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## “Out of place”: Reading Space in Percival Everett’s *Erasure*

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Percival Everett’s twelfth novel, *Erasure* (2001), satirizes America’s eagerness to consume racialized images of the ghetto, especially within an increasingly commodified literary marketplace. The main protagonist, an experimental African American novelist called Thelonious Ellison and known as Monk, pens a satire of ghetto glamour titled *My Pafology*, the story of Van Go Jenkins, a young African American man with four children by four different women, which Monk retitles *Fuck* just before publication. To Monk’s horror, the novel, written under the pseudonym of Stagg R. Leigh (a nod to the folk anti-hero Stagolee) is fêted as “gritty realism” by critics and general readers alike. It is even awarded a prestigious literary prize by a panel of experts that includes a disillusioned Monk among its number. Given the prominence of metafiction and parody in the novel, it is hardly surprising that most criticism has focused on Everett’s postmodernist playfulness, with a particular emphasis on the novel’s iconoclasm.<sup>1</sup> What this emphasis on newness misses is the political seriousness that underpins Everett’s sustained intertextual engagement with a diverse political tradition of African American urban writing. *Erasure* abounds with allusions to and revisions of the writings of prominent mid-century African American novelists, including Chester Himes, Richard Wright, and Ralph Ellison, who shared a thematic preoccupation with spatial confinement and liberation. Everett’s recourse to the imagery of subways, high-rise hotels, airplanes, elevators, and cars signals his investment in a tradition of excavating the spatial imaginary (often by way of such motifs as manholes, airshafts, kitchenettes and sewers) in order to explore issues as diverse as the psychological impact of segregation, the relationship between literature and politics, and America’s tendency to whitewash its multiracial history.

To some extent, Everett's backward glance to African American fiction that is marked, in various ways, by the social and political pressures of Jim Crow carries political implications. Taking aim at a cartography of racial division in contemporary American society and a segmented literary marketplace where multinational chains such as Borders, "the Wal-Mart of books" (33), separate "African American Studies" from "Literature" and "Contemporary Literature" (Everett, *Erasure* 34), *Erasure* refuses to conform to the demands of a racially bifurcated publishing industry that trades in constricting notions of authenticity. Not only does Everett create a moving family drama, which focuses, among other things, on Monk's mother's battle with Alzheimer's and his sister Lisa's murder at the hands of anti-abortion protestors, but he also reprints *My Pafology* in full alongside extracts from Monk's latest novel, philosophical musings about woodwork and fishing, and letters from Monk's dead father to his secret lover.

Yet *Erasure* does not simply offer a celebratory vision of spatial transgression, which cuts across symbolic if not literal color and class lines in such diverse spaces as ghettos, suburbs, basketball courts, TV studios and bookshops. Allusion to Ellison, Himes, and Wright underlines Everett's participation in a continuing debate about the relationship between politics and literary activity. More specifically, he introduces comparative insights that dramatize the difficulties of mounting an effective political critique amid a hollow consumer culture that has, according to Paul Gilroy, "largely superseded the rights and responsibilities of citizenship" (*Darker* 8) that formed bedrock concepts for the earlier novelists. In this context, Everett's intertextual revisions are freighted with ambivalence and irony. Even though his satire is motivated by anger at the runaway success of a novel that trades in stereotypes about ghetto life, Monk becomes implicated in the cultural commodification of blackness when *My Pafology*, "a book on which [he] knew [he] could never put [his] name" (Everett, *Erasure* 70), is so commercially successful that he is forced to

masquerade as Stagg, a theatrical (if rather insubstantial) authorial persona that capitalizes on “the political and commercial value of blackness” (Gilroy, *Darker* 2). Furthermore, Everett raises searching questions about the limitations of satire, especially with reference to the reception of African American literature in a literary marketplace that tends to misread, and consequently erase, any kind of political critique.

### **Mapping Urban Space**

Recent interpretations of *Erasure* have been centrally concerned with the novel’s critique of a publishing industry that has, in John K. Young’s words, “consistently maintained distinct racial categories in which literature marked as black could be produced and consumed” (33) without paying sufficient attention to individual author’s preferences. In this context, Sinéad Moynihan reads *Erasure* as a new kind of passing narrative that she calls “passing as black(er)” (25). According to Moynihan, such narratives feature protagonists who are “indisputably ‘black’ according to the visual economy of race, the most oft-deployed means of ascertaining racial identity. However, they are seen as ‘white’ or racially ambiguous in terms of their class background, cultural affiliations, modes of behaviour and so on” (13). For these characters, passing is not physical; rather, it is “carried out through the act of writing” (26).

Everett’s adaptation of the conventions of the passing narrative serves to maximize ambiguity since passing is at once a subversive challenge to racial categories of identity and a conservative strategy that remains invested in the color line it aims to unsettle. As the blurring identities of Stagg and Monk suggest, Everett is centrally concerned with the limitations of satire, especially with reference to notions of complicity. He implies that Monk’s act of passing as an embodiment of what is perceived (by the literary establishment) to be an authentic African American mimetic realism may, in fact, maintain the very

structures it aims to dismantle. Indeed, as Everett explained in an interview, “I’m making fun of satire as well as satirizing social policies” (“Percival”). In other words, *Erasure* dramatizes the limits of satire. Since the genre’s political implications are realized only at the point of reception, it is dependent on the interpretive competence of informed, engaged readers. In this context, the elusive figure of Stagg, a masquerader who dons a disguise, darting in and out of view, encapsulates the challenge of locating tone in satire, a genre where authorial position is deliberately disguised.

