Antiessentialist Form: The Bebop Effect of Percival Everett's *Erasure*

JOHN BROOKS

THE ONLY THING CONSISTENT ABOUT THE BODY OF WORK PERCIVAL Everett has produced since the publication of his first novel, *Suder* (1983), is its generic inconsistency. Following *Suder*, Everett wrote two other novels and a collection of short stories titled *The Weather and Women Treat Me Fair* (1987), after which he published two novels that refashioned Greek myths—*Zulus* and *For Her Dark Skin*, both of which he released in 1990. He then changed directions by writing *The One That Got Away* (1992), a children's book illustrated by Dirk Zimmer that tells the story of three cowboys who round up escaped (number) 1s. After then publishing two Westerns, *God's Country* (1994) and *Watershed* (1996), Everett released *Big Picture* (1996), his second book of short stories. In addition to more novels, Everett then added to his canon a novella titled *Grand Canyon, Inc.* (2001), the introduction to an edition of *The Jefferson Bible* (2004), and his first collection of poetry, *Re: R (Gesture)* (2006), which features one of his original paintings on the front cover. As of 2017, when Everett published his most recent novel, *So Much Blue*, his literary enterprise included twenty novels, four books of poetry, three short-story collections, a novella, and a children's book.[1]

Within this disparate literary trajectory, Everett's 2001 novel *Erasure* can be read as a commentary on the limitations of genre and the idea of classification. Over the course of the novel, Everett challenges his readers' expectations about the limits of literary categories, especially expectations that cultural groupings like "African American literature" have come to generate, such as the idea that a "black identity" exists to be represented in literature (and that it is the black author's responsibility to do so). By referring to the musical strategies of bebop jazz and abstracting the forms, styles, and themes that might be expected of a novel written by an American of Afri-

JOHN BROOKS is a postdoctoral fellow at the Bill and Carol Fox Center for Humanistic Inquiry at Emory University. His main research interests are abstractionist and experimental aesthetics in contemporary African American literature and performance, particularly as they pertain to visual and auditory representations of race.

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can descent, Everett mixes genres to create a sensibility I call disharmonious harmony, a dissonance that deconstructs notions of paradigmatic identities. *Erasure* destabilizes the idea of literary category and prompts critical inquiry into the legitimacy of racial representation, provoking its reader to confront the racial discourse that supplements processes of reading and interpretation.

Erasure unfolds as a series of knotty and fragmented entries in the journal of Thelonious "Monk" Ellison, a middle-aged African American who grapples with a professional dilemma: as a little-respected writer of experimental fiction, he struggles to reconcile his sense of artistic integrity with his desire to have a reading public celebrate him as a novelist. As editors and publishers tell Monk repeatedly, he has received little commercial success because many readers feel his novels are "not black enough" (43); however, he refuses to publish fiction that reduces race to stereotype. Much to Monk's vexation, the author Juanita Mae Jenkins's novel *We's Lives in Da Ghetto* is acclaimed as a realistic portrayal of African American experience for doing precisely this. To expose the danger of her work, which fortifies racial stereotypes in the minds of its readers, Monk writes a parody of *We's Lives in Da Ghetto* that he titles *My Pafology* (quickly renamed *Fuck* to augment the work's obscenity) and publishes under the pseudonym Stagg R. Leigh. The second half of *Erasure* focuses on the unexpected success that Monk's parody receives. Written as a catalog of stereotypes exaggerated to their most transparent and absurd form, *Fuck* highlights the difference between Monk's life as an American of African descent and the stereotypical experiences that books like Jenkins's attribute to him; however, readers and critics alike endorse the content of his novel as an authentic portrait of African American life. Ironically, with the overnight success of *Fuck*, Monk becomes the one who reaps profits and appears on television as an author of fiction featuring racial stereotypes. As his success grows, and as he disguises himself as Stagg with increasing frequency, he begins to lose his sense of autonomy. The psychological anguish caused by his disguise and by the success of his novel—which ultimately wins a National Book Award—drives him toward breakdown at *Erasure*'s abrupt conclusion.

Critics of *Erasure* have approached the novel in two ways, one of which is to contrast the characters of Monk and Van Go Jenkins, the protagonist of *Fuck*. Chauncey Ridley, for example, reads Van Go as a generic semblance of black life that mass media reproduces as a substitute for "real black folk," which Monk embodies (101–02). Similarly, Anthony Stewart explores the ways Van Go is the "polar opposite" of Monk (170). A second approach tends to discuss how *Erasure* relates to other works of fiction, most routinely how *Fuck* signifies on Richard Wright's *Native Son* (Gysin 67; Eaton 226; Russett 365). In a related vein, Scott Thomas Gibson has argued that Everett revises the modernist trope of black invisibility famously rendered by Ralph Ellison in *Invisible Man* (354), Joe Weixlmann has traced Everett's references to Chester Himes's *If He Hollers Let Him Go*, and Brian Yost has characterized Monk as a descendent of Amiri Baraka specifically and the black arts movement more generally (1325–27).

