the case of Stagg, this is a rather effortless undertaking since Monk openly confesses that it is anger that drives him to create his alter ego Stagg Leigh and to engage in satire. Talking to his agent, Monk fully admits to the aggressive mindset fostering his latest creation when he asserts: "Look at the shit that's published. I'm sick of it. This is an expression of my being sick of it" (*Erasure* 132). It is this attitude that turns Stagg R. Leigh into a satirist and that drives him to commit "that murder by indirection we identify as satire."³⁶⁸ His anger builds up and eventually finds release in his writing. Shortly before the protagonist starts with the production of *My Pafology*, he gives a detailed description of the emotions that spark his writing:

The pain started in my feet and coursed through my legs, up my spine and into my brain and I remembered passages of *Native Son* and *The Color Purple* and *Amos and Andy* and my hands began to shake, the world opening around me, tree roots trembling on the ground outside, people in the street shouting *dint, ax, fo, screet* and *fahvre!* and I was screaming inside, complaining that I didn't sound like that, that my mother didn't sound like that, that my father didn't sound like that and I imagined myself sitting on a park bench counting the knives in my switchblade collection and a man came up to me and he asked me what I was doing and my mouth opened and I couldn't help what came out, "Why fo you be axin?." (*Erasure* 61-62)

The quoted passage indicates that it is clearly not the delight of comical parody which motivates Monk, but contempt as it commonly fuels acid satire in Juvenalian terms. Obviously, Monk's anger stems from the fact that the novels and TV shows which crucially contribute to the public definition of "blackness" do not account for

³⁶⁸ Bridgman 86.

black life beyond a clichéd ghetto existence and most of all not for an African American intellectual such as Monk Ellison.³⁶⁹ Satire offers the troubled author a means to articulate his disapproval with elegance and sting. The mere fact that Monk resorts to satire is indicative of his self-perception. Since Monk engages in satire, a mode commonly employed when an enemy cannot or should not be confronted directly, one can presume that Monk fears repercussion from the publishing industry, which he is dependent on for his living. Although he has a clear outline of his target and, as an author, control over his rhetorical weapon, his plan to lambaste the persistence of racist stereotypes in art ultimately fails, setting a powerful example of the risks of satire.

As discussed in the chapter on theory, satire's potential to give a critical yet witty voice to outsiders and the oppressed does not come without risks. If too reliant on stable irony and tropes of invective, the satirist loses his superior position aloof the mores and if he is exposed as an uncultivated railer, his intended didacticism will be ineffectual. If the satire is too close to harmless comedy and drenched in unstable irony and a Horatian tone, readers are likely to ignore the author's critical voice amidst the foolery. In any case, satirists not only need a clear concept of their objective, they also need a precise notion of their audience in order to properly adjust indirection and morality. The predicament of Stagg R. Leigh stems from the fact that he overestimates his readership. Very much in opposition to the author's design, his readers fail to identify the work as "a thing to behold" and a "warning" (*Erasure* 209). Consequently, his satiric subtext goes entirely unnoticed. Since satire is often heralded as a test of intelligence, measuring to what extent a given audience is able to decode implicit references and irony, the reception of *My Pafology* passes merciless judgment on its readers. Monk's audience fails to realize that the pathetic story of Van Go Jenkins does not constitute the work's artistic core, but that the author's satiric approach sways the story's concern to the widespread problem of artistic representation and authenticity. The story thus functions as a synecdochal representation of the mass

³⁶⁹ See Tony Lindsay, rev. of *Erasure*, by Percival Everett, *Black Issues Book Review* 4.1 (2003): 57. Lindsay rightfully notes in his review of *Erasure*, the Ellison family as a whole constitutes "a radical departure from the 'traditional' black family. Led by a non-believer – an atheist father – you won't find fried chicken, macaroni and cheese or Sunday churchgoing in this household. The Ellison family feasts on oysters, and intellectualism takes priority over religion."

marketing of racist stereotypes under the guise of artistic authenticity. The reactions the novel garners, however, strongly suggest that the readership is entirely unable to recognize the implicit critique inscribed in the work. Random House offers the author six hundred thousand dollars for the publishing rights and refers to the book as “true to life,” “important,” truly “the kind of book that they will be reading in high schools thirty years from now” (*Erasure* 136). Likewise, critics claim that the novel is authentic to the extent that one could “lift the dialogue right out of the book” (*Erasure* 217). Unable to identify the grotesque brutishness of *My Pafology* as a “representation of deformity,”³⁷⁰ a common satiric feature, Stagg’s readership interprets these inflated defects as indicative of its realist approach.

It is not only the satire in the novel that goes unnoticed, but also the author’s ironic comments on his own work remain undetected. Several times Stagg gives ironic hints as to the ambition behind his latest work and is repeatedly on the verge of dropping his mask. His editor Paula Baderman calls Stagg to inform him about the publishing plans: “Well,’ she said. ‘We’re hoping for a spring pub date. I think this is just perfect for summer reading.’” With much ambiguity, Stagg replies: “Yes, white people on the beach will get a kick out of it” (*Erasure* 156). Here, the author implicitly references his targets and is eager to articulate his contempt for those readers who seriously consider the novel an authentic representation of African American life, suggesting that it is a feeling of sustained superiority that satisfies them. However, the ambiguity in his statement is not acknowledged by his editor.

The story of the misunderstood satirist Stagg R. Leigh indicates several of the pitfalls of satire. Departing from the preliminary outline of the satiric mode of operation, it is possible to explain the ignorance of Monk’s readers and his own mistakes as a satirist from a theoretical angle. The readership of *My Pafology* appears unable to identify the novel’s social concern. More precisely, Monk’s audience lacks the intellectual capacity to detect the work’s dislocating shift, a key element in satire that “drives readers’ attention away from character and towards

³⁷⁰ Griffin 167.

ideas or towards a broad analysis of society.”³⁷¹ Thus, *My Pafology* serves as potent proof for the assumption articulated in the first chapter, namely that satire can function as a test or gauge of intelligence. Those unable to place the work in its accurate socioeconomic context and who do not have the proper codes to interpret implied criticism will be unmasked by their inability to laugh. In *My Pafology*, the author’s primary means of indirection is parody, and he implicitly demands that his audience connect his work to certain aspects of the African American literary tradition. Here, the ignorance of Stagg Leigh’s readership is magnified by the fact that Leigh’s work is not that of a covert ironist. For if *Erasure*’s approach to satiric critique is complex and layered, *My Pafology* is a prime example of Juvenalian satire.

The excessive use of violent language and the repulsive portrayal of the protagonist’s primitivism clearly point to the text’s satiric intent. However, there is even stronger evidence for an intrusion of the satiric mode. In the case of *My Pafology*, the disruptions the satiric mode often leaves in a text are developed to a substantial degree: the slipshod plot, flat characters, excessive use of *reductio ad absurdum*, and the play with stock elements of pulp fiction are clearly the result of a satiric mission behind the text. Even the author’s name is indicative of his satiric objective. The penname Stagg R. Leigh is a reference to Stackolee (also Staggerlee) a “mythical, superhuman, Bad Nigger”³⁷² figure. The name of the author thus anticipates his play with preconceived notions of African American viciousness. In general, the work’s obvious signifying and the palpable reference to its targets are less indicative of mild Horatian satire than they are of a biting Juvenalian tone. Yet, the novel receives critical acclaim as semi-autobiographical fiction. On the Kenya Dunston show, a thinly veiled rendition of Oprah Winfrey’s “book club” television program, *My Pafology* is praised by the host as a “gripping and truly realistic tale” (*Erasure* 248).³⁷³ In order to bring the widespread misinterpretation of his work to a halt, Monk slightly adjusts it. With its exponentially harshening satiric tone, *Black*

³⁷¹ Knight, *Literatures of Satire* 224.

³⁷² Watkins, *On the Real Side* 461.

³⁷³ See Corine Squire, “Empowering Women? The Oprah Winfrey Show,” *Feminism & Psychology* 4.1 (1994): 63-79. While the focus of Squire’s article lies with the representations of gender on the Oprah Winfrey Show, it also comments on images of race. For a general assessment of Oprah Winfrey’s television book shows see Stephanie Smith, “The Story of O – The return of Oprah Winfrey’s much-maligned book club,” *New Statesman & Society* 21 Apr. 2003: 43.

No More indicates one possibility that allows an author to make sure his critique does not go unheard, without running the risk of abandoning the shelter of indirection. Just as Schuyler moves his work from a mild Horatian tone to a harsher Juvenalian critique, eventually even resorting to open diatribe, Monk also uses straight invective to express his disappointment and at the same time lead his readership on the correct path of interpreting his work. To counteract the commercial success of his novel as an authentic piece of art and to give enhanced visibility to his satiric design, Stagg R. Leigh decides to change the title of his work.

Stagg calls his editor and informs her about the plan to change the manuscript of his latest work: "I'm changing the title. The new title is *Fuck*" (*Erasure* 210). In the context of satiric critique, this change has to be interpreted as a conscious effort to give the novel a more easily understood Juvenalian approach to satire. Yet, since invective as found in the title *Fuck* betrays the author's wrath, it considerably undermines his satiric mission; for a key aspect of satire is to stay covert. However, even this insult, which fervently insists on being taken literally, goes unnoticed by Monk's readership. Usually, satirists are anxious to exploit the effects of laughter in order to form a united readership for a specific cause; and Stagg R. Leigh is no exception. However, his satire fails to have the desired effect. Contrary to the author's ambition, readers and critics alike do not unite in contemptuous laughter over the foolishness of racist pulp fiction, but in their approval of the story, collectively hailing the book as a genuine representation of blackness in America. This condescending perspective, supporting white supremacist ideas at the sight of a showcase into black primitivism finds synecdochal demonstration in Wayne Waxen's *New York Times* review of *Fuck*:

This novel is so honest, so raw, so down-and-dirty-gritty, so real, that talk of objectivity is out of place. To address the book on that level would be the same as comparing the medicine beliefs of Amazon Indians to our advanced biomedical science. This novel must be taken on its own terms; *it's a black thang*. The life of Van Go Jenkins is one of sheer animal existence, one that we can all recognize. Our young protagonist has no father, is ghetto tough and resists education like the plague. It is natural, right for him to do so. (*Erasure* 260)

Waxen's review suggests that the communicative problems that influence Monk's family life also characterize his artistic career. It is only the literal layer of *My Pafology* that is received while the broad use of irony and signifying as well as the

work's entire critical connotation remain undetected. Through *Erasure's* discussion of the misunderstood satirist Stagg R. Leigh, Everett's book offers implicit commentary on the risks of satire and the pervasiveness of racism.

5.5 Debunking the Literary World

Having explored the ways in which Monk utilizes the stylistic and thematic concepts of Jenkins and Wright, it is now possible to analyze how he attacks these works on the level of content and critiques the images they represent. The issue of representation in particular is central to *My Pafology* and also constitutes *Erasure's* primary satiric target. And yet, in the hands of Percival Everett, satire loses nothing of its "scatter-gun tendency,"³⁷⁴ making for considerable collateral damage in the form of secondary targets. Therefore, while the issue of representation is Everett's key satiric concern, there are several other objectives connected to this target. Among those who do not escape unscathed are intellectuals, critics, and the general academic community.

While the public is exposed by their failure to trace the satire in Monk's work, it is the sphere of academia that is implicitly condemned through its simplified and uncritical reading of the novel. By depicting the academic acclaim *My Pafology* receives, most symbolically through its Book Award nomination, Monk's satire indirectly questions the intellectual authority of academics. One can even make the case that the narrator's critical attitude toward his fellow intellectuals and peers can be observed throughout *Erasure*. It is through the witty depictions of the narrator's meetings with the Nouveau Roman Society, an academic literary organization, that Monk rebukes depraved activities within intellectual circles. In the midst of these activities, one of the minor targets in Monk's critique appears to be the self-preserving practice of the academic world. When the narrator encounters his part-time lover Linda Mallory, Monk not only criticizes her lack of talent as a writer, but also the isolated and self-nourishing nature of the academic world of which she is a part:

³⁷⁴ Thorpe 91. Also see "Gangsta Trap." The review implicitly acknowledges the novel's multiplicity of satiric targets as it stresses that "sardonic asides glance at everything from academia and teenage discos to brushing your teeth."

