Jesting in Earnest

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Portions of the previous two chapters discuss in passing how Everett satirically treats certain aspects of the mythology of the American West in *God’s Country*, *Grand Canyon, Inc.*, and *American Desert*. Several critics have noted a contrast between those three books and the remainder of Everett’s fiction set in the mountains and deserts of the West. For example, Leland Krauth began his comparison of *God’s Country* and *Watershed* by noting that the two novels “are radically different, the one an uproarious comedy, the other a troubling mystery” (314). Similarly, William Handley suggested that “if Everett’s other westerns, *God’s Country* and *Grand Canyon, Inc.*, are mischievous re-workings of generic conventions that call to mind Mark Twain, then *Watershed* is a non-formulaic but equally revisionist western more like John Sayles’*[s] soberly searching film *Lone Star*” (304). The predominant critical opinion has been that the “naturalist mediation of frontier experience” (Munby 323) found in such works as *Walk Me to the Distance*, *Watershed*, *Wounded*, and *Assumption* stands somewhat apart from the overtly satirical and predominantly comic tenor of the aforementioned trio of novels. This chapter, however, demonstrates that Everett’s Western—that is, set in the West, not necessarily conforming to the genre conventions of the “Western”—fiction remains intrinsically satirical, as well as specifically Menippean and degenerative, even when its form and/or tone make it less immediately discernible as such.

The key to this assertion lies in considering these novels not only as a subset of related works (as several of Everett’s critics have already done) but also within the wider context of his entire body of work. Krauth suggested the value of such an approach in noting that *God’s Country* and *Watershed* “make a natural pair that reveals how Everett’s engagement with the West—the West of fiction as well as actuality—provides a medium for the expression of some of his most fundamental concerns. . . . The two novels disclose both characteristic gestures of his sensibility and essential values deep in the grain of his art” (314). Handley further outlined the contours of Everett’s complex, sometimes
even contradictory depiction of the West, particularly in terms of any perceived obligations to represent the region and its history in prescribed ways:

Seen together, Everett’s western novels both exhibit and tackle one of the central literary problems in literature of the American West: how does a western writer free his imagination and at the same time respond to the demand for historical authenticity that readers for two centuries have brought to this cultural landscape (whether real or imagined) . . . ? These works of western fiction are historical in the deepest sense: not because they offer up “facts” or because they “faithfully represent a bygone era,” but because they are self-conscious about the way in which the “truth” of history is never objective but always subjectively imagined. Moreover, “history”—especially the history of American racism—is itself a record of discourses. (Handley 304, 306)

Everett uses “self-conscious” repetition of various tropes of Western exceptionalism in all four of the works of fiction examined in this chapter. In these “unpredictable acts of self-creation” (Ramsey 131) he engages in a mostly non-comic yet fundamentally Menippean satirical critique of conventional Western constructions of identity. William Ramsey noted that “the West in Everett’s stories is never a complete release from the cage of racial oppression. . . . In one way or another, [his] fiction often focuses on individuals who do not ‘know their place’ in a socially hierarchical American culture” (132). The troubles that Everett’s characters experience in the West become a synecdoche for their struggle with belonging in the country as a whole; they satirically reveal the flaws in a “record of [American] discourses” pertaining to both individual and collective concepts of identity.

Frontiers, Old and New

The majority of God’s Country takes place in a physical world whose constituent parts—for example, a one-street town prominently featuring a general store, a saloon with a swinging door, a brothel, and a jail—contribute to an intentionally clichéd representation of the nineteenth-century West. Everett described God’s Country as having arisen from a desire “to exploit the fact that there is a mythic West. . . . It has nothing to do with any reality” (Birnbaum 37). Although his other two comic satires set in the West depart from the intentionally formulaic setting of God’s Country, they still tinker with “mythic” and/or “invented” aspects of the West. Rhino Tanner’s story of self-absorbed capitalism in Grand Canyon, Inc. plays out in an iconic landscape with a multitude of symbolic layers that comment on the relationship between American identity and nature. American Desert’s title alone signifies the literal and metaphysical
lifelessness that Ted Street encounters throughout that novel, whether in the suburbs of Los Angeles, in Big Daddy’s fundamentalist enclave/arsenal in the wilderness, or in the Area 51–like government research compound far beneath the surface of the southwestern desert. Although Everett has bristled at times at the critical overdetermination of his works set in the West—“I hate that the presence of Native people, mountains, or even a horse causes people to call a work a western” (Goyal)—he also has delineated it as a region with a distinct cultural dynamic that he finds both useful and liberating: “I set things in the West because I know it very well. I have a level of comfort that gives me freedom. It’s a place that’s known for the self-sufficiency of its inhabitants but where people actually depend on each other profoundly. You can live in your apartment in New York and never see anybody for years and survive. You can live on a ranch in Wyoming, but you’re gonna need somebody sometime, and the people who live around you are there. That’s part of the landscape” (Dischinger 46). His nuanced, and far from uncritical, appreciation for the region’s cultural history and geography—both real and imagined—provides Everett with ample opportunities to explore the mimetic and the satirical potentials inherent in it.

The books under consideration in this chapter are set neither in the mythic western territory of Zane Grey novels and John Ford films—or the simulacral versions depicted in the cinematic and serial versions of Westworld—or in the familiar spaces of Beverly Hills 90210, Weeds, Breaking Bad, or countless other television serials set in the contemporary urban/suburban West. Instead they take place in the sprawling ranch country of Wyoming, the rough plateaus of rural New Mexico, and the snowy mountains of northern Colorado; such realms have been featured only sporadically in contemporary pop culture—for example, Clint Eastwood’s “revisionist western” film Unforgiven (1992) or Craig Johnson’s series of crime novels that subsequently spawned the television series Longmire (2012–17). As spaces with fewer readily available preconceptions for reader to bring to the text, these settings allow for more intimate and psychologically engaging portraits of how prejudice roams the West than do those that appear in Everett’s overtly parodic work. The symbolic significance of these places is simultaneously less complex and less rigid than that of an iconic landscape such as Monument Valley or a prototypical “Western” town such as Deadwood, South Dakota; this affords Everett greater freedom to play with the largely unexamined assumptions—again, the “constricting boundaries of fixed systems” (Ramsey 131)—that adhere to these places and the people who inhabit them, ultimately “reveal[ing] the black ranch to be a compromised sanctuary in an environment capable of nurturing as much bigotry as anywhere else” (Munby 323). In these works Everett satirically “recuperates” reality in
a manner akin to that which Krauth has seen at work in *God’s Country*: “at the same time [Everett] dismantles the traditional Western, he recuperares it, infusing into its clichés some gritty realities and exploiting its abiding mythic power to create a Western paradoxically truer to life than the conventional one but still larger-than-life” (321).

As is true in *God’s Country, Grand Canyon, Inc.*, and *American Desert*, race is relevant to the satirical tenor of each of these four books without being the overriding concern of any of them. These books’ geographically remote and sparsely populated settings are contemporary analogues of the malleable “frontier” that has contributed to racialized constructions of American identity since the earliest days of European settlement:

As a much repeated ideological narrative in American culture, the frontier myth has most often served the interests of the dominant race, class, and gender, providing a mythic justification for the positions of power held by middle-class white males. The myth is based on a racial opposition between the “civilized” (white) and the “savage” (nonwhite, usually American Indian but often African American or even lower-class whites or white immigrants) and tells the story of the evolutionary inevitability of the triumph of civilization over savagery and the dominance of the white race over all other races. The frontier myth is the narrative of the civilized individual’s journey westward into the savage American wilderness. (M. Johnson, *Black *)

Compared to its foregrounding in *God’s Country* or *Grand Canyon, Inc.*, the frontier myth is relatively diluted in the contemporary settings of Everett’s realistic Western fiction, as can be inferred from the narrator/protagonist John Hunt’s description of the town near his ranch in *Wounded*: “I was never quite prepared for it, though I’d lived outside it for twenty years. Even when it had been tiny, its abrupt appearance after the bend always made it seem large. Now, with a couple of housing developments and the new community college campus and the strip malls that followed, it was damn near urban sprawl” (11). Despite this description of a borderland that has been “civilized” and homogenized, Everett’s characters still interact with their distinctly western environments in ways that reveal the ongoing influence of the frontier myth.