One important aspect of Everett’s revision of the passing narrative that has gone unnoticed is his alertness to the centrality of spatial geography to these fictions of identity. As numerous commentators have pointed out, New Negro passing narratives such as James Weldon Johnson’s *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912), Rudolph Fisher’s “High Yaller” (1925), Jessie Redmon Fauset’s *Plum Bun: A Novel Without a Moral* (1928), and Nella Larsen’s *Passing* (1929) undertake a precise mapping of urban geography, from cinemas and ice cream parlors to factories and cabarets. A delineation of racial spaces in the modern city meant that mobility, or adept navigation of racial boundaries, was a prerequisite for any convincing performance of whiteness. The designation of particular urban spaces as either black or white, or the partition of black and white individuals within a shared space was, as Gilroy has demonstrated, based on “a principle of exclusion and social discipline” (*Against* 334). Given this, it is hardly surprising that the act of passing is associated with a physical transgression of multiple color lines that crisscross the city and a reorientation of the ambiguously raced body toward spaces that are perceived to be white. To take only one example, Angela Murray’s passing in Fauset’s *Plum Bun* is signalled by her abandonment of black, middle-class Philadelphia for the bohemian, predominantly white social set of Greenwich Village, a morally dubious arena that Fauset defines through a textured ethical geography, in which Paris represents racial tolerance, Harlem stands for racial community,

and multiracial spaces such as Grand Central Station facilitate what Amy Robinson has called a “triangular theatre” (716) of passing featuring three participants: “the passer, the dupe, and a representative of the in-group” (723).

Central to my discussion of space in *Erasure* is the tendency of New Negro writers such as Fisher and Larsen to plot the spatial dimensions of passing along a vertical axis, a move that permits indirect commentary on class privilege and racial identity. Take, as an example, the symbolic associations that Larsen establishes in *Passing* between Clare Kendry’s restless crossing of the color line and tall buildings such as the Drayton Hotel, skyscrapers, and the elevated window from which Clare falls to her death. Allied to modernity, sophistication, and consumerism, such architectural spaces at once confirm Clare’s privileged status as an individual who has secured economic advantages that would be unavailable to her as an African American and her precarious position as a woman of mixed race married to a racist white American.

In this context, it is rather surprising that critics of *Erasure* have failed to notice that geography becomes a major metaphor and structural principle in the novel. Refusing to adhere to a racial cartography of division and separation, Everett mines a tradition of writing the city that seeks to capture urban life in all its diversity, a tradition that might include such writers as Charles Dickens, Fyodor Dostoevsky, Ellison, and Wright, to mention only a few. Significantly, the bounded space of Van Go Jenkins’s ghetto in *My Pafology* is set in counterpoint to Monk’s physical, economic, and cultural mobility. Early in the narrative, Monk tells us: “I did not grow up in any inner city or the rural south. My family owned a bungalow near Annapolis” (Everett, *Erasure* 3). By drawing attention to his suburban upbringing, he draws a distinction between his fictional output and clichéd rhetoric of authentic expression issuing from the urban or rural folk. More generally, Monk’s mobility as a middle-class author of means is contrasted to Van Go’s entrapment.

Scenes of driving serve to underline these class differences. In a fascinating study of the automobile in African America, Gilroy explains that its neglected history “obliges us to update our understanding of culture itself in order to accommodate mobility and speed and their transformation of space, as well as to acknowledge the entrenched divisions between public and private that ludic technologies promoted and invested with new meaning once the private could traverse the public with pleasure and with ease” (*Darker* 30). In this context, Monk’s drives around Washington, DC, which prompts him to remark on the comfort and “quiet” he experiences “inside an automobile” (Everett, *Erasure* 36), encapsulate his insulation from the poverty that his sister Lisa witnesses every day as a doctor in a depressed inner city neighborhood. The economic and physical mobility secured by Monk’s driving gives him privileged access to economic realities masked by a city that “hides its poverty better than any city in the world” (24), but his perspective remains that of a distanced outsider, a Harvard-educated driver who is safe in the comfort of his private space. Given Monk’s limited view, it is crucial that readers are offered an alternative, expansive view of city life, which sets more realistic forms of poverty, such as the particularized stories of individual women who attend Lisa’s clinic, against the novel’s parodic reiteration of ghetto glamour. In the juxtaposition of multiple perspectives a democratic view of the city emerges, a humanist challenge to social and aesthetic segregation.

Van Go’s driving, on the other hand, fails to secure his independence. For one thing, he is, like Wright’s Bigger Thomas, employed as a chauffeur, a role that at once constrains his freedom of movement and generates unease as a consequence of the physical proximity of employee and employer. In the final pages of *My Pafology*, Van Go steals a Ford Torino to make his escape from the police after committing murder. In contrast to Monk’s purposeful navigation of the streets in the early stages of *Erasure*, Van Go is unable to find his way out of the ghetto. Indeed, a farcical scene that bombards the reader with specific routes and

highways repeatedly represents him “goin the wrong way” (146). In negotiations with the police after a hold-up, he demands a new car, a request that accords with a broader trend whereby “consumer citizenship and brand identities eclipse the merely political forms of belonging promoted by governmental institutions” (Gilroy, *Darker* 21). Given this trend, it is ironic that his getaway is brought to a halt by an air bag, which has been primed to immobilize him as a prelude to his arrest.

