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Between Authenticity and the Postracial: Cultural Trafficking and Identity in Colson Whitehead's *Sag Harbor* and Percival Everett's *Erasure*

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A Thesis Presented

By

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Chapter 1: Introduction and Context

I.   Cultural Traffic, Authenticity and the Postracial

In 2009, a year after Barack Obama was elected President of the United States, Colson Whitehead penned an Op-Ed piece for the *New York Times* entitled "The Year of Living Postracially" wherein he declared, "one year ago today, we officially became a postracial society. Fifty-three percent of the voters opted for the candidate who would be the first president of African descent, and in doing so eradicated racism forever." Whitehead's piece is bathed in irony, and the satirical editorial takes steady aim at the postracial sentiment found in America at the time--that we have somehow erased "centuries of entrenched prejudice, cultivated hatred and institutionalized dehumanization overnight" with the election of an African American president (Whitehead, "The Year"). Whitehead's editorial came just seven months after the publication of his novel *Sag Harbor*. While *Sag Harbor* is set in 1985, Whitehead infuses the story of young Benji's coming-of-age summer with the postracial concerns of the 21st century. Foremost among these postracial concerns in *Sag Harbor* are how and why cultural representations of "authentic" blackness affect the formation of an individual identity. Writing in a world where race is no longer supposed to matter, Whitehead plunges Benji into a world where race matters very much. Benji is left wondering how it matters and who he is within the paradigm established by cultural representations.

In practice, cultural authenticity often reveals a fundamental irony, as representations of the authentic are bound to be criticized as limiting or reductive, undermining their supposed "authenticity." Richard Schur suggests that authenticity in African American literature is borne out of the question of what African American literature "ought to represent about African American life" (Schur 235). Schur's suggestion here is usefully applied beyond the bounds of literature and to culture in general. Ideas about what African Americans "ought" to be hound Whitehead's young Benji. Reductive or limiting cultural representations

of blackness present unique challenges to postracial thinking. According to cultural critic Jonathan Rossing, postracialism "thwarts the articulation of a successful politics of race and disallows movement toward racial justice because it impedes discourse about race" (Rossing 45). Rossing attributes this to people putting "blind faith in grandiose ideals like equality," embracing those ideals and rejecting discourse that appears to undermine them (45). Whitehead is certainly not alone in dealing with authenticity as a challenge to individual identity, but in the still-evolving postracial world, authentic representations of what black "ought" to be may go unchallenged if Rossing's assertions hold true.

This tension between authenticity and the postracial did not originate with Whitehead or even with the election of Barack Obama, the event Whitehead ironically credits with ushering in the postracial world. A very similar struggle exists in Percival Everett's 2001 novel *erasure*. In *erasure*, literary novelist, critic, and intellectual Monk Ellison struggles to get published by an industry that decides he is not "black enough" (Everett, *erasure* 2). In his essay on the crisis of authenticity in contemporary African American literature, Richard Schur goes on to say that "blackness, when framed in the terms of authenticity, creates a fiction around racial identity and experience and elides how race, in fact, operates" (Schur 236). Schur's criticism here, that authenticity is a fictional construct that omits the real-world operations of race, suggests we should eliminate the quotations around the word authentic and accept it as always ironic. Monk Ellison is in a near-constant state of rejecting pressure from the publishing industry regarding what he should be as a black author. Authenticity is not, in fact, a true or definitive view of African American life; it is the embodiment of a fictionalized representation of how blackness ought to be. As Gene Andrew Jarrett describes authenticity, "texts are 'authentic' when their authors are identifiable as African American, regardless of whether these authors desire to be characterized this way" (Jarrett 2). Jarrett's description of authentic texts carries particular weight in *erasure*, where Monk rails against

his own classification as an author of "African American" literature. Everett and Whitehead are not pioneers in their exploration of authenticity, but it is their willingness to explore the ramifications of cultural authenticity in the supposedly postracial world that puts them on common ground.

Whitehead is struggling with both authenticity and postraciality in *Sag Harbor* as Benji encounters authentic representations of blackness in his world. While trying to build an identity as a fifteen year-old, Benji is caught in a tug-of-war between seemingly opposed representations of blackness: hip-hop music and *The Cosby Show*. Both cultural phenomena apply tremendous pressure on Benji to be a certain type of black person, with hip-hop pulling him toward a version of blackness that is tough and hip and carries greater value as social currency, and *The Cosby Show* presenting a race-free facsimile of his own upper-middle class life. Ultimately, Benji is using these cultural artifacts to piece together an identity. While Benji's search for a sense of self is typical of any teenager, the manifestations of authenticity in the cultural world around him magnify his identity struggle by offering him forceful suggestions about what he is supposed to be as a black American.

Because he is an established adult Everett's Monk is facing a somewhat different challenge. Monk's encounters with cultural authenticity do not warp a developing sense of self, but rather challenge an established identity. While his own art fails in part because the publishing industry expects his work to be blacker, Monk watches a culturally authentic but artistically bankrupt novel entitled *We's Lives In Da Ghetto* succeed wildly despite overtly racist and reductive content. That *We's Lives In Da Ghetto* is "black enough" for publication exposes the potential risks of cultural authenticity, namely the reification of stereotypes. Authenticity becomes increasingly troubling in *erasure* when *We's Lives In Da Ghetto* is promoted by the Oprah Winfrey-like character Kenya Dunston who praises the novel as "real" and "true to life" (Everett, *erasure* 53). Though Everett is writing in a time that

precedes the advent of postraciality as a concept, he is tapping into a major concern of postracial thinking: in Dunston's race-blind paradigm, novels like *We's Lives In Da Ghetto* are not racist, since racism is passé, but rather they are valuable and "real." The ways in which these cultural representations move through Monk and Benji's lives and impact their senses of self can be best understood in terms of "cultural traffic." Understanding cultural trafficking in blackness illuminates the tension Everett and Whitehead are exploring between authenticity and the postracial.

In Tricia Rose's foreword to *Black Cultural Traffic*, a collection of essays exploring the movement of black culture, she tethers black cultural traffic to the trafficking of black bodies, noting similar trade routes, uneven exchanges, and a singular focus on capital gain (Rose vii). Her goal is not to explore the slave trade or its ramifications in the modern world, but rather to point out the long and complex evolution of trafficking in black culture that ultimately led to what she calls an endless paradox that ensnares the interpreters of black cultures: "black culture has been both an enduring symbol of unchanging purity, in full and complete opposition to white, western normalcy and yet a highly celebrated example of cutting-edge change, dynamism, and innovation" (vii). This reception and interpretation of black culture as both purely black, but also edgy and new, facilitates the kind of movement and consumption of cultural authenticity examined by Whitehead and Everett. For a black cultural artifact to be successfully trafficked it must be "recognized as black...and yet also be newly black" (vii). Rose falls short of labeling these interpretations of black culture as manifestations of authenticity, yet her use of the adjectives "whole" and "pure" to designate black culture serves as a functional definition of authenticity.

Many of the cultural artifacts Benji and Monk are exposed to, particularly hip hop and *We's Lives In Da Ghetto*, are examples of successfully moveable goods in the paradigm of black cultural traffic, given their appearance as pure and new blackness. There is certainly a

long distance between the hip hop Benji is exposed to and *We's Lives In Da Ghetto* in terms of content and aesthetic, but both serve as cultural representations of authenticity for their respective characters. Benji suggests that "rap was a natural resource," one he compares with sunlight or the breeze (Whitehead, *Sag* 38). Benji admits to, "Keeping my eyes open, gathering data, more and more facts, because if I had enough information I might know how to be" (84). Benji's open receptivity to the culture around him coupled with the pervasive availability of hip hop creates a crisis of identity in which cultural elements compete to define him.

The most critical and visible difference between Benji and Monk regarding their interpretation of cultural trafficking is the established identity Monk brings to *erasure*. Monk does not have the open receptivity to cultural trafficking in authenticity that Benji does, and in fact faces the press of authentic artifacts defensively, aggressively pushing away any suggestion as to who he should be that does not align with his self-definition. Seeing his novels in the African American section of the bookstore, he becomes "quickly irate, my pulse speeding up, my brow furrowing" (*erasure* 28). The bookstore serves as a repository of cultural trafficking, and the suggestion that he is an African American writer, which runs counter to his self-image as a literary and experimental novelist, provokes anger in Monk as he rejects the publishing industry's expectations of his work. Monk continually pushes away from these types of authentic artifacts and the publishing industry that traffics in them.

The very different tendencies of these characters when faced with cultural trafficking in authenticity will ultimately serve to unify rather than differentiate the novels. Operating from such different ends of self-development, Whitehead and Everett end up asking many of the same questions. Both authors are exploring the human cost of exposure to authentic cultural artifacts. At the heart of this cost is the challenge of developing a clear self-identity when barraged with representations of who the individual "ought" to be. The ability of these

characters to succeed or fail at developing individual identities will shed some light on the authors' attitudes toward resolving the identity crises raised by cultural trafficking in the authentic. Whitehead and Everett both ask, through their characters, if an individual sense of self can be maintained or developed in the presence of cultural trafficking in the authentic. If the characters fail to resolve their identities, readers are invited to consider why they fail.

II. DuBois, Hurston, and the Crisis of Self-Identity

This thesis offers a comparative analysis of the identities of Benji and Monk in order to explore each author's approach to coping with cultural trafficking and its effect on identity development. Will Whitehead show the reader who Benji becomes after his interactions with authentic cultural artifacts? Will Monk maintain his seemingly stalwart self-image? These questions point to a crisis of identity best understood in DuBoisian terms, that the "American Negro" is "longing to achieve self-conscious manhood" (DuBois 2). For W.E.B. DuBois, the inability to achieve full self-consciousness is limited by double-consciousness, the sense "of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity" (2). Writing in 1903, DuBois is concerned with the larger world of post-emancipation white America as the primary force behind double-consciousness, but his identification of massive outside forces dictating self-consciousness applies to cultural trafficking in authenticity as well. Substituting the concept of cultural trafficking for the larger structure of DuBois's white America, Benji and Monk are indeed measuring their souls against an outside force.

DuBois's language surrounding the productivity of black Americans is also useful in understanding the crisis faced by these characters, particularly Monk Ellison. DuBois discusses the "double-aimed struggle of the black artisan—on the one hand to escape white contempt...and on the other to plough and nail and dig" (DuBois 2). Here DuBois highlights

the difficulty of working in a world with racial expectations while still performing the task at hand. A review of one of his novels captures Monk's "double-aimed" struggle: *"The novel is finely crafted, with fully developed characters, rich language and subtle play with the plot, but one is lost to understand what this reworking of Aeschylus'* The Persians *has to do with the African American experience"* (*erasure* 2). Monk is producing art with his own personal objectives in mind, objectives such as artistry, intellectualism and critical thought, yet he is held to an external standard of African-Americanism. It is this gap between his own expectations and the expectations of a publishing industry trafficking in black artifacts that generates a crucial dilemma for Monk: to produce *his* art or to produce art that can be successfully trafficked.