Everett’s most significant Menippean gesture across these four books involves the simultaneous subversion of a pair of interrelated notions. First, he questions the veneration of individualism—generally of the “rugged” variety—that has been embedded in the mythology of the frontier in general and of the West in particular at least as far back as the trope of the “strong silent type” embodied by Gary Cooper in *High Noon* (1952) or John Wayne in *The Searchers* (1956). Second, he explodes the idea that the frontier has
become an egalitarian space in which everyone is free to participate: “If identity through place is as fictional a construct as identity through race, Everett’s characters nonetheless sometimes find an empowering sense of self through faith (if troubled) in that particular identity script. . . . [They] start with a strong sense of belonging to a western community and with a solid sense of identity . . . that becomes troubled as the story progresses” (M. Johnson, Hoo-Doo 194). This troubling sometimes takes place in an explicitly racial or ethnic context, but it just as often plays out on a more idiosyncratic level.

Alexa Weik Von Mossner has reminded readers that Everett “often insists on the fluidity and indeterminacy of race, confronting his audience with characters who defy racial stereotyping and broad generalizations” (76). The characterizations of the protagonists of these four books bear out her assertion, though there are also significant differences among them in terms of how and why their racial identities are complicated. David Larson’s race in Walk Me to the Distance is never specified, though numerous critics have argued (in general, unconvincingly) that he is black based on various circumstantial details in the text. It seems unlikely that Everett intended David’s race to be an issue, given that his initial description already negates various presumptions about who and what he is:

It wasn’t that David Larson returned home from Vietnam to find that his girl had taken up with another man; he didn’t have a girl when he left. He’d spent his time in the army telling people that he was from Georgia, then trying to explain to them and, with time, to himself, why he didn’t have a southern accent; finally coming to “I guess I never had one.” . . . David hadn’t had the good sense, the keen foresight to get wounded and lose a limb, and though certainly affected by his tour, he did not come home emotionally or mentally scarred, suffering from flashbacks or a fear of thin people on bicycles. He returned as unremarkable as he had been when he left . . . just a soldier, a man without the courage, conviction, or cowardice to have run north to Montreal or Toronto. (3)

Described from the start in apophatic terms—that is, that which he is not—he soon arrives in Slut’s Hole, a place whose very name evokes emptiness. Not long after his arrival, he meets a cantankerous yet kind local woman named Chloë Sixbury, whose distinguishing features are a wooden leg and a son named Patrick who is described simply as being “an idiot” (6) and “retarded” (7). After Sixbury asks David where he was born, she tells him that he should “settle there [in Georgia]. People should live where they have a history,” to which David replies simply, “Don’t like it there. Never did” (8). Although his initial stay in Slut’s Hole and at Sixbury’s ranch is intended to be only temporary while his
car is being repaired, David quickly finds an unexpected sense of home there, and the remainder of the novel examines how and why he arrives at the conclusion that “he couldn’t be any place else” (207) despite a number of developments that would seemingly contradict such a conclusion.

Michael K. Johnson insisted that “Walk Me to the Distance is in many ways paradigmatic of Everett’s western fiction” in its “use of disabled characters and metaphors of disability” (Hoo-Doo 187). He suggested a Menippean interpretation in observing that the physical and material grotesques that Everett’s protagonists encounter subvert foundational aspects of their identity: “[His] stories often turn on . . . encounters with the otherness of disability, deformity, or poverty [that] result in or foreshadow moments of existential crisis, disintegration, and fragmentation during which the character becomes aware of . . . the illusory nature of both his sense of wholeness and his sense of successful integration and belonging” (195). There is little doubt that David arrives in Slut’s Hole in need of something to fill the grammatical and existential negatives by which he is defined at the book’s outset, but Everett intends the reader to remain dubious about the reasoning that David employs in choosing his new home.

For example, early in the novel David sees Sixbury’s son “fucking a sheep” while wearing hip waders into which the animal’s legs are tucked to keep it from running away (22). This absurd image initially seems like a puerile mockery of rural life, an impression that is reinforced when David awkwardly recounts the scene for a neighbor, who responds with incredulous mirth: “Howard laughed harder. ‘Don’t shit me’” (29). David tries to redirect Patrick’s sexual urges by paying for a prostitute to visit him, but the encounter (predictably) goes poorly. Patrick’s next sexual indiscretion is less laughable, inasmuch as it involves an assault on a human, specifically Butch, the abandoned Vietnamese girl who has by this point in the novel become David’s de facto ward. Patrick runs off into the wilderness and is tracked down by a posse of local men, including David. When the men find him, they dispense a form of “frontier justice” that also has powerful and indelible racial overtones: “David went into the cabin and kicked at the low flame and embers. He was scared to death. He wasn’t sure what was going to happen, but of course he knew. . . . There was no hangman’s noose. Just a slipknot. . . . [Patrick] just hanged there and died” (126–27).

Troubled by his participation in this killing, David seeks solace at “the one church, the Lutheran Church of Slut’s Hole” (134). The sermon he hears there invokes aspects of the frontier myth in proffering excuses for the brutality of Patrick’s extralegal summary execution:

The thing about this country is—well, it’s relentless. It doesn’t let up. It goes on and on, with this enormous sky for a face. It goes on and on, with
this oppressive beauty. . . . And the longer it lets us live, the more we have to love it. As we trust God, so we must trust this land. We have no choice. We are alone here. We must trust ourselves and our faith. . . . There are bad things . . . and there are evil things in this world. But a bad thing need not be evil. A bad thing need not be wrong. Many a right action is unpleasant. God judges us as much by our intentions as by our deeds. Here, in this harsh environment, we must be men. Even our women must be men. (136)

Immediately after this sermon, David seems to be almost unconsciously “whispering the words, rolling them into the sea of mumbling as the entire congregation joined in the recitation” (136). This suggests the extent to which he has become receptive to the self-justifying and constricting logic that apparently demands (among other things) complete self-negation from women. Thus this logic is invalidated as neither an ethical nor a grammatical improvement on the negatives that constrained David prior to his arrival in Wyoming.

Everett never wholly undermines David’s embrace of Slut’s Hole and/or the West as his new home, but he certainly questions the extent to which it requires willful ignorance—that is, acceptance of a version of the frontier myth—on his part. David never confesses to Sixbury what he helped do to her son, although the text hints that she understands and even accepts it. Furthermore he and his fellow vigilantes escape prosecution because the investigating officers subscribe to a frontier ethics similar to that espoused by the sermonizing pastor:

David went to the Lowe ranch and told Joshua what Sixbury had said to the state police the night before. Lowe sat in his big chair and looked at David on the sofa. David came to the end of his report. “And so Baker just left.”

“You say it was Baker?”

“Yes.”

Lowe nodded. “A good man.”

“They’re not just dropping it like that, are they?” asked David.

“You sound like you’re not satisfied.”

“I just don’t think they’re finished.”

“I figure they probably just needed a reason to let it go.” (206)

David continues to question his own morality, though, wondering out loud if he, unlike Baker, is “a bad man,” to which his friend and fellow vigilante tidily responds, “If you have to wonder, chances are you’re not” (206). Though this scene thoroughly lacks the comedy of God’s Country or Grand Canyon, Inc., it is not difficult to imagine Curt Marder or Rhino Tanner invoking a similarly uncritical perspective to justify their own reprehensible actions. Moreover, if
Everett does intend the reader to perceive David as black, his ultimate acceptance of what essentially is a lynching of a mentally disabled man potentially becomes an even more perverse act of denial. Even without that inherently racialized interpretation, though, Everett leaves the reader less comfortable than David about the answer to the rhetorical question he poses to Sixbury on the novel’s last page: “So this runs pretty smoothly, now that we have a routine. No problem at all, huh?” (208–9). If we recall Sixbury’s early advice to David about settling “where [he has] a history,” then we also have to question the extent to which he acknowledges that history truthfully in his new home.

**Watershed Moments and Historical Wounds**

Whereas in *Walk Me to the Distance* David Larson begins as a character defined by what he is not, the narrator/protagonist of *Watershed* begins his story with an assertion of his individuality that also concurrently refutes any form of collective identity: “My blood is my own and my name is Robert Hawks” (1). He continues by noting that he “would seem [to be] a pretty faithful copy” of his father and grandfather, inasmuch as all three men “hated America, policemen, and especially churches” (3–4). It is not until after he recalls being told why he should not rely on the police “if some KKK grabbed your grandfather right now” that his race becomes unmistakably clear to the reader: “The police will stop you and search you and, if they don’t shoot you, they’ll take you in and say you look like another ‘nigger.’ They may not use that word, but that’s what they’ll mean” (14). Despite subsequently recounting incidents that validate his grandfather’s prediction, Hawks repeatedly asserts that race is of minimal importance to his self-conception and seems either mildly annoyed or nonplussed when other characters notice his blackness. Given his recollection that his grandfather “put the barrel of his over-and-under shotgun in his mouth and pushed the trigger” because of his inability to live with people who “believe in one way, their way” (72), Hawks’s withdrawal—symbolized by his frequent efforts at physical and emotional escape from Karen, his admittedly unstable girlfriend—seems more a psychological avoidance strategy than a principled affirmation.