Although these readings have provided valuable insight into *Erasure*, they do not take into account Everett's allusion to 1940s jazz and thus overlook the musical dimension of the novel, an oversight that would be more understandable had Everett not named his protagonist after Thelonious Monk, a jazz musician renowned for his unique style and role in the founding of bebop. This allusion invites a new perspective on *Erasure*, one that moves beyond examinations of racial binarism and efforts to locate the novel in a tradition of African American literature, both of which the thematic concerns and formal experimentations of Everett's novel destabilize.[2]

Through its references to bebop, this essay explores the way subversive artistic strategies might disarticulate processes of categorization, an effect, Everett emphasizes in *Erasure*, that stretches beyond the domain of narrative—both to the political categories of the marketplace, which are often used to create divisions and classifications that determine value within a hierarchy, and to cultural categories such as African American identity and black style.[3] Because many of Everett's digressions address the way misrecognitions and assumptions color cultural understandings of race, and because a number of his thought experiments concern ways to challenge these misrecognitions and assumptions, his interrogation of categorical limits must be considered alongside his broader focus: the patterns of thought that generalize in order to classify and order human bodies.

In his arguments against ethnic absolutism and racial essentialism, Paul Gilroy frames black music as a counterculture of modernity, or a political sensibility that critiques the rigidity of modernity's discourse of authenticity and identity. Black music, for Gilroy, disrupts these notions and models a way of understanding race and identity as neither fixed nor culturally constructed but "lived as a coherent (if not always stable) experiential sense of self" (*Black Atlantic* 102). This coherent but not always stable self is, as we shall see, the thematic and formal concern of *Erasure*.

Gilroy offers specific praise to "the anti-assimilationist unintelligibility of bebop in the forties," which he characterizes as simultaneously American and black, a pairing he presents as an ontological contradiction (100). In an interpretation that brings together the work of Lorenzo Thomas, Houston A. Baker, Jr., and Eric Lott, Mark Osteen amplifies this claim, noting that bebop compositions evolved by recomposing popular songs and are thus part of and apart from that tradition. Bebop musicians' experimentations turned such music on itself and subverted the expectations of those who were familiar with it, in effect making the music unrecognizable within the tradition from which it had sprung (94–96). Osteen's characterization captures the paradox of bebop: at once African American and antiessentialist, bebop embodies the rich contradiction that, Gilroy asserts, allows black music to displace notions of authenticity in favor of "self-fashioning and communal liberation" ("It Ain't Where You're From" 13). Margo Natalie Crawford has termed such aesthetic ambitions "black post-blackness," a phrase she uses to describe the work of some contemporary artists who turn away from extant notions of blackness while still finding value in complex engagements with its strategic abstractions, including explorations of blackness as a process or as a structure of feeling.[4] Improvisation and experimentation are not just musical conventions, such analyses indicate, but strategies of a deconstructive sensibility that questions the conceptual validity of the categories that modernity produces and reifies, all while continuously reconfiguring the meaning of blackness.[5]

By evoking bebop as a cognate expression of racial subversion achieved through technical innovation, Everett takes up this deconstructive sensibility and prompts the reader of *Erasure* to question the limits of a categorical thinking that results in generalized classifications. Because of the conversation that develops between the novel and the subversive, reflexive sensibility of bebop, I describe this sensibility as the author's bebop effect. By calling into question the notion of a paradigmatic racial literary voice, such as the one that fictional critics and readers believe *We's Lives in Da Ghetto* to have realized, Everett's bebop effect challenges not only his reader's expectations of race but also the genre of the novel itself. If devices of racial legitimation make bodies meaningful by giving them specific qualities (a law of genre not to be broken), then both the textual structure and the characters of *Erasure* trouble racial catego-

ries and expose how authoritarian cultural apparatuses reinforce imaginary blackness, one-dimensional ways of recognizing and knowing difference. Instead of validating any singular racial experience, thereby reinforcing the fantasy of a stable culture and thus preserving the authoritarian status of whiteness by diminishing the cultural viability of nonwhite groups, Everett renders the signs of race illegible.

I do not mean to say that *Erasure* sheds its fundamental relation to blackness. Instead, with Gilroy and Crawford in mind, I argue that the troubling of categorical thought has less to do with the announcement of a distinct and essential racial experience than with blackness's refiguration as a fugitive mode of thought and expression. Here, I draw on Fred Moten's recalibration of blackness as a disposition that refuses to acknowledge tenets of power—such as racial categories—and that, further, is predisposed to upset such structures' part in the preservation of social order.[6] In *Erasure*, instead of endorsing bebop jazz or African American literature as a product of a racial community, or as a collective and repeated philosophical expression out of which a careful critic could extract a master code for the race, Everett characterizes blackness as a mode of being in relation to the racial episteme of the twentieth century. His aesthetic defamiliarizes blackness, presenting it as nothing other than an attitude critical of delimiting racial discourse, which is to say that bebop's effects, for Everett, are audiovisual signs for the activity of this blackness, an activity through which he aspires to produce a disorienting sensibility that challenges the reader's complicity with racial discourse.

