



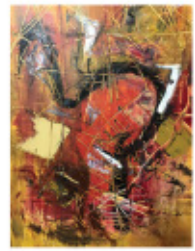
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Intimate Realities and Necessary Fiction in *Percival Everett*

by *Virgil Russell*

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Intimate Realities and Necessary Fiction in *Percival Everett by Virgil Russell*

Percival Everett by Virgil Russell takes the form of multiple overlapping stories told between a son and his father in a nursing home, the tales ranging from one about a painter named Lang who meets his long-lost daughter for the first time to another about a doctor named Murphy who dreams of Nat Turner, who in turn contemplates William Styron. Further complicating these narrative layers are the father's adventures in the nursing home as well as the storytellers themselves, who interrupt each other as only fathers and sons can. True to Everett's works, the narrative sediment is fused into something solid by metaphysical explorations of authorial and African American as well as personal identity—in this case, reflecting Everett's having published this novel after his own father passed away in 2010.

The wistful, even desperate messages conveyed by the paternal figure in Everett's novel are tempered with an awareness that, I propose, expands our ideas of both authorship and African American identity. The father and son characters engage in collaborative forms of self-authorship on numerous scales—even working meta-fictionally with the reader—spotlighting the project of defining the self that writers and readers share. The dizzying narrative interactions are subdued by the pervading consciousness that one or the other character is facing an impending death, or may already have died. Paired with this melancholy realization is the understanding expressed by Ta-Nehisi Coates that, for African Americans, “acceptance depends not just on being twice as good but on being half as black” (91). Everett's paternal character appears to be thinking of this injustice when he describes to his son a dream in which a white barkeep addresses two black customers with a racial slur: “one of the men points to the other and says but he's the president and the barkeep says that's his problem” (3). The naïveté of the customers, paired with the barkeep's malicious dismissal (he goes on to shake the president's hand with a hand buzzer and tells him to “get used to it, asshole” [3]), is representative of the satirical humor the father deploys throughout the novel. In multiple exchanges like this one, the father and son engage in acts of intimate and responsive storytelling that reveal the material and cultural limitations that persist among African Americans living in a supposedly accepting, multicultural society.

The father focuses on squandered authorship and the blank pages that haunt him. He attaches guilt and regret to his writing, which he began soon after the My Lai Massacre of the Vietnam War. He tells his son how, many decades later, he still remembers the images, voices, and words of the soldiers, “the way my heart broke, sank, collapsed, and the way it sounded so familiar, so much like white men in white hoods driving dirt roads and whistling through gap-toothed grins” (61). Haunted by the parallels of the mass killings overseas and the hate crimes in his own country, he regrets not writing about the exterminations on either continent or even his “disdain for my lying, bombastic, self-righteous, conceited, small-minded, imperialistic homeland. Instead, I wrote about getting high. . . . all of it as a sad, juvenile metaphor about the lost American spirit, the mislaid, impoverished, misspent, misplaced, wasted, suffering American soul. . . . The book was a success and so I became a success and I never published another word” (61-62). Like many facts the father and son exchange in Everett's novel, this last detail prompts revision:

He clarifies that he did write other works but avoided publishing them, instead publishing pseudonymous popular genre fiction to which he never attached his name. The father insists that he does not look back on his writing career bitterly, but rather that he “found it a bit amusing, ironic, ridiculous” (62). He thus characterizes most of his career as a lamentable avoidance of “real life” both on and off the page. While the writing he describes to his son is plentiful, each popular text and fake name highlights his inability to publish other works that illuminate his nation’s frequent multinational exercises of brutality against nonwhite people.

Whereas the father in Everett’s novel avoids attaching his name to his work, Percival Everett himself exhibits a radical self-referentiality in his novels, sometimes going so far as to include both his name and likeness in a text. Everett’s history of self-referentiality in his œuvre verges to some degree on autofiction, or the stylistic combination of autobiography and fiction. His name makes its first titular appearance in his 2004 novel *A History of the African American People (proposed) by Strom Thurmond as Told to Percival Everett and James Kincaid*, and a fictionalized version of Everett appears in both name and occupation in his 2009 novel *I Am Not Sidney Poitier*. Various other aspects of his biography also appear frequently in his works, such as his proclivity for fly fishing, guitar playing, and other personal hobbies; his love of ranch and desert environments of the American West; and his vocations as writer, professor, and even horse trainer, an occupation he undertook in his youth.

In this article, I argue that Everett’s attention to the intimacy between his writerly characters challenges the belief—represented by the critics Kenneth Warren and Houston Baker—that African American literature and authorial identity are tied to specific events or time periods, or that they must comprise a specific sociopolitical agenda. In its metafictional, self-referential, and autofictional nature, *Virgil Russell* creates a heightened sense of reality. The use of real-life details to describe the novel’s father-son-like relationships points to possible alternative storyworlds, while also asking readers to keep one foot rooted in the “real” world to highlight African American identity beyond the printed page. By underscoring the body of the biographical author, the text forces readers to confront the featured writers in the work—Everett’s father and son (Percival Everett, Sr. and Jr.)¹—and to consider their humanity alongside that of the author himself.

