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Notes of a Native Novelist: Institutional Blackness and Critical Uplift in Percival Everett's Self-Help Satire *Glyph*

It is one thing for a race to produce artistic material; it is quite another thing for it to produce the ability to interpret and criticize this material. —W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Crisis* (1925)

. . . I am a complete reading system. —Ralph, in Percival Everett, *Glyph* (1999)

What If a Black Baby Could Write a Paragraph?

In his seminal essay “Notes of a Native Son” (1955), James Baldwin defines being black in the United States as “never [being] looked at but simply at the mercy of the reflexes the color of one’s skin cause[s] in other people” (93). Published in 1999, *Glyph* provides insight into the experience of a black writer’s struggle for liberation from the reading “reflexes” that govern the reception of literary texts labeled “African American.” More specifically, the novel debunks the conventional disconnect between theory and race.

The book recounts the first four years of the coming-of-very-early-age story of Ralph Townsend, who is gifted with an IQ of 475, a photographic memory, and the linguistic acumen of a deconstructionist doyen. Reading and writing fiction and his own theory thereof, the black Nietzschean überbaby formulates a literary/philosophical treatise on Western models of reason, meaning, and language—in short, “knowledge” as we (grownups) know it. As the “one baby who can write a paragraph, . . . [thus appearing] as a radical who denies the possibility of universals” (206), Ralph sparks categorical chaos with wide-ranging institutional implications. Indeed, *Glyph* can be read as a satiric commentary on the establishment of African American literature as an object and discipline of literary inquiry. Ralph’s expansive reading project, which leaves race an insufficient yet necessary option, offers a self-help study of critical uplift. And its playfully emancipatory agenda centers on the expressive principle on which this literary institutionalization was based: the black vernacular. Ralph’s lack thereof defines *Glyph*’s programmatic ambivalence as a “black” text that categorically questions the ways we read (for) race.¹

Thus, the “voice” of *Glyph*’s narrating “I” belongs to the extremely smart, extremely snarky, and completely mute master of language, Ralph, who grows up as the only child of a black middle-class family based in 1970s Los Angeles. Rather than imitate his parents’ oral attempts at meaning-making, the baby prioritizes textual knowledge-reception and production. He spends his nights in his crib reading *everything*, dissecting and commenting on various texts, from the service manual of his parents’ 1963 Saab to “the Bible, the Koran, all of Swift, all of Sterne, *Invisible Man*, Baldwin, Joyce, Balzac, Auden, Roethke” (17).² Ralph is fostered and supplied with books by his mother Eve, an amateur painter of nonrepresentational art, and feared as a “freak” by his father Douglas, whom Ralph names “Inflato” and portrays as an unoriginal novelist and slumping poststructuralist critic. His father’s

signature notion, that “nobody is fooled by fiction anymore. Writing is the only thing. Criticism is my art” (11), is abhorrent to Ralph. Describing Inflato as “seduced, or fooled, by the language he had chosen, though claiming a simple awareness of discourse” (12), Ralph derides him for his disproportionate (or “inflated”) academic aplomb and opportunistic obsession with the critic/celebrity Roland Barthes, whose fictionalized alter ego visits his father’s university. This generational antagonism, his father’s fearing Ralph and having him tested by a psychologist, leads to Ralph’s kidnapping. And after his tumultuous excursion through a starkly satirized American scene of fame-craving scientists, Cold War-bred government agents, military executives, religious fundamentalists, and news reporters, during which Ralph is abducted, tested, and trained in the name of science, national security, and God, the baby is reunited with his mother.

Staging a crisis of epistemological *and* ontological dimensions, the novel satirizes doctrinal knowledge regulation and hegemonic abuse of power. At the center of an absurd constellation, Ralph is a *poeta doctus*, who lectures his fellow characters—all adults—on their intellectual shortcomings and ideological biases. The brainy baby’s native intellectual, linguistic, and literary capabilities challenge preconceived notions of (spoken) language as the primordial principle of human initiation, individuation, and civilization.³ They make him a subversive singularity, the mere “possibility” of which, as the novel’s Dr. Steimmel concludes, “would terrify the nation” (166). Ralph thus inflicts a taxonomic terror upon *Glyph’s* story world, thwarting what Foucault terms the “taxonomic impulse” of the Western episteme. Utterly exposed to the cultural contingencies of *Glyph’s* fictional universe, the baby is situated in labs, high-security facilities, and categories. In the truest sense, Ralph is a prisoner of other people’s prejudices, the victim of a form of misrecognition, which Pierre Bourdieu describes as “an alienated cognition that looks at the world through categories the world imposes” (140-41). Ralph thus serves to diagnose symptoms of societal corruption, which include academic dogmatism, militant nationalism, religious fundamentalism, and media sensationalism. These symptoms reflect a common concern: language.

We enter *Glyph’s* story world through the “I’s” of an eighteen-month-old toddler who is technically able to grasp reality but has yet to learn about the world.⁴ Having bypassed Jacques Lacan’s famous “mirror stage” in identity formation, Ralph complicates the notion of language as a pre-established, stable system of self-identification and expression. His refusal to speak signifies a radical departure from the established structures of human sociality and, significantly, community. The baby cannot be integrated into the established social framework because he breaks basic rules of linguistic exchange and thus human interaction.⁵ Generally speaking, Ralph resists what Louis Althusser seminally defined as “interpellation,” the social process of subject constitution, which, in sociological terms, defines the reflexive process of reconciling one’s self-image with the image of self perceived by the other (the “social validation feedback loop”).⁶ In the American realm of the “color-line,” as W. E. B. Du Bois has famously argued, this process results in a “double-consciousness,” as blacks internalize the negative image projected onto them by whites. Ralph bypasses or at least severely complicates this process.