Straight, No Chaser: The Relation of Commercialization to Genre and Race

Although jazz performers are continuously reevaluating the conventions that shape their genre, bebop's reflexivity and outright refusal to accommodate audience expectations are historically distinct, as Scott DeVeaux notes in his characterization of bebop's relation to the jazz that preceded it:

> As a music created for immediate consumption through commercial channels [jazz] had depended directly upon audience approval. Suddenly, with bebop, the terms of the relationship seem reversed: artists, acting on their own initiative, force radical and disorienting innovations upon a reluctant and bewildered audience, in this way guaranteeing a minority role in American culture for jazz as "avant-garde" art. (8)

By troubling the cultural notions through which a listening public could determine what counted as legitimate jazz, bebop produced a noticeable (if unmeasurable) effect on its audience's perception of the music as a genre.[7] The resultant music, a performance constructed in dialogue with itself, drew its listeners' attention to the cultural expectations that shaped musical convention and that limited aesthetic possibilities, challenging the very category of the music by questioning the components that determined its form, style, and purpose. If bebop was a reaction against the way jazz was hardening into a tradition and succumbing to commercial constraints, it was not simply the logical conclusion of early-twentieth-century jazz style or even an evolution of it. As DeVeaux clarifies, the jazz of the 1940s is recognizable as jazz today not because it satisfied the historical moment's criteria of the musical genre; rather, we consider bebop a form of jazz because the criteria for what constituted jazz evolved as an effect of bebop's ethos of musical subversion (6).

While beboppers expanded the public's notion of acceptable cultural and musical practice by rebelling against the idea of the song, their performances also challenged the devices of racial legitimation that gave shape to the period's racial episteme. As Amiri Baraka has explained, bebop

performers were in part reacting to the way that, "[p]hilosophically, swing sought to involve the black culture in a platonic social blandness that would erase it forever, replacing it with the socio-cultural compromise of the 'jazzed-up' popular song: a compromise whose most significant stance was finally catatonia and noncommunication" (188). Whereas the musical techniques that distinguish jazz evolved out of the black American musical folkways, the commercial pressure of the swing era often diminished the relevance of folk tropes like improvisation, call-and-response patterns, syncopation, and vocalized timbre. The flooding of the marketplace with dance-oriented white jazz bands threatened to erase these expressive origins and, along with them, the employment opportunities that many African American musicians had found in jazz. Moreover, DeVeaux notes, those who "traded on their musical culture for personal gain in the marketplace," like Jenkins in *We's Lives in Da Ghetto*, "inevitably found themselves boxed in and belittled by pervasive racial stereotypes" (62–63). Much to beboppers' dismay, the idea of African American entertainment often conjured images of minstrelsy in the popular imagination of the 1940s, Ingrid Monson explains, and jazz risked exacerbating such stereotypes (421). For this very reason, according to Gutherie P. Ramsey, many musicians self-consciously developed a subversive and expectation-challenging style of performance (106). This does not mean that bebop was a musical solution to a social problem; rather, the musicians who sought to perform outside the increasingly narrow conventions of commercialized jazz were also recalibrating cultural notions of an imaginary blackness.

Having been rejected by editors and readers for not writing "the true, gritty real stories of black life" (2), Monk also comes to feel the consequences of commercialization; in his case it is authoritarian cultural apparatuses like the publishing industry that reinforce narrow, race-based categories like African American literature. After receiving this very critique from a book agent at a party, Monk tells him, "I was living a *black* life, far blacker than he could ever know, that I had lived one, that I would be living one" (2), but this explanation has no effect. The book agent's quick dismissal of any American author of African descent whose subject lacks African American stereotypes illustrates the enormity of the abyss between Monk's lived experience and the experiences others attribute to him based on the color of his skin. It is in this abyss that Monk loses his self-sovereignty, his ability to explore identity as a process of self-making through social life or, since he is a writer, through narrative experimentation and expression, others having come to recognize him only as part of a larger—and essentially static—racial group. As he discovers while perusing the shelves of a bookstore in search of his own publications, his identity is less a self-created sense of individuality than a one-dimensional projection on which others are able to trade:

> I decided to see if the store had any of my books. . . . I went to Literature and did not see me. I went to Contemporary Fiction and did not find me, but when I fell back a couple of steps I found a section called African American Studies and there, arranged alphabetically and neatly, read *undisturbed*, were four of my books including my *Persians* of which the only thing ostensibly African American was my jacket photograph. I became quickly irate, my pulse speeding up, my brow furrowing. (28)