More than just two-dimensional caricatures, the writer-protagonists renegotiate their cultural identities with every newly disclosed writing project and narrative. The dramatized acts of writing and collaborative undertakings in *Virgil Russell* thus remind us how our identities are multiple and constantly constructed and reconstructed by language, while at the same time sparking questions about genre—suggesting that readers critically evaluate the categories in which texts appear on bookstore shelves and asking readers to question what constitutes (or does not constitute) African American fiction. Whereas critics such as E. San Juan, Jr., and Robert Young believe that postmodern and postcolonial literature privilege the aesthetic over the material, Everett’s work invites open discussion of both aspects of literature with a novel that is multimodal—employing white space, images, diverse typography, citations and allusions to both real and fictional texts, and the mixing of styles and genres.

Most significantly, the novel blurs the boundaries between writers with its emphasis on the dynamic qualities of African American identity and literature. “I’m an old man or his son writing an old man writing his son writing an old man,” Everett’s narrator observes. “But none of this matters and it wouldn’t matter if it did matter” (63). What matters, the novel suggests, are both the stories themselves and the way that knowing (or not knowing) the writers’ identities changes (or does not change) the narratives. *Virgil Russell* asks readers to follow the accounts of Murphy, Lang, the father plotting his escape from an oppressive nursing home, and—at the novel’s conclusion—the father and son attempting to escape members

of the Ku Klux Klan, while the text prods readers to ponder whether the identities of the storytellers affects the stories being told.

Underlying these mystifying narrative uncertainties is the presence of the empirical author in the not-so-camouflaged background, what Roland Barthes calls the “Author-God” (128). Like the authorial narrator whom Frank addresses in Toni Morrison’s *Home* and other similarly self-referential works, a version of the real-life author of *Virgil Russell* hovers behind his creations. What, then, are we to make of the novel’s deliberate diffusions of the writer and the highlighting of storyworld layers between reader and author in these texts? Everett provides an answer in his depiction of writing as collaboration. By presenting authorship as collaboration with coauthors on numerous scales both inside and outside the texts—incorporating even the readers themselves—the novel draws attention to writers’ and readers’ shared responsibility in defining and unearthing the fluidity of selfhood in African American literature.

Layers of Authorship: Everett Writes Turner Writes Styron

While Everett’s novels acknowledge and, in many ways, honor the place of African American literature in popular and academic circles, his works also contend with the limitations these groups impose on this genre, showing how such boundaries can be troubled in productive and creative ways. The father’s and son’s stories, and their conversations about the stories, are interspersed with a cast of characters both fictional and real: Historical figures such as the slave rebellion leader Nat Turner, author William Styron, and even Charlton Heston coexist alongside fictional characters including the ranch owner turned contractor turned doctor Murphy Lang and the painter Gregory Lang.² As the stories and storytellers weave and intermingle, the nature of the self becomes ever more unstable, and the narrator’s identity becomes ever more nebulous, as does the relationship between narrator and audience. At one point, it is even suggested that the son is dead, and the father is telling his stories to a ghost. At first, the multivocality and shifting perspectives smack of common postmodern gameplay. The metafictional nature of the text—first referenced in the novel’s title—evokes the playful and introspective narcissism that characterizes works by John Barth, Italo Calvino, and others. Embedded within this playfulness is, however, a seriousness that in *Virgil Russell* specifically emerges in this very space of metafictional ambiguity.

It is through metafiction that Everett actually accesses an identity defined intersectionally, across textual and temporal borders, and found in the closeness that connects characters to readers and readers to the text. For Everett, ethnicity becomes not a category of identity, but an event emerging out of intimate relationality. Stacey D’Erasmus observes that the intimacy readers feel with any text is found in both the closeness portrayed between two characters as well as the environment of the text itself. She points out that “the textual *where* of [the characters’] meetings, the meeting ground, the figurative topos—and by this I don’t mean physical locations where characters meet, but locutions, places in language that they share—actually produces not only opportunities for intimacy, but also the actual sense of intimacy: it is, sometimes, the thing itself” (11-12). That is, intimacy is manifested both in relationships between characters and in the ways that the text implicates readers, drawing them into the language. By deliberately emphasizing the world outside the text and pulling the reader outside of the textual environment, texts like Everett’s expand D’Erasmus’s idea of intimacy. The very self-referential nature of metafiction is what, for Everett, makes an effective exploration of African American

subjectivity possible. By manipulating the scales of authorship—and even of history and ethnicity—Everett in this novel collapses the biographical and content-oriented characteristics on which many depend to define African American literature, thereby providing a means by which we can critique the critiques of the genre and achieve a more interconnected understanding of authorship.

This interconnectedness allows us to look at the boundaries of African American literature themselves as fluid and dynamic. Arguing for restraint against the way we regard African American history and its corresponding literature, Kenneth Warren provocatively asserts that, in fact, African American literature was itself a product which emerged in response to a state of racial inequality and segregation that has since ended. Suggesting that the consistent logic and aims characterizing writing during the Jim Crow era no longer apply, Warren argues that, “with the legal demise of Jim Crow, the coherence of African American literature has been correspondingly, if sometimes imperceptibly, eroded as well” (*What 2*). He therefore asserts that African American writing as a response to social inequality no longer exists as a cohesive literary practice. While Warren posits economic class as a more distinctive and appropriate marker for literary genres, he ultimately associates African American literature with a unified, teleological sense of historical progress that Everett’s protagonists prove to be nonexistent.