The baby opens up to radical reinvestigation both natural language and what Yuri Lotman describes in *Universe of the Mind* as its “secondary modeling systems,” the cultural, aesthetic, religious, and scientific frameworks of world understanding. In his self-proclaimed “Deconstruction Paper,” with the latter word crossed out—*i.e.*, written “under erasure” in the Derridean sense, thus signaling the processual or preliminary (*i.e.*, anti-institutional) impetus of his project—Ralph draws on various elements from a host of literary, scientific, political, military, and religious languages. Mimicking academes (characterized by excessive verbosity and obscurity), military “acronymism” (with its excessive shortcutting), and religious forms of symbolism

(parabolic/allegorical language), Ralph criticizes various instances of doctrinal language (ab)use. His methodological apparatus comprises the developmental milestones of metaphysical and anti-metaphysical theory: from syllogism, Platonic dialogues, and ontological arguments to Descartes's cogito, poststructuralist binary dissection, and deconstructionist erasure and critique. Compiling his creative and critical output in a formally dense amalgamation of the artist's novel, the picaresque novel, and an eight-part research paper, Ralph provides a programmatically open spectrum of fictional and nonfictional writing—a by no means comprehensive list of which includes folklore (Tar Baby), children's fiction (*Alice in Wonderland*), modern and postmodern fiction (from *Tristram Shandy* and *Don Quixote* to *Finnegans Wake* to *The Crying of Lot 49*), fourteen poems (about body parts relating to speech) and two short stories by Ralph, and two letters. Deconstructionist nomenclature informs paragraph headings and subheadings throughout sections A through H. Semiotic graphs and formulas, along with logical equations, complement lists of keywords (the initial letters of which are congruent with the eight sections' alphabetical order), and numbered footnotes, which begin anew in each section of the novel. Ralph's treatise culminates with a theoretical appendix in the vein of Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, in which he draws on Wittgenstein's controversial criticism of metaphysics, a performance of philosophical inquiry as a practice of language criticism, to formulate his own "Theory of Fictive Space."⁷

Everett's novels, as Anthony Stewart has stressed, are much more than (just) fiction (217). Antibinary and counterconventional in nature, they operate in the interstitial dimensions of conceptual constellations. This "both/and-ness" (Stewart 223) makes them radically "open" in the sense that characterizes Umberto Eco's "open artwork": They are unfinished, autotelic projects that programmatically champion interpretive undecidability.⁸ Routing every social aspect of his being through the aesthetic language of literature, Ralph supplants various socially pre-defined situations and conventions with an aesthetic subtext.⁹ This aesthetic vision of the social world corresponds with the reader-writer-narrator triad known as Ralph, who represents a *principle* of textuality rather than its source or subject.¹⁰ As a variant of the archetypal American self-made man, Ralph is a self-taught critic who has pulled himself up by his own book sheets, as it were. He is a tireless reader and literary autodidact who works through the entire stack of his parents' private library, conceptualizing his own critical curriculum. The encyclopedic reading project of the "pint-sized lexicon" (85) is not a preemptive measure to keep the reader from reading (something into) *Glyph*. Rather, it challenges the central authority of the *critic*. It offers an allegorical counterproject to the aesthetic confinement in which texts labeled "African American" are often kept: the sociological framework of racial realism. Expanding this conventional focus to a plethora of possible readings, *Glyph* presents this systematic reduction as a structural concern of America's reading culture. Reading against the totalizing tendencies of dogmas and disciplines, the baby emblemizes an ironic notion of critical uplift, as he resonates with a host of scholarly concerns.

The Hermeneutics of Boredom: Ralph, the Barthesian Scribbler and Cranky Critic

Ralph embodies a comprehensive "system" of reading: "no other reading than the one I intend is possible and I defy any interpretation beyond my mission. To seek that meaning is to serve and work with my system. This is my language and only mine, my units, my pieces, my game. However . . . [l]ike all stories, any of these

I offer here has another side” (163, 168). By way of this parodic poststructural dissection of binaries, Ralph mimics various critical conventions, ironizing the stereotypical scholarly predilection toward abstraction and unworldliness as a sort of “ivory-towerism,” and reversing the linear “application” of theory to text. As the reader-writer-critic triad, Ralph thus represents a kaleidoscope of concerns and concepts associated with language, literature, and the established models of their theorization: the classic ideal of the artist (as a third-degree imitator), the Renaissance ideal of craftsmanship, the Romanticist notion of genius, exegetic scripturality (and the divine message of the immaculately conceived messiah), tricksterism (and its classic and black mythological figurations [Feith]), picarism (à la *Quixote* and *Huck Finn*), the new critical ideal of text-immanent interpretation, the poststructuralist sign critique (and its semiotic, deconstructionist, psychoanalytic, and Foucauldian variations), speech-act theory, reader-response theory, and literary postmodernism. This multiplicity of possible perspectives represents a statement in and of itself.

Connoting both captivity and creativity, Ralph’s “playpen prison” can be read as a textual test tube that grants him a significant amount of intellectual mobility: “Through reading, I had built a world, a complete world, my world, and in it, I could live, not helplessly as I did in the world of my parents” (17).¹¹ What this structuralization of text as fictive space suggests is, for one thing, a fundamental leveling of various kinds of language in literature. Secondly, this proclamation of fiction’s structural integrity can be read as an attempt to carve out a spot for his literary work of art, to assert its tangible reality contra the predominance of realist notions of literary mimeticism.