This withdrawal becomes more significant in light of the narrative control—Hawks is far from “dead” in Barthes’s sense—that he asserts at the book’s opening: “That I should feel put out or annoyed or even dismayed at having to tell this story is absurd since I do want the story told and since I am the only one who can properly and accurately reproduce it. There is no one else in whom I place sufficient trust to attempt a fair representation of the events” (2). Not long after this declaration, Hawks also acknowledges a tendency to “simply and stupidly fall . . . into something out of convenience” (6) in his relationships
with women and admits that he reflexively lies to Karen to placate her when they argue. These details cast doubt on Hawks’s conviction regarding his own “accuracy” and “fairness.” Moreover, Hawks’s choice of the word “fair” to describe his “representation of the events” recalls—perhaps intentionally—Curt Marder’s misplaced trust in the “fair account” (Everett, God’s 10) of the West that he receives from dime novels, as well as the title of Everett’s short-story collection The Weather and Women Treat Me Fair, whose protagonists, like Hawks, “seem stymied by the injustices they observe and are unable or unwilling to create alliances across boundaries of racial, ethnic, or other forms of difference” (M. Johnson, Hoo-Doo 207).

Hawks’s initial account of retreating to his cabin in the mountains of northern Colorado makes clear not only that the cabin is a place of refuge for him but also that his motivations for seeking such refuge are bound up with avoidance of unpleasant realities: “Before I came out here to the cabin, to fish and think and be alone, I was in the city with Karen, a woman I had been fucking. . . . Her voice grated on me, as did her attitudes and disposition, and finally her smells, but still I would lie between her legs again and again, pathetically seeking release or simply seeking” (4–5). As Karen tries to convince him not to go fishing, he realizes that he wants “to tell her that I was not in love with her, never had been in love with her and, further, believed completely that she was too insane to be capable of love herself,” finishing his line of thinking by noting that he “genuinely detested her.” Rather than express this admittedly unpleasant—but seemingly genuine—feeling to Karen, he instead tells her another noncommittal half-truth about his reasons for going fishing:

“Why!?” she had screamed, her voice much louder than her size.
“Because you need to get away from me? Am I that awful?”
“No, because I want to go fishing. I like fishing. It relaxes me.” (5)

The staccato cadence of Hawks’s answer is consistent with his relatively taciturn conversational affect throughout the novel, but it also contrasts dramatically with his narrative voice, creating a tonal multiplicity that calls attention to itself. Everett uses this distinction to set up his Menippean satire; Hawks the character, heading out to his cabin for a “relaxing” stretch of being on his own, does not possess the same sense of “self-sacrifice and moral commitment” that Hawks the retrospective narrator has developed by living through the events of the novel. Hawks’s veneration of the cabin as a site of uncomplicated succor from the world becomes another form of false place-oriented mythology, not only because his own avoidant behavior is a necessary precursor to his presence at the cabin in the first place but also because of the cabin’s proximity to the disputed watershed that becomes the reason for novel’s main conflict.
The cabin’s status as a symbol of Hawks’s mind-set is further established after he arrives there in the early stages of the book. While Hawks is stopped at a store on his way to the cabin, his truck fails to start. He is saved from being stuck by a woman named Louise—he learns her full name only later—who “jiggle[s] a do-hickey” under his hood. He offers her a ride, and she accompanies him part of the way toward his cabin. He notes that her canvas sneakers do not seem sufficient for the snowstorm that appears to be imminent, but he quickly suppresses his concern when she unconvincingly insists she has a pair of boots in her backpack: “I felt her uneasiness and so I backed off, attending to my driving, putting both hands on the wheel. I hoped that I had not made her feel that I was interested in her” (11). Although his ambiguous word choice in this final sentence might be interpreted to Hawks’s benefit as not wanting to scare her into mistaking him for a sexual predator, a line from the next scene suggests a less charitable reading.

Upon his arrival at the cabin, Hawks unleashes a lengthy and mechanical-sounding paragraph describing the minutiae of his routine at the cabin in a manner reminiscent of Ernest Hemingway’s “Big Two-Hearted River.” Much as John Livesey attempts to impose a routinized control onto the world around him at the outset of Cutting Lisa, Hawks tries to reduce the sum of his responsibilities to just himself and the upkeep of the cabin: “I climbed down, put away the ladder, and collected a load of wood from the pile I’d chopped earlier. I went into the house and dropped the fuel by the stove, then went back outside and secured the tarp over the stacked logs beside the house before taking in another lading of wood” (13). Once his chores are completed, though, he finds himself “thinking . . . about that little woman Louise out there someplace in the cold without proper gear.” He almost immediately severs any emotional response he might have to this mental image, though, in the process absolving himself of any possible ethical entanglement: “It was her business though. I didn’t care who froze to death from their own witlessness or considered deliberation” (13). The first few pages of the novel make it clear that Hawks does not allow himself to feel any potentially unsettling emotions, whether they pertain to his personal life, his familial history, or his work as a hydrologist. The wholly utilitarian language he uses to describe his life at the cabin becomes the verbal manifestation of this unencumbered personal utopia, echoing David Larson’s willful self-deception that everything “runs smoothly” now that he has “a routine” at the end of Walk Me to the Distance.

The reassurance that routine provides is satirically undermined not just by the tonal juxtaposition with Hawks’s more knowing narrative voice but also by the novel’s underlying formal multiplicity. Hawks insists that he has attempted to keep his unique brand of geological expertise—documentary
fragments of which are interspersed throughout the narrative in quintessentially Menippean form, along with excerpts from historical accounts, treaties, and other seemingly nonfictional texts—free from any ethical entanglements: “I had done so much to remove all things political from my life. Even in my work as a hydrologist I seldom involved myself in the use of my findings for any kind of agenda promotion; rather, I saw myself as a hired gun.” Moreover he reveals that he has attempted to include racial issues within this neutrality: “I didn’t talk about politics, didn’t respond to talk about politics, didn’t care about what I read in the papers, and didn’t feel any guilt about my lack of participation in those issues of social importance. I did not know or associate with many black people. . . . I didn’t need Christianity to dismiss people and I didn’t need them to be white” (152). Just as Hawks flees to the cabin to escape admitting to Karen not only that he does not love her but also that he has actually come to loathe her, he retreats to the emotional safety of largely unexamined beliefs regarding his own impartiality. These positions become increasingly untenable as Everett satirically degenerates their constituent premises; as the solitude of his cabin is increasingly breached by visitors both friendly and hostile, his emotional isolationism is revealed as unsustainable self-deception.

When his hydrological knowledge helps uncover evidence of a lethal conspiracy against the Plata, Hawks is forced to question the putative nonalignment of his work. The increasingly frequent and intrusive presence of FBI agents—particularly a special agent named Gladys Davies, whose interest in him seems equal parts prurient and professional—pushes Hawks further into a “new, if accidental involvement with the American Indian Revolution” (153). This association intensifies to the point that he voluntarily sides with the Plata during an armed standoff against the FBI, further opening the door to Everett’s subversion of the isolationist philosophy by which Hawks has been living: “If apathy and noncommitment are self-protective stances, so is distancing oneself from the issue of race. . . . The first step in that evolution [from apathy to commitment] for many of Everett’s characters is to acknowledge (or discover) the real effect fictions of race play in their lives” (M. Johnson, *Hoo-Doo* 193).

Hawks comes to realize that he is driven primarily by “a longstanding [sic], unanswered, personal quest to understand my grandfather” (Everett, *Watershed* 153). Acceptance of such a quest requires Hawks to acknowledge the truth of the claims of racialized injustice made by his grandfather and by the Plata, whose water is being both stolen and poisoned: “Understanding the struggle led by Louise Yellow Calf and Hiram Kills Enemy is, for Robert Hawks, understanding that his father and grandfather had been fighting for rights that were claimed and denied all the time” (Clary 171).
The narrative begins to draw more explicit parallels between the racism that Hawks’s grandfather faced and the situation of the Plata; this occurs at roughly the same time that Hawks uncovers evidence that agents of the federal government have been diverting the flow of Dog Creek, the water of which is necessary to the tribe’s survival and legally theirs by treaty. He recalls an episode from his childhood in which his grandfather “risked everything, his life, his career, and his family to keep ‘blacker than black’ Bunchy Cooke from frying in the chair in the Peach State,” an act for which he is hailed as a hero by the black community. However, it also resulted in his disbarment for a legal technicality, presumably in retribution for challenging the racist order of things. Young Robert does not understand his grandfather’s resulting sadness and hopes only that “things are going to work out . . . [because] all this means is that Grandfather will have more time to fish, right?” (157–58). His language echoes Hawks’s attempt to avoid a necessary confrontation with Karen by invoking his love of fishing; the salient difference, of course, is that the child’s hopeful invocation of fishing stems from naïveté, whereas the adult’s is a conscious side-stepping of unpleasant reality.

