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RESISTANCE AND PROTEST IN PERCIVAL EVERETT'S *ERASURE*

As argued by the literary critic Margaret Russett, Percival Everett “unhinges ‘black’ subject matter from a lingering stereotype of ‘black’ style [and] challenges the assumption that a single or consensual African-American experience exists to be represented” (Russett 360). The author presents such a radical individualism in his most admired literary work published in 2001. In *Erasure*, Thelonious ‘Monk’ Ellison, the main character and narrator of the book, pens a stereotypically oriented African American novel that becomes an expression of “him being sick of it”; “an awful little book, demeaning and soul destroying drive!” (Everett 132, 137) that caters to the tastes and expectations of the American readership but, at the same time, oscillates around pre-conceived beliefs, prejudices and racial clichés supposedly emphasizing the ‘authentic’ black experience in the United States. Not only is *Erasure* about race, misconceptions of blackness, and racial identification but also about academia, external constraints, and one’s fight against them. The present article, therefore, endeavors to analyze different forms of resistance and protest in Percival Everett’s well acclaimed novel, demonstrating the intricate connections between the publishing industry, the impact of media, the formation of the literary canon, and the treatment of black culture.

Percival Everett is often perceived as an African American writer who “tries to stay away from the mainstream literary recognition”

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and whose fiction “resist[s] classification” (Russett 363–364). Not only does Everett resent artistic limitations, for example by expressing his penchant for elaborate stylistic experiments and a wide range of genres and subjects, but his literary development proves that the author constantly challenges even his own conspicuously heterogeneous *oeuvre*. While commenting upon Everett’s literary works in the introduction to his 1996 novel *Watershed*, Sherman Alexie notices that “everybody, including other African-American writers and scholars, is ignoring him [...] [and adds that] Everett is being ignored precisely because he is so threatening” (Stewart 301). Whether the author of *Erasure* can revolutionize or has already revolutionized American letters is not the main concern here, but what needs to be noticed is the fact that the novelist has received more critical attention for *Erasure*, than for any of his earlier literary works. The book has been mainly praised for “blasting apart [the] notions of political/racial correctness”¹ and “social observations [as well as] stylistic inventiveness that reach for the bleakest comedy” (Pinckney 2003). Often described as an experimental, postmodern novel, “calling for alternative American literature” (Pinckney 2003), Everett’s literary work may not be easily classified and pinned down, especially taking into consideration the author’s attitude towards the commodification of black culture and classifications in general. Everett’s disdain for literary labelling (for example “uncategorizable” is still a category that the author detests) and bitter resentment at the mechanisms governing the literary market, the publishing industry and the academy² may put him in a risky, ‘biting the hand that feeds him’ situation, threatening both his literary and academic career. The author himself, however, seems to remain unmoved, claiming that “[he] never thinks about audience at all, [he] just thinks about trying to be as truthful as [he] can to [his] experience and the culture” (Stewart 313) and, therefore, does

1. The State, review on the cover of *Erasure*.

2. At this point, it seems worth mentioning that even though Everett is Distinguished Professor of English at the University of Southern California and teaches creative writing and literary theory, he openly admits that he will never attend the MLA annual conventions and he has no interest in any kind of conferences whatsoever (Stewart 302).

not cater to public taste. Furthermore, in an interview conducted in 2007 Everett admits that he prefers working with small presses to profit-driven publishing houses regardless of the fact that such small presses do not guarantee the availability of his books in North America, for instance as was in the case of Owl Creek Press that folded years ago, making the author's novel *Glyph* inaccessible for purchase. Everett comments on the power of the publishing houses, literary market, audiences and readership in general also in *Erasure*.

Due to the fact that Everett's twelfth novel satirizes the American willingness to "consume racialized images of the ghetto, especially within an increasingly commodified literary market" (Farebrother 117) and touches upon the questions of the American market of image making, as well as, to some extent, the literary canon formation, the dubious practice of selecting literary award winners and the glitz of the award ceremonies, it might be stated that Everett's novel depicts a protest against "the relationship between literature and politics and America's tendency to white-wash its multiracial history" (Farebrother 117).

