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Voicing His Objections: Narrative Voice as Racial Critique in Percival Everett's *God's Country*

The saloon was a dingy affair with small windows and doors that squawked miserably every time they swung. It was dusk when I got in there, and the lanterns that did work gave off a yellow light that made you feel worse than darkness. Blind Mitch, the nigger piano player, was banging away at the key that worked, playing that jig music that was hard to whistle. —Percival Everett, *God's Country* (1994)

In many ways, Percival Everett's 1994 novel *God's Country* is a traditional Western, filled with depictions of "savage Indians," saloon brawls, gunfights, and casual allusions to systemic racism, such as we find in the passage quoted above. As Everett's audience knows, to borrow Michael Johnson's language, *God's Country* is "a parody of the genre Western set in the nineteenth century that pointedly foregrounds the issue of race" ("Looking" 28).¹ And long-time readers of Everett's works—especially novels like *Glyph, erasure*, and *A History of the African-American People (Proposed)* by Strom Thurmond, as told to Percival Everett and James Kincaid—are familiar with his use of sharp, biting humor to drive home his social critique. Everett's historical novel, set in the Western territories of 1871, can read like a checklist of popular Western genre tropes precisely because it clearly identifies these tropes to demonstrate how they collectively contribute to the genre's heavy reliance on racism. That is to say, if there were no dark-skinned Natives and slaves against whom to test their mettle, how would the white heroes of Westerns demonstrate their supposed moral superiority and the presumed fitness of Manifest Destiny? Thus, *God's Country* is often read by scholars and students as Everett's critique of the racist assumptions that support America's foundational mythology (or its most sustained lie): the mythology of the American frontier. *God's Country*, in short, exposes the racism of the Western genre to expose the racism of Western, American ideology.

This article will in no way challenge this reading of the novel. Rather, I aim to bolster this reading, while laying a foundation for reading not only this one novel, or even Everett's body of work as a whole, but perhaps all fiction that consciously engages with race. As a narrative theorist whose primary interest lies in what universities commonly call "ethnic American fiction," I have been engaged for some time with the development of what my colleagues in the field and I have termed a "Critical Race Narratology."² Built on the foundation of feminist narratology that exposed gender as a structural component of narrative as well as a subject for thematic treatment by authors,³ Critical Race Narratology explores the means by which race can be read as a structural component of narrative form, while simultaneously understanding how authors use the formal properties of narrative to comment on the social condition of race. For instance, in my 2014 article "Focalization, Ethics, and Cosmopolitanism in James Welch's *Fools Crow*," I argued for the existence of a "culturally-focalized narrator," or a narrative construct that is "bound to the cultural worldviews of those whose actions it narrates" (57), and then explored the ethical implications of such a formulation in a novel that dramatizes an historical moment of cross-cultural conflict. Similarly, in his 2015 article "'I Felt Like I Was Part of the Troop': Satire, Feminist Narratology, and Community," Brandon Manning developed a "black feminist narratology" whose goal is to use tools of structuralist

narratology to explicate the formal means by which “black women writers resist, rewrite, or undermine . . . stereotypes” (128). And most recently, in his 2017 article “Postblack Unnatural Narrative—Or, Is the Implied Author of Percival Everett’s *I Am Not Sidney Poitier Black?*,” Christian Schmidt explores how Everett’s 2009 novel frustrates the concept of the Ideal Author by creating a “postblack agent” that refuses to be identified as “black” while simultaneously “prodding” the reader to make that very identification throughout the text (94).

It should come as no surprise to Everett’s many readers that his fiction provides fertile ground for formal narratological study. From his postmodern intertextual play in such works as *erasure* and *Percival Everett by Virgil Russell* to his use of more traditional realist narration in such works as *Watershed* and *Wounded* (both of which are also “Westerns”), Everett very consciously manipulates form in his novels to weave together their political and aesthetic purposes. Therefore, by investigating how race works as a foundational—and until very recently a largely unexamined—aspect of the construction of such abstract notions as Ideal Authors and Readers, focalization, or, in the case of *God’s Country*, narrative voice, we can begin to see how literary artists subtly use narrative form to help achieve the social and political ends addressed in the subject matter of these works.

