"It's a black thang maybe": Postmodern Racism in Percival Everett's *Erasure*

by

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For my family: Mom, Dad, Kate, Greg, and Hayley. Without them, nothing.

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Abstract

This thesis examines the nature and consequence of Percival Everett's engagement with the contemporary phenomenon of postmodern racism in his novel *Erasure*. To avoid perpetuating the idea that a critic is responsible for discussing African-American novelists as such, it explores *Erasure*'s satire of the position and positioning of African-American authors by today's publishing industry on the novel's own terms. That is, it investigates the interplay of stereotypes, postmodern racism, and the biographical positivism lingering in the reception of the texts by the novel's protagonist, Thelonius "Monk" Ellison, and Everett through the application of the theoretical and literary frameworks that the satire invites, notably the work of Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Richard Wright, and Ralph Ellison. The discussion of the impact of postmodern racism on the boundaries of authorship explored by Monk's and, more broadly, Everett's resistance to the collapsing of race and writing is framed in terms of the modernist resonances of Wright's *Native Son* in the "proof" of Monk's "blackness"—the meta-diegisis *Fuck*—and the recurring allusions to Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* in Monk's narrative, which negotiate the commercial potential and staggering limitations for the African-American novelist who renders the stereotypically "authentic African-American experience" associated with the ghetto lifestyle. What emerges in this project is the notion that *Erasure* is Everett's most important work precisely because it provides an alternative interpretive model for reading his output as a whole.

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Chapter One: Introduction

> The global politics of difference established by the world market is defined not by free play and equality, but by the imposition of new hierarchies, or really by a constant process of hierarchization. Postmodernist and postcolonialist theories (and fundamentalisms in a very different way) are really sentinels that signal this passage in course, and in this regard are indispensable.
> —Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire*

> The truth is that there are no races: there is nothing in the world that can do all we ask 'race' to do for us. The evil that is done is done by the concept and by easy—yet impossible—assumptions as to its application. What we miss through our obsession with the structure of relations of concepts is, simply, reality.
> —Kwame Anthony Appiah, "The Uncompleted Argument"

In October of 2005, National Basketball Association (NBA) Commissioner David Stern announced that the league would be instituting a mandatory dress code for its players requiring them to dress in "business casual" attire whenever they were participating in off-court team or league activities. The letter of the code was clear: No t-shirts, shorts, chains, sunglasses, headgear or headphones. The spirit behind the code was decidedly more ambiguous. Code proponents argued that Stern needed to redress the league's image, which had been tarnished the previous season when an ugly brawl involving players and fans erupted in Detroit during an Indiana Pacers-Detroit Pistons game. Those opposed to the code emphasized the connection between the fact that the NBA was the league with the largest percentage of African-American athletes and was also the first professional sports league to institute a league-enforced dress code. In other words, code detractors saw the policy as inherently racist: The NBA marketing machine sold a playground product on the court, but the players were not supposed to wear visible signs of buying into what corporate sponsors and middle-class fans might see as an unpalatable and threatening image of African-Americanness off the court. What is interesting is the manner in which the American media packaged the two sides of the

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debate through the lens of player reaction—a packaging that signaled something beyond the media's characteristic hyperbole. Judging by the number and tone of print and online articles enthusiastically promising "Player Reaction to the New Dress Code," the media was ready to seize on any sign of player dissent. Pacers player Stephen Jackson's claim that the banning of chains was "a racial statement [because] almost 100% of the guys in the league who are young and black wear big chains," however, represented the attitude of very few in the league (*Indianapolis Star*). More common was the sentiment expressed by Jackson's teammate Jermaine O'Neal:

> There's some battles in life that you just can't try to fight. Guys make enough money to put on some dress clothes. My plan this year was to dress up anyway. I have 40-50 suits already. I should be one of the best-dressed guys this year. (*Indianapolis Star*)

That the media eagerly anticipated a "battle" crystallizes a subtler but more pervasive form of racism than the one Jackson's quote invokes. The media's *expectations* were driven by an inflexible association of African-American identity with the high levels of poverty and crime often found in urban ghettoes. From the media's perspective, African-American players would presumably form a lay-up line to defend their culture—the so-called authentic experience articulated in hip-hop and located in the ghetto—against infringement by the league. The dress code storyline faded quickly from popular interest and media scrutiny but the stereotypes about African-American culture and identity that underwrote its development are worth exploring because of the persistence of this type of racist thinking in the United States.

When Thelonious "Monk" Ellison, the narrator and protagonist of Percival Everett's 2001 novel *Erasure* recounts an awkward experience playing basketball as a teenager, he positions himself at a remove from the "authentic" version of African-American identity, which includes athletic prowess:

> I had been playing for about thirty minutes, making safe pass after safe pass when I found myself considering the racist comments of Hegel concerning Oriental peoples and their attitude toward freedom of the self when I was bumped into the lane and so appeared to be cutting to the basket and the ball was thrown back to me. I threw up a wild and desperate shot which had no prayer of going in; it was ugly. A member of my team asked me what I was thinking about and I said, 'Hegel.'
> 'What?'
> 'He was a German philosopher.' I watched the expression on his face and perhaps reflected the same degree of amazement. 'I was thinking about his theory of history.' (134)

Monk is then turned home with a chorus of insults. On the one hand, this passage reflects the fact that the basketball court is no place for the type of abstract thought in which Monk is prone to indulging. The specific allusion to the "racist comments of Hegel concerning Oriental peoples and their attitude toward freedom of the self," however, signals this moment as a microcosm of the novel's extended interrogation of the straight line drawn between race, identity, and culture by the American public and the publishing industry. For as Monk, the grown-up writer and academic, discovers, the public and the publishing industry only relate to him through stereotypes about African-American

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culture. The most palatable of these stereotypes—the one the American culture industry pressures Monk to deploy in his writing—is a version of the lifestyle led by African-Americans in urban ghettoes. Monk's literary agent refers to this connection between authorship and race, between Monk's experience and a consensual "African-American experience," in the reception of texts when he tells Monk, "the line is, you're not black enough" (43). As Sterling Brown once wrote, "the statement [this statement] issued by the literary market [is clear]: [S]tereotypes wanted" (78).

Given that Brown's essay, "Negro Characters as Seen by White Authors," was first published in 1933, it would be easy to suggest that racism has remained constant in form and effect rather than mutated in the postmodern context. Certainly the notion that a writer has to trade in recognizable stereotypes in order to be commercially viable is nothing new. And an academic critique of popular audiences on the grounds of their collapsing of authorial and textual identity will not strike anyone as particularly incisive. But there is much more at stake when locating the continuing existence of racism in the United States, which my extended investigation of Everett's *Erasure* will articulate. In brief, this "more" refers to a fundamental incompatibility between the operation of the world system of capitalism and the logic underlying the increasingly popular theoretical rubric of cosmopolitanism. The incompatibility stems from the space allowed for pluralism in cosmopolitan discourse. By allowing for pluralism, cosmopolitanism elides the continuing existence of racial hierarchies which rely on the essentializing gesture of pluralism for their efficacy. While he is clearly in the cosmopolitan camp, Timothy Brennan concedes that "the ethical core of [cosmopolitanism and pluralism] [is] identical" in his latest book, *Wars of Position: The Cultural Politics of Left and Right*

(216). Brennan does not linger on the point, nor does his mission statement for cosmopolitanism from an earlier published work, *At Home in the World: Cosmopolitanism Now*—"not to flee from the global, but to socialize it"—suggest that essentialism is necessarily embedded in cosmopolitan theory (307). For Brennan, there is nevertheless a distance between the goal of cosmopolitanism and its practical application: "Cosmopolitanism is the way in which a kind of American patriotism is today being expressed" (*Wars* 227). Pluralism and patriotism are synonymous insofar as they emphasize difference to manufacture a sense of belonging for those who are marked as the "same." Both pluralism and cosmopolitanism, that is, depend on the existence of a national frame. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri argue in *Empire* that pluralism "accepts all differences of who we are so long as we agree to act on the basis of these differences of identity, so long as we act our race" (192). As a result, "the theoretical substitution of culture for race or biology is thus transformed paradoxically into a theory of the preservation of race" (192). What additionally complicates traditional discourse on race and identity, and allows us to designate the racism explored in *Erasure* as "postmodern racism," is the centrality of culture and capital as opposed to the more obvious biology and bigotry that defined, for instance, apartheid in South Africa or the post-Reconstruction era United States.

I am aware of the irony of putting Brennan's work in close dialogue with Hardt and Negri's *Empire*, given his thorough critique of the work in *Wars of Position*. Brennan derisively links the widespread popularity of *Empire* to the fact that "[m]ainstream news sources were understandably attracted by a book of radical theory [*Empire*] that coincided so closely with their own official story" (172). Brennan's

argument proceeds from his observation that *Empire* is grossly atemporal against the backdrop of, for example, the United States' role in Iraq. In this context, "*Empire*'s thesis that imperialism has ended is likely to seem absurd" (172). The "official story" that Hardt and Negri tell about the continuing existence of racial hierarchies, however, cannot be dismissed along these same out-of-context lines, given that it is more focused on exposing the North American media's myth-making strategies than on U.S. imperialism, per se. But there remains a further complication with reference to my project as a whole: How do I reconcile my race-cognizant reading of *Erasure* with the novel's assault on race-centered readings of texts written by African-Americans? Everett's texts are at least comparable, in terms of their expressions of self-consciousness, about his position within the Academy as a professor of Literary Theory at the University of Southern California. In fact, his disparate *oeuvre* (fifteen novels, three short story collections, one volume of poetry and one children's book) is nearly impossible to reduce to a single sentence on thematic interests, or even several extended paragraphs. So why choose *Erasure* for an extended project when Everett—a professional reader *and* writer of texts—demonstrates an awareness of how texts are received more generally, where race is but one vantage point among many? In order to negotiate these challenging questions, I will position my work in the discourse on Everett by balancing my account of the narrow body of existing scholarship on his novels with the extra-textual irony hovering around the fact that most critical attention is devoted to a work which takes a satirical stance on biographical positivism and race cognizance, *Erasure*, and yet is his most personal novel and most explicit engagement with race since his first novel, *Suder*. To avoid perpetuating the idea that a critic is responsible for

discussing African-American novelists as such, I will explore Everett's satire on its own terms. What will emerge in the process of this project is the notion that *Erasure* is Everett's most important work precisely because, with the textual clues connecting Monk and Everett, it provides a possible interpretive model for reading his output as a whole. My next two chapters will build toward this model, which will be developed fully in Chapter Four's discussion of the recurring allusions to Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*. These allusions not only open a compelling dialogue about invisibility, but they also invite discussion about Jacques Derrida's concept of "erasure." Taken out of their original context and reinscribed in the textscape of a postmodern novel, the lines from *Invisible Man* are part of Everett's assault on the tendency to anchor an author to a particular genre. Everett's novels can be seen as a collective experiment with genre— each text is an individual performance. Postmodern racism poses the most significant obstacle to this experiment.

The very invocation of racism is not unproblematic. For many theorists, racism is a rhetorical let-off—a way of achieving the safe distance and naïve assuredness of a political correctness that is nevertheless unfashionable in literary studies. In *After Empire: Melancholia or Convivial Culture?*, Paul Gilroy discusses the Academy's increasing disinclination to address racism:

> More than that, the very attempt to hold 'racism' together as an object to
> be analyzed will be unacceptable to many. To dispute racial issues is to
> invite dismissal as a spokesman for 'political correctness' or 'presentism.'
> To take racism seriously is in effect to sacrifice much of what
> distinguishes the academy as a special place in which contentious and

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heterodox arguments will be politely heard with patience and in good faith

before being refuted in a public culture for which we all assume

responsibility. (10)

Avery Gordon and Christopher Newfield argue in a 1994 article published in *Critical Inquiry*, "White Philosophy," that such disinclination allows "race liberalism" to "thrive" by reversing "the usual causality: [R]acism does not make people talk about race; talk about race sustains racism" (738-39). Sean O'Hagan takes a race liberalist perspective in his 2003 *Guardian* review of *Erasure* which also includes an interview with Everett:

It would be tempting to describe Everett's funny and provocative satire on

American mores as a novel about race – and, indeed, it is his challenging

treatment of that subtext that has of course garnered most critical

attention—but *Erasure* is a much bigger book than that, and, as such, is as

much about blackness as *Lolita* is about pre-pubescent female sexuality.

(O'Hagan par. 2)

On the surface, Everett does not evince his notorious slipperiness in interviews, and endorses O'Hagan's claim: "I see it essentially as a book about the creation of art and all the impediments placed in front of some of us as we set out to do that within this culture" (O'Hagan par. 3). Yet another reading of Everett's response uncovers a significant "us" clause which suggests, at least provisionally, that racism remains the most significant obstacle to self-definitions of success by postmodern experimental novelists who happen to be African-American. And racism *is* a bigger and more complex phenomenon than O'Hagan renders it. While it would be overly simplistic to reduce any author to the engagement with a specific issue, Everett's meditation on postmodern racism cannot be

easily dispensed with because it is unfashionable in the Academy or seemingly simple to identify and unpack. Theorizing about race and identifying novels and theorists who are engaging with it are significant for the simple reason that "racism is not receding but progressing in the contemporary world" (Balibar and Wallerstein 9). Although race debates might feel anachronistic to some, we need to return to them, as Gilroy stresses, because the "conflict between 'race' and more inclusive models of humanity [is wrongly perceived to have] concluded long ago" (*Empire* 15). Of course, it must be acknowledged that discussing race in the Academy is potentially "unfashionable" or "anachronistic" precisely because of the ethnocultural origins of many critics. As Gilroy points out, "[t]he humanities are still dominated by particular liberal and, I would suggest, sometimes ethnocentric assumptions about what counts as knowledge" (*Race* 286). With this obstacle in mind, it is important to stress that racism exists within and without the walls of the Academy; Everett's novel puts the various manifestations of this new form under scrutiny in a manner conducive to conversation and education, regardless of place.

The phenomenon of postmodern racism has been defined by a variety of contemporary theorists. It is a systemic bigotry that poses as non-racist. Gordon and Newfield describe postmodern racism (their term is "Liberal racism") as "an antiracist attitude that coexists with support for racist outcomes" (737). Hardt and Negri usefully point out that postmodern racist theory "attacks modern anti-racism from the rear and actually co-opts and enlists its arguments" (191). Because of the continuities between modern anti-racist theory and postmodern racist theory, "the dominant ideology of our entire society can appear to be against racism" (192). Postmodern racism's conception of

culture is central to understanding this gesture and the distinction that can be made between postmodern racism and earlier forms of racism. As an example, the popular celebration of "multiculturalism" is in some ways consistent with postmodern racist thinking insofar as it essentializes culture while simultaneously allowing proponents of postmodern racism to situate themselves in opposition to more commonly acknowledged yet fundamentally archaic forms of racism which posited the sort of clear self versus other binaries that multiculturalism challenges. As Etienne Balibar writes in the first chapter of *Race, Nation, Class: Ambiguous Identities*, postmodern racism, which he calls "differentialist racism," is "a racism without races" (21). In other words, culture fills the role once played by biology in the consolidation of racial hierarchies. W.E.B. Du Bois' problematic for the twentieth century, "the color line," has transformed into what Gilroy calls in his Introduction to *Against Race*, "*culture lines*" (1; 1). More recently, in *After Empire*, Gilroy has expanded on this idea, arguing compellingly that:

> Hendrik Verwoerd, Samuel Huntington, Ariel Sharon, Slobodan
> Milosevic, Osama bin Laden, Condoleeza Rice, and a host of others have
> all contributed something to the belief that absolute culture rather than
> color is more likely to supply the organizing principle that underpins
> contemporary schemes of racial classification and division. (39)

Skin colour fixes an individual to a narrowly defined culture in the expression of postmodern racism. Thus the snobby book agent that Monk encounters at a party at the start of *Erasure* does not tell him that he *cannot* write intellectual books, but rather that he *should* "settle down to write the true, gritty real stories of black life" (2). Such cultural essentialism stems from a belief that, as Hardt and Negri explicate in their

discussion of "Imperial racism," "there are rigid limits to the flexibility and compatibility of cultures" and that it is therefore "futile and even dangerous according to imperial racist theory, to allow cultures to mix or insist that they do so: Serbs and Croats, Hutus and Tutsis, African-Americans and Korean-Americans must be kept separate" (192). For Hardt and Negri, this cultural essentialism exists alongside the argument that cultures are equal *in principle*—Imperial racist theory is based on "segregations, not hierarchy" (193). Any hierarchies that result from this presumably egalitarian principle are regarded as "effects," rather than "causes," of "social circumstances" (193). In this "market meritocracy of culture," some cultures are perceived as simply better able to reap economic rewards than others (193). The centrality of capitalism in the operation of postmodern racism demonstrates that an understanding of the phenomenon cannot be reduced entirely to a substitution of culture for biology.

I will re-visit the idea of cultural segregation in postmodern racism shortly. "Meritocracy" is a term that needs to be unpacked given that at first glance, one of the most challenging aspects of negotiating *Erasure* is the overwhelming (albeit fictitious) commercial success and the unsettling (very real) readability of the parody which Monk writes within *Erasure*—which my next chapter will examine in the context of the ineffectiveness of irony as a rhetorical strategy—originally titled *My Pafology* and later renamed *Fuck*. *Fuck* is Monk's dialectical reading and representation of "the African-American novel" and is born out of his frustration with the American literary market's insatiable appetite for stereotypical portraits of the ghetto lifestyle written by African-American novelists. In particular, Monk is reacting against the fictional bestseller *We's Lives in Da Ghetto*, written by Juanita Mae Jenkins, as well as "*Native Son* and *The Color*

Purple and *Amos and Andy*" (*Erasure* 61). The irony that Monk's satirical vehicle is itself a stereotypical rendering of the "authentic African-American experience" located in the ghetto is missed by readers within the novel; outside of *Fuck*, another irony emerges: The novel is met with the same condescending popular and critical approbation as *Ghetto*. It earns Monk an appearance on television, a movie deal, a Book Award, and a six hundred thousand dollar advance. The marketability of *Fuck* is in stark contrast to the rest of Monk's output as a novelist, with the exception of *Second Failure*, his "'realistic' novel . . . about a young black man who can't understand why his white-looking mother is ostracized by the black community" (61). As the scare quotes that Monk puts around "realistic" illustrate, *Second Failure* "was received nicely and sold rather well" because unlike, for a representative instance, his obscure re-working of a Greek myth, *The Persians*, it is, in the parlance of Yul and the market, "black enough" (61, 43). Being "black enough" connotes being in line with a particular version of African-American culture and simultaneously trading in the type difference that sells in the postmodern marketplace. As Hardt and Negri point out, "postmodern marketing recognizes the difference of each commodity and each segment of the population, fashioning its strategies accordingly. *Every difference is an opportunity*" (152, my emphasis). Monk's "difference," his race, makes his novels sites of potential opportunity for the expansion of capital. *Fuck* realizes this potential via its crude packaging of difference. Its protagonist Van Go is not an Everyman; he is, in the eyes of the novel's primary audience, every young African-American man in the ghetto.