While *Virgil Russell* challenges Warren’s perception of a monolithic, historically specific body of African American literature, the questions he raises bear affinities to others suggested by Everett’s numerous works of fiction: Who defines African American literature, and by what standards? What is black writing now, as opposed to in the past? And, given that others continue to characterize African American writing as a static body of work, how can we account for its variations in content, purpose, and style over time? In other words, Warren and Everett share a concern about how we as readers and consumers place undue emphasis on limiting definitions of African American writing. And while these limits may have helped such multicultural institutions as higher education in defending the value of retrieving, publishing, and studying these texts in addition to—or even in place of—canonical texts, the two writers argue, in divergent ways, that these limitations have outgrown their helpfulness.

Everett complicates the question of definition in his novel *erasure*. Not unlike Everett himself, *erasure*’s protagonist Thelonious “Monk” Ellison is a writer whose experimental work often defies conventional categories of ethnicity and genre. For instance, although Monk’s novels prominently include philosophical contemplations that range from Euripides to Mark Twain, his work continually faces such criticism as “*The novel is finely crafted, with fully developed characters, rich language and subtle play with the plot, but one is lost to understand what this reworking of Aeschylus’ The Persians has to do with the African American experience*” (2). Pigeonholed by the author’s skin color on the book jacket, Monk is further frustrated by the commercial success of Juanita Mae Jenkins’s *We’s Lives in Da Ghetto*, a novel whose story of a black woman’s horrific experiences at the hands of black men is touted as a marvelous representation of authentic African American life. Monk’s reaction is visceral: “I remembered passages of *Native Son* and *The Color Purple* and *Amos and Andy* and my hands began to shake . . . people in the street shouting *dint, ax, fo, screet, and fahvre!* and I was screaming inside, complaining that I didn’t sound like that” (61). While it denounces Jenkins, Monk’s response also and more significantly censures a literary world that would make Jenkins its darling while silencing other texts and voices deemed “inauthentic.” Monk responds in the best way he knows: through his writing. Writing under the pseudonym Stagg R. Leigh, he authors a novel called *My Pafology* (later retitled *Fuck*), which parodies Richard Wright’s *Native Son* and is, to Monk’s consternation, wildly successful, forcing Monk to wrestle with the realization that the U. S.—particularly educated, literate America—mistakes the joke for the real deal.

While there is no place for an African American avant-garde novelist, doors open wide for the stereotypical Stagg R. Leigh.

If *erasure* exposes the danger of a singular notion of African American literature, *Virgil Russell* offers a way to approach and envision black writing today. African American writing, the author-characters of the novel seem to suggest, is not limited to one genre, topic, or historical movement. The novel incorporates a multitude of linear and nonlinear forms and genres and in many ways can be categorized as a hybrid text. Filled with allusions to literary, cultural, and philosophical texts, *Virgil Russell* sometimes literalizes Barthes's assertion that a text "is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture" (128). The first half of the text comprises a collection of stories that seep into each other, giving way in the second half to a seemingly linear plot about the father's exploits in a nursing home. At the center of the novel is the father-son writing team, serving at once as each other's writers and audience, a conceit that Everett pushes to the point that the two begin to blur. *Virgil Russell* thus posits a relational model of authorship on the most intimate scale built on moments of connection between two people.

Everett foregrounds this single relationship between the father and son storytellers and then expands it, demonstrating how this intimate form of writing then gestures outward to incorporate larger temporal and generic frames that go beyond discrete considerations of African American literature. Unlike Warren, Everett does not relegate African American literature to a specific era and announce its demise; rather, the novel points to issues beyond any historical period and focuses on form and relationality to first contract and then enlarge current views of African American literature. Rather than limiting our definitions of African American genres, he seeks to widen the characterization of African American literature in broad strokes. In other words, Everett hopes to expand the classification of African American literature to the point that its very arbitrariness as a category is exposed.

While not a direct response to Warren, Everett's novel complicates the teleological emphasis that critics like him have inflicted on African American literature and history, primarily through the use of Nat Turner as a recurring character. The famous leader of the Virginia slave rebellion was executed in 1831, almost half a century before the emergence of Jim Crow laws. The enigmatic Turner was literate and devoutly Christian, directly associating biblical tenets with what he regarded to be the necessary manumission of slaves. His revolt, the bloodiest in U. S. history, sparked fears of more insurrections, on the one hand charging abolitionist rhetoric with new urgency while, on the other, tamping down slave freedoms. This increasingly widening national rift helped create the tense conditions that incited the Civil War within a few decades.

Turner later reemerged in the popular consciousness with William Styron's imagining of the rebellion in his Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, published soon after the legislative dismantling of Jim Crow in the first half of the 1960s. While Styron portrays Turner as both a terror and a victim, Everett's novel presents Nat Turner as an author, highlighting the instability of Turner's historical role through the controversy surrounding his "confessions." In doing so, *Virgil Russell* problematizes Warren's contention that African American literature grew out of the Jim Crow era by hearkening back to a representative example of contentious storytelling that challenged racial inequality well before African American writers protested Jim Crow in their work. Everett decontextualizes Turner in the course of challenging critical inclinations to tie African American literature to any one historical period or experience. Challenging Warren's claims, Everett even suggests that the genre reaches backward to an era before the term *African American* existed.