One of the most powerful—and subtle—of Everett’s condemnatory moves satirizing the Western genre is his use of the first-person point of view. A great many classic Westerns have employed first-person narrators—Walter Van Tilburn Clark’s *The Ox-Bow Incident* (1940), Jack Shafer’s *Shane* (1949), Charles Portis’s *True Grit* (1968), Roy Hansen’s *Desperadoes* (1979), and Larry McMurtry’s *Boone’s Lick* (2000) immediately come to mind—enabling the narrator to relay his personal experience with the mythic figures of Western legend. In many such novels, the cowboy figures—ranch hands, rustlers, sharpshooters, highwaymen, etc.—are men apart, people whose lives, actions, and especially skills we are meant to admire, but whose greatness we can never equal. One of the most popular and noteworthy examples of such work, setting the stage for much of the narrative tradition that has followed, is Owen Wister’s 1902 novel *The Virginian*.⁴

Narrated by an unnamed Easterner (later nicknamed “Tenderfoot”) who has recently arrived in Medicine Bow, Wyoming, *The Virginian* recounts the mythic life of a Western hero whose bravery and moral character are surpassed only by his abilities as a fighter, gunslinger, and ranch hand. The narrator provides a detailed account of the Virginian’s remarkable life, by the end of which the hero has become “an important man, with a strong grip on many various enterprises, and able to give his wife all and more than she asked or desired” (323). For my purposes here, however, the Virginian is far less important a figure than the comparatively unremarkable narrator; the teller, in other words, is far more interesting than the told. Wister’s unnamed narrator opens his description of the Virginian by calling him “a slim young giant, more beautiful than pictures” (4) who, despite the effort put into getting to Medicine Bow, exhibits “no dinginess of travel or shabbiness of attire [which] could tarnish the splendor that radiated from his youth and strength” (5).⁵ The narrator serves throughout as a vehicle for praising the Virginian, whether speaking of his bravery in saving Molly Stark from a flooding and nearly overturned stagecoach (chapter 9) or his strength and gallantry after being shot (chapter 27).

But more importantly in terms of narrative form, the narrator’s personal connection to the Virginian is highlighted by the narrative voice (as opposed to the impersonal third-person point of view that we find used by such Western writers as Zane Grey). And Wister intends this point of view to influence us personally, as individual readers: As Mieke Bal explains, “The point of view from which the elements of the fabula [story] are being presented is often of decisive importance for the meaning the reader will assign [it]” (76). To reach the reader personally, the narrative is constructed as if it were an eyewitness account, lending both the

teller and the tale a veneer of credibility. And in a realist novel like Wister's, the reader can be swept up by the tale, encouraged to believe the narrator's account.

The readers of *God's Country*, however, are certainly meant to doubt the narrator, given his explicit comparison of his own narrative to those readers encounter in dime novels. In this regard, the use of a first-person narrator helps Everett establish the object of his satire: the genre of the popular Western. Everett's first-person narrator in *God's Country*, like the one we find in *The Virginian*, is relaying the events of a true Western hero to his audience. But what makes this usage so striking is that, unlike the narrator in *The Virginian* (and various other first-person Westerns), Curt Marder has no idea he's doing that. In fact, for much of the novel, Marder refuses to accept Bubba's function as what Madison Smartt Bell defines as "in some ways the classic Western hero" (343) due to one factor: Bubba is black. (Although Bell does not come right out and say it, race seems to be the only aspect of the "classic Western hero" Bubba does not possess.) *God's Country* is narrated by the relatively incompetent, boorish, and largely unrepentant racist Curt Marder, who employs the best tracker in the West to help him hunt down the people who burned his barn, kidnapped his wife, and killed his dog. And for all the work this novel does to highlight Bubba's importance—his skills, his intelligence, his indestructibility at the end of the novel—the most damning condemnations of the racism employed by the Western genre do not come from anything Bubba says or does; they come directly from Marder himself. Bubba does not narrate this novel because Everett wants his readers to understand the racism of the West(ern) from the inside. Racism is clearly wrong, even when we're presented with the point of view of the racist.

Drawing from feminist narratology in her analysis of Edith Wharton's penchant for choosing male first-person narrators for her works, Elsa Nettels suggests that "her preference for male narrators may also have been dictated by her persistent view of literary creation as a man's vocation" (248). Similarly, Everett may have chosen a white narrator specifically to highlight racist assumptions regarding narrative voice and cultural authority; Marder's easy and enthusiastic identification of his own story with those of dime novels puts him squarely in the narrative tradition of the Western, while his narrative infelicities and—more importantly—his racist worldview clearly mark him as a figure of derision. Nettels also suggests that Wharton may have chosen male narrators because, like the later writer Elizabeth Spencer, Wharton may have believed that male narrators enabled her to demonstrate "objectivity toward my material" (qtd. in Nettels 249). Certainly, just as male narrators were once believed to possess objectivity due to sexist beliefs about female irrationality, racist notions of minoritarian irrationality—which we see, for example, every time a nonwhite person is accused of "playing the race card"—might lead many readers to believe that white narrators possess a greater degree of rational objectivity. And as we will see below, Marder is not at all objective, at every turn not only betraying but openly and enthusiastically embracing his own racism. In this way, Everett shows his readers that the genre itself—here embodied by those who tell the stories of the frontier heroes and their exploits—knows itself to be racist at its core. As my students—as well as the next generation of Everett's readers—would say, racism is a feature, not a bug.