Immediately after this flashback to Hawks’s childhood, the narrative shifts to what appear to be fragments from early eighteenth-century legal codes. These excerpts from a series of four decrees cluster various nonwhite peoples together in ways that testify to their fundamental lack of freedom:

1706—All and every Negro, Indian, mulatto, or mestee bastard child who shall be born of any Negro, Indian, mulatto, or mestee, shall follow the state and Condition of the Mother and be esteemed a slave.

1712—Any Negro or Indian slave, or any other slave can be baptized but is not free.

1712—No Negro, Indian, or mulatto hereafter made free shall enjoy any houses, lands, tenements within the colony.

1740—All Negroes, Indians, mulattoes, or mestizoes and all their issue are absolute slaves, and shall follow the condition of the mother. (158)

These two scenes are narratively part of Hawks’s stream of consciousness, but they are also—and more importantly—part of his stream of conscience. When the narrative switches back to his involvement in the “business with the FBI and AIR,” Hawks’s decision to grab his “reports on the Plata Mountain drainage”—that is, the evidence of illegal actions by the government—and “my grandfather’s shotgun” on his way out the door speaks to both his new commitment to taking sides and his realization of the broader historical context of his choice. He notes that he “didn’t know what the Indians were planning and how I would fit in, but it was clear that somehow I would” (158–59). Although
he is not yet fully comfortable with this situation, he no longer feels the need to challenge its fundamental truth.

The incontrovertible “proof of bad shit” (199) that Hawks risks his life to carry to Denver at the end of the novel forces him to abandon his withdrawn individualism at least temporarily and associate himself more meaningfully and more personally with the targets—literal ones, in the case of the deadly shootout that both opens and closes the novel—of the predominantly white-associated power of the present-day version of the frontier. As Krauth observed, the novel’s resolution

folds together . . . the practical need for political action in the present with the mythic sense of heroic individualism enshrined in the past—the past of the Western. . . . Robert Hawks . . . has crossed a personal watershed from self-protective apathy to dangerous commitment. He has learned to act on behalf of others—as well as for truth. He does not face anybody in a shootout . . . nor does he ride off into the sunset, having set things straight—having, as the Old Western stages it, achieved some justice beyond the law . . . . His heroism [instead] becomes a matter of moral resolve. (325)

This “moral resolve” specifically involves a fuller acknowledgment of his personal past and the way that past interrelates with that of the same people—the Plata—toward whom he initially intended to maintain a dispassionate attitude, as first illustrated by his claim not to care about Louise’s fate in the cold weather. The uncomplicatedly “relaxing” narrative that envelops his cabin at the novel’s beginning has now been revealed as another soothing myth associated with the West that cannot and should not be maintained, lest one tacitly support what are essentially genocidal acts of treachery.

A character abandoning his logically flawed moral apathy to form a sympathetic and mutually protective community among the endangered is the overarching plot structure of Wounded as well. John Hunt features almost every trait that recurs in the pantheon of narrator-protagonists who populate Everett’s realistic fiction of the West. In fact, although they arrive in rural Wyoming on very different trajectories, the basic parameters of Hunt’s life in Highland are those that one might extrapolate for David Larson after a few decades of living in Slut’s Hole. A horse trainer by profession, Hunt is equally comfortable reading a book or welding a tractor blade. He peppers nearly all of his conversations with a sardonic humor that stops just short of misanthropy; he has been carrying for many years a psychological wound resulting from the untimely death of his wife; and he shares his author’s preference for the companionship of animals over that of humans—with the exception of his elderly uncle Gus and his flirtatious neighbor Morgan. As Marie-Agnès Gay observed, the way
Hunt tells his story reveals his inner state at the novel’s beginning: “The narrator’s description of life on the ranch teems with detailed descriptions [that] make use of a precise, discriminating and sometimes technical vocabulary. Language comes easy and straight when John Hunt evokes the reassuring routine of material life. However, his well-ordered everyday life with his Uncle Gus is put to the test by a series of crises” (Gay 2). Some of these “crises” are positive, such as Morgan’s ultimately successful romantic pursuit of him; others are unmistakably negative, such as the murder of a gay college student named Jerry Tuttle and the subsequent suicide of Hunt’s ranch hand Wallace Castlebury, the prime suspect in Tuttle’s murder. All of these plot developments, though, push both Hunt and his narrative language “out of safe boundaries and familiar territory” (Gay 2).

Like the notable distinctions between the utterances by narrator Hawks and by character Hawks in Watershed, the linguistic contrast that Gay notes becomes an example of Menippean tonal multiplicity by calling attention to Hunt’s tendency to shape reality to conform to his relatively simple but inflexible emotional needs. Hunt is also like Hawks in presenting himself as a man aloof toward both demographics and history. His love for the ranch country of Wyoming is unmistakable, but it is framed in mostly geographical terms: “It was dramatic land, dry, remote, wild. It was why I loved the West. I had no affection necessarily for the history of the people and certainly none for the mythic West, the West that never existed. It was the land for me. And maybe what the land did to some who lived on it” (45). This panegyric to the landscape immediately precedes a scene in which Hunt discovers a pair of baby coyotes who, unlike their mother, have survived an unjustifiably cruel act of human violence: “I knew what had happened. Someone had poured fuel down into the animal’s den and tossed in a match. . . . I felt sick. I was confused, near tears, angry. No one was keeping sheep there, so the lame excuse of protecting stock didn’t even make sense” (45). One of the pups survives and is adopted by Hunt and his uncle after being nursed back to health—albeit after having part of a leg amputated. This speaks to Hunt’s capacity for compassion in certain circumstances, but the sickening feeling he has while observing the burnt coyotes’ den exacerbates his generalized sense of being “endangered when it comes to human relations in general, and emotional involvement in particular” (Gay 4).

As Michael Johnson observed, Hunt’s love for the land and its potential to affect people echo the “idea that the American West is an exceptional place, fundamentally different from the rest of the country” as well as being “one of the oldest and most repeated tropes of western writing.” He went on to note that “it is typical of Everett’s fiction that he repeats and critiques that trope, his characters cynically realistic about western racial relations but also
idealistically hopeful that the West is indeed (or could become) . . . a haven” (M. Johnson, “Looking” 29). As he does in the scene with the burnt coyotes, Everett closely juxtaposes expressions of this cynicism and this optimism to emphasize the tension between them. For example, a gay-pride rally in the aftermath of the student’s murder brings a large group of outsiders to Highland, including David, the gay son of one of Hunt’s friends from college, and David’s boyfriend Robert. Hunt and the two young men go out to lunch, during which the Vermont-raised, Illinois-educated Robert asks Hunt if he has ever encountered any racial “problems” in this rural Wyoming town. Hunt’s answer contains both of the impulses Johnson mentioned: “Of course I have, son. This is America. I’ve run into bigotry here. Of course, the only place anybody ever called me nigger to my face was in Cambridge, Mass. . . . There are plenty of stupid, narrow-minded people around. They’re not hard to find. There are a lot of ignorant people, a lot of good, smart people. Is it different where you come from?” (52).

Hunt notes that by saying this to Robert, he “felt a little like a bully and didn’t like it” (52); he attributes these feelings to being put on the defensive by Robert’s presumptions about Wyoming’s cultural backwardness. On a deeper level, though, his emotional response is consistent with the cognitive dissonance arising from a desire to “repair or preserve the exceptional places that they simultaneously doubt can exist” (M. Johnson, “Looking” 29), a trait that Johnson has attributed to many of Everett’s characters. After all, Hunt has already been defensive about the “implication, if not outright accusation” in the “Eastern papers” that Tuttle’s murder is “symptomatic of some rural or Western disease of intolerance.” As he does later in the diner with David and Robert, Hunt claims that such intolerance is a wholly national trait and wonders pointedly “why the reported rash of fifty rapes in Central Park was not considered a similar indicator of regional moral breakdown” (34). The simplest answer is that there is no comparable mythology extolling “what the land did to some who lived on it” that is pertinent to New York or Cambridge.