Turner's first appearance in *Virgil Russell* finds him defying the subjection that he experienced in real life. In a reversal of authorship and authority, the character

Murphy dreams that Turner is writing *The Confessions of Bill Styron*, rather than the other way around. The father tells his son, “You could write that [novel for Turner], then follow it with *The Truth about Natty* by Chingachgook” (16). The authorship of Turner and Chingachgook, the Mohican chief who advises Natty Bumppo in James Fenimore Cooper’s *Leatherstocking Tales*, offers instances not of writing back to the dominant powers but of literally rewriting and decentering privilege. In his Author’s Note, Styron writes, “Perhaps the reader will wish to draw a moral from this narrative, but it has been my own intention to try to re-create a man and his era, and to produce a work that is less a ‘historical novel’ in conventional terms than a meditation on history” (n. pag.). Styron does not profess historical accuracy but promises to bring the character and era to life in an unprejudiced way. Yet Styron based his novel on interview “transcriptions” taken in 1831 by a lawyer, Thomas Gray, whom many scholars contend was not simply an amanuensis who recorded Turner’s words but a partial shaper of those words. Both Gray’s text and Styron’s have thus been mired in controversy, particularly regarding the fraught and, in Styron’s case, consciously distorted nature of the accounts, as well as the appropriation of Turner’s voice in both works.³ Critics at the time of the publication of Styron’s novel were chiefly disturbed by what they read as the novelist’s attempts to demonize Turner’s sexuality, while also presenting him as a vacillating and timid leader (Sieving 41).

Whereas Styron purports in his novel to “re-create” Turner and the events leading to his death, the father-son writing team in Everett’s novel makes no claim to historical accuracy. *Virgil Russell’s* writers instead situate Turner in an intimate framework that intertwines Turner’s and Styron’s histories. As if in response to past biases against the insurrectionist, the father thus envisions Turner’s reaching forward in time to take poetic license with the story of William Styron (“Nat says, it’s only fair that I too get to tell what is true” [208]). In this way, the father rewrites Turner while attaching Turner’s story to his own. Expanding the concept of authorship, the novel suggests that Turner is a writer whose tale can be gleaned from the surfaces of the misrepresented and mishandled stories that evoke him in the present. As the book’s narrator writes, “There are no realities that are more real than others, only more privileged” (31). The father honors his imagined vision of Turner above what he implies are the equally imagined “confessions” rendered by Gray and Styron.

The father’s attempt to create an intimate connection with Turner does not, however, come easily. In fact, the novel distances Nat Turner from the protagonists’ storyworld and reality. In one scene, the father describes Murphy as a doctor accepting for payment a collection of Leica cameras, and Murphy, peering through one camera, “sees” Nat Turner—a character who had previously appeared only in his dreams—smiling at him, ghostlike (57). The novel represents several layers of writing: The real-life author Everett writes the father and son, who in turn write Murphy, who in turn envisions Nat Turner, who was himself recreated by Gray and Styron. These layers of authorship mirror the layers of existence that Turner himself occupies: He is a man who has been written and rewritten by history, the truth of his experiences distorted to represent a simulacrum of reality, like what one might see in a photograph or a dream. By their nature, photographs inaugurate an alternate version of the world even as they are meant to represent and even stand in for reality. In a similar way, Turner is thus ubiquitous and unknowable, not unlike Everett himself, whose constructed authorial presence often haunts the pages of many (if not all) of his novels.

Everett adds a temporal element to these distortions of Nat Turner by placing the man and his poker-playing friends in the middle of the civil rights era. The poetic license taken with Turner’s story allows the father to bridge the temporal gap between them and provide his own meditation on Turner’s history to counter Styron’s. Jess Row’s defense of Styron’s novel states that the author’s liberties with history reflect a deliberately artistic motivation, adding that more recent historical

novels such as Morrison's *Beloved* and Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian* "embody a radically different sensibility, one that refuses to collapse the past into the present and that makes history almost fetishistically 'different,' difficult to accept or assimilate" (C27). Everett exposes the arbitrariness of such a literary distinction by collapsing the past and the present around Turner, a misunderstood figure whose story and history as a slave were never acceptable or accessible in the first place.

The novel thus imagines a writerly life for Turner, one that complicates the association of authorship with authority. On the National Mall on the eve of the 1963 March on Washington, Turner fumes that the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee edited his speech. And in an eerie parallel, Turner views Martin Luther King, Jr.'s consternation the next day when the latter discovers his own speech has been stolen and replaced with a different one, possibly by the FBI (83). The orator's shock is later matched by Turner's own, when Turner realizes the FBI actually gave King "the bogus confession that had been attributed to [Turner] by that white devil Thomas Gray" (85-86). Turner's "bogus" words are thus fed to King to infiltrate his influence over his audience. King, however, manages to speak extemporaneously. Had the defrauders succeeded, the King of *Virgil Russell* might not have delivered his "I Have a Dream" speech, itself an assemblage of cultural allusions, quotes from the Bible and King's colleagues, and lyrics from American folk songs. It is no coincidence that Turner, himself a figure whom we have similarly pieced together via an array of historical writings, is present to hear King's most famous oration. This fragmented biography actually echoes that of Everett's author-narrators, whose lives are told piecemeal.