And she was completely without literary talent, which was both irritating and, in a weird way, refreshing. Linda had published one volume of predictably strange and stereotypically *innovative* short fictions (as she liked to call them). She's fallen into a circle of *innovative* writers who had survived the sixties by publishing each others' stories in their periodicals and each others' books collectively, thus amassing publications, so achieving tenure at their various universities, and establishing a semblance of credibility in the so-called real world. Sadly, these people made up a good portion of the membership of the *Nouveau Roman Society*. (*Erasure* 11)

Since the narrator is singling out a specific individual one might argue that the cited passage is more of a lampoon than a broad attack on academic structures. The notion that one is, in fact, dealing with the latter is strongly supported by the presentation of other scholars in the novel.

The encompassing quality of Monk's critique finds particular expression in the paragraphs depicting the preparations for the National Book Association's awarding of The Book Award. Exemplary of the contemptuous wit with which Monk regards his fellow judges is the subtle irony he uses to introduce Wilson Harnet, a professor at the University of Alabama and chair of the committee: "His most recent book was a work of creative nonfiction called *Time is Running Out*, about his wife who was diagnosed with cancer. As it turned out, his wife did not die and all the secrets of theirs that he revealed led her to divorce him and so the literary community eagerly awaited his forthcoming book titled *My Mistake*" (*Erasure* 224). While the humor in this statement is easily traced, the passage does not offer transcendental social or political concern as would betray a satiric mindset. This mindset, however, surfaces in the descriptions of the committee's meetings. Here, Monk is anxious to disclose the extent to which his fellow academics, for all their sophistication, act to a considerable degree out of favoritism. Consequently, the justifications on which the judges base their recommendations are predictable and undifferentiated: "The fat books were praised for being fat, the skinny books were praised for being skinny, old writers were great because they were old, young writers were talents because of their youth, every one was startling, ground-breaking, warm, chilling, original, honest and human" (*Erasure* 228). Monk attacks this tendency with stable irony, making his personal attitude clearly identifiable when he suggests a different kind of criticism: "Jo Blow's new novel takes the mundane and leaves it right where it is.

The prose is clear and pedestrian. The moves are tried and true. Yet the book is so alarmingly dishonest. The characters are as wooden as the ones we meet in real life. This is a torturous journey through the banal" (*Erasure* 228). In an ironic tone as easily graspable as the satiric parody of *My Pafology*, Monk makes no attempt to camouflage his own standpoint behind unstable irony.

As soon as the judges try to agree on a short list of works for the award, relationships and corruption seem to critically affect the committee's choices. When one member recommends Rita Totten's novel *Over My Body*, the critic explains to have picked the book mainly for two reasons: "Because Rita is a good friend of mine and because she got such a scathing review in the *New York Times*" (*Erasure* 232). This is not the only instance where members follow common opinions and insider relationships rather than their academic estimation. Thomas Tomad makes it clear that he would like to see Richard Wordiman's book on the short list. When a fellow judge asks Tomad, in astonishment, whether the recommended author with the telling name is not one of his colleagues, Tomad admits to his connections: "Why yes, and although I don't think it's his best book, I'd like for him to know that I take his work seriously" (*Erasure* 233). The amount of such incidents and the room they are given in the narrator's depictions strongly suggest that *Erasure* tries to debunk what it sees as an alarming tendency in academia.³⁷⁵

Since the narrator is an author and academic himself, one might expect the protagonist to be equally implicated in this critical assessment of his colleagues; especially in light of the possibility of a raging satirist getting tainted by his own target. As a case in point, Monk's critique does seem to take its toll on his own conscience. Psychological conflicts imply that the narrator not only points at others, but also questions his own role as an artist and academic. Close analysis suggests that Monk Ellison is facing a severe identity crisis. Even before he is troubled by not being identified as a satirist, Monk questions his social value as an author. Informed by his sister about one of her patients whose children are named

³⁷⁵ See Laura Miller, "The Last Word; You Could Already Be a Winner," *New York Times* 16 Nov. 2003. Miller addresses the questionable public influence of The National Book Award. She explicitly refers to Everett's satiric critique in *Erasure* to make the case that "the winner of the National Book Award for fiction is chosen by fellow authors of novels and short stories. Theoretically, they ought to know best, but we're all familiar with that inconvenient gap between theory and practice."

Fantasy and Mystery, he condescendingly asserts: “I make up shit for a living and I couldn’t have come up with that” (*Erasure* 26). While this remark could be neglected as a witty remark and as such not representative of the narrator’s true feelings, the accumulation of such denigrating statements suggests otherwise. When Monk is asked by his mother about his recent meeting with the Nouveau Roman Society, the narrator describes the event with much contempt: “Just some stuff about novels and literary criticism. Dry, boring, meaningless stuff. I actually just came to see you” (*Erasure* 34). It is of importance that such comments imply that the narrator does not exclude himself from the derogatory judgment he passes onto his peers.

Monk Ellison’s doubts about his social value as an artist and his critique of self-preserving actions in the literary world can be identified as secondary targets of *Erasure*. Secondary, for these issues are subordinate to and part of a greater socioeconomic concern. This concern centers on the influence which finance has over the common artist as well as the politics of representation as a cornerstone in a racist capitalist system. The protagonist’s queries into these matters are initiated by the rise of *We’s Lives In Da Ghetto*. Being confronted with the tremendous success of Juanita Mae Jenkins’ pulp fiction, Monk frequently reflects on the nature and social value of literature, eventually conceding money’s authority over art.

5.6 The Power and Politics of Representation

Early on in his story, Monk admits to the corruptive command capitalism has over the artist. It is implied that the repeated rejection of the protagonist’s work is based on its lack of mass appeal and, consequently, its commercial value. Monk’s journal suggests that artistic freedom and individual creativity are corrupted by a system in which commercial success is the sole gauge of artistic value. The artist Thelonious Ellison must learn that his highbrow fiction, despite or maybe even because of its obvious sophistication, is not given a chance by the publishing industry. In a letter, Monk’s agent tells him of yet another rejection of his book project, although he acknowledges the work’s artistic qualities: “It’s challenging and masterfully written and constructed, but who wants to read this shit? It’s too difficult for the market. But more, who is he writing to? Does the guy

live in a cave somewhere? Come on, a novel in which Aristophanes and Euripides kill a younger, more talented dramatist, then contemplate the death of metaphysics?" (*Erasure* 42). Obviously, Monk finds himself confronted with precise demands in terms of style and subject matter. For the artist, the bottom line is always: "The market won't support this kind of thing" (*Erasure* 61).

Implicit commentary on the narrator's claim that art is subject to capitalist directives is inscribed in *Erasure's* Menippean complexity. A conversation between the Russian-American painter Rothko and the French filmmaker Alain Resnais takes on the issue of art and commerce:

Rothko: I'm sick of painting these damn rectangles.

Resnais: Don't you see that you're tracing the painting's physical limits? Your kind of seeming impoverishment becomes a sort of adventure in the art of elimination. The background and the foreground are your details and they render each other neutral. The one negates the other and so oddly we are left with only details, which in fact are not there.

Rothko: But what's the bottom line?

Resnais: The idiots are buying it.

The conversation between Resnais and Rothko can be read as a summary, as it were, of Monk's experience as an artist in a capitalist system. The simple formula of commercial success, reducing the most sophisticated art to a mere product in a consumerist society, is also the standard by which Monk's art is measured. The meaning and aesthetics of art are subordinate to its commercial value. Thus, media attention is given to those works which are likely to sell in great quantities due to their undemanding nature. The praise *Fuck* receives and the obvious failure on the part of critics and reviewers to process its satiric challenge suggest the media's stultifying focus on the possibility of commercial success and their total neglect of intrinsic artistic value. However, Monk's biggest concern lies within the choice of subject matter, and the kind of representation of minorities that is the most marketable; not only regarding *Native Son* and *We's Lives In Da Ghetto*, but also with respect to media representation of African Americans at large, particularly in novels and television shows.

As exposed earlier, the works *My Pafology* signifies upon are *Native Son* and *We's Lives In Da Ghetto*. Initially, the combined critique of these two works is irritating as it suggests obvious parallels between them. While both novels focus on the lives of underclass African Americans, there are crucial differences between

the two. Monk goes to great lengths to expose Jenkins as an untalented author entirely removed from her subject matter. On television, Jenkins explicitly declares that her runaway bestseller is based on very little personal knowledge of the lives she depicts. Furthermore, she stresses that she is not from the South but from Akron, Ohio, which sets her even farther apart from her subject. Accordingly, her novel is not based on personal experience, but is inspired by childhood memories of a short visit to Harlem: “When I was twelve I went to visit some relatives in Harlem for a couple of days and that’s what the novel comes from” (*Erasure* 53). Similarly to what Jenkins attempts, Richard Wright resolutely depicted “the grimly realistic side of black ghetto life,”³⁷⁶ as Watkins puts it. While Wright was sometimes accused of “narrowly focusing on the monstrous casualties”³⁷⁷ of such existence, his major work *Native Son* is widely acknowledged as an American classic, largely for its naturalistic portrayal of a world in which the protagonist Bigger Thomas is inevitably doomed to fail. Although the two novels focus loosely on the same milieu, the quality of elaboration differs drastically. What readers are told by Monk about the Jenkins novel is sufficient enough to identify it as poorly constructed, badly written and utterly trite. It is thus highly unlikely that the narrator is comparing the two works in terms of artistic value. Therefore, it seems that Monk’s critique must lie within the choice of subject matter, as it is the only aspect in which both works correlate. In fact, close analysis suggests that Monk Ellison has substantial reason to disapprove these works’ representations of black life.

The critique issued through *My Pafology* is not confined to hypocritical academics, the ignorance of the reading public, or unscrupulous capitalism in the publishing industry. Rather, it appears to lie within the artistic representation of African Americans and the severe consequences of such depiction. In this respect, it is important to be aware that representations, be it of gender, race, or class, are closely intertwined with both the construction and perception of social reality. In fact, Jonathan Culler defines reality as “the presence behind representations, what accurate representations are representations of, and philosophy is above all a

³⁷⁶ Watkins, *On the Real Side* 424-425.

³⁷⁷ Watkins, *On the Real Side* 425

theory of representation.”³⁷⁸ In his elaborations toward a proper definition of philosophy, Culler comments on the intricate relationship between reality and representation. Culler’s statement implicitly acknowledges the threat of inadequate representation serving as the material from which people furnish their concepts of reality. In an age where most media representations claim authenticity, one may ask how people differentiate between fact and fiction. As far-fetched as a link between Culler’s definition of philosophy and Everett’s *Erasure* may initially seem, there is a central connection between the two. Culler explores the relationship between representation and reality, and, in a sense, Monk does the same. Monk Ellison’s critical depiction of novels and television programs points to the same dilemma that characterizes the downfall of his family, namely the creation of social reality and the problems attached to this process.