One might be tempted to find multiple parallels between the actual life of the author of *Erasure* and his literary character, Thelonious "Monk" Ellison, and to "read [his novel] as a fictionalized account of Everett's career" (Russett 359). Russett observes that it is partly because the novel begins as a first-person confession and also because both the author and his literary character are "dauntingly erudite and relentlessly allusive" (Russett 359). In the opening lines of the book, the narrator confesses that he has dark brown skin, curly hair, a broad nose, some of his ancestors were slaves [...] and though he is fairly athletic, he is no good at basketball" (Everett 1) but, contrary to the presupposed belief, he did not grow up "in any inner city or the rural south" (Everett 1); his close family members are conspicuously literate and devote their professional career to medicine. Monk often thinks about his relationship to the image that other people have of him, as well as of his fellow black Americans. At those moments he realizes how disconnected his reality is from the image. Due to the fact that the narrator does not conform to the stereotypical role of a black man imposed on him, he believes that his awkwardness has

been the defining feature of his personality. Even though he lists cultural clichés conventionally attributed to African Americans, like “chillin’,” “dig,” “yo,” or “that’s some shit” and has attempted at inserting expressions like these into his speech, “[he] never sounded comfortable, never sounded real” (Everett 167). What is more, Monk never knew when to slap five or high five or which handshake was appropriate enough to use. Therefore, the main problem that the narrator/Monk/and allegedly Everett needs to confront is the fact that he constantly has “to prove he is black enough” (Everett 2) in order to be appreciated as a writer and to gain recognition. This particular stance is aptly illustrated by one of the book’s key quotes:

Some people in the society in which I live, described as being black, tell me I am not black enough. Some people whom the society calls white tell me the same thing. I have heard this mainly about my novels, from editors who have rejected me and reviewers whom I have apparently confused. (Everett 2)

‘Not being black enough’ results from Monk’s willingness to write about retellings of Euripides and parodies of French poststructuralists instead of, as one of the fictional reviewers observes, focusing entirely on depicting “the African American experience [in his fiction and creating] true, gritty real stories of black life” (Everett 2). In other words, Monk realizes that African American penmen whose writing does not fit into stereotypically reinforced and popularly circulated versions of the authentic black experience lack proper space, appreciation and attention in the literary world. Being dissatisfied with the fact that his literary works, no matter how intricate, revolutionary and ground-breaking they seem, are not well received by the editors and the readership only because they are “too dense,” “not for them,” and “the market won’t support [these] kind of thing[s]” (Everett 61), Everett’s protagonist decides to meet the expectations of the literary marketplace and creates a novel that would be similar in vein to his previous publication entitled “Second Failure.” As Monk explains:

“Second Failure” is about a young black man who can’t understand why his white-looking mother is ostracized by the black community. She finally kills herself and he realizes that he must attack the culture

and so becomes a terrorist, killing blacks and whites who behave as racists. [And adds] I hated writing the novel. I hated reading the novel. I hated thinking about the novel. (Everett 61)

The protagonist's mounting frustration finds its vent when Juanita Mae Jenkins, the author of a highly stereotypical and ostensibly offensive novel *We's Lives in Da Ghetto*, appears on TV on the "Kenya Dunston Show." Firmly believing that Jenkin's book is "a [true] slap in his face" (Everett 29) due to its presentation of warped images of black people and, at the same time, experiencing the internal conflict which "[caused] the pain in his feet that coursed through his legs, up his spine and into his brain" (Everett 61), Monk decides to write the gritty, dialect-ridden and overtly irreverent novella *My Pafology*, whose title is changed later into *Fuck* probably in order to gain more publicity and become a "sell-out." Ellison is well aware of the fact that in order to keep the good name of a highbrow writer intact, he needs to conceal his identity and, therefore, publishes the book under a pseudonym of Stagg R. Leigh. To Monk's surprise, his parody of African American experience filled with the most outrageous stereotyped images of black Americans dwelling on black violence, gangsta consciousness,³ the vernacular butt lore, (using Paul Gilroy's expression), and excessive sexual promiscuity, becomes a best-seller, is optioned for a film and the protagonist himself becomes a celebrity overnight. Interestingly, *My Pafology* was originally written as a free-standing novella, (Cf: Russett 359) and Percival Everett added it to *Erasure* at a later stage of writing the book.