The language with which Monk narrates his scrutiny of the bookstore shelves signifies the limits that categorical capture places on expressionistic possibilities. Monk characterizes his search for his books as an ontological process, one that likens his novels to a version of himself: "I . . . did not see me" and "I . . . did not find me" sharply contrast with the passive construction in which he depicts the

provoking discovery that the bookstore has confined his works to the single section of texts it groups as African American Studies in spite of their irrelevance to the conventions that potential readers may associate with that categorization. In the eyes of the publishing industry, Monk is recognizable only as an African American author, whose life and experiences must resemble the prepackaged stereotypes such a category signifies in the popular imaginary. His experience in the bookstore recalls the psychological torment experienced by the target of racial hailing in Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* (89): as Monk's pulse speeds up, as his brow furrows, what we might call his artistic-bodily schema collapses and gives way, in Fanon's words, to "an epidermal racial schema" (92).[8]

Through his disorienting experimentation in *Erasure*, Everett responds to the limited category of fiction to which Monk is confined, as well as to the imagined notion of blackness that it helps to reinforce—the "true, gritty real stories of black life" that editors and readers demand from Monk. By reflexively pushing against the limits of genre and unsettling his readers' expectations, Everett disputes the racial knowledges that categorical identities like "African American author" have come to signify. Throughout *Erasure*, Everett prompts readers to contemplate the generic conventions of the novel—and, by extension, the limits that genre imposes as a means of categorical capture—by blatantly disrupting the story Monk is trying to tell with nonnarrative digressions. *Erasure* consists of Monk's journal entries, but the journal contains an academic paper titled "F/V: A Novel Excerpt" that deconstructs the opening line of Roland Barthes's *S/Z* (14–17), as well as a short story in which an African American character enters a game show—and defeats his white competitor—under the name Tom Wahzetepe (169–78). Titled "Àppropos de bottes" ("On the Subject of Boots"), this short story derives its name from an archaic French phrase indicating an abrupt and arbitrary change of subject, effectively announcing its function as a narrative disruption. The most significant digression, however, is *Fuck*, which Everett includes in its sixty-eight-page entirety (63–131). Interspersed among these larger digressions are a number of smaller disruptive texts, including the protagonist's résumé, several biographical sketches, a number of interview excerpts, book reviews for *We's Lives in Da Ghetto* and *Fuck*, a collection of letters between his deceased father and a woman with whom he was having an affair, conversations between imaginary and historical persons, short-story ideas, and musings on woodworking, fly-fishing, and literary theory.

Such a disruptive, pace-changing technique may not seem specific to the bebop idiom, or even to jazz writing more generally; however, the way Everett enacts structural discontinuity as a means of questioning imaginary blackness marks his novel's participation in a sensibility of bebop experimentation. Signaled by changes in typeface, point size, line length, and line spacing, the structural digressions of *Erasure* create tension between the novel's primary narrative voice—Monk's first-person journal—and the voices belonging to the characters of its numerous interludes. By shifting from journal narration to a professional mode of self-branding in the résumé Monk shares while seeking temporary work at the American University in Washington, DC, for example, Everett disrupts the steadiness of the text's longer, expressive sentences with short and fragmented statements (55). The contrast between Monk's controlled, erudite tone and the dully factual, incomplete sentences of his résumé is jarring, as is the contrast between our narrator's journal entries and his jargon-heavy academic paper, not to mention the profanity-laced monologues of Van Go Jenkins. By unpredictably switching point of view and tone, as well as narrative and fictional worlds, *Erasure* enacts textually bebop's primary impulse,

as DeVeaux characterizes it: "The bopping is inseparable from the stopping—the artful disruption of the natural expectation of continuity" (267–68). By constantly disrupting expectations and refusing internal continuity, Everett prompts his reader to question where narration ends and other modes of written communication begin, where Monk stops and something (or someone) new starts.

Because Monk characterizes himself against the transparently stereotypical representations in Jenkins's novel, it may be tempting to read his character as an authentic representation of African American life, as some critics of *Erasure* have done. It may also be tempting to read the different African American representations in *Erasure* as Everett's way of legitimating a variety of black experiences. However, the structural unpredictability of the novel places each representational possibility in tension with the others, putting strain on the idea of blackness and destabilizing the notion of racially derived identity. Indeed, although the novel's chapter partitions and, within each individual chapter, section breaks may seem to preserve the categorical boundaries of *Erasure* and its characters, Everett's unpredictable narrative digressions put pressure on the limits that the reader may expect to demarcate distinct generic groupings. While Everett is certainly concerned with delegitimizing Jenkins's stereotypical representation of blackness, the structure of *Erasure* also delegitimizes Monk's self-characterization as a universal representation of racial experience. The discontinuity of the novel challenges the reader's complicity with racial discourse by calling into question the possibility of racial representation.

Recognizing Everett's narrative experimentation as a bebop effect—rather than a broader modernist or postmodernist technique—highlights how the novel's deconstructive sensibilities erode the culturally impermeable notions of racial identity, those reinforced as imaginary blackness by the authoritarian cultural apparatuses with which Monk struggles. Like the bebop musician, who by questioning the idea of the song also broadened the imagined notions of its performers' racial identities, Everett unsettles his readers' expectations of the "African American novel" in order to prompt critical inquiry into the legitimacy of the racial representation that readers may expect from such a category. When an individual's identity is based solely on racial characteristics—as Monk's was by the bookstore—self-sovereignty is stolen and a voice muted. Accordingly, the figuration of any racial identity as authentic and paradigmatic is inherently problematic because the same operation that reduces an individual to a racial type also generalizes (and erases) the historical and political processes against which a racialized subject fights. Everett's bebop effect thus not only corrects the stereotypical representations found in novels like Jenkins's but also assaults the idea of representation itself by producing a nonrepresentation of race.