Placing Turner's questionable "confessions" in King's hands further stresses how others have appropriated both men's voices—during and after their lifetimes. Turner's authorship has been confounded by the levels of narratives heaped upon his own, a form of erasure over which Turner had no practical control. Using many fewer pages than the major works that preceded it, Everett's anachronistic account of Turner's words humanizes the historical figure in a way that connects Turner's amusement, frustrations, and fears, and ascribes to him the wry humor and honesty of a man more knowledgeable than popular history has made him out to be.

Everett also challenges Warren's claim of an historicized African American literary genre by narrowing the temporal scale between Turner and King. Deemed by many to mark the climax of the struggle for civil rights and the beginning of the end of the judicial and legislative existence of Jim Crow, King's speech is thus born out of a response to structural oppression that began with the systemic mistreatment of slaves such as Nat Turner. Michelle Alexander deliberately takes Jim Crow segregation out of its historicized context, stating, "African Americans have repeatedly been controlled through institutions such as slavery and Jim Crow, which appear to die, but are then reborn in new form, tailored to the needs and constraints of the time" (21). Warren, responding to Alexander in *PMLA*, insists that her use of the term *Jim Crow* is largely metaphorical, as the legislative impetus behind the laws no longer exists. While this is superficially valid, we cannot deny the material conditions relating to racial inequality that existed before Jim Crow and continue today, exemplifying what Alexander identifies as the moral equivalent of Jim Crow, almost equally effective in enacting legalized systems of racial control and segregation (Alexander 13).

Everett thus places the rebellion leader Turner in conversation with the orator King, showing that their words and images have been distorted by others as he illustrates how, despite their having opposite philosophies of violence and protest, the two nevertheless have much in common, both with one another and also with the father who connects their stories in the present. Everett productively juxtaposes their writerly responses to the limitations inflicted upon them by their skin color to reveal how intimate moments of connection can occur along an historical continuum.

While Everett's version of Turner attaches himself to a literary tradition of writers such as Virginia Woolf, the father places himself in a tradition of authors that includes Turner, presenting them as fellow writers seeking to expand current assessments of their abilities that extend beyond skin color. He explains to his son, "What I am telling you is a story about Nat Turner and William Styron. This is my way of giving you my history, on this eve of my visit to the gallows, and much of your understanding of my history, and therefore yours, relies on your acknowledgment that I am a prophet of sorts" (87). Prophecy in this temporal sense becomes a synonym for storytelling, an act the father accomplishes, the novel later reveals, on his deathbed, possibly even after his death. As storyteller, prophet, and historian, the father writes his own past, and in turn creates an origin story for his son as well.

Everett's novel ultimately questions the arbitrariness of literary categories based on time or the identity of the author or narrator. As far as the father is concerned, Turner's having lived before the advent of the term *African American* or the institutionalization of Jim Crow is immaterial to the role Turner plays in his history as a writer or African American. The intimacy of language opens up a space to claim that which is otherwise inaccessible and incomplete. Language also, the father suggests, enables its authors to reveal or not reveal themselves and their places in time: "however much constructed, affirmed, and validated by the very structure of the language that allows at least a pretense of making meaning, I am able to reveal my story without locating myself in the telling, at the time of the telling. Perhaps not even whether I am in fact the narrator at all" (132). The father challenges reader expectations that are simultaneously supported and confounded by the self-referential techniques of metafiction. As writer, storyteller, and prophet, he appoints himself the authority over his views of history and its power to define him.

Confronting the Shadows

Xiomara Santamarina offers an alternative to Kenneth Warren's study, pointing out that he implies that "chucking or giving up the past and its iterations of black particularity might be a more effective way of producing progressive political transformations" (399). To put it another way, Warren relegates African American literature to the time of Jim Crow with the ultimate intention of doing away with inequality, of moving literary genres away from racial politics and into other realms—most notably that of class. Black authors of the Jim Crow era, Warren argues, "were expected to produce work that exhibited or presumed black difference as a distinct and needful thing, even as they acknowledged, lamented, and sought to overcome the conditions that produced that difference" (*What* 27). He asserts that the only effective response to these restrictions is to relegate the ethnic designator to the past, allowing one to give up history's worrisome associations with black essentialism. Taken in this light, it is not hard to see how a novelist like Thelonious Ellison or, for that matter, Percival Everett might see problems with the "African American" literary category. Specifically, Everett and Warren challenge the intrinsic assumption that all black writing must address racial oppression or a specific version of African American life, like the folk traditions privileged by critics such as Houston Baker.

In exploring Warren's text, however, Santamarina also reveals its limitations. "What," she asks, would an implementation of Warren's argument "look like in an egalitarian society?" (399). The very nature of her inquiry reveals a problem with Warren's line of reasoning. After all, Warren calls for a stark and immediate transformation of how African American literary tradition has operated since its emergence as a field. He suggests, in its place, a paradigm that removes the "problematic

assumption of race-group interest” from the genre altogether (110). Then again, Santamarina posits that what Warren is arguing is fully possible only in, as she puts it, an “egalitarian society” that “giv[es] up the past” (399). But would a truly egalitarian society really require such a dismissal of historical narratives? And is relegating African American literature to obsolescence really the most effective way to enact the disciplinary ruptures needed to achieve this vision? These questions invoke David Hollinger’s argument for voluntary over involuntary affiliations, ethnic identity based not on blood but on “affiliation by revocable consent” (13). While Hollinger is correct to prefer the latter, his argument rests on the utopian assumption that voluntary affiliations are equally accessible and open to enactment on comprehensive scales. The worlds that would accommodate Hollinger’s and Warren’s visions, unfortunately, have yet to arrive.