Assigning a DuBoisian crisis to Benji is a challenge given that double-consciousness is predicated on a sense of self fighting with an external view of self. Benji lacks a strong enough self-consciousness to engage in this kind of dichotomous struggle. Whitehead playfully connects Benji's coming-of-age with DuBois, however, quoting DuBois' passage on double-consciousness while Benji considers a group of "Famous Black People" of which he is profoundly unaware. When Benji hears about DuBois and double-consciousness as a child, he thinks only of DuBois' connection to Sag Harbor, "The guy who wrote that was chowing fried fish behind my house" (*Sag* 18). Benji is relating to DuBois as a "Famous Black Person" who shared his neighborhood, but he has no clear grasp of DuBois's ideas. His is a struggle of normal teenage identity development exacerbated by cultural trafficking in authentic blackness. Like Monk, Benji struggles with feeling "black enough," but unlike Monk, who rejects this premise based on his own developed self-image, Benji is attracted to the authentic. This attraction ultimately pulls Benji in many directions at once as he encounters different cultural representations of blackness.

Further mining of *The Souls of Black Folk* yields more language appropriate to the conflicts created by Whitehead and Everett: the language of shame. DuBois does not just philosophize about consciousness; he is highly concerned with the human cost of fractured self-consciousness. He considers the strain of double-consciousness on black Americans: "This waste of double aims, this seeking to satisfy two unreconciled ideals, has wrought sad havoc with the courage and faith and deeds of ten thousand thousand people...and at times has even seemed about to make them ashamed of themselves" (DuBois 3). The idea of shame brought on in the attempt to satisfy warring ideals pervades both novels. Benji often feels ashamed of his lack of ability to be "black enough," noting that he "was a square" when he could not join in performing black culture (*Sag* 170). Benji's shame is a tremendous motivating factor behind his desire to access authentic culture. If he can access more of this culture, perhaps he can bridge the distance between who he is and who he feels he "ought" to be.

The shame that DuBois speaks of is a major factor in the erasure of Monk's self-consciousness. In writing a mock "ghetto novel," Monk attempts to satirize the cultural trafficking in authenticity that frustrates and challenges his views on art and himself as an artist, but in doing so, falls victim to the double-aims DuBois discusses. His satire meets the standards set by cultural trafficking in authenticity even as it aims to lampoon them. Monk is aware of this as he writes, thinking to himself, "I wrote this novel, a book on which I knew I could never put my name" (*erasure* 62). Monk is ashamed of himself for his creation before he writes it and this shame follows him throughout *erasure*, amplifying as his creation sees commercial success. Everett is acknowledging the shame associated with a DuBoisian crises of consciousness, but he is also exploring the limitations of the individual to resolve these crises and the limitations of satire as a weapon to attack cultural trafficking in authenticity.

DuBois translates these conflicts of self-consciousness into a crippling shame, limiting the self-actualization of the American Negro. While DuBois' language is helpful in framing the crises faced by Benji and Monk, the weight and eloquence with which DuBois expresses double-consciousness is starkly different from Whitehead's comic storytelling or Everett's satire. Everett and Whitehead wield humor as their primary tool to explore cultural trafficking and its impact on identity and self-consciousness. While countless authors have engaged in satire or humor to cope with these issues, Zora Neale Hurston is particularly helpful in bridging the gap between DuBois and Everett and Whitehead. In her essay "How it Feels to Be Colored Me," Hurston is discussing double-consciousness as she recounts how and when she first thought of herself as "colored." Hurston wastes no time in setting a humorous tone in the essay, noting in the first sentence that "I am colored but I offer nothing in the way of extenuating circumstances except the fact that I am the only Negro in the United States whose grandfather on the mother's side was not an Indian chief" (Hurston). Indicating a willingness to explore her racial identity with humor, she is simultaneously minimizing the impact of her race while playfully mocking cultural habits such as blacks preferring to identify with Native American heritage.

There are echoes of Hurston in Whitehead's tone concerning Benji's self-identification as black. Benji considers his race and socioeconomic status bemusedly and with enough self-awareness to gently mock himself: "Black boys with beach houses. It could mess with your head sometimes, if you were the susceptible sort" (*Sag* 72). Percival Everett adopts a harsher, more pointed satirical tone in *erasure*, but he often turns to this teasing tone to address race as when Monk confesses "I hardly ever think about race. Those times when I did think about it a lot I did so because of my guilt for not thinking about it" (*erasure* 2). Here, Whitehead and Everett use self-aware humor to ask vital questions about race and self-identity. The source of this self-awareness is different for Hurston than it is for Everett or

Whitehead, with Hurston contrasting her young self against a white world while Benji and Monk are forced to see themselves reflected in the cultural traffic to which they are exposed.

Hurston seems to be using her humor and self-awareness to work toward a different end than DuBois. Rather than being weighted down by shame or anger, Hurston asserts herself and her individual identity in spite of her own awareness of race. She muses, "I feel most colored when I am thrown against a sharp white background," and goes on to say "Sometimes it is the other way around. A white person is set down in our midst, but the contrast is just as sharp for me" (Hurston). This sharp contrast generates an acute awareness of her racial difference, but her humor undermines the impact of this. Where Whitehead and Everett use humor to ask questions and point out absurdities, Hurston uses it to establish a self-identity. Unlike DuBois, she has no strong feelings about being both colored and American and claims that "at times, I have no race, I am me." Such clear assertion of self is desperately lacking in *Sag Harbor* and is largely feigned in *erasure*. When Monk sees himself in contrast with more successful, "black enough" artists, he is unable to say, as Hurston does, "Sometimes, I feel discriminated against, but it does not make me angry. It merely astonishes me. How can any deny themselves the pleasure of my company? It's beyond me" (Hurston). The already challenging problem of self-identification has become less accessible today with the growing reach of cultural trafficking.

III. Satire and the Paradox of the Postracial

Despite their differences in tone and character, Whitehead and Everett are both using humor as their primary vehicle to address these issues of cultural trafficking and identity. Answering the question of why they use this strategy can provide insight into what the authors are hoping to achieve. Are they looking to resolve these crises for their characters or synthesize questions about cultural trafficking with their own concerns about postracialism?

Different movements and different authors have used satire as a means to attack or expose a variety of race-driven issues, but a movement-by-movement or author-by-author approach to understanding satire can be limiting when considering the role satire plays in the still-developing postracial moment.

The functions and effects of satire in the context of race are often presented as dependent upon a specific movement or moment within African American literature or history. From slave performances to minstrelsy to postbellum resistance humor, satirical and humorous performance art was informed by oppression and designed to resist white authority and attack prejudice. As Joseph Boskin notes, "three and a half centuries of oppression produced a particular style of resistance humor that entwined defiance, cunning, inventiveness and retaliation," and the primary function of that humor was to "preserve the ego identity of minority group members compelled to suffer attacks on their group image" (Boskin 264-65). Boskin's commentary on resistance humor is valuable in understanding the origins of contemporary African American humor, but his concern with protecting the black ego from white oppression is limited in its application to 21st century black humor. Such a model does not consider the nuances of the modern American world, relatively free of segregation, but rich in complex racial politics largely informed by cultural trafficking.

In his work on satire in the Harlem Renaissance, Darryl Dickson-Carr credits the expansion of targets of African American humor beyond the scope of white oppressors to satirists such as George Schuyler. According to Dickson-Carr, Schuyler (among others) challenged the efficacy of groups like the NAACP and aimed his writing at important figures in the Renaissance, figures including W.E.B. DuBois. These satirists were part of a new class of black writer that "would not observe or be bound to the niceties of those advocating uplift, that would be radical simply by disrobing icons" (Dickson-Carr 6). This willingness to criticize or simply lampoon important black figures along with racism, segregation, and white

oppressors allowed satire to be a tool for internal explorations of black culture. In this early development of two-directional satire, the roots of Whitehead and Everett's humor can be found. In order to criticize and expose problems associated with cultural trafficking in authenticity in a world that is ostensibly postracial, Whitehead and Everett will sight a variety of targets, both within and outside of the black community.

Derek Maus and James Donahue move the discussion of satire closer to Everett and Whitehead in their introduction to *Post-Soul Satire*. While Maus and Donahue too narrowly credit post-soul writers with changing the direction of satire in contrast to Dickson-Carr's contentions that such two-directional satire began in the 1920s, they are able to characterize what they call "dual-vectored" satire. Maus and Donahue describe these two vectors as "satirical commentary on follies and self-destructive habits...within the African American community" alongside satire "directed at political institutions, social practices, and cultural discourses that arise *outside* the community" (5). For Maus and Donahue, the former direction of satire includes "relatively mild ridicule of vices and hypocrisy" (xiii) and the latter involves "scornful and morally indignant mockery" (xiv) designed to harm the outside agent.

Whitehead directs such "mild ridicule" at targets within the African American community through Benji's self-awareness of the hypocrisy and naiveté of the characters. As Benji criticizes his parents' generation for their hypocrisy surrounding the use of the word "nigger," for example, he points out that, "there were no street niggers in Sag Harbor. No. No. No. But we all had cousins who...you know" (*Sag* 39). This self-aware ridicule is typical of *Sag Harbor,* and Whitehead uses it to expose the absurdity of Benji's responses to cultural trafficking in the authentic. Benji and his friends are attracted to the word "nigger" as a mark of authentic blackness despite their awareness of the word's meaning within the community as a designation for undesired social behavior and without, as a racial slur. Maus and

Donahue would perhaps attribute Whitehead's ridicule to the three-plus-decade "post-soul"

period that seeks "to delineate the contours of the far-reaching and multifaceted

reorganization of black life that has occurred over the past couple of decades" (Maus and

Donahue 1). Post-soul is criticizing or moving away from the soul period of the black arts

and civil rights era, with its frequently essentializing and romanticizing discourses of

blackness. While Whitehead may fit Maus and Donahue's description of the post-soul period,

labeling Whitehead as a post-soul humorist does not account for his treatment of *The Cosby*

Show, a highly trafficked cultural phenomenon that gives Whitehead an avenue to critique the

burgeoning postracial world where "race was widely denied—while race was everywhere

present" (Gooding-Williams and Mills 1).

      The postracial concerns Whitehead explores in *Sag Harbor* have their roots in

Whitehead's own life and work. The tone and scope of Whitehead's humor in *Sag Harbor* are

informed by his own attitudes toward race, authenticity, and the postracial. While Percival

Everett is a decade ahead of the curve on the postracial timeline that emerged with the Obama

presidency, Whitehead wrote *Sag Harbor* after the election of Barack Obama, his "official"

metric for the start of the postracial era. Whitehead tackles cultural trafficking and postracial

attitudes in *Sag Harbor*, but in his professional life, he faces a dilemma regarding race. Asked

about being labelled an African American writer, Whitehead responded:

      Twenty years ago, when I started writing, I didn't define myself as an African

      American writer...and that kind of term is generally used on the outside, by the critical

      establishment. These days I find myself wanting to avoid being pigeon-holed,

      ghettoized, held in a different category [than] other authors. And when people ask me

      if I'm a black writer, or just a writer who happens to be black, I tend to say that it's

      either a dumb question or a question which happens to be dumb. (qtd. in Shukla).

This desire to move beyond racial categories would seem to situate Whitehead as postracial, except, of course, that Whitehead is expressing a desire to move beyond racial categories as opposed to the acceptance of the idea that racism has vanished. However, his attitude toward the African-American label generates a conflict that finds its way into *Sag Harbor*. He does not wish to be pigeonholed as a black writer, but issues of race matter greatly in his work.

