
Speculative Realism and the Postrace Aesthetic in Contemporary American Fiction

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In the past few years, my research has focused on a project that I have termed “Speculative Realism and the Postrace Aesthetic.” In this new work, I am concerned with what I see as a large-scale generic, formal, and aesthetic turn on the part of some contemporary American writers to a “post-postmodern” and “postrace” era in American literature. My suggestion is that ethnic minority writers are at the forefront of this shift but that it is not limited to writers of color alone. In this chapter, I would like to identify some features of the transformation in American fiction being wrought by this speculative realism and the postrace aesthetic in the wake of the era of postmodernism.

I begin by noting that, in the last decade or so, a whole new generation of writers has come to artistic maturity whose work signals a radical turn to something we might call a “postrace” and “post-postmodern” era in American literature, film, and other arts. One of the most interesting of these writers, African American Colson Whitehead, for example, in an op-ed piece published in the *New York Times* in late 2009, marked the one-year anniversary of the election of Barack Obama to the presidency of the United States. In this piece, Whitehead proclaimed, “One year ago . . . we officially became a postracial society” (A31). What in the world did he mean by that? In what sense “postracial”? Why are people talking this way now? And what shape does this idea take in literature?

A New Postrace Generation

Colson Whitehead is not alone in his regard of a new “postrace” America. In addition to Whitehead, novelists such as African Americans Touré, Percival Everett, and Dexter Palmer; Asian Americans Karen Tei Yamashita and Sesshu Foster; Native American Sherman Alexie; and Latinos Salvador Plascencia, Yxta Maya Murray, Marta Acosta, and Junot Díaz all express similar concerns about a postrace America.¹ They are joined by an even larger group of contemporary authors (Michael Chabon, Jonathan Safran Foer, Mark Z. Danielewski, and Jonathan Franzen, for example) who have deliberately and self-consciously turned away from postmodern metafiction toward what I am here calling speculative realism or historical fantasy. What is it about this group of authors? What characterizes them as a cohort? And why now?

First, and probably most obviously, this generation of writers *is* a new generation: they are young, relatively speaking, all having been born for the most part in the 1970s, that is, a decade or two after the heroic period of the Civil Rights struggle. The Civil Rights Movement is for them not a *memory* (as it is for persons born in the 1950s and earlier) but a matter of *history* and so therefore part of the now-distant past. So there is a generational distinction.

A second important feature that distinguishes them from previous generations of great American writers is that this generation of writers is university trained. This distinguishes them from African Americans such as Richard Wright, James Baldwin, or Ralph Ellison; Chicano novelists Américo Paredes or Tomás Rivera; Asian Americans John Okada or Maxine Hong Kingston; or Native American D’Arcy McNuckles. Unlike these great early to mid-twentieth-century writers, who became authors as independent apprentices in a solitary craft, today creative writers are, almost without exception, products of what Mark McGurl has called the creative writing program era, the boom in university-based, workshop-style, creative writing programs in the postwar era.² Many of these creative writing programs simply did not exist before the Civil Rights era, and where they did exist, were certainly not admitting writers of color in any significant numbers into their programs. This is something, by the way, that is unique to the United States. To the best of my knowledge, in no other country in the world today do you find this need to be credentialed in a university in order to become a successful writer. In any case, feature number two is that the writers of this late twentieth-century generation are products of university-based creative writing programs. With this recognition, we would want to ask what the consequences are of their shared programmed creativity.

And, finally, they share a third feature: they are all what I will call, certainly inelegantly, post-postmodern. To describe them so is less a matter of historical nomenclature than it is an aesthetic matter. Postmodernism is a matter of style, peculiar to our time, and writers of the last quarter of the twentieth century educated in the creative writing programs of the United States could not become writers without having been exposed to, if not fully embracing, the rules and principles of

artistic creation associated with the postmodern styles emerging from architecture, music, film, and the avant-garde literary production of the era. Even today, it is virtually impossible to be a writer of note without being aware of, if not deeply influenced by, the tremendous explosion of postmodernism since the early 1970s (a time contemporaneous, in other words, with the end of the heroic stage of the Civil Rights era). The salience of postmodernism as an aesthetic is its rejection of the modern – and modernist – way of judging the world. If the ideology of the modern world was predicated on a turn away from a premodern world – that is, a world of tradition and faith – in favor of reason and rationality, then the postmodern was a way of questioning the modern triumph of reason and rationalism (which is what we like to believe separates the modern from the premodern worlds). Yet, unlike earlier styles and modes of realism, modernism, or even magical realism, postmodernism has not usually been a mode that writers of color have opted to use. Why? No doubt there are numerous reasons for this, not least of which might be a general turn to what has also been termed “post-theory.”³ But certainly, one main reason is because, for the most part, postmodernism has tended to be unrelentingly sardonic, parodic, cynical, and ironic, not to say outright pessimistic to the point of extreme narcissism about the possibility of redemptive futures, progressive arcs of history, and utopian solutions to the disasters occasioned in the name of enlightenment.