If Monk is a frequent flyer who can survey the world from the skies, Van Go is always on the ground, subject to surveillance: as a fugitive, he is pursued by police helicopters and tracked by searchlights. As Monk flies from Los Angeles to Washington, or drives from the family home to the beach house, we witness a precise mapping of geography. Spatial representations of the family home, the TV studio, and the subway are used to construct Monk’s black male, middle-class subjectivity. Indeed, Everett’s mapping of geographical space operates on a horizontal and a vertical axis, generating symbolism that experiments with notions of social hierarchy in such a way as to challenge what Everett has called “the established practice of pigeonholing the black experience” (“Interview” 223). As Everett explains in a recent interview, “the notion of a novel of the ghetto is a construction of white America. . . . Black people in America are as diverse as white people” (223). Given that this imaginative and literal cartography of racial division has its roots in segregation and slavery, it is significant that Everett refuses spatial (and aesthetic) segregation. He plays on ideas of liberation and confinement in his pointed juxtaposition of horizontal and vertical axes, which, taken together, deliver a kind of synoptic view of urban society.

Taken as a whole, *Erasure* delivers an expansive view of the city that cuts across racialized urban and cultural spaces, but Everett never loses sight of an enduring cartography of racial division, especially in a literary marketplace that manufactures spatialized concepts of racial authenticity. In the final analysis, both Monk and Van Go are subject to aesthetic



and literal segregation. Although Monk is associated with travel for much of the novel, he cannot escape from the ghetto in either its literal or figurative incarnations. He creates Van Go (and Stagg R. Leigh) to resist the fake racial authenticity of Juanita Mae Jenkins's bestselling *We's Lives in Da Ghetto*, but misinterpretation of his satirical intent means that the parody runs the risk of reinforcing a broader tendency to ghettoize black literature and culture.

To some extent, this opposition between mobility and fixity takes aim at "economically marginal" but "culturally central" representations of the ghetto that tend to freeze it in time and space, allowing outsiders to assume a voyeuristic, touristic perspective towards economic disenfranchisement (Kennedy 123). In this context, it is crucial that *My Pafology* updates Wright's best-selling *Native Son* (1940), a novel that establishes connections between Bigger Thomas's spatial and psychological isolation, especially through the recurring trope of "walls." Comparison of spatial dynamics in the two novels reveals that, even amid postmodern play, Everett's revision of *Native Son* draws inspiration from the earlier writer's detailed mapping of the city in terms of space and power, especially in its juxtaposition of various perspectives on urban life.

*Native Son*, of course, is centrally concerned with the social and psychological consequences of Chicago's residential segregation, with invidious practices such as zoning and redlining coming under the spotlight. According to Wright, the cramped space of the kitchenette, and by extension the ghetto itself, stunts Bigger's emotional development, especially his capacity for intimacy: "He knew that the moment he allowed himself to feel to its fullness how they lived, the shame and misery of their lives, he would be swept out of himself with fear and despair. So he held toward them an attitude of iron reserve; he lived with them, but behind a wall, a curtain" (48). To avoid psychological fragmentation, or being "swept out of himself," Bigger constructs "walls" that separate him from his family, creating

a warped kind of privacy, based on alienation and repression, in a space where there is none. Significantly, Wright's carefully chosen vocabulary keeps larger social, political, and economic forces in view: the phrase "iron reserve" invokes Chicago's restrictive property practices, especially the so-called "iron ring of housing" (Jurca 107) that segregated African Americans and whites.

Within the fictional world of *Erasure*, reviewers, publishers and talk show hosts celebrate *My Pafology* for its "raw," "honest," and "real" portrayal of the "hood," without noticing that its plot borrows heavily from Wright's well-known naturalist novel. Read alongside James Baldwin's essays "Everybody's Protest Novel" (1949) and "Many Thousands Gone" (1951), responses to "a post-war, post-*Native Son* literary landscape in which African-American novelists could only hope to sell their manuscripts if they consented to try 'out-Wrighting Richard'" (Warnes 60), Everett's allusions to Wright suggest that narrative expectations for African American fiction have changed little since the 1940s. Even so, there is at least one important modification to Wright's narrative outline in *My Pafology*. If, in Wright's novel, the Daltons are whites who have become rich on the profits of discriminatory real estate practices, Everett's Daltons are reimagined as successful, upper-middle-class African Americans, whose exploitation of and dependence on the working-classes as loan sharks is masked by a veneer of respectability and a well-appointed suburban home. Mary Dalton is reborn as Penelope Dalton, a Stanford graduate who has little time for politics; instead, she and her boyfriend Roger (who is a Communist named Jan in *Native Son*) become voyeurs who consume images of the "colorful" ghetto as if it were a commercialized theme park, which Van Go aptly names "Dissylant" (Everett, *Erasure* 119). With this shift of emphasis, Everett indicts the abdication of political responsibility that has accompanied the ghetto's cultural commodification, forcing readers to consider "who watches and from what position" (Sommer 98-99) and to make room for multiple discourses and perspectives.

Since Van Go's tour of the ghetto prompts Penelope and Roger to "star[e] out the windows like we in Jungleland" (Everett, *Erasure* 119), it is clear that an expectation of entertainment has supplanted both a political vocabulary of action, rights, and responsibilities and any kind of empathetic response that might signal development from distanced spectatorship to active involvement. Such a lack of political vision might seem to accord with Everett's decision to bring his adaptation of *Native Son* to a halt before the most politicized portion of the novel, namely Bigger's court case, which showcases the defense arguments of Bigger's Marxist lawyer Max. As Fritz Gysin observes, "what might have been the court scene becomes the TV show" (67), a substitution that underlines how celebrity and consumerism forestall serious inquiry into the wider implications of Van Go's behavior. However, Everett's framing of *My Pafology* counteracts any endorsement of an apolitical consumer culture by bringing multiple perspectives to bear on urban life, including an account of the poverty experienced by Monk's half-sister Gretchen's white family and the precarious insider's view opened up by Lisa's job as a doctor at an abortion clinic, which recalls the liminal position occupied by lower-middle-class governesses, nurses, and teachers in so-called "Condition of England" British novels.<sup>2</sup>

