Menippean Satire through Tonal Multiplicity

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CHAPTER 4
Menippean Satire through Tonal Multiplicity

Shifting the focus onto a second cluster of Everett’s books, the critical center of this chapter realigns around another subset of features from Musgrave’s schema for defining Menippean satire. This trio of features, outlined in greater depth below, coheres into what can be called “tonal multiplicity” and is a slightly less intrinsic marker of Menippean satire than the formal, linguistic, and philosophical forms of multiplicity discussed in the previous chapter. Tonal multiplicity undoubtedly contributes to a Menippean sensibility—or mind-set, or outlook—within a particular work by amplifying and augmenting the formal structures and linguistic/rhetorical techniques associated with the mode. However, when tonal multiplicity is the predominant Menippean trait of a given text, it insinuates the mode more than epitomizing it. Stated differently, tonal multiplicity marks Menippean satire in the way that a particular combination of spices might indicate a specific cuisine; those spices can be a distinctive marker, but the distinction is largely notable for the way it alters the flavor of something more substantial, such as meats, proteins, or vegetables.

Using the parameters of Paul Alpers’s definition of a mode as “the literary manifestation, in a given work, not of its attitudes in a loose sense, but of its assumptions about man’s nature and situation” (50), the Menippean character of those assumptions is conveyed more obliquely through tonal multiplicity than through its formal, philosophical, or linguistic cousins.

The Menippean effects of tonal multiplicity are apparent and significant within *Suder*, *Cutting Lisa*, *American Desert*, *The Water Cure*, and *I Am Not Sidney Poitier*, as well as in many of Everett’s other works; however, those effects are also more sporadic, diluted, and/or ambiguous than in the works surveyed in the previous chapter, in which most, if not all, of the other features of Menippean multiplicity are also at work. This chapter thus continues cataloging the tonal Menippean qualities of the five books covered in the last chapter but also broadens out to look at the way in which tonal multiplicity on its own can define the Menippean quality of another set of books by
Everett, even though these are moderately less representative examples of the mode.

Although the three features of Musgrave’s schema being characterized here as “tonal multiplicity” sometimes manifest formally within a given text, their function is more to impart a transformational tone to the text than to serve in and of themselves as the tropes of a recognizable literary convention. By way of analogy, stock characters such as charming princes, distressed orphans, and greedy trolls, or conventional plots involving abductions/rescues, rediscovery of lost objects, and extrication from undesirable marriages are all common formal markers of the fairy-tale genre. The predominant tonal markers of the genre, however, rely on less embodied descriptors such as menace, deception, imposture, virtue, restoration, and/or transgression. In keeping with the musical metaphor of tonality, these are the Menippean traits that help satirically “bend” or “blue” individual notes within what otherwise might appear to be straightforward and euphonious melodies.

Thematic Heterogeneity

The first component of this subset is Musgrave’s third feature, which he calls “thematic heterogeneity.” He describes it as the obvious juxtaposition of thematic elements that clash with one another to the point of creating an intentional and elaborate cacology—that is, a seemingly inept choice of incompatible words comparable to the dissonant noise of a cacophony: “Menippean satire frequently uses vulgarity, coarseness, or grotesquery to provide a stark contrast to the intellectual sphere which is being satirized. Another aspect of this thematic heterogeneity is the mixture of fantasy and morality” (Musgrave 23). In A History of the African-American People, Barton Wilkes’s letters and Martin Snell’s memos—which intertwine indiscreet flirtations with professional matters—are self-contained exemplars of thematic heterogeneity. The glaring difference between Monk’s cultured authorial voice and the coarsely vulgar voice he creates for Van Go Jenkins serves a similar purpose in Erasure. Glyph contains some of the most jarring contrasts in all of Everett’s work, as the narrative frequently veers between high-flown scholarly utterances and discussions of Ralph’s bowel functions: “I sat on the potty while Rosenda watched. A sad scene, but I had grown accustomed to such indignities. As I sat there ignoring the woman, I closed my eyes and considered my mother. Actually, I considered Lacan, as was my wont when doing what I was doing. At that moment, I contemplated his restatement of the Freudian Oedipus Complex” (164). This contrast emphasizes that the “entire tone and flow of the novel follows from the incongruity . . . between Ralph’s [adult] mind and [infant] body” (Schur, “The Mind-Body Split” 77–78). The book’s thematic
heterogeneity thus results both from its extreme fragmentation—which seems, literally and figuratively, like child’s play when compared to *The Water Cure* (see below)—and from Ralph’s simultaneous status as a physically dependent baby and a mentally autonomous polymath.

In a different way, Everett satirizes George Armstrong Custer’s bloody historical legacy in *God’s Country* partly by contrasting it with an absurdly comical set piece more reminiscent of *Blazing Saddles* (1974) than of *They Died with Their Boots On* (1941). Marder initially encounters Custer after stumbling into a Seventh Cavalry encampment and meeting one of Custer’s soldiers with the childishly scatological name of Rip Phardt. Marder tells Phardt that he has information that will allow Custer to ambush Big Elk, an Indian chief who has been frustrating Custer’s racist imposition of Manifest Destiny. Custer expresses his motivations to Marder: “It’s the American way. I’m talking about our way of life, man. And they’re trying to take it away from us. From me. First the slaves wanting to be free and now these red heathens. It’s enough to make you spit in bath water” (Everett, *God’s* 128). Although Marder has been invoking the “mythology [that] was invented for the West” throughout the novel to this point, Custer’s words bring its underlying genocidal implications clearly to the fore. Everett noted in an interview that this myth “is really the American story. Not the story itself but the fact that it was needed” (Birnbaum 37). Presuming, with good reason, that Marder is already sympathetic, Custer tells him the unsavory part of this “American story” that is elided from the ennobling accounts of Western “settlement.” When Custer and his men finally attack Big Elk’s village, Marder repeats his behavior from the novel’s opening scene and regards the carnage from a nearby hiding place: “They wasn’t interested in taking prisoners. They shot this way and that and blindly into tepees and they was high on the killing. I could see it in their eyes. I saw a couple of soldiers grab Happy Bear, who was already wounded, and stake him to the ground. They laughed while they stood over him, then one of them sliced open his belly” (169). Marder’s shamefulness in this instance is compounded not only by his complicity in betraying Big Elk—who had helped him earlier in the book—to Custer but also by the fact that the only thing he does while hiding and watching Custer’s men destroy Big Elk’s village is to knock Bubba unconscious with the butt of his gun to prevent him from intervening.

Disgusted by this display of violence and the underlying mind-set that justifies it, Bubba goes to a whorehouse in the town of Cahoots with a simple goal in mind: “I’m gonna kill and scalp that Custer” (178). When Bubba and Marder find Custer there, Marder initially mistakes him for a whore, which is a reasonable misapprehension given that Custer is in a bordello and “wearin’ ladies’ unmistakables” (182). Custer’s feminized appearance triggers a rather
sentimentally Oedipal reaction in Marder, who asks Bubba, “Are you really gonna kill that poor man what’s dressed like my departed mama, or are you just gonna give him a little bit of a scare?” (183). When Bubba seems intent on following through with his deadly intentions, Marder reverts to his default morality; he pulls out his gun and points it at Bubba, saying, “I’m afraid I’m gonna have to do my American duty and stop you and then turn you in as a nigger what’s gone wild” (184). Bubba easily wrests the gun from the cowardly Marder and knocks Custer out cold before deciding that “killin’ is too good for him.” Instead, Bubba issues a kind of malediction that recasts Custer’s subsequent death at Little Bighorn as righteous vengeance against a coward rather than the glorious sacrifice in service of the nation as it was framed in the press and in histories: “Man like him ought to die in a special way, seeing it comin’ and scared to death” (186). Custer’s men burst into the room at this point, and Bubba, Marder, and the actual prostitute with whom Custer was consorting all jump out the window and flee, with the soldier in pursuit absurdly yelling, “Stop ’em! Stop ’em! . . . They done tried to kill the colonel by dressin’ him up like a woman” (187). These scenes satirically undermine Custer—and Marder, who is more than willing to support Custer, tacitly and actively—not just by showing the awfulness of his actions but also by robbing him and his quintessentially (white) frontier narrative of the nobility and gravitas—“My name is George A. Custer. Perhaps you’ve heard of me” (127)—that Custer clearly believes he and it richly deserve.

This Menippean characteristic is hardly a development of Everett’s later career, though. Thematic multiplicity is already evident in his first novel, Suder, in which the seemingly serious themes of existential crisis, parental insanity, and pervasive racism are paired with farcical episodes involving a sassy nine-year-old runaway named Jincy, flashbacks to Craig Suder’s childhood in which he has to fend off his mother’s frantic accusations of “pull[ing] on [him]self” (13), and a scene in which a now-adult Suder wins five hundred dollars in a carnival game by hitting an elephant—who also becomes his boon companion later on in the novel—in the testicles with his baseball bat. Jacqueline Berben-Masi described the tone of these latter scenes as “slapstick . . . drawn from an animated cartoon for adolescent entertainment” and suggested that they temporarily displace the book’s narrative into a “realm of strange happenings that now and then exceed both the patience of a sophisticated reader and the experience of ordinary mortals” (“Getting” 25). She also contended that Everett alternates between “the basest of animate comportment and the highest of spiritual experience” and, in doing so, blends “the prosaic with the poetic” (25) as he tells “the tale of the adult protagonist’s failing athletic career coupled with his haphazard itinerary towards self-discovery and fulfillment” (23). Simultaneously
accentuating the book’s formal, rhetorical, and thematic forms of multiplicity, she concluded that “Suder is parody, pastiche, intertextuality, mythic quest, and post-postmodernism—all of them rolled into one” (28).

One of Everett’s most striking, but also subtle, uses of thematic multiplicity occurs in Cutting Lisa. The novel’s resolution intertwines seemingly dissonant thematic strands—for example, beauty and revulsion, love and violence—that are established in the novel’s opening pages and recur throughout the book. For the bulk of the novel, doubts have been building in John Livesey’s mind concerning his daughter-in-law’s possible infidelity toward his son, and therefore also the parentage of the child she carries in her womb. These doubts have been mostly confined to internalized narratives, though, many of which overlap with scenes involving three relatively breezy domestic subplots: John playing with his granddaughter, Katy; the burgeoning friendship between John and the Turners, the quirky older couple who live next door; and the unexpected romantic/sexual escapades between John and a considerably younger woman named Ruth Spencer. Although the novel is narrated in an omniscient and depersonalized third-person voice similar to that of Walk Me to the Distance, the narrative’s focus is nearly always on John’s experiences and his thoughts. The narrator rarely offers direct commentary, but the manner in which details are related to the reader results in a frequent sense of disjunction arising from both the juxtaposition of tonally dissonant details and John’s curious lack of reaction—directly expressed or indirectly reported—to these dissonances.