Yet while Marder is abysmally ignorant, he is not stupid. He knows the Western and its narrative conventions well. Early in the novel he notes that "I had read what I could of the dime novels of the frontier, thinking it my duty as a citizen of it to make sure the truth be told, and generally the little books gave a fair account" (10). Here he reminds himself and his audience not only of his expertise—drawn from reading dime novels rather than his lived experiences—but also of his view (and here again the point of view matters) that these novels more or less accurately represent frontier living. Of course, one way to read this passage is as straight-up satire; no reader of Everett's is going to believe that dime novels were historically

accurate. Further, as Bill Brown reminds us, the primary audience for dime novels was “adolescent boys” (39), a readership more interested in the sensationalism of the action than the historical accuracy of the narrative. Similarly, modern Westerns—including some very successful films—have enjoyed taking dime novelists to task. For instance, fans of Clint Eastwood’s *Unforgiven* will remember W. W. Beauchamp’s failed attempts to turn English Bob into a folk hero in his wildly inaccurate novel *The Duke of Death*. In addition to correcting many of the novel’s inaccuracies, Little Bill Daggett (whom Beauchamp recognizes as a frontiersman worthy of mythic treatment himself) mispronounces the title of the novel as “The Duck of Death,” both to insult the ostensible hero English Bob as well as to deflate the power of the narrative tradition that builds people up into unrealistic caricatures.

In a similar vein, Everett noted in a 2004 interview (speaking of his novel *Watershed* and the massacre at Wounded Knee) that “history is like memories: it is constantly being reconstructed. History doesn’t exist without the lies” (Shavers 48). As has been demonstrated elsewhere, the narrative tradition of frontier mythology is built on just such lies.⁶ And in response to the political activism of the 1960s (much of which engaged explicitly with racial equality), many writers—including John Barth, E. L. Doctorow, Thomas Pynchon, Ishmael Reed, Leslie Marmon Silko, Gerald Vizenor, and James Welch, to name a few contemporary historical novelists whose works have engaged in explicit social critique—have taken these lies to task, specifically exposing the narrative tradition of mythologizing as a tool of racism (as well as other manifestations of systemic oppression).

That said, *God’s Country* is more than just a modern critique of Westerns (whether dime novels or those included in the literary canon) and the narrative tradition developed from them; in having this novel narrated by a white character steeped in the narrative construction of “the West,” Everett is subtly suggesting that this narrative tradition knows itself to be racist. By opening the novel in the voice of a white character narrator who, at least in his own mind, speaks on behalf of this largely white narrative tradition, Everett is inviting his readers to see Marder’s later overt acts of racism—in particular, his overt speech acts of racism—as an integral part of the narrative tradition into which Marder consciously writes himself. And lest the reader forget, Marder occasionally reminds his audience that “this here is my story” (5) or notes that “I’ll hurry through this part here” (133), demonstrating his persistent self-identification as a narrator.

We also know Marder to be an unreliable narrator. Early in the novel, he describes an incident in which a man named Greenfeld is being assaulted in a bar, and “everybody . . . managed to get a lick in, exceptin’ me. I took the opportunity to sneak a taste of the bottle of elixir,” which made him so ill that his vomiting “caused the men to leave off beatin’ poor Greenbelt” (9). First, Marder knows the man’s name is Greenfeld. But, more importantly, Marder later remembers the event as his having “drew their attention” so that Greenfeld could “[scoot] into the street away to safety” (116). Given Marder’s overinflated sense of self-importance—as well as his drawing from a narrative tradition of active mythologizing—Marder is very likely misremembering the event to make himself seem more heroic.

Marder is also unreliable about the story he thinks he’s telling. As Johnson has argued, “Marder mistakenly thinks he’s telling his own story rather than Bubba’s” (*Hoodoo* 9). It is certainly true that Marder sees himself as the subject of his own tale, and Bubba as a minor character, part of the supporting cast. Yet Johnson is only half-right. Marder is telling Bubba’s tale, but he is, in fact, telling his own as well. The confusion arises from Marder’s misunderstanding what his own tale is; he thinks he’s narrating a realist tale in the spirit of such works as *The Virginian*. Again, as Johnson notes, “Through Marder’s narration, Everett comments on the way that white-authored histories of the American West have erased or obscured black collaboration in Western experience” (9). Bubba’s accomplishments are all

there for the reader to see. But when Marder narrates them, they are rarely noted as accomplishments. It is as if Marder cannot conceive that Bubba—or any African American—might be an accomplished individual, even if Bubba’s known accomplishments are the very reason Marder approached him for help. As we see later in the novel, Marder is clearly insecure around Bubba, and almost recognizes his own inferiority: “For some reason I was afraid of Bubba. Well, for several reasons, not the least of which was that it was becoming clear that he weren’t impressed by the color of my skin” (165). And because of this growing insecurity—developed, no doubt, from watching Bubba succeed as a tracker while Marder himself seems mostly to get in the way—Marder will take any chance he gets to craft a sympathetic narrative for his actions. As is made clear throughout, Marder’s narrative is every bit as deliberate a construction as Everett’s, and we are intended to read both narratives as satires of the narrative tradition of the Western. The only difference, of course, is that Everett knows his narrative to be a satire, whereas Marder clearly does not.