### **Excavating the Spatial Dynamics of US Urban Writing**

Everett's precise mapping of spatial dynamics, with particular reference to "the ideological and commercial use to which the (particularly male) African American is relentlessly put in late-twentieth and early-twenty-first-century America," accords with recent trends in African American literature (Stewart 168). Everett's lampooning of demands for "real" representations of ghetto life shares much with contemporary fiction by Paul Beatty and Colson Whitehead, not least because all three writers employ comedy in their juxtaposition of urban and suburban spaces. Of particular relevance to this discussion is Whitehead's *Sag*

*Harbor* (2009), a witty coming-of-age narrative that provides a quasi-anthropological insider's account of the African American summer resort of Sag Harbor. Like Monk, Benji, Whitehead's adolescent protagonist, is perceived to be "not black enough." Not only does he use the summer to catch up "on nine months of black slang and other sundry soulful artifacts [he's] missed out on in [his] 'predominantly white' private school" (29), but he comes up short in his identity as a consumer: the brands he "worship[s]" live "in the soup aisle, in the freezer section behind glass" (45).

As in *Erasure*, geography serves as an organizing principle in Whitehead's novel. In his account of Sag Harbor's origins as a black holiday resort, Benji draws attention to real estate practices that serve to reinforce racial separation. Beyond this interest in the persistence of spatial configurations that assign African American identity within social, political, and cultural boundaries, Whitehead demonstrates that Sag Harbor residents' lives are not only constructed by place but also reconstruct place. As Benji explains, "[a]ccording to the world, we were the definition of paradox: black boys with beach houses. A paradox to the outside, but it never occurred to us that there was anything strange about it" (57). In this context, Benji's perspective on Sag Harbor as a walker—an informative guide to the cultural and historical significance of local landmarks such as haunted houses, short cuts, and the rock on the beach that serves as "a powerful psychological meridian" (36)—pioneers an alternative, more synoptic understanding of space to the hackneyed stereotypes of ghetto fiction.

Even so, as in *Erasure*, this project of reimagining physical and psychical spaces is characterized by ideological blind spots, especially with reference to gender. Although Benji and Monk's identity as middle-class male subjects is inscribed in and through geography, a consideration of the relationships between women, space, class, and race remains, for the most part, beyond the scope of these narratives. This rather narrow interest in masculine identities is underlined by the formal choices made by Whitehead and Everett as they delve

into a literary tradition that is vitally alert to the racial politics of space. Both writers employ “richly allusive modernist techniques that refer to major works of the American canon in contexts that impel reinterpretation” (Nadel 149), plumbing the depths of a male-authored and predominantly male-focused body of literature in which masculine identity is constructed in relation to landscape, the city, the ocean, the river, the subway, and so on. Whitehead evokes a specifically male tradition of American letters that includes W. E. B. Du Bois, Herman Melville, John Steinbeck, and Mark Twain, while *Erasure* is punctuated with allusions to and revisions of Raymond Carver, T. S. Eliot, Ellison, Ernest Hemingway, Himes, Twain and Wright, to name only a few. Given Everett’s exposure of the ease with which critical and popular acclaim for *My Pafology* turns a blind eye to Van Go’s misogyny, it is ironic that the intertextual underpinnings of *Erasure* serve to reinforce a male tradition of American letters.

Such a reading is endorsed by a recent interview, in which Everett describes *Erasure* as a self-conscious “tribute” to Ellison’s *Invisible Man* (1952), with references to Himes’s first published novel, *If He Hollers Let Him Go* (1945), “scattered throughout the book in a lot more subtle way” (“Interview” 225). Everett’s allusions to Himes warrant further discussion, not least because *If He Hollers Let Him Go* details Bob Jones’s experiences in wartime Los Angeles, with a particular focus on “how wartime racism and classism become coded onto both the spatial geography of Los Angeles and the racialized body of Bob himself” (Itagaki 66). A recent migrant to Los Angeles, Bob spends much of the novel trying to evade the psychological impact of racism, which leaves him “[l]iving every day scared, walled in, locked up” (Himes 5). One strategy involves transgression of the city’s racially segregated neighborhoods in his Buick Roadmaster, especially when he challenges white drivers to duels over supremacy on the road. Ultimately, neither Bob’s defiance of racial segregation nor his acute analysis of the black bourgeoisie’s complicity in the exploitation of

working-class African American migrants can insulate him from racial violence. After narrowly escaping lynching at the hands of his fellow workers, Bob is compelled, at the close of the novel, to join the military, a fate that underlines the inescapability of racial injustice since “[a]s long as the Army is Jim Crowed a Negro who fights in it is fighting against himself” (149).

It is not difficult to establish thematic parallels between the treatment of psychological and physical space in the two novels. Just as in his revision of *Native Son*, Everett’s sustained engagement with Himes in *Erasure* underscores his immersion in a politically inflected tradition of urban black US writing, an aspect of his work that has been overlooked in critical accounts of his postmodernist experimentation. For a start, Everett’s exploration of the psychological impact of structural racism through a sustained, even compulsive, exploration of dreams that are marked by a feverish preoccupation with space bears the imprint of Himes. In *If He Hollers Let Him Go*, Bob’s first-person narrative, which begins *in medias res* with a bizarre dream about a homeless dog with “a piece of heavy stiff wire twisted about its neck” (1), is punctuated with surreal nightmares that capture his apocalyptic fear of racial violence, confinement, and emasculation. Many of these dreams take place in specific locations across Los Angeles, such as “Main Street downtown” (84), the shipyard, and city center hotels; indeed, urban spaces become the stage for spectacles of white power that underscore Bob’s alienation and isolation. In short, Himes explores the psychological impact of a literal and symbolic geography of racial division by way of dreamscapes replete with images of entrapment, confined spaces, and restricted movement.