    An emphasis on capitalism's endorsement and entrenchment of "difference" appears overdetermined because the "capitalist world-economy is a system built on the

endless accumulation of capital. One of the prime mechanisms that makes this possible is the commodification of everything" (Balibar and Wallerstein 31). Ideologically then, capitalism is associated with universalism rather than rigid outlines of difference. Accordingly, "particularisms of any kind whatsoever are said to be incompatible with the logic of a capitalist system, or at least an obstacle to its optimal operation" (Balibar and Wallerstein 31). Nevertheless, as Immanuel Wallerstein explores in the chapter "The Ideological Tensions of Capitalism" from *Race, Nation, Class*, there is a tension between the "continuing ideological legitimation of universalism in the modern world and the continuing reality (both material and ideological) of racism and sexism in this same world" (29). If capitalism "attacks nothing more violently than fixed boundaries," it also simultaneously inscribes and constantly re-inscribes new boundaries between cultures in the interest of meritocracy (Hardt and Negri 150). Meritocracy is the concept that theoretically resolves tensions that emerge in capitalism. In working reality, meritocracy *exacerbates* these tensions. As Wallerstein asserts, "the meritocratic system is politically one of the least stable systems" because:

> While privilege earned by inheritance has long been at least marginally acceptable to the oppressed on the basis of mystical or fatalistic beliefs in an eternal order, which belief at least offers them the comfort of certainty, privilege earned because one is possibly smarter and certainly better educated than someone else is extremely difficult to swallow, except by the few who are basically scrambling up the ladder. (32)

Moreover, it is this "political fragility that [allows] racism and sexism to enter the picture" (Balibar and Wallerstein 32). For racism and sexism "allow a far lower reward

to a major segment of the population than could ever be justified on the basis of merit" (34). Capital inheritance has been replaced by cultural inheritance. When Monk introduces himself on the first page, he appends to the list of his physical features the claim that "the society in which I live tells me I am black; that is my race" (1). These features also signify a narrowly-defined culture that his novels are expected to articulate. This form of discrimination uses meritocracy as its justification, obscuring the racist hierarchies that it proceeds from by—in the parlance of the talk show host Kenya Dunston in *Erasure*—getting Monk "some of that good money, chile" for his work (*Erasure* 54). The empty rhetoric of "universalism" and "meritocracy" is a tacit racial hierarchization. While postmodern racism may "reject discriminations on the basis of race or color," it also "upholds and defends systems that produce racializing effects, often in the name of some matter more 'urgent' than redressing racial subordination, such as rewarding 'merit' or enhancing economic competitiveness" (Gordon and Newfield 737). Under this logic, *Fuck* is not only the novel that Monk has the responsibility to write but in an economic sense, it is the only novel that Monk is allowed to write.

The implication that Monk has the *responsibility* to write *Fuck* returns me to the point about segregations predicated on cultural essentialism. In her 1990 essay "Postmodern Blackness" from the inaugural issue of *Postmodern Culture*, bell hooks expresses the same frustrations that occasion *Fuck*'s genesis when she asserts that despite the prevalence of postmodernism—a theoretical mode premised largely on critiques of essentialism—African-American writers are still confined to stereotypical roles as arbiters and vendors of "authentic" African-American culture. Theoretically, postmodernism should be redemptive for African-American writers because it

"challenges colonial imperialist paradigms of black identity which represent blackness one-dimensionally in ways that reinforce and sustain white supremacy" (hooks 11). In so doing, postmodernism enables a subversion of the stereotypes of "the authentic African-American experience" associated with the "'primitive'" (hooks 11). However, as hooks says, in practice, African-American writers are, by and large, still forced to conform to the "pre-existing pattern or stereotype," which she identifies as a marker of earlier imperial discourse, if they want to be published at all (hooks 11). Such is the rule of the market, which promotes the segregation of cultures and presumes that the audience for literature written by African-Americans desires only reiterations on that same theme—the ghetto story. As such, despite the apparent rejection and destabilization of colonial paradigms of African-American identity, those paradigms are still largely in place. They are now simply "effects" rather than "causes," in Hardt and Negri's terms, of the market system. The segregation of cultures inherent in these paradigms is reflected in hooks' discussion of her personal and professional experience with "the authentic African-American experience" in a passage that bears uncanny parallels to Monk's experience in *Erasure*:

> Using myself as an example, the creative writing I do which I consider to be most reflective of a postmodern oppositional stability—work that is abstract, fragmented, non-linear narrative—is constantly rejected by editors and publishers who tell me it does not conform to the type of writing they think black women should be doing or the type of writing they believe will sell. (13)

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Here hooks explicitly acknowledges the ways in which African-American artistic

production is limited by the market-oriented system of publishing. Since literature is less

marketable than, for example, music, African-American writers are forced to write in a

certain way to get their work published: Their work must "conform" to market

expectancy. hooks' differentiation between music and literature is slightly willful given

that African-American musicians are under many of the same pressures her perspicuous

argument about the expectations of African-American authors to perform a particular

cultural identity details. A decade after the publication of hooks' essay, Robert Fikes Jr.

makes much the same argument in his descriptively-titled, "How Major Book Review

Editors Stereotype Black Authors." For Fikes, "mainstream book review editors, as well

as book editors in the black press, reinforce the notion that blacks are experts on

themselves and on little else" (110). Complicating such a straightforward critique is the

idea of "differential inclusion" which Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari explicate in *A

Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (178). While there is officially no

racist system in place—African-American authors are actually *encouraged* to contribute

to the artistic world—there are nonetheless limits to the type of work African-Americans

can produce. Not coincidentally, this "type" of work is that which contributes to a

limiting public conception of African-Americans, one that equates "the African-

American experience" with straightforward narrative and a thematic engagement with so-

called authentic blackness, thereby excluding African-Americans from adopting a

popularly postmodern style that features experimental prose, non-linear narratives, and,

as Everett's novel suggests, any theme that tends toward the universal.

The "universal" is, admittedly, a problematic term. It can rarely be invoked without incurring accusations of blind utopianism. It is a term that is further problematic when considering the disjunction between cosmopolitanism's aim of realizing "conversation across differences," across cultures, and its theoretical permission of a pluralism that essentializes cultures and thus tends to cut off conversation (*Strangers* 146). In his recent exploration of the value of cosmopolitanism, *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics In a World of Strangers*, Kwame Anthony Appiah offers this hopeful slogan for the theory: "[U]niversality plus difference" (151). Although Appiah admits to some "ambivalence" in choosing cosmopolitanism as his "rubric" over "globalization" and "multiculturalism," he goes on to declare confidently that "cosmopolitanism isn't hard work; repudiating it is" (xx, xii). Carol A. Breckenridge et al. offer a more nuanced definition of cosmopolitanism in the seminal and collaborative work on the theory, *Cosmopolitanism*. While cosmopolitanism, by nature, resists a rigid definition, Breckenridge et al. gesture towards one when they state that "[t]ransdisciplinary knowledge, in the cosmopolitan cause, is more readily a translation process of culture's inbetweenness than a transcendent knowledge of what lies beyond difference" (6-7). Breckenridge et al. thus advocate a more tempered praise of universalism than Appiah insofar as they stress the importance of the domestic as a check on "thin claims to universalism" (9). Now a thin history of the idea: Cosmopolitanism has roots in Western thought dating back "at least to the Cynics of the fourth century BC, who first coined the expression cosmopolitan, 'citizen of the cosmos'" (*Strangers* xiv). Its current chic in the Academy speaks to Appiah's optimism about the difficulty of "repudiating it" (*Strangers* xiv). "Wayne Waxen's" fictitious review of *Fuck* which praises the novel's need to "be

taken on its own terms; *it's a black thang*," is part of the hard work of repudiating

cosmopolitanism. For, like Waxen, people respond to Monk's book *through* the sort of

difference celebrated by pluralism, and admitted by cosmopolitanism. Appiah is aware

of the challenge pluralism poses as one of the theoretical underpinnings of

cosmopolitanism. While he asserts that "one distinctively cosmopolitan commitment is

to *pluralism* . . . [wherein] we hope and expect that different people and different

societies will embody different values," he also recognizes the significant challenge

offered by "counter-cosmopolitanism" which asks, "how, in principle, [do we]

distinguish benign and malign forms of universalism?" (*Strangers* 145, 143). In other

words, how do we navigate the tension between the benign values of universalism and

the potential for prejudice embedded in pluralism?

Walter Benn Michaels' *Our America: Nativism, Modernism, and Pluralism* does

not answer this question directly, but it does usefully interrogate the "malign forms of

universalism" which developed in the context of twentieth century America and which

provide a compelling place to locate the crux of Everett's satire. These "forms" were

"malign" because, as Michaels broadly argues in his book, "the pluralizing of culture . . .

adapted [culture] to a racial purpose" (13). Michaels comments indirectly on the absent-

presence of Monk's relationship with an essentialized version of African-American

culture when he argues that "the commitment to pluralism requires . . . that the question

of who we are continue to be understood as prior to questions about what we do" (14-15).

Monk is understood as part of African-American culture ("it's a *black thang*") even

though he only tenuously acts in accordance with this narrowly-defined culture when he

satirically dresses the part of Stagg R. Leigh, the pseudonymous author of *Fuck*. With his

critique of the project of pluralism articulated in American literary modernism, Michaels provides a useful tonic to cosmopolitanism's often problematic endorsement of universalism. In Michaels' most recent work, *The Trouble With Diversity: How We Learned to Love Identity and Ignore Inequality*, he explores how economic inequality is obscured as a consequence of the overemphasis on identitarian equality. While Michaels' claims may seem counterintuitive and controversial, this is also the nature of their appeal. Gordon and Newfield strongly disagree with him. In response to Michaels' article out of which his *Our America* developed, "Race into Culture: A Critical Genealogy of Cultural Identity," they accuse him of practicing a "post-pluralism" that has "cultural pluralism [problematically] rest[ing] on an essentialist notion of racial identity" (753, 757). Michaels responds to this criticism in *Our America*, arguing that "in [his] view, there are no anti-essentialist accounts of identity" (181, fn 241). Notwithstanding their disagreement with the tenets of Michaels' project, Gordon and Newfield recognize that Michaels is an important figure because "he focuses attention on liberal racism, particularly the kind that appears in cultural pluralism" (738). His work, especially *Our America*, is also an important key to comprehending the critique of postmodern racism at the heart of *Erasure*.

Our America* explores the racism implicit in the cultural expectations that accrue with modernist literature about African-Americans and by African-Americans. Michaels locates the shift from biological to cultural conceptions of race in the United States in the founders of 1920s pluralist Nativism. For a representative example, Michaels cites Lothrop Stoddard, an early anti-immigration Nativist, who, in his 1927 book *Re-Forging America*, writes,

No theoretical questions of 'superiority' or 'inferiority' need be raised . . .

The really important point is that even though America (abstractly

considered) may not be nearly as good as we think it is, nevertheless, it is

ours . . . That is the meat of the matter, and when we discuss immigration

we had better stop theorizing about superiors and inferiors and get down to

the bedrock of *difference*. (65)

Under the logic of pluralism, Michaels argues, "one prefers one's own race not because it is superior but because it is one's own" (67). According to Michaels, this type of attitude helped to obscure racism (towards both immigrants and African-Americans) in society, making it appear to be on the decline; however, these newly fashionable references to "difference" really just perpetuated existing racial hierarchies. These hierarchies became harder to identify, and, consequently, harder to protest. Thus, as Michaels argues, not only does "Nativism's racial pluralism [make] one's difference from the other essential . . . . Nativism's cultural pluralism makes one's potential difference *from oneself* equally essential" (84, my emphasis). In this sense, the concept of culture "provides the technology through which the fact that you are who you are can be doubled by *responsibility to be who you are*" (84, my emphasis). This statement is an early form of the cultural essentialism that Hardt and Negri argue continues to exist—individuals can be both different from their fixed cultures and *responsible* for acting in accordance with the stereotypes of those cultures.

The claim that racial hierarchies are still with us brings me back to the epigraphs that framed my Introduction. The two epigraphs take a different stance on the utility of postmodern and postcolonial theory in regards to understanding "race." Whereas Appiah

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calls for a non-objective definition of race, Hardt and Negri suggest that objective accounts of race in Theory should not be so easily dismissed. In juxtaposing the two quotations, I am thus representing two very different roles posited for theorizing about race. My position on the importance of Theory in relation to race is closer to Hardt and Negri's and is best articulated by Brennan: "The symbolic mediations of intellectuals writing on mass culture . . . help[s] to set the conceptual frameworks and ethical outlooks of the struggles themselves" (*Cosmopolitanism* 309). My third chapter addresses this optimistically rendered potential for Theory by acknowledging where and how Theory can fail to provide useful vocabulary and ethical teaching. After interrogating the grounds upon which irony fails to resonate within *Erasure* in Chapter Two, Chapter Three will explore the relationship of Theory—specifically the famous Author-scriptor distinction that Roland Barthes makes in "The Death of the Author"—to postmodern notions of authorship and identity as well as what Theory can offer as an ideology for understanding the working reality of racism. I have already defined the rather amorphous term "cosmopolitanism" in the course of outlining Appiah's position in *Strangers*. Another shape-shifting term central to my project, "race," also requires a more concrete definition. Here I will borrow from Gilroy's *After Empire*, which uses "race" to denote "an impersonal, discursive arrangement, the brutal result of the raciological ordering of the world, not its cause . . . [and not] physical variation or differences commonsensically coded in, on, or around the body" (42). In this sense, Monk is "told" his race by "the society in which [he] lives" (*Erasure* 1). And since "[t]he logics of nature and culture have converged" (*Empire* 6), postmodern racist thinking renders race an experiential signifier, a cultural signpost, which Everett juxtaposes with Monk's actual experience

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throughout *Erasure*. The political efficacy of this juxtaposition is difficult to gauge. Everett is often simplistically conceived of as a politically disengaged writer, but *Erasure* suggests that this characterization needs to be re-evaluated, as the novel maps out the mechanisms, constraints, and ambiguities of postmodern racism in the capitalist world system. That there exists space to articulate resistance—to posit an alternative arrangement—within this system encourages us not to simply dismiss any discussion of race or racism as determinist. Rather, engaging with race at a theoretical level not only challenges, in particular, the easy acceptance of the media's framing of the NBA Dress Code "controversy" through the lens of a particular lifestyle associated with "the African-American Experience," but it also, more broadly, makes us usefully self-conscious about aspects central to the emerging rubric of cosmopolitanism. Like *Erasure*, discourse on race participates in a conversation that remains pressing.

Chapter Two: Blunt Parody: *Fuck Native Son*

The play's the thing/Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the King.
—William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*

Claudius stands up. The eponymous Prince in *Hamlet* interprets this reaction to the "mousetrap" of the play-within-the-play as a sign that the cheese is taken—the parody has uncovered the guilt of the focal decoder. Or has it? "Yes" say the theses of innumerable high school Shakespeare essays which would view the contemplative response of Hamlet as consistent with his indecisive nature. "No" say serious students of parody who would view Hamlet's paralyzing mental rigor as befitting the instability of the genre he attempts to use as a weapon. While it could be a guilty conscience that motivates Claudius, it could also be an unfavorable reaction, as King, to the portrayal of regicide. Like Hamlet, Monk employs a parody to uncover guilt. Monk aims to make the American reading public self-conscious about their large appetite for "authentic" portraits of "the African-American experience" associated with the ghetto lifestyle. This appetite is established in *Erasure* by the enormous popular success enjoyed by Jenkins' fictitious bestseller, *We's Lives in Da Ghetto*. Unlike in *Hamlet*, the success of Monk's parodic *Fuck* in *Erasure* is not open to critical debate. It fails. *Fuck* is met with the same blend of condescending critical approval and enormous commercial success as Jenkins' novel. The failure of Monk's parody and the success of Monk's novel are the teeth of Everett's satire.

The dust jacket of the 2001 Hyperion edition of the novel reflects the popular reception of the novel as satire. Three of the four fragments from reviews selected for the front and back covers of the novel, the *New York Times Book Review*, *Publishers Weekly*, and *Playboy*, refer to its "satire," "satiric brilliance," and "sharp satirical voice." Given

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that *Erasure* is packaged in this manner, the disproportionate amount of critical attention to the parody bears interrogating. In one of the only article-length academic explorations of *Erasure,* a 2005 *Callaloo* piece entitled "Race Under Erasure: For Percival Everett, 'a piece of fiction,'" Margaret Russet briefly acknowledges the parodic dimension of *Fuck,* noting that "in its plot outline, [*Fuck* is] a transparent updating of Richard Wright's *Native Son,* the foundational text in the construction of the category 'African-American novel'" (364). Although the parallel she draws is rather obvious, Russett is right. *Fuck* invokes *Native Son* more directly than the other targets of Monk's scorn— "*The Color Purple* and *Amos and Andy*" (*Erasure* 61). Monk makes no effort to conceal the superficial similarities between *Son* and *Fuck*: One year separates Wright's Bigger Thomas and Monk's Van Go in age, both are bastards who live under the shabby apartment roofs of their mothers in American ghettos, their lives of joking with friends and plotting crimes at local pool halls are interrupted when they find employment as domestic workers for wealthy families named Dalton—each comprised of a real estate tycoon father, blind mother, and rebellious teenage daughter. The significant textual iterations with a difference—Monk's Daltons are black not white; Bigger murders the Dalton daughter and allegedly rapes her whereas Van Go actually rapes her but does not kill her; *Son* ends with Bigger being sentenced to death after trial, while *Fuck* concludes with Van Go being captured on live television—are interesting as such, but move us only slightly closer to an appreciation of the complicated dynamics of Monk's parody.