Even though Everett applies satirical lenses to depict the life of his fictional university professor/writer Monk and to present the frenzy connected with the huge success of *My Pafology*, "a vivid, life like [novel], believed to be taught in schools, despite its rough language" (Everett 254), as the fictional judges of the literary contest in *Erasure* proclaim, there exists "the political seriousness that [permeates and pervades Everett's literary world] and that underpins his engagement with [...] African American urban writing"

3. The parody of the ghetto novel although Everett explains that "the notion of a novel of a ghetto is a construction of white America [...]. Black people in America are as diverse as white people." (Farebrother, 2015, p. 121.)

(Farebrother 117). First of all, Everett touches upon the question of black authenticity and the limitations put on African American authors whose portrayals of the black experience do not fit into the existing notions of blackness thus forcing them, as the protagonist of *Erasure* aptly observes, to create literary characters “[who] comb their afros and [are] called niggers” (Everett 43) in order to be noticed by the editors and valued by the readership. What is more, Everett’s novel may be treated as a political commentary on the “strategies writers have employed to reflect upon the ambivalent position occupied by black middle-class authors in a racially bifurcated literary marketplace” (Farebrother 133). One may recall at this point the complaints of bell hooks, who in “Postmodern Blackness” voices the need to enact a post-modernism of resistance and expresses her views on the literary market that limits and manipulates the representation of black culture. Hooks insists:

Attempts on the part of editors and publishing houses to control [...] the representation of black culture, as well as their desire to promote the creation of products which will attract the widest audience, limit in a crippling and stifling way the kind of work many black folks feel we can do and still receive recognition. (hooks, 1990)

Hooks was not the only one who raised the question of the black writer’s artistic obligations. One may not forget about the members of the Black Arts Movement and their agenda (e.g. Ron Karenga’s essays “On Black Art” and “Black Cultural Nationalism” or the voices of Amiri Baraka and Larry Neal), as well as the followers of the New Black Aesthetics (i.e., cultural mulattoes educated by a multi-racial mix of cultures [Cf: Ellis 234]). Resistance, protest and freedom of artistic expression were also expressed in visual arts created by African Americans starting from Betye Saar’s famous “Liberation of Aunt Jemima” and ending with Kara Walker’s black and white silhouettes, which rely on stereotypes from the era of slavery and relate to modern day concerns. The deeper analysis of the visual artistic works created by black Americans, however interesting, goes beyond the scope of this article. Everett’s Monk claims that “protest is an element of art” which, according to Russett, may take the indirect form of “a technical assault against

the styles which have gone before” (Russett 362) Therefore, what Monk-the fictional character, as well as Everett-the writer, notice and protest against is the demand of the literary marketplace for the type of writing that is stereotypically oriented and that conforms to the marketability of the product. Everett comments upon the hollow consumer culture and the black artist’s obligations in one interview in the following way:

The easy road for American publishing has been to publish novels about black farmers or inner-city [...] and slaves. Because these are the pictures that are easily commodified. But if it’s the black middle class, and it’s not so different from someone else, then what’s exotic about that? (Stewart 299)

The profit-driven literary establishment obliges African American authors to heavily rely on stereotypical representations perpetuated within the dominant white gaze because, as Brown observes, “the statement issued by the literary market [is clear]: stereotypes are wanted” (Brown as quoted in: Depci, Tanritanir 283). Thelonious Monk Ellison also notices that the WalMart of books, i.e. the chain bookstores which classify him as an African American Studies expert (exclusively on the basis of his “ostensibly African American photograph” [Everett 28] that appears on the cover of his book about the obscure reworking of Greek tragedy), “take[s] food from his table” (Everett 28). The propensity of the readership to rely on the flattened commodified silhouettes is visible because, as Paul Gilroy declares, “the imaginary blackness is being projected outward [...] as the means to orchestrate a truly global market in leisure products; [...] corporate multiculturalism is giving the black body a makeover” (Gilroy 270). Therefore, the jacket photograph of Monk becomes in a way a visual signifier that has a material significance.

