

INVISIBILITY AND THE COMMODIFICATION OF BLACKNESS IN RALPH ELLISON'S *INVISIBLE MAN* AND PERCIVAL EVERETT'S *ERASURE*

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In considering my novels, not including the one frightening effort that brought in some money, I find myself sadly a stereotype of the radical, railing against something, calling it tradition perhaps, claiming to seek out new narrative territory, to knock at the boundaries of the very form that calls me and allows my artistic existence. It is the case, however, that not all radicalism is forward looking, and maybe I have misunderstood my experiments all along, propping up, as if propping up is needed, the artistic traditions that I have pretended to challenge.

—*Erasure* 155

By relying too heavily on a critique launched from the margins, we risk never being able to dismantle those margins without wholly erasing ourselves; in an effort of self-preservation, marginal we must remain. In combating an oppression based on the category of “race,” we may re-create the notion of “race” itself and, in doing so, hazard laying the framework for a new type of essentialism that potentially reproduces many facets of the old.

—J. Martin Favor, *Authentic Blackness* 9

The first epigraph above reflects a broad tendency in Percival Everett's fiction to meditate on the postmodern condition of participating in, breaking from, and trans-

forming “tradition.” The second, I propose, expresses the poststructuralist project of unsettling oppositional categories—in this case of “race”—that emerged from realist and modernist ontologies. For Thelonious “Monk” Ellison, the narrator of Percival Everett’s 2001 novel *Erasure*, the task of writing “novels” and “experiments” is at the nexus of his conflicting individual, artistic, and cultural identities that grow out of and significantly revise these earlier aesthetic and cultural practices. “Race” in Everett’s fiction is a particularly dubious category, especially in a contemporary literary landscape that questions the integrity of such classifications, despite our critical awareness of their lingering power.

354 In *Erasure*, Thelonious Ellison eschews the notion of “race” and his identity as an African American author, only to later confront the condition of his “invisibility” in a world of commodified racial aesthetics. This essay specifically examines *Erasure* as a postmodern rewriting of Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* and as a revision of the modernist trope of Black invisibility so famously rendered by Ellison. Drawing upon poststructuralist theories of “race” as well as New Black Aesthetics theories of cultural hybridity, I contend that *Erasure* highlights modes of “invisibility” that persevere in contemporary American literary and consumer cultures. Unlike modernist invisibility that manifested itself in the fissures between Black and white in the biracial social taxonomy of the United States throughout most of the twentieth century, contemporary generic and aesthetic categories generate sublimated forms of invisibility that give the appearance of legitimizing heterogeneous African American subjects while simultaneously and subversively regulating the available range of supposedly “authentic” Black representations. In this process, the rich pluralism of Black culture and aesthetics gets reduced to a few subgenres that prove most economically viable and palatable to white and Black consumers alike. After a brief explanation of the modernist trope of invisibility in Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* and modernist aesthetics, I will discuss the role of New Black Aesthetic (NBA) theorists who have etched out considerable space for a range of heterogeneous Black cultural expression within the closing decades of the twentieth century. Finally, I will show how *Erasure* responds to New Black Aesthetics by rewriting *Invisible Man* to expose forms of Black invisibility in contemporary consumer culture.

“GREAT POTENTIALITIES”: RALPH ELLISON AND THE MODERNIST TROPE OF INVISIBILITY

For the purposes of this discussion, modernist conceptions of Black “invisibility” can be broadly construed as the rejection or elision of Black subjects by white social and cultural hegemonies. In this formulation, invisibility is a deeply-embedded consequence of “mutual invisibility and mutual projection” across racial lines, wherein one is not only seen as “invisible” but also potentially “*by suspecting himself to be so*”

(Cheng 16). On one hand, it is produced paradoxically by “skewed racial visibility” and “exploited symbols”—for instance, “Aunt Jemima” or “Uncle Ben” on food packaging—that announce racial difference only as a means as identifying and exploiting a racially marked “other” (Gordon 70). On the other hand, “invisibility turns inward and can be regard as what we may call ‘a black *thang*,’” where the illusion of nonracial determination of a Black person’s identity among whites is shattered by the presence of one “black stranger” identifying another within an otherwise white crowd (76, original emphasis). Each of these modes of invisibility requires an ironically visible counterpoint: in the first formulation, “overdetermination” renders blackness invisible, wherein “Black novelists emerge as more than symbols of blackness; they become blackness on our shelves, our curricula, our mythology,” allowing society to deny “responsibility for the blackness we exclude by way of the blackness we include, which we identify as blackness *in toto*” (75). The second formulation depends upon the “illusion of seeing-without-seeing,” a “role-played” erasure that is “psychically and socio-politically structured with oblique sight,” wherein the illusion of colorblindness prevails (76). In both cases, white persons see Black persons only partially, perceived either as representatives of a homogeneous and static Black culture, or as assimilationist anomalies who temporarily and imperfectly mirror a kind of whiteness. As W.E.B. Du Bois theorized in his notion of “double-consciousness,” the sense of invisibility and twoness comes from seeing oneself through the eyes of another. Both modes of invisibility render the Black subject incomplete, recognized only by the “shadow” of an imposed and subjugated racial identity.