Whitehead is very aware of this paradox, recognizing the difference between desiring freedom from racial categorization and achieving it. Whitehead suggests that, "you're only post-racial when you stop asking if you're post-racial," acknowledging that in discussing racial categories and tensions in his art he is undermining his own desires in some way (qtd. in Shukla). This awareness of both himself and the challenges of addressing race in a mythologized postracial world spawns the style of humor seen in *Sag Harbor*. Whitehead is poking fun at his own wish to not be pigeonholed as an African-American writer while coping with distinctly African-American issues (cultural trafficking in authenticity) much in the way that Benji-the-narrator pokes fun at Benji-the-boy for his naiveté.

Whitehead often plays with this distance between the perceived world and the actual world in *Sag Harbor*, exploiting the young characters' views on race within the context of a middle-class beach community. Benji watches his friends, particularly his friend NP, embrace codified modes of blackness, and though Benji-the-narrator is aware of the characters' naiveté, Benji-the-boy is still swayed by his friends' mimicry of authentic black behavior. In an argument over the ambiguous race of their boss, Benji finds himself, "in the middle, bending as usual in the direction of whatever breeze was blowing through me that day" (*Sag,* 117). That NP views this summertime quandary as part of a "race war" and that Benji is easily swayed by this argument indicates a disconnect from the realities of their middle-class beach life. Whitehead mildly ridicules NP's hyperbole and Benji's "bending in the breeze" while acknowledging the powerful attraction the boys have to these representations of

blackness. In a rare moment for *Sag Harbor*, Benji-the-narrator injects his voice into the story after Benji-the-boy explains his vulnerability to NP's idea of a race war. The narrator caps the scene with a postracial shrug: "What are you going to do about it? What are you ever going to do about anything" (*Sag* 117)? Perhaps the boys' views on race are skewed and informed by cultural trafficking, but race does indeed matter greatly to them and their sense of self. Whitehead offers no resolution to the gap between Benji's perception of race and any sort of "truth" about race in Sag Harbor in 1985. The question, "what are you ever going to do about anything" demonstrates Benji's lack of agency in his own life. This lack of agency becomes increasingly evident in *Sag Harbor* as Whitehead tackles cultural trafficking in authenticity and its effect on Benji's identity.

The postracial condition, that of denying race despite its ubiquity, permeates Everett's work as well and greatly influences the nature of his satire. Everett is engaging in the "scornful and indignant mockery" described by Maus and Donahue, directed both inward toward black audiences and outward toward the publishing industry and cultural trafficking in general. The scorn in *erasure* emanates from a conflict between the postracial and cultural trafficking in authenticity. Everett himself appears to be a postracial paradox: he insists that race does not define him as an artist, but his art is filled with racial themes. Everett refuses race in discussing his work, saying, "I don't want to talk about race...I just want to make art," but his work forces race into the center of attention (qtd. in Monaghan 71). Interviewer Peter Monaghan paraphrases Everett in defining the objective of *erasure*, suggesting the novel's real focus is "the work of writing, and its multiple difficulties" (75). Everett's insistence on avoiding the discussion of race in his novel directly contradicts the visible work of the novel itself. The opening pages of *erasure* discuss Monk's slave heritage, the Black Panther party, and the challenges of being pigeonholed as a black writer (*erasure* 1-2). Opening a novel in this way and then expressing frustration and anger when audiences read issues of race and

authenticity into the novel exposes a seeming hypocrisy in Everett that breeds much of his defensive, scathing satire. Is this a true hypocrisy on the part of the author or is it a paradox borne out of the postracial moment?

This hypocrisy, or paradox, can be seen in Everett's own life as well as in *erasure*. Everett prides himself on his lifestyle, including a love of fly-fishing, woodworking, and animals (Ehrenreich 25-6). At times, however, his interviews indicate a sense of self defined by a denial of black stereotypes: "I'm good at math, I cannot dance, and I did not grow up in any inner city or the rural South" (qtd. in Monaghan 74-5). This tension between being free of racial categories in his life or art while partially defining himself in opposition to racial categories very closely mirrors the conflict Monk faces in *erasure*. In 2005, Everett insisted that readers cannot uncover any meaning about him in *erasure* (Julien 84), yet in 2002 he lamented that, "the character resembles me so much it's harder for readers to divorce me from the work" (qtd. in Ehrenreich 26). These conflicts greatly inform and influence his tone and satire as well as his representations of cultural trafficking in *erasure*.

A prime example of this type of conflict in Everett's life came in 2002 when he was chosen as the recipient of the first ever Legacy Award from the Zora Neale-Hurston/Richard Wright Foundation. The Foundation describes the award as: "the first national award presented to published writers of African descent by the national community of Black writers. This award recognizes the highest quality writing in the categories of fiction, nonfiction and poetry"(About Us). Given his refusal to be identified as a "black" writer, this award presented a significant problem for Everett. Peter Monaghan describes the conflict: "Mr. Everett 's primary discomfort had to do, like so much in his life as a writer, with the impositions of American conceptions of race—and of any identification of him as an 'African American' writer" (Monaghan 74). Despite the obvious irony of being nominated as an African American writer for a book in which he rejects any such label, Everett did accept the award,

making a personal choice that he denies to Monk at the end of *erasure*. Monk is faced with a similar choice, but Everett does not allow readers to see the outcome of his choice. This refusal to resolve a central conflict for Monk is crucial in analyzing the work Everett is doing with his use of satire, his approach to cultural trafficking, and the problems associated with the growing postracial world.

The postracial paradox faced by Everett, the drive to move beyond racial definitions while being anchored to them, drives the tone and limits the efficacy of his satire. For example, Everett expresses contempt for the use of black dialect in fiction, intimating that, "I have never heard someone say 'Where fo' you be going?' (Laughter) So Alice Walker can kiss my ass" (qtd. in Shavers 64). The laughter is Everett's, implying an intent to joke about Alice Walker and dialect, yet the language of the joke is caustic, exposing an underlying frustration with such representations of language in art. There is a very short distance between Everett's humor here and Monk's response to Juanita Mae Jenkins' novel in *erasure*: "'She's a hack,' I said. 'She's not even a hack. A hack can actually write a little bit'" (*erasure* 43). In fact, Monk goes on to ponder *The Color Purple* before he writes *My Pafology*, again targeting Alice Walker, directly relating the criticism in the novel to his personal criticisms of Walker.

Everett's personal conflicts with representations of culture in art directly influence the tone of *erasure*, but he is also limited by these personal conflicts. Everett fails to see that his criticism of Alice Walker is clearly limited in its efficacy based on his own criteria for the criticism: he has never heard someone speak in that dialect, therefore it is stereotype, but what if Alice Walker *has* heard this dialect and there is truth in it for her? Everett's criticism serves only to identify his own struggle with cultural trafficking. He does not wish to traffic in these images, regardless of any mitigating circumstances as to their use, yet on some level he must engage with them. In *erasure*, there is a limit to the efficacy of the satire similar to

the limit of Everett's own criticisms made in interviews. In taking aim at Juanita Mae Jenkins, Monk is exposing a major problem with cultural trafficking in authentic blackness, the blurring of lines between "truth" and stereotype. For all of his criticism and satire (via the writing of *My Pafology*), Monk is only able to expose the problem, not overcome or cope with it in any way. Monk, and by proxy Everett, is using satire to expose conflicts, not to attempt to resolve them.

Closely examining Benji and Monk's exposure to culturally authentic representations of blackness and how such exposure shapes their identities allows for a clearer understanding of these authors' refusal to resolve critical questions of self-identity. This refusal stems from the postracial paradox faced by Whitehead and Everett. This thesis examining Benji and Monk asks several critical questions:

1) What culturally trafficked representations of authentic blackness are the characters exposed to?

2) How do they respond to these representations?

3) How do the authors' postracial concerns impact the way they shape the characters?

4) What is the human cost of cultural trafficking for these characters?

5) How does the authors' refusal to resolve these tensions shape their overall objectives related to coping with race in a postracial world?

Chapter 2: Negotiating Authenticity

IV. Seeking Benji: Hip Hop and the Huxtables

While Percival Everett's character Monk Ellison is running away from representations of blackness, Colson Whitehead creates a character in *Sag Harbor*, Benji, who is running toward them. Here, the crucial distinction between the characters comes to light: Monk knows who he is and cultural blackness threatens his sense of self, whereas Benji is trying to form his identity and cultural blackness presents possible building blocks for his emerging self. Benji views pervasive cultural movements as opportunities rather than threats. His story is a bildungsroman wherein Benji strives for an identity cobbled together from various available cultural representations of blackness. Whereas Monk was producing art, Benji is consuming it, and so Benji's battles arise when different cultural notions of authenticity pull him in different directions. The rise of both the black middle class and urban hip-hop in the 1980s,when the novel takes place, places these beach house boys in a cultural tug of war: embrace their wealth or embrace their blackness.

The rise of hip hop as a major element of American culture gave a far-reaching voice to the challenges facing many black Americans, but its focus on impoverished, usually violent urban areas sometimes offered a decidedly limited and negative view of black Americans to audiences outside these experiences. Benji is a black New York prep school student "catching up on months" of black culture that he has missed in his upper-middle class world (*Sag* 37). Benji fits the role of the "black geek" during his school year, playing *Dungeons & Dragons* and obsessing over comic books and *Star Wars*, yet he is drawn to the cultural world of hip hop in search of a more authentically black experience. Benji is caught in the midst of swirling social identities: too black to fully assimilate into his prep-school

world and too white to be part of the hip hop world. The summer beach community of Sag

Harbor is the place where he tries to negotiate this tension and reinvent himself.

Critic Richard Schur explores this problem in *Sag Harbor*, noting that Benji "feels

compelled to meet dominant constructions" in his search for authentic blackness (Schur 248).

The problem with these dominant constructions, particularly hip hop as authentic black

experience, is that Benji's personal experiences fall outside the scope of these constructs. It is

this reality, his distance from perceived black authenticity, that drives Benji to reinvent

himself as someone "blacker." Thus, Benji spends much of *Sag Harbor* performing the rules

and rituals of this authentic black identity. As Schur notes, "authenticity of any kind is

frequently understood as much as a matter of consumption and performance as it is

connecting to history, institutions, traditions, or shared struggle" (Schur 238). Benji

consumes hip hop and other facets of this authentic identity, and then replicates what he

consumes via performance. While Schur's reading of *Sag Harbor* thoroughly outlines the

difficulty of creating an authentically black identity for Benji, he fails to adequately answer

the question of *why* Benji so desperately needs this authentically black identity. The mere

existence of hip hop culture and its standing as authentically black is not cause enough for

Benji's identity struggle; rather, I will argue that his quest is motivated by the tension

between the world of hip hop as Benji sees it and the world he comes from, reflected by *The

Cosby Show*.

While Benji is not participating in the socioeconomic struggles that were the

prevailing motif of early hip hop music, the music and culture are undoubtedly important to

the formation of his identity that summer in Sag Harbor. Time and again, Benji longs to

belong to a hip hop crowd. Hip hop was the dominant construction for the black male identity

at the time, but this authenticity was not the only attractive element of hip hop for Benji.

Benji's musical interests are broad and variable and part of his attraction to hip hop is the

style of hip hop: sampling from other tracks to create driving new rhythms. Rather than enhancing his participation in hip hop culture, however, Benji's appreciation of hip hop's aesthetic form alienates him from his friends' perceptions of this culture. When Benji points out that Afrika Bambaataa sampled a song by the German group Kraftwerk, his friend Marcus reacts defensively, threatening "you're lucky Zulu Nation ain't around...they'd scalp your shit" (*Sag* 77). It does not matter to Marcus and the others that Afrika Bambaataa willfully sampled a track from Kraftwerk to create their sound. Their perception of hip hop as an exclusively black music form limits Benji's ability to closely engage with the formal construction of hip hop. Benji's knowledge of music and hip hop production marks him as a "fuckin' Siouxsie and the Banshees-listenin' motherfucker," and not as someone who "gets" hip hop the way Marcus does (78).