Ralph’s Wittgenstein-informed semiological approach to the cultural language of race crystallizes in the controversial semiotician Roland Barthes, who, significantly, represents the critical shifts of the poststructuralist revolution toward a radically decentered, reader-oriented notion of intertextuality. As one of the last “hommes de lettres,” Barthes managed, during the expansion of the academic job market, to obtain a prestigious position in the upper echelons of France’s scientific system (Angermüller 61), and his inclusive project, combining sophisticated semiotic inquiry with pop-cultural criticism (see *Mythologies*), fundamentally informs Ralph’s autodidactic and antidogmatic agenda. Curiously, Ralph portrays the gay critic as a notoriously French wise guy—*i.e.*, a smoking, hyper-heterosexualized intellectual. Always almost making sense with what he says, Barthes constantly indulges in verbose obscurities, ending nearly every soliloquy with his signature line: “I’m French, you know.” Among other things, this obvious fictional veneer of stereotypical Frenchness, which camouflages Barthes’s actual sexual identity, offers an interpretive incentive for the reader to detect the cultural signification of social categories (such as nation and race) that *Glyph* debunks.

In contrast to satirizing the American brand of poststructuralism and deconstructionist thought,¹² Ralph shows an increasing fascination with Barthes as an enigmatic thinker or an esoteric language enthusiast. Embracing boredom as a critical mindset, Ralph evidences an emphatically unimpressed engagement with Paul de Man’s and Jacques Derrida’s theories—the latter he does not dignify with significantly more than a footnote on *Of Grammatology* and a passing reference as “that Derrida guy” (110)—that can, in this regard, be read as an ironic inversion of his father’s self-serving adoration of Roland Barthes and Jacques Derrida, to both of whom he turns for help with his slumping academic career.

Barthes emblemizes what Arthur Danto (qtd. in Lotringer and Cohen 2) terms “the true gift of incoherence,” ironizing the potential misrepresentation involved in the “sorting-out processes” of the American import of French theory. It is Barthes’s self-ironic obscurity that inspires Ralph to repurpose the theorist’s notion of the “scriptor” in a conceptual amalgamation with “scribbling.” Ralph

conceives scribbling as making “a mark that will constitute a kind of fuzzy mess that is in turn productive in the way of constructing obscurity” (108). The counter-concept to the ideologically freighted “author,” Barthes’s “scriptor” “ceaselessly calls into question all origins” (“Death” 145-46). Ralph’s “scribbling” of notes signals the preliminary, processual, and playful quality of his textual project, whose crucial purpose is precisely to counter what Todorov has called “the violence wrought upon literature by non-literature” (22), the “violent” fixation of figurative potential in critical categories.

Glyph thus tends toward the textual “ideal” that Barthes promoted in *S/Z* as a “writerly” text of “bliss,” which programmatically promotes its own reversibility or incompleteness. Connected with the affective state of “bliss,” which Barthes theorizes in *The Pleasure of the Text*, the *scriptible* text emerges as a (partially) *reversible* script of significationality. The text’s excessive indeterminacy, its “explosion and dispersal into the intertextual, into the cultural text,” causes a pleasurable receptive experience in the reader’s loss of control (Allen 88). In the writerly state of bliss, which thrives on the productive preservation of indeterminacy, the text’s communicational efficacy cannot be measured in terms of the transmittal of a final and fixed signified, but in the reader’s active engagement in a latently overwhelming, ideally self-ironic experience of reading.

In constructing what amounts to a hermeneutics of boredom, Ralph draws on one of the affective dimensions of reading discussed by Barthes, namely ennui or boredom, a term that is also implicit in one of the narrative’s chapter subheadings (“ennuyeux”): “Boredom is not far from bliss: it is bliss seen from the shores of pleasure” (*Pleasure* 25). Ralph is the industriously bored genius baby who makes use of his temporal and intellectual resources as (an abducted) toddler to soak in and comment on every detail of the novel’s absurdly distorted social universe. Boredom, Ralph concludes, “is the baby’s friend. . . . Boredom is not blind to anything, and certainly not to amazement,” adding in a footnote: “It is finally an affirmation of everything, but an admission of nothing” (10).

With what Friedrich Nietzsche described as a “mistrust [of] all systematizers . . . [whose will to a system shows] a lack of integrity” (470), Ralph champions a cranky variant of “critique,” in the modern-day philosophical sense of systematically scrutinizing any given idea, concept, or theory manifesting in a doctrine, discipline, or other institutional authority. Rita Felski has famously debunked this scholarly method of arguing, reading, and thinking. Widely considered “synonymous with intellectual rigor, theoretical sophistication, and intransigent opposition to the status quo,” the crucial problem with critique, Felski suggests, is its tacitly tautological quality. “The idea of critique,” she states, “contains the answer to its own question. As a highly normative concept, it knows itself to be exceptional, embattled, oppositional, and radical” (*Limits* 50). Ralph, in essence, does not argue against the critical rigor associated with “critique” but questions what Felski identifies as its tacitly inscribed academic code of seriousness, detachment, and self-evidence. Often venturing into scatology, Ralph counters this self-saturated, clinical seriousness with a childish compulsion for jokes, pranks, and tricks in his creative celebration of self-compromising transparency.

The brainy baby’s *cranky critique* is an ironic adaptation of the central modern-day method of “the hermeneutics of suspicion,” a term coined by Paul Ricoeur. Felski paraphrases this “common spirit that pervades the writings of Marx, Freud, and Nietzsche [as] a distinctly modern style of interpretation that circumvents obvious or self-evident meanings in order to draw out less visible and less flattering truths” (“Critique”). For Felski, it is telling that, in Anglo-American literary studies, “suspicion” has been notoriously avoided. This seems to encapsulate the haunting legacy of hermeneutics, an allegedly archaic model of retracable and retainable “deeper” meanings, which was “never able to muster the intellectual edginess and

high-wattage excitement generated by various forms of poststructuralism” (“Critique”). Ultimately, Ralph satirizes institutionality *as such* and what Sacvan Bercovitch describes as its inevitable result, namely a hubris of certainty. Tending “*sui generis* toward absolutes, closure, solutions,” Bercovitch polemically claims, disciplines are “control freaks. . . . This has been true from Plato’s monologic dialogues to Derrida’s predetermined indeterminacies” (75).