What needs developing is Russett's unelaborated claim that *Fuck*'s "updating" of *Son* is "transparent." While we can recognize the parody, readers and critics in the fictive universe of *Erasure* cannot. Russett's claim thus conveniently ignores that the satire is

predicated on the failure of the novel-within-the-novel to be received *within the novel* with an awareness of the irony at play. Irony is well-trodden territory for literary theorists partly due to its proliferation in popular culture; therefore, I will not piggyback without purpose. My purpose is to locate Everett's satire in terms of what underlies the process of naturalizing and neutralizing the irony, parody, and satire of *Fuck* within the novel—the continuing existence of debilitating stereotypes about the works and mimetic responsibility of novelists who happen to be African-American. The form of Monk's parody activates these stereotypes. In form, *Fuck* resembles another of Monk's literary efforts, *Second Failure*, which he derisively refers to as a "'realistic novel'" (61). The "realistic novel" is a conflation of realism and stereotypes about African-American culture. The "realistic novel" is a synonym for the so-called African-American novel. *Native Son*, as Russett usefully points out, is "the foundational text in the construction of [this] category" (364). In Linda Hutcheon's terminology, Monk's parody "use[s] [the backgrounded text] as [a] standard by which to place the contemporary under scrutiny" (*Parody* 57). Accordingly, Everett's satire demands that critics do not stop at a formal comparison of *Fuck* and *Native Son*, but that they contrast the popular critical reception of the two. In the process what emerges is a tension between the anomalous and representative aspects of *Son*: *Erasure* clouds *Son*'s originary status by exploring how Wright's text has been transformed into *the* stereotype of "the African-American novel."

I am aware of the danger of engaging too specifically with *Son*. If Wright's novel—or, more precisely, the critical legacy of his novel—is under attack, providing an extended reading of its reception potentially falls into a major trap set by parody: Replacing destabilizing jokes with serious readings. A juxtaposition of the reception of

Son with that of *Fuck*, however, is important because Everett uses *Son* and its protagonist Thomas as synecdoches for an entire genre under attack: "The African-American novel." Jonathan Culler's claim that "genre determines expectations" is a succinct statement of the logic driving my chapter (13). Culler's claim will also be inverted to show how expectations, in the form of stereotypes, play into genre construction. Hutcheon's work on parody does not sufficiently account for genre; nevertheless, it provides a way into understanding how the ironic, parodic, and satirical elements of *Fuck* are muted within the novel by the suggestion that Monk, unlike Wright, writes into an already existing position defined by an element that Homi K. Bhabha identifies as "central to the stereotype," "ambivalence" (95). In order to understand how ambivalence's blunting of the ironic, parodic, and satirical edges of *Fuck* within the novel complicate straightforward definitions of *Erasure* as "parody" (Russett) and "satire" (book jacket dialogue), I will problematize Hutcheon's definition of parody in the context of postmodern racism and genre construction.

The moment where postmodern racism and genre construction intersect most explicitly in *Erasure* occurs when Monk visits the bookstore "Border's" and is first exposed to Jenkins' novel. Browsing the store, Monk finds his work in neither the "Literature" nor "Contemporary Fiction" sections (28). Instead, to Monk's considerable indignation, four of his novels are listed under "African American Studies" (28). Monk critiques the organizational logic of a place that he derides as "the WalMart of books" on economic grounds: "That fucking store was taking food from my table" (28). But Everett's critique of the dubious cataloguing of Monk's work extends beyond the walls of the monolithic bookstore when he comments that "the only thing ostensibly African

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American was my jacket photograph" (28). Here Everett pinpoints a defining feature of

the construction of the genre of "the African-American novel": The imbrication of

authorial and textual identity. Waxen's fictitious review of *Fuck* emphasizes this generic

feature in aligning the realism of the protagonist with the experiential paradigm of the

author through effusive diction: "The novel is so *honest*, so raw, so down-and-dirty-

gritty, so *real*, that talk of objectivity is out of place" (*Erasure* 260, my emphasis).

Implicit in Waxen's review is a conflation of the subjectivity of the African-American

author and the "honesty" and "reality" of the representation of the protagonist. Monk's

parody cannot contend with the expectations which accrue about literature written by

African-Americans as a result of the continuing publication of books like *Ghetto*

precisely because it too is absorbed as part of this genre.

Given that Monk's intentions can be clearly distinguished from those of Jenkins,

this chapter will not rest on such a straightforward claim. Rather, *Fuck* needs to be

explored in the context of studies about parody as a genre in its own right. Hutcheon

gives voice to a formalist definition of parody in *A Theory of Parody: The Teachings of

Twentieth-Century Art Forms*. For Hutcheon, the formalist aspect is parody's "ironic

playing with multiple conventions" (*Parody* 7). The "target" of parody can be

simultaneously conventions and particular texts (*Parody* 13). *Fuck* plays, in this bi-

directional fashion, with *Native Son* and the conventions of the "realistic novel."

Hutcheon helpfully nuances the definition of parody by not limiting it to a parasitic or

comic invocation of a model. A parody can take a reverent or neutral stance towards its

model, as "[t]he parodied text today is often not at all under attack" (*Parody* 103).

Erasure suggests a more antagonistic relationship between parody and parodied by

indirectly commenting on the target text in one of Monk's surreal "notes-for-a-novel sections" (*Erasure* 39). Monk writes a fictional dialogue in which D.W. Griffith expresses his admiration for Wright's "book"—which the parody identifies as *Native Son*—and Wright responds, "thank you" (*Erasure* 193). On the surface, the fantastic element of this encounter foregrounds its humour. Since readers of *Erasure* have become somewhat de-sensitized to the fantastic due to the other surreal exchanges in the novel though, what emerges simultaneously is something more serious: An implication that Griffith commends Wright because the filmmaker recognizes continuity between the essentializing of African-American identity in *Birth of a Nation* and Wright's *Son*. An antagonistic dynamic between the original text and the parody is emphasized in most conventional definitions of parody, and Hutcheon accommodates such a relationship by acknowledging that "'critical ridicule' remains the most commonly cited purpose of parody" (*Parody* 51). Notwithstanding this purported purpose of parody, Hutcheon convincingly valorizes the form as a "serious" one, even "though its bite is still achieved through ridicule" (*Parody* 51).

The blind spot in Hutcheon's theory emerges at the pragmatic level. Hutcheon defines parody as "repetition with critical difference" (*Parody* 7). She acknowledges that "ambivalence" arises from the paradox central to this definition, that of repetition (conservative) and difference (revolutionary) (*Parody* 77). Hutcheon does not, however, interrogate the consequences of this ambivalence. Thus her next step, the pragmatic granting the reader the responsibility to "decode [the work] *as parody* in order for the intention to be fully realized," overlooks the potential interference of genre expectations and postcolonial ambivalence in this process of "decoding" (*Parody* 23). Postcolonial

ambivalence and the ambivalence generated by parody are parallel. As Robert J.C. Young succinctly states in *Colonial Desire*: *Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race*, "ambivalence is a key word for Bhabha, which he takes from psychoanalysis where it was first developed to describe a continual fluctuation between wanting one thing and its opposite" (161). The conservative repetition of parody aligns with the anxious repetition of the colonizer. With *Fuck*, the opposing "difference"—the serious, critical dimension of the parody—disappears, replaced by a stereotype of "the African-American novel" as a genre, which obscures the critical repetition of *Native Son* and compresses the distance between the two texts at the expense of the functioning of the parody. As the early reception of *Native Son* shows, Wright did not have the same problem in regards to being taken seriously.

Irving Howe's oft-quoted remark from his 1963 essay, "Black Boys and Native Sons," is a good, albeit contentious, indication of how seriously Wright was taken. For Howe, "the day *Native Son* appeared, American culture was changed forever" (36). This sweeping assessment offers an ideal starting point for comparing the reception of *Native Son* with *Fuck* because while it touches on the most general of parallels—authoring socio-cultural transformation—in the intentions of Wright and Monk, it elides a significant aspect about Wright's novel: It was heavily censored by publishers at the request of the Book-of-the-Month Club. "Change" thus takes on a new connotation. The Book-of-the-Month Club's acceptance of *Son* was contingent on Wright's willingness to alter certain plot details and tone down explicit sexual language. Most famously, given the lacuna that is signaled later in the novel when the District Attorney at Bigger's trial refers to "that dirty trick you and your friend pulled off in the Regal Theatre," Wright

was told to change a scene where Bigger and his friend Jack masturbate in a movie theatre, which the editor claimed "was a bit on the raw side" (*Early* 731, 912). By contrast, *Fuck* is praised by Waxen because it is "so raw" (*Erasure* 260). The hyperbolic celebration of elements that would have been censored had they been in *Son*, for instance the chapter "Fibe" scene where Van Go has sex with a young girl, is unsettling (*Erasure* 92). It articulates the operating strategy of postmodern racism: The acceptance of lewdness appears anti-racist, but this obscures the racist outcome that African-American authors are pigeonholed to Wright novels. *Fuck* is accepted in all its profane glory. Like Jenkins' *Ghetto*, it is "offensive, poorly written, racist, and mindless" in Monk's estimation (*Erasure* 261). As *Erasure* implies, anything else written by African-Americans would be pushed to the margins of commercial success.

The point about Wright's intentions that Howe's quote invokes is an important one is light of the censorship of *Son*. Wright openly declared his intentions in an essay, "How Bigger Was Born," which was initially intended to be used as an introduction to a special "Author's Edition" of *Native Son*, "but when sales slowed, [Harper and Brothers] put off the special edition and issued the essay in pamphlet form" (Rampersad 487). Wright wanted to write a book that, unlike his first publication, a volume of short stories entitled *Uncle Tom's Children*, "bankers' daughters could read and [not] weep over and feel good about" ("Bigger" 454). Despite the censorship to which the novel was subjected, Wright was successful in this aim, as demonstrated by Arnold Rampersad's unatrributed anecdote about sales of *Son* declining "'once prospective buyers understood that *Son* was not an entertaining detective story, as some had supposed, but a serious, even harrowing, text'" (Rampersad xxi). In other words, *Son* retains the "harrowing"

effect that Wright wanted. Wright wrote "How Bigger Was Born" in direct response to the dismissive reviews of *Son* by Burton Rascoe in *American Mercury* and David L. Cohn in *Atlantic Monthly* (Reilly xvii). Although the two reviews are particularly inflammatory, their premise that African-Americans are a "problem" to which Wright contributes illustrates the contentiousness of Howe's characterization of the immediate effect of *Son*. Rascoe scoffs at his own casually stated contention "that whites have given the Negroes a dirty deal" by noting that "whites have given themselves a dirty deal also" (90). Continuing along this specious line of argument, Rascoe says Bigger is equal to a "small-scale Hitler. Or a Negro Stalin or Mussolini" (90). Cohn is no more rigorous in his dismissal of *Son*: "Justice or no justice, the whites of America simply will not grant to Negroes at this time those things that Mr. Wright demands. The Negro problem in America is actually insoluble" (93). It would be an easy solution to the problematic perspectives voiced in the two reviews for me to declare the reviewers "racist" and not engage with them too seriously, but such a move overlooks that the general premise of the reviews, however exaggerated, is common in the immediate reception of the protagonist of *Son*: Bigger stands in for African-American people as a whole. Waxen's discussion of *Fuck* in *Erasure* illustrates that this conflation of a character and an entire race has mutated into a conflation of a genre of novel and an entire race. Waxen argues that "[*Fuck*] must be taken on its own terms; *it's a black thang*" (*Erasure* 260). The chief critical debate concerning verisimilitude in the immediate wake of *Son*'s publication takes an identical tack insofar as the barometer of realism is a "black thang." Bigger, for better or worse, is treated as the embodiment of a single "African-American experience." In a *New Masses* article, "The Meaning of Bigger Thomas," published the same year as

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Son, Samuel Sillen summarized the two main critical positions on verisimilitude in the novel. Either Bigger is taken as "a mean, contemptible, ignorant, and brutish killer," a "'bad nigger,'" or he is "treated as a poor victim of circumstance" (83). In both readings, Bigger the character is discussed as if he accurately represents the condition and characteristics of impoverished African-Americans in the country's urban ghettoes. With *Fuck*, there are no opposing poles because realism is not scrutinized—it is taken as a given of "the African-American novel" as a genre.

The seemingly more elastic grounds of the immediate critical debate about *Son*, whether Bigger is a "true" symbol of the African-American people or "hard . . . to accept . . . as representative of his race" (Wallace 61), demonstrates that Bigger's reception reflects Bhabha's notion of "stereotypical racial discourse" as a "four-term strategy": "[M]etaphor," "metonymy," "narcissism," and "aggression" (Bhabha 111). For Bhabha, the stereotype is located in Lacan's "Imaginary" order, where our desires realize a one-to-one relationship with the "Real" world (Bhabha 110; Jameson 94). The use of psychoanalytical theory is arguably Bhabha's most significant contribution to the theoretical understanding of colonial discourse and his reliance on the concepts provided by psychoanalysis also constitutes his biggest shortcoming. For my purposes, Bhabha's challenge to the "totalizing aspect of [Edward] Said's argument in *Orientalism*" through "add[ing] psychoanalysis to Said's Foucauldian analysis" is secondary to a more general appreciation of Bhabha's analysis of colonial subjectivity through the lens of psychoanalysis (Young 161). Through this lens, Lacan's "Real" is marked by a "profound heterogeneity" (Jameson 91). In colonial discourse, Bhabha posits that the desires of the colonizer in regards to fixing an "'identity'" for the colonized subject "play

out . . . in the face and space of the disruption and threat from the heterogeneity of other positions" (110). "Heterogeneity" is neutralized by the one-to-one relationship the colonizer draws between the image of identity—the stereotype—and the "Real"-ity. This image resonates in the "Symbolic" order as well, since "to speak of the Imaginary independently of the Symbolic is to perpetuate the illusion that we could have a relatively pure experience of either" (Jameson 91). These complex dynamics underlie the immediate critical reception of *Son* insofar as the notion that Bigger is frequently discussed through the lens of the stereotype, the "bad nigger," is not independent of his implicit connection to a fundamental African-American identity, whether convincing or not. In other words, even for those critics who do not take Bigger seriously as a representation of his race, the synecdochal element of Bigger overrules any sense of his anomaly as a character.

Waxen's review practices a similar strategy of treating anomaly as synecdoche. Here the qualities that Wright's reviewers emphasized in Bigger contsruct a notion of African-American as a culture and as a genre. After noting in the preceding paragraph that Van Go is "on the verge of becoming a criminal," Waxen punctuates his review with the endorsement that "*Fuck* is a must read for every sensitive person who has ever seen *these people* on the street and asked, "*What's up with him?*" (*Erasure* 260, my emphasis). Van Go shifts from an anomalous criminal to a portrait of a "people." The reception of the protagonists of *Fuck* and *Son* is identical in terms of Bhabha's dynamics of the stereotype; the position which *Fuck* and *Son* occupy as novels contrasts sharply.

This contrast has everything to do with context. *Son* reflects, in Arnold Rampersad's estimation, "the major goal of [Wright's] writing—the exposure of the

starkest realities of American life where race was concerned" (xv). Identifying the general intent of an author's writing without sounding superficial is virtually impossible. What Rampersad's characterization usefully touches upon, however, is the *originality* of Wright's novel. In "Richard Wright: The Hammer and the Nail," Louis Menand makes the familiar move of locating Wright in the American naturalist school associated with writers like John Dos Passos, Sinclair Lewis, and John Steinbeck, and then expands on Rampersad's characterization by noting that Wright "add[ed] race to [naturalism's] list of subject matter . . . he made it part of the naturalist novel's critique of life in the capitalist era" (89). In so doing, Wright wrote an atypical novel. Menand's claim that "[n]obody in America had ever before told a story like [*Son*] and had it published" emphasizes the originality of *Son* (77). That Wright is fitted in a literary school rather than the genre of "the African-American novel" is illustrated by a book published in the same year as *Son* with which Wright's novel is most frequently compared in contemporaneous reviews: Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*.

The repeated comparisons of *Son* to *Grapes of Wrath* reinforce the point that Wright's novel is not fixed in a dubious genre-position. By contrast, the reception of *Fuck* fixes the novel in such a position because the book to which the parody is most often compared is ironically one of its targets— *We's Lives in Da Ghetto*. This comparison is done indirectly through the shared critical configuration of the novels as "authentic" and "exotic" representations of African-American culture. In the same breath, the reviewer of Jenkins' novel praises its "*haunting verisimilitude*" and the author's ability to paint the ghetto "*in all its exotic wonder*" (*Erasure* 40). And, similarly, Waxen calls the novel "honest" and declares that addressing the book with

"talk of objectivity . . . would be the same as comparing the medicine beliefs of Amazon Indians to our advanced biomedical science" (260). Both reactions are parodies of the tendency to exoticize African-American novels in the United States; however, importantly, this stereotype is a direct rendering of the generic expectations to which the novel is constrained in order to receive critical and commercial approval. This fixing of *Fuck* through generic expectations is more pronounced in the context of the review of one of his earlier-published novels. The reviewer praises Monk's novel for its characters, language, and plot, but ultimately criticizes it because *"one is lost to understand what this reworking of Aeschylus'* The Persians *has to do with the African American experience"* (2). The frustration that provides Monk the impetus for writing the parody, *Fuck*, is fundamentally political: Although "the hard, *gritty* truth of the matter is that [he] hardly ever think[s] about race," he is not permitted to define either his own "culture," his own "experience," or himself artistically; instead, he is interpreted only as part of *the* African-American culture, and is thus expected to write about experiences he has never actually had (2).