For example, near the middle of the book, John and his new friend Oliver Turner take a trip into Newport, Oregon, the town nearest to his son’s isolated coastal home. As the two older men walk down the town’s main street, John sees a kite store and speaks aloud his mental note to return and buy a toy for his beloved granddaughter. Oliver responds simply with “Good idea. Now, let’s drink,” and the two of them walk into an “excessively nautical bar” that is immediately thereafter described by the narrator as “a room full of homosexuals.” Oliver makes a mildly off-color joke—“This place is full of semen”—and asks John if he is uncomfortable. John claims not to be, remarking, “I’m from Staunton, Virginia; we don’t have places like this.” Oliver remarks that it is likely more accurate that “you just don’t know about them” and offers to go somewhere else, but John declines, since neither of them expresses any particular concern one way or the other about the setting:

“What do you make of all this?” John asked.
“All what, exactly?”
“The affectation, all this show?”
Oliver shrugged. (66)
They order several rounds of drinks and talk for a while rather superficially about their immediate environment and their lives until a comedian named Denny takes the stage. John again asks Oliver a seemingly pointed question, “What do you think of this guy?,” and Oliver again wordlessly refuses to answer. Denny’s raunchy performance sets the crowd off, leading John to quip that he “feel[s] like an anthropologist,” to which Oliver replies, ominously, “I feel put upon” (68). His comment comes as even more of a shock since only a few lines above, the narrator notes that Oliver has watched their waiter walk away while commenting approvingly, “Many women should have his butt” (68). The sudden change in Oliver’s demeanor possibly suggests that his significant alcohol intake has lowered his inhibitions to the point that he is feeling ashamed of some repressed homoerotic impulses; at the very least, his heretofore jovial acceptance of his surroundings has been revealed as a facade that masks an underlying homophobia now free to manifest itself.

Whatever the case, Oliver soon shouts at an especially raucous fan of Denny’s, “calling the man a sissy” in a manner that the narrator describes “as if [it were] an afterthought” (69). What has been a largely uneventful scene suddenly adopts a tone of danger and hatefulness: “[John] became more afraid when he looked into Oliver’s terrified eyes. . . . The man’s size and the alcohol made John angry and belligerent—later he would admit to being stupid and suicidal as well. John raised his fists and said, ‘Come on, pretty boy. Let’s see if you can take it in the face the way you take it in the butt’” (69). Oliver throws a pitcher at the man, and they run out of the bar, almost immediately resuming their jocular tone upon realizing that no one is chasing them:

“I forgot to leave a tip,” Oliver said.
“That’s tacky.”
“That was actually sort of fun,” Oliver said.

As they prepare to drive away, John sits for a moment behind the wheel and they revert fully back to their earlier mode of disengaged non-conversation:

“What is it?” asked Oliver.
“Nothing.” John turned the key. (69)

By itself this scene is not especially central to the novel’s plot, but it reveals both the degree to which John is capable of having his thoughts troubled and how quickly and effectively he represses those troublings when they occur. Rather than question why he might be uncomfortable when he realizes that they have entered a gay bar, he first denies that he is and then ironically deflects further by asking Oliver his opinion of the “affectation” in the room. When Oliver’s hostility toward Denny and his admirers begins building, John feels “hollow
and fearful” as he notes the “strange inebriated glow he thought he saw in Oliver’s eyes” (68). However, when Oliver provokes a fight, John acts like Mar—

der in God’s Country and reverts unthinkingly to his familiar moral code: “John did the only thing he could think to do; he stood with his friend” (69).

Although the consequences of this incident for John and Oliver are negligible—the narrative perspective is notably unconcerned with any repercussions for the men toward whom Oliver hurls his taunt of “sissy”—the incident’s rapid tonal shifts from the easy sentimentality of buying a grandchild’s kite, to sublimated and euphemized discomfort in the presence of “affectation,” to drunken fear and hostility, to lighthearted jesting, and finally back to sublimation are premonitions of the even more rapid shifts that mark the book’s conclusion. John’s lack of knowledge concerning the existence of gay bars in either Newport or Staunton is revealed not to be a matter of unfamiliarity—which is both understandable and perhaps even excusable—on his part. Rather, it is a symptom of his reflexive practice of excising, either by rejection or by willful ignorance, from his consciousness anything that threatens his ethical worldview. Ultimately the rapid changes in tone leave him saying and possibly feeling “nothing,” a state that recurs in numerous other emotionally charged situations throughout the book.

This process of excision becomes literal in the novel’s final scene, which also hearkens back strongly to the prologue. The prologue is a flashback to years earlier, when a newly widowed John was still practicing as an obstetrician. The book’s opening passages describe a morning that initially fulfills John’s desire for unchanging routine: “John Livesey always walked early . . . . Stopping at the steps of the porch, he looked across the street at the pastor of the Baptist church. The young minister was there every Tuesday at the same time to place the title of his next sermon in the bulletin case. John approved of this sort of regularity” (1). His leisurely morning is interrupted by a call from a colleague at the hospital in which he works, imploring John to come in early to deal with a curious case. He quickly learns that a young husband named Thompson has performed an impromptu emergency caesarean section on his pregnant wife before bringing her to the hospital to recover. John’s shocked reaction contains a range of contradictory emotions: “he was angry that someone could be so stupid, appalled that a person could be so careless with the life of another, and uncomfortably impressed that anyone could pull it off” (4). When he confronts the young husband, the man replies calmly, “I did what I had to do,” which sends John into a rage:

“Jesus, man, you could have killed your wife and baby.”
“They’re okay.”
“You don’t understand what I’m saying, do you? That’s not the point. . . . You were lucky.” He took a step away and came back. “How did you know what to do?”

“I figured it out.” (5–6)

Although John is ultimately able to “find a certain empathy with the man” because of his “emotionless response” to the situation, John “said nothing to anyone at the hospital” and drives away, returning to his morning of following the “strict routine [that] would be the easiest way to care for himself.” Upon arriving at his home, he finds that he “wanted to think about Thompson, but he didn’t know how. There was something attractive about the man, yet he couldn’t isolate what it was.” Unable to cogitate on the ethical dilemma presented to him, John turns instead to puttering around his house and then to painting, a practice described in wholly utilitarian terms: “He had taken up painting at the suggestion of his daughter-in-law. He painted fruit. That was all he painted, fruit on tables, fruit in bowls, groups of like fruit, bunches of different fruit.”

Painting is a purely mechanical activity for him, rather than an opportunity to develop any new thoughts: “He claimed not to be exercising some highly developed aesthetic peculiarity but only painting to get better at it.” The prologue ends with another evocation of John’s conflicted emotional response to Thompson’s words and deeds: “He was not so much bothered by the fact that he had just seen a woman so badly mutilated, nor was he terribly disturbed by the fact that a man could have done such a thing. What bothered him was that he was finding Thompson’s action somehow beautiful” (6–7). The awkward interplay of the words “mutilated” and “beautiful” in these passages sums up the cacology that threatens to disrupt John’s habituated existence by forcing him to “figure out” something that “he didn’t know how” to think about otherwise.

Superficially, the ending of the book suggests that John has concluded that cutting into his stepdaughter Lisa to abort her unborn child is likewise a “somehow beautiful” act of “mutilat[ion].” Everett’s juxtaposition of these two acts, though, is importantly not parallel. The thematic heterogeneity of scenes such as the one at the bar in Newport ethically distinguishes John’s act—the result of a monologic reversion to his established understanding of how he believes the world should be—from Thompson’s shocking, but ultimately creative, act of “figur[ing] out” what needed to be done to deliver his baby and to save his wife. Everett is undoubtedly aware that Thompson’s deadpan avowal that “I wanted to bring my child into the world. . . . It’s as simple as that” (5) is unlikely to persuade most readers of the righteousness of his actions, but the narrative construction of the novel’s final chapters makes it abundantly clear that John’s impending act is ethically indefensible unless
one agrees a priori with John’s reasoning. In short, there is no way to “figure out”—that is, deduce—a valid justification; one can arrive at one inductively only by begging the question and ignoring the flaws in his moral premises. In this manner Everett’s conclusion becomes a Menippean satire of John’s “bad philosophy,” specifically his inflexible thought process and the flawed premises on which that process depends.

The extended buildup to the novel’s conclusion begins when John’s son Elgin is severely injured while climbing a beachside bluff with his friend Greg Yount. John rightly suspects Yount of being Lisa’s partner in an extramarital affair but never voices this suspicion openly before the accident. While Elgin is confined to the hospital in Newport, Lisa confesses the affair to her husband, though she does not name Yount as her lover, a situation that John finds intolerable:

“Oh, Dad. I know you’re worried about me, but . . . it’s over. She told me it’s over and I believe her.”

“Is it your child?”

Elgin closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose. “I don’t know.”

“You need to know.”

“Why? Why do I need to know? The affair is over. We’re trying to get it together.” (118)

John is horrified to realize that Elgin not only does not know with whom Lisa has been having her affair but also, in his ignorance, still trusts and relies on Yount as a friend and confidant. Instead of informing his son, he essentially repeats his gesture from the earlier scene outside the bar in Newport: “He looked at his son but said nothing before leaving” (118).

John does not, however, have a shortage of ethical judgment about the matter, as the start of the next chapter reveals: “It was the betrayal, not the lies nor hurt nor the ignorance that smelled so badly. The stench of rancid souls, thought John. . . . John could just picture Greg Yount listening to Elgin’s woes and nodding sympathetically, being the supportive friend, then laughing later while he held Lisa in his arms. He hated Yount, and as he thought of him, he became like the target at the end of a rifle barrel, flat and without history, just a place where the bullet would go. This man was destroying his son, his family” (119). Not long after the narrator shares these violent thoughts, John sees Yount’s car in the parking lot of a bar and decides to go inside. The bar is described as though it “could have been a bar in Staunton,” suggesting that John feels more comfortable here than at the “excessively nautical” bar to which he went with Oliver previously. This sense of comfort and recognition
also takes on moral overtones since it is clear from the passage quoted above that John wants to confront Yount over his behavior and feels entitled to do so; he is literally and figuratively on familiar turf. The conversation that ensues between the two men is superficially chummy at first, with John even buying a round and proposing that they drink a toast “to these sad times” (125). John tries to hint obliquely to Yount that he knows about the affair via an elaborate anecdote about a protozoan parasite that uses its genetic mutability to transmit an incurable disease to humans: “The trypanosome, however, has a talent. You see, the human body produces specific antibodies for specific antigens and this parasite apparently has a mechanism for altering its antigenic coat” (126). The highly specialized biomedical vocabulary that John uses to veil his blunt accusation of deception, subterfuge, and marital infidelity unsurprisingly leaves Yount “frow[n]ing in puzzlement,” and the two men leave the bar for a walk out onto a nearby jetty, where John tries again along a different, somewhat more direct tack: “I assume you know that Lisa’s had an affair” (127). When this too fails to get a rise out of Yount, he becomes yet more direct, though still stopping short of an outright accusation:

“You know, I don’t think that Elgin is the father of this new baby.”
“You don’t?”
“No, what do you think?”
“I don’t know.” Yount looked at the rocks at his sides, the waves pounding them. “You could be right.”
“Yep,” John said and sighed. “Elgin really trusts you.” (128)

Perceiving no sign of guilt or regret in Yount, John looks at him and oddly “felt none of the hatred he’d experienced earlier. He felt hollow, disappointed,” and he once again leaves by saying nothing and sitting in his car for a moment before departing (128). He seems genuinely confused at the fact that Yount neither understood him nor took responsibility for his actions. As with Thompson at the start of the book, his inability to get another man to agree with his ethical censure leaves John unable to speak or think.