In a 2014 profile of Everett published in *Ploughshares*, noted Everett scholar Anthony Stewart described him as “the magician who breaks the guild’s code by revealing how the trick works,” explaining how “everyone knows it’s a trick. The real art is to make the audience believe anyway, in spite of their knowing it is a trick. The master stroke is to work to make sure the audience never forgets that a trick is being performed” (“About” 192). Much has been made, and rightly so, of Everett’s work as a stylist, and his readers certainly delight in knowing the trick while believing it anyway.⁷ But this is also an apt way of describing what Everett reveals of the narrative tradition of the Western; essentially, the novelists (and many of their readers) are fully aware that their narrative tradition is built on overt, systemic racism. In fact, justifications of racism are part of the point of many of these books. In *God’s Country*, Marder is clear in his description of Bubba as “the best tracker in the territory. A legend. A nigger” (10). Nor is Marder the only character that uses such language and makes assumptions about people based on race. Later in the novel, a preacher asks, “Where would a nigger learn manners?,” to which a man named Peterson replies, “That’s what I said. . . . Can’t blame him for what he is” (38). Nor are these discussions happening only in the company of other white men. Marder later tells Bubba that “it’s 1871, ain’t you people ever gonna forget about that slavery stuff?” (24). And near the novel’s end (as already noted), he laments that “it was becoming clear that . . . [Bubba] weren’t impressed by the color of my skin” (165), registering his frustration that Bubba refuses to accept (what Marder feels should be) his place.

Of course, even though Bubba is not at all “impressed” by Marder’s race, this does not mean he is not aware of the tensions brought up by the persistent presence of racism. Speaking to Jake—the young girl traveling with Bubba and Marder, passing for a young boy⁸—Bubba explains that

My folks was slaves and I was a slave. . . . That man what owned us in Virginia liked to beat his slaves. My pa died and I run away. I run as fast and as far as I could. They say we’re free now. But I don’t believe it. I’ll always be a runaway and they’ll always want to kill me. (55)

Bubba knows that whatever freedom under the law he may now have does not translate to actual freedom in practice. He knows full well that racism—either the beliefs of individuals or the systemic racism that pervades all aspects of American society—does not disappear with a change in the law. But this does not mean that language does not matter. Following this passage, Jake asks, “Are you a nigger?,” to which Bubba replies, “No. . . . I’m a black man.” The distinction is crucial: the former is not, in any capacity, a person; the latter is, even if people like Marder refuse to or cannot recognize it, or even see the distinction: “‘Nigger’s just a word for black man,’ I said” (55). Bubba does not reply here, in part because he spends much of the novel trying not to talk to Marder about race; however, as Marder

refuses to see Bubba as anything other than a (former) slave, Bubba is forced to put the point to him bluntly: “You hired me, but you don’t own me. Don’t nobody own me. You hear what I’m sayin’ to you. I ain’t no more a slave than you is a child of God” (67). Further, even though Marder cannot think past his racism, he still needs Bubba to explain to him just how pervasive it is. After Jake shoots a man for trying to rape her—an act Bubba was trying to prevent—Marder seems confused as to why Bubba is in such a hurry to leave; Bubba has to spell it out for him explicitly: “He’s white and I’m black and I was fightin’ him and two-hundred white witnesses cain’t convince the twelve I’ll never see that I didn’t kill him” (88).

While we see numerous examples of Marder’s racism through his own narrative voice—in his internal monologues as well as in his dialogue with other characters (not to mention the selection of incidents he chooses to narrate)—the short snippets of Bubba’s conversation that Marder chooses to include further highlight his ignorance. As the example immediately above demonstrates, Marder has given precious little thought to the systemic influence of racist beliefs and practices. Like many racists, he has accepted the status quo that places himself and those like him in a position of social superiority, with no thought given to the repercussions felt by others. Moreover, his various comments and actions highlight his belief that race can and should be the only thing that matters in terms of social standing and personal merit, the only factor that determines worth, even while simultaneously (and without any sense of self-reflection) recognizing Bubba’s superiority as a traditional Western “hero.” To return to Stewart’s language, the “trick” here for Marder—and for the (largely white) Western novelists he comes to represent—is to convince readers of the existence of white superiority even while recognizing that there is absolutely no evidence for it. And, indeed, a great many readers of Westerns knew the trick and believed it anyway. Sadly, many readers still do.

