

## Post-racial African-American Writing in Percival Everett's *Erasure*

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### Abstract

As the voice that America now entered the postracial era came out, race was more frequently discussed in literature field. The word post-race symbolizes a shift of African-American writers' consciousness of race and their own racial identity in their novels in the post-racial era. This paper applies Ramon Saldivar's definition of postrace to analyze the novel *Erasure* by Percival Everett, the African-American writer of new generation, revealing the meaning of race for the contemporary African-American writers.

**Key words:** Post-racial era; African-American writers; Percival Everett; *Erasure*

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### INTRODUCTION

Percival Everett (born 1956) is an African-American writer and distinguished Professor of English at the University of Southern California. He is a prolific writer and until now he has published nineteen novels and

novellas, three collections of short stories, three volumes of poetry, and a children's book. And his books discussed many themes including westerns, satires, revisions of classical mythology, and race. He achieved a number of honors including Academy Award in Literature from the American Academy of Arts and Letters and Wright Legacy Award for Fiction. According to his interviews, he considers race a bogus and socially-constructed conception, but race virtually is an inevitable topic for him due to his identity. When America stepped into the post-racial era, the color-blind racism replaced previous racism and the connotation of race changed. And Percival Everett is a representative among contemporary African-American writers, who senses the transformation and presents his post-racial African-American writing in the novel *Erasure*, which made him and his book *Erasure* a valuable studying object.

*Erasure* was published in 2001 and won him a Hurston Legacy Award for Fiction. It received high compliments among critics. *The Guardian* focuses on the dark comedy that it represents, describing it as moving towards the "bleakest comedy" and "sly work" (Pinckney). *Ready Steady Book* thinks that the novel is "full of anger" (Tripney) about the African American literary establishment. This novel contains so many topics, publishing industry, canonical western artists, abortion, race, literary schools and family responsibility, to name but a few. Despite so many branches, *Erasure* essentially is a story on how the publishing industry pigeon-holed black writers so that black writers' art talent and efforts can only be presented on the stage of black arts and never have the chance to enter the dominant art palace for the whole world. Based on this plot, most researches on the novel emphasize on the racial theme and conflict between artistry and commercialization. The represented ones are Brian Yost's "The Changing Same: The Evolution of Racial Self-Definition and Commercialization", Margaret Russett's "Race under Erasure" and Sinead Moynihan's

“Living Parchments, Human Documents: Racial Identity and Authorship in Percival Everett’s *Erasure* and Hannah Crafts’ *The Bondswoman*”. There are some researches discussed on the narrative of this novel. Bernard W. Bell analyzed the form of metafiction in his review on *African American Review*. Percival Everett employed an experimental structure written in multiple narratives with the dominant story about the writer Thelonious “Monk” Ellison, the embedded narrative for Monk’s novel *My Pafology* and other embedded narratives such as academic paper, personal letters, metafiction, imagined dialogues between fictionalized historical characters. The researches on the writing skills such as parody are commonly observed with the typical one from Wang Yukuo’s “Parody and Racial Dialogue in Percival Everett’s *Erasure*”. Among all the researches, the researches on race mainly discuss about the definition of race in Black Arts Movement and its later influence on media and commercialization. This paper will adopt postracial perspective, discussing on black writers’ identity and on the post-racial African-American writing in the novel.

The earliest use of the term “post-racial” can be dated back to 1971 when *The New York Times* titled an article “Compact Set Up for ‘Post-Racial’ South” in which 70 politicians and professors agreed that the United States has entered an era in which race relations are soon to be replaced as a major concern by population increase, industrial development, and economic fluctuations, but actually the term “post-racial” gained currency after 2008. Rating the election of Barack Obama as a turning point, Daniel Schorr believed that “America now entered the ‘post-racial’ political era” in which the society is color-blind. It is true that after the struggle of Civil Rights Movement, racial segregation was abolished and racial equality was written into the American Constitution in 1964. However, the end of legal discrimination doesn’t mean that race is not a problem now, and the only change is that “color-blind racism became the dominant racial ideology as the mechanisms and practices for keeping blacks and other racial minorities ‘at the bottom of the well’ changed” (Bonilla-Silva 22). Apparently, compared with Jim Crow racism, the ideology of color-blind racism seems “racism lite” (3) and “otherizes softly” (3). For example, the segregation still exists due to those covert practices of discrimination like quoting high rents to colored people. And the colored people were represented as stereotypes in the western culture who were poor and violent, most of whom undertook the evil and secondary parts in the movies or books.

Along with the appearance of color-blind racism, the conception of race changed. Thus Ramon Saldivar defined the term postrace as entailing “a conceptual shift to the question of what meaning the idea of ‘race’ carries in our own times” (575). And he believes that today “race can no longer be considered exclusively in the binary form, black/white, which has traditionally structured racial

discourse in the US” (575). In this way, the prefix “post” is “not like the post of post-structuralism; it is more like the post of postcolonial” (575). And to further use this term in literary critics, Ramon Saldivar refers postrace both to “the critical difference between the social and aesthetic conditions of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, and the significance of this difference for the form of fiction in the contemporary American context” (575). Thus this paper will discuss how the contemporary African-American writer Percival Everett deals with his black identity and the meaning of race in a time when race supposedly no longer matters.