The issue of expectations in regards to Wright's reception is more ambiguous. Whether Wright had any other choice than to, in Menand's terms, "add race to [naturalism's] list of subject matter" (89) is speculative, and perhaps worth exploring elsewhere. For my purposes, the recurrence of the words "force" and "powerful" in the reviews of *Son* signal that Wright's novel was seen to possess an effect more important than the cause. *Son* was taken to be an original, and this status would not let the text be easily marked by a stereotype of "the African-American novel." The long critical debate about the relative cultural significance of *Son* which engaged, most notably, James

Baldwin, Ralph Ellison, and Irving Howe, will not be re-capitulated here. One thing that remains in the rhetorical aftermath of the discussion is a sense of the originality of *Son*. Baldwin construes this negatively in "Many Thousand Gone," declaring that "[s]uch a book [*Native Son*], we felt with pride, could never have been written before—which was true. Nor could it be written today" (99). Howe's much different take on the transformative effect of *Son*, "the day *Native Son* appeared, American culture was changed forever," stresses the importance of Wright's novel in terms of force (36). Even two of the biggest detractors of *Son*'s effects, Ellison and Baldwin, concede Wright's originality. In "The World and the Jug," Ellison comprehensively rejects Howe's points about the significance of *Son* from "Black Boys and Native Sons," while acknowledging Wright's novel as a first. Ellison also makes the same distinction as this chapter between Bigger and *Son* in the reception of the novel, as "[Ellison] rejected Bigger Thomas as any final image of Negro personality" but could "recognize *Native Son* as an achievement . . . and [was] happy for the impact [Wright] had made upon our apathy" (118).

Erasure complicates the sense of *Son* as an original by illustrating that Wright's text has been transformed into the genre of "the African-American novel." The ghetto provides the setting for *Son*; the ghetto story is set up in *Erasure* as the only "authentic" tale of African-American culture. People from the ghetto are considered, as movie producer Wiley Morgenstein states, "the real people" (217). And this pressure to be a "real" African-American, this, in Walter Benn Michaels' terms, "responsibility to be who you are," occasions Monk's frustrated and ironic authoring of *Fuck* (*America* 84). Such a responsibility is a form of doubling because individuals can be both different from their fixed cultures and *responsible* for acting in accordance with the stereotypes of those

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cultures. Monk's agent, Yul, emphasizes that the pressure for Monk to be responsible is applied by a publishing industry that ties the representation of stereotypes to commercial viability. Yul sums up a publisher's rejection of Monk's latest effort as "[t]he line is, you're not black enough" (*Erasure* 43). The subtext of the rejection is that Monk's "blackness" does not come across in his novels, and therefore he is not commercially successful. In the same exchange, *We's Lives in Da Ghetto* is set up as the example of what publishers and the American reading public want: "Look at that Juanita Mae Jenkins book. It sold like crazy" (43). Everett plays with Sterling Brown's claim that "why even one trip to Harlem will reveal the secret of [the African-American's] mystery" when Jenkins discusses her novel on Kenya Dunston's daytime talk show (a distinct parody of *Oprah*) (Brown 78). Jenkins says that her novel "comes from" one "visit" she made "[w]hen [she] was twelve" to "relatives in Harlem for a couple of days" (53). This knowledge of "our people" that Dunston shares is couched in terms of a stereotype of the ghetto lifestyle (53). In Bhabha's terms, the "pleasure-value" of the "dark" knowledge provided by the racial stereotype is actually a "withdrawal in order to know nothing of the external world" (117). Brown's claim for the desirability of stereotypes is incommensurate with Rampersad's earlier cited anecdote about the sales figures of *Son* dropping rapidly once readers recognized that the text was not a part of the detective genre, but a whole new genre. Readers saw *Son* as the type of "knowledge" from which to "withdraw." The postmodern audience, by contrast, has an insatiable appetite for the stark portraits painted in stereotypes of the ghetto. Waxen situates the appeal of *Fuck* in terms of its resemblance to "the evening news" (260). He then, with unintentional irony, goes on to say, "for this glimpse of the hood existence we owe the author a tremendous

debt" (260). The "debt," as Monk learns, is an enormous financial one. The price that Monk pays is that *Fuck* is received as "more like the evening news" than the targets of his parody, *Son* and *We's Lives in Da Ghetto*.

To understand the theoretical grounds that underlie the muting of irony in *Fuck*, the intersection of Bhabha's conception about the process of fixing a stereotype and Hutcheon's ideas about the dynamics of parody must be explored. Bhabha and Hutcheon avoid the easy appeal of normative judgments in their theories of the stereotype and parody in order to foreground the complicated processes at work in each. Hutcheon "chang[es] the focus attention from aesthetic merit . . . to instructional value" in order to explore the "function of parody in modern art" (*Parody* 3). Bhabha's move is more startling insofar, as rather than "judg[ing] the stereotyped image on the basis of a prior political normativity," he analyzes the determinate fetishism of the colonizer from within (Mostern 262). Producing parody and stereotyping each generate ambivalence. The interaction between the conservative resonance of "repetition" and the revolutionary resonance of "difference" in parody renders the form's function ambivalent (*Parody* 77). The "anxious repetition" of the stereotype fixes the colonized in an ambivalent position in colonial discourse (Bhabha 95). In the reception of parody there is a similar fixing, wherein the reader negotiates the ambivalence. Just as the stereotype "is defined by its placement in a determinate position within the dominant person's network of possible desires" (Mostern 262), the "pragmatic ethos [of parody can] be neutralized by the [decoder's] refusal or inability to share the necessary mutual code" (*Parody* 94). The desires of the parodist, like those of the colonized subject, are contained within a shared network constructed by the desires of the decoder—colonizer and reader. Monk's agent,

Yul, points to a space outside of this network through his initial response that he "admires the parody," but does not think that publishers will share his opinion (*Erasure* 132). Monk acknowledges the inhibiting network when he responds to Yul's question about "qualifying" the manuscript as a parody by declaring, "*if* they can't see it's a parody, fuck them" (132, my emphasis). What Monk fails to realize is that if readers cannot see that it's a parody, *Fuck* cannot, as he later states, "do the work [he] wants it to do"—to express his "being sick" of "the shit that's published" (212, 132).

Fuck is read straightforwardly as an expression of "the shit that's published" because the chief rhetorical device of parody, irony, eludes the encoder's attempts to stabilize meaning. This characterization of irony marks a departure from Wayne Booth's influential 1974 book on the subject, *A Rhetoric of Irony*. Booth calls the examples of irony that he catalogues "*stable* or fixed, in the sense that once a reconstruction of meaning has been made, the reader is not then invited to undermine it" (6). For Booth, "the most obvious stylistic clues" that outline how meaning is to be reconstructed "is found in parody" (71). Irony is central to Hutcheon's definition of parody as "a form of imitation . . . characterized by ironic inversion" (*Parody* 6). The problem with Booth's definition of irony in relation to parody is that it implies that readers will detect something other than the surface meaning. Monk embeds many "obvious clues" in *Fuck* that invite the reader to read the work as an ironic comment that reflects Monk's being fed up with the commercial success of books he deems racist like Jenkins' *We's Lives in Da Ghetto*. He even gives his protagonist, Van Go, the same surname as Jenkins. But these clues, like the parody of *Native Son*, are ignored. The novel is met with what Monk

calls "nonironic acceptance"—a phrase which emphasizes the significance of the decoder to the classification of irony (153).

More recent accounts of irony, such as Simon Gaunt's *Troubadors and Irony*, also cannot adequately account for the muting of Monk's parody. Gaunt asserts that one of the connections between medieval and modern irony regards intention, as "the only way to be sure that a statement was intended ironically is to have a detailed knowledge of the personal, linguistic, cultural and social references of the speaker *and* his audience" (25). As with stable irony, it is dubious to assume that such reconstruction is possible without recourse to stereotyping. Monk's general statement about his mother's increasing incoherence, "sharing a language does not mean that you share the rules governing the use of that language," acts as a comment on the shortcomings of Gaunt's reading of irony (*Erasure* 32). Even in a community as intimate as a single family, "no matter what is said, something else is meant" (32). Hutcheon explores such slipperiness in the context of irony in *Irony's Edge: The Theory and Politics of Irony*. As the title indicates, Hutcheon posits that "unlike metaphor or allegory, which demand . . . supplementing of meaning, irony has an evaluative edge and manages to provoke emotional responses in those who 'get' it and those who don't" (2). In refusing his agent's request to qualify *Fuck* as ironic, Monk submits to the slipperiness of irony, which is manifest when the American reading public do not "'get' it." We in the world outside of the text "get" the parody, and *Fuck* remains an enjoyable read. Everett responds to the potential that such enjoyment coincides with *Fuck*'s parodic function through a strategy of avoidance. In an interview with London's *The Observer*, Everett confesses, "I can't even bear to read from

that section because, *despite all my efforts to the contrary*, it works in some weird way"

(O'Hagan par. 8, my emphasis).

Everett's notion of working against the "edge" of irony can be read into Monk's

digressions about woodworking and fishing in the novel. These digressions act as

analogies for the functioning of parody because they stress the significance of working

within a structure. The problem with *Fuck* is that the structure is seen narrowly as "the

African-American novel." Monk's account of people's preference for the "heartwood" of

a tree is aligned with his meditation on the desire of trout for the "smooth curves of

nature" insofar as both are based on the superiority of organic structures (13, 138).

Everett's apparent attempt to mask the enjoyable elements of the parody fails because

irony can be read straightforwardly as entertaining. What is more problematic is the

grounds upon which the parody "works."

Market dynamics complicate most postmodern accounts of irony. Monk signals

this complication by confessing, "call it expediently located irony . . . but I was keeping

the money" (260). Not only does the notion that irony can be "located" complicate the

device's stability, but also its "location" is connected to a market that rewards nonironic

representation. Hutcheon's edict that "[i]n parodically encoding a text, producers must

assume both a shared cultural and linguistic set of codes," ignores the operation of the

market which divides cultures (*Parody* 95). "Sharing" is subsumed by a market

exchange which, according to bell hooks in "Postmodern Blackness," is defined by an

audience for African-American literature that is presumed to desire only reiterations of a

"pre-existing pattern or stereotype" (11). Accordingly, Monk responds to the financially

lucrative reception of *Fuck* by musing that he "would not be economically oppressed

because of writing a book that fell in line with the very books [he] deemed racist" (*Erasure* 212). He finds this irony "beautiful" (212). The ugly side of this irony is the reliance on stereotypes in the fixed reception of African-American novels and novelists which precludes the functioning of irony. As Monk says in the last sentence of the paper that he delivers on Barthes' *S/Z*, "a reiteration of the obvious is never wasted on the oblivious" (17).

Not only does this quotation comment on the obliviousness of the audience of *Fuck* which "wastes" the novel's parodic overtones, but the invocation of Barthes also signals an adjoining bulwark against the operation of irony in *Fuck* which is consistent with the role of stereotype—the importance of the context of an utterance in shaping its intended meaning. Intention is a notoriously contentious arena in literary theory. Culler cites Northrop Frye's complaint in *Anatomy of Criticism* which responds to the tendency "to take the elucidation of the text's intention as the goal of literary studies," which Frye calls a "'Little Jack Horner view of criticism [wherein] the critic, like Little Jack Horner, complacently pulls [the 'beauties or effects' stuffed in the work by the author] out one by one, saying, 'O what a good boy am I'" (Culler 155). Nevertheless, irony demands that I at least partly visit the site of a discussion which Gaunt rightfully calls "one of the thorniest problems in modern critical theory": "If structuralists stressed the importance of context in any interpretation of a literary text, deconstruction implicitly denies the need to have a knowledge of the text's frame of reference" (25). Hutcheon aligns herself with a structuralist paradigm in regards to parody insofar as for her, "[t]exts do not generate anything until they are perceived and interpreted" (*Parody* 23). As such, a parody could not function "without the implied existence of a reader" because the parodic text would

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be a "collection of black marks on white pages" (*Parody* 23). Monk makes a nearly identical comment at the opening of the chapter in which he sits down to write *Fuck*. His discussion of literal "space breaks between paragraphs of texts, between lines of text, sentences or words of the text" culminates in an implicit attribution of the comprehensibility of linear narrative to the existence of a reader who always requires orientation (52). At first glance, this meditation may give us cause to revisit the flaws associated with Hutcheon's dependence on an encoder to establish a text's meaning; however, there are numerous passages in *Erasure* which also point to the signifying responsibility of the internal logic of the text. In the preceding chapter to the one cited above, Monk expresses surprise that "a sentence is ever understood" given that it is composed of "[m]ere sounds strung together by some agent attempting to mean some thing, but the meaning need not and does not confine itself to that intention" (44). As the failure of *Fuck*'s parodic dimension demonstrates, the decoder *can* confine the intention.

Although Monk vacillates between structuralist and deconstructionist perspectives on authorial intention, he does not endorse one at the expense of the other; rather, Monk frequently returns to the notion that a violation of form activates the rules of form. This notion is an excellent summary of the fate of *Fuck*: Monk's attempt to "violate" the so-called African-American novel activates "the rules" ascribed to this genre. The statement also has resonance with Hutcheon's structuralist reading of parody's paradox insofar as the transgressive "difference" of parody is fundamentally conservative, activated as it is through formal rules that demand "repetition." The thesis of the undergraduate paper on James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* which Monk shares with his father at the dinner table aligns subversion and conformity with a deconstructionist paradigm. For Monk, *Wake*

"depends on the currency of conventional narrative for its experimental validity" (185). Earlier on in *Erasure*, Monk makes a similar claim about his own experimental fiction which reflects "[his] instinct to defy form" with the underlying "irony" that "[he] very much sought in defying it to affirm it" (139). The "irony" emerges from a deconstructionist perspective at a purely textual level.

Monk's attempt to "defy" the form of "the African-American novel" is frustrated by an American reading public that seek to "affirm" the novel with recourse to a stereotype about the form. In his most frank assessment of *Fuck*, Monk expresses his dissatisfaction with the form of the "parody" because "so easy had it been to construct that [he] found it difficult to take it seriously even as that" (160). In my assessment of the force of Everett's satire, I have located the "ease" of Monk's "construction" in the erasure of particular intertextuality by constraining popular and commercial expectations for "the African-American novel." Wright's *Son* played an influential role in establishing these constraining expectations, as Everett suggests. Menand's statement that *Son* "casts a long shadow" is thus illuminating (78). What Menand de-emphasizes too casually when he goes on to claim that "if we consider *Native Son* primarily in the company of works by other blacks artists, we'll miss what Wright was up to, and why he is such a remarkable figure," is this: It is partly *because* of "what Wright was up to" that other, more recently published "remarkable figures," are seen "primarily in the company of works by other black artists" (78). Everett is one such figure and in contrasting the reception history of *Fuck* and its target text, *Son*, he provides an insightful look at the limitations of our theoretical understanding of irony in light of the pervasiveness of postmodern racism.

Chapter Three: The Life of "the African-American Author": Everett and Barthes

> 'I really don't think that after Foucault,' said the bearded guy loudly, as if addressing a conference, 'you can think that the body even *exists*, given the fragmented and mediated perceptions we have of it, I mean we don't have a self any more—'
> 'Wait a minute,' said the pale woman. 'My body doesn't exist?'
> 'We can no longer afford to think so.' And he downed his beer conclusively. The woman was touching his arm. 'Wow.' She was feeling the bones and muscle, twisting her wrist under her sleeve. 'Cool.'
> 'Jesus fuck,' said James.
> He stood up and stood on the bearded grad student's foot. 'Oh, I'm sorry,' said James, 'did that hurt?'
> 'It's okay,' muttered the guy, hopping.
> 'It's funny that it hurts, doesn't it? I mean considering—'
>
> —Russell Smith, *Noise*

Considering that Everett writes from within the Academy, I would be remiss not to acknowledge that his position as an English professor at the University of Southern California specializing in Literary Theory and Creative Writing is pertinent to a discussion of his fiction, especially *Erasure*. These two sides of his professional life also intersect in Everett's other major satirical work, *Glyph*. Everett borrows his title from typography as well as the published version of the 1977 exchange between John Searle and Jacques Derrida concerning theories of authorial intention. *Glyph*, as Margaret Russett puts it, "is a satire of poststructuralism as told by a baby genius in mock-academese, complete with pompous footnotes" (363). It includes a hilarious cameo by Roland Barthes, who is so self-absorbed in spontaneous linguistic analysis that he cannot, for instance, answer a simple question about what to drink with dinner or function at the market. Barthesian theory figures prominently in the existing critical body on Everett. Russett broadly but persuasively characterizes Everett's disparate *oeuvre* as "perform[ing] a *collective* experiment on the second-order identities called 'voice' or the 'author-function'" (363). While Russett argues that Everett has been "ostentatiously

absent from the spaces he creates," it is Everett's presence in the academic paper delivered by Monk that superficially invites reading *Erasure* in the context of Barthes (363). Monk's parody of Barthes' *S/Z*, entitled "F/V: a novel excerpt" is, almost verbatim, a copy of Everett's own paper, published in 1999 in *Callaloo*, "F/V: Placing the Experimental Novel." Although the paper, in both contexts, "might easily be classified as parody of its *subject text*" according to Everett, its consistencies with *S/Z* make it an astute theoretical approach to Barthes' text ("F/V" 18). It is astute because given the accretive and self-contained narrative logic of *S/Z*, a "parody" is the best possible commentary on *S/Z*. Seán Burke makes this same point about *S/Z* in his thorough examination of anti-authorial discourse, *The Death and Return of the Author: Criticism and Subjectivity in Barthes, Foucault and Derrida*: "The best commentary on *S/Z* would indeed be its reproduction; it belongs to that class of writing that precludes any sort of faithful summary" (47). The presence of *S/Z* in *Erasure* is not only a primary document from the life academic of Everett and Monk; rather, *S/Z* is the fuller project of a work with which *Erasure* is in dialogue, "The Death of the Author."