Thus, while postmodernism has been an effective way of providing salutary critique of the triumph of modernity and instrumental reason, pointing out the failure of faith, ethics, or morality by showing how even belief in postmodern times functions in the service of the globalized money economy, using the techniques of modern advertising and commodity markets, few minority writers have embraced it as a form. For postmodernists, for example, the triumph of modern instrumental reason has meant that even something as allegedly divorced from market considerations as religion can be seen to be ruled not by faith, ethics, or morality but by making belief itself a matter in the service of the money economy, something, in other words, that one can commodify, market, and sell successfully. For many writers of color, consequently, postmodernism has proven to be simply too distantly removed from the real world of justice and injustice and too pessimistic about the possibility of freedom and right to make it the basis for an attractive form of imaginative creativity. The group of writers I refer to here are different from their predecessors on this score as well: while not postmodernists, they nevertheless critically, selectively, provisionally, and strategically employ the postmodern as a style, form, and ethos to be parodied, satirized, exploited, and, ultimately, superseded.

These, then, are the three features that a new “postrace” “post-postmodern” generation of writers shares:

- Youth: constituting a generational difference
- University credentialed: providing a difference in craft

- Post-postmodern: utilizing an aesthetic of critical modern and postmodern forms, modes, and styles of representation

The Meaning of “Postrace”

Before I turn to my textual examples, I must first say something about my other term, namely, “postrace,” a term that has understandably riled many people. In thinking about the “postrace” era, I want to make one thing crystal clear about my use of the term: race, racism, and the patterns of inequality and discrimination that racism creates are nowhere near extinct in contemporary America. Race remains a central question, but one no longer defined exclusively in shades of black or white, nor in the exact manner we once imagined. That is, apart from the election of Barack Obama, one other matter marks the present differently from the racial history of the American past: today, race can no longer be considered exclusively in the binary form of black and white, which has traditionally structured racial discourse in the United States. If for no other reason than the profoundly shifting racial demographics of early twenty-first-century America, a new racial imaginary is required to account for the persistence of race as a key element of contemporary American social and cultural politics. What this suggests is not that we are beyond race; the prefix “post” here does not necessarily mean a chronological “superseding,” a triumphant posteriority. Rather, the term entails a conceptual shift to the question of what meaning the idea of “race” carries in our own times. The post of postrace is not like the post of poststructuralism; it is more like the post of postcolonial, that is, a term designating not a chronological but a conceptual matter, one that refers to the logic of something having been “shaped as a consequence of” imperialism and racism. The coloniality of power has not been superseded in the postcolonial. In the arts, the idea of “postblack” or “postrace” is not entirely a new one. It began in the art world with a class of black artists who were adamant about not being labeled *black* artists even as their work redefined notions of blackness. Now, however, the idea is gradually expanding into the wider consciousness.

In thinking about changing contemporary notions of race, it is useful to concentrate on racial symbolism, that is, the ways that creative writers, filmmakers, musicians, and artists in general today represent life experiences, such as access to safe working and living conditions or good schools, and how life opportunities are limited by conditions of severe economic exploitation, from living under constant vigilance and surveillance, or by migration, diaspora, and the history of economic, social, and legal injustice in the Americas. How are these matters symbolized in literature? Especially now that we have a “post-black” president, that is, someone who came to political prominence not as a product of or under the guidance of the traditional leadership of the Civil Rights Movement, the question of how as a society we may today represent and reimagine ideas and symbols of blackness, color, and race generally is a central

one for writers, poets, dramatists, novelists, and other producers of creative works. The new generation of writers sees race differently, as an open-source document, a trope with infinite uses.

Percival Everett's *Erasure*

This is the context within which I wish to read Percival Everett's novel *Erasure* (2001), which predates Obama and the most recent controversies about the reality of a postrace era, but which asks all the questions that are implied in current discussions.