In addition to these processes that generate invisibility in the black/white racial binary, it is also reasonable to assert that modernist aesthetics inhibit the self-determination of Black subjectivity. As Lawrence Hogue explains, “racial tradition” is often at odds with the broad cultural movement we call “modernity.” Hogue’s explanation of modernist conceptions of racial identity serves well to highlight the basic cultural tensions that produce invisibility in texts like *Invisible Man*:

Whereas racial tradition connotes wholeness, homogeneity, historical continuity, and a sense of common ancestry or place of origin, classical modernity connotes the loss of metaphysical meaning, rampant individualism, nihilism, hedonism, alienation, fragmentation, the lack of social identification, and the lack of historical continuity. Whereas racial traditions consider the past as a model, or a guiding example, modernity’s hallmark is the impulse to experiment, to break with the past. (5)

The pessimistic tone of *Invisible Man* is underscored by Ellison’s critical investment in modernist aesthetics, wherein the project of historicizing Black cultural “traditions” runs against the grain of the modern emphasis on the individual. In modernism, broadly construed, the racialized subject is defined “as a unity” that cannot brook the contradictions of plural cultures and traditions inhabiting a single subject (Hogue 5). For writers such as Ellison who attempted to understand this system of racial coding, it means articulating one’s relationship in reference to the broadly oppositional categories of “black” and “white” and in terms of the individual’s relationship to a racial

collective. While contemporary theorists of Black subjectivity such as Mark Anthony Neale and Michelle Wright note that “Blacks in the Americas were deconstructing white Western nationalist discourses” well before Derridean deconstruction and post-structuralism, (Wright 27), it is also apparent that social conditions during major twentieth-century Black cultural movements such as the Harlem Renaissance and the Black Arts Movement define themselves against a white hegemony. In this cultural model, transgression of perceived racial “lines” by an individual becomes the enemy of Black cultural authenticity because it threatens the stability of self-determined representations of “black” humanity. There is little room for racially ambiguous subjects; for an individual to be between is simply to be “invisible,” lest one be a traitor.¹

356 The narrator of *Invisible Man* occupies exactly this liminal space, habitually taking conciliatory stances to ameliorate tension between black and white communities (though whites are clearly the aggressors in these feuds), but he later learns that his efforts toward reconciliation were in fact manipulated by the “Brotherhood” that sought to undermine burgeoning, heterogeneous forms of Black subjectivity in favor of a highly regulated model of Black collective consciousness. The damaging effects of his transgression are nowhere more apparent than in the Harlem riot scene, where the narrator confronts his unwitting collusion:

It was not suicide, but murder. The committee had planned it. And I had helped, had been a tool. A tool just at the very moment I had thought myself free. By pretending to agree I *had* indeed agreed, had made myself responsible for that huddled form lighted by flame and gunfire in the street, and all the others whom now the night was making ripe for death. (553)

In the margins/center dichotomy of modernist thought, Ellison suggests here that to gain access to the center is to subvert the political resistance of the margins, which in *Invisible Man* can be read as both Black resistance against white hegemony and the individual against the social collective *within* a specific racial category. In the above passage, the narrator gains access to the Brotherhood, thinking that his conciliatory ambitions can improve “race” relations, but he ultimately becomes the means of destroying Harlem’s counterculture. The “modernist strategy of containment” operates fully in *Invisible Man*, forcing the narrator to choose between membership in a “managed” political body of Black resistance and the alienation experienced through his privileging of individual agency (Harper 122). As suggested in my opening epigraphs, postmodern theorists of racial representation such as J. Martin Favor recognize such limitations of modernist dichotomies, wherein “a critique launched from the margins...hazard laying the framework for a new type of essentialism that potentially reproduces many facets of the old” (9). This proves to be the case in *Invisible Man*, since being “free of illusion” places him back into the same realm of invisibility from whence he came. As he concludes, “the end was the beginning” (571), offering, diegetically at least, no solution to the problem of racial invisibility.

Ellison does, however, point toward an alternative to invisibility through the float-

ing signifier of Rinehart which, I contend, prefigures postmodern aesthetic answers to Black invisibility. In contrast to Ellison's other "archetypal" Black men, Rinehart embodies a range of identities which the narrator finds difficult to process amid his notions of fixed subjective positions.² The narrator, whom several people mistake for Rinehart when he wears his dark glasses and a white hat, is temporarily identified as a bookie, pimp, criminal, reverend, and gambler, all of which may be said from a "white" perspective to be stereotypical perceptions of Black men, but that nonetheless suggest to the narrator an alternative to his invisibility. Rinehart allows the narrator to see a "merging fluidity of forms" and imbues him with a feeling of liberation and power, opening a "world...without boundaries" (491, 498). More significantly, however, Rinehart represents to the narrator the possibility for self-determination that is not predicated on the modernist ideal of subjective integrity. In his final conversation with Hambro, for example, he rails: "He talks to me of *integrity!*...What was integrity? What did it have to do with a world in which Rinehart was possible and successful?" (503).