Everett weaves this basic conundrum into the entire novel. Testifying to the prospects of repair and preservation, Hunt’s ranch becomes a warm, nurturing home not only for him and his uncle but also for the rescued coyote, for Morgan, and for David; much as he does in Suder and Walk Me to the Distance, Everett creates an unconventional yet basically functional family structure that transcends biology and conventional social bonds. The doubts about the exceptionality of the place, however, are reinforced when Hunt is called “nigger” to his face by white neo-Nazis right there in his hometown (200) and also when Hunt overhears his friend Duncan making bigoted comments about David’s sexuality. Although he claims to be neither “disappointed” nor “surprised”
(188) by Duncan’s comments, the lack of compassion they evince is magnified by having been uttered during a manhunt for David, who has gone missing and for whose safety Hunt rightly fears. These incidents complicate Hunt’s assertion that where he lives is no worse than anywhere else in the country, and they also redirect back onto Wyoming his efforts to subvert the moral superiority of other, more presumably liberal parts of the country. Everett gently but unmistakably satirizes Hunt as an unrequited lover of the West; he is willing and able to overlook and to excuse its unsavory aspects, but the favor is never fully returned.

The novel’s violent resolution is reminiscent of Patrick’s hanging in Walk Me to the Distance, both in its brutal interpretation of what constitutes justice and in the unsatisfying justifications offered for such brutality as an inevitable part of life on the frontier. Hunt’s uncle Gus is dying of cancer and frustrated by a lifetime of miscarried justice, especially the eleven-year prison sentence he served for “kill[ing] the [white] man who was raping his wife” (9). Near the book’s conclusion, Gus apparently executes the three neo-Nazis with whom Hunt has had multiple run-ins; he kills them in retaliation for their numerous hate crimes, the last of which is kidnapping David and beating him to near-death. Importantly, he shoots the first one immediately after being racially slurred by him:

Gus entered the cabin.

“Fuck me,” the redhead said. “What is this? Nigger heaven?”

What happened next was and still is a blur. I recall a flash and a loud pop and the red beard expanding and breaking, the chair falling over, the weasel sliding across the floor to the wall and Gus, standing there with a .45 in his hand.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck,” the remaining tied-up man kept saying.

As Hunt begins to process what has happened, he bluntly states the obvious: “You killed him”; and Gus replies equally matter-of-factly: “It would seem so.” When he follows that up by saying, “I’ve got two left,” Hunt observes, “At first I thought he was talking about bullets, but then I realized he meant them. Gus’s face was tired, hard” (202).

Although Gus’s lack of emotion might initially imply his acceptance of righteous violence in a normative manner comparable to that of the preacher in Walk Me to the Distance, Gus—who moved to Wyoming only after the death of Hawks’s wife—is not acting in order to protect any existing idealized notion of “his” West. After Hunt discovers David unconscious and bleeding heavily but still alive, he returns to the cabin to get Gus so that all three of them can go to the hospital together. Gus makes it clear, though, that he intends to finish
evening the score, not just for David’s wounding but also for the injustices he has suffered in his life, which are as responsible as his cancer for the tiredness and hardness in his face at that moment: “Gus gave me a hard look and I felt the differences in our years and experiences. He put his hand on my shoulder and said, ‘Take David to the hospital. Tell the cops you found David anywhere but here or near here’” (204). Hunt’s reference to “[feeling] the differences in our years and experiences” marks the return in _Wounded_ of the Freudian _unheimlich_ that Michael K. Johnson perceived at the core of Everett’s Westerns: “The central dramatic event, or the catalyst for that event, involves a moment when the homely becomes unhomely, when the familiar becomes strange, and that uncanny experience usually precedes a moment when the racialized identity that the protagonist has left behind, transcended, repressed, or that has simply become only one part of the protagonist’s sense of self, returns to centrality. Concurrently, the American West that has become home for so many of Everett’s characters becomes instead an unhomely place” (“Looking” 35). Hunt professes not to understand Gus’s words, which suggests that he has not yet fully processed the “differences” that are driving Gus’s actions. However, after David succumbs to his injuries at the hospital, the truth of the situation has dawned on Hunt enough for him to tell Morgan, “Gus killed a man today. I think he’s up there killing all of them.” He adds a telling narrative comment to this piece of dialogue that completes the circle of Everett’s satirical critique of Hunt’s previous mind-set and attendant narration: “I found it odd how easily those words came from my mouth” (206). These words do not remain “safe” or “familiar” (Gay 2) within the ethical confines of Hunt’s erstwhile mythology of place; if justifications of violence are now coming “easily” to him, it is because he has learned a brutal lesson through David’s death that forces him into a recognition of solidarity with the excluded that is akin to Hawks’s political kinship with the Plata at the end of _Watershed_. Both men come to recognize that they have both figurative and literal “skin in the game” in ways they formerly tried to discount.

_Wounded_ ends with Gus being brought back to Hunt’s ranch by Elvis Monday, a resident of the local Indian reservation who too has been personally targeted by the neo-Nazis. When Hunt asks Gus what has happened, he says only, “Talking is over,” and Monday ruefully explains to Hunt that “this is the frontier, cowboy. . . . Everyplace is the frontier” (207). Both of these comments importantly differ from the exculpatory sermon David Larson hears in _Walk Me to the Distance_ because they come not from a (tacit) beneficiary of the frontier myth such as the preacher—or Curt Marder, or George Armstrong Custer, or Rhino Tanner—but rather from characters who have personally and collectively suffered because of it. Monday’s lack of distinction between the
local and the universal conveys a moral flattening similar to Hunt’s earlier comments to Robert; if “this” is the frontier as much as “everyplace” is, then exceptionalism is no longer a viable perspective. However, if Monday’s utterance is taken as a commentary on the ubiquity of violence claiming to be justice, then it contains none of the tempered optimism of Hunt’s earlier attempt to balance “ignorant” and “good, smart” people. In neither case does Monday’s comment allow for the circumvention of reality that Lowe offers to Larson at the end of Walk Me to the Distance. Monday encourages Hunt to “take care of your uncle” (207) but does not offer him absolution based on abstract notions of what the frontier considers moral. The novel simply and ambiguously ends with Hunt “nodd[ing] and stepp[ing] away” (207) in response to Monday’s words, leaving unanswered the “unsettling question [of] whether the neo-Nazis represent a new force threatening to change the West [that Hunt] loves or whether he has been misreading the natural and political landscapes all along” (M. Johnson, Hoo-Doo 211). Both answers to what Johnson posits as an either/or question can be true without any diminution of Everett’s satirical commentary, which is directed not at the actual situation of the American West but rather at the ways in which various forms of its idealization—that is, repression of the unheimlich—are unhelpful, even dangerous, in their willful ignorance.

Unmaking Assumptions

Assumption is perhaps Everett’s most thorough—and most unexpected—disruption of the conjoined mythologies of identity and place that adhere to the West. As the three stories that make up the novel unfold and the reader learns more about their protagonist, deputy sheriff Ogden Walker, it becomes apparent that he is yet another in a series of “central character[s in Everett’s work] whose sense of identity is under some form of stress, if not actually coming apart at the seams” (Stewart, “Talking” 1). This stress is already manifest in the novel’s prologue. While Walker is camping in the desert near Las Cruces, New Mexico, he hears his dead father’s voice berating him in his dreams: “His father spoke to him, a dead voice telling Ogden he was a fool, a fool to love the desert, a fool to have left school, a fool to have joined the army, a fool to have no answers, and a fool to expect answers to questions he was foolish enough to ask. And his father would have called him a fool for working in that hick-full, redneck county” (3). Soon thereafter the narrator elaborates that “Ogden’s father would never have approved of his son’s job with the sheriff’s office. He wouldn’t have said it outright . . . but he would have made it clear that he believed Ogden to somehow be a traitor. A traitor to what would have remained forever unclear, but it would have been tinged with the language of race and social indignation” (13). As with Robert Hawks and John Hunt before
him, Walker’s ancestor provides him with a troubled and contradictory history that centers on his racial identity, coupled with a westward migration that was supposed to mitigate the significance of that identity. His father had “moved to New Mexico from Maryland because there were fewer people and so, necessarily, fewer white people. He hated white people, but not enough to refrain from marrying one” (13).

In many ways Walker is more prepared than Robert Hawks or John Hunt to admit the bigotry that pervades his western home, observing early on that an elderly woman he is assisting “didn’t like him because he was black” and then adding that this “was probably true for half of the white residents of the county” as well (6). In a moment of dark humor reminiscent of the Clayton Bigsby character from Dave Chappelle’s television show, Walker even meets a blind white supremacist who claims to be able to “smell a nigger” (90) but who nevertheless fails to perceive Walker’s race—presumably because he cannot imagine a black cop in rural New Mexico—until Walker sardonically reveals it to him as he walks away from their encounter. Almost all of Everett’s exposition in Assumption attributes characteristics to Walker that are strongly associated with his region, race, and profession. It remains unclear both to Walker and the reader, though, whether he will define himself by opposition or acquiescence to the prejudices he faces from multiple quarters because of these various traits.