Even though by writing *My Pafology/Fuck* Monk tries to resist and protest against the mass-mediated circulation of distorted images of blackness, believing that the literary critics would notice the irony and realize that it is not a novel at all but “a failed conception, an unformed fetus [...] a hand without fingers, a word with no vowels [...] that it’s offensive, poorly written, racist and mindless” (Everett 261), the reception of his book elevates

him to stardom. As a consequence, Monk/Stagg is implicated in the cultural commodification of blackness, i.e. the very thing that he was protesting against. In order to conform to the stereotypical image propagated by the literary market, the protagonist of *Erasure* turns into a trickster “who works within American cultural and social expectations” (Farebrother 130). Monk masquerades himself so that he would become the true embodiment of what is perceived by the literary establishment to be an authentic African American writer, to be “the real thing” (Everett 218), as he names it. Ellison’s appearance, his speech, and moves allegedly must reflect his authentic blackness and for that reason Monk/Stagg dons “black shoes, black trousers, black turtleneck sweater, black blazer, black beard, black fedora, [he] is black from toe to top of head, from shoulder to shoulder, from now until both ends of time” (Everett 245). As a consequence, the body of the literary celebrity becomes, in Farebrother’s view, “a commodified emblem of racial authenticity” (Farebrother 131); i.e. he becomes a version of the stereotype that he detests. When the protagonist meets with Morgenstein to discuss the details concerning the film production, a puzzled Morgenstein admits: “you’re not at all like I pictured you [...] [I mean you should be] tougher or something. You know, more street, more... black” (Everett 218). In order to meet the film producer’s expectations and prove himself to be ‘the real thing’ Stagg lies about having killed a man “with a leather awl of a Swiss army knife” (Everett 218), underscoring thus his propensity for crime and fitting into preconceived notions of a black man who tells the real and trustworthy story of his people. *My Pafology* after all becomes “the hallmark of his authenticity as a black writer” (Russett 359). With time, however, Monk finds himself unable to perform the black stereotype that he wished to satirize and experiences the disintegration of his personality. Near the end of the novel the narrator asks himself: “Had I by annihilating my own presence actually asserted the individuality of Stagg Leigh? Or was it the book itself that had given him life?” (Everett 248) The protagonist adheres to the norms imposed on him by the society and moves from invisibility to hypervisibility, becoming thus the caricature of himself. In the final chapter of *Erasure* Monk confesses:

I did not write out of a so-called family tradition of oral storytelling. I never tried to set anybody free, never tried to paint the next real and true picture of the life of my people, never had any people whose picture I knew well enough to paint [...] and I would have to wear a mask of the person I was expected to be. (Everett 212)

The mask is dropped, however, when Monk finds himself in the light of the TV cameras during the literary award gala and he works within the so called “televisual blackness” which Casey Hayman defines in terms of working within and against the mass-mediated iconography of blackness (Hayman 137). It is too late to correct or counteract the stereotype because his initial artistic resistance is misread by the public and any attempt to divulge his true identity is futile. The publishing world wins.

Apart from launching the attack on the mechanisms governing the literary marketplace and the external constraints put on black artists, Everett also ridicules in *Erasure* the gruesome process of selecting book award winners. Depicting the absurdity of the whole enterprise where five judges are given four hundred books to evaluate within a short period of time, the author comments upon the power of the capital and the potential consequences for the award winner that the fictional judges are not even aware of. After all, *My Pafology/Fuck* as a winner of the Book Award gifted by the National Book Association is likely to appear as a standard for school curricula in the future. During the selection process the appointed judges, Monk included, hope that “they are not expected to read every word of every book [explaining that] they do have lives” (Everett 225), and the members of the committee agree that “a lot of books they will be able to dismiss after the first couple of sentences” (Everett 225). The set criteria for the winning of the award are similarly ludicrous: the award may be given to the writer who is a good friend of the judges or because, as one fictional member of the jury admits, “[even though it’s not the best book, I’d like for its author to know that I take his work seriously” (Everett 233). The ceremony, during which the winners are announced, shows the publishing industry’s treatment of black culture and literature in general. The protagonist explains:

We judges [...] were all seated at tables with important guests. I was seated with the Director of the Board of Boston General Hospital,

the CEO of General Mills, a vice president from General Motors and head of marketing from General Electric, all with their spouses. (Everett 262)

Being surrounded by the profit-oriented executives of large companies who express neither interest in nor knowledge of literature, Monk fails to realize that he becomes a cog in the powerful machine and his protest is quelled.