Ralph’s self-analysis signals that the job of the critic with respect to *Glyph* is not only already done but to a certain extent irrelevant, if not misleading. More specifically, the novel—with all its allegedly idealist implications—calls for a reader who takes up the challenge of Ralph’s radical research: to read outside the box, as it were, and approach *Glyph* as both the theoretical tour de force and the unconventional race critique it is, without resorting to the self-affirming closure of a coherent theory.

Institutional Discourses of Race and the Theoretical Re/Turn

Glyph introduces Everett’s signature emphasis on the academy and the African American literary theme of uplift as he specifically, and satirically, engages with race in the post-civil rights paradigm. *Glyph* shares his subsequent novels’ crucial concern with social equality and cultural emancipation *vis-à-vis* the conflicting racial narratives of representation and neutrality (associated with the doctrine of “color-blindness”) in the contemporary U. S. sociocultural scene.¹³ As the inaugural text of his post-millennial project of racial satire, *Glyph* represents Everett’s institutional intervention in African American cultural and literary discourse, with a broad focus on biological (eugenics, Social Darwinism), educational and socioeconomic (higher education and class status), legal (racial profiling, mass incarceration), and academic discourses (from Critical Race Theory, Whiteness studies, and African American literary studies).¹⁴ *Glyph*, in other words, is a novel preoccupied with race that elaborately circumvents a conventional discussion of race. The text thus inspires us to reconsider what literary texts can (or should) say about extratextual realities, and how criticism can help us come to terms with this referential relationship.

In the aftermath of the highly politicized projects of canonical inclusion (in white-male-centered frameworks of Anglo-American literature) and disciplinary incorporation (in the multicultural academic curriculum), both of which fostered new ambivalences and asymmetries, African American literature today, as Everett himself has stressed, is caught between the commercially exploited expectations of a predominantly white audience and the institutionalized indifference of a largely nonexistent black readership. The “unsophisticated eye which cannot read symbolically” that Everett diagnoses is, above all, blind to an African American literary project committed to an aesthetic vision of innovation that champions formal experimentation and cultural sophistication (“Signing” 10).

Writing along the fault line that Stewart has identified between race and theory (219), *Glyph* appropriates white-codified modes of so-called highbrow formal experimentation and theoretical metadiscursivity. In so doing, it harkens back in multiple ways (notice, for example, that the novel is set in the mid-1970s) to what Winston Napier has termed the “Onset of Theory” in African American literary discourse. The novel’s title signals this return to the poststructuralist Euro-American theory transfer. Issued between 1977 and 1981 as the crucial organ for the distribution of French theory in the United States, the journal *Glyph*’s blurb strongly resonates with Ralph’s impetus: “Situated in the crosscurrents of continental and

Anglo-American developments, *Glyph* provides an international forum for articulating a common set of problems that not only cuts across traditional academic divisions but also calls into question the very status of such divisions.” Retracing the “elitist, canonical and ahistorical” tendencies in the transition from New Criticism to Deconstruction (Gallop 182), Ralph reads against the consolidating effects of institutional inertia.

The text’s defining trap of racial ambivalence, which Ralph has set up and into which he lures the reader, severely undermines the notion that one needs to focus on race in the established ways to move beyond it. This complicates the centrality of race, which Critical Race Theory (CRT), for instance, champions.¹⁵ Fifty-four pages into the narrative, Ralph unfolds a story of racial passing in reverse right in front of the reader. By suggesting that we “no doubt . . . probably assumed” that his high-brow narratorial sovereignty is indicative of his whiteness, Ralph puts the reader in an awkward position, the awkwardness of which is signaled by the conflicting adverbial modifiers “no doubt” and “probably.” Rendering race an ambivalently indispensable yet insufficient option, Ralph’s move, ultimately, problematizes the riskiness for a minoritized writer who is likely to be misunderstood. This tactic suggests an important question: What if “a” David Foster Wallace would have pursued such a daunting theoretical project? What—given *Glyph*’s program—are the institutional preconditions and critical implications of such a project in the realm of *black* letters?

Ralph challenges the African American literary establishment by refraining from what Kenneth Warren has criticized as the sanctioned attempt of black literary “practitioners at transforming their high-cultural practices into vital transactions through an encounter with traditional vernacular practices” (136). Ralph’s muteness, thus, *has* to be read as Everett’s implicit side poke at those whom Warren has called the “vernacular critics”: Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and Houston A. Baker, Jr., and their projects of canonical integration and disciplinary consolidation. It is noteworthy, in this regard, that the baby’s literary sophistication serves to align him with those writers whom Gates and Baker have helped to elevate to the upper ranks of post-modern African American literature (think of Ishmael Reed or Toni Morrison, for instance), and that the text of the novel would appear to gesture toward Gates’s theoretical contributions, in particular his trickster theory subsumed by “Signifyin(g),” which prominently includes his notions of the “(un-)Talking Book,” “the ur-trope of the Anglo-African tradition” (*Signifying* 44), and the Signifying Monkey, “black mythology’s archetypal signifier” (“Blackness” 687).¹⁶ However, although *Glyph* does not question the literary/rhetorical validity of these concepts, it implicitly challenges their ideological implications. Specifically, it problematizes the “estrangement that vernacular-based canonical critiques of African-American literature have sought to heal with the belief that by bringing to bear the ‘virtues of the vernacular,’ African-American novelists (and by extension, critics) could situate their texts ‘at the locus of the black neighborhood, the material home front, or the southern vernacular community’” (Warren 133).

The novel thus challenges the centrality of the black “voice” in African American canonical discourses and in the context of programmed writing.¹⁷ Rather than targeting the vernacular as a cultural idiosyncrasy of black communal life, the text works against its institutional systematization as a catalyst of canonical and cultural cohesion in the postmodern phase of crisis in racial identity and community.¹⁸ *Glyph* seeks to explore and explode the limits that this and other critical models have drawn for African American literary practice. To be specific, it punctures the institutionalized ideal of “finding” and expressing one’s voice to “give” a voice to one’s racial community.