From the outset Walker expresses an existential crisis that only worsens as the book progresses: “I just wonder what I’m doing. Am I wasting my time here? I don’t mean in this house. I mean in this town.” When his mother surprisingly agrees that he is wasting his time, she tempers her criticism by adding that his father “would be damn proud” of how Ogden has turned out because “there are not a lot of good men around” (22). In light of the novel’s conclusion, the irony of his mother’s statement not only calls her “reading” of her son into question but more importantly also implicates the manner in which Ogden assuages his own doubts in order to maintain this sense of “good[ness].” Everett varies his narrative technique both within the novel and in comparison with Watershed in order to highlight the flaws in Walker’s thought process: “The tripartite structure of the novel is important here because the first two sections can be read as more traditional counterstories, and the last as a radical counter-counterstory. Thus, while the novel is unified in a loose sense, the three distinctive stories offer a diversity of critical approaches to dominant ways of narrativizing race” (Mullins 467).

Taking his cue from Richard Delgado’s identification of “counterstories” as “a cure for the cultural and legal ills that perpetuate discrimination based on race,” Matthew Mullins argued that Everett goes one step further:
Rather than offering a triumphant story that runs counter to predominant preconceptions or that defamiliarizes narrative conventions by making a hero out of a black sheriff in the white-dominated American West, *Assumption* builds such a counterstory only to have it collapse under the weight of Ogden Walker’s guilt. . . . The question that naturally arises from such a reading is why would he undercut the counterstory? Or, in terms of the story itself: why would Everett make his black hero into a murderer? The answer to both of these questions, I argue, is that to imagine *Assumption* as a counterstory would be to acknowledge that the story is, in fact, counter, which would necessarily imply that it is counter to something, reifying its position as somehow secondary or at least reactionary. (459–60)

Mullins’s reading of the novel aligns not only with Everett’s comments about “toying with the [reader’s] assumptions” (“Author Percival” 188) but also more specifically with Weisenburger’s assertion that degenerative satire “reflect[s] suspiciously on all ways of making meaning, including its own” (*Fables* 3). *Assumption* is not simply targeting Walker for satirical negation as with Rhino Tanner or Curt Marder, nor is it allowing for the projection of a reawakened consciousness into the book’s aftermath as in *Watershed* and *Wounded*. The ending of *Assumption* overthrows the expectations of a reader expecting either a conventional narrative or its Horatian or Juvenalian satirical counternarrative. Everett leaves the reader only with an oxymoronic resolution of Walker’s existential crisis in which “nothing makes sense and that’s the only way that any of it can make any sense” (*Assumption* 225). Without naming it as such, Mullins identified the Menippean and degenerative quality of *Assumption*’s satire by noting that “Everett leaves dominant narratives behind and forges an alternative reality that is not beholden to self-definition by way of opposition or negation” (467). The inherent and unresolvable paradoxicality of the “alternative reality” Everett produces in this manner implicitly warns the reader against adopting it, in turn, as a prescriptive reality—that is, a new set of assumptions—in its own right.

As is the case with many of Everett’s other protagonists, Walker’s preferred method of processing his anxieties is to withdraw from the world into the soothing reassurance of solitary habits. Although Walker is less brazenly assertive about the effectiveness of his form of “retreat” than Hawks is, he nevertheless insists that “the world below seven thousand feet meant nothing to him” (71). Like Hawks, he frequently expresses a desire to isolate himself whenever the stress of his job becomes overwhelming, trying to use the routine tasks associated with his bachelor’s home and with fly-fishing as a means of escape. His friend and fellow policeman Warren Fragua reinforces his belief in
the self-protective nature of such forms of withdrawal from the world: “You’ve been watching television again. I told you, just tie flies every night and your mind won’t get polluted” (51). The narration initially suggests that the resistance to his attempts at imposing order arises from his subconscious and is the result of repressing, rather than confronting, his self-doubts. His strategy also appears to become increasingly less effective in staving off the identity crisis that Stewart has perceived as imminent.

Walker is quite adept at sublimating any anxieties that result from either his profession or his race. When Walker goes to a diner for breakfast and a cup of coffee early in the novel, the narrator notes that he is served by a woman who “didn’t much like the idea of policemen,” a sentiment with which Walker seems to agree in the abstract, if not the immediate circumstances: “He understood. He didn’t much like cops either, though he did want to like himself.” When he tells her, “It’s okay to dislike the uniform. . . . Under it I’m just like you,” the narrative reveals that both he and the woman “realized that he had just uttered a blatant untruth” (15–16), though neither of them acknowledges that fact aloud. Walker’s desire to “like himself” is particularly understandable in light of the town’s widespread racism and the unsettling implication of suicide that closes the prologue: “He thought about the desert around him, thought about water and no water, the death that came with too much water. . . . To drown in the desert, that was the way to die. . . . Ogden closed his eyes and thanked the desert wind that it was all over” (4). This passage appears immediately after the dream in which his father calls him a fool and not long after his observation that the “desert that he and his father had shared was not like this one” (3), giving the reader a seemingly compelling explanation for Walker’s willful repression of the “blatant untruth” underlying his assertion of solidarity with the woman at the diner and, by extension, with the entire community.

Everett develops this sense of repression further through the narrative exposition. For example, immediately after his mother’s assertion that his dead father would approve of him as a “good man,” Walker goes into “his father’s tying room, where the man had made trout flies for the last twenty years of his life” and sits down to “make something easy”; this is a passage suffused with the highly specialized vocabulary of fly-fishing: “number 12 down-eye hook . . . zug bugs . . . nymph skipping the bottom of a riffle . . . peacock herl” (22). The simultaneously meditative and somewhat obsessive tone of this passage is offset by the dream that follows immediately thereafter, in which Walker attempts to lure “ten cutthroat trout,” not with the “easy” tackle he was depicted tying in the previous paragraph, but with “the largest stonefly nymph he had ever seen at the end of [a] crazily long tippet.” Despite casting his fly “perfectly,” the trout—whose colloquial species name provides both ominous
foreshadowing and local color to the story—“ignore it, almost with disdain” (23). Even though he insists to Fragua that he is perfectly happy to “fish and not worry about what we catch” (63), this dream passage’s placement links it not only with his earlier self-questioning but also with his father’s accusation of foolishness in the dream sequence from the novel’s prologue. The association of these various scenes reinforces Walker’s profound sense of doubt, whether about his profession, his father’s approval, or even just the therapeutic value of his chosen hobby.

In a scene that strongly echoes Hawks’s arrival at his cabin in the opening sections of Watershed, Everett plays out a more subjectively focalized version of the earlier fly-tying episode: “Ogden walked into his home and looked at his walls and furniture and unwashed dishes in the sink and breathed easier. He peeled off his hat and coat, went to the gas heater, and turned it on high. He took off his shoes and slipped into the moose-hide moccasins his mother had given him last Christmas. He then turned his attention to the collection of feathers and patches of deer and calf hair and spools of thread on his desk. He sat behind his vise and secured a size 10 hook, imagined a trout on the Chama rising for the Green Drake he was about to tie.” This time, though, Walker does not have to fall asleep before thoughts related to his father and his own working life intrude into his routine. Initially he recalls being ten years old and “ask[ing] his father to teach him to tie,” but this quickly develops into something far more complex than a halcyon memory of childhood: “As he dubbed a mixture of yellow rabbit and tan-red fox-fur onto the olive thread he recalled his father. He no longer felt sad when he thought of him. In fact, thinking of him helped Ogden relax. They had been close, for some reason not having the conflicts his friends had had with their fathers. He wondered if his present profession would have caused a problem between them. . . . He wondered because he himself had a problem with it” (49). Walker’s unspoken, but seemingly conscious, thoughts concerning his father’s theoretical disapproval may strike the reader as odd, given that the book has already depicted expressions of that disapproval on at least two previous occasions—in the prologue and in the blunt accusation that Walker is a race traitor that occurs only a few pages into the first story. However, each of the previous mentions—such as the disdainful trout refusing the amazing lure—is associated with Walker’s dreams, and the narrative is generally forcing him further away from the improvised (and relative) comfort of such subconscious means of deflecting the recognition that “he felt out of touch with his time, didn’t feel like people his age” (49).

The image of Walker’s father accusing his son of being a “fool” and a “traitor” is almost impossible to reconcile with the assertion that “thinking of him helped Ogden relax.” Everett uses this cognitive dissonance to suggest that
the protective dissociation that Walker has used to displace his father’s anger into the manageable realm of the subconscious is falling apart; by the end of the novel, this collapse will extend to the illusion that Walker is the “good man” that his mother believes he is. Everett’s Menippean brand of satire does not simply invert his putative goodness, though, with some innate iniquity that can be easily censured; instead, as he has done in each of the earlier books discussed in this chapter, Everett indicts not only the personal mythology that allows Walker to maintain his comforting fiction of himself but also, and more extensively, the various diseased cultural narratives that mandated his acts of self-protective imposture in the first place. In a novel riddled with impostors, Walker is accused neither of being unique in his ignominy nor of being the *primum movens* of a fallen world.