Monk’s permanent questioning of the nature of language, and his efforts to negotiate the creation of meaning through words, continues on the level of signification and representation. The narrator’s concern with race and discrimination is closely connected to the issue of representation, for he comes to understand that it is through representation that symbols of threat or inferiority are generated and race as a socially viable and economically useful category finds life. This leads one back to Monk’s use of *Native Son* and *We’s Lives In Da Ghetto*. Why should the narrator of *Erasure* take offense at the two works’ choice of subject matter and, more importantly, how does this tie into his bout with racism? In order to answer this question, one must be aware that art, no matter how deficient or plain, contributes to the social production of meaning; for meaning is not fixed and monolithic, but rather a construction. As Stuart Hall notes, “meaning does not inhere *in* things, in the world. It is constructed, produced. It is the result of a signifying practice – a practice that *produces* meaning, that *makes things mean*.”³⁷⁹ It is vital to highlight a connection between representation and production. Just as meaning in language is constructed out of signs, so is meaning in general derived from signifiers. Both media and art are socially relevant agents of representation. Stylistically, Monk revisits the issue of representation through signifying on *Native*

³⁷⁸ Jonathan Culler, *On Deconstruction* (London: Routledge & Keagan Paul, 1982) 152.

³⁷⁹ Stuart Hall, *Representation. Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (London: Sage, 1997) 24.

Son and We's Lives In Da Ghetto. Considering the narrator's journal in its entirety, the implicit connection the narrator draws between Richard Wright's *Native Son* and right-wing discourse is especially striking.

While Monk never directly refers to Richard Wright with respect to *My Pafology*, Wright does appear in the narrator's journal. One of the many short conversation excerpts that *Erasure* is interspersed with features a conversation between Richard Wright and American filmmaker D.W. Griffith.³⁸⁰ The latter gained notoriety for his Civil War epic *The Birth of a Nation*. The film, released in 1915, was then the longest and most expensive one ever made. However, the film has also gained notoriety as one of the most controversial works in film history. Although its technical value is largely undisputed, its political message contributed considerably to the manifestation of bigoted prejudices and racial discrimination. Karen Ross gives a summary of the work's racist subtext, highlighting the film's contribution to the cliché image of the oversexed and primitive African American:

It is for its controversial content that the film is best known, constructed around the explicitly racist text of Thomas Dixon's *The Clansmen*. The film was an outstanding success when first shown and was the first film to be 'honoured' by a White House screening. The film demonstrated how the South had been 'right' about black people and how the North was 'right' about preserving the Union. It argued that the reconstruction which freed black people also endangered the most precious asset of the South, that is, its (white) women, who would require the heroic deeds of the Ku Klux Klan to vanquish the rapacious lust of black men for pure white womanhood.³⁸¹

The Birth of a Nation fanned heated discussions for its representation of white supremacy over black primitivism. Familiarity with Griffith's reputation for his racist work is part of the indispensable knowledge needed to identify the harsh Juvenalian commentary inscribed into the following exchange of words:

D.W. Griffith: I like your book very much.

Richard Wright: Thank you.

³⁸⁰ It is striking that D.W. Griffith is the only celebrity in *Erasure's* interludes of dialogue that is introduced with initials. Usually, throughout the novel these figures are only introduced by their last names, relying on the reader's sophistication to properly identify and contextualize the given persons. In the case of D.W. Griffith, however, it seems as if Everett is particularly anxious to make his critical point and thus not let the filmmaker be misidentified by the reader.

³⁸¹ Karen Ross, *Black and White Media: Black Images in Popular Film and Television* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996) 11.

This brief interlude does not extend beyond these two lines. Since *Native Son* is Richard Wright's best known and most acclaimed novel, it stands to reason that it is also the book Griffith refers to in this short exchange. Initially, one may wonder why Griffith would approve of the work of an African American author, especially one that highlights the discriminative social practices through which African Americans are forced into fatal stereotypical patterns. The expression of approval by a renowned white supremacist to the defining novel of an African American writer combines satire's ambiguity with the brutish barbs of Juvenalian tonality. Those unfamiliar with Griffith are likely to not give too much importance to this passage. However, it is this brief exchange that offers valuable clues to the decoding of *My Pafology*. Obviously, Everett suggests that the representation of blackness as it is found in *Native Son* could potentially appeal to and ultimately generate racist-minded people. What Everett criticizes about *Native Son* is what he fears with respect to Stagg Leigh's *My Pafology*, namely that "people will read this shit and believe that there is truth to it" (*Erasure* 261). Or, more generally and less drastically put, that such art will function as the material out of which social reality is manufactured. However, the worry of Ellison and Everett is not confined to the portrayal of African American life in novels, but generally includes the way African Americans are represented in the media.³⁸²

5.7 Television: Broadcasting Binaries

My Pafology not only offers critical commentary on the representational significance of *Native Son* and *We's Lives In Da Ghetto*, it also questions the role of the media in the creation of reality, and, in the final analysis, the creation of race as a socially relevant category. After Van Go Jenkins gets his new job working for the Daltons where he eventually rapes their daughter, he is invited to a television talk

³⁸² See Gerd Hurm, *Fragmented Urban Images* (Frankfurt a.M.: Peter Lang, 1991) 258-259. One could make the case that Everett's use of *Native Son* anticipates his concern with the politics of representation. Hurm highlights the controversy that surrounded Richard Wright's use of a black thug protagonist and notes that "the neglect of black community traditions by Wright is revealing in many ways. For one, it testifies to the influence of ecological theory which deemphasized communal cohesion. Strong neighborhood ties and stable structures contradict the model's predictions, which expects society to develop from primary bonds to complex individual independence. Richard Wright accepted this interpretation of urban history."

show. Under false pretenses, he is tricked into appearing on the show: “Well actually we have a guest who wants to surprise you with something. Someone who has a crush on you” (*Erasure* 109).

It is in keeping with Monk’s design of an utterly dim-witted protagonist that Van Go remains unsuspecting and is excited at the prospect of being on television. Shortly after the phone call, Van Go finds himself in Burbank at the tellingly titled “Optic White Studios.” The assumption that Van Go, being an embodiment of various racist stereotypes about blackness, proffers himself as a guest for such format is strongly supported by the depiction of his preparation for the show:

“You want to be on TV, right?”

“Yeah,” I say.

“You want all those people out there to see you on the stage, right?” she say and straightens up the front of my shirt.

“Yeah,” I say.

“Then let Queenie shine you up just a little bit,” she say. “I promise it won’t hurt.”

[...]

“This will make you shine like a proper TV nigger,” he say. Then he laugh real loud and I can see in the back of his mouth. He got gold fillins.” (*Erasure* 112)

The reference to “shine” in this dialogue is especially significant. Frequently, African Americans are portrayed as particularly shiny, and, as Richard Dyer suggests, “the shininess may be as racially significant as the colour.”³⁸³ This is explained by the tendency that shiny skin is usually associated with physical labor and unclean bodies. Furthermore, it has been used as a marker of blackness. Dyer notes how “dark skin, especially under strong light, and notably in photography, often has shiny highlights, thus associating shininess with non-white people.”³⁸⁴ Apparently, the producer of the show is eager to portray Van Go according to a fixed pattern of stereotypes. The above exchange illustrates how Van Go is made to accept his “darkening” in order to appear on television. The scene that ensues as soon as Van Go enters the stage is no less indicative of contemporary television practices. Van Go is received by a frantic crowd and publicly confronted with his four babies and his four girlfriends:

³⁸³ Richard Dyer, *White* (London: Routledge, 1997) 65.

³⁸⁴ Dyer 78.

I be struttin cool as shit along that red line, round the corner, through the door and down the stairs to the stage and there they be. My fo' babies sittin on they fo' mamas' laps. [...] The audience be booin me and I look up and I can kinda see they ugly ass faces, but the lights in my eyes and I gives them the finger. Booin me? Shit, I kick all they asses. Snookie Cane, that fat bitch, be standin in the middle of the audience and she say, "What a tough audience. Welcome to the show, Van Go. Look at the expression on his face," she say. (*Erasure* 113)

The host announces the show's title "You gave me the baby, Now where's the money?" and welcomes Van Go with probing questions regarding his children. It is noteworthy that the show not only portrays Van Go as a paradigm of racist clichés, but that the depiction of African American women is no less stereotypical. The purposeful derogative representation of black women in which their bodies are their only form of capital informs Monk's depiction of the Snookie Cane show.³⁸⁵

While the show is characterized by the same satiric exaggeration that distinguishes *My Pafology*, the basic procedure is in accordance with the routines of contemporary television. As Herman Gray notes, stereotyped television images of African Americans became especially pronounced in the 1950s and functioned as a key column in a racist social structure: "Blacks appeared primarily as maids, cooks, 'mammies,' and other servants, or as con artists and deadbeats. These stereotypes were necessary for the representation and legitimation of a racial order built on racism and white supremacy."³⁸⁶ The presentation of minority stereotypes in television shows is no longer confined to American programs typified by the Jerry Springer Show, but has unfortunately become a regular theme

³⁸⁵ Robert Entman and Andrew Rojecki, *The Black Image in the White Mind: Media and Race in America* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 200) 184. Entman and Rojecki analyze the persistence of racist representation and emphasize the fact that, to this day, Hollywood productions and television shows exploit stereotypical images of black women. Exemplary proof is given in an analysis of Roland Emmerich's 1996 science fiction blockbuster *Independence Day*. Here, the authors identify cliché roles in keeping with the practices implicitly criticized by Monk in his satire: "A stripper, Jasmine Dubrow (played by Viveca Fox) has a child by another man. Even though involved with an Air Force officer and living a middle-class lifestyle, she apparently has no occupational options beyond trading on her sexuality. Her intellectual capacity appears impaired: she fails to grasp the seriousness of the alien ships hovering all over the world, even the one over her own neighborhood. After complaining about Steve's having to go on active duty to deal with an alien menace she barely notices, she continues on to her job, apparently unperturbed, with little concern about her child's fate – despite seeing her neighbors furiously packing and heading for the hills."

³⁸⁶ Herman Gray, *Watching Race: Television and the Struggle for Blackness* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1995) 74.

on television in most Western cultures. Whether it be the alleged polygamy of homosexuals, the supposed misogyny of Southern men, or the assumed brutish ways of the lower classes, afternoon talk shows are frequently characterized by the dissemination of undifferentiated and demeaning pictures of various social groups. Recalling the interplay of representation and production, it stands to reason that these television images trigger consequential effects. Departing from Jonathan Potter and Margaret Wetherell's study on discourse and social psychology, Robert Ferguson investigates "the ways in which specifically racist discourse may be generated and sustained."³⁸⁷ According to Ferguson, media images establish and support "interpretive repertoires." The danger of such schemes of interpretation is that they may be adopted and employed by recipients unconsciously, regardless if they are adequate or not: "The description and placing of certain minority groups as *ethnic* minorities are, for instance, an example of media discourse constructing and, to a large extent sustaining an interpretive repertoire."³⁸⁸ Here, Ferguson is highlighting the absurdity inherent in constructing minorities against an ethnic majority that is never explicitly mentioned or defined. The effects of such "interpretive repertoires" are far-reaching.

In their work *The Black Image in the White Mind – Media and Race in America*, Robert M. Entman and Andrew Rojecki explore the contribution of media representation in peoples' perception of race and race relations. According to their findings, the repeated representation of African Americans in a fashion quite similar to Monk's satiric depiction in *My Pafology* is partly responsible for the proliferation of racist stereotypes. The sheer amount of stereotypical representations of African Americans on such shows lead people to construct their own notions of reality according to these stereotypes. More simply put, people take these biased and stereotyped representations as adequate and thus see them as congruent with reality. With regard to this threat, Entman and Rojecki offer potent proof:

Lily, a thirty-four-year-old mother with a Black brother-in-law, noted that the less sophisticated afternoon talk shows offered forums for Blacks who willingly demeaned themselves in front of the camera: "They really make

³⁸⁷ Robert Ferguson, *Representing 'Race.' Ideology, Identity and the Media* (London: Oxford UP, 1998) 56.

³⁸⁸ Ferguson 56.