We could also read studies like Warren’s alongside the critique of a similarly provocative argument suggested by Everett himself. In *Virgil Russell*, the narrator delays another round of stories about Murphy and Lang to relate an anecdote about a friend who theorized that race does not exist. The father recalls that a “low-level academic took [a friend of his] to task about his so-called theory. . . . the hack academic, his name was Hometown Pastrychef or Dallas Roaster, something like that, wrote that my friend was essentially full of excrement and that, furthermore, race was not only a valid category but a necessary one. This may or may not have been true” (34). This story comes after a series of others about academics losing touch with reality, each suggesting the failure of academics to relate to the people about whom they write, particularly in the context of multicultural and ethnic studies. While Everett does not excuse himself from this company, he does critique the worth of such theories to material, lived conditions. He recognizes the value of academic pursuits to challenge close-minded ideas of race, but also insists that these pursuits are limited.

In his book *Critical Memory*, Houston Baker—the Hometown Pastrychef referenced above—offers Richard Wright as an example of someone who properly rendered African Americans’ humiliation in shocking detail. Baker asserts that, unlike Wright, other authors have traded their critical memory to be “liked” by white America (15). Mirroring the story that the father in *Virgil Russell* tells his son about the academic’s challenging his friend’s ideas on race, Baker laments that “Ellison’s ‘ghosts’—his shadowers . . . have gladly accepted the affirmative action benefits and rewards bestowed by race in America while writing fiercely with studied hypocrisy that there is no such thing in America as race” (39). He thus derides authors such as Charles Johnson and Ernest Gaines as ungrateful for the strides that their literal and literary African American fathers have made towards equality. Baker includes in his proof of these novelists’ pursuit of white likeability the wide acclaim Ellison and his “shadowers” have received by critics, white or otherwise (39). He suggests that their acceptance is fueled by the content of their work, which shows none of the oppression that he feels is emblematic of serious African American literature.

Intriguingly, Baker’s disapproval of Ellison and his counterparts mirrors the condemnation that Wright himself expressed for Zora Neale Hurston, particularly for her novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Wright surmised that “Hurston *voluntarily* continues in her novel the tradition which was *forced* upon the Negro in the theatre, that is, the minstrel technique that makes the ‘white folks’ laugh” (22; emphasis his). While Baker and Wright have innovated our approaches to African American literary traditions, both privilege a vernacular element of protest writing that would dismiss and silence voices such as Hurston’s. While not tying African American literature to a specific time or legislative agenda as explicitly as Warren does, they insinuate that some versions of African American literature are more legitimate and honorable than others. As J. Martin Favor asks, can Baker’s literary model “also account for the presence and products of the black middle class? Does this

particular vernacular also have room for, say, immigrants from Africa and the Caribbean and the vernaculars they bring along with them?" (4-5). Favor's implicit answer is found in the quashing of voices and representations like that of *erasure's* Monk or *Virgil Russell's* writer-protagonists.

Indeed, Baker's critique of *erasure* in *I Don't Hate the South* also references this privileging of specific representations of African Americanness when he says that the novel, "for all its parodic and deconstructive energy and achievement is completely clean, clear, and empty before what I believe is the signal social and political fact of its time, namely, the Ronald Reagan/George Herbert Walker Bush compromise of American decency and rights that has produced George W. Bush" (149). Thus, Baker faults *erasure* for not addressing what he feels were the most pertinent issues at the time of the book's writing.

One cannot help but wonder if Baker meant this criticism in jest. Like the critic in *erasure* who is "lost to understand what [Monk's] reworking of Aeschylus' *The Persians has to do with the African American experience*" (2), Baker reads Everett's *erasure*—a novel about the troubled reception of African Americans in literature—and is at a loss to understand why it does not mention Reagan's policies in the White House.⁴ After Baker indicts *erasure's* failure to examine the Reagan legacy, he goes on to say that the novel's one redeeming virtue is that its protagonist Monk brings to mind the jazz musician whom Baker identifies as the "actual" Thelonious Monk (150). In Baker's cultural space, there is room for only *one* Thelonious Monk, and the man who writes of Aeschylus, metaphysics, and French poststructuralism is not him.

Ironically, the father in *Virgil Russell* is in some ways just as dismissive of "Housetown Pastrychef," for he claims not to be sufficiently knowledgeable to understand the literary controversy, and the debate leaves him "feeling like I was looking at a clock with three hands." Meanwhile, the father's friend dismisses the academic as having "made his living and career out of being the ethnic" (34). The friend's accusation opens up the question of intention, an idea central to authorship. Should an author's or critic's intentions make his or her words any less valid? What is the intended effect of what Everett's narrator calls a "big bag of . . . Immaterial words" (33) to those who may not understand them? And what does someone have to gain by asserting that race need no longer affect personal and professional relationships?