In one disturbing sequence, Bob is beaten by two white migrant workers, who take orders from “the president of the shipyard corporation dressed in the uniform of an Army general” (84), an embodiment of brutal racism in the military and industry. Even though the workers question the extreme violence they are incited to inflict on Bob, the president

choreographs the beating to enhance his political and moral authority, transferring blame onto his workers for public disorder. In so doing, he forestalls any potential interracial working-class political alliance by manipulating spectators' responses to racial violence. A group of African American witnesses who stumble upon Bob's beating are coerced into making the workers into scapegoats while Bob himself is reduced to silence. Given that these dreams depict racial injustice that infiltrates every aspect of society, it is hardly surprising that Bob regards them as reminders of the futility of his challenge to white power: "I knew with the white folks sitting on my brain, controlling my every thought, action, and emotion, making life one crisis after another, day and night, asleep and awake, conscious and unconscious, I couldn't make it" (185).

Everett's *Erasure* is also punctuated by dreams, but they tend to illuminate a commodification of African American culture that signals a retreat from Himes's nuanced political analysis in *If He Hollers Let Him Go*. In a self-conscious echo of the earlier novel, Van Go's first-person narrative in *My Pafology* begins by relating a violent dream in which he murders his mother "Cause I love her. Cause I hate her. Cause I ain't got no daddy" (73). With its invocation of crime, an absent father and maternal influence, Van Go's fantasy might be read as a parody of the notorious Moynihan Report of 1965, which characterized black families as "pathological" (Simpson 3-4). Read in this context, Van Go's dreams pander to a white readership who, in Stagg's words, "will get a big kick out" of exaggerated stereotypes about black violence and sexual promiscuity (Everett, *Erasure* 178). Indeed, the dreams are literal-minded and hackneyed, displaying little beyond a "surface concern" with Van Go's "dislocation," as Monk worries in a bitter commentary on the novel's shortcomings. He is particularly damning in his criticism of *My Pafology*'s failure to "self-consciously [throw] back" its thematic preoccupation with space through formal innovation with "compositional or . . . paginal space" (182).

If Bob's dreams are replete with gothic images, such as rag dolls, shrunken bodies, "swine with bony sharp spines and long yellow tusks" (Himes 124), barbed wire, and concealed blades—motifs that are suggestive of the violent intersection of gender, race, and class in wartime Los Angeles—Van Go's dreams, with their lurid, exaggerated stereotypes, confirm Monk's estimation of the novel as a "sell-out" (Everett, *Erasure* 182). In one dream, Van Go's misogynist fantasy of encountering naked women on a paradise island leaves him "countin the babies [he's] gone make" before one young woman morphs into his mother whom he stabs "over and over and over and over until the ocean be fulla blood" (94). Much of the humor derives from incongruity: Everett moves stereotypes beyond familiar cultural territory (to a paradise island), picking away at inconsistencies to reveal the absurdity of such enduring representations. Since readers in *Erasure* overlook the comic exaggeration of *My Pafology*, it ends up catering to self-absorbed whites who want, in the words of the novel's faddish *New York Times* reviewer Wayne Waxen, to "feel the loss . . . of [their] own innocence" (288). Given Everett's interest in the slippages between authorial intention and the text's consumption in the literary marketplace, it is significant that Van Go's dreams take their imaginative coordinates from a spiritually and politically hollow consumerism. In a marked shift from Bob's politically engaged, if disturbed, imagination, Van Go's desires bear the mark of mainstream consumerism, modelled as they are on holiday brochures, saccharine Hollywood films such as *Forrest Gump* and, above all, Disney's inauthentic Main Street, which, according to Van Go, represents "what it s'posed to be like" (112).

### **Excavating the "Underground" in Ellison and Everett**

Everett's interest in supplementing his parody of ghetto glamour with perspectives on the city that stretch beyond a horizontal street view to encompass verticality, with a particular emphasis on the "underground" aspects of urban experience, is central to Everett's revision of



Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, another canonical African American novel that undertakes an excavation of masculinity by way of spatial metaphors. In a pivotal scene, which underlines associations between a politics and poetics of spatial trespass, Everett focuses on Stagg's short but precisely mapped journey to the Kenya Dunston TV studio (a parody of Oprah Winfrey's Book Club) where he is due to give an interview from behind a screen, part of his "ultimately unsuccessful quest for textual disembodiment" (Moynihan 43).

In accordance with Everett's modernistic collage technique, his insertion of pre-existing fragments into new contexts, the description of Stagg's trip is preceded by a short, unattributed quotation from *Invisible Man*, "KEEP AMERICA PURE" (Everett, *Erasure* 272), the company slogan from the Liberty Paints factory where Invisible Man is briefly employed to produce "pure" "Optic White" paint. In a parable that encapsulates the official whitewashing of America's multiracial history, the narrator makes white paint "that'll cover just about anything" (Ellison 164), including the Washington monuments, by adding ten drops of "dead black" liquid to each batch (163). After supplying this interpretive template for understanding Monk's masquerade, Everett moves on to detailed description of Stagg's movements: Stagg leaves his hotel room and takes the elevator before descending into the subway. Associated with elevators and subways, liminal architectural structures that transgress boundaries, mobile spaces that slide in and out of view (*Erasure* 245-46), Stagg is at once visible and invisible, a subversive trickster and an insubstantial, two-dimensional "silhouette" (276).