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This world, Ellison suggests, is both subversive and utopian. Rinehart teaches the narrator to finally take his grandfather's advice and signify on whites,³ conceding to their whims only to leverage their naiveté and expose the "illusion" of their misconceptions, as when he convinces Sybil that he had enacted a rape scene to elicit information from her in his attempt to undermine the Brotherhood. While the narrator ultimately fails to etch out his own racially ambiguous space in the biracial organization of society, he also embraces the role of the trickster figure that Henry Louis Gates, Jr. says "rules the process of disclosure" and embodies "a process that is never-ending, that is dominated by multiplicity" that is central to African American "rhetorical strategies" (21). I would like to suggest that in addition to appropriation of the trickster figure and thus position *Invisible Man* within a decisively African American literature tradition, the figure of Rinehart also begins a process of rewriting that tradition, which Everett continues in *Erasure*. Specifically, Rinehart points toward the play and fluidity that characterize postmodern subjects, able to take on a multiplicity of roles without feeling tragically split or invisible as the result of the modernist emphasis on integrity and homogeneity. In this way Rinehart promises an alternative to Black invisibility, allowing him to become visible in ways that provide more agency than whites imagine he has within a narrow set of prescribed, racialized roles. "Between Rinehart and invisibility were great potentialities" (510), the narrator concludes, hinting at the promise of Rinehart's multiplicity to supplant the escapism of the invisible man.

While *Invisible Man* is generally pessimistic, Ellison offers a model of social organization that not only precludes the invisibility of the Black subject, but also points toward the poststructuralist logic that facilitates the recognition of a wide range of Black subject positions and the blurring of racial categories in the latter half of the twentieth century:

Whence all this passion toward conformity anyway?—diversity is the word. Let man keep his many parts and you'll have no tyrant states. Why, if they follow this conformity business they'll end up by forcing me, an invisible man, to become white, which is not a color but the lack of one. Must I strive toward colorlessness? But seriously, and without snobbery, think of what the world would lose if that should happen...Our fate is to become one, and yet many—This is not prophecy, but description. Thus one of the greatest jokes in the world is the spectacle of the whites busy escaping blackness and becoming blacker every day, and the black striving toward whiteness, becoming quite dull, and gray. None of us seems to know who he is or where he's going" (577).

Ellison is very much a modernist in this passage, clearly privileging individual integrity and framing his political project as the individuals' assault on "conformity" and racial erasure, but he also hints at New Black Aesthetics who, as I will show below, promote heterogeneous forms of Black subjectivity without whitewashing Black cultural traditions.

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POSTMODERNISM AND THE NEW BLACK AESTHETIC RESPONSE TO INVISIBILITY

With this passage in mind, I would like to turn to postmodern treatments of "race," which overlap and borrow from modernism significantly, but which nonetheless advance Ellison's project by further unsettling the logic of a biracial system which generates the chasm of "double consciousness" wherein the invisible subject resides. Ellison, as noted above, hints at the "potentialities" of fluid postmodern constructions of identity, but they are ultimately aborted in *Invisible Man*. In general, postmodernism emphasizes points of cultural conflict and contact in a decentered cultural milieu, as opposed to the modernist privileging of individual and cultural integrity. Mary Louise Pratt calls these "contact zones," the "social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other" (34), while Jean-Luc Nancy theorizes in his definition of "community" that essentialist notions of "origin" or "identity" must be replaced with the "the sharing of singularities" whose points of contact are "the borders upon which or along which singular beings are exposed" (33). Here, the "limit" of these singularities constitutes the site in which one "does not rediscover" an essential self but "experiences the other's alterity" (33); in other words, it is being defined in relation that is not predicated on simple subject-object dichotomies. The risk in such formulations, of course, is obfuscating the material reality that political power is often concentrated in one group, which may or may not be identified as the "center," but that nevertheless exercises its power over marginal or disenfranchised individuals and collectivities. However, postmodern interpretations of social organization and community also offer possible solutions that the modernist *avant garde* could not see: namely, the ability to combine, appropriate, and transform subjectivities through the permeable membranes—the "contact zones" and "limits"—of social

and political beings.

Herein we find postmodernism's potential for rendering the unseen visible, which New Black Aesthetic (NBA) artists have realized and capitalized upon (literally and figuratively) in efforts to create a Black cultural movement not from the margins, but within all aspects of contemporary cultural production. This process of disrupting the dichotomies of margin/center, black/white incorporate forms of cultural hybridity and transformation not imaginable to modernist aesthetes. As Paul Gilroy explains, "Notions of mixing are being celebrated" and favored over the "obsession with origins" that informed "modernist racial and cultural typologies" (251), enabling new combinations and interactions between cultural communities and individuals. Contemporary Black aesthetic movements such as the NBA and the "Post-Soul Aesthetic"⁴ advocate cultural amalgamation and greater play at the borders of identity formations to not only validate a tradition of literary production specific to racialized subject positions, but also loosen the semantic associations between cultures, physical appearances, and corresponding "racial" categories. In these models, individual determinacy has some leverage over group solidarity that has been so important to modernist interrogations of "race," since in postmodernist conceptions of individuals (who are not "individuals" at all in the modernist sense, but "beings" or "singularities," in Nancy's words, that do not imply the privileging of integrity or the so-called problem of split subjectivity) can also demonstrate the diversity within a particular racial category. As Michael Eric Dyson points out, the relationship between group and individual identity formation is not necessarily antagonistic, since "[enabling solidarity] will only appeal to the richly varied meanings of cultural practices, the diversity of authentic roles one may express within the repertoire of black cultural studies, and the ever-expanding context of historical experience in supporting its vision of racial cooperation" (221).