Benji's exclusion from his friends' hip hop world reaches a climax of sorts when his brother Reggie exposes his "squareness." As Reggie and his friend Bobby rap through a limited-edition live recording of a Run-DMC performance, Benji muses that he has been listening to "too much Buzzcocks. I thought I knew all of Run-DMC's records...but I was a square" (*Sag* 170). His attraction to other musical styles again serves to isolate him from his friends and their "in" music. This does not mean that Benji only likes "white" music; in fact he discusses knowing almost the entire Run-DMC catalogue. His exclusion here is based on him *almost* knowing all of it, as opposed to *really* knowing all of it. Benji is allured by the style of music as well as Reggie's full immersion in it. Here, hip hop is not just the song, but also the performance and the social status. Reggie and Bobby are, at least temporarily, the center of the social group because of their ability to perform the song with confidence and swagger. Benji, identifying as a "square," lacks this confidence and swagger. Being on the outside leaves him wanting in: "In my jealousy, I saw Bobby and Reggie performing their bit behind the counter at Burger King, their clubhouse where I was not allowed" (171). Here,

Benji struggles with the style and aesthetic of hip hop, how it looks and feels as a social performance tool.

His struggle with the revolutionary content of hip hop is even more problematic. The rebellious party-rock anthems of Run-DMC and Afrika Bambaataa offer their own appeal to Benji as songs expressing the liberated desires of a teenager. However, much of the hip hop of the early eighties was also built around social consciousness and an effort to unveil the socioeconomic troubles faced by many black Americans. As summertime vacationers, these boys have little-to-no relationship with the content expressed in much of hip hop music. The violent, dangerous world described in much hip hop at the time was presented as a warning against getting trapped in a too-common world of drugs, guns, and oppression. Music and literary critic Geoffrey Baker argues that hip hop of the eighties developed into a black social construction built upon revolt against the social constraints holding back many black Americans (Baker 235). Benji again falls outside this social construction of hip hop as he is neither living in (or creating) a dangerous world.

This distance from the content of some of Benji's favorite hip hop is not a problem unique to Benji and his friends. In a survey by sociologist Chyung Sun, black listeners of hip hop express a tension inherent in the consumption of the often violent and dangerous imagery of hip hop. Among these listeners, some reject these images as negative and destructive, while others embrace these images as indicative of "real" life for many black people (Sun et al. 123). This study suggests that even when alienated from the content of hip hop, black audiences respect the presence of a black voice in music. As Benji searches for a more authentic black identity, he is drawn to hip hop, not just for its style, but also for its black voice. The forefather of socially conscious hip hop, Grandmaster Flash, becomes a presence and a refrain in *Sag Harbor*. Grandmaster Flash, along with Melle Mel and the Furious Five, are natural points of recurrence for Benji in his relationship with hip hop, considering the

preeminence of their song "The Message" in the 1980s. Benji's interaction with this song becomes emblematic of his attraction to, and alienation from, hip hop as an identity-forming social construction.

In "The Message," Melle Mel is rapping about the deterioration of the Bronx and the abandonment of black neighborhoods to decay. The result, as Melle Mel sees it, is a dangerous trap that many black people can fight against but can never escape. The song's hook expresses this: "It's like a jungle sometimes/ It makes me wonder how I keep from goin' under" (Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five). This harsh content, marked by "people pissin' on the stairs" and "junkies in the alley with a baseball bat" is a far cry from Sag Harbor, but the success of "The Message" established social awareness as an essential hip hop strategy. Benji's alienation from the song's content demonstrates the difficulty he has in meeting the perceived expectations of socially conscious hip hop. The third verse of "The Message" raps:

> Got a bum education, double-digit inflation
>
> Can't take the train to the job, there's a strike at the station
>
> Neon King Kong standin' on my back
>
> Can't stop to turn around, broke my sacroiliac
>
> A mid-range migraine, cancered membrane.
>
> <div align="center">(Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five)</div>

The content of this rap is centered around the depressing socioeconomic conditions observed by Melle Mel in the Bronx. His broken "sacroiliac" is a reference to the back-breaking challenge of struggling against this decaying world. Sometime in Benji's life, he morphed "sacroiliac" into "sacadiliac", substituting an anatomical reference to the lower back and pelvis with "getting socked in the nuts" (*Sag* 260). Benji's misinterpretation of the lyrics relates the tension in the song to his own emasculation and social impotence. Where Melle

Mel blames white-dominated society for the ruination of black Americans living in areas of urban decay, Benji blames society for his own isolation from a clear identity.

In *Sag Harbor*, the pull of authenticity is strong for Benji and with it the pull of hip hop, but if these are pulling him toward a more black experience, what are they pulling him *from*? His experiences as an upper-middle-class son of a podiatrist are more closely reflected in *The Cosby Show* than they are in hip hop. The cultural effect of the *Cosby Show* is difficult to overstate, and for Benji, this TV version of his life becomes a standard by which he is judged and by which he judges himself. When Benji declares "we were a Cosby family," he does so with some awareness that this is what his life is "supposed" to be like, yet he cannot escape the reality that his family life is not like what he sees on TV (*Sag* 192). For Benji, *The Cosby Show* becomes a performance standard, an act that his family tries to replicate without success. This "Cosby Effect" becomes another driving force behind Benji's identity crisis by offering another cultural standard of blackness that Benji is unable to meet.

The Cosby Show was a tremendous TV success and built overwhelming popularity through the 80s and into the early 90s. The success, both critical and commercial, of *The Cosby Show* was driven by white audiences (Innis and Feagin 187). In general, the "whiteness" of the show (the upper-middle class lifestyle, the absence of racial tension, etc.) was highly problematic for some black audience members. In an audience study of *The Cosby Show*, Jhally and Lewis discovered that black audience responses ranged from highly critical to highly supportive. For many in the audience, *The Cosby Show* was a vital weapon in the struggle to redefine stereotypes. Black doctors and lawyers do exist, and as one survey respondent noted in the audience study, "there are families like that. It's not a one in a million thing" (Jhally and Lewis 283). In this sense, the show became a symbol of pride, particularly for a family like Benji's. The Cosbys represent a destruction of stereotype and a mark of success for black families, and the appeal for Benji to relate to the show is strong. In response

to white audiences loving the show (even as "science fiction"), Benji asks, "who are these people? We said: People we know. And we watched it" (*Sag* 192-193). Benji wants to be a Cosby family, even noting that the label is "a term of affection and admiration" (*Sag* 193).

Unlike Benji's interactions with hip hop, he does not engage directly with *The Cosby Show* in the pages of the text. The show exists as a phantom pressure generating tension between Benji's life as it is and the life of the visibly absent Huxtable family. In the summer of 1985, *The Cosby Show* had just completed its first season wherein it notably avoided tackling any issues of race, focusing instead on the minutiae of family life. The content of the show, while invisible on the pages of *Sag Harbor*, does shed light on Benji's difficulty characterizing himself in the context of *The Cosby Show*'s cultural impact. *The Cosby Show* gave a nod to the burgeoning hip hop and breakdancing culture in Season 1, Episode 16, entitled "Jitterbug Break." In this episode Dr. Huxtable (Cosby) walks into his living room to find his daughter Denise and her racially diverse friends breakdancing to a synthesized beat, leading to an old versus young dance contest. Both the style of dance and the music were recent products of the urban African American population, yet the show treats the dancing and music as the product of youth. Dr. Huxtable quips about the differences between how the "young people" and "old people" dance, turning the conflict into a generation gap issue without acknowledging either the economic or the racial origins of hip hop ("Jitterbug Break"). Certainly the show was not setting out to tackle these issues, but to Benji such representations of family life and hip hop music would have been almost unimaginable: without any acknowledgement of race, a happy father is dancing with his children and their racially diverse friends to music that Benji associates with racial identity.

On the heels of labeling his family as a "Cosby family," Benji diverts the narrative immediately to images of his father's mistreatment of him and his brother. His father calls Reggie "Shithead" for a year, and Benji's short haircut is derided as belonging to a "corner

nigger" (*Sag* 193-194). Benji's father tries to enforce a strict code of middle-class blackness onto his children, a code that both distances them from white people and from "nigger" behavior. Hypocritically, Benji's father engages in behaviors drawn from both of these "enemy" groups. While he embraces a racially separatist attitude in his career and his vacation spot, the financial success of being a doctor, owning a beach home, and sending one's children to private school are typically "white" landmarks of success. In fact, these are the same elements of "whiteness" criticized by black audiences of *The Cosby Show* (Innis and Feagin 194). Benji sees his father model many of the trappings of *The Cosby Show* while being harshly critical of whiteness and standards of white success. This is the beginning of a significant conflict in how Benji views his family in light of the Cosby social construct.

Benji's father not only embodies some elements of whiteness that he is harshly critical of but also embodies much of the "nigger" behavior that he warns his sons against. The story is littered with these examples: embracing violence as a means to deal with problems and white people, hypermasculinity and the notion that his children should act like "men now," (*Sag 50)* and intimidation and abuse as a means of establishing authority. Is this the vision of the strong black man that his father preaches about? Benji's family life seems to be constructed out of a paternal hypocrisy; father says "don't be white and don't be a nigger," but father does both. So while Benji sees his family in the success of the Huxtables, there is nothing in *The Cosby Show* that reflects the reality of his home life. The failure to identify himself relative to *The Cosby Show* coupled with his disconnect from hip hop culture leaves Benji unable to clearly define a self-identity because he feels isolated from both his family and his friends. His exposure to cultural trafficking in authenticity has left Benji with a powerful desire to meet the expectations of dominant modes of blackness, but an inability to do so.

V. Black Enough to Sell Books

While Colson Whitehead deals primarily with television and music as the sites of cultural trafficking in *Sag Harbor*, Percival Everett deals primarily with the book publishing industry in *erasure*. Everett's protagonist, Monk Ellison, living an established life as an under-published author of dense literary fiction, operates in a professional world almost wholly dictated by cultural trafficking. Monk explains, "Some people in the society in which I live, described as being black, tell me I am not *black* enough. Some people whom the society calls white tell me the same thing. I have heard this mainly about my novels, from editors who have rejected me" (Everett, *erasure* 2). Monk is exposing the consequences of the cultural fetishizing of images of authentic blackness. Labeling black and white readers as being "described" as such indicates Monk's personal frustrations with race labels. In light of this viewpoint, being labeled not "black enough" generates a tension between Monk's personal identity and cultural expectations. Who he is cannot measure up to demands for cultural authenticity.

Critic Tricia Rose argues that, "cultural exchanges, desires, appropriations, and affinities always speak to already existing relationships, conscious and otherwise - those we want to reinforce, transform, deny, embrace" (Rose viii). In this sense, cultural expectations for Monk's blackness are driven by existing "affinities" within the society, accepted paradigms of blackness that are willingly consumed and propagated via cultural traffic. For Monk, the realities of societal expectations and public desire to consume representations of blackness impinge upon several critical areas of Monk's identity: his art, his ability to publish this art, and his ability to criticize society via his art. He asks his agent about his audience, "How do they even know I'm black? Why does it matter?" and here Monk attempts to angrily defend his work and criticize his audience (*erasure* 43).This criticism will prove insufficient as Monk continues to fail as a literary novelist. The failure of his personal artistic quest is

cemented when his scathing satire of ghetto culture, *My Pafology*, is received as an unironic example of such culture and achieves wild success. The battle for Monk's identity against so-called authentic blackness takes place on two fronts: the publishing industry that promotes these representations and the audiences who embrace them.