"The Death of the Author" is perhaps Barthes' most well known contribution to scholarship. While Burke's statement that the essay "has been the single most influential meditation on the question of authorship in modern times" is debatable, he is right to point out that "Death" "has become the centre of controversy. What it has not become, though, is the centre of debate or discussion" (19, 21). For many contemporary literary theorists, the question of the life or death of the capital-A Author is seen as peripheral to their individual critical pursuits. When they proceed under the assumption of authorial absence, Barthes' thesis is redundant. When they talk about lowercase-a authors,

Barthes' thesis is otiose. *Erasure* does not take the propositions of "Death" so lightly. In particular, *Erasure* critiques Barthes' famous distinction between the Author and "the modern scriptor . . . born simultaneously with the text" ("Death" 145). The source of the troubling and the trouble in *Erasure* is Stagg R. Leigh, who Russett calls "a demonic parody of 'the modern scriptor'" (365). As I will explore in this chapter, Stagg embodies the modern scriptor, but with a crucial difference that undermines Barthes' distinction between Author and scriptor: Whereas Barthes says that the scriptor is invisible, Monk's "Stagg Leigh performance" makes him all too visible on the stage which Stagg and the language inhabit, contemporary America (*Erasure* 162). Stagg is visible in the way that the mythology of his name suggests; he is seen as the African-American bad man of the blues tradition. The characters that encounter Stagg within the novel, however, never acknowledge the specific resonance of the name. The fact that they respond to the name's racial mythology illustrates that Barthes' view of language as *the* origin of the text overlooks the aspect of mythical significance that texts and those that sign them acquire when located in the world outside of Barthes' theory—a significance which elides the distinction between Author and scriptor by making each equally subject to forces beyond the text.

Barthes clears space for the existence of these "forces," specifically capitalism, within his clean distinction between Author and scriptor in "Death;" however, he does not adequately account for the impact of capitalism on his famous distinction. While he claims quite persuasively that the Author is "the epitome and culmination of capitalist ideology," Barthes underestimates the disruptive potential of capitalist *practice* on the supposed invisibility of the modern scriptor ("Death" 143). His theory is outmoded in

the context of what Hardt and Negri call the "biopolitical production" that attends "the postmodernization of the global economy" (xiii). Capitalist production is broader in scope than the commodity culture that Barthes somewhat playfully explores in *Mythologies*; capitalism also produces subjectivities. In Hardt and Negri's terms, capitalism "produces producers" (32). The modern scriptor represents the fantasy of independence from this process of production. He produces but is never produced. The modern scriptor is thus a potential site of resistance to postmodern racism. As Graham Huggan argues in the conclusion of his pioneering work on the popularity of the postcolonial, *The Postcolonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins*, however, "the language of resistance is entangled, like it or not, in the language of commerce" (264). Such entanglement compromises the scriptor's potential for resistance. Moreover, *Erasure* exposes how the mutation of the market that Barthes' theory does not anticipate, in conjunction with postmodern racism, produces a narrow range of producers whose work can widely circulate. Stagg the scriptor becomes Stagg the Author—"the African-American Author"—after Monk loses control of his performance. Stagg is then no longer a singular performance: He transforms from invisible scriptor to racially visible Author, which serves as a critique of Barthes' distinction in the domain of a market more monolithic than "Death" accounts for.

Returning to the critical vogue of studying Bathes in conjunction with Everett, Russett takes the biographical bait laid out by Everett's fathering of a paper about Barthes onto Monk, and includes as epigraphs to her article a quotation from "Death" and an excerpt from "F/V." Certainly Barthes provides a useful lens through which to interrogate Everett's exploration of authorship and the operation of postmodern racism in

contemporary America. To date, however, Everett scholarship has rendered Michel

Foucault as absent as the obnoxious grad student in my epigraph from Russell Smith

would like to imagine his foot. I will discuss how Foucault's theories of authorship

explicated in "What is an Author?" coincide with the consequences of Monk's

performance of Stagg and the surrealistic sections of "notes-for-a-novel" which recur

throughout *Erasure*; moreover, Foucault's essay marks a transformation in his work

which articulates *Erasure*'s critique of the Author-scriptor distinction. The nature of this

transformation is nicely stated by Hubert Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow in the "Preface" to

their seminal study of Foucault, *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and*

Hermeneutics:

> Foucault does not deny that during the mid-sixties his work was deflected
>
> from an interest in the social practices that formed both institutions
>
> discourse to an almost exclusive emphasis on linguistic practices. At its
>
> limit this approach led, by its own logic and against Foucault's better
>
> judgment, to an objective account of the rulelike way discourse organizes
>
> not only itself but social practices and institutions, and *to a neglect of the*
>
> *way discursive practices are themselves affected by the social practices in*
>
> *which they and the investigator are imbedded.* (xii, my emphasis)

While he is building a nightstand for his mother, Monk comments directly on the mid-

sixties work of Foucault. Monk "considered Foucault and how he begins by making

assumptions about notions concerning language that he claims are misguided" (*Erasure*

133). Monk's critique of these "assumptions" resembles that of Dreyfus and Rabinow,

insofar as he too feels that Foucault does not sufficiently "argue the point, but assumes

his notions rightly or wrongly, to be the case" (133). Although Monk feels slightly awkward "hav[ing] such thoughts" in the garage, his recollection of Foucault's "discussion of discursive formations" is significant insofar as he sees it as self-reflexive (133). Given that this moment of self-reflexivity in the context of Foucault's notions of discursive formations occurs directly after Monk tells his agent to send the manuscript of *My Pafology* to the publishers, it frames the eventual "stepp[ing] away and look[ing] at [him]self" that the birth and reception of Stagg will occasion for Monk (133). This process of self-examination in response to the overwhelming visibility of Stagg critiques Barthes' blindness to the operation of capitalism and the linguistic basis of his Author-scriptor separation. Monk's experience exposes how the single performance of a text in the Barthesian sense is suppressed by American society's desire for only the singular performance of texts—a desire which conjoins "the African-American novelist," "the African-American novel," and a narrow version of "*the* African-American experience" that exists for, and insists upon, repeated representation.

"Death" endeavors to put an end to a view of language that locates the meaning of a text in the single figure of the Author. In her "Translator's Preface" to Derrida's *Of Grammatology*, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak expresses the message of "Death" when she says that "[t]he text belongs to language, not to the sovereign and generating author" (lxxiv). Yet before abolishing the "sovereign and generating author," Barthes must first gloss and hence participate in the construction of this figure. For Barthes, "[t]he author is a modern figure, a product of our society" which "has attached the greatest importance to the 'person' of the author" ("Death" 142, 143). By thus conceiving of the author as a "person," Barthes must be, for Burke, "deeply *auteurist* to call for the Death of the

Author" (27). That is, unlike later poststructuralist assaults on criticism rooted in author-and-the-work readings, Barthes' theory recognizes that society privileges the author as the unifier of text and context. *Mythologies* marks his earliest challenge to this privileging—a challenge echoed in *Erasure* as well as in Walter Benjamin's essay, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." Benjamin's key term for critiquing the ethics of representation is "aura" (220). The "aura" denotes contextual properties largely external to the work itself, which mark a work's authenticity and authority, "its presence in time and space" (220). Mechanical reproductions of artworks, as well as technological advancements like film, cause the aura to "wither" because they detach the work from the context of production—from the original aspects bearing on the representing object (221). While the "withering" of the aura increases the audience demand for (not to mention the value of) the original work of art, Benjamin politicizes and celebrates the atrophying of the aura, as "for the first time in world history, mechanical reproduction emancipates the work of art from its parasitical dependence on ritual" (224). *Mythologies*—a collection of essays about French popular culture—makes clear that Benjamin's theoretical liberation is contested by the continuing appeal of ritual in society. Barthes critques this appeal by exposing the media's authenticating of cultural products via "the 'naturalness' with which newspapers, art and common sense constantly dress up a reality" (*Mythologies* 11). In "Death," the grounds of Barthes' challenge to the ethics of representation shift to authorship. His distinction between the Author and scriptor is prescriptive insofar as he wants to author a "transform[ation] [of] the modern text" by removing the Author, who traditional criticism holds to be the dresser of reality ("Death" 145).

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Taking the Author's place is the modern scriptor, who does not carry the mimetic weight of his forefather. While Barthes derides the Author for so narrowly attempting to represent reality, he elevates the modern scriptor for allowing a proliferation of meaning by performing the text like a translator of language itself, who "no longer bears within him passions, humours, feelings, impressions, but rather this immense dictionary from which he draws a writing that can know no halt" ("Death" 147). That is, scriptors are "'operators' of the writing machine, assemblers and rearrangers of codes, lexicologists like the young de Quincey invoked in 'The Death of the Author'" (Burke 33). Barthes thus establishes his Author-scriptor distinction on the grounds of a distinction between reality and language, respectively. Barthes' Balzac in *S/Z* is not a master of social realism, as he is popularly conceived, but one who juxtaposes and combines "various cultural, literary, and historical tools . . . yield[ing] unintended consequences of which Balzac himself may have been ignorant" (Aronowitz 104). For Barthes the semiotician, close attention to the language of the text, with all of its "unintended consequences," moves readers past the hermeneutic "halt" of relying on a biographic referent in their interpretation of the meaning of a particular work. Hence the oft-quoted conclusion to "Death": "[T]he birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author" (148). This conclusion has become the critical legacy of "Death." As Jonathan Culler declares, "['Death'] invit[es] the reader . . . to play a more fundamental role as constructor of the work" (37). In the context of empowering the reader, "Death" is an obvious criticism of literary criticism's constraining emphasis on the biography of the Author. But it can also be read as a subtle critique of mimesis—of the notion of a reality outside the text that aligns with the language of the text—because Barthes' Author-scriptor distinction never

places the scriptor outside of the context of the language of an individual text. This focus on language and its attendant separation from reality, of the modern scriptor from the Author, is partially the locus of *Erasure*'s criticism of "Death."

The first gesture Everett makes at undercutting the distinction between language and reality is by attributing its direct articulation to the comic figure of Davis Gimbel, a fictitious and card-carrying postmodern author and academic who takes the premises of Monk's "F/V" paper personally. Gimbel's initial opposition to Monk, as well as the fact that he quotes the opening lines of Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* when later trying to pick a fight with Monk, does not engender our sympathy. Thus, when Gimbel boasts that he has "disrupt[ed] [readers'] comfortable relationship between words and things" and "brought to a head the battle between language and reality," we are skeptical of not only the veracity of the particular claims, but their underlying logic as well (37). The idea that a "battle between language and reality" can take place in a text—in other words, that a text can dispense with mimesis—is undercut through *Erasure*'s presentation of the character Stagg R. Leigh, the pseudonymous writer of *Fuck*, who is established as the invisible modern scriptor, but who is eventually transformed into a visible agent of verisimilitude—bound equally to his text and the singular reality it is seen to reflect.

Stagg's first appearance in the print of *Erasure* is, appropriately, on the cover of *My Pafology*. He is thus, like the modern scriptor, literally "born simultaneously with the text" ("Death" 145). On the previous page, by contrast, Monk's statement that *My Pafology* is a "book on which [he] knew [he] could never put [his] name" aligns him with the Author via the ethics of the signature (*Erasure* 62). Monk views his refusal to use his own signature as a form of protection against ethical responsibility for the text. Monk is

thus self-fashioning himself as an Author because a signature is an act of authorship "addressed to an ethical future in which the still-living . . . subject may be recalled to his or her text . . . it describes nothing more and nothing less than the ethical contract on whose basis the institution of authorship is established" (Burke 208, fn 9). Before Stagg meets Morgenstein and becomes visible, this ethical distinction between Stagg the scriptor—the innocent operator of the language machine—and Monk the Author is easier to maintain. Above all then, Monk fears that his "Stagg Leigh performance" will be visible and that this distinction will erode and he will have to take ethical responsibility for Stagg (162). As a result of this fear, he insists that his encounters with the publishing world are done through his agent or over the phone. Although immediately into his first conversation with the editor of *My Pafology*, Paula Baderman, Monk assures himself that he "[is] not going to put on an act for her," he proceeds, "after detect[ing] a change in her breathing" indicating her excitement, to do just that, wryly stating in response to her proposition of a "spring pub[lication] date" that "white people on the beach will get a big kick out of [*My Pafology*]" (156). Of course, in reality Monk has already confessed to being "vex[ed] and indigna[nt] at [such] completely nonironic acceptance of that so-called novel as literature" by the publishing community (153). He really wants "white people," indeed wants everyone, to be offended by *My Pafology*. Still, the exchange with Baderman illustrates that Monk maintains control over his performance of Stagg. Here the decision to perform Stagg that Monk makes, in Huggan's terms, "may be not so much [the choice] whether to 'succumb' to market forces as how to use them judiciously to suit one's own, and other people's ends" (11). *My Pafology* may be commodified by the market in such a way that it undercuts its oppositional gesture, as I hinted at in Chapter

Two, but Stagg's invisibility allows Monk to "lay bare the workings of commodification" from a safe distance (Huggan 264).

The Author-scriptor distinction starts to dissolve when Monk makes Stagg visible by agreeing to meet with Morgenstein. In the context of Barthes' "Death," this dissolution is foreshadowed by the motivation for Monk and Morgenstein's meeting—money. A lot of money. Morgenstein offers three million dollars for the movie rights for *My Pafology* but "insists on meeting [Stagg]" (*Erasure* 209). While Yul thinks that "the least [Monk] can do is have lunch with the guy," his qualifier that "[he] ha[sn't] told [Morgenstein] that there's no Stagg Leigh yet" illustrates that Yul, at least in principle, accepts the invisibility and anonymity Monk desires for Stagg (209). More subtly and more compellingly in relation to "Death," Morgenstein's comments after reading *My Pafology* maintain the temporary alignment of Stagg and the scriptor. For Morgenstein does not declare that he wants to meet the person of Stagg R. Leigh. Rather he says he has "gotta meet the writer" of *My Pafology* (193). The fact that he says "writer" instead of author may seem incidental given that the terms "author" and "writer" are conventionally synonymous. In terms of "Death," Morgenstein's diction is not accidental though, as any discussion of the modern scriptor employs writing as the preferred verb. Barthes' association of the scriptor with writing prefigures one of the "basic concepts of [his] poetics . . . [the] distinction between the *lisible* and the *scriptible*," between readerly and writerly texts (Culler 32). Such a reading of an individual example of Morgenstein's diction would be farfetched were it not for the uncanny parallel between his next line and a central proposition of "Death." Morgenstein says that "[he] want[s] to know the hand that wrote this book. You know what I mean?" (193). What he means is that Stagg is

conceived, and literally not seen, as qualifying as a modern scriptor according to Barthes'
definition, which states that "[f]or [the modern scriptor] . . . *the hand, cut off from any*
voice, borne by a pure gesture of inscription (and not expression) traces a field without
origin" ("Death" 146, my emphasis). The connection between the "hand" of the scriptor
and the text is reinforced in *Erasure* immediately after Monk agrees to meet with
Morgenstein and peruses the letters written by his father's lover, Fiona. On his first
glance at the letters, Monk focuses, understandably given the circumstances, on the
identity of their author. But now, returning to the letters, Monk does not "actually read
[them], [but] attend[s] to the script, the hand at work, and f[inds] a purity there that
perhaps reflected the depth of feeling" (209). Monk's association of the scriptor with
"purity" is a defense mechanism against the guilt he feels for accepting the offer to meet
Morgenstein. It is this meeting which marks Stagg's transformation into an Author.

That Monk accepts visible responsibility for authorship, albeit still donning the
mask of Stagg, only after a large sum of money is on the table might tempt one to make a
complaint similar to the one voiced against the Deconstructionists and their proud
declaration of the end of subjectivity in a *Sunday Times* review of Malcolm Bradbury's
Mensonge:

> Though Deconstructionists may confidently proclaim the Death of the
> Author, they have never evinced much difficulty in reconciling this view
> with the scooping up of advances and royalty cheques made out to them
> personally, not (as you might logically suppose) to the English or French
> language. (Taylor 59)

An overemphasis on the ethical distance Monk keeps between himself as Author and Stagg as scriptor, however, overlooks the countervailing feeling that "[his] pay was substantial and deserved" (*Erasure* 238). In other words, making Stagg visible is more complicated than an ethical compromise because making Stagg visible makes Monk, in the words of Juanita Mae Jenkins, "some of that good money" which he feels he "deserves" (54).