Thelonious Himselves: Narrative's Verticality and Disharmonious Harmony

Like Everett's Monk, the bebop pioneer Thelonious Monk launched an assault on the idea of representation. Dubbed the "high priest of bop" in the late 1940s, Monk is recognized today by jazz critics as one of the founders of modern jazz. Listeners did not always appreciate his music during his lifetime, as is evident from early reviews, such as one in *Down Beat* magazine that expressed impatience with the "far-fetched type of composition and inventiveness which are displayed by the much publicized Monk for a very simple reason. Nothing happens" (Review), but he undoubtedly helped to demarcate bebop. Indeed, in 1962 André Hodeir looked beyond Monk's unorthodox technique to praise his contribution to reinventing traditional musical structures (156–77). Likewise, Ran Blake's

1982 analysis of Monk's effect on the jazz tradition, in which he argues that the jazzman's "approach to the keyboard was a radical departure from what had gone before, and he unquestionably qualifies as one of the great jazz innovators," reframes the significance of his distinct musical style (24). Most recently, Robin D. G. Kelley's 2010 biography, *Thelonious Monk: The Life and Times of an American Original*, celebrates in detail Monk's influence within the black radical tradition.

One of Monk's biggest contributions to bebop was his unique sense of jazz harmony, a musical process that has significant import for Everett's novel. Like a progression of musical notes, narrative is said to move along a horizontal axis, developing in time as the plot progresses. However, the identity-making experiments and dense allusions of *Erasure* give the novel a vertical orientation that allows Everett to expand the space in which his characters move by compounding and multiplying their personalities the way a bebop composer like Thelonious Monk layers different notes of a scale to build harmonic structures. Monk's identity confusion begins in the opening pages of the novel when he chooses to represent himself as more than just an author: "I will be something else, if not instead, then in addition, and that shall be a son, a brother, a fisherman, an art lover, a woodworker" (1). By layering the pseudonymous Stagg on top of his narrator's identity performances, then complicating both characters with nondiegetic (and sometimes contradictory) biographical documents and ideas for experimental short stories, as well as allusions to historical personalities or characters not belonging to *Erasure*'s milieu, Everett establishes a sense of harmonization among the many voices of his narrator's journal. The narrative element of *Erasure* is still moving always forward, but the protagonist's polyphonic identity—the novel's vertical orientation—makes the story resemble less a singular strand than a tapestry of tensely woven yarns, each of which influences the reader's engagement and understanding of its character's identity (especially in terms of Monk's inclusion in any particular racial category).

The value of bebop as a tool for interpreting Everett's novel hinges on Thelonious Monk's unique and experimental approach to harmony, which, as his biographer Thomas Fitterling puts it, resulted often in "a peculiarly disharmonious harmony" (99–100). Because his signature sound is largely indebted to his reliance on the whole-tone or augmented scale, a scale in which each note is separated from the next by the interval of a whole step, Monk's music (whether composed or improvised) often has a wandering, indistinct quality in which no single tone stands out from the others.[9] As a scale with no semitones, the whole-tone scale produces a harmonic and melodic feel that differs from the modal music with which the Western ear is familiar, in particular the patterns of notes that make up the Ionian, or major, scale and the Aeolian, or minor, scale. Whereas C major includes the pitches C, D, E, F, G, A, and B, the whole-tone scale in the same key unfolds as C, D, E, F♯/G♭, G♯/A♭, A♯/B♭. The first three pitches of the whole-tone scale match the familiar major scale; however, each note in the second half of the scale is in a tritonic relation to one of its predecessors (F♯/G♭ with C, G♯/A♭ with D, A♯/B♭ with E).[10] The extreme dissonance of these tritonic relations generates the disharmonious harmonies of Thelonious Monk.

In *Erasure*, Monk's sense of disharmonious harmonic arrangement contributes to Everett's bebop effect because it further grounds his work's concern with the limits of categories and with genre in the novel's formal structure, making the text into a kind of musical score. The disharmonious, bebop sensibility inherent to the polyphonic arrangement of identity types becomes clearer as Monk's investment in his performance grows and he begins to wonder whether Stagg

is displacing his sense of self. Monk begins to worry about where his identity, like the individual yet indistinct notes of bebop's wholetone scale, stops and his construction begins. If we recognize Monk's musical-narrative function as the novel's root note, or tonal center, each of the competing identities emerges as the other half of a (dissonant) harmonic relation. The intervallic arrangement of these categorically figured identity types always places them in tension, although some figurations may feel sonorous, such as the relation of Monk's journalistic self-characterizations to the versions of himself he presents in his résumé or author biographies; alternatively, Monk's harmonic relation to Stagg, for instance, seems distinctly tritonic, since their categorically driven identity types exist in extreme dissonance.