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Indeed, Ellis's formulation of the "New Black Aesthetic" advocates such a brand of black cultural diversity, even suggesting that the NBA can and should—to borrow Audre Lorde's familiar phrasing—use the "master's tools" to "dismantle the master's house" to garner broader public appeal. In this sense, Ellis advocates the NBA as a "mongrel mix of classes and types," citing as examples a wide range of musicians from Tracy Chapman to the group Fishbone, and directors such as Spike Lee and Robert Townsend who, Ellis claims, "took the dominant [white] culture's credit card and clobbered it with a film" (240). Here the "cultural mulatto" is "black person... educated by a multi-racial mix of cultures, [who] can also navigate easily in the white world" (235) and use aspects of formerly "white" modes of cultural expression in the generation of new forms of Black subjectivity. These diverse NBA artists, then, become highly visible subjects, recognized not by overdetermined "ethnically identifiable idiom[s]" but as humans capable of a full range of artistic expression across racial categories.

And yet Ellis is cautionary in his NBA model, avoiding a slippery, uncritical celebration of cultural amalgamation and disavowing black artists who enter into a

realm of cultural nonspecificity and lose sight of projects that “[cross] over so well because [they are] so true to the black” (242). Contrasting effective and abortive models of cultural hybridity, Ellis suggests that one might accept that Fishbone has “changed, crossed, and flouted existing genres” (234) to become culturally-mixed yet nonetheless “authentic” Black artists, but he also denounces artists such as Lionel Richie and Whitney Houston who, in Ellis’s estimation, “have transformed themselves into cultural-mulatto, assimilationist nightmares” and are “neutered mutations instead of thriving hybrids” (242). For Ellis, these artists are in cultural limbo, “[t]rying to please both worlds instead of themselves” and tragically “end up truly pleasing neither” (242). They are, in this sense, unabashed sell-outs, trading what Dyson characterizes as the “relentless evolutions and metamorphoses” of “black cultural expression” for generic commercial success (218-219). The implication for crossing-over, then, becomes something of a racial Scylla and Charybdis: an NBA artist should produce “supersophisticated black art that either expand[s] or explode[s] the old definitions of blackness,” but it must do so without leaning too much toward “the official, positivist black party line” (236) *and* without losing to “whiteness” that essential—yet slippery—element that is “so true to the black.” For J. Martin Favor, this cultural play is precisely what allows more “authentic” subjects to emerge, “legitimat[ing] not only the creator’s individual identity but also his or her status as a member of the wider community, for the imagined community has—to a certain extent—its imaginary boundaries set and legitimized by cultural production” (145). The NBA artist expands or explodes these boundaries, creating overlap and crossing over the spaces between “black” and “white” where the “invisible” subject had formerly retreated.

REWRITING IN ERASURE; OR, MAKING THE INVISIBLE VISIBLE AGAIN

While Percival Everett has resisted categorization as both an African American and postmodern writer, his novel *Erasure* nonetheless exhibits characteristics of both, employing African American strategies of appropriation and rewriting to interrogate the conditions of Black invisibility that, on the surface, seems to have been ameliorated by the postmodern aesthetic practices of the NBA. Black invisibility frequently emerges as a trope in Everett’s fiction which, when considered *apropos* of his reflections on his tendency to be classified as an African American writer, foreground his semi-autobiographical contemplation of racialized aesthetics in *Erasure*.⁵ For example, his first novel, *Suder* (1983), situates a black male protagonist—an aging baseball player—in relative isolation from black communities as he leaves his profession and uncovers his family’s past in the rural South. Everett also interpellates the genre of the Western narrative in *Walk Me to the Distance* (1985) and *God’s Country* (1994) in which he parodies the racist underpinnings of westward expansion and

white nationalist ideology. Prefiguring Thelonious Ellison's propensity for rewriting ancient narratives in *Erasure*, Everett's novella *For Her Dark Skin* (1990) retells the story of Jason and Medea, opening with Jason's description of the people aboard the Argo, among whom "a dark man" may "stare at you blankly as if there were something to be understood," leaving you "wondering what it was you had failed to see" (6). This "seeing-without-seeing" is also immediately apparent in his novel *Glyph* (1999), where the prodigious boy genius Ralph (alluding to Ralph Ellison and his intellectually ambitious narrator of *Invisible Man*) withholds his imposed racial identity from readers. The initial refusal and later disclosure of his racial identity brings to consciousness readers' internalized and sublimated complicity with the social and textual processes that generate Black invisibility:

Have you to this point assumed that I am white? In my reading I discovered that if a character was black, then he at some point was required to comb his Afro hairdo, speak on the street using an obvious, ethnically identifiable idiom, live in a certain part of town, or be called a nigger by someone. White characters, I assumed they were white (often, because of the ways they spoke of other kinds of people) did not seem to need that kind of introduction, or perhaps legitimization, to exist on the page. But you, dear reader, no doubt, whether you share my pigmentation or cultural origins, probably assumed that I was white. (53)