Glyph’s interdisciplinary language debate is staged as both a horizontal and a vertical conflict (father vs. son and father vs. mother). While the former reflects

the conflict between scholarly elitism and social engagement, the latter, namely the aesthetics-politics antagonism represented by Eve and Inflato, signals the persistent gender divide between black male and female literary practice and criticism. Thus, *Glyph* returns not only to the “onset” of theory but also to its “backlash,” which Diane Fuss has problematized. The notions that “poststructuralist Afro-American theory de-socializes and de-politicizes the text” (Fuss 85) and perpetuates “the social myth that literary criticism can somehow speak for the absent and unrepresented other” (Adell 118) have been articulated most prominently by black feminist critics such as Joyce A. Joyce (in her dispute with Gates and Baker in the Winter 1987 edition of *New Literary History*) and Barbara Christian (in her essay “The Race for Theory”). Baker, in turn, has allocated these black women theorists’ criticism of black male scholars’ white Western theory appropriation to a “new black conservatism” (“Dubious” 367).

Glyph retraces the fault lines of conservatism/progressivism and particularism/universalism, along which the extremely charged multiculturalist debates in the wider context of identity politics have been divided. Ralph severely complicates the fundamental “choice” that Gates promotes: “how effective and how durable our interventions in contemporary cultural politics will be depends upon our ability to mobilize the institutions that buttress and reproduce that culture. The choice isn’t between institutions and no institutions. The choice is always: What kind of institutions shall there be?” (“Master’s” 163). Two or three things about this statement might leave Ralph bored.

“The Literature of the People with Whom I Share Like Coloration”: Erasing African American Literature in the Race Baby’s Quest for Aesthetic Emancipation

Reading *Glyph* as a work of African American literature is *one* of numerous “stretches” to which Ralph programmatically provokes the reader. These topoi and tropes of black canonical writing inform the novel not as principles of a culturally specific black poetics, but as conventions written under erasure. The text’s fundamental feature includes what Robert Stepto has defined as the “primary pre-generic myth” of African American literature: the quest for liberty *qua* literacy (ix). Everett’s text is inscribed into what Madhu Dubey posits as one of the two dominant paradigms in black writing: the “uplift” paradigm, in which the writer acts “as an agent of social advancement and cultural improvement, thereby affirming the tangible value of print literacy for the masses” (6).¹⁹ Disconnected from the “vernacular paradigm” that provides the means of racial delegation *qua* idiomatic inflection (6), *Glyph* strongly emphasizes two major thematic clusters: oppression (enslavement and incarceration) and education. This double focus manifests itself in the generic combination of the neo-slave narrative and the self-educational essay in the vein of Du Bois’s and Washington’s projects of uplift.²⁰

Ralph is a radical promoter of the uplift ideal of “book-learning,” and his ultimate *raison d’être* (or rather *raison de representation*), and thus *Glyph*’s main motif, is the acquisition of books, specifically books of literature and literary theory. As an Ellisonian literary intellectual and Baldwinian cultural critic, Ralph ranks among the 0.1 percent of the “Talented Tenth.” He is a “race baby” with an educational mandate.²¹ As such, he is disconnected from what Baker has famously defined as the “blues matrix,” the historically shared milieu in which the cultural specificity of the black expressive tradition is rooted (*Blues* 3). The brainy baby neither has any experience of the outside world nor tells his personal “black” experience of living

in the rural South or urban North. He is without a communal past of oppression and, significantly, does not speak in an ethnically identifiable idiom (17, 54, 69).

In turn, bearing a name with a distinct cultural legacy, Ralph Townsend is reminiscent of Ralph Ellison, the widely influential figure of black literary modernism, and, perhaps less obviously, of Robert Townsend, the black Chicago-based comedian and actor whose signature stage persona, as Mel Watkins recalls, was “dressed in natty hipster attire and, with an upper-class British accent, deliver[ed] lines such as, ‘I’d like to say tonight that . . . I haven’t changed. I’m still that same old black boy from the ghet-to. Truly! I am . . . I am . . . I am’ ” (24). Townsend’s provocative parody of black progress (satirized in his hipster persona’s hyperbolic use of the British accent as a putative marker of upper-class status) resonates with Ralph’s peculiar privilege, recognizing, of course, that all privilege is peculiar. In literary regards, the only black canonical text he explicitly references is Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*. Ralph carefully highlights his alliance with the black intellectual tradition and further suggests an analogy between his text and the avant-gardist projects of writers such as Ellison, Baldwin, Zora Neale Hurston, and Ishmael Reed²²—writers known for their innovation and their refusal as artists to be reduced to race. In addition, Ralph’s admiration for Ellison’s epoch-making magnum opus *Invisible Man* highlights not only his commitment to the modernist ideal of “creative excellence,”²³ but also his prioritization of the novel as such, which, as Weixlmann has stressed, has conventionally been deemed incompatible with the sociocritical function ascribed to black writing (114).

Ralph’s literary isolation also brings to mind Richard Wright’s use of a borrowed library card while forging notes to trick a librarian into supplying him with books. Tellingly, everyone at first thinks that Ralph’s notes are forged. His archival work in the Townsends’ library prompts a crucial concern for the canon and what John Guillory has termed the “antinomies of value” (486). Tacitly supplanting the selection of literary artworks deemed “worthy” of preservation, these value judgments encroach on concerns not only about curricular selection and inclusion in literary anthologies but also about literacy—in short, about America’s “culture of reading.”