The critical relation Theodor Adorno sees between harmony and dissonance opens this discordant identity arrangement to analysis. In Adorno's theorization, harmony "presents what is not reconciled as reconciled," making dissonance "the truth about harmony" (151). For Adorno, discontinuity is a sign of the irreconcilability of the part and the whole, whereas harmony (or its appearance) is the imposition of order on disorder. Focusing interpretation on the dissonance created by the contrasting identity types of *Erasure*, rather than comparing the legitimacy of one identity category with that of another, clarifies how the disharmonious-harmonic arrangements that Everett creates trouble the identity boundaries on which imaginary blackness depends.

At several points toward the conclusion of *Erasure*, Everett amplifies the dissonance between Monk and his alter ego. During such moments, Monk slips between the individual notes of the text's vertical dimension and finds himself "in the break,"[11] being neither himself nor one of the stereotypical roles he created for himself. For example, as the novel progresses, he begins to fear that his "charade might well turn out of hand and that [he] would slip into an actual condition of dual personalities" (238). This fear arrives perhaps too late, as he feels an increasingly dissociated sense of self, even representing his given name, nickname, and pseudonym as separate selves: "Thelonious and Monk and Stagg Leigh made the trip to New York together, on the same flight and, sadly, in the same seat" (237). He soon wonders, "Had I by annihilating my own presence actually asserted the individuality of Stagg Leigh?" (248). Further, he asks, "What would happen if I tried holding my breath, if I had to come up for air? Would I have to kill Stagg to silence him? And what did it mean that I could put those questions to myself?" (248). As the multiple narratives Monk writes for himself at the beginning of the novel, those of "a son, a brother, a fisherman, an art lover, a woodworker" (1), merge with those that he gives to Stagg near the end—a parolee who "[t]hey say . . . killed a man with the leather awl of a Swiss army knife" (218)—the concept of a true or definitive self becomes increasingly unstable.

Such a disharmonious harmony of narrative subjectivities deconstructs the notion of identity in *Erasure* through a series of passages in which Monk assesses how his identity is made and sustained. Preparing to receive the National Book Award for *Fuck*, Monk, disguised as Stagg, begins to suffer a dissociative break. While standing in front of his hotel bathroom mirror, he first remarks that he has two bodies, then likens compromising his writing to castrating himself (257–58). Monk's meditation on his multiple selves repeats during the award ceremony a few pages later: "Then there was a small boy, perhaps me as a boy, and he held up a mirror so that I could see my face and it was the face of Stagg Leigh" (264). Both mirrors give Monk the chance to enter into a daguerreologue, a literal and metaphoric reflection on his performance of another self, Stagg, but they also capture, reproduce, and ultimately extend Monk in a way that reveals both a conceptu-

ally visible manifestation of polyphonic identity and, more important, the gaps between each of the categorical bodies that Monk has crafted of and for himself.

As we see in the dissonance between Monk and his alter egos, which closely resembles Adorno's understanding of dissonance as the truth of harmony, Everett's bebop effect insists that the irresolution of Monk's racial identity is the truth of categorical thought, that the apparent cultural harmony of imaginary blackness is actually the imposition of delimiting boundaries that the individual always exceeds. For Everett, blackness manifests itself in the restless and discordant irresolution of the racial body, but only as the very discontinuity that prompts his reader to police the legitimacy of any categorical identity type.

Monk's breakdown continues as he comes to believe he has to silence Stagg—"I had to defeat myself to save my self, my own identity" (259), he tells himself—but he has trouble recognizing which distillation of his discordant polyphony constitutes his self and which part of it he seeks to destroy. A close reading of this line reveals a subtle separation of "self" as a concept: Monk feels he has to kill "myself" in order to save "my self," which his language figures as a possession or attribute separate from "myself," his sense of an innate and consistent personhood. Monk's "self" is thus an object he has already somehow lost. Such a critical formulation of identity indicates that Monk can—and perhaps must—do without "my self" or "my own identity"; or, perhaps, that he has no self apart from the subjects he has constructed, a condition that helps to fortify his disharmonious harmonic identity as a sort of nonself, a category-escaping figuration that resonates with Everett's refusal to script race as recognizable.