Percival Everett completed his MFA degree in the creative writing program at Brown University in 1983. He has been a prolific writer of novels and short stories since then. In the main story of *Erasure*, the central protagonist is an English professor and creative writer at UCLA, an African American interestingly named Thelonious Ellison, nicknamed “Monk.” As we enter Monk's story, the narrative we read is in the form of a journal, “a private affair” (Everett 1), told from a vantage point that is a retrospective of the events we are about to read. Raised in a well-to-do family, a son and grandson of doctors, “graduated *summa cum laude* from Harvard,” Monk is a published author and black, in fact, a member of the elite black bourgeoisie. But black though he may be, Monk is not “*black enough*” (2) according to his critics, reviewers, and book publishers:

I have dark brown skin, curly hair, a broad nose, some of my ancestors were slaves and I have been detained by pasty white policemen in New Hampshire, Arizona and Georgia and so the society in which I live tells me I am black; that is my race. (1)

But then he adds,

The hard *gritty* truth of the matter is that I hardly ever think about race. Those times when I did think about it a lot I did so because of my guilt for not thinking about it. I don't believe in race. I believe there are people who will shoot me or hang me or cheat me and try to stop me because they do believe in race, because of my brown skin, curly hair, wide nose and slave ancestors. But that's just the way it is. (2)

Monk's books have nothing to do with the color of his skin, or his “black experience.” Instead, Monk writes intellectual novels grounded in mythology, philosophy, theology, and art, “retellings of Euripides and parodies of French poststructuralists” (2). *Erasure* opens with a wittily hilarious parody of Roland Barthes's *S/Z* that Monk is presenting as a paper at the annual meeting of the *Nouveau Roman Society* in Washington, DC (14–17). Academic postmodern parodies may be fulfilling and fun to write, but they are difficult to sell, as Monk's agent likes to point out.

Yet Monk doesn't care about selling books. For him, it's about "art" and the integrity of art. As his story opens, Monk is adamant about his desire to be able to write whatever he wants, in whatever form he wants, and not be pigeonholed or market-niched as a "black writer." Tellingly, he recalls early in the narrative that as a child, his father once told him in a museum, when he complained about an illegible signature on a painting: "You don't sign it because you want people to know you painted it, but because you love it" (32–3). Monk savors the nostalgic memory but now rejects its solemnity:

He was all wrong, of course, but the sentiment was so beautiful that I wish to believe it now. What he might have been trying to say, I suppose, . . . was that art finds its form and that it is never a mere manifestation of life. (33)

The remainder of Monk's narrative will hinge profoundly on the finding of the proper form for art while rejecting the mere manifestation of life.

At the beginning of the story, then, Monk is proud of his unpopular books, and equally proud to put his name on them. He appraises them not as "mere manifestations of life" but as sincere attempts to get at life's complexities. All of this, and especially his outlook on life and art, is challenged when, one day, he finds himself in a Border's bookstore and discovers his books "in a section called African American Studies" (28). About this, Monk says that "the only thing ostensibly African American [about the books] was my jacket photograph" (29).

As if that were not bad enough, to his further dismay, he finds in the bookstore a runaway bestseller titled *We's Lives In Da Ghetto*, about the "black experience," written by someone by the name of Juanita Mae Jenkins, a first-time black author who once spent "a couple of days" in Harlem (53). *We's Lives In Da Ghetto* purports to be a realistic slice-of-life novel about the gritty reality of the contemporary urban black experience. This is the moment of transformation for Monk: like St. Augustine compelled by a heavenly voice, "*Tole lege*," he picks up and reads *We's Lives In Da Ghetto*. And reading this book, he says, "was like strolling through an antique mall, feeling good, liking the sunny day and then turning the corner to find a display of watermelon-eating, banjo-playing darkie carvings and a pyramid of Mammy cookie jars" (29). "I closed the book and thought I was going to throw up" (29).

The Appeal of Black Pathology

Everett's incipient parody of *We's Lives In Da Ghetto* is clearly a sharp jab at books like Sapphire's *Push* (1996), adapted into the popular movie *Precious* (2009). Enraged by the book, Monk wants to know why it is that popular black books must be about slaves, or girls getting raped, or living in the ghetto, and why they have to be written in Ebonics. He wonders why books about illiterate black people as overweight, strung out on drugs, abused as children, raped, and having babies by their father are so

popular generally and so beloved by critics. Is it that readers are more comfortable with a depiction of black people as pathologic losers? He wonders too whether the explanation might be that black victims provide catharsis for white guilt.