As an author of dense, literary fiction, Monk clings fiercely to his stance that race should not define a literary genre. While shopping with his sister in the novel's third chapter, Monk wanders the aisles of a Borders bookstore contemplating how much he hates chain stores and whether they carry his books. The contradiction between hating the chain store and hoping to find his books on the shelf underscores multiple sources of personal frustration for him. He is angry at racial categorization in the bookstore and at his own lack of success. Failing to find his novels in the Contemporary Fiction section, Monk comes across his publications in the African American Studies section. Monk says of this placement that "the only thing ostensibly African American was my jacket photograph" (*erasure* 28). While considering how anyone interested in his writing would find the book in the store given its lack of relationship to anything African American, Monk declares, "that fucking store was taking food from my table" (28).

That such a thing as African American Literature exists as a distinct literary tradition constrains Monk both as an artist who desires to be read and judged by his art and as an author who must make a living. Critic Anthony Stewart suggests that Everett is exploring how African American literature "does or (more often) does not satisfy some pre-existing expectation that attaches to this heavily freighted, limited, and limiting term" (Stewart 218). Stewart's analysis here certainly applies to Everett's works as a whole, but Monk does little in the way of exploring the limits of the African American label. The genre and the expectations that come with it are offensive and destructive to his sense of art and self. The shelving in Borders makes him irate, but it quickly becomes clear that Monk's rage is not

only for the consumer market, but for the publishers that demand a certain degree of "blackness" from Monk.

Despite his commitment to producing art rather than bestselling novels, Monk must work with his agent to try and get published, not only to earn money directly from publication, but to maintain his professorship. Monk's interactions with the publishing industry underlie a critical truth for Everett: the existing genre of African American Literature is borne not out of the shelves at Borders, but out of the publishing industry and its criteria for publication. After seventeen rejections for his most recent novel, Monk asks his agent, Yul, "do I have to have my characters comb their afros and be called niggers for these people," to which Yul replies simply, "It wouldn't hurt" (*erasure* 43). Yul's answer is a truth that Monk grapples with. Knowing that he is a capable writer, Monk refuses to work within the expectations of the industry and, as a result, he fails repeatedly. Contrasting with his failures is the galling runaway success of *We's Lives In Da Ghetto*, a brutally stereotypical account of life in a ghetto written by a woman (Juanita Mae Jenkins) who was inspired by a few days spent visiting Harlem.

The success of *We's Lives In Da Ghetto* coupled with Monk's failures motivates *erasure*'s central engagement with cultural trafficking in blackness, Monk's publication of the satire, *My Pafology*. Before he pens the satirical novel, however, it is the mounting tension between his own sensibilities and the reception of Jenkins' novel that exposes Everett's most pointed critiques of the industry in response to his own work. Everett, responding to Doubleday's offer to publish *erasure,* wonders, "if they had even bothered to read it" (qtd. in Starr 23). Doubleday, like the publishers in Monk's world, failed to take measure of the content and value of the novel, concerning itself only with profitability. While *erasure* sharply criticizes the industry for promoting race-as-genre, Doubleday offers to print it for an African American imprint named Harlem Moon. This irony is not lost on Everett:

"The irony of it struck me, It would be really wonderful to have an imprint inaugurate and invalidate itself with the same book. But then I couldn't see doing that to my work" (qtd. in Starr 23). Percival Everett chose an independent publisher for *erasure's* paperback instead, defending his work against the very thing he criticizes in it. For Monk, the choice will come not in choosing a publisher as it did for Everett, but in writing, selling, and profiting from *My Pafology*.

Just prior to writing *My Pafology*, Monk is haunted by his only commercial success, *Second Failure*, a story about a young black man who becomes a violent terrorist in response to being ostracized by the black community because his mother was "white-looking." Monk reports that he "hated writing the novel. I hated reading the novel. I hated thinking about the novel" (*erasure* 61). While he offers no more insight on his relationship with *Second Failure*, Monk is suggesting that choosing to deal with race as a central conflict in a novel was a personal failure. His only real success in the industry is a sell-out: he has propagated not only a racial stereotype (the violent black man) but he has met the expectations publishers have for black authors. While this is profoundly difficult for Monk to cope with, Yul points out that the market can't support his dense style. Discussing the trajectory of Monk's career, Yul says, "If you could just write something like *Second Failure* again," leaving the thought to dangle in front of Monk, exposing his choice between success and artistry (61).

This conversation is the breaking point between Monk and the publishing industry. Staring at Jaunita Mae Jenkins' face on the cover of *Time* magazine, Monk experiences a flood of rage that gives birth to *My Pafology*:

> The pain started in my feet and coursed through my legs, up my spine and into my brain and I remembered passages of *Native Son* and *The Color Purple* and *Amos and Andy* and my hands began to shake, the world opening around me, tree roots trembling on the ground outside, people in the street shouting *dint, ax, fo, screet* and

fahvre! and I was screaming on the inside, complaining that I didn't sound like that,

that my mother didn't sound like that, that my father didn't sound like that and I

imagined myself sitting on a park bench counting the knives in my switchblade

collection and a man came up and he asked me what I was doing and my mouth

opened and I couldn't help what came out, 'Why fo you be axin?' (*erasure* 61-2)

Monk sees the dominant black stereotypes, like the African American dialect and the

possession of weapons he references, packaged and sold by the publishing industry as having

little bearing or basis in reality for most writers or readers of any race or class. Monk

dismisses the reality of these images for many in poor or working-class neighborhoods. The

constant movement and consumption of these images of blackness has given them a

heightened or falsified reality. Percival Everett plainly states in an interview that *erasure* is

an indictment of "dominant images of blackness: the Afro-American as either tastelessly

flash, bling-bling minstrel or violent victim from The Projects, speaking in sweary slang,

drowning in nihilism" (qtd. in Mulholland 30). Rather than sticking to his artistic guns and

failing, Monk feverishly pens an over-the-top satire of these very images. The problem for

Monk is now the fact that neither the publishing industry nor the audience is aware of the

satire, and *My Pafology* is taken seriously.

Intended as a reductive satire of Richard Wright's *Native Son*, Monk reimagines the

classic novel using the extreme stereotypes of black language, culture, and class that he sees

in the publishing industry, particularly in the successful novel *We's Lives In Da Ghetto*.

Monk adopts the nom-de-plume Stagg R. Leigh for his satirical novel, an ironic nod to

Stagger Lee, a notorious African-American pimp and criminal. *My Pafology* fails as satire

due in part to audience expectations surrounding authentic African American literature. These

expectations are fed by both the publishing industry and the promotion and trafficking of *My*

Pafology after publication. The Oprah Winfrey-like character Kenya Dunston promotes both

We's Lives In Da Ghetto and *My Pafology* through her Book Club. As Dunston labels *My Pafology* "gripping and truly realistic," Monk's sales soar even as he becomes part of the cycle of publication that birthed his rage at the industry (*erasure* 248).

The character Kenya Dunston is presented as an arbiter of artistic value. Everett himself has been highly critical of the influence public figures can have over mass audiences, particularly Oprah Winfrey, for whom Dunston is a stand-in. When asked about Oprah, Everett replied, "Oprah should stay the fuck out of literature and stop pretending she knows anything about it" (qtd. in Shavers 64). Everett's anger toward contemporary popular culture's interference in art is at the heart of Monk's crisis. Despite his vehement and repeated attempts to avoid answering what his books are "about," Percival Everett does offer some insight into how he feels about the effect Oprah and mass audience cultural products have on art, saying that *erasure* "is about how our culture seeks to interfere in the production of art" (qtd. in Mulholland 31).

Kenya Dunston appears in *erasure* at critical moments in Monk's publishing life. Dunston first appears as the champion and promoter of Juanita Mae Jenkins's novel *We's Lives In Da Ghetto*, praising Jenkins because the language of the story is "so real and the characters are so true to life" (*erasure* 53). The language and the characters she so praises as she reads an excerpt are reductive and stereotypical:

> *"Ain't none yo biznis. But iffan you gots to know, I'se goin to the pharmacy." I*
> *looks back at my dough to see if Mama comin out.*
> *"The pharmacy? What fo?" she ax.*
> *"You know," I says.*
> *"Naw," she say. "Hell, naw. Girl, you be pregnant again?"*
> *"Mights be."* (54)

The exaggerated dialect coupled with limited and stereotypical characters are lauded by Dunston as "so, so moving" as the audience sighs and applauds. In promoting this novel as a valuable representation of art and African American life, Dunston is feeding cultural authenticity. Her television show becomes a platform for the promotion of "real" stories of blackness. This is particularly destructive for Monk who has struggled with being black enough for publishers and audiences. Kenya Dunston's trafficking in culture such as *We's Lives In Da Ghetto* directly undermines Monk's attempt to produce art and literature independent of racial authenticity.

Not only are Dunston and Jenkins dangerous to Monk's objectives as an artist, he is seemingly alone in identifying the destructive power of the representations of race in Jenkins' novel. After thumbing through a copy in the bookstore and learning that Jenkins cut a lucrative deal for the rights to the book, Monk describes the experience of reading it as "like strolling through an antique mall, feeling good, liking the sunny day and then turning the corner to find a display of watermelon-eating, banjo-playing darkie carvings and a pyramid of Mammy cookie jars. 3 million dollars" (*erasure* 29). By employing these images of minstrelsy, Monk attacks the primary danger in what Jenkins and Dunston are contributing to culture. The creation and trafficking of these types of cultural representations exploit a postracial public sentiment that "allows not only for a denial of racism but also for a claim that those challenging racism themselves are 'racist' and that their racism is negatively affecting those who want to forget racism" (Ono 229). This type of postracial thinking enables Dunston to embrace reductive cultural representations because, in this race-blind paradigm, novels like *We's Lives In Da Ghetto* are not racist, since racism is passé, but rather valuable and "real."

Everett himself sharply criticizes this postracial attitude. When questioned about the possibility that he is anti-democratic because his art is not accessible to mass audiences,

Everett replies, "Give me a fucking break. Art is not democratic. Why should everybody think they can write a novel?" (qtd. in Shavers 64). From Everett's perspective, someone like Juanita Mae Jenkins should not be able to write and publish a novel because she lacks the requisite artistic talent to do so. This, coupled with Everett's harsh attitude toward Oprah, that she should "stay the fuck out of literature," speaks to Monk's trouble coping with the success of *We's Lives In Da Ghetto*. For Monk, there is no value in the talentless novel, yet the enthusiasm of Dunston and her audience's vulnerability to that enthusiasm lead to three million dollar contracts, movie deals, and, most alarmingly for Monk, critical success.