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This passage is instructive to my analysis of *Erasure* because it spells out the consequences of the rhetorical production of Black invisibility in the reader-writer-text trialectic. Appropriating the figure of Ralph Ellison, whose novel famously addresses issues of racial invisibility and authenticity, the narrator exposes readers' embedded assumptions that authors, narrators, and characters are "white" unless otherwise indicated. "Legitimization" of Black characters, Everett suggests, can only be construed through an "ethnically identifiable idiom," which as Alain Locke describes, obscures the narrator/author's genuine human "personality" behind the "shadow" of racial markers (631). By rewriting *Invisible Man* in *Erasure*, Everett interpellates the lingering effect of these markers in contemporary consumer culture, not only invoking Ellison's "fear and loathing of commercialization" (Harper 137), but also suggesting that the postmodern condition of invisibility manifests itself, ironically, through the public consumption of "blackness" in literary texts.

That Everett's protagonist in *Erasure* is a writer who consciously meditates on the discursive production of racial identities is relevant because it portends a metafictional critique on the cultural production and consumption of "blackness." For example, Ellison parodies Richard Wright's *Native Son* out of frustration over the enormous popularity of Juanita Mae Jenkins's "ghetto pulp" novel *We's Lives in da Ghetto*, creating a *mise en abyme* of texts on Black subjectivity: Everett rewriting Ellison rewriting Wright and Jenkins, all of whom reflect each other's representation of "blackness." As a result of this narrative layering, Everett effectively draws attention to his rewriting of canonical African American literary texts, highlighting his participation in their ongoing conversation about invisibility and subjectivity. As

Christian Moraru argues, postmodernist African American writers such as Ishmael Reed revise Henry Louis Gates, Jr.'s formulation of "Signifyin(g)," by not only defining "black writing as rewriting," as Gates postulates, but also "break[ing] away from the realistic and naturalistic codes that controlled African American writing up until the late 60s" (87-88). Like Reed, who "wants to 'be himself' and not a 'slave of tradition,' be that even *his* tradition" (Moraru 97), Everett attempts through the character of Thelonious Ellison to inscribe a "self"—certainly for his narrator and potentially for himself as an author—that appropriates and transforms "molds of culturally specific discourses" through a process of "crosscultural fertilization" that rewrites the literary traditions in which he participates (98, 104). The appropriation of Wright and Ellison, along with tacit references or allusions to other writers such as Paul Laurence Dunbar, Frederick Douglass, Herman Melville and James Weldon Johnson, allows Everett to critique contemporary manifestations of Black invisibility through his postmodern appropriation of both "white" and African American literary history.

362 By invoking these conflicting and intersecting traditions, Everett, like Reed, is able to signify on his audiences who continue to consume African American texts as if they still subscribe to the "realistic and naturalistic" codes of the past.

Following in the footsteps of Reed and other African American writers who "restructure the structures—fables, fictions, narrative, regimens, ideological constructs—constraining [the] representation" of African American subjects (Moraru 125), Everett centers his rewriting around the notion of "double-consciousness"—to invoke Du Bois's familiar term—that the narrator of *Invisible Man* expresses in his prologue. That this consciousness produces the conditions that generate "invisibility" are immediately apparent, since his invisibility, he tell us, is not "exactly a matter of a biochemical accident to my epidermis" but the result "of a peculiar disposition of the eyes of those with whom I come in contact" (3). Invisibility, he suggests, is not a condition of skin color itself, but a matter of perception by those whose investment in racial stratification prevents beholding the Black subject in full. While Thelonious Ellison replicates this logic in *Erasure*, he also foregrounds other aspects of his identity, such as being "a son, a brother, a fisherman, an art lover, a woodworker" and a writer, all before stating his name in a manner that recalls the famous first sentence of *Moby Dick*: "Call me Monk" (1). This allusion to Melville suggests that Ellison, like the narrator in *Invisible Man*, has too been confounded by the leviathan of whiteness. The fact that Ellison names himself, however, is a significant departure from the anonymous narrator of *Invisible Man*, implying that he believes he is a fully constituted subject because he has succeeded in defining himself in terms outside of racial categories—the very thing that Ralph Ellison's narrator could not do.

While the name "Monk" alludes to the famous jazz pianist Thelonious Monk, it also signifies the illusory nature of his nonracial sense of self, which can only be constructed in isolation from the realities of the social signification of his physical appearance. As he continues: "I have dark brown skin, curly hair, a broad nose, some of my ancestors were slaves and I have been detained by pasty white policemen..."

and so the society in which I live tells me I am black; that is my race” (1). In this regard, *Erasure* departs further from *Invisible Man*, in which the narrator never disavows but only fails to understand the implications of his “blackness.” Thelonious Ellison, in contrast, rejects the concept of “race” entirely: “I don’t believe in race. I believe there are people who will shoot me or hang me or cheat me and try to stop me because they do believe in race, because of my brown skin, curly hair, wide nose and slave ancestors, but that’s just the way it is” (2). Everett, then, picks up where Ellison leaves off, with both of their narrators capitulating to the power of “race” to push them underground, or less figuratively in Thelonious Ellison’s case, into ascetic modes of existence. As such, *Erasure* can be seen as the postmodern continuation of Ellison’s modernist novel, rewriting the trope of “invisibility” for a world which, at least superficially, seems to have abandoned the biracial system that produced the conditions of invisibility experienced by Ellison and his narrator in the middle of the twentieth century.