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## BLACK WRITER’S IDENTITY

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To examine how contemporary African-American writers deal with their black identity, firstly their consciousness of race should be focused on. For many contemporary black writers, race does not carry the same meaning as that for their forebears. To present it clearly, race symbolized not a harsh binary forms between white and black but a broader and more fused engagement for white and black. From the view of social causes, biological determinism, the prime proof for race, had been denied by modern gene science. And in the book *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1990s* (1986), Michael Omi and Howard Winant provide an account of how concepts of race are created and transformed, how they become the focus of political conflicts, and how they come to shape and permeate both identities and institutions. Thus in present America it is almost a consensus that race is socially constructed. This is also the case for the black writer Percival Everett. In an interview when Percival Everett answered the question about race, he said “Race is technically a bogus category, but it’s been constructed in the way that it’s real. Certainly in America” (5). In this way, gene science and social researches negated the inborn inferior flaws for the black so as to decenter the binary forms for white and black.

And from the view of writers’ personal causes, most of them were born after 1955 without personal experiences of the slavery or deep memories for civil rights movement and were brought up in multi-racial mix of cultures. And according to Trey Ellis, those writers were “cultural mulatto” who were “educated by a multi-racial mix of cultures, can also navigate easily in the white world” (235). For them, race does not mean any separation between the white and the black but a mixed creature. And compared with genetic mulatto, cultural mulattoes focus on two cultural systems, so their existence can be an evidence to overturn the stereotypes of white and black in western culture. To sum up, due to the different social conditions in post-racial America, race carries different meanings for contemporary African-American writers, which led to the formation of their post-racial novels.

On the premise that race no longer symbolizes binary opposition for white and black, that is to say, white and black are equal and can be fused on the appearance, they have no burden to accept and claim their black identity. However, things are different when it refers to their career. Marita Golden, the curator of a Harlem exhibition of 28 emerging black artists, considers “post-black art as a genre whose artists wanted to resist the label ‘black artist’” (Babb 35). It is “not because they wished to shun their racial identification but because they felt this term was too laden with past racial histories and too aesthetically constricting” (Babb 35). Thus obviously for them, their black identity became a burden for them to pursue their artistry.

This result was much owed to the past stereotypes on black writers. In post-racial America, aesthetic conditions are different from that in 21st century and highlights the diverse aesthetic trends and artists are enthusiastic to do more experiments on their art. The past classification limited their possibilities. However, today contemporary black writers are trying to break up this cage. For instance, Trey Ellis supported the New Black Aesthetic movement to argue that there is a broader way to characterize middle class blacks today. And in his novel *Platitudes*, he also discusses on how to represent blackness through an experimental structure with realistic metafiction on two writers and their novels. Therefore, on account of different aesthetic conditions in post-racial America, contemporary African-American writers harbored different views on their own black identity, which influenced their narration on race in their writings.

## POST-RACIAL WRITING IN *ERASURE*

*Erasure* is a fair example which illustrates well the issue of race in the post-racial age. As Ramsey maintained, “in writers such as Komunyakaa and Everett, the black cultural nationalism of the 1960s-1980s has been redirected toward an understanding of race as social construction. If separatist politics of that former era were grounded on a strong binary, by which white essence was to be rejected for black essence, today the binary is collapsing, with race and region characterized more by fluidity and cultural amorphousness” (134). In *Erasure*, Percival Everett displayed this collapse of the binary opposition by comparing two black characters respectively from post-racial America and previous America, namely, Thelonious Ellison and Van Go Jenkins.

Van Go Jenkins, a black character created by the writer Thelonious Ellison in his novel *My Pafology*, was a black image from western mainstream culture in 20th century, which is the time before the post-racial age. Russet points out that *My Pafology* is “in its plot outline a transparent updating of Richard Wright’s *Native Son*” (364). As *Native Son* was an influential African-American

work in presenting black image in 20th century, the protagonist Jenkins in its parody *My Pafology* virtually was an epitome of black people in 20th century America, reflecting the meaning of race and blackness at that time.

Firstly, in 20th century the image of black people was fixed and stereotyped. Black people are tied with the tags such as poverty, violence, limited education, and lack of responsibility. Those features are completely made for Jenkins. First, he was poor because his father had gone and his mother raised two children with a mean income. He was idle all day until his mother found him a job to be a driver for a rich man. His second tag is violence. At the beginning of *My Pafology*, Jenkins made a dream in which he stabbed his mother for many times. And in reality he raped his boss’s daughter when she was drunk, and then he grabbed a gun at his way to run away from the police. He had many fights, one of which led to his failing to graduate because he beat his teacher to hospital. Third, he did not receive a good education. And that is why his sentences were full of grammatical mistakes and dirty words. He bore neither social nor family responsibility. When he introduced himself, he said, “My name is Van Go Jenkins and I’m nineteen years old and I don’t give a fuck about nobody, not you, not my Mama, not the man” (66). And he blamed all the bad results on the world that “The world don’t give a fuck about nobody, so why should I” (66). He had four babies with four different women and though he said “I takes care of my babies” (66), he never gave any money to those women to support his babies. He even said one of them was a “crazy bitch” because “I know she gone pop a cap in me if I shows my face cause I ain’t give her no money and she been askin fo’ there monfs” (66). In a word, he was a fixed black image with the stereotypes existing in the mainstream culture of America in the 20th century.