With Dunston serving as an avatar for Oprah Winfrey, it is worthwhile to touch upon the interesting problem of Oprah's relationship with literature. Through her "Book Club," Oprah has encouraged audiences to read, supporting and exposing important writers of various races. In his exploration of Oprah's positive effect on Toni Morrison's book sales, John Young argues that "Winfrey's commercial power has superseded the publishing industry's field of normative whiteness" and allowed Morrison to reach a "single, popular audience" rather than racially divided audiences (Young 181). Young calls this ability to transcend normative whiteness the "Oprah Effect." The Oprah Effect is making important African American art more accessible to large audiences, but the problem for Everett arises where Winfrey serves as the arbiter of artistic value. Surely we do not need Oprah Winfrey to teach us that Toni Morrison is an artist—nor does Young suggest this—but in the act of choosing authors to promote, she is implicitly establishing her own authority over artistic merit and her own superiority over her audience in recognizing valuable writing.

Monk, echoing Everett's contempt for Oprah, rejects Dunston as a valuator of art particularly given the nature of the works she is promoting in *erasure*. In welcoming Stagg Leigh and *My Pafology* (since retitled *Fuck*) to her Book Club, Dunston reads a passage on air where Go, *Fuck*'s focalizing character, demonstrates myriad black male stereotypes: he is

an absentee father with several children, he is highly sexualized, he demeans and intimidates women, and he uses exaggerated language and dialect. After her reading, she tells her audience, "it doesn't get any more real than this" (*erasure* 251). Considering Young's "Oprah Effect", the supposed ability of Oprah to transcend racial norms, Dunston becomes representative of a blindness borne of postracial thinking. Representations of race, particularly representations of blackness coming from black writers, must be accepted as "real" or "true" and the possibility of racism is dismissed. Monk intends the writing to be reductive and racist as a satirical tool, but Dunston can't or won't see these elements of *Fuck* because of her desire to transcend race; she is blinded by the self-generated Oprah Effect.

Monk's anger is ostensibly directed at the success of *Fuck* and *We's Lives In Da Ghetto* and at the industry that propagates cultural authenticity. People like Yul and Kenya Dunston embrace and promote stereotypical representations of blackness for their profitability. They also can not or will not see the destructive or racist elements of these representations. Monk focuses much of his anger on this blind pursuit of profit, but this anger becomes the driving force behind his own self-destruction. He becomes a profiteer of cultural authenticity when he publishes *Fuck*, accepts the money, and promotes the novel on Dunston's show. He recognizes that he is contributing to cultural trafficking in authenticity in the same ways Yul and Dunston are, regardless of his intent in writing the novel or his needs in accepting the money earned by it. His anger turns inward, evolving into shame as Monk's identity is consumed by his alterego Stagg R. Leigh.

Monk pays a heavy price for this anger and shame as they fuel the erasure of his self-identity. Monk struggles to balance his practical needs with his anger toward the publishing industry and he loses himself in Stagg R. Leigh as his need to earn money outweighs his artistic ideals. His exposure to cultural trafficking in authenticity comes at a high human cost: he pays with the failure his own self-identity. In *Sag Harbor*, Benji also pays a very high cost

for his exposure to cultural trafficking in authenticity. He feels lost and isolated, unable to find a clear self-identity in relation to culturally trafficked modes of blackness found in hip hop and television. The final chapter of this thesis will closely examine the human cost to Benji and Monk in response to their exposure to cultural trafficking in authenticity and explore the sources of each author's unwillingness to resolve the identity crises they built their characters around.

Chapter 3: The Human Cost and Unresolved Identities

VI. Benji and the Formation of Identity

The powerful pull of authentic cultural artifacts impacts and informs many of Benji's choices as well as his view of himself, but the question remains: how did all of these interactions with cultural trafficking affect him as a young person building an identity? All of the concepts of authentic blackness Benji interacts with shape his sense of self at a time in his life when he is vulnerable to cultural influences. Psychologists Niobe Way and Onnie Rogers position self-identity as "relational," and that "scholarship acknowledges that the self is shaped by social forces and occasionally examines the cultural context" (Way and Rogers 271). Way and Rogers' framing of self-identity is useful in exposing Benji's vulnerability to culture as he forms a self-identity, but this vulnerability is heightened because of Benji's age. Way and Rogers, synthesizing a series of scholarly examinations of identity, describe the child as "an active agent, interpreting and responding to a cultural context. These responses are referred to as 'coping strategies' and may be *reactive* and counterproductive or *proactive*, positively challenging cultural expectations and ideals that are harmful" (272). In this light, Benji's responses to cultural trafficking in authenticity will either be reactive and thus destructive to a positive self-identity, or proactive and part of positive self-development.

Early in the narrative, Benji establishes that he is unsure of himself and susceptible to his exposure to culture, particularly through his friends. Playfully exploring his inability to swim despite his time at the beach, Benji expands his swimming experiences into a useful metaphor relating him to his surrounding world and his friends: "Letting my body go, as if I didn't have a body at all and there was no barrier between me and the sea, while waiting for one of my friends to flip me over or pull me under, because that's what friends do, but if I could get a few minutes alone out of the world I was happy" (*Sag* 80). This susceptibility to his friends and the world around him informs his behavior and sense of self.. Benji is

differentiated from any young person coming of age in that his interactions with culture are based on trafficking in authentic blackness.

Way and Rogers tackle the role of race and authenticity in identity formation in adolescents, and their data "consistently show that when adolescents speak about their racial and ethnic identities, they rely on an intersecting web of stereotypes to guide them" (Way and Rogers 274). This intersecting web of stereotypes includes gendered stereotypes painting black men into a box, "a set of rigid expectations that define Black male identity as a stoic image of strength, independence, and hyper-sexuality" (275). Benji feels compelled to fit into this box based on his exposure to representations of male blackness in the culture he consumes, particularly in his interpretation of hip hop music. Benji, as the adult narrator, describes some of these "rigid expectations" of black maleness when exploring the evolution of hip hop into something more violent and volatile in the years following the events of *Sag Harbor.* He declares:

> You were hard or you were soft, in the slang drawn from the territory of manhood, the state of your erected self. Word on the Streets was that we were soft, with our private school uniforms, in our cozy beach communities, so we learned to walk like hard rocks, like B-boys, the unimpeachably down. Even if we knew better. We heard the voices of the constant damning chorus that told us we lived false, and we decided to be otherwise. We talked one way in school, one way in our homes, and another way to each other. We got guns. We got guns for a few days in one summer and then got rid of them. Later, some of us got real guns. (*Sag* 176-77)

Here there is a very real consequence for Benji's consumption and interpretation of authenticity in culture. He and his friends are trapped in a cycle of performing blackness, a cycle that pushes some of these boys into a life of violence.

Whitehead's implicit indication that some of the boys from *Sag Harbor* succumb to violent stereotypes found in the culture they consume lacks definition. There is no indication of who among the boys will grow up to carry "real guns," and Benji's narration uses the collective "we," allowing the possibility that he is one of these boys. Whitehead uses narrative distance to create this ambiguity several times in *Sag Harbor*. Whatever perspective the narrator has on his childhood self is used primarily for the self-aware humor that pervades the novel, yet this awareness stops at a willingness to shed light on the intervening years between the dramatic present and the narrative present.

The narrator returns to the issue of guns after the boys engage in a BB gun battle on the streets of Sag Harbor, and regretfully looks back, "I'd like to say, all these years later, now that one of us is dead and another paralyzed from the waist down from actual bullets—drug-related, as the papers put it—that the game wasn't so innocent after all. But it's not true. We always fought for real. Only the nature of the fight changed" (*Sag* 191). This haunting revelation displays the human cost of engaging in identity performance in response to authentic culture. The unwillingness to reveal who is plagued by these dark futures eliminates the possibility that Whitehead is clearly identifying a specific behavior pattern or a specific vulnerability that would allow this to come to pass. He falls short of prescribing a solution to the crises faced by Benji and the ambiguity of these moments fails to clearly identify a specific risk or set of risks within the boys.

The narration continues, "we learned to arm ourselves in different ways. Some of us with real guns, some of us with more ephemeral weapons, an idea or improbable plan or some sort of formulation about how best to move through the world...Protect us and keep us safe. But a weapon nonetheless" (*Sag* 191). Again, the narrator does not clarify who armed themselves with which "weapon," information that the narrator ostensibly possesses. The source of the boys' fear, the thing they need to keep "safe" from, is also obfuscated in a

general defensiveness in response to the world. In Sag Harbor, these boys do not face real, physical threats to their safety, and their attraction to guns and the fear of the world seems to come from their performance of authentic blackness based on their (often misguided) interpretation of cultural artifacts such as hip hop music. The boys need to be "hard," but as the narration implies, their reactive response to culture has destructive ramifications for at least some of the boys.

Benji not only pays a price for his responses to "hardness" or violence he finds in culture. His responses to the alternate representations of blackness found in *The Cosby Show* also generate significant pressure on Benji as he tries to navigate his own family life in reference to the Huxtables. Through the Cosby lens, Benji's sense of self is out-of-focus. Benji notes that the Huxtables were "some version of ourselves on screen," but these versions of themselves are a great distance from Benji's understanding of his family (Whitehead, *Sag* 224-225). Consuming these televisual representations of blackness is an act of verifying that "we didn't exist" while Benji's father "restrained himself from kicking in the set: That's not how we live" (225). As the summer moves along, Benji shifts from his declaration that "we were a Cosby family" towards recognizing the disconnect between his life and this version of his identity. In reference to the television and the family within, Benji says, "the box contained things of value. Where did that leave us when we looked around our own houses? The reception was terrible" (225). *The Cosby Show* may represent potential successes of a black family, but this leaves Benji to view his own version of life as without value.

Benji's family cannot be the Huxtables, but can only perform the roles publicly. As he lists types of his own fake smiles and types of silences in his house, Benji is outlining his role in the performance (*Sag* 214, 228). He is aware that this performance is meaningless, as "no one cares about what goes on in other people's houses" (232). *The Cosby Show*, which initially feels like a model for Benji's identity, is merely a reflection of the artifice of his

family life. He cannot find himself in this construct and his final analysis of his family's relationship to the Huxtables is wedged into the story of his father's withering emotional abuse toward his mother. While Benji's family dynamic is problematic for Benji regardless of *The Cosby Show*, the availability of a cultural model to perform and compare his life to is devastating.

Each family member is expected to perform his or her role, to perform "Cosby-ness," despite the fact that "the soundstage was empty, the production lot scheduled for demolition. they'd turned off the electricity long ago. We delivered our lines in the darkness" (*Sag* 232). This desolate and lonely image captures the impact of Benji's interpretations of authentic cultural artifacts. Where interpretations of "hardness," guns, and violence resulted in real, physical death and destruction for Benji, interpretations of the idealized black family in *The Cosby Show* result in the sadness and despair highlighted in Benji's soundstage analogy. The Huxtables are representative of what "ought" to be for a middle class black family, and the failure of Benji's family to live up to these standards forces him to valuate his life in reference to the impossible metric of *The Cosby Show*.

Benji's family situation, much like the individual fates of Benji and his friends, is unresolved in *Sag Harbor*. While Benji, as a narrator with some distance from these events, has access to the events between the dramatic present and the narrative present, he refuses to provide this information. Benji pays a steep price for his interpretations of authentic culture, but the reader is not allowed to see who and what Benji becomes in response to the events of *Sag Harbor*. That Whitehead uses a first-person narrator with a certain amount of narrative distance but does not offer character resolution, even in moments of narrative reflection, indicates a willful choice to deny readers this very thing. Whitehead is running away from any prescriptive assessment of these conflicts. He refuses to say, "this is what happens when children are exposed to authenticity in culture."