Summarizing the work of scholars who have written about Everett’s Westerns, Matthew Mullins describes Everett’s novels in “Counter-Counterstorytelling: Rereading Critical Race Theory in Percival Everett’s *Assumption*” as “revisionist history committed to rewriting the western with an eye toward the narratives of oppression and marginalization that often go unrecognized or unowned in the genre” (457). While I certainly agree with the sentiment, I cannot help but wonder if Everett would fully agree. And not just because of Everett’s notorious aversion to defining his work for interviewers and scholars. Rather, I suspect that part of the point of *God’s Country*—and Marder as the first-person narrator and self-appointed authority figure—is to suggest that the genre does indeed know itself to be racist. Marder knows himself to be racist; what he refuses to recognize—what remains “unowned”—is that his racism is wrong. Mullins further notes of *God’s Country* that “the first-person perspective of Marder . . . reveals Bubba’s centrality gradually over the first few chapters,” arguing that “crafting a story about a black character through the voice of a white character is a clear critique of ordinary racism, dominant cultural narratives, and the reduction of people of color to racial categories” (461).

Voice here is an important component of Marder’s social positioning, as it comes to represent Marder’s (metaphorical) voice in the social world. Just as Bubba can speak in the novel only when and how Marder (as narrator) grants him the opportunity, so Bubba as a black man can be heard in society only when white America grants him his voice. As noted above, hundreds of witnesses to Jake’s self-defense could never convince a white jury that Bubba was innocent, even though he did not pull the trigger. So just as Mullins points out that “Curt Marder possesses the right skin color but lacks character” (with the reverse being true for Bubba), Marder also possesses a voice that can and will be heard, both by readers and by society at large. As Mullins reminds us, “Bubba is the protagonist” (461), but Marder is still the (narrative and cultural) authority. And while the reader early on picks up that Bubba is the central character and “hero” of the narrative, Marder

steadfastly refuses to get there himself, even when he manages to both accept that he is a racist and recognize that racism is a problem. Indeed, he frequently—and at times proudly—rests on his belief that his race makes him superior. In Marder's world, racism is not wrong. Today, most people seem willing to agree that racism is wrong but refuse to accept that their worldview may be built on a foundation of racism. We see this awkward acknowledgment when people begin sentences with "I'm not a racist, but. . . ."

One of the benefits of a first-person point of view is the reader's access to the narrator's thoughts, granting awareness of any change in attitude, beliefs, or worldview. And near the end of the novel, readers may be tricked into thinking that Marder has undergone just such a development. Knowing that the novel's narrator has spent a significant amount of time with Bubba, one might well assume that Bubba's personal strength of character and professional merits would win over even such an entrenched racist as Marder. While trying to save Bubba from making the mistake of killing Colonel Custer (an act for which Bubba would certainly be killed), Marder tries reasoning with Bubba, first appealing to his desire to own land, but then suggesting that Bubba might serve as an "ideal minority": "You could be an example to other ni— black folks" (182). Similarly, Marder later tries to dissuade Bubba from another suicidal mission by telling him he needs help, that he cannot just walk into a saloon and take a white girl from a white man: "You're a ni— a black man. They'll see you faster than a hog shits" (207). In both cases, Marder appears to be trying to save Bubba's life; in both cases, Bubba's plan could fail, and failure would bring with it execution (if he's lucky). But, perhaps more importantly, we also see here two examples of Marder's policing his own speech; he twice catches himself while starting to utter racist epithets and opts for a politer form of address. By boiling Bubba's identity down to his race and also catching himself in the act of using a hateful racist slur, Marder may appear to be recognizing that he is a racist and that racism is wrong. But this is simply not the case. Marder is merely realizing that outward expressions of racism might be improper, especially as he still needs Bubba to "get *me*" (not *us*) "that reward money" (205; emphasis added). Marder has not come to terms with his racism, nor is he on any path to distance himself from such a worldview. Rather, he merely recognizes that his outward expressions of racism will in no way convince Bubba to help him. These verbal expressions serve to mark Marder's growing awareness that overt racism will likely subvert his selfish endeavors.

We know that Marder has not changed how he thinks and feels precisely because of the first-person point of view employed throughout. At the end of the novel, Marder thinks to himself that, "When all was done, I was gonna have to kill Bubba, shoot him dead. There was nothing else to do. Simple. And he was a nigger; I wouldn't have to cover it up, justify it or nothing" (217). In addition to using this slur without reservation—knowing that Bubba cannot hear him thinking—Marder recognizes that the systemic racism pervading American society (especially in law enforcement) will not even register the act as a crime. To Marder as well as America at large, black lives absolutely do not matter. And in his final act, Marder repeatedly shoots Bubba in the back. I now quote extensively from the novel, both to explain the act and to present Marder's first-person narrative account:

I had a good feeling about following him out of there, but I was scared, too. I was staring at him and I don't know what come over me, but it was like some kind of blind historical urge and that black man in front of me weren't no kind of real human being, just a thing. I raised my gun and put a bullet in his back.