COMMODIFIED INVISIBILITY

While it may be too obvious that *Erasure*’s appropriation of *Invisible Man* brings the trope of Black invisibility into the realm of contemporary racial politics, it is less obvious that the novel also critiques the concept of invisibility itself as inadequate for uncovering the residual racialism in an ostensibly “postracial” world, no doubt triggered by the enormous popularity of NBA artists who have crossed over into the “mainstream” of popular art and culture. Specifically, the novel seems to suggest that *high visibility* in a postmodern cultural landscape is the contemporary manifestation of the *invisibility* that so preoccupied Ralph Ellison. Written in the wake of the multicultural rhetoric of “difference” in the 1990s, *Erasure* draws attention to contradictions in the “hip vanguard in the business of difference” emblemized by NBA artists such as Spike Lee, who in Paul Gilroy’s estimation “stimulated demands for exotica and authentic inside information” among the general public (Gilroy 242). The NBA concept of cultural hybridity, after all, is at least in part predicated on a model of consumer consumption, wherein “the culture industry is prepared to make substantial investments in blackness provided that it yields a user-friendly, house-trained, and marketable ‘reading’ or translation of the stubborn vernacular that can no longer be called a counterculture” (242). In other words, while public visibility, commercial success, and cross-cultural or cross-“racial” appreciation of NBA artists have certainly loosened the stranglehold on “double consciousness” and modernist conceits of invisibility, the idea of authentically Black self-determination through NBA aesthetic practices must also be interrogated because they underestimate the subversive power that popular consumption has on determining cultural formations. As Gilroy cautions, even “where the old dead skins of ethnic and racial particularity have been shed, it cannot be repeated too often that deconstructing ‘races’ is not the

same thing as doing away with racisms” (251). If, as Trey Ellis suggests, “the world is not only now accustomed to black faces in the arts, but also hungers for us” (237), then one must ask who constitutes this “world” and what version of “blackness,” exactly, satiates their hunger? Is it not possible that what passes for “authentic blackness” in the arena of commodified art is a throwback to the “modernist obsession with origins” that locates authentic cultural representation in lingering racist mis-conceptions (Gilroy 251)?

364 *Erasure* responds directly to these questions, tracing Thelonious Ellison’s refusal to perform “blackness” until he ultimately capitulates to a marketable form of Black identity embodied by alter-ego Stagg R. Leigh and the “completely nonironic acceptance” of his “so-called novel,” *My Pafology*, “as literature” (153).⁶ Indeed, *Erasure* itself seems to signify on its readers, subtly chastising them for their participation in the misrecognition of “Black” authors through racialized textual bodies. In a visit to a Borders bookstore, for example, after failing to find copies of his books in the “Contemporary Fiction” section, Ellison moves to the “African American Studies” shelf, where he finds four of his (apparently untouched) novels, “including [his] *Persians*, of which the only thing ostensibly African American was [his] jacket photograph” (28). Ellison laments that neither someone “interested in African American Studies” nor someone “looking for an obscure reworking of a Greek tragedy” would find his book there, resulting, “in either case, in no sale” (28). In stark contrast, the bookstore openly promotes Juanita Mae Jenkins’ exploitative *We’s Lives in Da Ghetto*, which, as an arguably “authentically black” novel becomes both a “runaway bestseller” and a marketable film premise worth “something like three million dollars” (28-29). The marketplace thus brings to the novel’s central conflict to a head: Ellison must, as a man with “brown skin, curly hair, wide nose and slave ancestors” generate authentically “black cultural expression” (2), but only within definitions of “blackness” advocated by a consumer culture that he perceives as fundamentally incompatible with his old promise to himself “that [he] would not compromise [his] art” (257). Whereas Trey Ellis’s “assimilationist nightmares” apparently try “to please both worlds instead of themselves,” Thelonious Ellison similarly tries to please himself by dissociating himself from “race” altogether, in that he, like Ralph Ellison and the invisible man, mistakenly believes that his staunch individualism and artistic agenda could throw off the social imperative to perform an “authentic” black racial identity. The implication, of course, is that he is always performing a kind of “blackness,” whether he wants to or not.