VII. Monk and the Erasure of Identity

Percival Everett is confronting identity from a completely different direction than Colson Whitehead. Monk is established in his identity, and his lifestyle and his exposures to cultural trafficking in authenticity challenge that establishment, leading to the erasure of his core identity. Building on their concept of proactive and reactive responses to culture, Way and Rogers go on to say that "identity formation involves the *avoidance* of the negative identity that is projected onto the self about the self. Thus, identity is not only about *becoming* (i.e. achievement) but also about *not* becoming (i.e. avoidance)" (Way and Rogers 272). Monk is swallowed up in the avoidance of negative or stereotypical images of blackness, eroding his sense of self as he becomes more and more reactive to the culture around him. Even his ostensibly clear sense of self is based largely on *not* meeting racial stereotypes. His identity is never truly free of the vortex of cultural trafficking in authenticity that he rages against.

While *erasure* is a study in Monk's vanishing self, that very self must be called into question from page one of the novel. For someone so violently opposed to racial stereotyping, authenticity, and pigeonholing labels, Monk immediately defines himself in reference to many of these things. He explains to the reader, "the society in which I live tells me that I am black; that is my race," setting the stage for the satirical tone that will dominate *erasure*; he has identified race as both a societal construct and his target (*erasure* 1). However, when delving into who he is, he provides a list of personal activities and accomplishments that seem to be direct responses to racial stereotypes: "I am no good at basketball. I listen to Mahler...I graduated *summa cum laude* from Harvard...I am good at math. I cannot dance. I

did not grow up in any inner city or the rural south" (1-2). This referential self-identification by Monk undercuts his vehement insistence on not being defined by cultural stereotypes.

The space between who Monk is and who he is not drives a great deal of the frustration he experiences when interacting with cultural trafficking in his world. Whether he is reading Juanita Mae Jenkins' novel or dealing with the racial expectations of publication, Monk continuously defines himself in opposition to these things. This referential identification leaves him vulnerable to the influences of these cultural artifacts because he must constantly rail against them. He writes *My Pafology* as an attack on the authentic images he sees in the culture around him, not as a reflection of his actual artistic self-identity, partly chipping away at that very identity. His first encounter with Jenkins' novel comes shortly after delivering a dense critical paper on Barthes and Balzac, a paper for which he has "only moderate affection" (*erasure* 21). While he identifies as an author of 'literary' works, Monk's apathy or distaste for some of his own writing weakens the foundation upon which he stands to attack authentic culture.

Monk's responses to authentic culture, particularly Jenkins' novel, increase in intensity and anger, beginning with thinking "I was going to throw up," moving to "She's not even a hack, a hack can actually write a little bit," and culminating with "pain in my feet...up my spine and into my brain...I was screaming inside" (*erasure* 29, 43, 61). These responses, leading him to write *My Pafology*, are certainly representative of Monk's distaste for the poor writing and commodified authenticity found in *We's Lives In Da Ghetto*, but the visceral rage that drives the satirical *My Pafology* is borne in part out of his own inability to escape exposure to Jenkins's novel. This exposure is not just an affront to his sense of artistry. The mounting rage leading up to the typing of *My Pafology* is a response to referential identification on Monk's part: "I didn't sound like that, my mother didn't sound like that, my father didn't sound like that" (61-2). Monk suffers greatly and pens a failed satire that

ultimately undoes him because he is continually engaged in reactive self-identification. *We's Lives In Da Ghetto* is such a powerful entity in Monk's life in that it becomes the central thing that he does *not* want to be.

The failure of *My Pafology* as satire and its acceptance as legitimate art by publishers and consumers forces Monk to become the very thing he has avoided in his self-identification. His anger and frustration with cultural trafficking transform into self-loathing and guilt after he accepts a huge payment for *My Pafology*. Faced with an ill mother and a stalled career, Monk accepts a book deal from Random House in the following exchange with his agent, Yul, acknowledging the irony and danger of accepting the money:

'Monk? This is what you wanted, right?'

'Random House?'

'Yep.'

'This is really fucked up, you know that.'

'You don't want the deal?'

'Of course I want the deal.' (*erasure* 136)

This recognition of the deal as "really fucked up," coupled with "of course," in agreeing to the deal leave Monk feeling wholly responsible for betraying who he thought he was. The pressing need to earn money and care for the family does not mitigate his responsibility, in his eyes, for perpetuating the cycle of cultural trafficking in authenticity or for betraying himself.

The immediate aftermath of accepting the book deal bears out this shift from anger to guilt and self-loathing. Monk tries to avoid contemplating his identity after the publication of *My Pafology*, but fails to do so, acknowledging that he "tried to distance myself from the position where the newly-sold piece-of-shit novel had placed me vis-a-vis my art. It was not exactly the case that I had sold out, but I was not, apparently, going to turn away the check"

(*erasure* 139). The problem here for Monk is that there is no way to differentiate himself from other sell-outs; regardless of intent or personal tension, he had produced and propagated this work. His effort to distance himself from it is marked by his adoption of the nom-de-plume Stagg R. Leigh and his refusal at first to make any appearances as the author. The vast sums of money he is being paid by Random House come with very powerful strings attached, however, and he slowly evolves away from Monk Ellison and into Stagg R. Leigh.

Monk's evolution into Stagg R. Leigh parallels the breakdowns of his family and personal life. The destruction of his personal life destabilizes Monk enough to increasingly rely on the income from the book deal and succumb to the demands of the publisher. Monk initially declares that he will not engage as the author of the book on any level, insisting that his agent tell Random House that "Stagg Leigh is painfully, pathologically shy and that he'll communicate with them through you" (*erasure* 136). Pressure and money from the publisher combined with a decline in his mother's health result in Monk bending to the demands of the publishing industry. At first, he agrees to speak with an editor over the phone as Stagg R. Leigh, but agreeing to the book deal and speaking with the editor plague Monk as he realizes that he is forfeiting his identity as an artist. He laments, "I considered everything that was not good about the novel I was about to publish, that I submitted for the very reason it was not good, but now the fact was killing me" (160). He attributes his own self-loathing in response to publishing *My Pafology* to "the real accusation staring me in the face. I was a sell-out" (160).

Selling out, while tortuous to Monk, is not the ultimate price he pays for engaging in the very cultural trafficking that he hates. The cost transcends guilt and shame and becomes all-encompassing as Monk's identity is increasingly subsumed into that of Stagg R. Leigh. While he still rails against *We's Lives In Da Ghetto* and his own novel, even destroying a burgeoning relationship with a woman because she happened to own a copy of Jenkins'

novel, Monk accepts a multi-million dollar movie deal and agrees to meet the producer as

Stagg R. Leigh. Monk's first-person narrative shifts strangely as it focalizes on Stagg R.

Leigh and Monk himself becomes obfuscated:

> Stagg was a little nervous about the lunch and so he spent extra time preparing. He
>
> stood in front of the bathroom mirror and practiced frowning, carving a furrow into
>
> his forehead, above the bridge of his nose. He shaved off his moustache and made his
>
> apologies to its original owner. He tried on a hat, couldn't bring himself to leave it on
>
> for more than a few seconds at a time.
>
> 'Who are you trying to fool?' He asked the mirror. (*erasure* 216)

Monk does not describe himself as adopting a costume or a temporary persona here, but is

instead treating Stagg as a real entity shedding reminders of some vague other self, the

"original owner." That it is a scene of Stagg preparing--and not of Monk becoming--indicates

that Monk has given up some real part of himself and replaced it with the imagined Stagg R.

Leigh.

Monk's climactic identity crisis comes when Stagg must appear on the Kenya

Dunston Show. Given the contempt Monk shows Dunston throughout the novel, and by

proxy Everett's contempt for Oprah Winfrey, agreeing to be on the show is a final descent

into the world of cultural trafficking that he has avoided throughout the novel. He has directly

engaged with the two main facets of cultural trafficking that shaped his anger and his

identity: the publishing industry and the consumption and propagation of authenticity enabled

by people like Dunston. En route to the show, Monk ponders the situation he is in: "Monk

and Stagg Leigh made the trip to New York together, on the same flight and, sadly, in the

same seat. I considered that this charade might well turn out of hand and that I would slip into

an actual condition of dual personalities" (*erasure* 237-8). While Monk wonders about this

potential schism in his own mind, he has already granted Stagg some percentage of his own

personhood by claiming authorship of the novel and agreeing to promote it. Monk asks himself, "Had I by annihilating my own presence actually asserted the individuality of Stagg Leigh? Or was it the book itself that had given him life?" (248). Having betrayed the cornerstones of his own identity and "thinking of Stagg as having agency," Monk has almost wholly lost himself in *My Pafology* and Stagg R. Leigh. What is left for Monk after this sense of self is lost?

Percival Everett, much like Colson Whitehead, seems intent on denying any real answer to that question. As Monk's novel is nominated for, and wins, a major award for fiction and rockets to the top of the *New York Times* bestseller list, Monk must make the defining decision in *erasure*. Will he accept the award as Stagg, validating both the award and Stagg's existence; will he stay hidden, keep his money, and allow Stagg to fade from public consciousness; or will he assert himself as Monk and reveal himself as the author of a satire the audience failed to understand? Everett walks Monk to the brink of this choice as *My Pafology* is announced as the award winner and Monk walks to the podium. Everett explores the dilemma faced by Monk in this moment. Monk sees himself as a small boy holding up a mirror, and in that mirror is the face of Stagg Leigh. The tension between who he was, who he wants to be, and who he has become propels him into the spotlight of the awards ceremony. Will he step to the microphone as Monk Ellison or as Stagg Leigh? The only words Monk speaks in this moment are "'Egads, I'm on television'" (*erasure* 265). Everett refuses to answer the critical question of who Monk is in this moment, even ending the book with a taunting use of Newton's famous disclaimer, "*hypotheses non fingo*" (265). Everett, in feigning no hypothesis, runs away from any resolution of character or of the conflict between cultural authenticity and self around which he builds *erasure*.

VIII. The Paradox of the Postracial, Redux

Everett and Whitehead both actively avoid any kind of prescriptive ending in their novels. The hesitancy to offer any resolution to these characters' identity crises stands out in novels largely about identity. *Sag Harbor* can be read as a collection of short stories, a mosaic of that summer of Benji's life, designed to humorously explore a unique coming-of-age; such a reading does not require a clear picture of who Benji becomes. The difficulty with this reading lies in Whitehead's insistence on interjecting into the narrative ominous future consequences for the events of *Sag Harbor*. Hinting at the fates of the characters, particularly Benji, puts emphasis on the time between the dramatic present and the telling of the story, a time wholly dependent on who Benji becomes in response to that summer. Whiteahead's narrative choices call attention to the character resolution he avoids at the end of the novel. Percival Everett is also calling attention to the very thing he ultimately avoids in *erasure. Erasure*'s satirical tone allows for the interpretation that Everett is setting up these crises for the purpose of shrugging at the end, essentially limiting the role of satire to a tool used for exposing problems, not solving them. Monk, however, is so insistent on his attitudes to art and culture that he undermines the ambiguity of the ending. Everett spends so much time developing Monk's anger toward the publishing industry and cultural representations of blackness, creating the expectation that he will resolve or address in some way the consequences of that anger. Why did these authors so richly develop these identity crises in the face of cultural authenticity only to run away from resolution?