Everett reuses a number of proper names from his past fiction in *Assumption*, thereby implying a degree of ontological consistency across his works that turns out to be one of the potential readerly assumptions that he undermines by the end of the book. Weixlmann has claimed that the small town and county of Plata in the rugged hills of New Mexico where most of *Assumption* takes place have also been the setting for several of the stories that appear in Everett’s short-story collections as well as in the short novel *The Body of Martin Aguilera* (Review of *Assumption* 511). Moreover, significant portions of the first section of *Assumption* closely parallel a story entitled “Warm and Nicely Buried,” which Everett previously published in 2001 and included in his collection *damned if i do*. Although Everett makes only passing reference to Plata’s name in *The Body of Martin Aguilera* and “Warm and Nicely Buried,” Weixlmann was not unreasonable in presuming a shared setting based on the presence of distinctive character names—for example, Warren Fragua, Fonda’s Funeral Home—and plot devices.

With almost any other writer these details would certainly suffice to suggest a stable, Yoknapatawpha-like fictional geography to which that writer might return over the space of several decades. One should bear in mind, however, that Everett uses nearly all of his next novel, *Percival Everett by Virgil Russell*, to close the “gap between text and world, fiction and reality, content and form” by making it impossible to discern whether the name “Percival Everett” refers to himself, his father, the author, the narrator, the subject, and/or someone else within that novel (Huehls 299). Everett’s repurposing of names and scenarios from his past works is part of a deliberate muddling of attempts to infer a unified, stable, and “Western” world that might provide prescriptive interpretations for readers. For example, whereas the Warren Fragua who appears in “Warm and Nicely Buried” is almost identical to his namesake in *Assumption*, the character who “went to the kitchen, poured himself a tall glass of orange
juice, then returned to sit behind the vise clamped to his desktop . . . [,] secured a size 10 hook and imagined a trout on the Henry’s Fork River in Idaho rising for the Green Drake he was about to tie” (damned 109; compare Assumption 49, quoted above) in the earlier story is named Lem Becker and demonstrates none of the race-consciousness that marks Walker in Assumption. Similarly, a character with the same name and prejudices as Emma Bickers, the old woman whose violent death at the start of Assumption sets the book’s plot in motion, appears in Everett’s 1998 story “Alluvial Deposits,” which was also collected in damned if i do. As is the case in Assumption, Emma Bickers has an encounter at her front door with an African American authority figure that features both passive-aggressive bigotry and gunshots, but unlike the scene in the novel, she lives in Utah, the man she interacts with happens to be a black hydrologist from Colorado named Robert Hawks, and their encounter does not end with her death. It is unlikely that Everett intends these mirror scenes to be interpreted as staggering coincidences—that is, that Fragua has had almost exactly the same conversations with two entirely different people, or that a single person named Emma Bickers had similar interactions in two small towns hundreds of miles apart with a pair of characters noteworthy for an idiosyncratic set of characteristics. Therefore these slightly skewed recurrences become yet another formal multiplicity reminiscent of his concatenated narrators and nominal doppelgängers. The familiarity of the “geographical terrain . . . to Everett devotees” (Weixlmann, Review of Assumption 511) becomes a highly self-referential part of Everett’s strategy of playful misdirection, designed to lure the reader further into a productively satirical misreading based on the assumptions that reader brings to the table.

Whatever his motivations, in specifying the place where Assumption is set, Everett inarguably chose to reuse the same signifier that named the tribe and reservation in Watershed. Most frequently translated into English as “silver,” the Spanish name Plata takes on potential ironic connotations in Assumption that are not apparent in Watershed or in any of his other earlier stories using a setting with that name. Silver’s relatively modest value as a precious metal corresponds to Plata’s status within the West; it certainly cannot sustain the “golden” dreams of mythic California. Plata’s name also ironically alludes to the thirty pieces of silver that Judas received when Walker bemoans about the petty monetary motives (see below) that he unconvincingly posits as an explanation for the town’s sudden outbreak of violence. In addition Plata’s prevailing benightedness is never given much of a “silver lining” in Assumption, except to the extent that it usually allows Walker to achieve his oft-stated desire “only to do his job” (49). This generally entails very little, as implied by the wholly unserious initial description of his boss: “Sheriff Bucky Paz was a big man with
a belly round enough that the general belief was that his suspenders not only held up his trousers but kept him from exploding. He didn’t carry a side arm because he figured he was wide enough without one” (13–14). Everett may also have had another, more colloquial usage of plata in mind. The phrase hablar en plata literally means “to speak in silver” but figuratively refers to speaking plainly or directly, something which few characters in Plata other than Warren Fragua actually do on a regular basis. Thus, hablar en Plata, New Mexico involves precisely the opposite of what this colloquial phrase normally suggests, an ironic reversal that serves Everett’s satirical ends well, given the misleading appearances that both Walker and the novel try initially to maintain.

Walker’s depiction at the start of the book “position[s] him squarely in the tradition of classic lawmen of the American West.” At the same time his complicated performance of “heroism and integrity” (Mullins 457) in fulfilling his duties as deputy sheriff of Plata County makes Walker reminiscent of such earnest and somewhat naive law enforcers as Marge Gunderson, the police chief of Brainerd, Minnesota, in Joel and Ethan Coen’s film Fargo (1996), or Ed Tom Bell, the sheriff of Terrell County, Texas, in Cormac McCarthy’s novel No Country for Old Men (2005), which was adapted into a film by the Coens in 2007. When confronted with criminal acts of extreme violence that occur in their sleepy and superficially benign communities, all three of these characters are understandably staggered; the narrator of Assumption communicates the overwhelming nature of the situation in a deadpan tone, stating that the “accumulation of so many dead people was unusual for the Plata Sheriff’s Department, and the only place to put them was the same place a single body would have been put, Fonda’s Funeral Home” (51). Whereas Gunderson rises to the occasion and apprehends her perpetrator in the act of stuffing his partner’s corpse into a wood chipper, Bell walks away from his duties dejected and disillusioned after being unable to collar the brutal hit man Anton Chigurh. As Joe Weixlmann noted, Assumption finds Everett “working both with and against the crime/mystery tradition as he interrogates assumptions we tend to hold about life’s basic issues. More fundamentally, the book focuses attention on personality and process as it critiques elements within our society” (Review of Assumption 512).

In the opening story, “A Difficult Likeness,” Walker is confronted with the mysterious murder of a cranky, bigoted elderly woman named Emma Bickers, who is introduced while Walker is investigating an incident in which she fired a gun through the closed front door of her house at what she believed was an intruder. Only moments after leaving, Walker returns to her house because of a “bad feeling about something,” having initially written this sensation off either as her “acting strange simply because she was strange, [or] because she
had never liked Ogden’s skin color, though she had never said as much. But he knew” (9). Upon reentering her house, he discovers not only the dead body of Mrs. Bickers but also the corpse of her cat. The senselessness of the killing leads Walker’s mother to ask him, “How could such a thing happen? . . . Why?” Walker’s reply is simply, “It’s a cruel world out there” (20), a clichéd response with limited explanatory power, to say the least.

Walker’s impression that Plata is a haven removed from everything that happens “below seven thousand feet” is revealed as a willful delusion as he and his law-enforcement colleagues get more deeply enmeshed in this crime, the parameters of which begin to sprawl far beyond Plata’s boundaries. Walker openly questions his motivations for so ardently investigating the death of a woman in whom he “had had little interest . . . when she’d been alive.” He furthermore observes that he “was amused at how much her death was affecting him. Perhaps it was as simple as a mystery to pass the time in a boring, sleepy village. Maybe it was some kind of sublimation for a stalled life, a life he was not pursuing. Or perhaps he just wanted to catch and stop a killer” (40). The lack of clarity in his purpose mirrors the lack of clarity Walker feels as his investigation uncovers the story’s various intertwined threads but cannot weave them together into the usual denouement of a police procedural: “Ogden started the drive back home. He knew more than enough to be sure that he knew nothing. A feeling that was becoming sadly familiar. He imagined that Emma Bickers was a part of the hate group the FBI agents had talked about. She’d always been unpleasant enough, but still he couldn’t believe it. He had no idea what to make of the numbers. He had learned little from talking to Robbins. . . . Perhaps the holes in the meadow up in Niebla Canyon made some sense” (92).