Bubba fell off onto the dusty, red earth. Then he got up. And like nothing had happened, he climbed back atop his mule. I shot him again. Again he fell. Red dust floated all around him. His shirt was red with blood.

He got up and looked at me with a hawk's eyes, not the eyes of a man with two bullets in his back. I was into something frightening and my heart was standing still. He moved like he was taking a step toward me, but he stopped. He went back to his mule, grabbed the animal's back and pulled himself up. He hugged the mule's neck, reaching for the reins. I watched my finger, not the black man, as I squeezed off another round. (218-19)

There is much to unpack here. First, we have the white Curt Marder attempting to gun down the black Bubba, shooting him in the back, and doing so repeatedly, without provocation. Contemporary American readers of *God's Country* will undoubtedly draw parallels between Marder's attempt at cold-blooded murder and the numerous high-profile cases of African American men shot and killed by the police in recent years.⁹ And although the novel was written before the passage of many versions of the "stand your ground" laws that became infamous following the murder of Trayvon Martin in 2012, Marder seems to be channeling the impulse behind the law when he notes that "he moved like he was taking a step toward me." In this case, we can perhaps see an attempt at justifying his actions, especially given that he also admits to being "scared." Scared, we should note, of a black man retreating, who politely asked Marder, "Please, don't do that," when Marder drew his gun (218).

More to the point regarding the narrative voice, though, we also see here that Marder is not in any way policing his own language. In fact, his language aptly parallels his actions: Just as gunning down Bubba is no way to treat a man—and no way to treat a Western hero, for shooting a man in the back would universally be seen as an act of cowardice in Westerns—Marder notes that Bubba is not a man, "no kind of real human being, just a thing." But even knowing that killing Bubba will bring about no legal or social repercussions, Marder still does not seem able to accept that he is the one killing Bubba. In addition to the possible sense of justification noted above, Marder claims that "I don't know what come over me, but it was like some kind of blind historical urge." It's not me, he seems to be saying; it's some larger force. Marder himself is not killing Bubba; he's merely the tool of systemic racism enacting its inevitable consequences. And at the end of the book, after everything Marder has seen of and done with Bubba, in his heart of hearts Bubba is nothing more to him than a "thing" to be disposed of. The first-person narration makes Marder's thoughts on the matter crystal clear.

In a 2007 interview with Anthony Stewart that covers a variety of topics related to Everett's fiction, Everett brings up what he called "the Thurmond book" (309), the epistolary novel he co-wrote with James Kincaid whose full title—*A History of the African-American People (Proposed) by Strom Thurmond, as told to Percival Everett and James Kincaid*—only hints at the novel's satiric treatment of American race relations, academia, and the publishing industry. Everett's final thought on Strom Thurmond's character can help us better understand Marder in *God's Country*: "And I come back to that very strange distinction between liking white people better and hating black people" ("Uncategorizable" 312). Marder seems to have no love for white people outside of their race, few people might call themselves Marder's friends, and none of his relationships seems predicated on his preferring the company of white people. In fact, Marder seems unable to get along with many of the other white characters in the book despite sharing the racial identity that he explicitly values. Rather, it is clear that he hates black people, so much so that when finally faced with the superiority of a black man in his world, his only response is to try to gun that man down. And because we are in his head when he commits these actions, we witness him shifting the blame from himself and his flawed beliefs to some vague sense of historical determinism. He does not even bother with the half-assed "I'm not racist, but. . ."

God's Country is not Everett's only Western, nor is it the only one in which his narrator explicitly engages with racial tensions in America. Set in the contemporary

West, *Wounded* employs a black first-person narrator who, early in the novel, regarding his employee, notes internally that, “I thought Wallace was okay, a little dumb, but okay. I didn’t know much about the man; I didn’t care to know much. I’d hired him in spite of his obvious surprise at discovering I was black” (5). Even though much of the novel focuses on the murder of a young gay man (again suggesting Everett’s sensitivity to intersectional issues of oppression in the American West), race is clearly identified early in the novel as an important factor shaping how the characters think about and respond to one another. And as with *God’s Country*, the first-person narrative voice often highlights this issue. However, paying attention to the formal operations of narrative voice can also help readers understand the racial (and other) tensions in Everett’s other Westerns. For instance, we might ask how Everett employs a third-person point of view in such books as *Walk Me to the Distance* and *Assumption*, and how the distancing qualities of the third-person narrative voice—and the presumed omniscience with which readers often imbue that narrative voice—might suggest the pervasive nature of the systemic racism that exists within larger, abstract social systems as well as in individual hearts and minds.