At almost the same time, Monk's sister, a reform-minded, social activist gynecologist working in a clinic offering poor women affordable health care is shot to death by an anti-abortionist right-wing zealot. Simultaneously, his mother is succumbing to Alzheimer's while Monk debates whether to institutionalize her, and his rich, and apparently superficial, plastic surgeon brother has just come out as gay and is leaving his wife and kids for another man. Driven by all of this surrounding social and personal craziness, Monk, in violation of his avowed aesthetic codes, decides to write "a book on which I knew I could never put my name" (62). In one anger-filled sitting, Monk writes his own "black experience" book, a parody – almost as a therapeutic cure to his anger and depression – and signs it under the pseudonym Stagg R. Leigh. The novella he writes is *My Pafology*, an interpolated narrative within the novel, included verbatim and as a complete disruption of the narrative flow of *Erasure*. On page 62 of *Erasure*, using the classical rhetorical mode of *parabasis*, the narrative of Monk's story breaks, and for the next 70 pages we get the interpolated novella, *My Pafology*, purportedly the work of "Stagg R. Leigh."

My Pafology

My Pafology is about Van Go Jenkins, a bad 19-year-old gangbanger and rapist with attitude and the father of four children by four different women. We don't get the names of all of the four women, but we do get the names of the kids: "Aspireena, Tylenola, Dexatrina, Rexall" (66). A bit later, with at best a hazy idea about geography, Van Go is dreaming about escaping his depressing ghetto life and retreating to the Afro Caribbean and "an island somewhere in them islands down there." In this reverie, he begins imagining names for the babies he's going to have by different "island" women. In alphabetical order, he says, "Their names gone be Avaricia, Baniqua, Clitoria, Dashone, Equisha, Fantasy, Galinque, Hobitcha, I'youme, Jamika, Klauss, Latishanique, Mystery, Niggerina, Oprah, Pastischa, Quiquisha, R'nee'nee, Suckina, Titfunny, Uniqua, Vaselino, Wuzziness, Yolandinique and Zookie" (82). That, plus the chapter headings of *My Pafology* – Won, Too, Free, Fo, Fibe, Sex, Seben, Ate, Nine, and Tin – should give a clue as to what's going on. (We should note that this is an example of what is called "eye dialect," that is, written representations of dialect speech where words are spelled in a manner that indicates a nonstandard pronunciation. Some famous authors who have used eye dialect to great effect are Mark Twain, Charles Dickens, William Faulkner, and Cormac McCarthy, something an alumnus of the creative writing workshops would certainly know.)

Then there is the matter of Monk's chosen pseudonym itself, Stagg R. Leigh. No one to whom Monk shows *My Pafology* notices that "Stagg R. Leigh" is a reference to the first black "gangsta" song ever written, a blues ballad titled "Stagger Lee," from

the 1890s about a cruel, murderous pimp and his crimes. On Christmas Eve, 1895, in St. Louis, Missouri, a man by the name of Lee Shelton (March 16, 1865–March 11, 1912), an African American taxi cab driver and pimp, was convicted of murdering William “Billy” Lyons. The crime was immortalized in a popular song that has been recorded by numerous artists. In song, Stagger Lee has become an archetype, the symbol and embodiment of the tough, outlaw, black man – one who is sly, streetwise, cool, lawless, amoral, and violent, and defies white authority.

And then, finally, the hero of *My Pafology*, describing a violent dream he has just had about his mother, says, “I stab Mama cause I love her. I stab Mama cause I hate her. Cause I love her. Cause I hate her” (65). In case we don’t get the abject misogyny, this nightmare scene is repeated a little later, on page 83, almost verbatim, the phrase becoming a leitmotiv of Van Go’s tendency toward the berserk. Each of these features of language, style, theme, and narrative mode is pathologically over the top. Clearly, Monk is doing his best to show readers of *My Pafology* that we are not in the real world here; rather, we are in a world of parody and satire, pure and simple, a fantasy concocted to excess in order to make an aesthetic and political point about the nature of racially pathologic symbology. With *My Pafology*, we have left the world of *Erasure* and entered a world constructed by pure irony to disrupt the stolidity of the Real. So far so good, we think. But then the problems of controlling irony and satire really begin for Monk. In order to effect his joke on the racialized world, Monk has to impersonate Stagg R. Leigh to book publishers and film producers. In one such meeting with a Hollywood producer, and in response to the man’s question about the reason for Stagg’s purported imprisonment, Monk intones, “They say I killed a man with the leather awl of a Swiss army knife” (218).