It seems significant to notice how Percival Everett enters into dialogue with the American image-making machine, skillfully using the jacket photograph of himself, which was printed on the back cover of the Graywolf Press edition of *Erasure*. In the black and white photograph, the author is depicted with a raven perched on his shoulder, which might be interpreted as the visual signifier of Everett's protest against the infringing powers of the literary canon formation or, perhaps, the author's willingness to find his place within the American literary canon. After all, as the editors of *Practices of Looking: An Introduction to Visual Culture* assert, "[people] live in an increasingly image-saturated society where paintings, photographs, and electronic images depend on one another for their meanings" (Sturken, Cartwright, 2001, p. 11) and "images have never been merely illustrations, they carry important content" (Sturken, Cartwright 1.). Therefore, one may venture to claim that Everett's portrayal with a raven might not have been coincidental and it is the role of the readers/viewers to discover its underlying message because, as Sturken and Cartwright recount:

Through looking we negotiate social relationships and meanings. Looking is a practice much like speaking, writing, or signing. Looking involves learning to interpret and, like other practices, looking involves relationships of power. [...] To be made to look, to try to get someone else to look at you or at something you want to be noticed [...] entails a play of power. (Sturken, Cartwright 10)

If one assumes that Everett's choice of cover photo was intentional, because "the creation of an image through a camera lens always involves some degree of subjective choice through selection, framing, and personalization" (Sturken, Cartwright 16), and taking into consideration the fact that Everett's jacket design alludes (via the portrayal of the bird) to Edgar Allan Poe, who is perceived as one of the masters of American literature, it may be concluded

that Everett, in a subtle way, encourages his readers/viewers to answer some possible questions such as: What makes a writer reach the level of Poe's craftsmanship? Will this literary work (i.e. *Erasure*) carve a niche within the American literary canon? Or, maybe, can I (i.e. Percival Everett) be the next black Edgar Allan Poe of American letters? The photo cover of the writer is a sign of the author's visibility and, as a consequence, the penman becomes discernible to the readership, but the way Percival Everett wants to be seen, looked at, and perceived may have a multitude of purposes as "the roles played by images are multiple, diverse, and complex" (Sturken, Cartwright 11).

Everett's or his publisher's decision to use the image of an African American author with a raven may recall Toni Morrison's conclusions presented in *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*. While Morrison is trying to find some answers to the question of how literary whiteness and literary blackness are constructed and examining the impact of "notions of racial history, racial exclusion and racial vulnerability on nonblacks who held, resisted, explored or altered those notions" (Morrison 11), the Nobel prize winner makes some comments upon Edgar Allan Poe and the racially inflected language in his fiction. According to Morrison, "no early American writer is more important to the concept of African Americanism than Poe" (Morrison 32). She explains that in Poe's works the images of whiteness denoting power are always presented "in conjunction with representations of black or Africanist people who are dead, impotent or under complete control" (Morrison 33). Taking into account Morrison's opinions about Poe's prose and her claim that "black people signified little or nothing in the imagination of white American writers" (Morrison 15), one may apply different lenses to view Everett's jacket photo. In one of the pivotal fragments of *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* Morrison makes a powerful statement concerning the role of American writers:

Writers are among the most sensitive, the most intellectually anarchic, most representative, most probing of artists. The ability of writers to imagine what is not the self, to familiarize the strange and mystify the familiar, is the test of their power. The languages they use and the social and historical context in which these languages signify are indirect and direct revelations of that power and its limitations. So it is

to them, the creators of American literature, that I look for clarification about the invention and effect of Africanism in the United States. (Morrison 15)

In light of the above, one may reach the conclusion that Everett may seem to be fully aware of his obligations as a writer and, in an inconspicuous manner, expresses his unwillingness to work within American cultural and social expectations, as well as the expectations of the literary market.

To recapitulate, Everett's novel *Erasure* is an expression of protest and struggle against an industry that insists on viewing the African American writer as an author obliged to reinforce a stereotype in order to fit the demands of the literary market and also a commentary on "superficial empty symbols that underline a close relationship between the increasing commodification of the literary marketplace and reductive [demeaning] racial stereotypical representations" (Farebrother 128). Everett offers here also his view on the limitations that stifle the individual's artistic mind and provokes further questions concerning the manufacturing of black authenticity.

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