Glyph is committed to this overarching reading culture, and not a culturally specific project of representation. This fact is spectacularly proven by the text’s translation of crucial concerns and conventions associated with three central literary-theoretical complexes of African American literature into the “lowbrow” sector of genre fiction. During the text’s ontological section, a cartoonish adventure story based on a formulaic thriller plot, Ralph progresses through three societal spheres: science, politics, and religion. These three stages represent what I conceive as literary *theoryscapes*. Each one features an overarching theme: abolitionism (science), nationalism (politics), and tribalism (religion). In each ideologically inflected reading to which Ralph is subjected, Everett experiments with classic focal points of black writing: liberation, self-representation, and solidarity. *Glyph* thus provides a *lowbrow literalization* of black literary institutionalization.

Polemically speaking, a baby who writes seems perfect for *proving* black equality in the vein of abolitionism. In this regard, *Glyph* follows to its illogical conclusion the abolitionist rebuttal to the biologically based notion that blacks are *innately* incapable of intellectual excellence and cultural originality.²⁴ *Glyph*’s protagonist is a black writer *sui generis*—in other words, a native novelist. As such, Everett contrasts Ralph with what appears to be, as Michel Feith has observed, “quite literally, a Signifying Monkey” (305). Everett has literalized this cultural/mythological archetype, which undergirds Henry Louis Gates’s seminal theory of black cultural expressivity, as a *signing* monkey well-conversant in ASL.²⁵ In his absence of *voice*, *the* crucial trope of African American criticism, both Ralph, the radical aesthete of *writing*, and Ronald, the prototypical signer, engage in a sort of metacritical dialogue. Thus, Ralph and Ronald, each representing a distinct conception of expressive

practice, are caught on the fault line of a scholarly debate, between a psychological and an anthropological argument. Yet Ralph's retrospective alliance with Ronald complicates the reductive notion of an antagonistic opposition between Ralph and Ronald, and by extension between Everett and Gates. Ultimately, this episode calls for a more nuanced understanding of African American literature that is *not* anchored to the *voice* and its ideological baggage.

In the political theoryscape, Ralph is abducted by government agents, with whom the brainy baby partakes in a test mission by infiltrating a high-security nuclear weapons plant to engage in industrial espionage. Ralph's employment as a spy hints at the functional aspects of literature and writing promoted by the Black Arts Movement (BAM). He thus emerges as a "soldier poet" whose linguistic and mnemonic capabilities are made to serve the express purpose of recording and transmitting knowledge to his captors. Strongly resonating with the BAM's ideal of "poetic militancy," Ralph's aesthetic talents are rendered into the features of a highly efficient and dangerous "weapon." By translating the political project of black cultural nationalism into a Cold War scenario of industrial espionage and nuclear threat, *Glyph* speculates on an absurdly hyperpoliticized project of black self-assertion that cannot help but succumb to the very mechanisms against which it revolts: a cultural hegemony camouflaged under a thin layer of pluralist representation.

Transitioning into the religious theoryscape, Ralph's archetypal black struggle for liberty *qua* literacy is ironized when he is rescued from a high-security prison by a guard who reads "fat novels about spies and sea creatures" (140). Mauricio Lapuente is obviously a fan of genre fiction, which, as the text suggests, seems to foster his ability to empathize with the toddler. Ralph is then adopted by the Mexican American couple Rosenda Paz and the abovementioned Mauricio—people who, contrary to the racial stereotype of the (hyper-)fertile Latino/a, are unable to conceive a child. "The likeness of their skin color to mine," Ralph concludes tellingly, "made us a proper-looking tribe." This section's thematic negotiation of community, conceived as "tribalism," is trivialized in Rosenda's and Mauricio's "wide-eyed, sloppy, indelicate adoration" of Ralph, and inscribed into both characters' surnames—Paz ("peace" in Spanish) and Lapuente ("bridge" in Spanish). With this contrived bond of solidarity that has "no subtlety, no understatement, no refinement" (146), Everett implicitly places African American literature in the comparative perspective of American minority culture, alluding to the racial dogma of diversity and ethnic representation. Recast as the progeny of solidarity, Ralph, finally, denounces a specific, romanticized notion of ethnicity as a repository of cultural identity, which Stuart Hall famously debunked as the myth of "coming home to rest in some place which was always there waiting for one" (45).

Coda: The Critical Potential of Radical Research

Satirizing literary institutionalism as such, *Glyph* insinuates that the competition over disciplinary legitimacy in the establishment of African American literature, by way of the very theory that helped to debunk and deconstruct the tacit totalizations and exclusions of the Western cultural apparatus, was carried out—to a certain extent—at the expense of a more open vision of cultural contribution. To be clear, *Glyph*, for all of its high-theoretical bacchanalia, *wants* to be read as African American literature. It seeks to create or anticipate a reader who can productively navigate the fault line between aesthetics and politics in black literary art. This is a particularly difficult challenge in light of the systemic reduction of

African American literature to its very “oppositional” function of “protesting” racial inequality in the extremely confined framework of social realism. The novel therefore tackles the crucial question that Warren has posed, namely “whether the current articulations of black difference remain tenable as oppositional critical practices” (136).

What, then, is the oppositional value of Ralph’s radical research; what, in other words, is the emancipatory potential of theory, or reading, in general? How, more specifically, can we attempt to suture the increasing disconnect between the academic and the public spheres in the midst of a continuing crisis within the very epistemological and normative basis of political dialogue and democratic life? That Ralph is a self-taught critic who depends on the book supplies of his parents’ library points in the direction of a possible answer. *Glyph* emphasizes the race-related problem of educational access, the problem that lies at the root of the institutionalized disregard toward black literary excellence that Everett satirizes by generically aligning high- and lowbrow theory with genre fiction. *Glyph*, then, literally gives us what we expect, namely a version of African American literature rendered readily accessible in an all-too familiar pop-cultural setup.