His disappointment and sense of betrayal finally do find their release, though, once he can direct them at Lisa. After his encounter with Yount, he returns home and immediately begins drinking heavily, perhaps an intentional echo of the earlier scene with Oliver in Newport. This scene’s ominousness is initially somewhat disguised; right after noting that alcohol “quenched no desire but took care of everything,” John walks into his granddaughter’s room and “watched her sleep for a while. So beautiful. He wondered about her dreams, if they were sweet, if he were in them.” The narrator, seemingly reporting John’s thoughts, describes Katy’s sleeping form using the same adjective, “beautiful,”
that appeared in John’s difficult thoughts about Thompson’s actions at the beginning of the book; this repetition helps explain why the impulse to save a child by cutting into a woman seems to take root in him at this precise moment. After all, he has already expressed the thought that Katy, as part of his son’s family, is in danger of being “destroy[ed]” by Yount and the affair, of which the unborn child is a revolting reminder (119). Since he can seemingly think of no way of dealing with Yount, he turns to Lisa instead. John carries his drink into Lisa’s room and takes a seat next to her bed, drinking his bourbon while she sleeps. When Lisa wakes up in understandable fright, he observes that Katy is “exquisite” and adds that he would “do just about anything to protect her.” Thereafter he directly confronts Lisa about the affair without any of the verbal subterfuge he has used previously with his son or with Yount. He tells Lisa that he “had it in [his] mind to kill” Yount earlier but “couldn’t do it. Or wouldn’t do it” (132). He rages at her for a while longer and ultimately suggests that there is still time for her to abort the baby. When she protests, “Greg wants it. He wants me,” John explodes at her, “Fuck him. I do not want to hear about him” (133), and angrily goes off to bed.

Upon awaking the next morning, he cheerfully greets Lisa as though nothing has passed between them and instead manipulates her through her daughter: “He could see the fear in her face. He knew she was terrified of losing Katy” (134). He takes Katy with him to see Oliver, and the three of them drive up the mountain to pay a surprise visit to John’s girlfriend, Ruth. When they arrive at her cabin, though, John goes in by himself and discovers her in flagrante delicto with another man, the sight of which reduces him to an expressionless state even deeper than those previously depicted: “He felt his entire weight, the weight of all his years, of everything he had come to know, settle where his stomach used to be. He felt nothing in his head, nothing in his heart, just that heaviness. He backed away, knowing that later what would bother him most about the scene was the tenderness” (136). Whether the physical metaphor is intentional or not, the language of this passage suggests that the shock of this additional betrayal has reduced John to relying on his metaphorical gut—“where his stomach used to be”—since there is nothing in his head or heart anymore. He corrals Oliver and Katy, and they drive off in silence “all the way [back] to the Turners’” (137).

Once there, John receives yet another shock when Oliver informs him that he has been diagnosed with gastrointestinal cancer, an ailment of the gut more literal than John’s. The two friends exchange expressions of sympathy, but the most important development in the scene comes when John finds out that Oliver’s wife has taken sleeping pills to help her deal with the stress related to her husband’s diagnosis. Moments after commiserating with Lorraine by telling
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her that he too feels “helpless, angry, hollow,” John goes into her bathroom and steals several doses of Seconal, though his reason for taking them is not yet clear. John and Katy return to their house to find Lisa gone, and John retreats to his room to process the three interrelated pains he feels: “Down in his bedroom, John lay on his back and looked at the ceiling. Some day, he thought. And it was not yet over. Indeed, it had just begun. His head was swimming but he held his direction. Nothing was clear, but he was sure. He recalled the sight of Ruth with that man. He hurt. But he felt no anger. He wanted to cry about Oliver, but he needed to put that aside” (142). The ambiguous diction at the start of this passage reinforces the fact that “nothing” in his thoughts at this moment “is clear,” and it calls into question the certainty of the latter half of the passage. John is not “figur[ing] out” how to respond to his difficult feelings; he is repressing them to the point of numbness and reverting to what he is “sure” is the right thing to do.

The next chapter, which is also the next-to-last one, begins with a scene of domestic familiar concord. Lisa and Katy are happily playing a board game, and Lisa reports positive news about Elgin from the hospital. John even “smiled as he watched Katy count her move aloud,” but the warmth of the scene evaporates almost instantly when that observation is followed by the narrator’s report that “when Lisa looked over and caught his eye, [John] wanted to say, felt like saying ‘Oliver Turner is going to die.’ But he didn’t say it. He didn’t know why he would say it. He finished his coffee” (143). The Nick Adams–esque elocution again reveals that John has reined in his thoughts to the point that he cannot conceive of expressing his sorrow at the potential death of his friend to Lisa. Instead he drives to the hospital and unloads his feelings onto a sleeping Elgin. He expresses his love for Katy and for the Turners and declares his “interlude” with Ruth to be at an end before moving on to a darker revelation: “On the way here I determined that life was devised by the enemy. ‘Let’s allow them to live,’ he said. ‘See how they deal with that.’ Dealing with it. We stumble through the years, trying to take care of our own. We do what we have to do. Sacrifices must be made” (144). John’s near- jeremiad echoes Job, Gnosticism, and the Protestant work ethic, but he ends with a compassionate litany that seems to presage forgiveness and reconciliation: “I love you. I loved your mother. I’m not trying to make up for anything. You know that’s not my way. Just realize that I love you. I love Katy. And now I love Lisa” (144).

The opening of the final chapter adopts a tone that continues in this direction, as John returns home, playfully scoops up his granddaughter, and offers to “make the famous Livesey cocoa” (145) for both Katy and Lisa. Everett even risks cliché as “the three sat at the kitchen table, sipping the hot drink” and John proposes adding marshmallows and singing songs together. Lisa is
described as “stud[ying] his face anxiously” but goes along with it, and within less than a page before the novel’s close, all seems to be well: “They . . . traded off singing songs, some they knew and some they made up. . . . They finished the cocoa. Katy yawned once more and was soon sound asleep” (146). When John proposes that Lisa have a drink with him, she “laughed and was puzzled,” but she is soon cajoled by his mild manner into having a “light bourbon and water” with him. The narrator notes that John “seemed to shake clear of something” as he “offered a smile” to Lisa, the significance of which becomes clearer when she notes that her drink “tastes bitter” (146). The full realization of what he has done and what he intends to do—foreshadowed all along, of course, by the book’s title—dawns on the reader at the very end as the narrator relates that John has drugged her with the Seconal he stole from the Turners’ bathroom: “Lisa was trying to gain her legs. She held a hand to her head and tried to take a step.” The book closes with an understated declaration whose implications are horrific: “He switched on the overhead light in the kitchen and cleared the table” (147). The oscillation between bliss and dread that has pervaded the final few chapters reaches its apex in the novel’s final line and accentuates the diseased way in which John’s inability to “figure out” how to deal with his grief and anger leads him to fall back on what he knows both practically—obstetrics—and ethically—that Lisa has a “rancid soul.”

Everett uses the untenable—for the reader, though not for John—dissonance created by the extreme tonal fluctuations in the novel to convey his noncomic satirical critique of the means by which John unbendingly maintains his belief in the rightness of his worldview, and by extension of the grotesque act of purported love that such belief justifies. Cutting Lisa thereby exemplifies Frye’s claim that Menippean satire is directed toward “mental attitudes” and both literally and figuratively undermines the “occupational approach to life” that John brings to his interactions with others. It is not the inherent principles of his literal occupation as an obstetrician that Everett calls into question, but rather the manner in which he ultimately puts those principles in the service of what Frye would call “a maddened pedantry” (9–10). His act of “cutting” Lisa serves no obstetric purpose but instead misuses obstetric knowledge outside its intended context to impose his ethical view—that is, to “save” his family—onto the world around him. His final act eradicates all sense of adherence to the Hippocratic Oath, and John cannot even lay claim to the debatable ethics of Thompson’s decision to cut into his wife from the start of the book. He retreats into silence and routine rather than doing the difficult work of subjecting his ideas to critical evaluation, a thoughtlessness that the narrative suggests is a reliable predictor of, if also perhaps a necessary precondition for, the inhumane act with which the novel ends.
Grotesque

Musgrave’s sixth feature is “grotesque iconography,” a somewhat more tangible relative of the comparatively abstract concept just discussed; in fact, grotesques often contribute prominently to conveying a sense of thematic heterogeneity. Musgrave has asserted that this feature involves the use of such curiously amalgamated things and situations as “comic mésalliances, giants, talking machines, dwarves, talking animals, odd combinations of human with non-human, transformations, strange powers, and so on” (23). Leonard Cassuto claimed that the literary “grotesque is born of the violation of basic categories. It occurs when an image cannot be easily classified even on the most fundamental level: when it is both one thing and another, and thus neither one.” Cassuto’s assertion that the “grotesque [should] be understood as a social construction rather than as an absolute value” (6) is supremely relevant to Everett’s brand of Menippean satire. Given their inherent paradoxicality, grotesques disrupt social discourses that are intended to establish or to maintain categorical divisions within reality. In this way they become “the heterogeneity of the form [made] evident in its images” (Musgrave 23), a phrase that itself is a succinct encapsulation of the general Menippean mind-set: “We behold . . . a cool and detached mind playfully exploring a moral topic. The reader’s interest is not in rediscovering that greed is a bad thing or that deceit is to be avoided but in working through (with the satirist’s help) the implications of a given moral virtue . . . , the contradictions between one virtue . . . and another . . . , or the odd similarities between a vice . . . and a virtue” (D. Griffin 37–38). Both Musgrave and Dustin Griffin have implied that Menippean satire is inherently a form of intellectual grotesquery, productively repurposing the anxiety or revulsion that results from unresolved paradoxes to stimulate a reexamination of conventional wisdom.

The grotesque hybrids and chimeras that inhabit Everett’s works are sometimes combinations of seemingly disparate physical characteristics. For example, Alice Achitophel in *Zulus* is both a morbidly obese woman and a lissome beauty; neither reality is privileged over the other: “Alice miraculously begins to grow even larger to the point where she literally explodes, splits from her 300-pound body, and emerges as a more attractive and slender woman. However, the shell of Alice’s fat body remains in rebel hands, even as she roams freely in her new slender body. Moreover, the thin Alice can psychically sense what the fat Alice’s discarded head perceives as it lays [sic] supine in the middle of the rebel camp” (Schur, “The Mind-Body Split” 77). Alice’s confusion regarding her “real” identity arises in part because her transformative explosion happens while she is in a “hallucinatory state,” during which the language of the book becomes even more convoluted than it has been. These passages
frustrate any attempt at strictly rational interpretation by suggesting that she
gives birth to herself in a manner that evokes mammalian biology, fairy tales,
and Lovecraftian horror fiction all at once: “Her thoughts spilled with shards
of her brain down her body and into her lungs and became sparkling cities, fat
with the hope of success and clear of the poison-planet air which she sucked
in. Her ovaries shined and sang vulgar songs; and standing in the glass case of
her uterus, fully developed, frozen still, was a thin Alice Achitophel, waiting
to awake, her eyes dead with the promise of coming life, growing, growing,
growing to the size of life” (Everett, Zulus 108).