Such images recall Marc Augé's concept of "non-places," a term he applies to transitional spaces, including freeways, airports, hotel chains, and railway stations, which are positioned outside the dynamics of identity relations and history that we so readily associate with grounded concepts of place. Establishing a connection between "non-places" and "the fleeting, the temporary and ephemeral" (78), Augé contends that passing through such sites

involves a surrender to “anonymity” (102), which can easily be mistaken for freedom when passengers taste the “passive joys of identity-loss, and the more active pleasure of role-playing” (103). Since mobility is often possible only after the “user of a non-place is in contractual relations with it” (101) (as a passenger, driver, or customer), the empty, flattened concepts of identity available to individuals in “non-places” must be seen as a product of late stage capitalism. In *Erasure*, Everett amplifies Augé’s insights by underlining the centrality of race to any interpretation of these spaces: motifs of elevators and subways at once demonstrate that Stagg’s identity is circumscribed by the vagaries of capitalism and the enduring influence of racial stereotyping. Read in the context of Ellison’s fable about the manufacture of whiteness, it seems that Stagg’s identity rests on little more than visual props—black clothes, “dark glasses” and a beard (Everett, *Erasure* 275)—superficial, empty symbols that underline a close relationship between the increasing commodification of the literary marketplace and reductive racial stereotyping.

More generally, Stagg’s literal journey is linked to a symbolic movement downwards, a movement associated with images of the New York subway and plummeting elevators. Recalling the vertical vectors of the passing novel, with its sophisticated play on the readability of race and class, Stagg is associated with recurring symbols of burial, falling, and hiding. These spatial motifs, which are suggestive of aspects of American culture that remain unacknowledged in stereotypical representations, signal sustained engagement with *Invisible Man*, in which a search for alternatives to historical determinism is figured as a burrowing into the unconscious and “hibernation” in “a hole in the ground” (Ellison 9). Everett’s detailed mapping of confined yet mobile spaces such as the elevator and the subway undertakes a comparable excavation of stereotypes, flattened, commodified “silhouettes” of the kind embodied by Stagg, which are mistakenly judged to be “true, raw, gritty,” and even “life-like” by literary commentators (Everett, *Erasure* 282).<sup>3</sup>

To underline the incorporation of such stereotypes into capitalist structures, Everett summons another specter from Ellison's novel: the old man in the elevator who asks Stagg if he is an engineer recalls the African American engineer Lucius Brockway's controlling but unacknowledged presence in the boiler room of the Liberty Paints factory. A grotesque figure whose battered body symbolizes the encroachments of an exploitative economic system, Brockway is a trickster who possesses "subversive knowledge" (74) of "the unacknowledged contribution of black men and women to the production (and reproduction) of white America" (Mullen 76). Yet Brockway's behavior is governed by self-interest: he does not challenge the system but instead colludes with white authority and his own exploitation as one of the "*machines inside the machine*" (Ellison 177). Such allusions serve to maximize ambiguity, triggering a series of questions about Stagg's complicity with a racially segmented marketplace that produces static, formulaic images of African Americans as types not individuals, a visual iconography that is, in its preoccupation with surfaces, coverings, clothing, and gloss, analogous to the "superior whitewashing ability" (Mullen 74) of Liberty Paints. Just as Brockway simultaneously reinforces and exposes the myth of white purity, Stagg's theatrical performance at once enacts and critiques a commodified veneer of blackness.

Taking this dialogue with *Invisible Man* further, Everett's description of the subway immediately brings Ellison to mind, not least because of a sly reference to the Golden Day, the bar that haunts *Invisible Man* for much of the novel: "He is encased with other black men. Although it is a golden day outside, they cruise below the world to their destinations" (Everett, *Erasure* 274). It is difficult to read this passage without thinking of the epiphany that *Invisible Man* experiences on the New York subway, which inspires him to reconceive dominant historical narratives. An encounter with zoot-suited "men out of time" (355), whose lives go unrecorded by historians, galvanizes him to bring them into "the groove of history"

(Ellison 357). Invisible Man realizes that these young men, with their stylized zoot-suits and “their heavy heel plates clicking remote, cryptic messages” (356), might be “the saviours, the true leaders” (355). Anticipating his subsequent experience with Rinehart, the masquerader who turns invisibility in “[a] vast seething, hot world of fluidity” (Ellison 401) to his advantage by pursuing parallel lives as a preacher, a pimp and a number’s runner—a figure who is repeatedly referenced as a model for Stagg—the narrator finally recognizes a capacity for improvisation (and subversion) among ordinary Harlem citizens.

Such allusions are significant because they underline a dramatic shift from Monk’s earlier efforts to draw a sharp dividing line between himself and working-class African Americans. In the final pages of the novel, space is, in Doreen Massey’s words, “constructed out of interrelations, as the simultaneous coexistence of social interrelations and interactions at all spatial scales, from the most local level to the most global” (264). Nevertheless, it is difficult to decide how exactly to interpret such connections, which appear to underline the persistence of double consciousness in the postmodernist context. On the one hand, the parallels that Everett establishes between Van Go, Stagg, and Monk suggest that stereotypes are almost inescapable. Monk’s last words in the narrative, “Egads, I’m on television” (*Erasure* 294), echo the ending of *My Pafology*, in which Van Go waves at the camera in excitement at his new status as a criminal celebrity. Notwithstanding his satirical treatment of the manufacture of racial authenticity in the literary marketplace, this doubling implies that Monk has created a celebrity author who embodies stereotypes just as much as Van Go. On the other hand, Monk’s erasure leads to the blossoming of a more generous, synoptic world view, which is alert to the connections between various marginalized groups in Washington, a city that “hides its poverty better than any city in the world” (24).