Such questions regarding the starting and stopping of distinct identity performances are a product of Everett's bebop effect, in particular the pressure it puts on the limits that seem to demarcate distinct generic groupings. The strongest instance of generic mixing arrives just after the aforementioned mirror scenes, at which point Everett collects his previously distinct characters in the same way that members of a jazz band regroup after a series of improvised solos in order to perform together: "Egads, I'm on television" (265), Monk's utterance at the close of *Erasure*, finds a sense of reconciliation with Tom Wahzetepe's televised, game-show success at the end of *Àppropos de bottes* (178) and Van Go Jenkins's final lines in *Fuck*: "Look at me. I on TV" (131). Monk's harsh reintegration with the other character types in *Erasure* reasserts the novel's emphasis on disharmonious harmony while applying pressure to the borders that seem to mark each character as distinct. With the pressure's sudden increase, the borders collapse and the character types bleed into each other, signaling Monk's escape from categorical belonging. Indeed, as soon as readers feel that they can recognize Monk as any particular type, his enigmatic multiplicity manifests itself most strongly. As a consequence, he undoes his own categorical belonging by exceeding the limits of categorical capture. Everett's bebop effect thus breaks the law of genre by disarticulating Monk's racial identity. If, as Jacques Derrida argues, "at the very moment that a genre or a literature is broached, at that very moment, degenerescence has begun, the end begins" (66), then Everett's bebop effect prompts the reader to conceptually dismantle the generic categories with which the modern racial episteme orders and categorizes bodies like Monk's.

In this way, *Erasure* announces that a cohesive, stable whole does not exist to be represented. In response to the popular notion that African American literature promises a paradigmatic representation of blackness, *Erasure* tells the story of Monk's disharmonious harmonic identity, an enigma of Everett's design whose activity is the unwriting, or erasure, of the possibility of its own representation.

According to such a reading, black subjectivity in the twenty-first century may be achieved not as W. E. B. Du Bois suggested in *The Souls of Black Folk* when he wrote that the free black person "began to have a dim feeling that, to attain his place in the world, he must be himself, and not another" (4). Instead, Monk must be himself *and* another (and another, and another . . .), continuously resisting identification and representation; this leads, however, to madness. Because any attempt to fashion a stable and consistent African American identity results in a construction "as real as the unreal" (264), Everett argues, his reader may understand blackness best as a shifting and multiplied (dis)harmonization of the self, always returning from being to becoming, always finding its expression at the limits of the knowledge that the modern period's racial episteme legitimates.

Misterioso: The Novelty of the Novel

Everett first published "F/V: A Novel Excerpt," the academic paper that Monk delivers to the *Noveau Roman* Society toward the beginning of *Erasure*, under his own name as a slightly longer, stand-alone article titled "F/V: Placing the Experimental Novel" in a 1999 issue of *Callaloo*. The version in *Erasure* concludes with his deconstruction of Barthes's opening lines. In the *Callaloo* edition, Everett continues by providing advice for future novelists: "What the next generation of novelists ought to do is affirm the novel's existence as novel while taking on as *stuff* the critical theory which has pretended to uncover the novel's so-called tricks" (21). This admonition, coupled with Everett's suggestion that "[t]he *new* new novel will rely less on ego, less on an attempt to establish personal existence and mark, and more on the stuff of its own fictive reality" (21), indicates that his larger concern is not the posturing of individual authors but the capacity of literature's fictive reality to provoke a critical inquiry.

Furthermore, Everett's focus on literary apparatuses like genre and canon formation highlights his assuredness that negotiations of power increasingly play out in cultural fields. The deconstructive sensibility of Everett's writing reflects this concern, questioning the categorical confines placed on *Erasure*, a work marketed as part of a tradition of African American literature despite its concern with its own classification as such. The title page and dust jacket of Everett's work may state its category of composition—*Erasure: A Novel*—and the promotional praise on its back cover may place its author "alongside Wright and Ellison," inserting the book into the tradition it pushes against; however, the deconstructive sensibility of Everett's bebop effect shows how the novel's contents render illegible the racially marked features on which such groupings depend.

By refusing to accommodate the conventional devices on which readers depend for making meaning, Everett destabilizes the law of genre and denies the expectations categorical thought advances. If, as Monk remarks at several points in *Erasure*, making meaning depends on accepting the rules governing a critical situation, then alienation as a critical gesture depends on strategically breaking such rules. As Monk notes on separate occasions, this phenomenon is understandable through a simple linguistic analogy:

> Anyone who speaks to members of his family knows that sharing a language does not mean you share the rules governing the use of the language. No matter what is said, something else is meant. . . . But since I didn't know the rules, which were forever changing, I could only know that [my sister] was trying to say something, not what that something was. (32)

> I watched his lips and realized I understood nothing [my brother] was saying. His language was not mine. His language possessed an adverbial and interrogative geometry that I could not comprehend. I could see the shapes of his meaning, even hear that his

> words meant something, but I had no idea as to the substance of his meaning. (213)

The condition Monk endures in these instances is one that *Erasure* simulates for the reader. The author aims to confuse his readers' understanding of the tradition of Western thought rather than to accommodate it, as *Fuck* (inadvertently) does for its fictional readers.