Black people look bad, and I know they are not representative of every Black person. I mean you get these Black guys that get on stage and brag about cheating on their spouse several times and it's like yes, I know that happens in the White community also and you have people that are too dumb to know they look dumb. But they seem to have an overabundance of them on talk shows and you just can't help but get that opinion of them, but I know you see the absolute worst selection there."³⁸⁹

It stands to reason that not every person negotiates the 'reality' as depicted on television as differentiated and critically as "Lily" quoted above. Rather, the concern expressed by Lily is not unfounded as people will take the large number of stereotyped representations of African Americans and come to assume that the represented majority on prime time television equals the existing majority. Van Go's experience at the Snookie Cane show also resonates with *Erasure's* second television show episode.

In the latter half of *Erasure*, readers stumble over ten pages of fictional third-person narration, presumably one of Monk Ellison's ideas for a novel. The content of the story is seemingly unrelated to the rest of the narrator's journal, yet the short piece titled "À propos de bottes" thematically ties in to some of Monk's critical commentary that runs through *Erasure*. The narrative starts in medias res, with a character named Tom applying for a show, a television show as it will turn out, named "Virtute et Armis (By Valor and Arms)."³⁹⁰ The applicant is portrayed as a trickster, making up most of his personal information, choosing Wahzetepe as his last name, and lying "all the way down the page, about his address, about his place of birth, about his education, claiming that he had studied at the College of William and Mary, about his hobbies, in which he included making dulcimers and box kites out of garbage bags" (*Erasure* 170). Tom is given an application form, featuring a number of test questions. It turns out the highly challenging questionnaire is supposed to determine whether the applicant will appear on the

³⁸⁹ Entman and Rojecki 37.

³⁹⁰ See Percival Everett, "Meiosis," *Callaloo* 4.2 (2001). The episode of Tom Wahzetepe's game show victory is the middle section of an article published by Percival Everett under the title "Meiosis." The short story elaborates on the public reactions to Tom's success, supporting the notion that African Americans are not meant to be represented as intelligent and erudite. The concluding pages of the story, which Everett does not include in *Erasure*, depict how Tom is accused by officials of cheating on the show and how no African American before him won on the show. It is in keeping with the nature of satire as a challenge to readers that Everett omits those parts which would make his critical point too obvious and instead forces readers to contextualize the episode.

show: “If you would answer these questions to the best of your ability, we’ll be able to make a decision about your candidacy for the show,’ she said. ‘You have fifteen minutes’” (*Erasure* 170). The potential candidate is faced with highly sophisticated questions from various fields of study, including the members of the insect family Haliplidae, Ferdinand Albert Decombe, and the Mean Value Theorem. However, Tom answers all questions with the greatest of ease.

In light of the very challenging application process, readers are left with the impression that, for reasons yet to be disclosed, the producer is anxious to keep Tom off his show. When Tom meets the producer and wants to drop his mask and admit he lied on the questionnaire, he learns that the officials at the studio have no sustained interest in factual truths: “Don’t concern yourself over that. This is television. Who really gives a fuck where you studied or what you studied or if you studied?” (*Erasure* 171). Despite efforts to keep the applicant away from the spotlight, Tom ends up as a candidate. Since one of the contestants cannot make the taping of the show, Tom is chosen as a replacement. When he is prepared for his television appearance, readers are informed of Tom’s dark complexion, but also the fact that his skin is yet not dark enough for television: “You ain’t quite dark enough, darlin’,’ she said. She began to rub the compound into the skin of Tom’s face. ‘This is TV stuff.’ He watched in the mirror as his oak brown skin became chocolate brown. ‘There now,’ the redhead said, ‘that’s so much better’” (*Erasure* 173). Dressing the competitor in a white shirt while darkening his face, the officials are eager to highlight the African part of Tom’s racial heritage: “Tom looked at the mirror and saw someone else. The contrast of the white shirt against the altered hue of his face was unsettling and confusing. He felt like a clown” (*Erasure* 174). Just like Max Disher after taking the Black No More treatment and Lester Jefferson after attaining The Wig, Tom Wahzetepe is transformed into a new person. However, while the former two examples embark on attempts to attain whiteness, Tom is forced into the role of the jet black entertainer. Here, the story of Tom Wahzetepe also mirrors the narrative of Van Go Jenkins’ television appearance, although there are crucial differences between the two. While the shine on Van Go’s face just serves as the finishing touch on an embodiment of racist clichés, Tom’s pretended quality education and his obvious sophistication set him apart from widespread stereotypes of black retardation; it might be due to Tom’s

complex personality that his appearance on the show unsettles the host and the producer.

Shortly before the show is supposed to start, Tom witnesses a conversation between producer Damien Blanc and host Jack Spades: "The two men looked concerned about something, one shaking his head and then the other. At one point during their conversation, Blanc pointed over at the white contestant in his recliner. Tom felt a profound loneliness. He watched the audience file in and find seats. They were all white, all blond and all staring at Tom, an ocean of blue eyes" (*Erasure* 75). There is a glaring contrast between the artificially darkened Tom and the studio audience. This opposition is strengthened by the choice of Tom's opponent. Hal Dullard, from Elkhart, Indiana, is introduced as a father of two and president of his neighborhood association. From the beginning of the show, there is a one-sided distribution of sympathies. Tom is introduced much more briefly and readers get the impression that he is not supposed to function as an equal candidate on the show, but as a pre-determined victim outnumbered by the predatory audience, officials, and challenger. This notion is supported by the demands the two candidates face.

Dullard, whose telling name might point to satiric critique, is presented rather basic questions. However, much to the audience's dismay, he is neither able to come up with a primary color, nor to name the person who slew Goliath in the Bible. Tom is asked much more erudite questions, yet, neither questions about nuclear division nor on the tenth century poet Joseph Ibn Abithur can seriously challenge the candidate. With equal measures of disappointment and nervousness, host Jack Spades witnesses Tom answer question after question, while producer Damien Blanc chews "aspirin like candy" (*Erasure* 177). For the three-hundred thousand dollars in cash, Tom cites the opening lines of Ralph Waldo Emerson's essay "Self-Reliance" and wins the show: "'Spades' disappointment was obvious as he formed the word, 'Correct,' but hardly said it out loud. 'And so you, Tom Wahzetepe from somewhere in Mississippi, are our new champion.' The audience made no sounds. They were dead" (*Erasure* 178). While *Erasure's* departure into third-person narrative is not directed in any obvious way to its main plot, one can argue that the story of Tom's game show appearance adds to the critical

commentary on the representation of “race” as it resonates in Monk Ellison’s journal.

In *My Pafology*, Monk demonstrates how well a stereotypical figure such as Van Go Jenkins fits into the pattern of representation which television holds for African Americans. Through the figure of Tom, the narrator explores reactions from the established system to any threat posed to this order. With his education, knowledge, and tremendous erudition, Tom is a hazard to established systems of representation. As an anti-Van Go Jenkins, beating a stereotypical white middle-class American on television and thereby gaining considerable wealth, Tom deconstructs many established oppositions. His victory over *the* white middle-class American serves as a symbolic threat to the “white” privilege of authority and prosperity. This, in turn, explains the reactions of the officials and the audience. In order to fully understand the extent to which a person such as Tom Wahzetepe would destabilize the status quo of race relations in the United States, one must recapitulate the intimate connection between commerce, television, and white supremacy. As Robert Staples and Terry Jones summarize,

television, controlled by American advertisers, regulated by the Federal Communications Commission, and influenced by the American public has chosen to adapt a white American cultural ideology based on the glorification of white norms, mores, and values. This ideology glorifies whiteness and demeans blackness by establishing, maintaining, and refining a society based on race and racial privilege.³⁹¹

Published some fifteen years after Staples and Jones released their study on “Culture, Ideology and Black Television Images,” Everett’s *Erasure* supports the argument that television and other media in the United States “support this white cultural ideology that works to maintain a status quo for black Americans as second class citizens.”³⁹² One may question whether Tom’s game-show incident is an overstatement on the forces trying to regulate the public image of blackness. However, considering the far-reaching implications of the racial binary, Everett can hardly be charged for such an overstatement. As Dyer explains, “given the overwhelming advantage of being white, in terms of power, privilege and material well-being, who counts as white and who doesn’t is worth fighting over – fighting

³⁹¹ Staples and Jones 15.

³⁹² Staples and Jones 15.

to keep people out, to let strategic groups in, fighting to get in.”³⁹³ The game-show theme allows Monk to explore these very processes and to expose the struggle fought over the power to define race. Having come across many stereotypes of blackness in the course of this analysis, the extent to which Tom deviates from such preconceived notions of blackness is readily apparent.

The reactions to Tom’s success can be explained by the assumption that a show which carries “virtue” in its title cannot be won by an African American, for that would contradict Western ideology. Here, “white is beautiful because it is the colour of virtue. This remarkable equation relates to a particular definition of goodness.”³⁹⁴ The anxiety of the producer and the host as well as the eventual death of the audience symbolize the unwillingness and inability of the media to depart from fixed blueprints of representation, in which African Americans are shown as inferior beings, brutish and oversexed rather than sophisticated and erudite. The fact that Tom is put at a disadvantage by being asked much harder questions than his Caucasian opponent implicitly comments on the workings in television by which the presentations of such stereotypes are endorsed. While *My Pafology* suggests that the media are anxious to portray African Americans according to certain patterns of character and behavior, Tom’s game-show episode implies that the audience and officials would not be willing or prepared to change the system from within. Having identified Monk Ellison’s concern with the representation of African Americans on the media, one still must observe the greater effects of these practices; in this specific case, one must look at the relevance of “interpretive repertoires” and the effects of stereotypical representations.

Departing from the theoretical standpoint that representation plays a crucial role in the construction of social reality, it is clear that Monk’s interrogation of the system of representation has to negotiate the consequences and effects of stereotyped representation in one way or another. And indeed, Monk Ellison himself implicitly admits to his preconceived notions of certain groups of people, thereby creating awareness for the process which governs our perception. When Monk wants to visit his sister in Washington, he has to spend some time in the

³⁹³ Dyer 52.

³⁹⁴ Dyer 72.

waiting room since his sister is with a patient: "I sat in an empty, thinly upholstered, orange chair beside a young woman with curling, blue fingernails. She had a little boy with a runny nose sitting on her lap" (*Erasure* 21). The ensuing conversation between the narrator and the woman suggests that the protagonist is not only personally suffering from preconceived notions others have toward him, but that such patterns of observation influence his own perspective. When Monk introduces himself as an author, the woman mentions some of her favorite works: "My cousin gave me *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. She had it in class. She goes to UDC. I liked that book" (*Erasure* 21). Much to Monk's surprise the woman not only mentions Zora Neale Hurston's novel, but also claims Jean Toomer's *Cane* as one of her favorite works. Obviously, the woman's outer appearance has led Monk to draw conclusions about her character and intellectual capability, which are then contradicted by her own words. Monk reflects on his misguided and immature judgment: "I scratched my head and looked at the other faces in the room. I felt an inch tall because I had expected this young woman with the blue fingernails to be a certain way, to be slow and stupid, but she was neither. I was the stupid one" (*Erasure* 21). The protagonist has to realize that he had used certain features from the woman's appearance to indicate her intellect, and that it was wrong for him to do so. However, this is not the only instance where the narrator jumps to conclusions due to preconceived notions about others.