Or, to take a more recent example, we could look at the play between narrative voices in Everett’s collection *Half an Inch of Water*. Eight of the nine stories are told in the third person, and four of the five mentions of African Americans or blackness come in direct speech uttered by the characters, without any other context suggesting that race matters to the conversation at hand. (The one mention not given in direct speech occurs in a passage focalized through a character, so we know the thoughts are his; as such, the mention is more properly attributed to the character than to the narrator.) These various mentions could suggest that, even when otherwise irrelevant, race is always on the minds of some people, and that such people always feel the need to comment on race as a way of addressing African Americans (“What are you doing up this way, brown man?” [111]), suggesting the foreignness of African Americans in certain communities (“She from here?” “Black girl.” [131]), or reminding African Americans that they will always be defined by their race (“You know, being a black vet out here. I have to admit, I had my doubts.” “About what exactly?” “Whether you’d make it.” “You mean fit in?” “I guess that’s what I mean, yeah.” [10]). And in the final story of the collection, told in the first person by Jack Keene, who has been asked by a dying Arapaho woman to find her estranged, elderly son, the reader learns of Jack’s race only when an Arapaho clerk at the reservation office calls him a “wasichu”:

“Every week, some wasichu comes in here looking for an Indian nobody knows.”
 She was joking, but she had used Lakota slang for a white person and it kind of rankled me.
 “I’m not white,” I said.
 “You’re not Indian,” she said.
 “True enough. Have a good day, ma’am.” (152-53)

This short conversation is a stunning reminder of the slipperiness of racial identification and community definition, especially given that *wasichu* does not explicitly refer to whites, or even exclusively to people of European descent. Often translated as ‘greedy person,’ the term refers to non-Natives who have taken Native land. Although the word is most commonly used in reference to a white person, there is no racial or etymological reason that it cannot also refer to an African American.¹⁰ In this case, the clerk may be using it to mark Jake as an outsider, a non-Native. Or it could be the Native woman’s way of noting that all non-Natives are, in her view, indistinguishable; while neither Jake nor his ancestors are the ones who displaced the Native populations, he is still a property owner living on traditionally Native land, and at this moment is standing in a reservation office. Either way, it is the first-person narrative voice—Jake’s internal comments—that define *wasichu* for the reader as a racially charged word. Despite its etymology and current use by the Arapaho clerk, Jake defines it in terms of race. And despite any similarities he and

this clerk may have as “people of color,” he is reminded that he is “not Indian,” and therefore an outsider, because he is black.

God's Country is also not the only novel in which Everett skillfully employs a first-person point of view, nor is it the only one in which he uses such a narrator to comment explicitly on race. *erasure* obviously comes to mind, in which the narrator Thelonious “Monk” Ellison introduces himself to the reader by noting, “I have dark brown skin, curly hair, a broad nose, and some of my ancestors were slaves and I have been detained by pasty white policemen in New Hampshire, Arizona and Georgia and so the society in which I live tells me I am black; that is my race” (1). And one of the most powerful moments in *Glyph* comes at the point where the narrator asks, “Have you to this point assumed that I am white?” (54) Obviously, the critical methodology I am developing here is not limited to narratives from a single genre, even if this genre should be singled out given its longstanding nature as an explicit vehicle for the narrative transmission of American racist self-definition. The first-person point of view employed in *God's Country* is, however, notable in Everett's work for belonging to a white character narrator. Everett's readers will of course know that he often employs the first-person narrative voice in his fiction, in such novels as *Suder* (1983), *Watershed* (1996), *Wounded* (2005), *The Water Cure* (2007), *I Am Not Sidney Poitier* (2009), and *Percival Everett by Virgil Russell* (2013), all of which employ character narrators that are explicitly identified as black. That Curt Marder is white not only marks a break from Everett's usual narrators, but also highlights the racial critique Everett makes with this stylistic choice. While on the one hand this attribution suggests a connection to the white narrators of the Westerns that Everett is clearly parodying, Everett is also subtly suggesting that this narrative tradition has always been built on—if not centrally concerned with—establishing a narrative foundation for structural racism in American culture. That Marder sees himself as a spokesman of white supremacy is satirically undercut by the reader's understanding of him as a buffoon. That said, Marder's narrative authority also reminds readers that such notions of racial superiority were always constructions, and not based on merit. Despite his flaws, Marder is still the figure of authority, social as well as narrative.

Further, while many read works written by African Americans and narrated by black character narrators as overt commentary on racism in America, in *God's Country* Everett demonstrates that narrative voice can be employed to highlight the importance of race as a structural component of the narrative regardless of the narrator's racial identity. And given the institutional importance of white men in America, Everett may also be slyly taking a dig at the idea that only white voices can be granted authority, because black voices are so easily dismissed.¹¹ Moreover, even when we accept that Marder possesses narrative authority, we also recognize that such authority is only granted by narrative convention. This aptly mirrors the authority of “white voices” in American culture, which only have such authority based on social convention and not any inherent superiority.