After a shootout at the end of the story, Walker swiftly apprehends some of the criminals, including a woman (falsely) claiming to be Emma Bickers’s daughter, a corrupt FBI agent, and members of a white supremacist group called The Great White Hope (76). Far from being the rational and reassuring denouement of the conventional detective story, though, this resolution seems more an accident than a validation of either Walker’s moral code as a lawman or his skills as an investigator. The fact that a racist hate group is involved in the crime proves to be another red herring, given that Walker’s status as “the only black man in a five-hundred mile radius” (78) hardly makes him a force analogous to the boxer Jack Johnson—as the Great White Hope’s name implies. Bigotry is omnipresent here, but it is also wholly tangential; it affects Walker’s life, but not in ways that ultimately signify greatly. As Claude Julien noted, though, the fundamental closure of detective fiction is still achieved: “In the end, the hick town sheriff . . . puts things right and a traitorous FBI agent is dispatched.
The reader feels snugly at home in a world that runs according to conventions. Good prevails over evil. . . . Life can go back to normal” (“Assumption” 3). The story’s title suggests that although Walker may only be a “difficult likeness” of a competent detective, he has been good enough in this instance—provided that one disregards Everett’s implicit warnings about reading with the same trust in superficial appearances of reality that gets Walker into trouble.

The next two stories further unravel this already imperfect satisfaction of readerly expectation, simultaneously subverting the formulaic moralism of the detective-fiction genre and any sense of societal innocence that might be attributed either to the outwardly placid realm of Plata County or to the nation as a whole. Clément-Alexandre Ulff noted that Assumption repeatedly uses the “motif of relatives, their mysterious disappearance, and the sudden appearance of people pretending to be those missing relatives, thus faking their identities,” which allows Everett to question “the authenticity and resilience of ties in an American society whose ravaged Dream seems a distant utopia: gun violence, prostitution, hard-drugs and con-men seem to drag the reader of Assumption into a whirlwind of desolation” (4). As a novel composed of three crime stories that are linked by a common setting and some common characters, Everett sets up a reasonable expectation that there will be some narrative “ties” among these stories as well. Such expectations are dashed in the opening pages of the second story, “My American Cousin,” in which there is no clarifying commentary on the ragged ending of the previous story, despite the passage of six months’ time. As Walker becomes embroiled in another mystery—this one involving a woman named Caitlin Alison, who arrives in Plata searching for her missing cousin Fiona McDonough—there is little reason to believe that either he or his somewhat bumbling comrades in the sheriff’s department are better prepared to handle it. If, like Marge Gunderson, he somewhat accidentally succeeds in the first story, then he resembles Ed Tom Bell more in the second one. By the third story, suggestively titled “The Shift,” Walker has unexpectedly transformed into something entirely outside the usual interpretive framework of a lawman.

The title of the second story is a multilayered play on signification that indicates Everett’s degenerative satirical intentions. On the surface it refers to the double imposture at the story’s center; neither Caitlin Alison nor the cousin she is looking for turns out to be who Walker gullibly believes them to be. It also puns on the title of the farcical drawing-room comedy Our American Cousin, a performance of which Abraham Lincoln was attending when he was assassinated on April 14, 1865. Everett is borrowing the inherent tonal multiplicity of that historical event to frame his story, blending moments of comic mockery with deeply disturbing scenes of deception, violence, and criminality. In the early stages of the story, Walker’s assistance to the putative Caitlin in her
efforts to locate her missing cousin is reminiscent of the courteous small-town police work depicted on *The Andy Griffith Show* and gives Everett a chance to mock Plata’s lack of sophistication gently: “The billboard was a giant hand-painted portrait of Manny with microwave ovens for eyes and a deep freeze for a mouth. Blinky had painted the sign himself and along with it the mural on the side of the store. The mural depicted refrigerators dressed like Indians dancing around a huge, glowing red convection oven. The scene was modeled after the local corn dance and most people were offended by it, but Blinky, being Native, claimed that every detail was accurate, except for the fact that the dancers were appliances” (107). When this relatively benign story devolves into another web of lies involving hookers (both dead and alive), drug deals, and kidnappings, it only heightens the contrast to the litany of trifling jokes about shooting noisy peacocks and Sheriff Bucky Paz’s eating habits.

Walker travels to Denver and Dallas while chasing down vague leads, making him feel even more out of his depth than in the first story. He questions both his professional competence and his personal motivations: “Ogden was striking out. He’d only learned what he already knew. To make matters worse, the longer he drove around Denver asking his stupid questions, the less he knew what he was doing. . . . Did he really expect to solve the murder of the woman in the cabin? . . . Or was it some ego thing, or worse, some macho thing driving him?” (150). The story concludes much as the first one does, with Walker engaging in a firefight that ends with some of the criminals injured and apprehended, but there is even less explanation of the criminals’ motives or methods. Walker ends the story by expressing his puzzlement to his mother:

> “Three lives for twelve thousand dollars. I mean, I just can’t wrap my mind around it. I guess it wasn’t about the money.”
> “What was it about then?”
> “That I don’t know. Power, maybe. You know what, Mom?”
> “What’s that?”
> “People scare me.”
> “They should, son.” (172)

His mother’s final comment becomes the springboard by which Everett completes the transformation of *Assumption* from a seeming morality play about the incompatibility of an honest man and a corrupt world into a Menippean satire of the discourses—literary and cultural—that have encouraged an overly uncritical reader to assume he or she understands Walker: “The novel’s resolution will force you to reread the whole work, scrutinizing Everett’s use of detective novel clichés in order to chart the variations and modulations that alienate the novel’s meaning” (Muyumba).
The final story begins with Walker at a crime scene more appropriate to his initial conception of Plata. He helps Terry Lowell, a local game and fish patrolman, arrest a poacher at a riverside fish hatchery in the New Mexico backcountry. As has been the pattern in the previous stories, this relatively quiet opening quickly changes into something much more sinister. Walker’s failure to maintain custody of a boy who claims to be the poacher’s eleven-year-old son leads him to a meth lab in the scrubby mountains and eventually back to the riverbank where the story began, albeit under radically different circumstances. When Lowell turns up dead, Fragua gradually pieces together evidence that points to Walker not only as Lowell’s killer but also as the prime suspect in the death of several other people connected to the poacher and the boy (falsely) claiming to be his son. A puzzled Fragua confronts Walker at gunpoint on the riverbank at the end of the story: “None of this makes any sense. . . . What in the world are you into? Are you on drugs or something?” (224). Although Walker’s rambling answer certainly does not discount Fragua’s pharmacological suspicion, it does perform a Menippean satirical subversion of the conventional resolutions of crime/detective fiction and also of rational interpretation generally:

Of course it doesn’t make sense. What does make sense, Warren? Nothing in this damn world makes sense. Just look around. I’m out of my fucking mind. I must be. What do you think? Does that have it all make sense for you? I’m an evil man. Live is evil spelled backward or is it the other way around? I’m evil. I suppose that’s what they’ll say. I’m possessed by the devil, lived spelled backwards. Does that make any sense? I wanted some drug money. I’m hooked on meth. Do any of those reasons help this make sense? I was tired of being a good guy. Was I ever a good guy? How about that? Does that have it make sense for you? This is the way it is, Warren, simply the way it fucking is. Sad, sad, sad, sad. Shitty, shitty, bang, bang. Nothing makes sense and that’s the only way that any of it can make any sense. Here I am, the way I am, not making any sense. Blood in the water. Blood on my shirt. (224–25)

Warren is forced to shoot Walker dead, and the story ends without offering any additional clues to either Fragua or the reader to aid in discerning what caused Walker’s titular “shift.”

Anthony Stewart noted that “where Ogden leads us by the end of the novel does not, in fact, solve anything,” thereby completing the disruption of the conventional plot and assuring that “we cannot find out why he did what he did” and must therefore “do our best to try [to understand] within our limitations” (“Talking” 5–6). Much as Thomas Pynchon did via the opaque resolution of
The Crying of Lot 49 (1966), Everett forces his readers to think for themselves by refusing to provide any guidance in that regard. Linking the reader’s desire for understanding with Fragua’s, Everett has allowed them to be led collectively to the riverbank by their assumptions; in the reader’s case, these assumptions may come from familiarity with the book’s apparent genre, mythic associations with the West, and/or nominal connections to Everett’s larger body of work. Having shot and killed Walker in the dark, Fragua “turned his light back on and looked at the face on his boots,” which is presumably that of Walker’s corpse. Just as the reader is now confronted with an ending whose significance is “unknowable” by any conventional reasoning, the narrator simply—and uncannily—states that “it was not a face [Fragua] knew” (225).