To his shock and horror, *My Pafology* is bought by Random House for \$600,000, the film rights are taken for \$3 million, and an Oprah-like TV talk show host picks Stagg R. Leigh’s book for her book club and invites him on her TV show. But it is not just the lowbrow naïfs who get taken in by the parody. When Monk is asked to be on a literary prize committee to select the National Book Award, he is furious at his fellow judges, sophisticated readers all, who want to give the prize to *My Pafology* – even though Monk insists that Stagg R. Leigh’s book is “offensive, poorly written, racist and mindless” (261), nothing more than a piece of “demeaning and soul-destroying drivel” (137). This is the imperturbable and insanely ironic logic that seems to drive the contemporary discourses of race coupled with artistic freedom in Monk’s world. Which way will Monk chose? Integrity and authenticity as an artist? Or the money that comes with being a “black” writer? Integrity or selling out?

The Novel’s Postrace and Post-Postmodern Dilemma

Percival Everett’s *Erasure* is a postmodern parody within a parody. It is about how contemporary society has become so obsessed with things that are shocking and awful that we don’t care whether they are real or not. Also, it scathingly satirizes the fact

that we are much too ready to take the exaggerated, over-the-top representation of extreme violence and depravity as the *norm* of African American life. We are caught in the novel’s dilemma: the novel gives us something – a parody – and then parodies the parody. Which version of “black” life are we really supposed to believe? Monk’s or Stagg’s? In what ways is a story like *My Pafology* honest? In what ways is it dishonest? What is it about stories like *We’s Lives In Da Ghetto*, *Push*, or *Precious* that so capture people’s imaginations and sensibility?

At the same time as it satirizes representations of race, *Erasure* also deflates the entire enterprise of “postmodern fiction” (37), especially in the send-up of one pathetically insignificant defender of postmodernism, the character named Davis Gimbel. In a “disturbed, certifiable, and agitated postmodern state,” Gimbel accuses Monk of being “a mimetic hack” (18) and of despising postmodernism even while he fails to understand it (36–7). Monk dismisses Gimbel and his accusations, as he takes gleeful pleasure in satirizing him, poststructuralism, and postmodernism too in the parody of Roland Barthes’s *S/Z* that I mentioned earlier. Significantly, Everett links his satiric representation of the contemporary world of racial discourse to uncritical assumptions about the nature of both the racial imagination and the postmodern one. In the end, the two are linked as providing equally deficient possibilities for understanding the profundity of the contemporary social world.

But the fact is that, despite his parodies of it, Monk *is* a kind of postmodernist. Enough so that he is anxious about one of his earlier novels, written in the “realist” mode, a story of a black character whose “white-looking mother is ostracized by the black community” and who decides to “attack the culture and so becomes a terrorist, killing blacks and whites who behave as racists.” Of this earlier work written in a reductively realist mode, Monk now claims, “I hated writing the novel. I hated reading the novel. I hated thinking about the novel” (61).

What Monk hates about that earlier narrative has to do with its subject matter – that is, race – but only to a degree. He is, I think, more concerned about its lapse from his usual postmodern sensibility, style, and understanding. As a poststructuralist and postmodern writer, he is wary about the illusiveness of the kind of certainty and conviction that it takes to become a terrorist against racists. He believes that when we accept certainties of this kind, we are only one false step away from holding distorted, stereotyped, hypothetical versions of certainty and conviction. And when we do so, and verge into convictions that more often than not diminish and flatten out the infinite complexity of truths, especially social truths, we feel that we are thereby absolved from having to deal with the more uncertain truths of who people are and how they become that way.

All too often, stories like the ones from Monk’s past, represented by his earlier “realist” novel and more repugnantly by Juanita Mae Jenkins’s *We Lives In Da Ghetto*, come to represent all black people’s stories, which obviously they are not. At the same time, however, as is evident in the events of his own life – his sister’s murder, the chaos in his brother’s life, his mother’s descent into Alzheimer’s disease, his father’s suicide, and the subsequent revelation of his Korean War-time affair with a white

British woman by whom he has fathered a daughter now living in New York – unimaginable things do happen to people, particularly to poor people of color, but to bourgeois blacks as well. So, as readers, we are caught in the novel's dilemma: the novel gives us something – a parody – and then parodies the parody. Which one are we ultimately supposed to believe? Monk's or Stagg's versions of the truth?