There is another instance that is revealing about the narrator's vulnerability to buy into mediated stereotypes. On his way to see his mother, Monk stops at a highway junction to get something to eat, when two men enter the diner and start trouble: "I was carving into what was called a chicken fried steak and was unable to detect chicken or steak, but it was clear that it was indeed fried, when a couple of stringy, gimme-capped, inbred bohunks came noisily into the restaurant" (*Erasure* 45). The troublemakers approach a French gay couple and try to start a fight. Monk is alarmed at the supposed helplessness of the gay men and concludes that he has to intervene: "I was afraid now that I might really have to do something I didn't do very well, throw punches" (*Erasure* 46). However, Monk is proven wrong as the two French men turn out to be physically strong and are able to fend off the two agitators without the narrator's assistance. By invoking the cliché notion of gay men as feminine and fragile, Monk underestimates the men's vigor:

“The Frenchmen were huge, six-eight and better, and healthy looking. The rubes stumbled over themselves backing away, then scrambled out of the diner. I was laughing when the men asked me to join them, not at the spectacle of the rednecks running out, but at my own nerve and audacity, to presume that they needed my help” (*Erasure* 47). Similar to the instance where Monk interprets blue fingernails as a signifier of dim wit, he now mistakes homosexuality as a marker for weakness. While Monk jumps to conclusions on the basis of stereotyped images, he is frequently the victim of this very process. His African American ancestry is repeatedly used as the major signifier from which the public person Thelonious Ellison is created.

Throughout his journal, Monk cites conversations and events in which his surroundings urge him to adjust his art and his identity to cliché representations of his racial heritage. The narrator remembers instances from his childhood when he tried to consolidate himself with the expectations of others, and continues to dwell on the expectations society holds for him as an African American:

While in college I was a member of the Black Panther Party, defunct as it was, mainly because I felt I had to prove I was *black* enough. Some people in the society in which I live, described as being black, tell me I am not *black* enough. Some people whom the society calls white tell me the same thing. I have heard this mainly about my novels, from editors who have rejected me and reviewers whom I have apparently confused and, on a couple of occasions, on a basketball court when upon missing a shot I muttered *Egads*. (*Erasure* 2)

Here, Monk admits to taking steps toward adhering to social images of blackness, to doing what he deemed society’s de facto expectations of African Americans. Throughout the novel, Monk struggles with “race” as the main signifier that overrides all other aspects of his identity and assumes the form of a social obligation. His life as an artist is severely impaired by such rigid patterns of expectations, for he is faced with unyielding demands in terms of style and subject matter: A “rather ugly book agent told me that I could sell many books if I’d forget about writing retellings of Euripides and parodies of French poststructuralists and settle down to write the true, gritty real stories of black life” (*Erasure* 2). What his agents urge him to write about is an issue Monk is not even remotely familiar with. Moreover, neither Monk’s lifestyle nor his language offers any evidence that he could be African American. Accordingly, the protagonist wonders how people he

has never even met approach him with certain expectations of his artistic work. The seventeenth rejection of his new novel comes in the form of a letter from his agent Yul, who confronts the narrator with a statement he is frequently faced with: “‘The line is, you’re not black enough,’ my agent said” (*Erasure* 43). Curious and frustrated at the same time Monk, speculates how people are able to tell he is African American and why it matters in the context of his work. His agent reminds him of the layout of his first book which featured a picture of the author: “‘We’ve been over this before. They know because of the photo on your first book. They know because they’ve seen you. They know because you’re black, for crying out loud’” (*Erasure* 43).

Blackness functions as the visible signifier through which people generate notions and expectations of the novelist Monk Ellison. The author is drawn into the mechanisms of stereotyping, with no chance to escape the erasure of his own identity. Stuart Hall elucidates the process of stereotyping and explains that “stereotypes get hold of the few ‘simple, vivid, memorable, easily grasped and widely recognized’ characteristics about a person, reduce everything about the person to those traits, exaggerate and simplify them, and fix them without change or development to eternity.”³⁹⁵ The most easily identified feature of Monk Ellison is his complexion, a signifier which largely determines the role society holds for Monk as an African American. Here, striking parallels between Monk Ellison and game show contestant Tom Wahzetepe become obvious. Both are sophisticated intellectuals, both deviate significantly from what their surroundings expect them to be, and thereby both threaten to deconstruct the prevailing social order.

Neither Tom nor Monk can be filed under the stereotypical notion of blackness. Rather, their presence calls into question these categories. While Monk’s character Van Go Jenkins just needs a little shine to fully comply with various racist stereotyped concepts of African American primitivism, makeup does not succeed in turning Tom Wahzetepe into a “proper TV nigger” (*Erasure* 112). Both Tom and Monk do not operate within the spaces assigned to them by a discriminative social order; an order which is constructed largely out of binary categorizations. As Hall observes, “the racialized discourse is structured by a set of binary oppositions.

³⁹⁵ Hall 258.

There is the powerful opposition between ‘civilization’ (white) and ‘savagery’ (black). There is the opposition between the biological or bodily characteristics of the ‘black’ and ‘white’ ‘races’, polarized into their extreme opposites – each the signifiers of an absolute difference between human ‘types’ or species.”³⁹⁶

The act of beating a white male on television through wit, sophistication, and intelligence, then leaving behind a dead blue-eyed audience, symbolically captures the threat Tom poses to the established racial order. The same is true for Monk Ellison. His highbrow fiction reflects a level of erudition that is not granted to the African American artist, his presence thus threatens existing stereotypes. One could argue that the same holds true for Stagg R. Leigh. He is not accepted as a satirist, for the superior position of the latter and the satirist’s “gratifying sense of moral victory”³⁹⁷ are not granted to the African American writer, as it would undermine mechanisms of stereotyping and endanger the racial hierarchy. One has to keep in mind that stereotyping is a fundamental practice of discriminative social systems. In such configurations, stereotyping “is part of the maintenance of the social and symbolic order. It sets up a symbolic frontier between the ‘normal’ and the ‘deviant’, the ‘normal’ and the ‘pathological’, the ‘acceptable’ and the ‘unacceptable’, what ‘belongs’ and what does not or is ‘Other’, between ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’, Us and Them.”³⁹⁸ Hence, the ultimate goal of corporate television has been identified as manipulating the identity formation of African Americans by trying “to show blacks that heroes are always white and, by being deprived of black heroes, their reflection of self will be devalued and their capacity to resist their oppression eroded.”³⁹⁹ While Tom’s story ends in his spectacular victory over an inferior opponent, along with the symbolic death of the audience, Monk’s story takes a different, more pessimistic turn, nourishing theories of the prevailing system’s superiority over the African American artist.

³⁹⁶ Hall 243.

³⁹⁷ Griffin 156.

³⁹⁸ Hall 258.

³⁹⁹ Staples and Jones 19.

5.8 Manufacturing the Raced Author

The development of the narrator from the independent intellectual writer Monk Ellison to the capricious ex-convict Stagg R. Leigh symbolizes the strength of the system which forces the freethinker to believe in the dogma of race and to support the notion of racial predisposition through his art. Since this development is related to the creation of meaning through representation, it is also an integral part of Everett's epistemological concern. Monk's metamorphosis into a new being suggests that race as a social marker is powerful enough to transform every "raced" individual according to fixed patterns. However, to substantiate this claim, it is important to recapitulate key stages in the narrator's development.

Fairly early in his journal, Monk dwells on the issue of race: "I have dark brown skin, curly hair, a broad nose, some of my ancestors were slaves and I have been detained by pasty white policemen in New Hampshire, Arizona and Georgia and so the society in which I live tells me I am black; that is my race" (*Erasure* 1). As in this quote, Monk expresses his belief in race as first and foremost an artificial means to oppress and exploit minorities. Evidently aware of the various expectations and stereotypes attached to race as a social marker, the narrator initially dissociates himself from such preconceived notions while highlighting the complexities of his own identity:

Though I am fairly athletic, I am no good at basketball. I listen to Mahler, Aretha Franklin, Charlie Parker and Ry Cooder on vinyl records and compact discs. I graduated *summa cum laude* from Harvard, hating every minute of it. I am good at math. I cannot dance. I did not grow up in any inner city or the rural south. My family owned a bungalow near Annapolis. My grandfather was a doctor. My father was a doctor. My brothers and sisters were doctors. (*Erasure* 1-2)

Monk's introduction implies that his existence does not agree with preconceived notions of blackness. He is eager to stress that he is neither a talented basketball player nor from a low social background – features commonly part of simplified and derogatory concepts of African Americans. The narrator's ivy-league education and his sophistication pose a challenge to the racial binary as they contest claims for white superiority. Here, Monk functions much like game-show competitor Tom Wahzetepe – as a danger to the racial status quo. By being publicly visible as highly gifted intellectuals, both contradict racist notions of black inferiority. The threat set up by the intellectual Monk Ellison, however, is intimately linked to his work as

an artist. Armed with a public voice which he attempts to use to create awareness for the politics of representation, he could weaken existing hierarchies: "For those in power in the West, as long as whiteness is felt to be the human condition, then it alone both defines normality and fully inhabits it."⁴⁰⁰ In order to keep the author from carrying out his mission, his art becomes regulated through the forcing of the author into a "raced" position.

Several times, Monk's writing is rejected for not being 'black enough.' In fact, his work does not specifically deal with the African American experience, nor is it particularly reflective of his own racial heritage. One may wonder how it can be different, with an author proclaiming his disbelief in race as anything but a reason to discriminate and exploit (*Erasure* 2). *Erasure* offers sufficient textual evidence for the assumption that Monk Ellison is suffering from and eventually creating awareness for these artistic constraints. The narrator's experience at a Border's bookstore supports this claim, serving as a synecdoche for rigid racial classification. Searching for his own books, the narrator ends up in the African American section of the store, although none of his works is even remotely concerned with any form of an African American experience:

I went to Contemporary Fiction and did not find me, but when I fell back a couple of steps I found a section called African American Studies and there, arranged alphabetically and neatly, read *undisturbed*, were four of my books including my *Persians* of which the only thing ostensibly African American was my jacket photograph. I became quickly irate, my pulse speeding up, my brow furrowing. Someone interested in African American Studies would have little interest in my books and would be confused by their presence in the section. Someone looking for an obscure reworking of a Greek tragedy would not consider looking in that section any more than the gardening section. The result in either case, no sale. That fucking store was taking food from my table. (*Erasure* 28)

Race, as a social marker, is powerful enough to have two consequences: first, it erases and overrides features of the artist's identity and confronts him with unbending expectations. Second, it wields tremendous influence over his work. The rigid categorization which Monk encounters in the bookstore symbolically captures the notion of the artist as imprisoned by the marker of race; what is a minor factor in the narrator's self-perception proves to be the most significant

⁴⁰⁰ Dyer 9.

aspect of his social identity. Commercial success and public attention largely depend on compliance with discriminative practices. Juanita Mae Jenkins' race pulp fiction follows these standards for she claims to be speaking for a homogenous group of people. As the primary motivations for her book, Jenkins seeks to answer two questions about her racial heritage: "Where are the books about our people?" and "Where are our stories?" (*Erasure* 53). Publishers as well as the reading public expect Monk Ellison to hold this same commitment to "his race." However, as Monk's critique of Jenkins' book suggests, simplified representation comes with severe consequences, both for those represented and for the consumers of those representations. Karen Ross notes that

the constant positioning of the one black voice as the only black voice results in a serious double-bind. Firstly, individual subjectivity is routinely circumscribed by the appropriation of her specific experiences as 'typical' of an entire community. Secondly, precisely because that individual voice is perceived as the voice of the many, it is forced to occupy the position of stereotype, where all black people are regarded as the same.⁴⁰¹

Ross' concern reflects what Monk criticizes about Wright's *Native Son* and especially Jenkins' *We's Lives In Da Ghetto*. Namely, that such representations of blackness support discrimination in society, by selling simplified images of African American underclass life and by labeling these portrayals as indicative of a larger African American experience, thereby postulating notions of a monolithic, homogenous, and unvaried African American community. In order to criticize these processes, Monk assumes the identity of Stagg R. Leigh and writes the cliché-burdened work *My Pafology*. Yet, the satiric parody of the work does not stop at the level of content, but the author Stagg Leigh himself can be read as an embodiment of stereotypes.