As a manifestation of fugitivity, Everett's bebop effect produces a communicative sensibility that verges on structural indecipherability at every opportunity. The jarring activity of blackness created by Everett's bebop effect prompts readers to filter and reassess their reliance on subconsciously accepted assumptions—especially those revolving around the relation between racialized individuals and the identity categories the modern racial episteme assigns them—and to consider new, more critical approaches to understanding the construction and recognition of race in the nation's political imaginary. As Monk explains while delivering "F/V: A Novel Excerpt" to the *Nouveau Roman* Society, "Embedded here is already the conclusion that there is this universal story" (17). It is through the dissonance of Everett's bebop effect that *Erasure* practices critical blackness and unwrites this conclusion about the viability of a paradigmatic African American identity.

Notes

1. Everett also has a diverse working history. Beyond writing and painting, his career has included stints as a jazz musician, a ranch worker, and a high school teacher, as well as appointments in English departments and creative writing programs at the University of Kentucky, Lexington (1985–89), the University of Notre Dame (1989–92), and the University of California, Riverside (1992–present).

2. *Erasure* could thus be located in a deep tradition of literature with formal and thematic connections to African American music, from the writing of Frederick Douglass and W. E. B. Du Bois to the blues poetry of Langston Hughes and novels such as Ellison's *Invisible Man*, Ishmael Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo*, Toni Morrison's *Jazz*, Gayle Jones's *Corregidora*, and Paul Beatty's *The White Boy Shuffle* and *Slumberland*.

3. According to Smethurst, African American artists have long been preoccupied by the unwanted, stereotypical representations of race and racial identity. He explains that while versions of the black body and black voice have always saturated the popular culture of the United States, starting in the late nineteenth century they increasingly represented African Americans as criminals or sexual predators. Framing African American modernism as a discourse on modernity, he writes that the work of African American modernists was not to write the black subject into existence but to engage the powerful and dangerous modernist tropes that already circulated in the popular imaginary (30).

4. Crawford characterizes "black post-black" aesthetics as a performance of blackness's unnaming, which she associates most strongly with twenty-first-century artists, including Everett (11–12, 67–70). However, she also exposes a historical circularity that locates the same ambitions in earlier art movements of the twentieth century. She explains that the black arts movement practiced "black post-blackness" when participants recognized the movement itself as the ethos of black style and that a number of Harlem Renaissance artists anticipated the militancy of the 1960s in their efforts to shape and unshape blackness (6, 21–22).

5. Though I do not have space to discuss them here, there are a number of nuanced interpretations of the formal interrelations between bebop jazz and African American literature. In addition to Mackey's essays "Sound and Sentiment, Sound and Symbol" and "Other: From Noun to Verb," see *Cross-Rhythms: Jazz Aesthetics in African-American Literature*, by Omry, and *The Jazz Trope: A Theory of African American Literary and Vernacular Culture*, by Hawkins, as well as the essays collected by O'Meally in *The Jazz Cadence of American Culture* and by Lock and Murray in *Thriving on a Riff: Jazz and Blues Influences in African American Literature and Film*. For analyses of writing by jazz musicians, see Edwards's *Epistrophies: Jazz and the Literary Imagination*.

6. Moten characterizes blackness as the "desire to be free, manifest as flight, as escape, as a fugitivity that may well prove to veer away even from freedom as its *telos*, [that] is indexed to anoriginal lawlessness. The predisposition to break the law is immediately disrupted by an incapacity for law, an inability both to intend the law and intend its transgression and the one who is defined by this double inability is, in a double sense, an outlaw" ("Taste" 223).

7. The subversive effect of this genre-challenging sensibility was not lost on music critics of the mid–twentieth century. Russell characterized bebop as "the music of revolt" in 1948 (202). Similarly, for Ellison, whose critical essays reveal a complex and changing relation to jazz, the effect of this stylistic challenge to the standards that came

to define jazz during the swing era amounted to nothing short of "a momentous modulation into a new key of musical sensibility; in brief, a revolution in culture" (239).

8. Fanon famously records such a moment when a white child hails him by his color—"Look! A Negro!" (89). As Fanon describes it, the target of such racial hailing comes to feel a history of race as a condition of psychological pain by means of epidermalization: "the body schema, attacked in several places, collapsed, giving way to an epidermal racial schema" (92). Fanon's account of the epidermal racial schema is momentous because it denotes a relation between recognition and racial categorization. The child's visual process connects a perception of difference in skin color to a previously established system of racial knowledge in order to identify Fanon in a particular way, in this case as representing the broadly conceived category of "Negro," which Fanon indicates carried with it the racial associations innate to the political and popular imaginary of mid-twentieth-century France.

9. Thelonious Monk's "Trinkle, Tinkle" and "Four in One" are fine examples of the whole-tone scale in action.

10. Pitches sound harmonious together when there is a simple ratio between the frequency of two notes. The ratio of two notes that are an octave apart is 2:1, and the ratio of a perfect fifth is 3:2. Tritonic relations have a ratio of 45:32, which sounds extremely discordant to the human ear. The dissonance produced in this restless interval has been symbolically associated with the devil since the early Middle Ages, sometimes being referred to as *diabolus in musica*, or "the devil in music." Tritones are often used in alarm bells or emergency sirens because of their harshness.

11. Moten has extensively theorized this jazz term in *In The Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition*.

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