Benji, vulnerable to the influences of cultural trafficking, identifies modes of authentic blackness and, along with his friends, performs them as a means to formulate some self-identity. In response to these modes, Benji reactively defines himself and adapts to better meet the expectation of what he "ought" to be. He identifies hip hop as a "blacker" cultural mode and attempts to perform elements of hip hop in his own behavior. Whether he is

actually trying to engage in hip hop performance or responding to his understanding of the content and culture of hip hop, Benji is pulled toward cultural representations of authenticity. Benji's identity conflict is borne out of his need to meet the expectations of authentic culture despite his overriding tendencies to be something else. This tension is exponentially magnified in the presence of the alternate authentic blackness found in *The Cosby Show*. Benji, recognizing that his family is not the Huxtables and feeling that he is not "black enough" based on his interpretations of hip hop culture, feels "not allowed" in the club of hip hop or that he is "delivering his lines in the darkness."

Of course, *Sag Harbor* is not a story about Benji's isolation; it is a funny coming-of-age novel and, at least in Whitehead's mind "Benji is a lot smarter on Labor day than he is at the beginning of the summer" (qtd. in Shukla). The humor in the novel is derived from the self-awareness of the narrator as he views his childhood in hindsight, but it is this very narrative distance that is problematic when assessing Whitehead's ultimate message on cultural trafficking. The narrator's awareness is vital to the tone and narrative in *Sag Harbor*, but Whitehead's dependence on this narrative distance exposes his unwillingness to resolve Benji's character or identity crisis. While the narrative structure, a coming-of-age tale built out of largely self-contained essays or chapters, does not demand character resolution, Whitehead's novel seems to require resolution when he uses his narrative distance to explore the costs and consequences of Benji's exposure to cultural trafficking in authenticity. The narrator possesses information about who Benji becomes in response to the events of *Sag Harbor* and he expresses a willingness to discuss elements of this information, indicating a willful choice on the part of the narrator and the author to deny the reader access. Whitehead's refusal to do so is tied to the postracial moment he is writing in and his own difficulty managing the distance between himself and the world in which he writes.

Whitehead's desire to not be pigeonholed as a black writer presents a challenge in a growing postracial society. Whitehead derides the very idea of a postracial America, noting that the idea that racism has vanished is "Obviously not true" (qtd. in Shukla). Given this acknowledgement of race as an ongoing issue in America, Whitehead is aware that in paying so much attention to race and authenticity in *Sag Harbor*, he is making himself available to the label "black writer" that he hopes to avoid. Whitehead is not being hypocritical here; he is merely operating within the not-fully-realized postracial paradigm. He posits that, "you're only postracial when you stop asking if you're postracial," acknowledging that the racial labels he rejects are still operational (qtd. in Shukla). Whitehead is "asking the question" in his writing, simultaneously working with racial issues like cultural authenticity while working to avoid strictly racial labels.

In *Sag Harbor*, however, Whitehead actively tethers Benji's exposure to cultural authenticity and the costs of that exposure directly to his personal development and to the ambiguous future where these costs have terrible ramifications for Benji and his friends. If *Sag Harbor* is a story of a young man growing up and Whitehead opens the door to visions of who he becomes, then Whitehead's unwillingness to resolve who Benji becomes works as something of a taunt. Some of the friends are dead or maimed in the future, but we are not allowed to know who or how or why, even though the narrator has the information and has chosen to divulge part of it. In his effort to avoid feeding the cycle of cultural authenticity, Whitehead is hesitant to concretely declare definitively how Benji's exposure to cultural trafficking affects his life, whether productively or destructively. Doing so could potentially put Whitehead in the position of proposing a way to successfully navigate modes of blackness, which in itself would be an assertion of an authentic means of living to combat cultural trafficking.

Whether or not this is why Whitehead avoids resolving the identity crises that he develops throughout *Sag Harbor* and highlights in the narrative, he is certainly asking questions about the impact of cultural trafficking in authenticity without answering them. His interviews indicate that he is aware of the postracial paradox he is operating in: he wants to be free of racial labels, but acknowledges that race continues to generate myriad issues that still demand attention, an acknowledgement that undercuts his own desires. This awareness and acknowledgement, while not contributing to character resolution in *Sag Harbor*, does facilitate the playful, self-aware humor in the novel. Whitehead is asking the questions, not to answer them, but in the hope that someday they do not need to be asked.

Percival Everett seems to be doing a very similar thing in *erasure*, but with a vital difference—he refuses to acknowledge the gap between his own insistence on being free of racial labels and the extensive work he is doing on racial issues in *erasure*. Like Whitehead, Everett outlines a cause-and-effect relationship between cultural trafficking in authenticity and self-identity. Monk, seemingly assured in his sense of self, responds to the publishing industry reactively, defining himself as a negative image of the cultural artifacts around him. He is *not* Juanita Mae Jenkins; he is *not* supportive of Kenya Dunston and her ilk; he does *not* speak like the characters in the reductive, stereotypical representations of blackness he sees everywhere. This breeds a resentful anger in Monk, ultimately resulting in him betraying many things he held up as vital to his self-identity. He becomes the author of a stereotypical novel and he promotes it on Dunston's show. His sense of self is eroded until he has difficulty separating himself from his alterego Stagg Leigh. Everett's ending, that of Monk stepping to the microphone unsure of who he will be or what he will say, supports and enhances Monk's personal confusion. However, the ending also suggests that Everett avoids any kind of character resolution for Monk, despite building the entire novel around the character's identity.

As with Whitehead, Everett's unwillingness to answer the questions about the endpoint of Monk's journey spawns from the author's own difficulty bridging the gap between his personal beliefs about racial categorization and his need to cope with critical racial issues like cultural trafficking in authenticity. Everett's aggressive rejection of being labeled a black author, as well as his avoidant identification as someone who does *not* fit stereotypes, is difficult to accept at face value given the volume and intensity of race-driven satire in *erasure*. Like his problematic claims that readers cannot hope to learn anything about him from his characters despite having said that Monk resembles him so much, Everett's staunch refusal to provide any prescriptive or corrective resolution at the end of *erasure* does not readily align with his own personal beliefs and his own self-identity.

Critics of *erasure* often credit Everett's ending as a successful postmodern take on race. Critic Scott Gibson attributes Percival Everett with a tendency to "meditate on the postmodern condition of participating in, breaking from, and transforming 'tradition' (353-4) Gibson goes on to say that *erasure* is a novel that "loosens the semantic associations between cultures, physical appearances, and corresponding 'race' categories" (Gibson 359). Gibson, embracing the postmodern resistance to narrative closure, praises the ending as Everett "flushing him (Monk) out to dispel his illusions in the most public of places" (367). Gibson's definition of *erasure* as a postmodern novel provides insight into why Everett avoids resolving Monk's issues related cultural trafficking and self-identity. Postmodernism, in an effort to transform tradition and loosen semantic associations, tends to avoid closure and reject any responsibility of fiction to correct society's ills. However, when asked if his work is "corrective," Everett doesn't forthrightly claim a postmodern resistance to such a term. Instead he replied, "I'm not correcting anything. That would mean I know enough to correct. I'm just a dumb writer" (qtd. in Shavers 61-2). This expressed attitude demands the cagy ending that Everett provides. He fails to show Monk's utter failure as a person, his

redemption, or his human reaction to the situation he finds himself in at the end of the novel. If he were to show what Monk does at that podium, Everett could then be held responsible for being corrective, so he avoids that altogether. If, for example, Monk's identity is wholly subsumed into that of Stagg Leigh, then *erasure* can be read as cautionary; Monk's choice to produce and sell *My Pafology* (engage in cultural trafficking) led to his downfall. If Monk achieves any sort of redemption, then Everett would have painted a path toward that redemption. Everett's contention that he is just a "dumb writer" who is not capable of corrective writing is his justification for the ending of *erasure*.

Everett is hypocritical on this contention, given that he also declared that Oprah should "stay the fuck out of literature and stop pretending she knows anything about it" and "Art is not Democratic...to think everybody is going to be good at it, just because they want to—that's compete idiocy" (qtd. in Shavers 64). Everett seems fit to determine the parameters of valuable art and is possessed of rare skill in writing, yet according to him, he is unfit to be corrective. Allowing Monk to make a choice in that final moment does not need to be a prescriptive or corrective act. Everett could simply be drawing a human character responding to a human situation. While Everett is under no obligation to provide answers or resolution for his audience, *erasure* is driven by Monk's identity crises and, as the title promises, the narrative is focalized around the erasure of his sense of self. The lack of follow-through on these core structures of the narrative leaves *erasure* trapped in the space between Everett's personal beliefs about race and his emphasis on race in his writing.

Hypotheses fingo: Whitehead and Everett are both victims of their own core beliefs and desires. Their wish to be free of racial categorizations is entirely understandable for talented writers who can, and should, be valuated based on merit. The postracial world, however, imposes the absurd belief that we have transcended race, leaving any who wish to cope with racial issues as either racist themselves or purveyors of the passé. *Sag Harbor* and

erasure are, at least in part, each author's way of coping with this growing attitude. Aware of their own desires to move away from racial categorization but knowing how prevalent race issues still are, both Everett and Whitehead are left to wonder how they go about tackling the dangers they see in cultural trafficking in authenticity without painting themselves into the very category they hope to avoid.

Both authors turn to humor as a tool to point out and expose both the destructive power of cultural trafficking and the ridiculous nature of postracial thinking. Humor allows them to explore their characters' identities in response to exposure to authenticity while deriding and critiquing a variety of targets. Whitehead and Everett both succeed at this, with both *Sag Harbor* and *erasure* bursting with humor in exposing the dangers of cultural trafficking. This humorous approach, while used very differently by each author, also enables them to throw their arms up and shrug at all the questions and problems they have posed. After all, Everett is "just a dumb writer," and perhaps he is just trying to point out the problems and not solve them, corrective writing being beyond the realm of the satirist. Maybe Colson Whitehead is really just trying to tell a funny coming-of-age story with a limited character arc and these larger issues can't be resolved in one funny summer in a young boy's life.

Whitehead, at least, seems to understand that he is stuck. He doesn't want to be labeled as a black writer, but these issues of race are central to the narrative in *Sag Harbor*. The novel's sense of humor is founded on Benji's self-awareness as he recounts his youthful adventures, but perhaps that self-awareness extends to Whitehead as well. He knows how important cultural trafficking in authenticity is to his story and he embraces racial conflicts with a wry, self-deprecating humor. In the absence of the narrator's ominous warnings from the ambiguous future, the novel functions very well as a contained story about one summer in the life of Benji. Whitehead's insistence on drawing attention to the potential ramifications of

exposure to cultural trafficking in authenticity for a group of young boys is indicative of the author's awareness that these problems must be solved if racial categories are going to vanish. He is asking the questions in the hope that they can be answered eventually, just not by him.

In contrast, Everett has dug his heels in. He lives and writes in rejection of racial categorization while reacting furiously to problems of race in the world. This fuels the scathing satire in *erasure* and frees Everett from the need to be corrective. Everett seems to have found the answer to coping with racial categorizations and cultural trafficking in authenticity in his own life: ignore it and live your life. Even his own lifestyle, however, cannot liberate Everett from the realities of race. Everett understands and, on some level, embraces this, choosing to target and attack the absurdity of racial categorizations and cultural trafficking in authenticity. His refusal to be corrective, or even to show Monk in the most vital moment of characterization, is a refusal to entirely accept that what he so desires is not a fully realized actuality yet. Everett and Whitehead are both left waiting for a world that is not here yet, unable to show readers how to get there.

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