The inability to explain or to reconcile what has happened initially confuses
both Alice and her protector/lover Kevin Peters, though, on one hand, both of
them eventually concur that simply believing it as a matter of fact is preferable
to doubting: “I don’t understand, but I believe that you at least think you are
Alice Achitophel. Which is all that matters” (112). On the other hand, Kevin
disCOVERs that the rebels who initially appear to be Alice’s refuge from the op-
pressive, bureaucratic city in which she lives at the beginning of the novel have
“worked [themselves] up into a religious frenzy” over what happened to Alice:
“I was told that an insane young woman killed Alice Achitophel, blew her wide
open with dynamite and fled, that the fat woman swelled larger than her con-
finement, burst open and a beautiful maiden came out with her blood, and that
God came down and exploded the evil one and left a minor evil for humans to
exterminate. All crazy, but all convinced” (117). Kevin’s conclusion that their
interpretation is another sign that “this planet is sick and strange” foreshad-
ows the novel’s cataclysmic ending, in which he and Alice apparently eradicate
themselves and the remnant of human life in order to cure this “sick[ness].”
The grotesque oxymoron contained within Alice’s vision of “eyes dead with
the promise of coming life” echoes the novel’s next-to-last line, in which Alice
and Kevin prepare to press down together on the lever that will exterminate
humanity: “She questioned him with her eyes, then closed them” (245).

Employing the grotesque in a more abstracted manner, each of the three
stories within Assumption (which is discussed at length in the final chapter)
involves Ogden Walker being misled by an act of imposture related to a crime,
a situation that stimulates the one essential trope—the “mystery” in need of a
solution—of conventional detective fiction. Everett creates situations in which
Ogden is fruitlessly chasing after a series of red herrings rather than solving
the mysteries with which he is presented. Few of the characters in this book are
who and what they appear to be—or at least what they represent themselves
to be—a process that ultimately extends all the way to Ogden himself in the
unexpected climax of the third story. This irreconcilable instability upsets the
fundamental logical premises of the genre and thereby constitutes a major part
of Everett’s “toying with the assumptions we have when we enter into that kind of story” (“Author Percival” 188).

*Glyph* presents the reader with yet another form of grotesque, one that incorporates both the literal/corporeal version that appears in *Zulus* and the more figurative/conceptual version that appears in *Assumption*. Although his intellect is exceptional for any human being, Ralph’s grotesqueness is partly physical, as evidenced by the reaction of almost all the adults in the book to the precocious writings produced by an infant still bound to his crib:

> It wasn’t until I was near done writing that I looked up to see the completely stunned and befuddled face of Inflato floating over me. What I wrote:

1) Mixolydian is not misspelled.

2) Though the writing is young and, perhaps, overly exuberant, the story is solid and thoroughly and absolutely readable.

3) Da-da is full of shit.

Inflato looked at my eyes and then to Mo, swayed for a second, then fainted. (Everett, *Glyph* 25–26)

Just as the physiological response of fainting is an analogue to the emotional confusion engendered by Ralph’s note, the physical dimension of Ralph’s grotesqueness accentuates the novel’s other, more abstract forms of multiplicity: “the reader must suspend disbelief that a child could be born with the innate ability to read and write at a post-doctoral level . . . even if he has yet to discover elementary lessons of day-to-day living, or the wonders of his own body . . . . The protagonist must retain the attributes of childhood, adolescence, and adulthood” (Berben-Masi, “Jailhouse” 50, 53).

Theodore “Ted” Street’s undead status in *American Desert* is likewise a mixture of physical and ontological grotesques. It is, after all, the sight of his presumed-dead body coming back to life during his funeral that stimulates not only “a terrible riot which spread from the church and into the streets” (16) but also a sense of thematic heterogeneity through the clash of funereal and farcical elements:

> Then, as the choir ended its final *amen* with a harmonious hum, Theodore Street sat up in his coffin. A hush filled the church, as one might expect, but it was not long-lived. . . . Gloria Street fainted but remained frozen upright with wide-open eyes. Gloria’s sister made a break for the door, her large feet tripping her near the end of the aisle’s red carpet, causing her to roll to a stop at a blind man’s feet with her dress over her head. Orville Orson farted and farted again. The dean prayed, loudly. The *Beowulf* woman reached into her bag and readied the pepper spray her fiancé had bought for her. (11)
It becomes clear after he is examined by a doctor a few days after his seemingly miraculous resurrection that Street realizes he has few, if any, of the usual signs that would normally indicate being alive:

“I don’t know why I’m doing this,” [Dr.] Timmons said. “I can’t find a pulse in the first place. . . . No blood pressure”

Ted looked at the woman’s face and could see her fear. . . . “What now?” he asked.

“I can’t really tell anything here,” she said. “I need to find out if there is any brain activity.”

“My speaking to you doesn’t count,” Ted said.

“As odd as it sounds, no,” she said. (65)

Neither the doctor nor Street can articulate what this contradictory set of signs means: “‘It seems I’m dead,’ Ted said to his wife. ‘Obviously you’re not dead, Mr. Street,’ Timmons said” (66). The doctor’s comments to the press as she leaves the examination demonstrate that this indeterminacy stimulates neither curiosity nor wonder but rather dread: “This man is dead, yet he is alive. His heart is not beating, but his brain continues to function. I don’t understand it, I don’t have any answers for you. He’s frightened, I think. I too am frightened . . . . Maybe we should all be frightened” (68). As Michel Feith pointed out, “[Street’s] re-animated body, unable to feel physical pain but endowed with new gifts of empathy and mind-reading, is a paradox,” and he gave this state a specifically grotesque/Menippean interpretation when he argued that it “makes him akin to a trickster figure” when “associated with his sense of humor and parody” (Feith, “Blueprint” 10).

Street remains unsure throughout the rest of the book about how and why he has returned from nonexistence, and neither of the two discourses—science and religion—that would presumably have ready answers to those questions proves useful. Their mutual inadequacy is exemplified by a man named Oswald Avery, whom Street meets while escaping from incarceration in a government research lab. A parody of the classic “mad scientist” character, Avery is trying to combine religion and science in a manner laden with potential significance: “We’re here trying to uncover the secrets of reanimation. Perhaps the most famous reanimated person is Jesus Christ. . . . The fifth wound to the Christ was a cut delivered by a Roman soldier named Longinus. The staff of the spear is in Rome, but the blade, well, no one ever knew where the blade was. Until about fifty years ago when Hitler’s men found it in a cave. . . . Anyway, we ended up with the blade and on the blade are blood stains, the blood of Jesus. From the stains we isolated the DNA and using the DNA we tried to clone Christ” (197).
These efforts ultimately re-create not a world-redeeming heroic figure but only “twenty dark-haired, drooling men dressed in jumpsuits,” many of whom are “badly deformed” with “faces [that were] twisted, with cleft palates, crossed eyes, long drooping lobes” (196–97). As Feith pointed out, this is just one of “many episodes of the novel [that] seem to have been beamed piecemeal from paranoid action and [science fiction] series: the black helicopters, the underground base and laboratory at Area 51, the secret military experiments therein conducted, ring the X-Files bell of government conspiracy.” This observation led him to assert that “Everett engages in cultural critique, through the satire of cliché fragments of popular culture,” which seemingly produce nothing more significant than the shambling pseudo-Christs of Avery’s underground laboratory (Feith, “Blueprint” 11). Feith furthermore suggested that “the very pleasure derived from their reactivation and recombination in a comic, surrealist-inspired narrative may well redeem” these otherwise stale narrative fragments.

The conclusion of Street’s life story supports this claim, even as it stops short of offering any explanation for what has been happening or why. Street actively participates in the rescue of a group of children from a charismatic, David Koresh/Jim Jones–type cult leader and is hailed as a hero because of it. Although this act might seem to justify his return from the dead, Street gains no insight by the end of the book that would mitigate his status as a grotesque in violation of his (and our) understanding of the categorical distinction between alive and dead. Street films a farewell interview in the book’s final pages in which nearly all of his assertions about what has happened to him are grammatically and/or existentially negative: “I am dead. I died and I am dead and I can tell you no more about the meaning of life than I could when I was alive. . . . Now I am nothing but pain. To myself, my family, and to you. . . . I am no hero. . . . I am no angel. There is no god for which I might serve as an emissary. I am no savior. I am no messiah. . . . I wish that I had no mouth, so that my silence would mean as much as my words. I wish that my words had no meaning” (290). In keeping with Everett’s possibly ironic goal of “knowing nothing at all” (Medlin and Gore 159) through his writing, Street’s (after)life has become a Menippean rejection of almost all positive interpretations other than Street’s emphatic relief at being “finally, in this life, a decent man” (290). When Street removes his head from his body—the same cause that failed to kill him permanently after he was in a car accident while driving to commit suicide—after concluding the interview, he “stayed dead” (291). Although there is no sentimentalized redemptive significance to his return, as in such iconic “second-chance” films as Heaven Can Wait (1978) or Ghost (1990), Street at least gets to fulfill the promise, stated on the novel’s opening page, of telling a galloping story that describes how “in a most profound way, he stood—or
stands even—outside himself, not so much on the parapet of consciousness but of life itself” (3).

Despite this list of fairly literal examples, Everett’s grotesques just as frequently operate in more figurative psychological, philosophical, and/or linguistic realms. For example, in the course of analyzing Suder, Anthony Stewart explicitly referred to Cassuto’s definition of the grotesque as he outlined the novel’s plot:

Suder is . . . a test of the title character’s abilities to converse across boundaries and, in the face of the failure of a conversation, to find emancipation in some other way. . . . It represents multiple attempts at such conversations: black/white, male/female, representative/individual, technical/vernacular, stereotype/cosmopolitan, sane/insane, and the binary that perhaps contains these others: conventional/unconventional. . . . Suder intuits his stereotyped subjectivity and attempts to escape this position . . . by becoming “grotesque,” as Leonard Cassuto uses this term, defining the tension created in the space between categories. (“Do you mind” 116)

The only overtly physical grotesque in Craig Suder’s characterization involves his literal interpretation and subsequent incarnation of a hybrid identity that is unconsciously attributed to him by various figures throughout the book. In the opening chapter, as Suder returns to the dugout after yet another hapless strikeout, his manager suggests that the way out of his slump is “to straighten up and fly right” (Everett, Suder 5). While Suder is a child, he meets the famed jazz pianist Bud Powell, who deepens the complexity of the youngster’s association with flying creatures: “He looked at my face and said, ‘You remind me of Bird.’ . . . ‘Charlie Parker,’ Daddy said to me. I didn’t know this name either, but I liked that he said I looked like Bird” (31). After taking his leave from baseball, his home in Seattle, and his family, Suder becomes profoundly invested in Parker’s explicitly bird-themed song, “Ornithology,” going so far as to carry a record of it and a phonograph with him everywhere, in addition to buying a saxophone on which he attempts to learn how to play the song. Uzzie Cannon has described this last development explicitly as a tonal—in a musical sense as well as a more figurative literary one—shift: “Through his appreciation of ‘Ornithology,’ the freedom and flight imagined in Parker’s song become, for Suder, synonymous with life. . . . Suder’s encounter with ‘Ornithology’ begins his transformation from blues-child to jazz free-bird” (101).