Secondly, the previous emphasis on Black Nationalism and the nature or essence of black can also be observed on Jenkins. In *My Pafology*, the black community is bonded inside and separated from outside. Black people created their own world and were reluctant to be assimilated by the mainstream white culture. Black people and white people are from two different worlds with a distinct color line. Jenkins got his job from his mother’s black friend and often hung out in the pool hall with his black gang. Black people had their cultural identities in sports, music and fashion because they had good performance in being basketball players, jazz players and models, making these identities an exclusive thing for them so as to emphasize the essence and uniqueness of blackness. It is also shown in the novel.

“You ought to think about going back to school,” Penelope say, looking at my eyes in the mirror, “I bet daddy could help you get a scholarship to college.”

“What kinda schola-ship I’m gone get?” I ax.

"I don't know. You're underprivileged, you've that going for you."

Roger laugh. "Can you run fast?" he ax. "If you can run fast then you can run track. Can you play basketball?"

"Yeah I can play ball" I say.

"There you are then. A basketball scholarship." (102)

Thus black people were proud of their black identity and dedicated to dig out their black essence and promote their black culture in America of 20th century.

Thelonious Ellison, who also had a nick name as Monk, was the protagonist in the novel *Erasure* and an example of contemporary black people in post-racial America. The proof came from Percival Everett's autobiographic writing. Monk and Percival Everett shared a number of similar experiences so Monk actually symbolized Percival Everett who served as a contemporary black writer in post-racial America. For instance, both Monk and Percival were from middle class and received good education. They both were writers who wrote retelling of Euripides and met with same problem with publishers. Therefore, as a symbol of Percival Everett, Monk's image covered the meaning of race and black identity in the post-racial age.

In the first place, different from 20th century, post-racial age witnesses multiple black images and opposes stereotypes. Monk is just one example of these images. And as he is from middle class, Monk is almost contrary to Jenkins in many ways. Well-educated, he has good manners. Gentle and soft, he is not a hero but a normal person who lives a life mixed with happiness and sorrows.

"I'm sorry if my books offend you, Lorraine."

She was taken off guard by my directness, but kept chopping peppers now.

"You know, just because my characters use certain words doesn't mean anything about me. Its art."

"Yes, I know."

"Have you ever used the word fuck?" I asked.

She stopped cutting, seemed almost ready to laugh. "Yes, I have, Mr. Monk. It's a word which has its use." (59)

Apparently Monk seldom use dirty words, which is a sharp contrast to Jenkins who used the word in his every sentence. And though he escaped from his family responsibility in taking care of his mother at first, he eventually moves back to his mom's house after his sister's death. These details all shape a different black image from the image in the 20th century America.

Secondly, besides the different black image, the more tolerant frame of race takes place of the binary oppositions of white and black. When Monk introduces his black identity, he says that "some of my ancestors were slaves and I have been detained by pasty white policemen in New Hampshire, Arizona and Georgia and so the society in which I live tells me I am black" (1). Monk actually does not believe in race and considered it as a bogus and social structured thing. In doing so, the line between black and white was erased. Moreover, in Monk's world basketball is not an exclusive tag for black people, just as

classic music is not white's property. It is also clear in his self-introduction.

Though I am fairly athletic, I am no good at basketball. I listen to Mahler, Aretha Franklin, Charlie Parker and Ry Cooder on vinyl records and compact discs. I graduated summa cum laude from Harvard, hating every minute of it. I am good at math, I cannot dance. (1)

Thus on Monk, readers can notice the mixture of white and black instead of its original binary pairs. By creating the two characters Jenkins and Monk, Percival Everett illustrated a clear explanation for the meaning of race in different time. More importantly, based on his own experiences, he displays the real lives of some black people in post-racial America. Through his tricks in making Jenkins a fictional black character from Monk (a real black writer)'s novel and an opposite response from Monk's readers that Jenkins is more real for being black people than Monk himself, a great irony was formed to arouse people's deep thinking on race today.

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## CONCLUSION

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Due to the different social and aesthetic conditions in America of 20th and 21th century, race carries a different meaning for contemporary African American writers and it influences their writings. In *Erasure*, Percival Everett portrayed two characters Jenkins and Monk who respectively represented the fixed stereotypical black image in America of 20th century and an example of black image from middle class in post-racial America. Race has different connotations on them from a binary opposition to a fluid frame. Therefore, on behalf of new generation of African American writer in post-racial America, Percival Everett expresses his thoughts and attitudes on race, which arouses new critics and considerations on African American Literature.

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