My application of Barthes' theory of authorship to this point seems somewhat insular in its assumption that Monk cannot strategically negotiate his identity but must hide, and hide behind, Stagg the scriptor. After all, Monk chooses to put on the mask of Stagg and subject himself to the gaze of Morgenstein. That this act of making Stagg visible transforms him into an Author is later reinforced when Monk "imagine[s] a reading given by Stagg Leigh" (234). Formally, Monk maintains an ethical distance from Stagg by narrating the process of dressing the part of the scriptor and meeting with Morgenstein in the third-person. Strategically, he plays with Morgenstein's expectations. At first, he orders "a plate of fettucini and a little olive oil and Parmesan" which causes "the fat man [Mortgenstein] [to] turn to his date with a troubled expression," but then Monk "relieve[s]" Morgenstein by conforming to the expectations that Stagg is "the real thing" by describing his fabricated crime of "kill[ing] a man with the leather awl of a Swiss army knife" (218). Nevertheless, Monk's ordering of fettucini could be seen as a moment where the mask of Stagg slips off, demonstrating the difficulty of a stable identity-performance. In this view, the fettucini order is not an example of playing with Morgenstein's expectations, but rather revelatory of the obstacles to Monk's control over the response to his performance. I would argue that Monk orders the fettucini for the

purpose of proving to himself that he can remain at a remove from the performance. Monk's awareness of Morgenstein's expectations and his comic manipulation of them mark the performance of Stagg as a form of postmodern blackface. The ordering of fettucini thus demonstrates Monk's desire to avoid the danger inherent in blackface performance where "the minstrel mask threatens to possess the subject behind it" (Tuhkanen 23). As Mikko Tuhkanen explains in "Of Blackface and Paranoid Knowledge: Richard Wright, Jacques Lacan, and the Ambivalence of Black Minstrelsy," blackface is traditionally "considered as a dehumanizing, distorting mask imposed on African-Americans and colonized subjects" but contemporary theoretical explorations of black minstrelsy account for the possibility that "this mask, when actively deployed, can also denote the racially marked subject's becoming inaccessible to the culture otherwise bent on determining him or her" (17). Monk's meeting with Morgenstein makes Stagg literally visible; however, Stagg remains closely connected to a figurative invisibility insofar as the performance of him makes Monk's ironic intentions that much more "inaccessible" to Morgenstein. In the words of Ellison, the "motives hidden behind the mask are as numerous as the ambiguities the mask conceals" ("Joke" 55). The words from Ellison's *Invisible Man* that stand alone in *Erasure* after the Morgenstein scene— "*Behold the invisible!*"—appear to imply the availability of an invisibility that allows Monk to strategically circumvent "the culture otherwise bent on determining him" (*Erasure* 219). Monk is now the one to "behold," and he will be holding a lot of money as a result of the work of Stagg the scriptor-cum-Author.

Ellison's quotation on masks, however, acknowledges an element of ambiguity in every blackface performance that Tuhkanen takes up and which bears heavily on Monk's

performance of Stagg. Monk is simultaneously aware while performing Stagg that "the outcome of [such] [a] strategic reappropriation is never guaranteed" which is why the question Morgenstein asks Stagg about his crime, a question which necessitates his first lie beyond answering to the name Stagg, "face[s] [Monk] with a dilemma" (Tuhkanen 12; *Erasure* 218). The "dilemma" is more wide-ranging than the individual ethical concern that plagues Monk from the birth of Stagg and his script, *My Pafology*. The "dilemma" is in response to the continuing existence of racial paradigms, which, as Tuhkanen argues, means that "the dynamics of blackface should not be considered a thing of the past" because "the minstrel mask perhaps continues to be a central figure in how 'racial' visibility functions in the United States" (12). If the motivations for making Stagg visible could be reduced to a choice for Monk—a decision to "slip the yoke"—Barthes' Author-scriptor distinction would be tangential to a discussion of *Erasure*; however, when Monk loses control of the transformation of Stagg from invisible scriptor to "racially visible" Author, it serves as a critique of Barthes' distinction.

Monk's joke in naming the pseudonymous writer of *My Pafology* Stagg R. Leigh is aimed at disrupting the easy adoption of racial paradigms through the bluntness of its humour. Stagg behaves, for the most part, like the archetypal bad man disseminated in the oral literature, blues, and ballads of late nineteenth and early twentieth century America that his name invokes. Cecil Brown traces the social uses and resonances of the Stagolee story in *Stagolee Shot Billy*, arguing that "[d]espite the historical references found in the hundreds of existing versions of the Stagolee song, the legend is not based on facts" (70). Stagolee is a stock figure of African-American folklore, a "signifier of the 'bad nigger'" (Brown 216). For Brown, Stagolee is "the representation of modernism"

because he is a "viewing subject, who looks but is never himself seen" (227). Stagolee "looks" to serve as a "trope for the resentment felt by people marginalized by the dominant white society" (120). In the postmodern context of *Erasure* though, Stagg is "seen" as conforming to a racialized mythology because no one gets or wants to acknowledge the joke behind his name. They attend to the name's racialized mythology without ever acknowledging its etymology. This is the "Liberal Racism" that Gordon and Newfield say is defined by "an antiracist attitude that coexists with support for racist outcomes" (737). While it could be argued that Monk anticipates and negotiates these "outcomes," and more closely fits the definition of the invisible scriptor than Barthes' Author, with Stagg and his cultural signification as text, the imbrication of Stagg and Monk by a system that promotes only a narrow range of African-American experience, which I will explore shortly, renders such a position and a positioning mute. That the framework for the "racist outcomes" is already in place when Monk chooses a name that signals them is illustrated by the surname of the first person that Monk talks to in the character of Stagg, Paula Baderman. For her, Stagg is the iteration of the bad man she expects from the text of *Pafology* and the myth of Stagolee to which she is responding. Baderman thus does not interrogate the etymology of the bad man's name. Her easy acceptance of the mythology behind the name elides Barthes' attempt in "Death" to "overthrow the myth" of the Author by advocating careful attention to the language of the text because an equally pervasive myth about African-American identity obscures any sense of the linguistic origins of the text, and of Stagg's name ("Death" 148).

When Monk meets with Morgenstein as Stagg, the bad man myth he is expected to perpetuate effaces any attention to the text to the point that Morgenstein only mentions

Pafology in passing. The "cool laugh" that Stagg lets out at the end of his meeting with Morgenstein is not an expression of calm, self-possession (*Erasure* 219). As Monk's ensuing paranoid identification with Stagg illustrates, this laughter at his condition emerges from a sense that "[h]e cannot control [his] surroundings, [and] [thus] there remain no pretenses to the self-identity and self-determination of the Cartesian *cogito*" (Tuhkanen 26). Tuhkanen's allusion to laughter in the context of a determinate position and my notion of Monk's paranoid identification with Stagg are unified under a Lacanian identity politics that encompasses the dynamic of racial visibility which dissolves the Author-scriptor distinction. The clearest articulation of Monk's paranoid identification with Stagg comes after *Fuck* is short-listed for the National Book Award:

> I had the strangest of thoughts. I reasoned, for lack of a better word, but
>
> perhaps no word is better, that if I were to go out into the streets of
>
> Washington, say around 14th Street and T, I might find an individual who
>
> by all measure was Stagg Leigh and then I could kill him, perhaps bring
>
> him home first for a meal, but kill him after all. But there was no such
>
> person and yet there was and he was me. (259)

Here, Monk's displacement of Stagg's identity onto an anonymous "individual" and simultaneous identification with Stagg—"he was me"—reflects Lacan's famous idea about identity formation at the "mirror stage." Lacan's "mirror stage" presents reconciliation with a social *I* as a fundamental aspect of identity formation. Monk tries to resist this reconciliation by asserting that "there was no such person" as the socially visible Stagg. Yet as in the mirror stage, Monk's specular *I*, his narcissistic subjectivity, "deflect[s] into the social *I*" when he encounters his image as separate from the world for

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the first time, "say around 14ᵗʰ Street and T" ("Mirror" 5). John Sheehy cautions against applying Lacan's "mirror stage" model to African-Americans because it "does not take into account the various ways race distorts—'colors'—the . . . confrontation with the mirror" (Sheehy 403). Lacan *does*, however, account for the distorting potential of the mirror in the mirror stage, designating it as "the moment when the human infant (mis)recognizes itself" (Tuhkanen 19). So while Sheehy is correct to point out that the "mirror stage" does not specifically acknowledge race, he overlooks, for instance, the consistency between Lacan's theory and Du Bois's concept of double consciousness. For both Lacan and Du Bois, alienation is central to identity formation. Self-consciousness is always mediated through an "Other" that assures the subject's "paranoiac alienation" (Tuhkanen 21).

When Monk visits the set of the Kenya Dunston show in the costume of Stagg, his refusal to answer her questions resembles the third strategy of the player of the game "even and odd" that Lacan discusses in his second seminar as a "parable for the structure of all human knowledge as paranoid," who tries to defeat his opponent—in Monk's case the stereotypes about African-American authors that Dunston perpetuates on her show—by "play[ing] like an idiot" (Tuhkanen 22; *Seminar* 181). Although Monk's strategy of "playing like an idiot" initially unsettles Dunston, the perpetuation of these stereotypes is assured after she does her own reading from *Fuck* and endorses it to her audience on the grounds that "it doesn't get any more real than this" (*Erasure* 251). Monk's performance of Stagg thus comes full circle at this point of alienation. Stagg is born out of Monk's frustration with the constraining criteria of "real"-ness for novels that are written by African-Americans and now his novel is packaged in the same manner. The

mask he wears is not of his own fashioning, but it is, as he is aware, "the mask of the person [he] was expected to be" (*Erasure* 212). Before he walks off the set of the Dunston show, Monk is looking down at his feet but cannot see his reflection, and can only "imagine [it] in the leather of [his] shoes" (252). He cannot see himself outside of how he is seen through his Stagg Leigh performance, which illustrates the "dangerous edge" of blackface performance, which Monk had avoided earlier in his ordering of fettucini, but to which he was now subject(ed) (Tuhkanen 29).

In the climactic sequence of *Erasure*, when Monk approaches the stage to accept the National Book Award for Stagg, the possession by the minstrelsy mask is manifest:

> The faces of my life, of my past, of my world became as real as the unreal Harnet and the corporations and their wives and they were all talking to me, saying lines from novels that I loved, but when I tried to repeat them to myself, I faltered, unable to recall them. *Then there was a small boy, perhaps me as a boy, and he held up a mirror so that I could see my face and it was the face of Stagg Leigh.* (264, my emphasis)

Monk's uncertainty about whether it is himself as a child obscures the allusion to the Lacanian "mirror stage" and invites Jean Baudrillard's reading of the postmodern process of simulation in the opening chapter of *Simulacra and Simulation*. For Baudrillard, simulation "is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: [A] hyperreal" (1). The Real has transformed into a "hyperreal." Such a transformation means that the Lacanian space between the Real and the Imaginary cannot be distinguished. As such, "it is no longer a question of imitation, nor duplication, nor even parody. It is a question of substituting the signs of the real for the real" (Baudrillard 2). This substitution is

contested by Monk's paranoiac disorientation at the conclusion of the novel. For everyone else in the scene, however, the distance between Monk and Stagg is no longer real because the hyperreal has replaced the real—the repetition, Stagg, without a definite original, is what contemporary, commodifying culture desires. In *The Protestant Ethnic And The Spirit of Capitalism*, Rey Chow describes operation of this desire in the context of mimesis in postcolonial cultural politics. Chow coins the term "coercive mimeticism" to describe "a third level of mimeticism" that "cultural theorists have . . . neglected" in their emphasis on the first level, driven by the edict of the "White Man's burden" where what is white is culturally original, or the second, rooted in the postcolonial criticism of Bhabha that focuses on the colonized's subjectivity (106-107). "Coercive mimeticism" marks "the level at which the ethnic person is expected to come to resemble what is recognizably ethnic" (107). The space that contemporary American society demands that Monk, as African-American author, and Stagg, as the scriptor of an "African-American novel," occupy is the same and identically narrow. It is a space where only recognizable stereotypes can circulate. Sterling A. Brown outlined seven of these stereotypes in a 1933 essay, "Negro Characters as Seen by White Authors." At the time of the essay's publication, the most pervasive and debilitating stereotypes were "the contented slave" and the "brute negro" (70). The former was established by the first slave character to appear in a mainstream American novel, Caesar Thompson Wharton, a house servant in James Fenimore Cooper's novel *The Spy* (Dates and Barlow 7). Not only was Wharton "loyal, devoted to his master's welfare, and seemingly comfortable with his own servitude[,] [h]e also provided the story with comic relief due to his fear of ghosts and other superstitions" (Dates and Barlow 7). The more famous figure of Uncle Tom from

Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* slightly de-emphasized the contented and comic aspects of "the contented slave" stereotype; nevertheless, Uncle Tom was still limited to gentle and childlike characteristics. "The brute negro" is the product of a general change Brown detects in selected works of American literature with African-American characters during the Reconstruction era, where the stereotyped "contented slave" as "docile mastiff" is transformed "into a mad dog" in works by authors of "Ku Klux Klan fiction," notably Thomas Nelson Page and Thomas Dixon (70). This is the specific stereotype with which *Erasure* contends—the stereotype defined by coercive mimetic paradigms and defining of the space in which *Fuck* circulates. It is the space outside the "cave" that the fictitious editor Hockney Hoover suggests that Monk must live for him to write about anything other than "the African-American experience" when he rejects Monk's latest novel (*Erasure* 42). "The Death of the Author" says that "the modern scriptor is born simultaneously with the text" in order to emphasize the "*here and now*" of every instance of writing and language; however, this emphasis on the ahistorical nature of language and writing, its gleeful removal of a stable and thus constraining referent, ignores the stabilizing force of existing myths, realities, and prejudices that the text and language are born into (145). In *Erasure*, the Author-scriptor distinction crumbles under the weight of the response of American society to—and its appetite for—a representation of reality that incorporates the biographical positivism with which Barthes associates mimesis in addition to a recognizable and hence marketable version of "the African-American experience." Monk and Stagg are thus not only agents of a language, but also agents of verisimilitude who are very visible and ultimately indistinguishable.

Erasure critiques the failure of "Death" to account for the ultimate context—the world into which texts enter. After deconstructing Barthes' theory of authorship, *Erasure* is left to explore the practice of authorship in contemporary America. Everett states as much himself in an interview with the *The Observer*: "I see [*Erasure*] essentially as a book about the creation of art and all the impediments placed in front of some of us as we set out to do that within this culture" (O'Hagan par. 3). While my last chapter explored the pitfalls of granting interpretive authority to authorial intention, Everett's statement about "impediments" directs my attention towards a useful lens through which to view *Erasure*—Foucault's "What Is an Author?" essay. Unlike "Death," "Author" does not remove the language of texts from the social context in which they and their authors are embedded. Nor does it, like "Death," tempt us into slotting writers into either one of two categories. Rather, Foucault considers authorship a "function," a form of discursive formation, which Everett explores as an "impediment" ("Author" 267). At first glance, Foucault's essay shares the scope of "Death." Like Barthes, Foucault aims to "locate the space left empty by the author's disappearance" (266). Unlike in Barthes, the space is not filled solely with the language of the text because Foucault acknowledges a space outside of the text where authorship appears as "characteristic of the mode of existence, circulation, and functioning of certain discourses within a society" (267). Foucault's analysis of the author "as a variable and complex function of discourse" resonates strongly with the surrealistic "notes-for-a-novel" sections of *Erasure* that Monk describes as well as the discursive formation of Stagg ("Author" 274).

The "notes" sections interspersed throughout the novel and set off in italics can be grouped according to the theme that Monk "contemplates" at the opening of Chapter

Eight of *Erasure*: "[T]he notion of a public and its relationship to the health of art" (145). Given that in the majority of fictional exchanges between famous figures from the world of art this "public" is Nazi-era Germany, it would be more precise to include in my characterization of the "notes," their exploration of "the notion of a public and its relationship to the health" of the artist. Monk dates the first exchange, between Ernst Barlach and Paul Klee, as "1933" in order to highlight the larger historical frame (37). In the context of Nazi Germany, Klee and Barlach are persecuted, and derisively labeled "a Slavic lunatic" and "a Siberian Jew," respectively (37). They commiserate, sharing concerns about the "health" of their art after the former is "expelled from the Düsseldorf Academy of Art" and both are subject to the "burning [of] any books which contain pictures of [their] work" (37). Their "health" as artists, however, seems less compromised when Klee jokingly says in response to the labels of the oppressive "They" that "[t]hey're right about both of us," and Barlach laughs (38). In other words, both artists appear to find a space outside of their unified conception of the totalizing power of the quasi-anonymous and ominous "They" from which to joke. For Foucault, no such space exists. As Houston A. Baker Jr. notes in "Archaeology, Ideology, and African American Discourse," Foucault sets his works, beginning with the "Author" essay, "in nonsubjective terms [which] leads him to talk of statements and laws rather than of, say, speakers and intentions" (159). By contrast, the "notes" are largely focused on "speakers and intentions," on how the artists characterize their intentions for a particular work or a group of works. But the notes are also focused on how these works are received by the public. Many of the exchanges revisit the initial Klee-Barlach dynamic of two artists and a surveying "They." That the "They" is located in 1930s Germany reinforces Foucault's

insistence "that the locations for discourse are more productive analytical considerations than the motives, intentions, or transcendent subjectivity of individual speakers" (Baker 159).

The cultural context of the production of the works—the restrictive prejudices and practices of Nazi Germany—is emphasized, and forms the "analytical consideration" of my investigation of the impact of discourse on authors and artists alike. Monk makes the context the centerpiece of the "notes-for-a-novel" exchanges not only by making it integral to their humour, but by framing their genesis within a concern with context. The "notes" "c[o]me to [Monk] on [a] flight back to Los Angeles" when he "admit[s] to a profound fascination with Hitler's relationship to art" (39). This "relationship" is simultaneously aesthetic and political. As the dialogue between Hitler and Dietrich Eckhart illustrates, Hitler sees artistic purity as inseparable from Aryan "purity." The "anguish and sheer beauty" that Hitler says Eckhart's "verses offer the reader" are aligned with the "[k]eep your blood pure" motto that the two later recite (38, 39). Although Ernst Kirchner can tell Max Klinger in another exchange that he is "glad, no proud, that those brown shirts are burning my paintings," the exercise of power, the burning, carries on (60). Conversely, although Monk can tell Yul that "[n]o one is ever going to know that I wrote that piece of shit [*Fuck*]," he is progressively delusional as the distinction he makes between himself and Stagg begins to collapse when *Fuck* is given the Book Award (247). For Monk, such widespread acceptance of his "art" is stifling like the book burning. In both cases, echoing "Author," "the author [and artist] is . . . the ideological figure by which one marks the manner in which we fear the proliferation of meaning" (274). Kirchner's works are burned not because of their content, but because

of the fear that his ability to produce works of "anguish and sheer beauty" undermines Hitler's ideological myths about himself as the leader of the Aryan race; Monk's work is accepted because it conforms to the desires of the publishing house to, in hooks' terms, "promote the creation of products which will attract the widest audience, limit[ing] in a crippling . . . way the kind of work many black folks feel [they] can do and still receive recognition" (13).