All of these references to flight and birds converge in the final scene of the novel, when, “having had his fill of being seen only as a black baseball player . . . Suder decides that the most thoroughgoing escape from such limitations is to take to the air, to momentarily become something entirely different . . .
that only Craig Suder can become—namely a man who flies like a bird” (Stewart, “Do you mind” 121–22). Initially he does so by manifesting his would-be avian identity in the most superficial ways: “As his resolve strengthens, Suder begins to do what he feels is necessary to become closer to bird-like: he starts to eat worms, he tries to raise his body temperature by deliberately catching a cold and attempts to increase the flexibility of his neck” (Stewart, “Do you mind” 123). With the assistance of his cranky nine-year-old ward, he uses an assemblage—that is, a material grotesque—of objects to construct the means by which he intends to take his coach’s words at face value and “fly right”: “I’ve built the frames of the wings with plastic tubing. Each frame is like a big horseshoe, about as tall as me, with slats running across the width. I’ve sorted out the strongest trash bags and cut them into strips and wrapped the strips around the frames. The feathers are going on one at a time” (Everett, Suder 164). It is with these artificial wings that he “step[s] off” the mountain on which he has been living with Jincy and Renoir the elephant—whom he adopted after their comically violent first encounter—in a situation that parodies the conventional nuclear family. Unlikely yet happy quasi-familial combinations recur throughout Everett’s fiction, further complicating the idea that grotesques are intended solely to disgust or to censure. Suder begins flying, albeit only after an initial terrifying free fall. At the novel’s end, not only is he “making big circles and . . . pretty much in charge,” but he is also sporting an erection, signaling an end to the literal impotence that has accompanied its figurative twin since the opening pages of the book (171).

Berben-Masi associated Suder’s transformation with the transcendent mythic hero pattern cataloged in Joseph Campbell’s The Hero with a Thousand Faces: “the plot line proceeds from the hero’s motivated departure . . . [and is] completed by the eventual fulfillment of his true nature as predicted during his childhood by recognition of and reunification with his ‘Bird’ heritage, or consecration by the divine father figure” (“Getting” 24). Although Campbell did not define such a “reunification” specifically as a grotesque, Berben-Masi suggested such an interpretation in calling Suder a “successful human bird” (26). Using “human” as an adjective to modify “bird” in this way is not only linguistically unusual but also ontologically grotesque and wholly appropriate: “Suder’s refusal to play by the rules of taxonomy [the zoologist Richard] Beckwith tries to impose on him signals the shift in Suder’s quest, from one of understanding to one of grotesque autonomy. . . . The crucial point here is not that [Suder] expects to become a bird, but that he . . . heighten[s] our realization of his violation of the basic categories, a violation upon which he begins to thrive” (Stewart, “Do you mind” 123). Suder’s rejection/expansion of Beckwith’s biological classification in the book’s final line resembles Ted
Street’s experience with scientists—mad or otherwise—in *American Desert*. Beckwith embodies a rigidly scientific worldview, as shown by his insistence on referring to all animals by their Latin taxonomical names; yet he cannot explain Suder’s flight in an ultimately meaningful way, leaving it up to Suder to define it for, and as, himself: “And I’m flying, goddamnit, I’m flying. Then I see Beckwith on a ridge with the hunters and he’s pointing up at me. I imagine him to say, ‘Homo sapiens.’ And I says, ‘Craig Suder’” (171). His name now denotes a hybrid individual who has “become the ‘Bird’ that Bud Powell had once called him, the ‘Bird’ soaring in Charlie Parker’s ‘Ornithology,’ and the literal bird that flies off Willet Rock” (Cannon 110).

There is some critical disagreement concerning the extent to which Everett intends Suder’s flight to echo the “quintessential metaphor for freedom” that recurs “in modern and contemporary African American literature, music, and art” (Cannon 112n8). The comparison with Toni Morrison’s oft-cited adaptation of the “flying African” folktale in *Song of Solomon* (1977), published only six years before *Suder*, can be suggested readily in case one is so inclined. I tend to side more with Stewart’s view on the novel’s conclusion, which is that Suder is in greater need of “an assertion of the aggressive and radical autonomy available in the grotesque” than of a liberation that simultaneously solidifies a racial or ethnic bond: “At this point he is not ‘too black’ or ‘not black enough.’ . . . He is only Craig Suder, and this is his great accomplishment. As he flies over the group of people watching from the ground, to say anything else about who he is can only miss the point” (“Do you mind”124). Stewart further argued that “miss[ing] the point” in this manner would be to sidestep the novel’s “requirement that we interrogate our habitual interpretations. One need not be able to take flight like a bird to be able to commit oneself to questioning the associations we tend to make through habit” (“Do you mind” 124–25). His interpretation of the ending allows Suder to become and to remain a sui generis figure; it does not invalidate habituated readings, but it certainly points out their ultimate limitations.

Such limitations become apparent once again in *I Am Not Sidney Poitier*, the curiously named protagonist of which is both a material and a nominal grotesque as he gets older in the novel and starts physically resembling the famed actor after whom he is (not) named: “I can’t get over how much you look like Sidney Poitier. A young Sidney Poitier.’ ‘More every day, it seems,’ I said” (83). Sarah Mantilla Griffin has suggested that this resemblance does not necessarily constrict Not Sidney’s identity because of what Sidney Poitier represents as an actor: “Sidney Poitier’s movies are famous for boldly exploring race relations. . . . In exploring these relations, Poitier has to signify in many different ways in order to challenge the meanings attached to signifiers like blackness,
criminality, wealth, education, and so forth. Through divorcing signifiers from meaning and henceforth changing meanings, Poitier’s characters were often able to change understandings of those signifiers” (27). The difference between Sidney and Not Sidney becomes confused on a narrative level, though, as Everett deliberately incorporates scenarios that parody scenes from some of Sidney Poitier’s best-known films: “When Not Sidney Poitier gets himself into such scenes, the distinction between him and the actor becomes blurred. Not [Sidney] does not have his own identity; the one he has been given is just a negation, defined by what he is: Not” (Gretlund, “Black” 44). For a while Not Sidney proves to be able to emulate Sidney Poitier, which Griffin argued “change[s] the signifying fields of Poitier’s films,” thereby allowing him to become a similarly “multifaceted, malleable signifier” (S. Griffin 27).

Any positive aspect to this malleability is soon undermined by the fact that Not Sidney appears to be fated in his life to replay the same scenarios that Poitier played as an actor. Given that many of Poitier’s films featured happy endings for the characters he portrayed, this might not initially seem like a bad thing, but Sharon Willis has offered some insight into Everett’s methods by contending that Poitier’s films ultimately were expressions of a “fantasy of racial understanding and ‘assimilation’ that requires no effort on the part of white people.” In her view, the “Poitier effect . . . functions as a defense, or a compensatory gesture, averting or deflecting the possibility of a kind of critical thinking that would involve a serious reciprocal interracial exchange” (5). Not Sidney’s ultimate inability to break away from Sidney Poitier despite being nominally his diametrical opposite reveals the invariable and extremely limited system of signification that is available to him.

He clarifies early on in the telling of his story that his mother—whom, it should be noted, he also describes as “absolutely, unquestionably, certifiably crazy” (4–5)—gave him his name apparently without consideration of the famous actor: “One might have thought that my mother imagined that our last name, rare as it was, was enough to cause confusion with Sidney Poitier. . . . But her puzzled expression led me to believe that my name had nothing to do with the actor at all, that Not Sidney was simply a name she had created, with no consideration of the outside world. She liked it, and that was enough” (7). His mother’s unlikely, but seemingly genuine, disconnection from external signifiers contrasts with a phenomenon that Willis has articulated in regard to the real-life Sidney Poitier. She noted that as he became more successful and recognizable as an actor, his appearances in film were increasingly marked by a doubled identity in which he and the characters he portrayed were simultaneously present: “As the only black male lead in Hollywood in this period . . . he was always appearing as himself alongside whatever character he was playing
To the extent that both his casting and his roles depend on and reinscribe his iconicity, he is always playing himself” (24). Furthermore she noted that Poitier’s participation in the rhetoric of “magical reconciliation” that pervades his films not only creates a self-reinforcing confusion between himself and his characters but also radiates outward to subsume African Americans in other contexts: “But as his roles conflate the image and the man through repetitions of his familiar presence, his returns also help guarantee the exclusion of other black actors. Besides securing the authenticity of his performance and, by extension, of his films’ stories and their magical resolutions, Poitier’s performance also stands in for an entire race even as he emerges from it as an exception. His cinematic presence . . . recall[s] a population largely absent from his films’ on-screen worlds” (25). If Sidney Poitier himself is caught up inescapably in a representational process that blurs the lines between his real-life self, the characters he plays, and all of black America, then Not Sidney hardly stands a chance of escaping that same gravity; in essence, his name protests too much for most people—especially most white people—who come in contact with him to take seriously, since what Sidney Poitier represents to them is so reassuring and comfortable that it does not make sense for a young black man not to be him—or to be Not him.

One of the few people who accepts that Not Sidney has an identity that is meaningfully separate from Sidney is, ironically, Ted Turner, the media mogul. Not Sidney’s mother had believed in Turner’s company before it became successful and struck up a friendship with the future billionaire: “Turner saw my mother’s substantial investment in his dream as the kind of symbol and charm for his success. My mother was the kind of grass-roots, if not proletarian, person he wanted to imagine his media world touching, however tangentially, on his way up to great and obscene wealth” (8). After Not Sidney’s mother dies, Turner comes to get him and takes him away to Atlanta, where he lives in one of Turner’s mansions. Unlike Rhino Tanner from Grand Canyon, Inc., though, Everett’s fictional Turner is neither bumpkin nor bullshitter. He is fully aware of the “scenario of the rich do-gooding white man taking in the poor little black child” that was popularized on television during the 1980s: “You ever see that kidney-sick little boy who can’t grow on that Diff’rent Strokes show? Well, I think that’s just obscene, Not. Not him, but that picture, that model of the black child being raised by some great white father. I’m not that arrogant” (12). Not Sidney confirms Turner’s rejection of this clichéd role when he notes that he was not actually raised by Turner after his mother’s death, but rather that he “lived at one of his houses and was left pretty much to my own unformed devices” (8). Despite his quirky demeanor and proclivity for homespun turns of phrase, Turner reveals himself to be a fairly open-minded thinker, one who
even has something of the satirist’s bent to him in how he intends to undermine the “Arnold and Webster” model he deems “obscene”: “I’m going to take over television and air that trash every day several times a day instead of only once a week. That way we’ll all become desensitized to its harmful and consumptive effects by sheer overexposure” (12).

Everett, of course, knows that this was not the real Ted Turner’s intent in developing the syndication-based programming model for his much-imitated TNT network, but his fictional Turner is in many ways a more astute observer of reality than most of the people with whom young Not Sidney interacts. Although Turner’s worldview is far from clear-eyed and infallible, his willingness to accept Not Sidney’s identity as something entirely distinct from Sidney Poitier makes him exceptional within the novel: “I imagined that he considered Not to be an actual name and couldn’t believe that it would be simply the single syllable it was. So, it came out Nu’ott, the same way god became ga’awd for the evangelist on the street in downtown Decatur” (11). Whereas almost everyone else overdetermines the latter portion of Not Sidney’s two-part first name, Turner accepts and emphasizes the former portion and makes Nu’ott—which would also be, more or less, the pronunciation of “new art” in Turner’s southern drawl—out of it; if Not Sidney could find a way to do the same, it would validate his mother’s claim that his name was entirely sufficient to identify him on its own.