Everett keeps the irony spinning, switching from humor to horror and back again, as Monk weaves his way through the uncontrollable pitfalls of life and the self-induced dilemma he has created with the huge success of *My Pafology*. Given, then, the deficiencies of both contemporary racial discourse and postmodern critical and imaginative forms, how may one write the reality of race and racial experience with integrity and without stereotyping? As Monk puts it late in the novel,

Had I by annihilating my own presence actually asserted the individuality of Stagg Leigh? Or was it the book itself that had given him life? There he was for public scrutiny and the public was loving him. . . . Would I have to kill Stagg to silence him? And what did it mean that I could put those questions to myself? Of course, it meant nothing, and so, it meant everything. (248)

Thus the novel's dilemma: does the mild-mannered black artist have to resort to killing his archetypal black alter ego in order to retain his artistic integrity? Everett's answer for this set of questions is to create a multidimensional protagonist interacting on several different levels, each representing different symbolologies of race. What do I mean by this?

The Multidimensional Protagonist

Everett's novel gives us a triple-layered protagonist:

- Thelonious "Monk" Ellison, a university professor, cultured writer, furniture maker and lover of finely crafted woodworking, fly-fishing enthusiast, and possessor of sensitive intellectual humor who finds himself "not black enough" to satisfy the stereotype of the black man and black artist
- Stagg R. Leigh, an alter ego, the ex-con murderer-turned-novelist, an artist of the vernacular street culture, and a connoisseur of the desperation of the ghetto
- Van Go Jenkins, another alter ego, the repulsive main character of *My Pafology*, counterpoint to both creative authors and an independent crafter of an aesthetics of mayhem and violence

What do they add up to? Who is Thelonious "Monk" Ellison?

In a way, *all* of these characters ~~ARE~~ part of who Thelonious "Monk" Ellison is. I place the "are" and the "is" *under erasure*, crossed out: because none is all of who Monk is. Each is a stereotype, and therefore a partial version of reality. But more than

a stereotype, each is understandable not as either Monk or not. On the contrary, each is *both Monk and not*.

Sous Rature

This is the very nature of the process called *sous rature*, "under erasure," a strategic philosophical device originally defined and developed by Martin Heidegger and later elaborated by Jacques Derrida. Usually translated as "under erasure," it involves the crossing out of a word within a text, but allowing it to remain legible and in place.

Particularly in *De la grammatologie* (1967), Jacques Derrida uses the process of placing a word *sous rature* in order to signify that the word is "inadequate yet necessary," that is, a particular signifier that is not wholly suitable for the concept it represents, but nevertheless must be used to represent it, since the constraints of our language offer nothing better. "Since the word is inaccurate, it is crossed out. Since the word is necessary, it remains legible," explains Gayatri Spivak in her monumental preface to her translation of Derrida's *Of Grammatology* (Derrida; in particular, see Spivak's "Translator's Preface," xiv). *Sous rature* has been described as the "typographical expression of deconstruction" (Taylor and Winquist 113). Deconstruction is a mode of analysis in literary theory that seeks to identify sites within texts where key terms and concepts may be paradoxical or self-undermining, rendering their meaning undecidable.⁴ More accurately, deconstruction and the practice of *sous rature* seek to demonstrate that meaning is derived from *difference* and *dialogical relationality*, not by simple reference to some preexisting notion or freestanding idea (Belsey 116).

In his use of the strategy of placing key words *sous rature*, Heidegger was concerned with trying to return the absent meaning of a concept to its present meaning, and the placing of a word or term under erasure "simultaneously *recognised* and *questioned* the term's meaning and accepted use" (Taylor and Winquist 113). Derrida adopted this technique and further extended the implications of Heidegger's *erasure* and its application in the wider setting of deconstructive literary theory. In particular, Derrida extended the problem of presence and absence to include the notion that *erasure* does not mark a lost presence. Rather, it marks the potential impossibility of presence altogether. In other words, Derrida pushes Heidegger's notion all the way to investigation of the potential impossibility of univocity of meaning ever having been attached to the word or term in the first place. Ultimately, Derrida argued, it was not just the particular signs that were placed under erasure, but also the whole system of signification (Taylor and Winquist 113).