God's Country is not a novel that creates a well-developed black character narrator conceived to present to the reader the humanity of African Americans, nor is the narrative focused on documenting the struggles of “the black community,” even if it does demonstrate some of these struggles through Marder's treatment of Bubba (while alluding to ongoing struggles for a contemporary readership). However, it is still one of the most powerful commentaries on race that has been produced in recent years, given that it simultaneously highlights the prevalence of racism in American culture while also noting a major source of that racism: the popular Western genre. As Everett subtly demonstrates throughout this work—in terms of narrative form as well as larger social practice—race is structural, foundational, and informative. Race matters. Even if it does not mean what Curt Marder thinks it does.

1. One of the strengths of Everett's fiction is his complex commentary on race, and it is quite common throughout his work (not just in *God's Country*) to employ Native American characters and comment on various sociopolitical issues faced by contemporary Native populations. I would like to acknowledge this concern, even while the present article focuses on antiblack racism. Obviously, a richer understanding of race in Everett's works would also attend to his Native characters. With respect to the focus of this article, though, Everett has not yet employed a Native character narrator for any of his works.

2. For a more complete background on this development, see Donahue, "Focalization"; Donahue, Ho, and Morgan; Kim; and Manning.

3. In particular, see Susan S. Lanser's groundbreaking article "Toward a Feminist Narratology."

4. Leland Krauth also connects *God's Country* to *The Virginian* but focuses more specifically on the novel as a parody ("pushing toward farce" [317]) of the traditional Western. Krauth concludes that the novel "paints on the familiar canvas of the West a new picture of the vast, deep problem of racial prejudice" (321). The only problem I have with this conclusion is the suggestion that the picture Everett paints is new, since he is actually forcing us to see the whole picture that has always been there. Racial prejudice is not a new feature of Westerns, even if many readers have failed to notice it.

5. Readers familiar with both *God's Country* and *The Virginian* may also see a similarity between Everett's dressing up General Custer in "ladies unmistakables" (182) and the claim by *The Virginian's* narrator that, "had I been the bride [to the Virginian's groom], I should have taken the giant, dust and all" (5). Everett is certainly critiquing both the gendered and racial assumptions of the Western. In this regard, one could productively read *God's Country* against Ishmael Reed's *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down* (1969), particularly in the latter's feminizing description of the Field Marshall as a "Dresden Doll" in a "curled and pressed" wig, wearing "evening pumps" (171-72). However, whereas Everett and Reed are clearly writing satire, Wister uses this quick feminization of his narrator as a means of praising the Virginian's superior masculinity.

6. See, for instance, James J. Donahue's *Failed Frontiersmen*.

7. Many of the essays collected in Mitchell and Vander's *Perspectives on Percival Everett* focus on style and form in their analyses of various novels.

8. Bubba's recognition of Jake as a girl, paired with Marder's inability to see Jake for who she really is, suggests that Marder's problem is not only with race. Rather, Marder represents the systems of authority that work to oppress minorities by covert as well as overt means. Marder's inability to recognize—much less respect—anyone who is not a white man demonstrates the need for intersectional approaches to systemic oppression. In this regard, we are reminded of Stewart's suggestion that "maybe the ultimate magic trick for the African American magician to perform is to show that his art need not be 'just' about race" ("About" 192).

9. These victims of police violence include, among others, Dontre Hamilton (2014), John Crawford III (2014), Michael Brown, Jr. (2014), Ezell Ford (2014), Akai Gurley (2014), Tamir Rice (2014), Romain Brisbon (2014), Jerame Reid (2014), Tony Robinson (2015), Eric Harris (2015), and Walter Scott (2015). And this does not even begin to count the number of black men killed by other whites, and by other means. Nor does it include black women who have also been killed in various ways by the police.

10. African Americans are sometimes referred to as "black wasichu," which would certainly be racially marked.

11. While I am certain that Everett is not consciously calling anyone out in this regard, one should be reminded of works like John Howard Griffin's bestselling 1961 memoir *Black Like Me*. Although Griffin's intentions were good, and his activist work on behalf of the black community in the 1960s should be commended, the entire premise of the book rests on the unquestioned assumption that the racism suffered by African Americans needs to be validated by a white man, whose racial identity gives him authority. Griffin's book is hardly the first American narrative to document the range of indignities, crimes, and atrocities faced by African Americans. But on the very first page, Griffin writes that "the Southern Negro will not tell the white man the truth" (1), as if decades of writing by African Americans could so easily be dismissed. The experiences thus become "real" only when personally validated by a white man.

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