While he is in high school, though, Not Sidney’s name continues to be a source of confusion and consternation for him:

To my teachers my name was odd, but to my classmates I was Sidney or Not Sidney or something other than Sidney. My real name became a mystery to be solved for many. Still, I was beaten often, but now in an attempt to have me give up that prized bit of information, namely my name. There was some upside, as some of the looser girls would offer to kiss me if I told them my name. I would gladly agree to the arrangement. I would receive the kiss and then say, “My name is Not Sidney.” Unfortunately, the looser girls often would and could be more violent and fierce than the boys, and so they would offer up an entrée of whup-ass with sides of hair pulling and scratching. (29)

Sidney claims, in an echo of Turner’s earlier comment regarding his plan to inundate audiences with episodes of *Diff’rent Strokes* and *Webster*, that a “steady diet of humiliation leads to a kind of immunity or desensitization to abasement and discomfiture,” after which the beatings taper off for lack of interest, having not left “any perceptible marks—physical, physiological, or neurological” on him. Ominously, he remarks that “psychic damage . . . is far more difficult to
assess,” though he also believes himself to have been inoculated against it by his “sense of irony” (29–30).

The possibility of such damage intensifies, though, when his history teacher, Miss Hancock, takes an interest in him for more than his savvy answers to her in-class questions: “There were clearly codes in her employ that fell short of my understanding, but it soon became evident that my emerging resemblance to Sidney Poitier was not lost on her and that an inappropriate and, I must say, welcomed relationship began to surface” (30). Not Sidney initially enjoys her attention and their awkward sexual encounters, but when he begins feeling uncomfortable and tries to end their affair, she threatens to turn him in, mockingly noting that the authorities will hardly believe him, “a kid without a proper name, angry because he couldn’t live out his fantasy with the hot teacher” (36). Essentially she is pointing out that by not being Sidney Poitier, the unthreatening and desirable image of blackness for whites such as Miss Hancock, he will doom himself. Having recognized from the beginning that her interest in him is due precisely to his uncanny resemblance to Sidney Poitier, Not Sidney knows what breaking that spell means for him, but he decides to do it anyway. When Miss Hancock flunks him, Not Sidney reports her to the school’s principal and the district superintendent, neither of whom takes his complaint seriously. Far from being dismayed, though, he understands it as his cue to leave and, in doing so, invokes another fictional character with few, if any, possible connections to Sidney Poitier: “I was fairly clear in my desire to become a high school dropout. I decided right then to light out for the territory, as it were, to leave my childhood, to abandon what had become my home, my safety, and to discover myself.” He punctuates this revelation with two further literary allusions—“I was a fighter of windmills. I was a chaser of whales”—before ending with a Suder-like self-affirming exclamation: “I was Not Sidney Poitier” (43). The comparisons with Huck Finn, Don Quixote, and Melville’s Ishmael all suggest that Not Sidney’s self-authored bildungsroman will not be entirely devoid of external patterns, but all the ones he alludes to are at least definitively not Sidney Poitier. The life story he proposes for himself may not be wholly “new art” at this point, but in that regard he is not so different from most other adolescents.

Although Everett mines his protagonist’s complicated identity for a substantial amount of slapstick humor, its damaging existential consequences are made clear by the middle of the novel, when Not Sidney begins showing signs of having a mental breakdown caused by the strain of maintaining the boundary between himself and his nominal not-self. Not Sidney’s journeys upon leaving home immediately begin resembling episodes from Sidney Poitier’s films. This does not seem to be planned ahead of time, nor does Not Sidney
appear to recognize the similarities; nevertheless, these parallels undermine his ability to “discover [him]self” in the manner expressed by his soliloquy upon departing from his high school. Not Sidney finds himself agreeing to build a church for a group of nuns in the backwater town of Smuteye, Alabama, a plot development that parodies Sidney Poitier’s Academy Award–winning role in *Lilies of the Field* (1963). While there, Not Sidney avails himself of a bathroom at a truck stop with a “lot full of big rigs and Confederate flags” and has a moment of anxiety: “There I shaved while truckers in undershirts brushed teeth and washed hairy pits. No matter how much they scrubbed they looked nothing like Sidney Poitier, but I looked just like him and so they stared.” Not Sidney’s mention that the presumably white truckers with whom he shares the bathroom cannot scrub themselves to look like Sidney Poitier initially seems like a wry twist on the old racist joke about the inability to wash the blackness off one’s skin. The looks they direct toward him—and the implicit threat thus conveyed—reinforce this interpretation. However, a second level of dissociation develops and involves his reflection: “They stared at Sidney Poitier’s face in the mirror and I stared at it, too. The face was smooth, brown, older than I remembered, handsome. The face in the mirror smiled and I had to smile back” (191). Not Sidney seems to perceive the face in the mirror as that of Sidney Poitier, and the sense of compulsion expressed in the final sentence again echoes Willis’s observations about both the manner in which Sidney Poitier’s self and cinematic image are intertwined and the way in which he becomes a stand-in for “largely absent” others. Not Sidney is in the midst of literally reenacting a scene from one of Sidney Poitier’s movies as he slips into a state of confusion regarding his identity. As Sarah Griffin noted, this is the first slip down a slope that eventually results in an almost complete out-of-body dissociation: “Not Sidney recognizes a separation between himself and the self that smiles at him from the mirror, but is comforted in seeing this other. Only just before his psychotic break does it become clear that this other may be harmful to Not Sidney’s mental well-being. At that time, Not Sidney dreams that he is dead and looking down upon his dead body” (28–29).

Whereas Craig Suder’s combination of human and birdlike—and Birdlike—qualities imparts to him “a sense of autonomy and purpose he lacks before” (Stewart, “Do you mind” 123), Not Sidney’s unresolved fusion of identities has the opposite effect. By the end of the book, the resemblance between Not Sidney and Sidney is as much metaphysical as physical, and Not Sidney’s dream death has become disturbingly close to becoming a reality, at least as far as his distinct personality is concerned. He attends an Oscars-like awards show to accept a “special award for Most Dignified Figure in American Culture” (234) as Sidney Poitier. His interactions with various people who believe
he is the actor point out the extent to which his identity has become blurred: “[A] young woman came up to me and asked for my autograph. She said ‘I just love you, Mr. Poitier.’ . . . I wrote: *For Evelyn, All the best, Not Sidney Poitier.* She was puzzled as she read: ‘You’re not Sidney Poitier?’ ‘I am!’” (232). This exchange repeats a gag regarding his name that has recurred throughout the novel; although his signature indicates that he retains his understanding of himself as being separate from Sidney Poitier, his response to Evelyn’s question is both grammatically and typographically ambiguous, and the conclusion to the book confuses the issue even further.

By the time he has schmoozed—as Sidney Poitier, of course—with Elizabeth Taylor and Harry Belafonte before the show, he faces a conundrum of identity that has no easy resolution: “Was I Not Sidney Poitier or was I not Sidney Poitier?” (233). Both of these propositions are, of course, true, and yet everything in the moment suggests instead that he is Sidney Poitier—and therefore is not Not Sidney Poitier—by virtue of the fact that everyone perceives him as such. In giving his acceptance speech, Sidney/Not Sidney offers his audience and Everett’s reader one last multileveled mordant joke in this regard, indicating that he wishes the epitaph on his gravestone simply to read, “I AM NOT MYSELF TODAY” (234). Whether this grave will bear his name or that of Sidney Poitier is unclear, though the statement chiseled onto the tombstone would be equally true in either case because of the toll that the unresolved conundrum has taken: “although Not Sidney appears to be ‘normal’ throughout the novel, his final delusion reveals that he had been compensating [because of the confusion of identity resulting from his name]. . . . This does not mean that he is completely psychotic; it suggests only that he is partially delusional due to a rupture in his symbolic order” (S. Griffin 31). Everett’s satire in the novel is not primarily directed at Not Sidney for failing to break free from the gravitational pull of his famous partial namesake; rather it is aimed at the various people and processes responsible for narrowing Not Sidney’s opportunities to make “Nu’ott” out of himself.

In a similar—albeit far less comedic—manner, Ishmael Kidder’s identity in *The Water Cure* is both multiple and seemingly unstable, much like the structure of the book. Depending on the context, he is: 1) the narrator and protagonist of a highly literary, if also extremely disjointed narrative; 2) a father grieving his daughter’s sexual violation and murder; 3) the torturer of the man alternately identified as Reggie, Art, and W., who he believes is guilty of his daughter’s murder; or 4) a female romance novelist named Estelle Gilliam. Jonathan Dittman has explained one of the effects of this particular multiplicity: “While markers, such as husband, father, and son, can refer to the same individual, these markers cannot independently define a person—more
comprehensive qualifiers are necessary to even scratch the surface of identity . . . . While there is an underlying and perhaps ‘genuine’ description of an individual, the layers of meaning encoded in all of these symbolic representations make it impossible to truly identify a person” (16). Everett confessed in an interview to being “fascinated by” the manner in which names function as “rigid designators,” and The Water Cure resembles many of his other recent works in exploring the “literal misunderstandings and desired misunderstandings” that arise from the way names are used (Champion 166).

Kidder echoes these observations when he expresses his sense of the inherently contradictory nature of names fairly early in the book: “Naming functions as a device for distancing as much as an emblem of connection” (Everett, Water Cure 33). The manner in which Kidder presents his simultaneous distance from and connection to the identity of Estelle Gilliam reveals the significance of this particular grotesque to Everett’s serious play with the “layers of meaning encoded” in names. In explaining his “understanding of the novels that I made using the name of another person,” Kidder pointedly “refuse[s] to consider [her] an alter ego,” saying only that “somehow Estelle Gilliam found a voice and life, such as it was” (65). Earlier, though, he complicates that assertion of separation when he claims, “I simply am of course who I am, Ishmael Kidder, but I am better known as Estelle Gilliam.” Such declarative utterances establish his claim to be Ishmael Kidder, but this passage’s allusions to the opening line of Moby-Dick, to the “Popeye” cartoons, and to the punning evocation of Popeye’s signature phrase by the narrator of Ralph Ellison’s Invisible Man—“I yam what I am” (201)—all remind the reader of its constructedness by overtly signaling its fictionality; the fact that his ostensible last name is Kidder—that is, jester, jokester—only serves to deepen the reader’s doubt regarding the veracity of the outermost layer of his narrative self-presentation. He goes on to claim that the only three people who know “who I am and am not” are his ex-wife, who “lives far away in another life on that other planet”; the local sheriff, to whom Ishmael is obliged to reveal his secret in order to forestall suspicion—arising from his lack of “visible means of support”—that he is a drug dealer; and his agent, whose income is dependent on Estelle’s output, not Ishmael’s (25–26).