It is no accident, then, that Everett titles his novel *Erasure*. Or that erasures mark the title page of the novel, that the front matter title is under erasure, that the chapter numerals are under erasure, and that the running heads place the title ~~*Erasure*~~ under erasure. In these instances, the narrative writes a word, crosses it out, and thus represents in print both word and deletion, literally. The crossed-out word is a sign of the unrepresentable and the unknown, like the "X" in the name of Malcolm X. Yet,

this procedure is also, allegorically, the mode that Everett uses to represent and simultaneously retract a variety of terms in the novel, most prominently ~~RACE~~ itself. This is clearly the way to read the passage cited earlier about “race.” I cite it again, this time under erasure, because it bears rereading *sous rature*:

The hard gritty truth of the matter is that I hardly ever think about ~~race~~. Those times when I did think about it a lot I did so because of my guilt for not thinking about it. I don't believe in ~~race~~. I believe there are people who will shoot me or hang me or cheat me and try to stop me because they do believe in ~~race~~, because of my brown skin, curly hair, wide nose and slave ancestors. But that's just the way it ~~is~~. (2)

Since in the novel, and in the world that Everett is attempting to represent, the word “race” is inaccurate as a sign of the multiply layered, doubly enfolding, intricately contradictory nature of identity (and of the contemporary racial discourse and the practice of doing or performing racial identity), the only way to use the word, or live the consequences of its use in all honesty and sincerity, is under erasure, crossed out: ~~RACE~~. Yet, because RACE *is* a word that can carry life-and-death implications, since one may be assuredly shot or hanged under its sign, it must necessarily remain visible and legible under the cross.

This is one explanation for the formal strategies of the novel, namely, the multi-dimensional protagonist and the interpolated narratives (the parodies of *S/Z* and the full novella of *My Pafology*). It also explains why Everett gives his protagonist, Thelonious “Monk” Ellison, a name that triumphantly recalls both the great jazz artist Thelonious Monk and the magisterial African American novelist of the mid-twentieth century, Ralph Ellison, author of *Invisible Man* (1952). And it is why Monk, late in the narrative, self-consciously cites Ellison, “Behold the invisible” (212), obviously aware that he is a postmodern rendition of Ellison's invisible hero, who in the guise of his own alter ego, named Rinehart, strained to adapt to white society at the cost of his own identity. As Monk further realizes, in creating Van Go Jenkins and Stagg R. Leigh, he is producing “an overly ironic, cynical, self-conscious and yet faithful copy of Juanita Mae Jenkins, author of the runaway-best-seller-soon-to-be-a-major-motion-picture *We's Lives In Da Ghetto*” (221).

Erasure thus proposes that in examining race, love, art, integrity, and other such necessary terms, we come to such unfamiliar conclusions that our very language is twisted and contorted as it guides us. As Spivak notes, “Writing ‘under erasure’ is the mark of this contortion” (in Derrida xiv). This is the “erasure” of the novel: is Monk a sellout or not? Is he a black author or not? Is he a mimetic hack or not? Is he black or not? And the answer that the novel provides is that, of course, under erasure, he is and he ~~is~~ not.

The Postrace Aesthetic in a Post-Postmodern World

Given the rigor of these erasures, Everett's novel leaves us with yet another perplexing conundrum: is this a good book by a Black writer, or is it a Black book by a good

writer? And what would either of these labels, or any other that we could come up with, for that matter, mean? Still, the fact that we can pose these questions is what makes this novel “postrace.” This does not mean that race is superseded by the prefix “post,” but that it parodies both the modern and postmodern ways of thinking about race. For the postrace authors, neither the traditional, nor the modern, nor the postmodern ways of thinking about race are sufficient for accounting for the complex, multiple, often contradictory ways that persons today account for who they are and why they are that way, or imagine how they can be in the future. The “post” in postrace may simply be an indication of an attempt to clear out epistemic space for a new way of conceiving what “race” is and has been all along, not a way of claiming that we have somehow “gone beyond” race or that it has been transcended as a reality in contemporary life.⁵

Percival Everett's *Erasure* and the other authors who I named at the beginning of my chapter are all getting at a variety of speculative and fantastical modes and forms: a new generational way of thinking about race, trained in the creative writing workshop in the wry, self-conscious, postmodern way of parodying traditional and modern ways of thinking about race, all of this in order to imagine something that does not yet exist in the real world, a place where “race” might truly not matter at all.