Abandoning his complex identity, Monk creates Stagg as an exemplar of prevailing stereotypes. A former criminal, shady and unpredictable, the character of Stagg R. Leigh could well inhabit the cliché pantheon of *My Pafology*. When his agent calls Monk to let him know that there is an editor anxious to meet Stagg Leigh in person, Monk invents the vita of his alter ego: "Tell her Stagg R. Leigh lives alone in the nation's capital. Tell her he's just two years out of prison, say he

⁴⁰¹ Ross 51.

said 'joint,' and that he still hasn't adjusted to the outside. Tell her he's afraid he might *go off*" (*Erasure* 153). The allegedly aggressive and brutish character of Stagg Leigh is in keeping with the social implications of his dark complexion, thus his work *My Pafology* is praised as a "black thang" (*Erasure* 260). However, as his satire remains undetected and *My Pafology* turns into a commercial success, Monk is forced to keep playing the role of Stagg Leigh. Referencing Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, Monk tries to fathom the stability of his alter ego: "I wondered how far I should take my Stagg Leigh performance. I might in fact become a Rhinehart, walking down the street and finding myself in store windows. I yam what I yam. I could throw on a fake beard and a wig and do the talk shows, play the game, walk the walk, shoot the jive. No, I couldn't" (*Erasure* 162). By stating that he might eventually run the risk of "rediscovering" himself, Monk implicitly acknowledges the possibility of losing his identity during the process of role playing. In fact, over the course of the story, the narrator's different identities, namely, his concept of self and his social identity, get increasingly at odds with one another.

As the growing success of Stagg Leigh and the accompanying misinterpretation of *My Pafology* increasingly frustrates Ellison, he is forced to reveal his identity. Infuriated by the readership's ignorance of the work's criticism of prevailing patterns of representation, Monk uses a meeting of the Book Award committee to attack the literal layer of Stagg Leigh's book: "It is no novel at all. It is a failed conception, an unformed fetus, seed cast into the sand, a hand without fingers, a word with no vowels. It is offensive, poorly written, racist and mindless" (*Erasure* 261). Yet, by interpreting the novel as a representation of African American life in general, Monk's fellow academics resort to the very practice *My Pafology* works to highlight. In this way, the novel unveils the dangers inherent in subordinating individuals to a common cause, be it for the organization of political majorities or, as is the case in the novel, the mere articulation of a shared experience.⁴⁰² Critics implicitly merge the intellectual Monk Ellison and his artistic creation, the bestial Van Go Jenkins and show little understanding for Monk's concern: "I would think you'd be happy to have the story of your people so vividly

⁴⁰² For an overview of the causes and effects of homogenization, especially as opposed to stereotyping, see Richard Williams, "Challenges to the Homogenization of 'African American,'" *Sociological Forum* 10.4 (1995).

portrayed,' Hoover said. 'These are no more my people than Abbot and Costello are your people,' I said, considering that I had perhaps offered a flawed analogy" (*Erasure* 261). However, Monk does not succeed in his battle with the system of representation, for it is this system that robs African American artists of their individual voices. Marked as "raced," he is only allowed to speak for a universal African American cultural body and must reiterate and revitalize simplified and often derogatory notions of blackness; consequently, he is not allowed to speak as an unmarked human being. *Erasure* makes a powerful statement about the discrimination inherent in prevailing patterns of representation and the silencing of raced artists who are kept away from positions of power. In this respect, it is important to recall Dyer's elaboration on the importance of race as a social marker:

There is no more powerful position than that of being 'just' human. The claim to power is the claim to speak for the commonality of humanity. Raced people can't do that – they can only speak for their race. But non-raced people can, for they do not represent the interests of a race. The point of seeing the racing of whites is to dislodge them/us from the position of power, with all the inequities, oppression, privileges and sufferings in its train, dislodging them/us by undercutting the authority with which they/we speak and act in and on the world.⁴⁰³

Monk is denied the ability to speak for humanity, but is forced to speak for "his race." As the clichéd ex-convict Stagg Leigh, he assumes the role society had held for him from the start when people wanted him to be 'more black.' Dwelling on the weakness of his satire *My Pafology* and the considerable financial gain he earned through the book, Monk is conscious of the changing of identity he is undergoing: "Then I caught the way I was thinking and realized the saddest thing of all, that I was thinking myself into a funk about idiotic and pretentious bullshit to avoid the real accusation staring me in the face. I was a sellout" (*Erasure* 160). Painfully aware of the role his stereotyped text and his cliché alter ego play in the formation of social reality, the narrator feels like a traitor. As Stagg Leigh, Monk becomes a product of racial stereotypes. The complexity of Monk Ellison, his sophistication, and his features, which implicitly threaten to deconstruct racial binaries, are gone.

⁴⁰³ Dyer 2.

His attempt “to erase or nullify his African American identity in his transgressive quest for freedom and wholeness as an artist”⁴⁰⁴ ultimately fails.

The preceding paragraphs set out to elucidate how Monk Ellison’s concern with the creation of meaning, which also plays a crucial role within his family, informs his artistic struggle with the issue of representation. More specifically, what enrages the intellectual artist is the homogenizing categorization which takes place in peoples’ minds on the basis of undifferentiated and frequently demeaning representations of blackness. By juxtaposing the sophistication and complexity of Monk Ellison with the stereotypical ferocity of Stagg Leigh, Everett contests simplified notions of the African American novel and the African American experience, suggesting that “this category is less unified than publishers or academic syllabi often imply.”⁴⁰⁵ Furthermore, *Erasure* seems to reject the notion that authors can exist independently of their work. In Everett’s novel, the author and his work are an indivisible unit, fused together by the ever-present determinant of race. In such a way, authors are forced to produce a certain kind of text. Monk Ellison as a sophisticated highbrow author does not meet the common conceptions of being African American. As a consequence, he is repeatedly asked to focus on a subject matter which is decidedly “more black.” Stagg R. Leigh’s obscure nature is more a reflection of who readers anticipate they will encounter, based on his race. Despite this, Monk is unable to navigate his alter ego convincingly enough for his surrounding. When Stagg meets Wily Morgenstein, who offers the author three million dollars for the movie rights of *My Pafology*, Monk realizes that his efforts to feign a stereotypical ghetto existence are only partly successful:

“Morgenstein offered a puzzled look to his young friend. ‘You know, you’re not at all like I pictured you.’
 ‘No? How did you picture me?’
 ‘I don’t know, tougher or something. You know, more street. More...’
 ‘Black?’
 ‘Yeah, that’s it. I’m glad you said it. I’ve seen the people you write about, the real people, the earthy, gutsy people. They can’t teach you to write about that in no college.’” (*Erasure* 216).

⁴⁰⁴ Bell, review 475.

⁴⁰⁵ Margaret Russett, “Race Under Erasure – for Percival Everett, ‘a piece of fiction,’” *Callaloo* 28.2 (2005): 365.

By approaching the author with a predetermined image of what an African American artist should be like, Morgenstein confesses to Stagg: “‘You know, you really ain’t at all what I expected’” (*Erasure* 218). Even within the Stagg R. Leigh persona, Monk cannot fully escape the dilemma of facing a social image created out of his “raced” body and constructed within the constraints of discriminative representation. The preceding analysis has revealed how Monk’s attempt to maneuver himself out of this predicament through the use of satire does not succeed. Up to this point, however, the focus has been on *Erasure* as a novel *on* satire, the story of a discriminated author who tries to exploit satire to express his critical thoughts on the prevailing mechanism of racial representation. The question remains as to what extent the author and the narrator are concordant in their critical intent and how far Thelonious Ellison functions as Percival Everett’s *raisonneur*. After seeing how Monk uses elements of parody and signifying in order to create satiric indirection in *My Pafology*, the satiric stylistics of *Erasure* is now accessible for scrutiny. Of special interest are the questions regarding critical intent and the creation of subtlety in the novel, both key features of satire. Ultimately, one can argue that it is Everett’s cunning play with the narrative voice in *Erasure* that creates satire’s subtle edge and is eventually a fundamental factor which qualifies the novel not only as a work *on* satire, but also as a piece *of* satire.

5.9 Everett’s Satire: The Narrator and the Novelist

With the narrator’s critical intent, his satiric targets, and the stylistic elements with which he tries to camouflage his critique localized, Monk Ellison is clearly identifiable as a satirist just as his work *My Pafology* is seen as satire. Yet, *My Pafology* is just one piece of *Erasure* and Monk Ellison is not to be confused with Percival Everett. Ultimately, however, *Erasure* as a whole must be interpreted in the context of satire as questions regarding Percival Everett’s critical intent and his subversive stylistics remain unanswered. Previously, one has seen how the voice of author George Schuyler resonates in the stable irony of his third-person narrator in *Black No More*, indicating his wit and his sociopolitical concern. In *The Wig*, Charles Wright employs elements of black humor to exempt his protagonist from having to function as an authorial lens, instead making him the embodiment of his

critique. *Erasure* discloses yet another option with which to evoke a satiric fusion of indirection and criticism. While the narrator's initially discussed depth of character and the thoroughly motivated plot of *Erasure* are atypical of satire, Everett's novel is no less critical and elusive than the two works studied previously. Having seen how *My Pafology's* play with signifying points outside of its immediate literary boundaries by critically referencing Richard Wright's *Native Son*, it is a technique which allows Everett to resonate in Monk's critique. However, Everett's major satiric tool is his cunning play with the fine line that separates himself from his protagonist Thelonious "Monk" Ellison.

Several biographical parallels between Everett and his protagonist Monk appear obvious. For example, both are prolific novelists and come from a family of doctors. There are many more similarities between the two which are more elusive; however, the blurb on the back of the book offers readers valuable insight. Everett is introduced in detail, including his hobbies such as painting, woodworking, and fly-fishing, all of which are leisure pursuits he shares with his protagonist. Yet, the relationship between author and narrator runs deeper, prompting some critics to refer to *Erasure* as "disturbingly semi-autobiographical."⁴⁰⁶ Indeed, the narrator and the author reveal certain artistic similarities. For instance, the paper "F/V: Placing the Experimental Novel," which Monk reads at a conference, was originally published by Percival Everett.⁴⁰⁷ Likewise, the episode of Tom Wahzetepe's game show triumph was published as a key section in Everett's short-story "Meiosis."⁴⁰⁸ The fact that Everett partly assigns authorship for his own work to his protagonist suggests that the author of *Erasure* is willing to blur the line which separates him from Monk, thus installing the latter as his *raisonneur*. In fact, comparing critical statements from Everett with the satiric targets of Monk's *My Pafology* further suggests cunning cooperation between the two.

⁴⁰⁶ Bell, review 474.

⁴⁰⁷ Percival Everett, "F/V: Placing the Experimental Novel," *Callaloo* 22.1 (1999). In the explanatory section to the parody on Roland Barthes' *S/Z*, which is not included in *Erasure*, Everett refers to his disapproval of much literary criticism. It is suggested that he consciously includes the parody "F/V," yet omits the explanation in his satire, in order to combine his critical intent with the general attack on the academic sphere he launches in *Erasure*.

⁴⁰⁸ Percival Everett, "Meiosis," *Callaloo* 4.2 (2001).

In an interview with Jim Kincaid, Everett is asked what it is that motivates him to write novels. In his answer, Everett comments on the downsides of the profession, further nourishing the assumption that his creation, Monk Ellison, is an autobiographical figure: "It will end badly no matter what you do, and you will alienate all those close to you."⁴⁰⁹ The feeling of alienation that Everett mentions is shared by his protagonist. One must be aware, however, that the interview with Kincaid never directly alludes to *Erasure*. It stands to reason that Everett is voicing his opinion without respect to certain artistic projects of his own. With Monk's communicative problems studied in detail, one has seen how the author Ellison, similar to what Everett mentions, is alienated from his surroundings. The Kincaid interview also suggests that Everett shares his protagonist's obsession with the construction of meaning through language. Repeatedly, Everett is eager to define terms before using them. When Kincaid refers to academia or the avant-garde, Everett replies with: "What the hell does that mean?"⁴¹⁰ This questioning of language as a system of signs resembles Monk's concern in *Erasure*. Ultimately, both Monk and Everett articulate their disbelief in race and must learn that, despite their distrust, race as a social marker holds far-reaching, powerful implications.