About Estelle’s formulaic output, Kidder writes, “The structure of my romance novels was confining” (62), which hearkens back to Margaret Russett’s claims about Everett’s “unrelenting assault on constricting fictions of identity” (366). However, Kidder recognizes that his “business” as a writer of romance novels “was not art . . . in any way,” resulting in a situation in which he cannot imagine “when form and structure [would] not confine me, not constrain me” (Everett, Water Cure 62). The Water Cure, which is simultaneously Everett’s
novel and Kidder’s memoir/meditation/disquisition, is an extreme example of such an unconfined, unconstrained narrative, one that allows Kidder to “find some kind of freedom” and challenge those who would dictate to him “what the form will allow” (62). Albeit in a radically different format, this same structure and intention are present in Erasure as well, and in his own way Kidder is as much an outspoken critic of bad writing and reading practices as Monk Ellison is. Kidder continues his thoughts in this fragment by angrily ranting against the “stinking corrupt dumbass morally de-centered president and his greedy slimy ass-breathed henchmen” (63), in the process marking his text as the diametrical opposite of the implied romance novel he normally writes—but of which no explicit trace appears in The Water Cure beyond a few book titles. He longs to be able to interrupt “during some steamy removal of some hat or cape or bra and simply tell the lost and lonely woman who is reading my formulaic, predictable, though albeit well-written, novel” about all the ghastly things her “beloved country” is doing (147).

Kidder thus presents his assertion of an identity as an author separate from Estelle Gilliam as a productive response both to perceived artistic limitations and to his abiding sense of powerlessness resulting from the violence inflicted on his daughter and the violence of the novel’s geopolitical setting. However, as Dittman noted, it also involves an attempt at reclaiming his masculinity, which is publicly threatened when he is forced to reveal the female aspect—that is, Estelle—of himself to the sheriff. In order to confirm his own innocence and re-establish his manly bona fides, he has to demonstrate the very type of violence he seems to abhor when it is perpetrated by his government or his daughter’s killer: “Kidder goes along with the sheriff’s suggestion and waits for the drug dealers in the woods. In order to defend his masculine identity, Kidder must conform to the ‘American way’ [of vigilantism] alluded to by the sheriff. As a result of this challenge, Kidder plays into the conventional assumption that masculinity equals violence” (Dittman 13). As is the case with the text of the narrative being read as Everett’s novel, “Kidder’s statements about guns and killing are diametrically opposed from the thematic elements of Gilliam’s romance novels. . . . Violence toward others, while antithetical to Estelle Gilliam, becomes a necessary tool for Kidder’s reclamation of the masculine identity lost through his appropriation of a feminine alter ego” (13–14). In short, the multiplicities of identity within Kidder function like the “series of narratives that exist both within and in contradiction with each other” that Kimberly Eaton has contended destabilize meaning in Erasure (224).

The fictional characters named Percival Everett in A History of the African-American People, I Am Not Sidney Poitier, and Percival Everett by Virgil Russell destabilize identity not by showing the multiplicity of meaningful layers within
a single person but by questioning the value of names, one of Dittman’s most “categorically significant linguistic markers” (16). The real-life Everett implies this technique in describing the origins of *Percival Everett by Virgil Russell*: “It comes out of Frege’s Puzzle, the problem that you have reconciling sense and reference. And so it’s really about that, about two things that can have the same name and not be the same thing. That’s not very helpful, is it?” (“Author Percival” 189). Like René Magritte’s famous painting *The Treachery of Images* (1929), which playfully reminds its viewers that a representative image of a pipe is still not a pipe, Everett’s semantic grotesques—whether they are one thing/perso n with many names or one name that signifies multiple things/people—are intended to remind his readers that “linguistic systems of representation can be altered or amended to form new meanings in society” (Dittman 16). The linguistic and semantic grotesquery associated with naming in *Percival Everett by Virgil Russell* reaches its bewildering apex near the book’s end: “My name is Name. My name is my name and the name of both the word name and Name, my name. I am not the only one with the name Name and there are also other names” (219).

Grotesques of various sorts appear elsewhere in Everett’s work as well. For example, nearly all the characters in *A History of the African-American People* are grotesquely “doubled” in some way, whether through the contrast between the real-life versions of Thurmond, Everett, and Kincaid and their fictional selves; the gradual revelation of McCloud’s sister Reba, who increasingly draws Wilkes’s attentions away from the other R. McCloud in the book; or the dozens of ridiculous appellations—for example, “Toodle-oo, Beeuuttee” (127) or “Call me Lars, Barton” (199)—with which Wilkes closes his letters. His inconsistent self-reference further destabilizes the ability of both his correspondents and the reader to understand who and what he is—and, therefore, what he is saying. Wilkes furthermore inflicts this destabilization onto his various correspondents by constantly altering their names. For example, he addresses Everett and Kincaid variously as “Percival and James, James and Percival, Jacival and Perames” (117); “Perce and Jim” (178); and “Percy and Jimbo” (254), and he is constantly trying to pry loose the meaning of the initial R. in McCloud’s name—“Roman? Reynard? Rilke? Raz?” (48). This overt play with names echoes Dittman’s claims about Everett’s technique in *The Water Cure*. It also shakes the most fundamental indicator of identity of a character whose entire significance to the book—his putative status as Thurmond’s aide—is already suspect as early as the book’s second piece of correspondence, when Thur mond asks, “Who are you?” Wilkes’s claims become wholly doubtful by the book’s middle, when Thurmond asks Everett and Kincaid, who have never met Wilkes in person, if “he [is] the one who wears those light blue outfits?” (151).
Although Thurmond’s mind is far from sharp, Wilkes’s assertion of being his close aide and collaborator is rendered unreliable by Thurmond’s complete ignorance of his existence. The irony of this situation is magnified by the horde of individuals implied by the catalog of names Barton assigns himself in his correspondence. If Barton himself is of dubious reality, what does that suggest about his self-referential entourage?

The intentional layering—and resultant confusion—of texts, authors, and characters in *Erasure* likewise results in a grotesque of polyvocal multiplicity that contributes to the novel’s Menippean disruption of authorial significance: “Everett, in his portrayal of the reception of Stagg Leigh’s work, shows that the existence of a writer in reality has no bearing regarding the creation of a narrative” (Eaton 224). As discussed in the previous chapter, the meaning of *My Pafology* is absolutely dependent on the reader’s ability to discriminate among the book’s would-be authorial voices at any given moment, a situation that results in “an ambiguity about to whom this narrative actually belongs” (Eaton 223). It is at once a fictional part of Everett’s novel, a document within Monk’s nonfictional journal, Monk’s fictional parody of *We’s Lives in Da Ghetto*, Stagg’s nonparodic fictional expression of a supposedly “authentic” black aesthetic, and Van Go’s nonfictional memoir of growing up in the ghetto.

Issues of (self-)representation are prominently featured in *Grand Canyon, Inc.* as well. Sylvie Bauer noted that Rhino Tanner “materializes and gives shape to an abstraction, a chimera” (“Percival Everett’s *Grand Canyon Inc.*” 258) in “lay[ing] claims to the American Spirit” (Everett, *Grand Canyon Inc.* 113). She argued that Tanner’s transformation of the Grand Canyon from a natural wonder into an expression of himself “not only legitimizes his position but also legitimizes the absurd reality he creates, in which the American spirit he claims is symbolized by the Ferris wheel [with which] he mars the Grand Canyon’s rim” (Bauer, “Percival Everett’s *Grand Canyon Inc.*” 260). The creation of a nominal/philosophical grotesque prefaces the physical transformation of the landscape:

At the age of ten, the boy already has a goal in life, inscribed in bold letters in his sidekick’s notepad: “Acquire the Canyon.” In the process, the name of the place is maimed—deprived of the adjective “grand,” it loses its nature as a proper noun and becomes another reality, an abstraction figured by its ultimate transformation into a brand. . . . The canyon is thus de-realized and given a new identity, that of a mere adjectival modifier defining the now real object embodied in the truncated word “Inc.” In other words, the series that moves from “Grand Canyon” (the original), to “the Canyon” (its transcription in the notebook), and then to “Grand Canyon Inc.” (its
mutilation to become an amusement park) finds its ultimate transformation when it becomes “the Grand Tanner Canyon.” (Bauer, “Percival Everett’s Grand Canyon Inc.” 258–59)

Moreover, within a few pages of the book’s end, Tanner’s notoriously ignorant worldview seems on the brink of transforming more than just the canyon:

Rhino Tanner and the Sultan of Brunei sat in Tanner’s special glass room stuck in the side of the canyon overlooking the amusements. . . .

“I am amazed at what you have accomplished,” the Sultan said.

“It took vision, my friend.”

“It has given me hope that I can take over as much of New York and San Francisco, just as you have succeeded here.”

“It just goes to show: If you want it more than they want it, you get it. Jesus said that.” (Everett, Grand Canyon Inc. 123)

Bauer noted that “what has happened here is a sense of confusion between reality and its representation, representation being the only sense of reality that survives Tanner’s plans” (“Percival Everett’s Grand Canyon Inc.” 259). Thus, when Everett does to Rhino’s plans what Bubba symbolically does to Custer’s—Everett even links the two by calling Rhino’s futile act of shooting at an on-rushing wall of water “Tanner’s last stand”—it is by completely transcending human representation and, in doing so, removing the physical and nominal grotesques from reality: “Everything he had built was completely defeated, washed away forever, no pieces ever to be found. The canyon became what it once was. There was no dam, no lake, only river, the mighty Colorado” (126).

The narrator Vlepo functions as a metafictional grotesque in Frenzy because of how Dionysos uses him invasively to observe other characters. The “grotesque mutations” of Vlepo’s character are “partly a display of self-definitions, leading us to wonder about how we imagine ourselves and possibly depict ourselves” (Tissut, “Frenzy” 287, 288). Vlepo’s initial self-presentation even breaks down the categorical distinction between himself and Dionysos: “For as long as I have known that there is time and a life to know, I have been with the god. I am not his creation, but I cannot claim a life away from him. My experience is, of a kind, my own, but it is shaped by what is chosen for me to see” (3). Initially, Dionysos chooses for Vlepo’s self to be translated into various inanimate objects and animals, often in order to aid with Dionysos’s own efforts at human self-presentation: “Dionysos stood at the canal edge, having disguised himself first as a mortal and further as a country man with a tethered goat. I had been made the goat and so stood on four feet, shaggy” (4). The limitations of this dislocation of identity are described in a manner that
parallels Dionysos and Vlepo as author and narrator, respectively: “The god would have me in this goat but not as a goat, it being a limit of his power; he could not propagate out of nothing the matter of the beast, but he could insert me. And in the beast I was, smelling my vessel and tasting in my own mouth what it chose to eat” (5–6).

As the book progresses, though, Vlepo begins to inhabit a multitude of other human characters within the novel, sometimes riding along as a passenger physically attached to their bodies and at other times as a presence within their psychological consciousness: “Dionysos put me upon the head of Agave. The window into her thinking was buried beneath her grey hairs, but I found stable footing and observed” (43). Essentially, Dionysos empowers Vlepo to represent the identity of the things and people into which he is “inserted,” but neither Dionysos nor Vlepo can create them. Everett described his own authorial relation to reality is similar terms: “Every one of my novels is a complete and accurate representation of the world around me. I don’t believe they’re abstract at all. I think they’re concrete and absolutely real. . . . The only constraints that are sometimes annoying, or maybe it’s just one constraint, is that the world I create has to exist between the covers of the book” (Champion 172). Vlepo’s usefulness as an observer in the text is thus less a result of his shrewdness in describing reality from the perspective of an individual consciousness and more because of his ability to enter into a kind of mythic gestalt consciousness comprised of anyone whose thoughts or internalized sensations Dionysos wishes to know. Vlepo incarnates the inherently grotesque (in Cassuto’s definition) situation of the quasi-divine omniscient narrator, gifted with the limited ability to be others but consequently cursed by an attendant diminishment of the self.