Finally, the novel prompts a question: What is the alternative to these canonical models? As long as race continues to cement the permanent marginalization of American minorities, it seems naïve if not dangerous to dismiss the necessity of black self-representation, as much as established conceptions seem to be conducive to commercial cooptation and cultural assimilation (cf. *erasure*). *Glyph*’s attempt at reclaiming the literary and critical terms of black writing can be read, after all, as a demonstration of both progress and regression. Situated somewhere between a literary-political manifesto and a childish prank, Ralph’s project shows that the struggle for aesthetic emancipation is both necessary and incomplete.

1. Ralph asserts that his muteness is an “expression” of silent revolt against his linguistic initiation, on which he comments accordingly: “My parents, . . . clawing at speech like sick cats, could not fathom my lack of interest in parroting their sounds” (5; emphasis added); “Choosing not to engage in speech had its drawbacks, among them an inability to summon help from the next room” (49; emphasis added).

2. It is significant that Ralph’s reading survey enlists programmatic pairs: two major religious texts; probably the two most influential Anglophone writers of humor (Swift, the preeminent satirist, and Sterne, the most famous humorist); the two African American writers most important to Everett (Ellison, the doyen of novelistic modernism, represented by his magnum opus, and Baldwin, the famous race critic); two major European novelists (Joyce, the most important modernist, and Balzac, a great representative of the social novel); and, finally, two poets (the British W. H. Auden and the American Theodore Roethke) who some would claim were the most accomplished of their generation. With this synopsis Ralph sets the agenda for his aesthetic program, introducing his characteristic strategy of working *in between* ontological and epistemological, aesthetic and political, satiric and humoristic, and novelistic and poetic registers.

3. *Glyph* harkens back to the problem of the origin of language and the nature/nurture fault line in its acquisition and function as a conveyor of knowledge and experience. Discussed by Plato in his Meno dialogue, the knowledge-experience split exemplified by an uneducated slave boy’s mastering math was termed “Plato’s Problem” by the linguist Noam Chomsky, who adapted it for his “poverty of the stimulus” argument. Ralph’s split of linguistic faculties relates to Chomsky’s competence-performance model of capability and practice. That Everett’s mute protagonist shows an extremely high level of competence in putting (literary) language to use ironically literalizes Chomsky’s notion of a generative grammar, an innate structural qualification for language independent of experiential determination.

4. Ralph’s physiological precondition is based on the split between his corporeal limitations (reduced control over his own bodily functions and impeded motor skills in terms of spatial mobility and deictic communication) and his exceptional intellectual capabilities. Ralph shares with other children an unmitigated receptiveness to external stimuli, processing his environment in holistic fashion, both quantitatively and qualitatively. He is, however, exposed to both the forces of the physical world (gravity, order of magnitude, mischievous adults) and his own corporeal composition (immobility, incontinence, teething, fatigue, psycho-emotional instability). In the psychological regard, the toddler represents a spectacular

Notes

collapsing of what Jacques Lacan has famously conceptualized as the two separate stages of a child's identity formation: the *imaginary* and the *symbolic*. The former identifies the narcissistic state of a child's identification with her image, the "mirror stage," during which her ego (*i.e.*, her sense of being a unique self) is created through the alienating experience of *méconnaissance* in the disconnection from her mother. In the *symbolic* phase of individuation, the father severs the dyadic relationship between mother and child by way of his authority, which compels the child to channel her demands of the mother through speech, thus enframing the child within language. Ralph has bypassed this developmental progression, emblemizing the unmediated interplay between the unconscious and language. Thus, his unconscious is structured like a language, but not *only* in the Lacanian sense. Rather, it is structured like a language filled with signifiers of the symbolic register of language and literary language, specifically.

5. See H. Paul Grice's concept of the cooperative principle in "Logic and Conversation," in *Studies in the Way of Words* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1989), 22-40.

6. Former president of Facebook Sean Parker's description of the social media platform. See Erica Pandey, "Sean Parker: Facebook Was Designed To Exploit Human 'Vulnerability,'" *Axios*, 9 Nov. 2017, Web.

7. Ralph's alignment with the controversial philosopher Wittgenstein attests to Everett's promotion of language as a situational and unstable system of signification. Significantly, Ralph draws on both Wittgenstein's early *and* later project (of the *Blue Books* and *Philosophical Investigations* published post-humously in 1953). While in the former Wittgenstein dwells on the illogical, imponderable aspects of language (consider his notion of the "disposable ladder"), he reemphasizes language's social functioning in the latter (cf. his notion of "language games" as well as the so-called "private-language argument" and its associated "beetle in the box"). The "meaning is use" doctrine, which undergirds Wittgenstein's later project, posits language as a rule-based communicative tool dependent on two principles of dynamic meaning exchange in everyday language use, namely context-dependency and adaptability.

8. Eco defines a work of art as "a corn-piece and closed form in its uniqueness as a balanced organic whole, while at the same time constituting an open product on account of its susceptibility to countless different interpretations which do not impinge on its unadulterable specificity" (4). According to Eco, this receptive plurality is a fundamental feature of *every* aesthetically sophisticated work of art, and making this plurality a programmatic principle of poetics is, in turn, characteristic of artworks associated with the modernist turn. This "second-order" openness derives from the dialectic interplay of the artwork's closedness and openness: its *singularity* as a "signifier," what Eco calls the "structural vitality which the work already possesses, even if it is incomplete" (20), and the *plurality* of its possible interpretations. It is this complete incompleteness which makes the "open artwork" radically open, since it calls for the reader to ponder the implications of an "aesthetic organization of a complex of signifiers that [are] already, in themselves, open and ambiguous," while both the aesthetic organization and the ambiguity of the signs are "mutually supportive and motivating" (40). Eco's key example here is Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*.