These connections are underlined by Everett’s unglossed allusions to Ovid and Horace, which are scattered throughout the description of Stagg’s journey to the television

studio without any kind of authorial comment. Each reference pushes interpretation in a different direction, invoking the various strata of society. While the quotation “*precibus infimis*,” with its mention of humble prayers, suggests a privileging of marginalized voices, Everett’s reference to Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, “*medio tutissimus ibis*” (Everett, *Erasure* 273), which Mary Innes translates as “[t]he middle way is safest” (Ovid 53), derives from Apollo’s advice to Phaethon before he embarked on his disastrous drive of the sun’s chariot. Finally, a quotation from Horace—which Niall Rudd translates as “what harm can there be in presenting the truth with a laugh?” (Horace 40)—reminds readers that Stagg is the creation of a satirist who is “wearing a mask.” To some extent, these allusions, which play on notions of vertical space, surface, and depth, confirm Stagg’s position as a trickster who works within American cultural and social expectations. Partly as a consequence of Stagg’s fluid class identity, the narrative arc of *Erasure* moves toward an acknowledgement of potential alliances between diverse social groups.

### **Reading Space**

Analysis of the literary antecedents that give shape to the symbolic geography of *Erasure* helps to excavate, in its horizontal and vertical axes, a political sensibility that has been overlooked in recent accounts of the novel. Building on a thematic preoccupation with space in the writings of Ellison, Wright and Himes, Everett’s interest in the politics of space extends to a sustained critique of the maintenance of racially marked spaces in the literary marketplace, a move that establishes connections between geographical, textual, and interpretive spaces. Everett’s search for a more democratic view of the city finds its echo in his call for interpretations of American culture that embrace a version of double consciousness that makes room for multiple perspectives and angles of vision.

*Erasure* is populated with internal audiences—reviewers, publishers, literary agents, judges, TV audiences, and general readers—whose interpretations are produced in cultural arenas that tend to reinforce racial stereotypes, often by means of a physical separation of black and white viewers or theatrical performances of racial masquerade that recall minstrelsy. Attending to racial demarcations within audiences and performance spaces allows Everett to foreground the idea of interpretation as a kind of “positioning,” in which the separation of black and white individuals is echoed in racially inflected readings of cultural texts.

In line with his thematic crisscrossing of racialized urban spaces, Everett takes aim at a segmented literary marketplace, in which an author’s racial identity generates expectations about how they should write. Criticism of readers’ complicity in the production of stereotypes has long been a central preoccupation for Everett. In “Signing to the Blind” (1991), he describes a racially bifurcated literary audience that leaves writers “at the economic mercy of a market which seeks to affirm its beliefs about African-Americans” (10). According to Everett, “[o]ur television, fast-fix society” has impacted upon reading practices, prompting readers to see “with ‘American’ eyes, with brainwashed, automatic, comfortable, and ‘safe’ perceptions of reality” (10). Condemning “the insidious colonialist reader’s eye which infects America” (10), an image that captures a fundamental connection between the consumption of literature in contemporary American society and colonialist occupation of space, he calls for new modes of interpretation, alternative ways of seeing that transgress the color lines inscribed within a racialized literary marketplace.

Nowhere is this clearer than in the final scene of the novel, set at the awards ceremony, when Monk climbs on stage to accept his prize for *My Pafology*, an act that will result in his exposure as Stagg R. Leigh. In this scene, the personas of Monk and Stagg coalesce; it becomes clear that they are both implicated in the cultural commodification of

blackness. In accordance with Everett's sustained interest in surface and depth, this moment of revelation is punctuated with allusions to Invisible Man's nightmare of castration, in which various authority figures who have "kept him running" attempt to destroy him. A final waymarker in the narrator's bitter journey towards self-knowledge, the nightmare underlines that Invisible Man no longer harbors any illusions about the extent to which racial stereotypes have governed his experiences. In an imagined conversation between Stagg and Monk, Stagg appropriates the words of Brother Jack, one of Invisible Man's tormentors: "How does it feel to be free of one's illusions?" (Ellison 459; Everett, *Erasure* 293). As Fritz Gysin has pointed out, "That the chimera of Stagolee speaks the words of a white betrayer is the ultimate irony; it presents the avatar of vernacular power as a pawn in the hands of the white commercial establishment" (77).

Notwithstanding this ironic representation of complicity, the reader's position in this scene suggests alternative interpretive possibilities, not least because awareness of Monk's perspective on the ceremony forestalls passive, apolitical observation of the kind that has characterized the reception of *My Pafology*. Along with Monk, readers watch the audience at the televised awards ceremony. Consequently, narrative perspective remains firmly rooted in Monk's consciousness, never inhabiting the spectators' distanced, detached observation of a literary celebrity whose body becomes a commodified emblem of racial authenticity. In a significant departure from earlier representations of homogeneous, indiscriminating interpreters, Everett describes an audience that is at once diverse and engaged.