Collectively these manifestations of the grotesque in Everett’s work perform the “straddling of the nihilistic, the affirmative, the speculative[,] and the silly” that Musgrave has seen as a defining condition of Menippean satire. He claimed that it “ultimately resists systematic definition precisely because it is . . . characterized by a structural principle of radical heterogeneity,” enabling it to serve as “an inspiration for imitation and parodic investigation” (31), as it does in so many of Everett’s stories and novels.

**Madness**

The last remaining feature from Musgrave’s list—fifth in his original ordering—is applicable to practically every one of Everett’s books from *Suder* to *So Much Blue*: “Eccentricity, madness, foolishness, extreme behavior or abnormal states are frequent in the narrator and/or characters of Menippean satire” (23). Given that eccentric or insane characters are in no way unique to Menippean satire, this trait is perhaps the least intrinsic among those in Musgrave’s schema. Such
characters can, however, play a crucially Menippean part when used to critique a “bad philosophy” that is otherwise perceived or believed to be wisdom. For example, the unshakably optimistic philosophy espoused by Pangloss—and sanctioned by the Westphalian court of Baron Thunder-ten-Tronckh at which he serves—in Voltaire’s *Candide* (1759) certainly seems like madness when juxtaposed against a world filled with extreme violence, deceit, treachery, natural disasters, and disease. Likewise, Peter Profitt, the narrator of Edgar Allan Poe’s story “The Business Man” (1840), presents himself as a wholly reasonable figure at the outset of his first-person tale. The reader is surely intended to doubt this assertion—as well as the “method” whose merits he touts—once Profitt confidently discloses that his keen business sense is due to a prominent bump on his head that he received as a child when his nursemaid smashed him into a bedpost. Even a wholly noncomic character such as Raskolnikov in *Crime and Punishment* (1866) is at least partly Menippean in his murderous and self-justifying eccentricity, inasmuch as Dostoyevsky used him to illustrate what he saw as the glaring flaws in the philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche and the politics of Nikolai Chernyshevsky, both of which were gaining proponents in Russia at the time the novel was written. In contrast, Robin Mookerjee has argued that sociopathic, hyperviolent contemporary characters such as Tyler Durden from Chuck Palahniuk’s *Fight Club* and Begbie from Irvine Welsh’s *Trainspotting* serve a Menippean satirical function in their “reject[ion of] beliefs considered assumptive” (102) within their societies; in Mookerjee’s view, they are at least as much the vehicles of those books’ satirical energies as they are the targets of them.

The eccentrics, fools, and madmen/-women who appear in Everett’s books—many of whom have already been discussed in different contexts above—fulfill a wide range of functions, from the conventional to the unexpected; the majority of them are in some way targeted by Everett’s satire as the embodiment of or mouthpiece for a philosophy whose “madness” is its downfall. Some of his characters—for example, Douglas/Inflato and nearly all of Ralph’s series of kidnappers in *Glyph*; Monk Ellison in the latter stages of *Erasure*; Barton Wilkes in *A History of the African-American People*; and Theodore Street in the earlier stages of *American Desert*—are mocked as “educated fools” in a manner that hearkens back to the earliest Menippean satires. Characters in another group that includes Curt Marder in *God’s Country*, Rhino Tanner in *Grand Canyon Inc.*, the vain television journalist Barbie Becker in *American Desert*, and the hick residents of Smuteye, Alabama, and Peckerwood County, Georgia, in *I Am Not Sidney Poitier* are considerably less educated in their foolishness and, accordingly, are satirized more for their uncritical acceptance/invocation of bad philosophies than for their formulations.
thereof. Another group that includes John Livesey in *Cutting Lisa*, Ishmael Kidder in *The Water Cure*, and Ogden Walker in *Assumption* departs from the two groups above by shocking the reader in noncomedic ways with unexpected acts of violence. These outbursts—and their justifications, or lack thereof in Walker’s case, for them—undermine or at least trouble these characters’ external appearances and/or narrative assertions of rationality and respectability.

Another set of characters with altered mental states provides Everett with a different sort of satirical tool, one related to William Ramsey’s assertion that “irrationality and madness appear frequently in [Everett’s] fiction” because the American society he depicts “is such an arbitrary assault on individual dignity that often it is mentally disruptive” (132–33). In the opening chapter of *Suder*, Craig Suder recalls a childhood memory of his father bluntly telling him and his brother, “Boys, your mother is crazy” (7). Her behaviors in subsequent flashbacks—going jogging in hot weather wearing a full winter coat, speculating with increasing paranoia that her husband is having an affair, constantly berating both of her young sons for their presumed masturbation—do little to contradict this diagnosis. However, the novel also gradually reveals the extent to which Craig’s mother is defined by others, specifically other men, including her well-meaning but aloof husband and the racially bigoted, religiously zealous, and medically incompetent Dr. McCoy. Everett described the novel as “an African-American’s internal search for emancipation. Craig Suder is obsessed and terrified by the craziness of his mother, an insanity which is a metaphor for the American experience as she is taunted by white religion which fights her own attempt to find freedom” (“Signing to the Blind” 9). Both as a child and in the novel’s present, in which his baseball career and his family life are falling apart, Craig is “scared to death that whatever sickness was loose in my mother was also loose in me” (Everett, *Suder* 82). Everett certainly gives the reader reasons to question Craig’s sanity as he withdraws further from his life into the isolation of the mountaintop cabin/bird’s-nest that he shares with Jincy, the runaway child, and Renoir, the battered/rescued elephant.

As Stewart observed, it is Bud Powell—the same character who suggests Craig’s connection to Bird—who offers a more positive interpretation of the mother’s seeming insanity: “Powell’s assessment distinguishes itself from that of the rest of the family: ‘He said that maybe Ma was just different. I was searching for “just different” in the woman dashing back and forth, back and forth, but all I saw was crazy’” (82). Powell exhibits “a . . . willingness to approve of—or at least accept—Kathy on her own terms. He brings a different language to the family’s habitual practices and is able to reinterpret these practices as a result. He doesn’t convert; he converses” (Stewart, “Do you mind” 120).
Cannon specifically related this “different language” to Powell’s background as a jazz musician, noting that the philosophical underpinning of jazz as a musical form becomes the metaphor for Suder’s liberation from the “blues” he is suffering from at the novel’s beginning: “The blues seems to designate hopeful resignation, while jazz appears to emphasize movement and action to overcome that resignation. . . . At any given moment, the performer can choose his approach to the music of his life; this is what Suder does when the blues has given him no recourse and he turns more earnestly to jazz for inspiration” (Cannon 104). Powell’s articulation of the merely “different” state of Kathy Suder’s mind removes the constrictions that seem to cause her suffering; likewise Craig has to do something irrational in attempting to fly with his artificial wings. As unorthodox as this act of willful madness may be from a therapeutic standpoint, the novel’s conclusion does not condemn it.

Daniel Barkley’s willing embrace of the Confederate flag in “The Appropriation of Cultures” likewise leaves many of the people he interacts with—both black and white—puzzled about his sanity. Travis, the man from whom he buys the pickup with the massive “rebel flag decal covering the rear window of the cab,” is described as “lost, scratching his head and looking back at the house for his wife” (damned 96–97) when Daniel not only refuses to haggle down the asking price but also offers him two hundred dollars more. Similarly, Daniel’s friend Sarah assumes that he has “flipped” (98) because of his idleness when she hears his claim that he bought the truck for its decal, not in spite of it. When Travis delivers the truck and Daniel expresses his delight at finding a vehicle “with the black-power flag already on it,” his uncomprehending reaction highlights Daniel’s eccentricity in regard to the flag’s presumably monological symbolic power: “What?” Travis screwed up his face, trying to understand” (100). After a period of “confused” (101) reactions, the “strange looks and expressions of outrage changed to bemused laughter and finally to open joking and acceptance” (102) of Daniel’s “mad” gesture of reverse appropriation. When the story ends with “the piece of cloth [being] quietly dismissed from its station with the U.S. and State flags atop the State Capitol,” it is without either “ceremony” or “notice” (103), suggesting that Daniel’s complication of the flag’s symbolism has devalued it for its primary audience. His action has in no way eradicated the underlying racist mind-set, but it employed madness to accomplish a powerful symbolic goal—removal of the flag from the South Carolina Capitol—that seemed impervious to reason at the time Everett wrote the story. Ted Street’s development of limited omniscience as a seeming, if also unexplained, result of his dead-alive status in American Desert and the insightful “nonsense” offered by Not Sidney’s strange surrogate father-figures—Ted Turner and Percival Everett—in I Am Not Sidney Poitier likewise serve as
positive examples of alternative mental states that raise questions about conventional wisdoms that have become either stale or unreasonably restrictive.

In a wholly different tenor, the slow descent of Monk’s mother into Alzheimer’s disease provides a frequently grim backdrop to Erasure’s parodic and comic play with literary conventions. She is certainly not “mad” in the usual sense, but her loss of memory and personality becomes a mirror for aspects of Monk’s characterization as he simultaneously fragments into his literary alter ego and unearths long-buried family secrets that radically alter what he thinks he knows about his parents and his siblings. Marc Amfreville has gone so far as to argue that Monk is “carefully constructed as what could be viewed as a pathologically depressive character.” Exacerbated by the extent to which he “is confronted with actual loss”—including his sister’s murder, his brother’s marital difficulties and identity crisis, his mother’s mental health problems—during the course of the novel, this condition has progressed to “a stage . . . where action is mechanical, creation no longer a source of satisfaction, and self-loathing pervasive” (182). Such a premise radically alters the interpretation of Monk’s dissolution as the book progresses; rather than being the comeuppance for an act of callously hypocritical egotism, Monk’s fragmentation into Stagg and Van Go instead becomes a cautionary tale about the unforeseen psychological consequences of rigid stereotyping—another potentially distressing “loss” of meaningful identity—on already unsettled personalities. Not Sidney’s breakdown in I Am Not Sidney Poitier likewise issues a satirical warning about the traumatic effects of overly rigid external impositions of identity. In less comedic ways, Alice Achitophel’s almost infantile simple-mindedness—which disappears along with her body fat when she mysteriously transforms—at the beginning of Zulus and the titular “dance that [Dionysos] had spread like disease throughout the hills of those nostalgic lands” (3) in Frenzy become metaphors for Everett’s philosophical musings on the mental and physical aspects of altered states.

In short, although it is perhaps the weakest of Musgrave’s Menippean traits on its own, “madness” combines productively with various other, more substantial techniques both to amplify and to signal more explicitly Everett’s satirical intentions. Rather than continuing to catalog further the extensive range of eccentricities and insanities of Everett’s major and minor characters across thirty books—a process that has already been accomplished to some extent in piecemeal fashion thus far—it is perhaps more useful to move on to a case study of another interlinked subset of Everett’s texts that includes additional explication of the role that madness plays in his work even as it extends the discussion further.