Stagg's "crippling" and increasing visibility coincides with the entry of *Fuck* into the public sphere which illustrates not only Foucault's idea from "Author" that "literary anonymity is not tolerable," but, as compellingly, the correspondence of this visibility and Monk's collapsing individuality recalls Foucault's famous concept, explored in *Discipline and Punish*, of panopticism (269). That Stagg is born in the context of disease, on the cover page of a book titled *My Pafology*, parallels the significance of disease to Foucault's definition of panopticism. Foucault discusses the "measures to be taken when the plague appeared in a town" at the opening of the third chapter of his "Discipline" section (195). For Foucault, these "measures," of "surveillance" and "control," are the roots of the architectural logic of Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon prison system, and more broadly, of "[a]ll the mechanisms of power which, even today, are disposed around the abnormal individual, to brand him and to alter him" (198, 199-200). As the cover to *My Pafology* suggests, Stagg is Monk's "abnormality," his disease. Central to the disciplinary function of the mechanisms of power is the notion of visibility. Discipline is enabled because "power [is] visible and unverifiable" whereas for the subject of the gaze, "[v]isibility is a trap" (201, 200). The symbol of the "hole" that recurs in *Erasure* is a response to the potential negative effects of Stagg's visibility. The

hole represents invisibility, and hence offers subjective freedom. This characterization of the hole is strengthened by its allusive quality—it is the term used by the narrator of *Invisible Man* to describe his basement apartment, both a getaway from chaotic reality and a place of "light and . . . truth" (7). My next chapter will investigate in more detail the complicated dialogue between *Invisible Man* and *Erasure*. For now, it is important to recognize that the first reference to the "hole" in *Erasure* comes shortly after Monk begins his "Stagg Leigh performance" (162). Monk says he "would let Mr. Leigh continue his reclusive, just out-of-the-big-house ways. He would talk to the editor a few more times, then disappear, like down a hole" (162). Here, the hole is an un-literalized space that symbolizes Monk's sense of self-discipline. If Stagg remains out of sight, then the "trap" of his visibility—the persistent attaching of Monk to such roles because of his race—is circumvented.

The hole, however, is not only an allusion, it is an illusion as well. It is accessible to the man Monk comes across who sings "Bread and Wine" to him and then disappears, "as if sucked down a hole," but not to Monk (*Erasure* 237). Just before he appears on the Kenya Dunston show as Stagg, Monk asks Yul, "[i]s it too late to jump into my hole and hide?" (247). Monk may conceive of the hole as his own, but his experience on television demonstrates that, to return to Foucault on the plague, he is "inserted in a fixed place . . . in which each individual is constantly located, examined, and distributed," where "order" functions (*Discipline* 197). Monk's refusal to answer Dunston's questions does not allow him to access invisibility, but rather reflects that "he is the object of information, never a subject in communication" (*Discipline* 200). The "information" is the restricting form of "the African-American experience"—the "authentic" and "gritty"

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one— that contemporary American society recognizes as "real." Of course, the site from which the gaze emanates "has become a transparent building in which the exercise of power may be supervised by society as a whole" (*Discipline* 207). In this way, Monk can view himself *and* the system that endorses only a narrow range of African-American experience. But Stagg must nevertheless "pass through the representatives of power," a process figuratively illustrated by Monk's switch from first-person narration when describing Stagg on the phone, to third-person narration when he meets Morgenstein (*Discipline* 197). Stagg's visibility makes him a presence, a reality. Even in the absence of these "representatives of power," Monk renders Stagg more than just a character he adopts for the sake of disguising his own identity: "Thelonius Monk and Stagg Leigh made the trip to New York together; on the same flight, and sadly, in the same seat" (237). Stagg accompanies Monk. As such, "the surveillance is permanent in its effects, even if it is discontinuous in its action" (*Discpline* 201). When Monk later asks himself, "[h]ad I by annihilating my own presence actually asserted the individuality of Stagg Leigh? Or was it the book itself that had given him life?", he still has yet to come to terms with the fact that he and Stagg are not seen as separate entities; nor, however, can Stagg simply disappear once the costume—for instance, the "dark glasses" that he wears—is removed (248, 219).

Stagg dons a black costume and black glasses as the hyperbolic embodiment of the concept of "black enough" that informs how Monk is seen. As Monk approaches the stage after Stagg's name is announced for the Book Award, Harnet jokes "[i]t's a black thang maybe" (264). Despite Harnet's belief that Stagg and Monk are two separate individuals, his simultaneous conception of a natural affinity between the two is invoked

by his joke. The earlier refrain of *"Behold the invisible!"* is thus all at once an ironic comment on Stagg's persistent visibility, a direct comment on Monk's invisibility as an African-American whose individuality is obscured by his race—"it's a black thang"— and a gesture towards the system that disciplines Stagg and Monk as a "collection of separated individualities," but remains unseen (*Erasure* 219; *Discipline* 201).

Ambiguity—such as that which the singular operation of power over a "collection of separated individualities" signals—is absent from Barthes' theory of authorship explicated in "The Death of the Author," insofar as he makes a rigid distinction between an Author and a scriptor. The experience of Stagg and Monk, of Monk as Stagg, points to the possibility of a writer being both or existing outside of these categories. Moreover, it critiques Barthes' emphasis on language independent of its mimetic properties, and the notion that an "operator of the writing machine" can exist outside of the "homogeneous effects of power," outside of the monolithic forces of the market it enters (Burke 33; *Discipline* 202). The central "effect" in *Erasure* is the discursive formation of Stagg as an aspect of Monk. In other words, Stagg is something that contemporary American society sees in Monk. They both occupy a space on the fixed continuum of *"the* African-American experience" that Monk and Stagg—regardless of whether they are labeled Authors, scriptors, or writers—are expected to represent. In my next chapter I will explore how the allusions to *Invisible Man* in *Erasure* resonate outside of their original context by further pointing to the systemic, postmodern racism of contemporary America through the lens of Jacques Derrida's concept of "erasure." Hovering around my critique of Barthes' "Death" is the need to be self-conscious about the potential insularity of Literary Theory produced by the Academy. From a pragmatist's perspective, Richard

Rorty celebrates Theory because it "gives you one more context in which you can place the text—one more grid you can place on top of it or one more paradigm to which to juxtapose [the text];" Everett takes Rorty's counterbalancing statement that most Theory "brings you no closer to what is *really* going on in the text" a step further by suggesting that the reason for this distance is because the Academy is at a remove from what is *really* going on in the world (105). What is really going on in terms of *Erasure*'s critique of contemporary America and the publishing industry is that for texts written by African-American authors—to quote Foucault quoting Beckett—it still "matter[s] who is speaking" ("Author" 264).

Chapter Four: "Erasure": *Invisible Man,* Visible *Oeuvre*

'It's very simple. There are two sorts of artists, one not being in the least superior
to the other. But one responds to the history of his or her art so far, and the other
responds to life itself.'

—Kurt Vonnegut, *A Man Without a Country*

At first glance, my choice of an epigraph appears counterproductive given that it

returns me to the sort of binary thinking that my previous chapter critiqued in Barthes'

Author-scriptor distinction. Identifying an author as one or the other of two categories

and overlooking the excluded middle where more complex factors informing artistic

production play out is anything but "very simple." However hesitant I am to endorse

Vonnegut's claim—attributed to "the wisest person [he] ever met . . . the graphic artist

Saul Steinberg"—the defining characteristic Steinberg provides for the former type of

artist strikes me as an appropriate starting point for understanding Everett's *oeuvre* and

the issues surrounding its reception that *Erasure* explores (134). In a forthcoming

interview with Anthony Stewart to be published in *The Canadian Review of American*

Studies, Everett cuts through the uneasiness that emerges for critics when they discuss the

author's entire output: "I see all the works as fitting together, as an overall project. I'm

writing one big novel" (Stewart 3). When questioned directly about the subject matter of

this "novel" though, Everett is comically evasive: "I can't tell you that. If I did, I'd have

to kill you" (Stewart 3). *Erasure* is more open to suggesting answers as to what the "big

novel" is about, and, perhaps more importantly, what it is not about.

Everett's *oeuvre* is not about being able to finish a sentence that starts like this

one with any sort of definitiveness. A novel about a headless university professor, a

novel about a protective father who performs a home abortion, a novel about a

disinterested activist caught up in a land dispute, a novel about a slumping baseball

player—to begin to navigate Everett's bibliography is to unravel the comfortable critical thread of thematic continuity. If I decided to cling to a thread, I could say that these are novels with protagonists who frequently feel alienated or out-of-place. Critic William M. Ramsey says as much in his 2005 article on Everett, published in the *Southern Literary Journal*: "Percival Everett's fiction often focuses on individuals who do not 'know their place' in a socially hierarchical American culture" (132). Given the narrative and stylistic particularity of each novel, however, it appears that there is something broader at play when approaching Everett's entire literary output. Call it a productive elusiveness. What holds Everett's *oeuvre* together most prominently is the authorial signature: All of his novels are "Percival Everett" novels. This seems like a simple point but it is important in the context of the effects of postmodern racism on the popular reception of an author that I have been discussing thus far. Everett plays most clearly with his audience's stereotype-laden expectations of "the African-American author" in *Erasure*, as does the novel's protagonist. Of all Everett's novels, *Erasure* most explicitly engages with issues of race and racism in contemporary America. As this chapter will explore through a developed reading of the theoretical concept of "erasure" in conjunction with the novel's allusions to Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, *Erasure* also suggests how Everett's other novels, taken as a whole, resist the expectations and the weight of the expectations that accrue for an author who happens to be African-American.

In the text in which he first articulates the theoretical concept of "erasure," *Dissemination*, Jacques Derrida argues that "the proper name of the author [disappears] in a constant equivocal motion of death and safe-keeping or salvation" (328). The author's name becomes a "dead surface effect" of the text (328). In other words—those

of Barthes—the Author is "dead." Yet the authorial signature, emptied of its historio-biographical identity signifiers, cannot be so easily dismissed as a "dead surface effect" because as the disparateness of Everett's *oeuvre* attests, attention to the proper name "Everett" as the unifying factor—as the hint to the secret subject of the "one big novel"— shifts the critical focus from the restrictive label of "African-American author" and points to a tradition that is not so narrowly defined by a supposedly unified cultural identity. In acknowledging the potential for a productive shift in the way Everett is received, I must also acknowledge that, on the surface, this shift is defined by the type of binary thinking that I have problematized throughout my project; interrogating the effects of *Erasure*'s erasure of *Invisible Man* will help to nuance my optimistic claim about the significance of the proper name.

Where Derrida's notion of "erasure" is useful in the context of the novel *Erasure* is at the moments when Everett *does* acknowledge that he works within a tradition through his recurring references to Ellison's *Invisible Man*. These references, whether oblique or obvious, crop up throughout the Everett canon. Following Derrida's method of deconstruction, *Invisible Man* is the key element for decoding Everett's "system," or *oeuvre* (*Taste* 4). This deconstructive "key" is unique to each authorial system. J. Hillis Miller articulates Derrida's reading strategy as follows: "It is necessary to read *each oeuvre* to find out what, *in each case*, is the element that does not fit, that is out of joint with the system in question, but that makes the system possible/impossible" (202-203, my emphasis). Everett's invocation of *Invisible Man* contains an acknowledgement of the possibility of being located in a tradition that includes Ellison (and other canonical figures like Joyce), while simultaneously (and ultimately) marking Ellison as the element

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"that does not fit" with Everett's project insofar as it suggests a thematic consistency to Everett's *oeuvre* that is absent. Everett thus not only resists the label "African-American writer" but also the *weight* of this label. Cultural custodian is a role that Everett does not want and one which he feels causes the work to "suffer" (Stewart 11).

Invisible Man is not the exact equivalent of the "pharmakon"—the deconstructive key—in Derrida's influential reading of Plato's *Phaedrus* because Everett's writing is self-conscious of the key. For this reason, an overemphasis on *Invisible Man* causes Everett criticism to suffer by suggesting that race be the beginning and ending of the critical conversation about his authorial project since *Erasure* is also a novel about the creative process—about writing. Before Monk, academic and writer, ever introduces himself, this is signaled by the epigraph from Mark Twain's *Following the Equator* about Twain's paradoxical position as a writer in society ("I could never tell a lie that anybody would doubt, nor a truth that anybody would believe") and the critical reviews of the novel which all come from authors who are identified with a particular novel they have published. In addition to the fact that his notion of "erasure" is invoked by the title of *Erasure*, Derrida is invited into Everett criticism because out of all the literary theorists of the twentieth century, he is arguably the most interested in writing. The term that Derrida brought to American criticism, "Deconstruction," famously proceeds from a critique of "Western metaphysics" for its "Logocentrism" wherein speech is privileged over writing because it supposedly renders meaning more immediate. Derrida's critique is far too complex to say simply that he champions writing. By his own account, "paper" is actually his main focus: "I have never had any other *subject*: [B]asically, paper, paper, paper" (*Paper* 41). What Derrida's work does—regardless of subject—is to draw

attention to the *scene* of writing, and this is where his theory intersects directly with

Erasure.

There is a scene in the "notes-for-a-novel" section of *Erasure* which includes

Derrida:

> Wittgenstein: Why did Bach have to sell his organ?
>
> Derrida: I don't know. Why?
>
> Wittgenstein: Because he was baroque.
>
> Derrida: You mean because he composed music marked by 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. (192)

Derrida does not initially "get" the joke because he attends to the wider aspect of artistic

production and ignores the pun. While Derrida's reaction is amusing, it does not invite

wholesale skepticism about the consequences of paying significant attention to the act of

composition given that this act is so embedded in the narrative fabric of *Erasure*, notably

in the "notes-for-a-novel" and "Story idea" sections, the inclusion of the entire text of

Fuck, and the opening line which frames the novel: "My journal is a private affair; but as

I cannot know the time of my coming death, and since I am not disposed, however

unfortunately, to the serious consideration of self-termination, I am afraid that others will

see these pages" (1). The end product, Monk's journal-*cum*-novel, contains a bevy of

allusions to *Invisible Man*, the majority of which are fractured. In the act of composing

Erasure then, Everett puts Ellison's novel under erasure. A trace of the original meaning

remains in the text but the act of erasure is foregrounded. The trace and the act are formally equivalent (that is, not in a hierarchical binary relation to each other); however, the erasure is given more emphasis by the title of the novel and the startling abruptness of the allusions to *Invisible Man*. The effect of this erasure—a form of "*différance*," which is Derrida's chosen verb to conflate "difference" and "deferral" in the signifying act—is significant (Johnson ix). The erasure underscores that the meaning of *Erasure* is different than that of *Invisible Man*, as I discussed earlier in the context of the transition from modern to postmodern racism encountered by the protagonists of the respective novels; more importantly, the link between *Invisible Man* and *Erasure*, between Ellison and Everett's *oeuvre*, is figuratively deferred by the erasure.

Without an original, of course, there is nothing to erase. Accordingly, Derrida's definition of erasure is located in the space between imitator and imitated. The "Double Session" section of *Dissemination* teases out the gap through a reading of Stéphane Mallarmé's *Mimique*. *Mimique* portrays a Pierrot miming the murder of his wife. For Derrida, the Pierrot's act of self-parody is, in the words of *Dissemination*'s translator Barbara Johnson, "a perpetual allusion to himself on the point of alluding, in which the difference between the imitator and the imitated is at once preserved and erased" (xxvii). Monk's last line in *Erasure* inverts the movement of *Mimique* insofar as he, the real-life character, paraphrases the final line of his own creation, the fictitious Van Go, exclaiming "Egads, I'm on television" (265). Despite the inversion, the overall effect is the same. Preserving and effacing at the point of (re)production is a succinct statement of *Erasure*'s relationship to *Invisible Man* throughout the novel. It is not that the allusions to *Invisible Man* are out-of-place. Indeed, as I will explore shortly, Monk's epiphany-trajectory

follows the same course as the narrator of *Invisible Man*. But there is also more at stake here in regards to Everett's relationship to Ellison. When talking about his latest novel, *The Water Cure*, Everett confesses that in some ways he "can't escape" the presence of Ellison in his writing (Stewart 16). This claim challenges some of Derrida's other remarks about the enabling act for the imitator in *Writing and Difference*. There, Derrida says that "[t]he disciple must break the glass, or better the mirror, the reflection, his infinite speculation on the master. And start to speak" (32). As a possible Derridean binary set for outlining the dynamic between the two authors, "master" and "disciple" would not approach a fair assessment of Everett the writer. Despite its slightly problematic aspiration to a very particular type of intimacy, "father" and "son" are more apt descriptors insofar as they approach the sort of dynamic that *Erasure* establishes with the relationship of Monk to his surname and negotiates through the eponymous action performed on Ellison's text.

Monk's surname "Ellison" signifies in two ways which are closely related. In the story, "Ellison" is the name that Monk inherits from his father. Monk marks this inheritance as a difficult one insofar as it is loaded with expectations: "I grew up an Ellison. I had Ellison looks. I had an Ellison way of speaking, showed Ellison promise, would have Ellison success" (151). Although this brief passage ends on an optimistic note, the repetition of "Ellison" positions the name as something from which Monk cannot detach himself. And while in the earlier stages of his life he "liked belonging to something larger than myself" until his teenage years ushered in the characteristic "resent[ment]" of "family name and identification," Monk ends up resigned to wear the name because not only does he "not care," but also "the world d[oes]n't care" (151). The

advancing years empty the surname of its associative potential. Monk's decision to be a writer and not a physician could be read as a defiance of the promise of the particular resonance of his *family* name, were it not for the fact that this decision fulfills his father's "pronouncement": "Lisa, you and Bill will be doctors. But Monk will be an artist. He's not like us" (143). The vocation of artist illustrates the continuing relevance of the father and grants the surname "Ellison" its second signifying function. Given the conscious similarities that he invokes between himself and his author-protagonist (for instance, including for Monk the full text of a *Curriculum Vitae* that mirrors his own), Everett's use of "Ellison" and Ellison's novel places his own act of composing *Erasure* at least as much in the foreground as Monk's writing of the journal that will become the text of the novel. This is an important distinction insofar as it provides critics of the novel with a useful lens for viewing the increasingly arresting references to *Invisible Man* in *Erasure*.