Taking his cue from Ellison's list of individuals who witness the narrator's castration in the nightmare at the close of *Invisible Man*, Everett depicts an imagined audience comprising male and female, black and white, the dead and the living, including Monk's mother, father, sister, brother, and half-sister: "The faces of my life, of my past, of my world became as real as the unreal Harnet [chair of the judges] 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” (*Erasure* 293). If the awards ceremony represents the erasure of Monk’s reputation, it also allows him to communicate with his loved ones, especially his mother to whom he speaks “most directly” (294). Consequently, readers are invited to eschew the distanced spectatorship fostered by cultural commodification in favour of empathy for a man who has cared for his mother during her debilitating illness with money raised by *My Pafology*’s commercial success. By using the word “real,” Everett creates a thread of connection with references to this concept throughout the narrative, repetition that serves to unsettle the dominant values of “corporations” that determine the production and consumption of literature. If critics, TV personalities, and reviewers indiscriminately apply the label of “real” to African American imaginative texts that embody hackneyed stereotypes (4, 46, 245, 288), Everett creates an alternative criterion for “reality” through allusions to domestic life, fishing (48), family secrets (271), woodwork and illness, tangible objects and experiences that are “so much more real than words” (159). Even as he represents Monk’s fallible memory, Everett assigns readers an active interpretive role, encouraging them to piece together the implications of his indirect form by bringing earlier allusions to the “real” to bear on their reading of the passage. In short, he unsettles the logic of a literary marketplace powered by “corporations” and a visual economy of image-making, turning instead to the rich but fragile resources of memory to offer a more complicated perspective that is neither passive nor apolitical.

### **Towards a Spatial Reading of *Erasure***

In an apparently inconsequential scene, Monk recalls his physical awkwardness on the basketball court during his youth. Having missed an easy shot, a member of Monk’s team asked him to account for his failings. When he replied that he was thinking about Hegel’s



“theory of history,” Monk is ejected from the court, mocked for his pretensions as a “philosopher” and instructed to “Hegel on home” (Everett, *Erasure* 153). Even as it generates comedy through an apparently incongruous juxtaposition of philosophy and sport, Everett’s spatial evocation of historical racism by way of Hegel underlines his enduring fascination with the politics of space. He establishes correspondences between Monk’s experience of physical and psychological alienation—signalled by a nagging, persistent feeling of being “out of place” (36, 291)—and the rigid hierarchical distinctions that Hegel drew between Europeans and Africans, an allusion that opens the way for analysis of contemporary discourses of racial authenticity in relation to a longer, global history of racism and colonialism.

In this context, attention to Everett’s detailed typology of urban and suburban life as its focus, this essay has sought to expose the limitations of current critical approaches to *Erasure* and to black postmodernist fiction more generally. Much of the criticism produced in the wake of Madhu Dubey’s landmark study of black postmodernism, *Signs and Cities* (2003), has fixated on the various postmodernist (and often metafictional) strategies writers have employed to reflect on the ambivalent position occupied by black middle-class authors in a racially bifurcated literary marketplace. If some critics have trumpeted the arrival of a “new black aesthetic” that is “culturally mulatto” (Ellis 235), others have identified how anxieties about a fragmented class structure surface via metaphors and indirection in contemporary African American historical fiction (Byerman 2). In the case of *Erasure*, a critical preoccupation with questions of authorship and postmodernist experimentation has resulted in a rather narrow interpretation, which has prioritized Everett’s satire of the commodification of black culture at the expense of an examination of other aesthetic and political registers within the novel’s collage form.

Analysis of the precise mapping of urban, textual, and interpretive spaces in *Erasure* allows for an examination of a social and political sensibility that persists even in the midst of Everett's explicit postmodernist play. Far from engaging with writers such as Himes, Ellison, and Wright only through the prism of postmodernist parody, Everett's excavation of city life, along its vertical and horizontal axes, reveals his investment in and engagement with an established novelistic tradition that spans Victorian, realist, modernist, and naturalist fiction and that has sought to map city life in all its diversity. Indeed, in an interview with Anthony Stewart, Everett claims that Ellison's writing is important to him precisely because it locates him within just such a tradition: "I just happened to land on Ellison as a way for me to accept the fact that I work in a tradition" ("Uncategorizable" 306). Excavation of the close connection between Everett's participation in a US tradition of urban writing and his desire to crisscross racialized urban and cultural spaces paves the way for a critical approach to *Erasure* that attends to his fusion of postmodernist experimentation with a more overtly political fictional mode that is alert to histories and experiences that are above ground and underground.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> To take just two examples, Fritz Gysin reads Everett's parody of ghetto glamour as a postmodernist examination of the limitations of the genre, not least because the implications of Everett's satire remain dormant without "the active and activating consciousness of the reader" (Fish 83), who must identify comic exaggeration and decode intertextual patterns that are missed by the majority, if not all, of the fictional readers represented in the novel's pages. More recently, Ramón Saldívar has pursued this idea of newness to a different effect, naming *Erasure* as an exemplary instance of the "dialogic and critical relation between contemporary ethnic fiction and postmodern metafiction" (4). Reading *Erasure* alongside fiction by Junot

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Díaz, Charles Yu, and Colson Whitehead, Saldívar contends that the novel encapsulates a broader trend towards the invention of “a new ‘imaginary’ for thinking about the nature of a just society and the role of race in its construction” (5).

<sup>2</sup> I am grateful to Andrew Warnes for this insight. The “Condition of England” novels, such as Elizabeth Gaskell’s *Mary Barton* (1848) and *North and South* (1855), Charlotte Brontë’s *Shirley* (1849), and Charles Dickens’s *Hard Times* (1854), illuminated mid-Victorian social problems through realistic portrayals of poverty, working conditions, and inequality.

<sup>3</sup> The associations that Everett establishes between elevators, parody and the difficulties of locating authorial tone recall Colson Whitehead’s *The Intuitionist* (1999), a novel about lift inspection in which the symbol of the plummeting elevator at once represents satire and sincerity, naturalism and metafiction, and the visible and the hidden.

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