There is, then, a lingering process of racial “overdetermination” that regulates the kinds of “blackness” that can be produced, marketed, and consumed under the duress of contemporary consumer forces. This paradoxical form of invisibility is itself a rewriting of the narrow range of acceptable Black roles, echoing the contradictory elements of Rinehart in *Invisible Man* as a site of resistance and as the capitulation of Black stereotypes imagined by the white (reading) public.⁷ *Erasure* explicitly comments on this process in Ellison’s negotiations with his agent. As Ellison learns more

about the success of *We's Lives in Da Ghetto*, he begins to understand that “selling out” his artistic principles—invariably bound to his nonracial aesthetics—ironically means that he must both acknowledge and exploit his “race”. When his literary agent Yul tells him that the literary market perceives him as “not black enough,” Ellison asks, “How do they even know I’m black? What does it matter?” (43). Yul’s response suggests that Ellison embodies an essential “blackness” that he fails to realize, commenting, without irony: “They know because of the photo on your first book. They know because they’ve seen you. They know because you’re black, for crying out loud” (42). These comments also echo a review of Ellison’s reworking of Aeschylus’ *The Persians*, in which the reviewer confesses that he “is lost to understand what [it] has to do with the African American experience” (2). Whereas Ellis proclaims that “NBA artists are now defining blacks in black contexts” and “have liberated themselves from both white envy and self-hate” (238), both of these passages from *Erasure* reminds readers of the slippage between definitions of “blackness” as articulated from both “white” and “black” contexts, and the possibility that shifting racial discourses, as identified by Gilroy and other postmodern theorists of “race,” may in fact obscure residual racism. NBA artists and entrepreneurs such as Russell Simmons may “[sell] to pop America what they thought was exclusively black” and generate their “own definitions of blackness no matter how loudly either white or black people may complain” (241), but *Erasure* suggests that the real persistence of an “ethos of white disbelief in black humanity” (Dyson 219) also has the potential to slip into ostensibly “black” art through contemporary modes of literary consumption.

In addition to representing these contemporary racialist tendencies in literary production and consumption of “blackness,” Everett also historicizes his critique, signifying on his reader’s complicity in a legacy of racialized consumption. The agents, reviewers and critics in the novel represent the arbiters of the literary market and, very often, obliquely reference historically “white” perceptions of African American art. The allusions here to overdetermined Black identities in fact have specific antecedents in the realist racial paradigms at the turn of the twentieth century. Most notable, William Dean Howells famously praised Paul Laurence Dunbar for his poetry collection *Majors and Minors*, reducing his aesthetics to a “natural” outgrowth of his racial predisposition toward vernacular language. In his review, Howells identifies Dunbar as a man of “pure African type” by the frontispiece printed in the volume (Jarrett, *Deans* 31), and he remarks that Dunbar’s poetry represents an extraordinarily rare example of “white thinking and white feeling in a black man” (Jarrett, “We Must,” 317). Such evaluations by esteemed white literary critics and editors shape both the aesthetic expectations and modes of consumption of African American texts. In contrast to the “white thinking and white feeling” of his “major” verses, Dunbar’s “minor” verses were in a form of African American vernacular, considered by Howells and his ilk to be the authentic “black” language natural to African physiognomy. In this formulation, Dunbar’s work is at any moment all “white,” marking Dunbar as an aberration of his “race,” or all “black,” assuming the “natural”

talents of his “race,” but never both at the same time.

The reference to Ellison’s publicity photos in his dust jackets, mentioned above, echoes this naturalist line of racial determinism and suggest their residual influence over the denial of a fully realized Black cultural agency. In contemporary multicultural markets, as Paul Gilroy explains, this kind of “absolutism...is blindly endorsed by cultural institutions that fall back on an ossified sense of ethnic difference as a means to rationalize their own practices and judgments in a parody of pluralism which perversely endorses segregation” (253). At least superficially, the reception of Ellison’s fiction in *Erasure* is not far removed from Howell’s assessment of Dunbar’s work based on “phenotype and physiognomy” (Jarrett 31) in that both presume a writer with identifiable “black” physical features naturally inherits a particular kind of aesthetic. Ellison’s scenario operates on a much subtler level, however, in a contemporary American society that by and large subsumes “white thinking and white feeling” under an ostensibly nonracial designation of a generic culture of commodifiable “difference.” Thus, the arbiters of culture, who are represented in *Erasure* by white literary agents, film producers, academics, and game-show hosts, derive their power from both a dissociation of themselves from an oppressive whiteness and a commercially and intellectually sanctioned “ghettoizing” of black cultures. Since no one in the novel ever accuses Ellison of acting “white,” or, in Trey Ellis’ words, of being one of the “self-deluding cultural mulattoes [who] desperately fantasize themselves the children of William F. Buckley” (235), *Erasure* suggests that consumer culture has effectively effaced itself of “white” racial specificity and parodied the “pluralism” it purports to embrace. For Ellison to succeed commercially he must ironically then become more “black,” or, from the perspective of his agent and colleagues, he may as well not exist at all.

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Everett continues to spoof this logic throughout the novel, comically revealing the absurdity of racial determinism in an ostensibly postracial society. In the *Appropos de bottes* section, one of *Erasure*’s most notable metanarratives, Tom Wahzetepe finds himself on the gameshow “Virtute et Armis,” competing against Hal Dullard, a white “social worker and part-time blues musician” (174). When he arrives at the set, a cosmetologist puts makeup on his face, since he “ain’t quite dark enough” (173). During the game, the host, Jack Spades, throws Dullard soft questions, which he inevitably answers incorrectly, while Tom, who realizes the game is fixed, continues to shock the audience with correct responses to questions about obscure facts and mathematical formulas. When Tom recites Emerson’s “Self-Reliance” in the final question, the “all white, all blond” audience suddenly dies, unable to comprehend how the “chocolate brown” contestant could win the rigged competition.