Musing on Warren's intentions, Santamarina posits that, however "counter-intuitive" his methods (399), his aim in limiting the scope of African American literature is virtuous. Can the same be said of Baker? Actually, by highlighting acts of African American authorship not directly related to Warren's Jim Crow legislation or to Baker's critical memory, Everett is not necessarily placing himself alongside Ellison's "shadowers," who might believe that racism or racial inequalities no longer exist. Neither, despite Baker's criticisms, is Everett dismissing all of the critic's arguments offhand. In fact, centering *Virgil Russell* on the writing relationship between father and son may very well be Everett's way of honoring his father's memory, much as Baker honors his own father in *Critical Memory*. Subtitled *Public Spheres, African American Writing, and Black Fathers and Sons in America*, Baker's text ties critical memory to the honor one bestows upon black men who navigated "American racial 'likes'" (49)—that is, the careful negotiations of tolerance and compromises made for white acceptance. He relates, "None of the men from my growing-up time got rich, famous . . . or secured their sons' futures. . . they worked wherever and whenever they could to hasten the call and reality of a reported American meritocracy—a meritocracy renovated, or so one was told . . . by white men in charge of the American table" (49). In other words, the men of Baker's father's generation learned that the fights they joined during the civil rights era did not ensure a future for their sons or secure freedom from the racial anxieties they see emerging today.

Despite Everett's reference to Baker and *Critical Memory*, it is unclear whether Baker's representation of black fathers also applies to the father in *Virgil Russell*. The father divulges instances of ethnically based persecution (60-62, 81-82), but the novel interrupts its own circular and palimpsestic storytelling to relay instead, in common third-person narration, the father's experiences in a nursing home. This linear storyline stands in stark contrast to all that has come before it, inspired by the narrator's admonition that he "tell stories from now on without my interruptions" (131). In some ways a novel within a novel (not unlike the *My Pafology* section of *erasure*), *Virgil Russell's* nursing home plot resembles stories of raucous overthrows of institutions seen in novels such as Ken Kesey's *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest*. Faced with staff members whose cruelty outweighs their kindness, the father teams up with his best friend and fellow patient/inmate Billy to enjoy a moment of freedom and, they hope, to have the malicious orderlies fired in the process.

If hard pressed, one might connect this attempted overthrow to *Critical Memory's* conclusion, in which Baker proclaims that, if we work "critically and memorially with the best of our past, there is just a chance black fathers and sons may yet gather again in legions, genuinely about the business of redeeming ourselves" (73). After all, Everett dramatizes the destabilizing of an establishment whose oppression at first seems insurmountable, relaying a temporary victory at the end of the nursing home storyline that mimics the redemptive sentiment Baker desires. *Virgil Russell's* victory, however, comes at a price: Billy is goaded into madness by one of the orderlies. Notably, the nursing home scenes as a whole are devoid of racial politics, Everett thus illustrating that enumerating ethnic strife is not the sole—or maybe even the most important—factor in self-identification.

However hopefully Baker ends his message about the recuperation of critical memory, he also aims the aforementioned call to "gather again in legions" not at people like the father in *Virgil Russell*, who fail to comprehend Hometown Pastrychef's claims, but at people who, "like Richard Wright, are literary and have social opportunity to profit from archives of black writers, race men and race women who left examples of strategic, articulate, courageous interventions" (73). In other words, just as Baker points to Wright as a properly respectful keeper of African American critical memory, so he concludes *Critical Memory* with the belief that it takes a certain level of opportunity and education to oppose the subjugation of "the majority" (73). He leaves it to the educated elite, whom W. E. B. Du Bois called the "Talented Tenth" (136), to enact change. Notably absent from Baker's construction are people like the father in *Virgil Russell* who, when asked why he insists on writing Lang as a ranch owner, responds to his son simply by saying, "The ranches are not mine" (31). He knows he lacks the opportunities of the educated class on whom those like Baker fasten their aspirations. It is here that the father reminds us, "There are no realities that are more real than others, only more privileged" (31). We can see that reality itself is a story, and that the material and cultural reality of the father's life—not only Warren's class and Baker's race, but other factors as well—inform the way he reads and writes his and others' stories. At the same time, this reality also excludes him from the "majority" whom Baker hopes will benefit from this change.

While the father is left out of this constructed hope for future black fathers and sons, there can be little doubt that Everett himself intends his readers to connect *Virgil Russell's* fictional father to the real father whose name graces the dedication page. The novel opens with a dedication to Percival Leonard Everett, who died two years before the book's publication. Knowing this biographical fact adds poignancy to the father-and-son scenes of collaborative storytelling. In fact, in a review essay touting the pros and cons of metafiction, Sam Sacks reads *Virgil Russell* as a more meaningful example precisely because of the sincerity associated with the book's dedication. As Sacks notes, "Behind this satirical game of 'Pin the Tail on the

Narrator' is Mr. Everett's attempt . . . to find a deconstructed fictional form that matches the bewilderment and helplessness (and self-preserving impulse toward gallows humor) we feel in the presence of death" (C8).