9. An example of this running aesthetic commentary includes Dr. Steimmel's relegation of the baby's linguistic talents to motor skills, which Ralph ironizes with a reference to the Renaissance ideal of craftsmanship. To Father Chacón's pedophilic approach, Ralph responds with a reference to Michelangelo's God touching Adam's hand (172).

10. This notion has been promoted by various critics (cf. Berben-Masi 223; Wolfreys 348, 356; Feith 302; Roof 204; and Huehls 118-19).

11. This particular reading of Ralph as a human guinea pig, as it were, is visualized on the book cover of the French translation (Paris: Actes Suds, 2008; trans. Anne-Laure Tissut), which is accessible from the Percival Everett International Society website (<https://percivaleverettsociety.com.files.wordpress.com/2016/09/13e-glyph-french-cloth.jpg>).

12. It is important to stress that, despite his aversion to Derrida's alleged playing off of speaking against writing, Ralph's text draws on key deconstructionist ideas. Chief among these is *phonocentrism/ logocentrism*: speech as the original source of a transcendentally present order of meaning; writing as the *dangerous supplement*, which "appears as the 'non-phonetic moment' that lurks within language and creates all manner of dangerous, disruptive effects . . . [threatening] not simply language in its 'natural,' spoken state but the whole associated system of values upheld by this root supposition" of supplementarity (Norris 69); and *différance*—"both a 'passive' difference already in place as the condition of signification and an act of differing which produces differences" (Culler 61).

13. The novels I have in mind are *erasure* (2001), *A History of the African People (proposed)* by Strom Thurmond, as told to Percival Everett & James Kincaid (2004), and *I Am Not Sidney Poitier* (2009). The concept *post-race*, precisely because of its dangerously utopian and teleological implications, epitomizes what Emirbayer and Desmond define as the characteristic contemporary "push-pull of racial domination and racial progress, one beset by racial contradictions and paradoxes" (5). "Post-race" incorporates an inherent contradiction between its denotation and connotation. Denoting the eradication of race as a social category, which was promoted by various commentators across the political spectrum in the wake of Barack Obama's election to silence pressing concerns of systemic inequality (in education, housing, and

law enforcement) and reparations for slavery, it connotes the desire for the end of racism. This connotation resonates with the desire for the end of race as *the* exclusive aesthetic category in American minority culture. Dwelling along the fault line between racial representation and neutrality (associated with the doctrine of “color-blindness”), *Glyph* experiments with the critical implications of this desire.

14. One could even relate Ralph’s training and assignment as a spy to the military legacy of black soldiers fighting for the very country that denied them their basic human and civil rights (think, for instance, of “Varnum’s Regiment,” the Civil War’s famous Fifty-Fourth black regiment, and the African American soldiers stationed in Europe during and after World War II).

15. See Delgado and Stefancic.

16. In *The Signifying Monkey*, Gates has seminally set out to provide a comprehensive theory of black writing that is “endemic” to the black tradition. As a liminal figure situated between the rhetorical realms of orality and writing, the “Talking Book” is *the* foundational trope of figurative-language use in black literary writing, according to Gates. In its textual instantiations and intertextual revisions by the first African American writers, it served to negotiate the Enlightenment-informed systematic denial of black humanity and subjectivity with “the paradox of representing, of containing somehow, the oral within the written, precisely when black oral culture was transforming itself into a written culture” (144). Manipulating language to undermine authority, the Signifying Monkey is both the mythological “master” and the rhetorical principle of this technique of truth-telling in the face of systematic censure (82). According to Gates, these tales constitute the beginning of a transhistorical project of cultural expression, repetition, and revision—a project that culminates with the contemporary musical and literary practices of black artists (Hip Hop, Ishmael Reed’s “Neo-Hoodoo” aesthetics).

17. See Mark McGurl, *The Program Era: Postwar Fiction and the Rise of Creative Writing* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2011).

18. Cf. Dubey 5.

19. In the “vernacular paradigm,” according to Dubey, writers “may speak for distinctively black communities insofar as they can inflect their texts with the accents and idioms of black oral culture” (6).

20. See Timothy Mark Robinson, “Percival Everett’s *Glyph* as Neo-Slave Narrative: Within and Beyond the Tradition,” in *Percival Everett: Writing Other / Wise*, Keith B. Mitchell and Robin G. Vander, eds. (New Orleans: Xavier Review, 2014), 101-24.

21. The physically helpless and intellectually superior detainee/trainee is subjected not only to body-centered forms of censorship and detention, but also to experimentation and instruction. Ralph’s predicament invokes the stereotype of the black convict (the pathological perpetrator) and the black high school dropout (the underperforming adolescent). The inferiorization of blacks (as intellectually limited and culturally imitative) paired with the infantilization of the black male (suggested by the racist epithet *boy*) corresponds with the implicit notion of white patronage, translated into a nurturing bond between mother and son (cf. Robinson) and captor and captive. Ralph echoes the black victims of scientific abuse in the Tuskegee experiments (1932-72). Former President Bill Clinton’s formal apology in 1997 to the black men exploited in the U.S. Public Health Service’s syphilis study could be considered one of *Glyph*’s contextual side marks.

22. Ralph explicitly references a total of four African American writers: Ralph Ellison, Zora Neale Hurston, James Baldwin, and Ishmael Reed.

23. See Everett’s self-description in his interview with Sean O’Hagan, “The Books Interview: Percival Everett,” in *Conversations with Percival Everett*, Joe Weixlmann, ed. (Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 2013), 34.

24. Cf. Immanuel Kant, Thomas Jefferson, et al.

25. Curiously enough, the publication of this article coincides with the passing of Koko the signing gorilla, whom we might think of as the historical foil for Ronald. In addition to a substantial number of signs that her instructor Francine Patterson taught her, Koko was able to comprehend various words of spoken English. The gorilla’s facility for syntax—*i.e.*, the recursive component of language—remains disputed, however.

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