Monk acknowledges the existence of race as a category only as a means to discriminate. He openly declares: "I don't believe in race. I believe there are people who will shoot me or hang me or cheat me and try to stop me because they do believe in race, because of my brown skin, curly hair, wide nose and slave ancestors. But that's just the way it is" (*Erasure* 2). When asked by the interviewer about his definition of race, Everett gives a similar statement. Summarizing some of *Erasure's* key themes, Everett defines race as follows: "It's when two or more people, dogs, horses or cars try to get to a distant point as fast as they can."⁴¹¹ Everett's cunning play on ambiguity reflects not only his wit, but also his epistemological concern in the novel. This suggests that the author shares some of his protagonist's satiric objectives.

⁴⁰⁹ James Kincaid, "An Interview with Percival Everett," *Callaloo* 28.2 (2005): 377.

⁴¹⁰ Kincaid 377.

⁴¹¹ Kincaid 378.

Monk's critique of the publishing industry for the dissemination of one-dimensional, albeit purportedly comprehensive representations of blackness is an issue that Everett is openly supporting.⁴¹² During the conversation with Kincaid, the author is asked whether or not he expects a new era of creative bliss incited by young talented writers. Everett identifies a problem not in a dearth of talented writers, but rather in the politics of the publishing industry: "Writer's aren't the problem. Publishers are the problem."⁴¹³ In an interview by Sean O'Hagan for the British newspaper *The Observer*, Everett explains his accusations in more detail: "When I see my books in the Black Fiction or Black Studies section, I feel baffled. I really don't know what those terms mean. Especially, when I look around the store and there is no corresponding White Fiction section."⁴¹⁴ Most likely, it is this kind of thinking that has served as a model for Monk's incident at the Borders bookstore. Despite several graspable parallels between Percival Everett and his protagonist Thelonious "Monk" Ellison, *Erasure* is not purely autobiographical. Rather, Everett blurs the line between himself and his hero in order to create satiric subtlety. Yet, since there is enough similarity between the author and the narrator to identify the latter as the *raisonneur* of the former, one may ask why Everett has not chosen autobiography as his satiric vehicle. Recalling the introductory remarks on the nature of satire, one cannot forget that satire depends on a delicate balance between identifiable authorial concern and protective indirection. By creating a semi-autobiographical protagonist, Everett manages to articulate his concern through Monk Ellison. However, the distance between author and narrator is great enough for Everett to hide behind his hero and, whenever necessary to escape repercussion, deny complicity. This artifice enables *Erasure* to abstain from an extensive use of irony, usually satire's prime means of creating indirection.

⁴¹² See Mel Watkins, "Hard Times for Black Writers," *New York Times* 22 Feb. 1981. It stands to reason that Everett is targeting a phenomenon that had started to develop well before the publication of *Erasure*. In 1981, Mel Watkins wrote an article for the *New York Times* in which he lamented discriminative tendencies in the publishing world and the fact that fewer novels by independent black authors were being published. Here, Watkins complains about the capitalization of the market and concludes "as publishers move in frantic pursuit of the next blockbuster novel or piece of commercial fluff, it may be that the only option for these writers and, increasingly, for other serious writers, is to turn to the smaller presses."

⁴¹³ Kincaid 380.

⁴¹⁴ Sean O'Hagan, "Colour Bind," *The Observer*, Accessed: 2 May 2007.

<<http://books.guardian.co.uk/departments/generalfiction/story/0,,914871,00.html>>

In conclusion, *Erasure* elaborates on the critique issued by George Schuyler's *Black No More* and Charles Wright's *The Wig*. Similar to the two works previously studied, Everett's satire focuses on the economic implications of racism and does not spare academics and intellectuals from its critique. By having traced the author's concern with the creation of meaning as it informs the protagonist's private life just as his career as an artist, it has become apparent that Everett takes the epistemological concern faintly discernable in Wright's novel to another level. While *The Wig's* critique of Lyndon B. Johnson's "Great Society" tackles the issue of representation through the undignified career of former African American actor Jimmie Wishbone, Everett primarily focuses on the relationship between social semiotics and racism. In fact, the formation of (racist) reality through the politics of representation can be identified as *Erasure's* primary target. Stylistically, however, there are not many lines of continuity to be drawn to the aforementioned novels. As a frame narrative, *Erasure* calls attention to the risks and possibilities which satiric forms of expression hold. Through his protagonist Monk Ellison, *Errett* exposes the rhetorical elements from which satire creates its ambiguous, but critical framework. Furthermore, the peculiar social position and function of the satirist is exposed. What turns *Erasure* as a whole not only into a piece of meta-satire, but into a novel of satire, is the author's astute play with the work's narrator. By obscuring the biographies of author and narrator, Everett blurs their voices – enabling the author to partake in his narrator's critique while pretending to do otherwise. This intricate relationship between author and narrator is the major reason why *Erasure's* satire is just as deeply pessimistic as the story of Monk Ellison, whose development does not give much hope for change. Monk is defeated by a discriminative system that eventually manages to put the renegade in a formulaic position commonly assigned to African Americans. In a symbolic fusion of the stereotyped Van Go Jenkins and his creator Monk Ellison, the latter fully succumbs to social and economic pressure and, just like Van Go at the end of his story, acknowledges the authority of the prevailing system of representation: "Egads, I'm on television" (*Erasure* 265). The development from the intellectual artist Monk Ellison to the ex-convict Stagg R. Leigh captures Everett's pessimistic approach to satire, which not only questions the power of satire, but also suggests

that the system can only be challenged or changed from positions of power and control.

Juxtaposing the structural and thematic idiosyncrasies of the novel, it is possible to conclude that *Erasure* not only deviates stylistically from the two previously studied satires, it also attacks a different kind of racism. Unlike George Schuyler, Everett does not negotiate what Henry Giroux calls “the old racism,” a discriminatory tradition that “developed within the historical legacy of colonialism and modern slavery and rested on a blatant ideological appeal to pseudo-biological and scientific theories of racism to justify inequality, hierarchies and exploitation as part of the universal order.”⁴¹⁵ These manifestations of prejudice do not correspond with the sociopolitical context from which Everett’s satire emerges. Instead, his implicit attack takes on Giroux’s concept of the “new cultural racism,” discriminative routines manipulating what is perceived as social reality. Everett is eager to foreground how it is possible “to interrogate the historical, semiotic and relational dynamics involved in the production of various regimes of representations and their respective politics.”⁴¹⁶

Based on the present reading of the novel, *Erasure* demystifies “the act and process of representing by revealing how meanings are produced within relations of power that narrate identities through history, social forms and modes of ethical address that appear objective, universally valid and consensual.”⁴¹⁷ By exposing these prevailing manifestations of racism, *Erasure* is implicitly generative at best, for Everett abandons his protagonist to a system which eventually corrupts him at will. Gray concludes his detailed analysis of prevailing discriminative representational practices with the confident assertion that

black television makers, audiences, storytellers, and programming have transformed the look and feel of commercial network television. Inevitably, television programs about and representations of blacks will come and go, but I remain hopeful about the force and vitality of African American claims on the meanings, circuits, and uses of representations of blackness.”⁴¹⁸

⁴¹⁵ Henry A. Giroux, “Living Dangerously: Identity Politics and the New Cultural Racism: Towards a Critical Pedagogy of Representation,” *Cultural Studies* 7.1 (1993): 8.

⁴¹⁶ Giroux 19.

⁴¹⁷ Giroux 19.

⁴¹⁸ Gray 176.

Everett does not share this optimism, as the downfall of Monk Ellison implies.

VI. The African American Novel of Satire: The Versatile Weapon

The present examination of the treatment of racism in the African American novel of satire initially faced an unusual scholastic challenge: amidst the considerable critical attention satire has received, there exists but a single volume addressing the African American novel of satire as a distinct literary event. To create a functional theoretical framework for the subsequent analysis, it was therefore necessary to dismantle the satiric mode and its key components in order to closely examine them in more detail. The great disparity between differing concepts of satire and the conflicting definitions of some of the mode's key features necessitated a re-evaluation of satire as a whole. This investigation brought up striking connections between satiric forms of expression and the African American experience in general. Not only has the African American literary tradition produced several exemplars of the contemporary satiric novel, these works illustrate satire's potential for enacting social change. An arsenal of tropes, including trickster figures, signifying techniques, and contemptuous laughter, have armed the oppressed with a pungent amalgamation of indirection and criticism which in turn informs the African American novel of satire.

The subsequent analyses of *Black No More*, *The Wig*, and *Erasure* have offered sufficient proof to claim the status of the African American satiric novel as a singular literary model. Contrary to the model satirist outlined by many scholars on the basis of Swift and Pope, neither Schuyler, Wright, nor Everett place entertainment first in their quarrels with racism. Rather, they demand that both readers and critics question whether most satirists are "motivated by the aesthetic desire for self-expression far more than by the ethical desire for reform."⁴¹⁹ These authors do not corroborate a commonly accepted moral norm and cannot afford the luxury of assuming the position of aloof conservatives. Instead, all three novels are poignant reactions to the weight a dehumanizing racist system holds over marginalized individuals. Furthermore, it seems as if the authors resort to satire more as a weapon of self-protection, than one of offense. Thus, detachment between the satirist and his target is often trespassed, as wrath and anger encroach upon satire's critical commentary. However, this is as far as one can go

⁴¹⁹ Feinberg, *Introduction to Satire* 12.

when addressing “the African American novel of satire” without falling into the trap of simplification and generalization. For, if this present study has proven one thing, it is the versatility of the satiric parasite once it begins to infest the novel form as its host. Such a combination has proven powerful in the hands of the three African American satirists covered in this study, for the novel form offers sufficient room to assail the complexity of racism in *gedanken-experiments*, black-humor fiction, and semi-autobiographical journals. As a matter of fact, this investigation into the structural idiosyncrasies of the three novels has unearthed an enormous adaptability that fuses satire and the novel in order to create a form potentially destructive to a wide range of targets.

Schuyler’s *Black No More* has been identified as the most “traditional” of the works under study. Traditional, for the work complies with widespread notions of the satiric novel. Schuyler speaks through a superior third-person narrator, submitting racist institutions and greedy politicians to contemptuous laughter. The novel makes extensive use of *reductio ad absurdum*, stable irony and also serves as an example of a satiric intruder seizing its victim to the fullest. Structurally and thematically, the work is immersed in chaotic settings as the author gradually intensifies his critique; ultimately, Schuyler even steps over the line separating satire from straight invective. With a slipshod plot, flat characters, and no concern for the individual whatsoever, *Black No More* thoroughly neglects structural aspects of the novel form so as to revel in its encompassing socioeconomic critique. Although Wright’s *The Wig* treats the novel form with similar disregard, it exemplifies an entirely different approach to satire.

Inverting Schuyler’s macrocosm, as it were, *The Wig* resembles the individual microcosm of Lester Jefferson. With equal measures of black humor and structural irony, the author suspends his protagonist from his original function as an authorial lens, instead opting to portray him as an ill-fated trickster and, consequently, as the embodiment of his satiric critique. Thus, Lester Jefferson becomes the epitome of the unattainable American Dream and the error in reasoning upon which the Great Society rests, while powerfully exemplifying how “in so expansive an era, filled with such benevolent intentions, the boundaries

between fact and fiction, between the present and the future, no longer held.”⁴²⁰ It is chiefly due to the work’s lack of stable irony and the great amount of presupposed knowledge it demands of readers that the novel has been identified as the least obviously satiric of the three works. Yet, against the backdrop of entropy, it has been possible to contextualize the theme of chaos and disorder and to place this chaos within the author’s implied critique. While one can argue that the novel’s satiric subtlety is grounded in its choice of a first-person narrative perspective, Percival Everett’s novel suggests otherwise.