The appearance in the novel's title of the author's and his father's name, immediately followed by the dedication, begs for this layer of paratextual reading. The novel opens with the son visiting his father at a nursing home, the latter seemingly bed-ridden, and the son asks, "Why don't you just admit that you're working again?" (14). Speculating that Everett is writing this novel in the wake of his father's death, readers cannot help but imagine father and son—the two Percival Everetts—in conversation, or even the novel's author Percival Everett in conversation with himself, imagining his father alive and able to respond. In this way, the reader is made aware of the conversation between father and son while he or she is at the same time drawn into the drama of the grieving son, returning to his writing after his father's death.

Highlighting the real-life author alongside our fictional authors evokes what Eugen Simion calls the return of the author after the death knell of the author sounded by Barthes in 1967. Simion's term is a bit misleading, since he ultimately argues—as do Seán Burke, Benjamin Widiss, and others—that the author never really left the text. Similarly, by recalling the biographical author and responding to literary theorists in *Virgil Russell*, Everett commemorates the return of an author who remains, drawing attention to the philosophical and material registers on which authors operate in their work. Everett's devastating portrayal of these two registers is best seen in the polyvocal storytelling of the two writer-protagonists:

I could be writing you could be writing me could be writing you. I am a comatose old man writing here now and again what my dead or living son might write if he wrote or I am a dead or living son writing what my dying father might write for me to have written. I am a performative utterance. I carry the illocutionary ax. But imagine anyway that it is as simple as this: I lay dying. My skin used to be darker. Now, I am sallow, wan, icteric. I am not quite bloodless, but that is coming. I can hear the whistle on the tracks. I can also hear screaming, but it is no one I know. (216)

In the face of Baker's proposed solution to the problems of black fathers and sons in America, Everett offers his own startling response, one that moves beyond the abstractions of an educated and ideal literate class to instead focus on the intimate and visceral relationship between a son and his dying father.

Ultimately, the only barrier that the son in *Virgil Russell* seems unable to cross is that which would enable him to see his father for who he is and to let go of him. In the end, he imagines his father calling the roll of the people haunting his imagination—Nat Turner writing Styron's confessions as well as "Murphy and Lang, we're all in here, in all our various time zones and dress and dementias. And I am here, too, refusing to, as my father put it, cram for finals. No holy ghost for me, no accepting this one as my lord and savior, my guide and bookie, my plumber and electrician" (208).

Following this confession, Everett's novel ends with two scenes—one an imagined tragic scenario of the father's dying while saving his son from the KKK, and the other a scene seemingly plucked from memory: The father performs the role of victim to gain the son's sympathy, pretending he had no responsibility for his wife's infidelity. The scenes are, in fact, conjoined in terms of power: The Klansmen take away the pair's power and humanity under the mantle of white supremacy, just as his father had earlier "usurped" his mother's agency as a woman, a wife, and a mother (225). Describing his wife's infidelity to his son earlier in *Virgil Russell*, the father recalls "being called a postmodernist," one whose "work was about itself and process and not about objective reality and life in the world" (79). Solidifying the connection between his work and his wife's infidelity, the father insists that she

has abandoned them, knowing that returning would mean “she would be doomed to recognize her memories as constructions of a left world, necessarily fictions, necessary fictions, because in looking back, she would see a reality to which her memories might be compared and contrasted and she would know that her memories were not that world” (79). The son’s recollection—a memory of when his father learned of his mother’s infidelity and then performed a simulacrum of grief to widen the divide between himself and his mother—underscores an event in which humanity, “objective reality,” and his father’s postmodern storytelling collide. Like his mother, the son realizes that his father too creates necessary fictions, in both his writing life and his “real” life. In fact, both lives are part of the same continuum. Together, they set the terms by which they define themselves and their personal, ethnic, and cultural histories.

1. Reviewer Reba Leiding points out that the novel’s title invokes both the poet Virgil and the philosopher Bertrand Russell (60). But as it is with characterization and narrative attribution, the names in *Virgil Russell* are hard to pinpoint. Characteristic of this confusion, a *Publishers Weekly* review of the novel lists the son’s name, oddly, as “Virgil” and says that the father and writer “may be named Percival Everett.” The reviewer then goes on to note that the writer and storyteller may not be the father but “his guilt-ridden but loving son” (39). Given the biographical undertones of the novel, a much more probable scenario is that both narrators are named Percival Everett—with one being the senior and the other the junior.

2. Like the father’s and son’s names, the names of the characters about which they write are often confused over the course of the text. Murphy and Gregory shift identities and occupations continually in the novel, sometimes even in the same telling. As if to make the characters even more confusing, the father and son often refer to the characters not as Murphy Lang and Gregory Lang, but simply as Murphy and Lang. The significance of names and naming is one of the novel’s central concerns, as suggested by the titles of the novel’s three main sections: “Hesperus” and “Phosphorus” are synonyms of the name of the third section, “Venus.” This trio of names are a nod to German philosopher Gottlob Frege, who used the planet’s descriptors to question the essence of names themselves, and the information they do or do not hold (for more on Frege’s theories, see his “On Sense and Reference”).

3. For more on the controversies of authorship and accuracy surrounding Nat Turner, see Almendinger, Fabricant, and Stewart.

4. It is nevertheless worth noting that, in the same year that Baker wrote this, Everett published his novel *The Water Cure*. Through the protagonist, romance novelist Ishmael Kidder, the novel forces readers to question the efficacy and ethicalness of George W. Bush’s and Donald Rumsfeld’s actions in Guantanamo and the Middle East.

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