Thus, after he composes *My Pafology*, Monk decries having done it:

I tried to distance myself from the position where the newly sold piece-of-shit novel had placed me vis-à-vis my art. It was not exactly that I had sold out, but I was not, apparently, going to turn away the check. I considered my woodworking and why I did it. In my writing my instinct was to defy form but I very much sought in defying form to affirm it, an irony that was difficult enough to articulate, much less to defend. (139)

But as if in answer to this early question about the defying of form and the irony of affirming it while in the very process of denying it (exactly the way that as a young man he had once described the formal qualities of Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist* and *Finnegans Wake* to his father [185]), Monk returns to the issues of form and irony:

The fear of course is that in denying or refusing complicity in the marginalization of “black” writers, I ended up on the very distant and very “other” side of a line that is imaginary at best. I didn't write as an act of testimony or social indignation (though all writing in some way is just that) and I did not write out of a so-called family tradition of oral storytelling. I never tried to set anybody free, never tried to paint the next real and true picture of the life of my people, never had any people whose picture I knew well enough to paint. . . . But the irony was beautiful. I was a victim of racism by virtue of my failing to acknowledge racial difference and by failing to have my art be defined as an exercise in racial self-expression. So, I would not be economically oppressed because of writing a book that fell in line with the very books I deemed racist. And I would have to wear the mask of the person I was expected to be. (213)

Fantasy, delusion, imaginary: these are the forms of the new real, a speculative vision of a world that does not yet exist and may never. More poignantly still, after

his appearance on the Oprah-like “Kenya Dunston” television show, Monk realizes that “I had managed to take myself, the writer, reconfigure myself, then disintegrate myself, leaving two bodies of work, no boundaries yet walls everywhere” (257). The conclusion? “I had to rescue myself and that meant, it was ever so clear for a very brief moment, losing myself” (258). “I had to defeat myself to save my self, my own identity” (259).

Forced by these ironies to wear multiple layers of masks, Everett’s hero enters into a fantasy of near-undecipherable proportions. This situation figures exactly what Jacqueline Rose means when she maintains, “Fantasy is not therefore antagonistic to social reality; it is its precondition or psychic glue” (3).⁶ And it is why no realism, whether magical, modern, or postmodern, alone can accurately represent the resolution of its ironic desire for a postrace world and aesthetic. Nevertheless, in desiring it, the novel creates something new, something we might call *historical fantasy*. Its province is the aesthetic in the mode we might term *speculative realism* as a hybrid amalgam of realism, magical realism, metafiction, and genre fictions such as science fiction, graphic narrative, and fantasy proper. Historical fantasy is a way of describing the “something more” that the literary works I refer to as postrace fictions do in linking fantasy, history, and the imaginary in order to remain true to ethnic literature’s utopian allegiance to social justice.

With the concluding words of the novel, “*hypotheses non fingo*” – I frame no hypothesis, or, better, I feign no hypothesis – from Newton’s *Principia* (1729), Everett marks Newton’s emphasis on the margin between certainty and speculation as one of the central concerns of his own work as well.⁷ In a culminating act of supreme irony, Thelonious Ellison, Percival Everett’s postracial invisible man, like Isaac Newton drawing the line between sham hypotheses and explanations deduced from phenomena, stands at the very limits of our contemporary understanding of race and the postmodern to test our unexamined convictions about both. Instead of feigned hypotheses, *Erasure* poses an undiminished complexity of baffling truths that in their very speculative refractoriness cannot absolve us from having to deal with the real uncertainties of who people are and how they become that way. In doing so, it underscores the centrality of the condition of speculative realism as the mark of the postrace aesthetic in the era of the post-postmodern.

NOTES

1. Of the writers I refer to as “postrace,” see, for example, these works: Touré, *Soul City* (2005); Everett, *Erasure: A Novel* (2001); Palmer, *The Dream of Perpetual Motion* (2010); Yamashita, *Tropic of Orange* (1997); Foster, *Atomik Aztex* (2005); Alexie, *Flight* (2007); Plascencia, *The People of Paper* (2005); Murray, *The Conquest: A Novel* (2002); Acosta, *Happy Hour at Casa*
2. From McGurl’s observation in *The Program Era* about the institutionalization of creativity within the university, several crucial evaluative questions arise: how have creative writing programs reorganized postwar American writing, and how might this reorganization

3. Of numerous possibilities, see, for example, McQuillan and Zizek.
4. On deconstruction as a literary critical practice, see Belsey (116).
5. For an excellent account of contemporary theories of race, see Markus and Moya, especially their synoptic introduction, “Doing Race: An Introduction,” 1–102. On labeling black books by black authors, see McGoy.
6. Rose’s *States of Fantasy* is a wonderfully illuminating discussion of the power of fantasy as a personal and social reality.
7. See Cohen, who notes, “The sentence, ‘*Hypotheses non fingo*,’ which appears for the first time in the concluding ‘Scholium Generale’ in the revised second edition (1713) of the *Principia*, is unquestionably the most famous of Newton’s dicta” (379).

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