Also employing first-person narration, *Erasure* is characterized by a much more easily grasped Juvenalian tone. At least initially, though, the novel is barely identifiable as satire. Taking elaborate heed of plot and motivation, Everett’s novel differs significantly from *Black No More* and *The Wig*. The journal form of *Erasure* helps it escape many of the side effects which satire usually has on the novel form. Instead, it emerges unburdened by the structural and motivational constraints that are characteristics of the other two novels. With considerable wit and little stable irony, *Erasure* creates indirection out of a pseudo-autobiographical approach, in which the line between author and narrator is blurred. For all this fascinating stylistic diversity, all three satires embody the common theme of racism, which resonates with certain stylistic and thematic elements.

It has been possible to identify academics and especially the media among the common targets shared by the three novels. Be it radio programs in *Black No More*, movies in *The Wig*, or television shows in *Erasure* - the media is consistently portrayed as a key agent in the proliferation of discrimination. The works under scrutiny strongly support Jane Rhodes’ assertion that “a racist society also requires a racist media to disseminate these values and beliefs to a mass audience.”⁴²¹ If there are developments to be identified between these three works, they are a growing epistemological concern and a shift away from transcendental satire toward culturally specific criticism. The analyses have shown how *Black No More* tackles the significance of media representation in a racist system and how Wright’s satire elaborates on this issue in the context of stereotyped screenplays.

⁴²⁰ Kearns 219.

⁴²¹ Jane Rhodes, “The Visibility of Race and Media History,” *Gender, Race, and Class in Media: A Text Reader*, eds. Gail Dines and Gloria Abernathy-Lear (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 1995) 34.

Everett takes the discussion even further by probing into the production of reality through the representation of signifiers. *Erasure* thus comes to the defense of *The Wig*, for it highlights the ubiquity of *The Wig's* concern and thus disproves the critique Wright faced; namely that "some of his targets are too worn-out to yield more than hackneyed reflections or they are simply shortlived."⁴²²

Moreover, it has been possible to reveal a development away from transcendental satire and a move toward more culturally specific criticism. While it was possible to trace Schuyler's satire as an attack on basic human failings, the critique issued in Wright's novel is intimately linked to the political agenda of President Lyndon B. Johnson's "Great Society." With an even more precise concept of his objective, Everett attacks the publishing industry for its stereotyped and homogenizing representation of African Americans. All three novels can be read as a way of re-claiming control over representation, as they call attention to the fact that the "struggle between the transmission of racist ideology and dogma, and the efforts of oppressed groups to claim control over their own image, is part of the legacy of the American mass media. Racial identity has been – and continues to be – a crucial factor in determining who can produce popular culture, and what messages are created."⁴²³

The search for explicitly generative moments, though, has not yielded much result. None of the authors identify any cures to their outlined evil; but rather faint indications and suggestions of possible ways out of the targeted predicaments. With regard to *Black No More*, such pessimism is not surprising. In fact, by focusing on what Schuyler seems to identify as the inescapable human capacity for greed and prejudice, the author is left unable to offer a remedy for what he deems rooted in human nature. Wright could offer solutions, as his target lies within a political problem, but he nevertheless strictly refuses to engage in explicitly generative satire. Focusing on debunking the racial bigotry ingrained in Lyndon B. Johnson's agenda of the Great Society, one can see how Wright at least implies the positive potential of critical education. Likewise, the bleak portrait Everett paints of prevailing acts of racial representation refuses to indicate any light at the end of the tunnel. His quasi alter ego Thelonious Ellison gradually transforms into a cliché

⁴²² Kreutzner 159.

⁴²³ Rhodes 34.

black ghetto brute, a marketable symbol of threat and the embodiment of African American representation which the author is pressured to produce from the start. Momentarily neglecting Wright's fragile optimism, there is a distinct, if implicit generative pessimism at work in all three works. Readers are left helpless and hopeless, but with a desire to escape the acrid ridicule, as well as an ambition to evade foolishness and absurdity. It seems, then, that it is not optimism, but vitriolic black humor, that is the mindset which fosters growth in the depth of a discriminative society.

It is in *Black No More's* graphic lynching scene that this project first reveals the distorted grin of black humor. By violently fusing the appalling with the ludicrous, Schuyler eagerly portrays the gross absurdity of racism. This approach to satire dominates *The Wig* in its entirety. Wright does not spare his readers scenes of unbridled sex, shocking violence, or malicious necrophilia, in order to expose the perplexed state of his protagonist and, eventually, the contradictions inherent in integrationist policies and the viciousness of racism. One is left wondering if the satiric treatment of racism inevitably comes with black humor in its wake. The present study supports this notion, since all three works are, by varying degrees, characterized by a fusion of horror and humor. Although Everett's *Erasure* does not expose marks of black humor, its vision of an artist corrupted and shaped by market demands is no less bleak and pessimistic.

Only time will tell if the shift toward more culturally specific criticism, epistemological inquiries, and black humor will prove to be a lasting phenomenon in the satiric novel targeted at racism. This is a task for future studies on the African American novel of satire. One thing is certain – as the battle over racial equality continues to assume new forms and is taken into new territory, satire aimed at discrimination will also evolve. For now, while one must acknowledge the enormous versatility of the satiric mode and the effectiveness with which these three artists dissect racism, along with its roots and its symptoms, the analysis leaves one with a dilemma. Is it prudent to hope for a further blossoming of the African American novel of satire and a growing resourcefulness in the combination of tropes and literary influences in an effort to eliminate racism, or would it be better for society to see these works slowly sink into oblivion, for, “the satire that survives uses material that continues to be significant, and issues that remain

relevant, long after the time when the satire was written.”⁴²⁴ In light of this knowledge, one should hope that these works are turned into historical records, serving as literary evidence of a time shaped by racial inequality.

⁴²⁴ Feinberg, *Introduction to Satire* 8.

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VIII. Appendix

8.1 Zusammenfassung der Arbeit in deutscher Sprache

Angesichts andauernder Ungleichberechtigung verwundert es kaum, dass Rassismus und Diskriminierung häufig ins Visier afroamerikanischer Satire geraten. Nimmt sich Satire dieses Themenkomplexes an, ergibt sich zwangsläufig ein vielschichtiger literarischer Gegenstand, hat doch die Form der Satire ebenso viele Gesichter wie das gesellschaftliche Phänomen des Rassismus. Mit Blick auf afroamerikanische Satiriker stellt sich die Frage, welche satirischen Techniken eingesetzt werden können, um Rassismus in seinen verschiedenen Erscheinungsformen wirkungsvoll zu konfrontieren. Obwohl dieser Fragestellung in der Literatur bezüglich afroamerikanischer Folklore bereits größere Aufmerksamkeit geschenkt wurde, hat afroamerikanische Satire in Romanform lediglich in Darryl Dickson-Carrs Monographie *African American Satire: The Sacredly Profane Novel* nachhaltige Beachtung gefunden.

Aufbauend auf meiner M.A.-Arbeit „Critiquing the United States’s Socioeconomic Machinery: Satiric Dissemblance in George Schuyler’s *Black No More* and Charles Wright’s *The Wig*“ untersucht die vorliegende Dissertation drei satirische Romane auf die in ihnen problematisierten Formen rassistischer Diskriminierung sowie deren satirische Umsetzung. Aufgrund der Vielzahl verschiedener Konzepte des Satirebegriffs sowie unterschiedlicher Definitionen satirischer Stilmittel ist eine vorausgehende Klärung theoretischer Schlüsselbegriffe unumgänglich. Gegenstand des ersten Analysekapitels ist George Schuylers *Black No More* (1931). Als anerkanntermaßen erste afroamerikanische Satire in Romanform bietet dieses Werk einen sinnvollen Ausgangspunkt für die vorliegende Untersuchung. Schuylers Gedankenexperiment spekuliert über die Folgen einer ethnisch homogenen amerikanischen Gesellschaft. Nach der Entdeckung eines Hautbleichungsprozesses durch einen findigen Arzt unterziehen sich nahezu alle Afroamerikaner der Behandlung. Eine ausnahmslos hellhäutige Bevölkerung ist ebenso die Folge wie Panik in Regierungs- und Wirtschaftskreisen angesichts fehlender Billiglohnkräfte, Streikbrecher und Sündenböcke. Konkret wird bei der Untersuchung von Schuylers Roman auf die Bedeutung von anti-essentialistischer marxistischer Kritik eingegangen wie auch auf die Darstellung der zeitgenössischen Gesellschaft als kapitalistische Ordnung. Ein Ziel der Analyse

ist es, Rassismus im Roman als Randerscheinung herauszustellen und Kapitalismus als Primärziel aufzudecken, welches von Schuyler durch einen sukzessiven Wandel von scherzhaftem Humor zu beißender Satire angegangen wird. Ist Schuyler noch darauf bedacht, die sozioökonomischen Vorgänge der 1920er Jahre von einer marxistischen Perspektive zu beleuchten, so zeigt Charles Wrights Roman *The Wig* (1966), Gegenstand des zweiten Kapitels, wie dieses kapitalistische System das Individuum korrumpiert und manipuliert.

Im Kontext von Präsident Lyndon B. Johnsons Amtszeit schickt Wright seinen Protagonisten Lester Jefferson aus der afroamerikanischen Unterschicht auf eine ebenso hektische wie erfolglose Jagd nach Anerkennung und Aufstieg. Der Schwerpunkt der Analyse liegt hierbei auf der kritischen Auseinandersetzung mit dem Mythos des „American Dream“ sowie mit Mechanismen der öffentlichen Repräsentation von Minderheiten. Ferner wird Wrights strategischer Einsatz von schwarzem Humor und dem Entropie-Konzept bei der satirischen Ausgestaltung des Romans beleuchtet. Der dritte Analyseteil befasst sich mit Percival Everetts Roman *Erasure* (2001). Everett erzählt die Geschichte von Thelonious „Monk“ Ellison, einem afroamerikanischen Intellektuellen, dessen Romane sich nur schleppend verkaufen. Als sein neuestes Manuskript wiederholt abgelehnt wird und gleichzeitig ein eindimensionaler Schundroman die Bestsellerlisten stürmt, schreibt Monk eine beißende Satire auf den Bestseller. Da nun aber seine Satire nicht als solche erkannt wird, wird sein Werk ein ebenso großer Erfolg wie die darin parodierte Vorlage. Das epistemologische Anliegen, welches in Wrights Roman mitschwingt, wird von Everett aufgegriffen. Speziell die Rolle der Medien als Werkzeug zur Prägung, Festigung und Verbreitung stereotyper Wahrnehmungskategorien, die systematische Diskriminierung ermöglichen, wird in *Erasure* kritisch behandelt. Durch den Einsatz einer Rahmenhandlung und einer Satire-in-der-Satire kreiert Everett eine Form der Meta-Satire, die sich so mit den Möglichkeiten und Gefahren satirischer Ausdrucksformen auseinandersetzt.

Auf diese Weise ergründet die vorliegende Arbeit die Vielseitigkeit von Satire als rhetorischer Geheimwaffe im Allgemeinen, ebenso wie die Eigenheiten afroamerikanischer Satire in Romanform im Besonderen. Da Satire jedoch immer soziopolitisch verwurzelt ist, macht es das hier angewendete Vorgehen auch

möglich, die ständig wechselnden Erscheinungsformen von rassistischer Diskriminierung in der US-amerikanischen Gesellschaft zu umreißen.

8.2 Erklärung über die verwendeten Hilfsmittel

Hiermit versichere ich, dass ich die vorliegende Arbeit eigenständig und ohne Zuhilfenahme anderer als der von mir angeführten Hilfsmittel verfasst habe.

Rhens, im Dezember 2007

Sebastian Fett

Ort, Datum

Unterschrift