Derrida's "master/disciple" binary is underwritten by a power dynamic that does not fit into a critical conversation about the Ellison-Everett dynamic. Putting *Invisible Man* under erasure is a productive move insofar as the effacement acknowledges the existence of Ellison's novel as an influential original while challenging the critical tendency to read Everett's work *only* through Ellison. Derrida describes a dramatic "breaking of the mirror," but when Everett "begin[s] to speak" in *Erasure* he turns the fractured and allusive mirror on his critical audience. The specific references to *Invisible Man*—for instance "Dr. Bledsoe" in the role of doctor at his mother's home, the billboard reading "KEEP AMERICAN PURE," the use of the number 1,369, and the castration scene with its list of phallic synonyms—are incomplete (215, 244). They simultaneously enact and negate the original, like speaking the name of a dead relative at a family dinner.

Since *Invisible Man* is the text that *Erasure* fathers onto itself, traces of the racism encountered by the narrator of Ellison's novel are enacted in Everett's. While the form of racism is different in each novel, as the narrator of *Invisible Man* meets more direct examples of racism in his day-to-day dealings with other people whereas Monk's world is one of implicit systemic racism obscured by official anti-racism, the outcome is the same: Monk and the narrator of Ellison's novel are marginalized as individuals and writers. The erasure of *Invisible Man* is not about destroying or forgetting the world of Ellison's novel. The erasure of *Invisible Man* is about remembering in a way that does not paralyze the agent of memory, and does not bind the memorial object—*Erasure*—statically to the original.

In Sigmund Freud's "A Note Upon the 'Mystic Writing-Pad,'" he describes a device, the *Wunderblock*, with a "construction [that] shows a remarkable agreement with [his] hypothetical structure of our perceptual apparatus [which] can in fact provide both an ever-ready receptive surface and permanent traces of the notes that have been made upon it" (228). Notwithstanding its purported similarity to the structure of the mind, the mystic pad—"a slab of dark brown resin or wax with a paper edging"—sounds somewhat dull (228). What is significant about the device in the context of Everett's novel is that an act of erasure is embedded in its function. When a writer makes an inscription on the pad, "th[is] inscription is transferred via the waxed paper to the underlying slab; to lift the double coversheet is to erase what has been written" (McCance viii). However, according to Freud:

> It is easy to discover that the permanent trace of what was written is
>
> retained upon the wax slab itself and is legible in suitable lights. Thus the

Pad provides not only a receptive surface that can be used over and over again, like a slate, but also permanent traces of what has been written, like an ordinary paper pad. (230)

The references to Ellison's novel in *Erasure* are so abrupt that it is as if Everett has torn off "the double coversheet" of *Invisible Man* and written over top of it—a rather willful theoretical casing for the allusions, regardless of how trace-like they might appear to be. Nevertheless the mnemonic purpose of Freud's device resonates strongly in juxtaposition with the rapid onset of Mrs. Ellison's Alzheimer's, which Monk witnesses firsthand throughout the novel. Monk's journal is a "private affair" precisely because it enables him to retain a sense of the individuality that experience, through memory, instills (1). This individuality is threatened by the potentially paralyzing traces that remain from the story of the narrator of *Invisible Man*. As *Erasure* reaches its uncertain conclusion, quoting Isaac Newton's famous phrase *"hypotheses non fingo"* ("I feign no hypotheses") in the final line, the pace of *Invisible Man* allusions quickens (265). The fractured allusions begin to overwhelm the new text to the point that Monk directly acknowledges the original inscriptions: "'I know those lines'" (265). Everett nods to *Invisible Man* in fragments in order to resist *only* being known by those lines.

The intersection of the two novels towards the end of *Erasure* suggests that the connection between them is possibly more thematic than theoretical, contrary to the central thread of my argument in the chapter thus far. Most prominently, Monk's epiphany-trajectory follows that of the narrator in *Invisible Man*. As in *Invisible Man*, Monk eventually comes to realize that he is invisible. After saying "'I know those lines,'" Monk declares that he "knows" that "[he] was saying them to no one" (265). The

epiphany about invisibility which allows Monk to "know" not just "the lines," but also that "no one" is paying attention to him is identical in nature to the narrator of *Invisible Man*: Both are freed from the "illusion" that the world sees them as individuals (265). Ellison's narrator introduces himself with the famous retrospective declaration of his invisibility: "I am an invisible man" (*Man* 3). The narrator ascribes his invisibility to the refusal or inability of other characters to see him: "When they approach me they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination—indeed, everything and anything except me" (3).

In *Invisible Man*, the character best able to navigate this chaotic reality is Rinehart. Both the narrator of *Invisible Man* and Monk encounter this character, albeit in slightly different manners, as they progress towards epiphany. Ellison's narrator discovers the power of "being" Rinehart when he first dons his well-known outfit of "dark glasses" accidentally (482). Instantly, those around the narrator see Rinehart when they look at him. Rinehart is an exaggerated version of the kind of invisibility the narrator comes to recognize that he feels because Rinehart is identified "not by features, but by clothes, by uniform, by gait" (485). And it is because Rinehart serves this symbolic role that Everett invokes him. He invokes him to introduce, as Ellison explores, the potential for power and the ultimate danger of being a Rinehart. Monk's meeting with Morgenstein is framed by the line "*Ain't you Rine the runner?*" (216). This line alludes to one of the many roles that Rinehart plays in *Invisible Man*, or, rather, to *the fact that* he plays so many roles. The narrator of *Invisible Man* learns about the indeterminate nature of reality from Rinehart's example. By invoking this character in his own narrative, Monk is illustrating that he recognizes that certain roles can potentially

help to better navigate the world—or, in his case, the literary world. For Monk, this role
is that of the "black enough" African-American author who appears violent and
dangerous. The danger posed by the Rinehart example is that in giving yourself over to a
role absolutely, you lose yourself by losing your principles. While Monk's masquerading
as a Rinehart offers him personal, financial gains, he is unable to overcome the shame of
his complicity in a system that trades in stereotypes about African-Americans and
literature written by African-Americans. This feeling is parallel to the shame that the
narrator of *Invisible Man* experiences during the climactic Harlem riot sequence:

> It was not suicide, but murder. The committee had planned it. And I had
>
> helped, had been a tool. A tool just at the very moment I had thought
>
> myself free. By pretending to agree I *had* indeed agreed, had made myself
>
> responsible for that huddled form lighted by flame and gunfire in the
>
> street, and all the others whom now the night was making ripe for death.
>
> (553)

Both the narrator of *Invisible Man* and Monk thus come to realize that they are not selfish
enough to become Rineharts: A Rinehart must be a "rascal" (*Man* 498); he must have no
principles, no "ethics", except those of "self-preservation" (Schor 89). Yet this allusive
link ultimately does not satisfy insofar as while the narrator of *Invisible Man* decides he
"must emerge" and live life according to his own decisions, as opposed to those of others,
Monk's epiphany is withheld, ambivalent (*Man* 581); he "feigns no hypotheses."

There is another sustained allusive line that also disintegrates in *Erasure*: The
symbol of the "hole." In this case, the distinction between the two novels is useful
because it involves issues of artistic production which resonate with Everett's challenge

to the traditional understanding of the *oeuvre*. As I explored in the previous chapter, the hole is a literalized space in *Invisible Man*, as it describes the narrator's basement apartment. By contrast, the hole in *Erasure* is illusive and un-literalized. This is similar to the quality of the hole in *Invisible Man* up until the narrator's final escape. As Edith Schor notes in *Visible Ellison*, "[t]he narrator's experiences in New York have periodically been leading him underground . . . but [these] underground visit[s] [are] . . . brief and incomplete" (93). For most of the novel then, the holes that surround the narrator of *Invisible Man* are as illusive as those that confront Monk—each time hinting at some deeper truth that cannot be approached. While Ellison's narrator does, in the end, escape into a hole of "light" and "truth" from which he is able to reflect on his life, Monk can only ever allude to such an escape (7). As I hinted at earlier, given that at least an equal amount of attention in *Erasure* is paid to the scene of production—the "notes-for-a-novel" sections featuring famous artists and Monk's musings on the meaning-making of narrative "spaces" come immediately to mind—as is paid to *Invisible Man*, the fact that the narrator of Ellison's novel composes his story from the hole is significant (52). The hole is not only a place of epiphany; it is a locus of creative genesis. That the hole eludes Monk re-establishes the theoretical meaning of all the fractured alluding to *Invisible Man*. Monk cannot write Ellison's novel because he cannot access the place where it is written. The hole is a site of meaning (making) in *Invisible Man*; it is a pitfall to meaning in *Erasure*, thus rendering it akin to Derrida's well-known interpretation of the Ancient Greek rhetorical term, *aporia*. For Derrida, an *aporia* is an interpretive "hole" in the infinite signifying "web" that the act of reading and writing weave into each text. At the opening of the "Plato's Pharmacy" chapter of *Dissemination*, Derrida

defines this "web" as "a web that envelops a web, undoing the web for centuries; reconstituting too as an organism, indefinitely regenerating its own tissue behind the cutting trace, the decision of each reading" (*Dissemination* 63). The surplus of meaning created by this infinitely "regenerating" network is an *aporia*, a hole in the fabric of signification. Alan Bass provides an excellent definition for *aporia* in his "Translator's Introduction" to Derrida's *Writing and Difference*:

> Once a system has been 'shaken' by following it totalizing logic to its
> final consequences, one finds an excess which cannot be construed within
> the rules of logic, for the excess can only be conceived as *neither* this *nor*
> that, or both at the same time—a departure from all rules of logic. (xvi-
> xvii)

Again, I return to the presence of the deferral of meaning, the "departure" *Erasure* makes from *Invisible Man*: a gesture of "accepting but also turning away from the past" (*Race* 336). Monk "knows the answer" to the key question from *Invisible Man*, repeated in the final pages of *Erasure*, "[h]ow does it feel to be free of one's illusions?", but it is he who provides the question (264). All that remains of *Invisible Man* are traces outlining the memory of the novel that Monk did not write.

Unpacking the divergent hole symbolism has brought me full circle back to the issue of Everett's *oeuvre*. Even if Ellison is recognized as the most immediately apparent key to Everett's project, there is nevertheless space left over for another consideration: Could the disparate nature of Everett's novels necessitate that very innocuous, but nevertheless accurate, *oeuvre* tagline, "Percival Everett novels"? If so, would this constitute a form of resistance to postmodern racism? In short, "yes" and "yes." During

one scene in *Erasure*, Monk is remembering the remarks his father made about a painting that they saw together in a museum. In response to Monk's complaint about the illegibility of the painter's signature, Dr. Ellison declares that "'[y]ou don't sign it because you want people to know you painted it, but because you love it'" (*Erasure* 32-33). In Monk's view, this idea is "all wrong" (33). Derrida and Everett would agree with Monk. The proper name and the *oeuvre* are entangled because "[e]ach oeuvre . . . must have and admit the proper name" (*Chances* 16). Although Derrida also argues in "My Chances" that the proper name that the signature carries "has no meaning in itself [because] [i]t does not refer to anyone; it designates someone only in a given context," he goes on to re-inscribe meaning for the proper name, given that "a mark must be capable of being *identified*, recognized as the same, being precisely *re-markable* from one context to another" (15, 16). In other words, the proper name has an important function: It is the "apparent solidity" or "*stereotypy*" underwriting the structure of a work (*Chances* 16). In Derrida's words from another work (*Specters of Marx*), "[a] man's life, unique as his death, will always be more than a paradigm and something other than a symbol. And this is precisely what a proper name should always name" (xv). Everett shows how the proper name is significant as well—it can hold an author's work together and posit a possible site of resistance to the pernicious unifying stereotypes of postmodern racism that would, for instance, fit Ellison and Everett together *solely* because of their race while presuming to do just the opposite. I am not suggesting that Everett's works necessarily have to be read together (indeed, my project has focused on one of his novels) nor am I making the utopian gesture of neutralizing the very real impact of postmodern racism on the popular and critical reception of works by African-American novelists; rather, I am

asserting that the disparateness of Everett's *oeuvre* insists that the proper name is the key unifying factor in his reception, when and if such a factor is invoked.

Returning now to "the signature scene" in *Erasure*, Monk goes on to provide a rather startling gloss on his father's interpretation of the illegible proper name, which slightly nuances the straightforward line I just drew between Monk, Everett, and Derrida regarding the ethics of the signature. Despite disagreeing with its principles, Monk finds his father's idea "beautiful" because in Monk's mind, "[his father] might have been trying to say . . . that art finds its form and that it is never a mere manifestation of life" (33). It is likely that this idea appeals to Monk, particularly after he just read a passage from Jenkins' offensive book for the first time, insofar as it posits a referential space for art outside the monolithic North American culture that trades in such "mere manifestations of life" as the racial stereotype. The ideal of Monk's father to which Monk attaches himself through the reverential word "beautiful" parallels Derrida's view of the *oeuvre* in relation to the context in which a work enters. For *Erasure* does not just enter into a society that practices postmodern racism; *Erasure* enters into this context "as a large-scale speech act to form or deform, in any case to change, [this] context" (Miller 203). *Erasure* takes on this context directly with satire. From a broader standpoint, Everett's entire literary output makes a similar context-deforming gesture, echoing Derrida's compelling claim that *oeuvres* "challeng[e] any program of reception" ("Chances" 17). Everett's elusiveness is thus a productive one: His novels, taken together, cannot be straightforwardly read through a context which they are constantly colliding with, deforming, and resisting.

Any other hint at the answer is contained in the proper name—"Percival Everett."

Resting on the signature as an interpretive key to Everett's *oeuvre* seems somewhat pragmatic as it almost seems to protect Everett's work from any sustained analysis; what I am suggesting though is that each of Everett's novels can be read and discussed individually, but as *Erasure* explores, any attempt to unify the entire project under a rubric other than the proper name is bound to re-capitulate the same errors of reception that Everett is critiquing in the novel. The theoretical concept of "erasure" is central to this critique. Within Monk's "notes-for-a-novel," he reproduces a fictionalized version of the Willem de Kooning and Robert Rauschenberg dynamic. Rauschenberg famously erased de Kooning's original drawing and sold the erasing as his own creation. I would not go as far to enforce a binary wherein Everett is Rauschenberg to Ellison's de Kooning; however, the exchange does emphasize the absolute importance of the signature in conjunction with the possessing power of erasure. As such, the traces of *Invisible Man* in *Erasure* belong to Everett *because* of the erasure, and he uses them to resist the uncomplicated interpretive mechanisms of postmodern racist and Ellison-overloaded readings. Returning to the exchange between Wittgenstein and Derrida and the joke that the latter does not get: This thesis would commit a similar error of broad-sightedness as Derrida if it overlooked the immediate issues of race and racism and the complex dialogue with *Invisble Man* in *Erasure* to focus solely on Everett's *oeuvre-politik*. Indeed, *Erasure*'s engagement with postmodern racism and Ellison makes the essential deconstructive gesture of understanding the possibility of a system before articulating its limits. In *Erasure*, Everett offers an enlightening reading of how his

oeuvre can be read whereby *Invisible Man* remains only a possible outcome; the rest is marked somewhere on the dotted line.

Chapter Five: Conclusion

All stories are haunted by the ghosts of the stories they might have been.
—Salman Rushdie, *Shame*

Erasure ends in the wide-open space of ambivalence, leaving the "hypotheses" that it dares not "feign" up to the reader. My thesis has taken up the challenge between the lines of this final note of disengagement by exploring the ways in which *Erasure* acknowledges and critiques the phenomenon of postmodern racism which affects too many of the reading strategies—popular and academic—applied to books by authors who are African-American. There is a host—perhaps a "ghost"—of unrealized material in this project that could be explored—exorcised—in another full-length work. In particular, Everett's *corpus* asks that the sense of any distinction between the popular and the academic be closely examined. Graham Huggan takes the entanglement of the two as a given, and his *The Postcolonial Exotic* asks an important question at its outset: "How has the corporate publishing world co-opted postcolonial writing, and to what extent does the academy collaborate in similar processes of co-optation?" (viii). Future Everett studies should consider this question to be a viable way in to understanding the rich potential—both popular and academic—of his work and the reality of his commercial and critical marginality. Attention to this issue in regards to the overwhelmingly positive reception of a novel, *Erasure*, which is so overtly pessimistic about the process to which it submits upon publication, would provide a useful check on the tendency to celebrate euphorically the novel's satiric edge without at least acknowledging the aspects that are blunted. What might have been.

As I close, I am also haunted by the sense that at points my thesis has advanced Everett as a somewhat narcissistic figure, concerned mainly with the relationship of

himself to his writing. This is a charge that is usually leveled against so much of American postmodernism. Everett's critics too often circumvent his apparent narcissism by choosing Everett's race above all other factors to neutralize and explain the contradictions and challenges that arise when reading his work. My thesis has shown the interpretive dead ends to such an approach, while exploring the insightful things that Everett has to say about race and racism in America when *he* invokes the subject. Despite its moments of obscurity and absolute self-reflexivity, Everett's writing has a self-consciously pedagogical bent. This aspect is another significant continuity between Everett and Derrida which was not addressed in my previous chapter: They are both, primarily, *readers* of texts. And their writing aims to make better readers out of us all.

What clues does Everett provide within his work for reading his work? I have approached the question broadly by suggesting that *Erasure* offers a model for reading his *oeuvre*, but this thread could be lengthened to touch upon an answer to the above question for each work. That ghostly figure of the reader should thus be granted a central role in Everett scholarship.

Gordon Miller. I insert myself into the frame as an equal and willing participant in the engaging dialogues that Everett opens up throughout his corpus. In transforming us into better readers, the theoretical rubrics of postmodernism and cosmopolitanism insist on the same thing that Everett's *Erasure* insists upon: the observer is included in the frame. Such insertion displays an edifying awareness of the responsibilities and the consequences of making meaning out of and in an increasingly de-stabilized world.

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