His emphasis on the audience’s death here parallels the responses by Ellison’s agent and his colleagues throughout the novel, who can’t comprehend how a phenotypically “black” man can write about and perform out of their limited range of comprehensible “black” identities. Indeed, the confusion surrounding these complex Black subjects who do not subscribe to “ethnically identifiable idioms” contrasts

sharply with the readers determined certainty of the “real, earthy, gutsy” people like Juanita Mae Jenkins, the characters of *My Pafology*, and eventually Stagg R. Lee (217). In this sense, *Erasure* is a kind of NBA text, a veritable pastiche of competing conceptions of “blackness,” but it also obliquely comments on the relationship between the theoretical and material positions of the “cultural mulatto” in consumer culture: those who are incomprehensible to the public are erased, while those who are familiar stereotypes of “authentic” blackness are publically praised and rewarded. Their recognition and remuneration give the appearance of the acceptance of heterogeneous Black subjects, but in *Erasure*, at least, they are overdetermined echoes of invisibility.

While Percival Everett’s career generally, and *Erasure* in particular, are illustrative of the NBA “mixing” that has to a degree ameliorated issues surrounding Black invisibility, I hope to have shown that the novel also problematizes the high visibility of Black subjects in contemporary consumer culture and cautions against hasty declarations of postraciality based on commercial success. Although some critics have suggested that *Erasure* is less about “race” than it is about “genre, mimesis, and authorial identity” (Russett 358), it would also be a mistake to ignore the plot’s movement toward “race” as its leit-motif by the end of the novel. Indeed, the novel’s intersecting plots and metanarratives seem to hinge upon Ellison’s decision to perform a kind of “blackness” that he knows is fraught with contradiction but that will nonetheless be publically rewarded. Nonetheless, I do not think that one can approach the novel’s aesthetics without at least asking what bearing that narrative trajectory has on the novel’s attention to other issues, including its moving family narrative and meditations on suffering and loss. Whereas the NBA, Post-Soul Aesthetics, and other Black aesthetic movements have established powerful and pervasive counter-hegemonic artistic traditions, *Erasure* interrogates the parameters of these traditions, asking whether a “supersophisticated black art that either expand[s] or explode[s] the old definitions of blackness” is really enough to expose a contemporary racism that has itself become largely “invisible.” Concluding with the line *hypotheses non fingo*—Isaac Newton’s response to public pressure to explain the origins of gravitational pull—*Erasure* does not presume to have a better answer. It does, however, suggest that the pervasiveness of racialist consumption no longer forces the “invisible man” envisioned by Ralph Ellison back into a hole, but now instead, evidenced by the “erasure” of Thelonious Ellison by his alter-ego Stagg R. Lee, flushes him out to dispel his illusions in the most public of places.

NOTES

1. Werner Sollors offers an authoritative and comprehensive study of racial ambiguity and the parameters of literary interracial relationships in *Neither Black Nor White Yet Both: Thematic Explorations of Interracial Literature*. In contrast to my emphasis on Ellison’s explorations of notions of racial authenticity, Sollors recognizes the ways in which Ellison critiques the damaging effects of such notions, based on myths of racial purity. In particular, Sollors sees Ellison’s character Jim Trueblood,

whose fear of “miscegenation” leads to rape and incest fantasies, as the embodiment of the tensions produced by these myths. For Sollors, this episode exposes the violence of incest by depicting it as rape and suggests that the conflation of incest and “miscegenation” motifs comments on the power relations and interracial relationships between slave masters and women of color.

2. For more on Ellison’s use of Black male archetypes, see Fleming.
3. I use the term “signifying” throughout this essay in line with the rhetorical strategy of signifyin(g) theorized by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. In particular, I employ it as an “indirect form of communication, as a troping” that plays with and parodies rhetorical structures as a means of critique and a method of asserting rhetorical agency (68-69). In *Invisible Man*, the narrator’s grandfather sees such play and performance as a way to leverage against white racist discourse and social organization. By extension, I use the concept of signifyin(g) to discuss the relationship between author, reader, and text, particularly in moments when the rhetorical strategy employed by the author uncovers or parodies the racialist assumptions of the reader as a method of critique.
4. Trey Ellis’s essay “The New Black Aesthetic” is often cited as the progenitor of the Post-Soul movement, used to describe a range of African American artistic production that employs but also extends and critiques postmodern aesthetic practices. Marc Anthony Neale provides a generally comprehensive study of the emergence of this movement in *Soul Babies: Black Popular Culture and the Post Soul Aesthetic*. The *African American Review* also recently published a special issue dedicated to the Post Soul aesthetic movement (41.4 [Winter 2007]).
5. For a discussion of these biographical parallels between Everett’s career and *Erasure*, see Russett.
6. Stagger Leigh was actually Lee Sheldon, a St. Louis cab driver and purported pimp who shot and killed William Lyons in 1895. For an overview of his history and mythology, see Brown.
7. My analysis does not preclude black readership, but addresses Everett’s specific critique of white readers, agents, and reviewers in *Erasure*. For an overview of African American reading practices in contrast to white readers, see Dietzel.

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