Deconstructing the Narrative: Language, Genre, and Experience in *Erasure.*

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> *"The realist text is a determinate representation, an intelligible structure which claims to convey intelligible relationships between its elements" (Belsey, 1980, p.107).*
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> *"Indeed, there is a general rule of realism to which virtually all nineteenth and twentieth century novels, at least those in the Western tradition, subscribe: the authorial audience knows it is reading a work of art, while the narrative audience believes what it is reading is real"(Rabinowitz, 1987, p.100).*
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> *"To become a logic of narrative it [plot] has to turn toward recognized cultural configurations, toward the schematism of narrative constituted by the plot-types handed down by tradition" (Ricoeur, 1985, p.43).*

Percival Everett's novel *Erasure* is a constantly shifting narrative that questions the structure of many types of form. On the cover, the title, outlined in red and white, appears as a label placed on top of the book. Standing behind it is a portrait of a young, bare-chested, black man whose identity is ambiguous. Is this person Theolonius 'Monk' Ellison, the narrator? Is the figure Van Go Jenkins of *My Pafology*? In back of the man loom the words of Van Go's style of language that Monk disowns from the black experience. Percival Everett's novel *Erasure* deconstructs language, the novel, the black experience and forms of stereotypical practice to demonstrate that meaning, which common social understanding defines, is a construct that does not leave space for alternative narratives to exist.

Monk Ellison's essay, which he presents at the Noveau Roman Society, is an example of Everett's deconstruction of language in *Erasure*. The dense paper explores the concept of S/Z as a subject, the '/' acting as both a wedge and a joint between the two letters. The paper states, "*In establishing its own subject, ostensibly Balzac's Sarrasine, it raises the question of whether that text is indeed its subject. And of course it is not, as S/Z tells us, its subject is the elusive model of that thing which Sarrasine might be argued to be a representation*" (Everett, 2001, p.14). 'S/Z' both deconstructs and constructs the subject through the '/' by exploring the plurality of signification and the suspension of meaning.[1] Monk writes this paper as a scholar in creative

[1] Roland Barthes explored Balzac's Sarrasine in his own book, *S/Z*. Howard, Richard. Preface of *S/Z* Roland Barthes. Trans. Richard Miller. (New York: Hill and Wang, 1974) xi.

writing and English literature, the same profession as Everett, who, in actuality, composed this academic paper (Everett, 1999). Everett creates an ambiguity about who is actually dissecting the subject in "F/V: Placing the Experimental Novel" because the narrative audience reads *Erasure* as Monk's journal but the authorial audience regards it as Everett's novel (Rabinowitz, 1987, p.96). Everett's deconstruction of the subject and the author who explores the subject in the paper shows the influence of the person completing the process of signification with defining the subject.

Monk's deconstruction of language analyzes not only the subject but also the definition of words. Monk explores the subjectivity behind the communication of a sentence, stating that intention cannot completely define the meaning of words: "It's incredible that a sentence is ever understood. Mere sounds strung together by some agent attempting to mean some thing, but the meaning need not and does not confine itself to that intention" (Everett, 2001, p.44). The perception of a listener is subjective and has the potential to comprehend a meaning that differs from that of the speaker. The sign is only able to stand for an object (the signified) because of a common understanding of its meaning through the speakers of language. Paul Ricoeur describes the possibility of making language a closed system:

> As for its systematic organization, it can in turn be mastered if it is possible to reduce it to a finite number of basic differential units, the system's signs, and to establish the set of combinatory rules that give rise to all its internal relations. [. . .] The immanence of these relations – that is, the system's indifference to any extralinguistic reality – is an important corollary of this closure rule that characterizes a structure (Ricoeur, 1985, p.30).

Ricoeur's statement claims that language must differ from any reality outside of linguistics if it is to be a closed system. Monk's assertion indicates that language must exist as an external system because of meaning's subjectivity. This lack of objectivity demonstrates that there is no combinatory set of rules to regulate the relations between the words in a sentence. Monk's deconstruction of the consistent meaning behind words and sentences reveals the inadequacy of language to describe alternative narratives because the linguistic message receiver will interpret based on their own understanding instead of that of the sender's.

Monk's continues his exploration of the relationship between words through the comparison of four sentences. Monk examines these sentences through focusing on the differences in the meanings of verbs and how those differences depend on the perception of the

reader, listener and speaker. He writes, "I have often stared into the mirror and considered the difference between the following statements: (1) He looks guilty. (2) He seems guilty. (3) He appears guilty. (4) He is guilty" (Everett, 2001, p.207). The meanings of these sentences are ambiguous because of the many possible supposed references by the verbs. 'He looks guilty' has a variety of possible interpretations because 'looks' can apply to facial expression, demeanor or gestures. 'He seems guilty' is more vague than the first sentence because 'seems' can apply to non-visual aspects such as speech. 'He appears guilty' is similar to the first sentence because 'appears' is once again obscure about what exactly makes the male person look guilty. 'He is guilty' is the most definitive sentence in the list. Monk's questioning of the differences between these statements inquires into the way the reader associates specific meanings to language. Do the first three sentences give the reader the impression that 'he' is guilty, even though they are certain degrees of implication? Monk's examination of the difference between four similar statements reveals his doubts about the consistent meaning of language, an obstacle he must encounter while attempting to communicate effectively with his audience. Fredric Jameson argues that convention can replace indications and signals (i.e.: intonation, gestures), which mark speech to keep language from drifting in an ambiguous, multiplicity of uses (Jameson, 1981, p.106). Convention is both a solution and a problem for Monk because it aids in the consistency of the perception of language's meaning. However, Monk's struggle to publish his work and avoid racial stereotypes shows that conventional meaning reinforces the narratives that readers are already familiar with and suppresses alternatives.

Monk not only explores language in abstract ideas; he also investigates its meaning in his own life. He recalls his parents' hostility towards homosexuality and how they labeled it. He remembers a particular word of his father's: "My parents talked rather badly about the *queens* that paraded the street near my father's office, but, more than anything, thinking of sexual preference, or that there was sexual preference, didn't exist. My father had a term, which I heard once, for a homosexual man and that was *Eye. I* never did discover how the word came to mean anything" (Everett, 2001, p.45). Monk does not see 'Eye' as signifying anything and, therefore, attaches no meaning to the sign. Ironically, the word 'Eye' is a homonym with 'I,' and Monk chooses to place those two words in italics in this passage along with the word 'queens.' Monk informs his audience that his parents did not acknowledge the existence of sexual preference, yet 'Eye' is the part of the body that sees, creating an association between the visual and the

homosexual. In addition, Monk uses the term in *My Pafology*; Van Go Jenkins calls the makeup artist, Queenie, at the Snookie Cane show an 'Eye' (Everett, 2001, p.112). Monk gives the word meaning by using it. His placement of it into a novel he hates, in the speech of the most despised character, implies his negative feelings about the word. The juxtaposition of Monk's initial refusal to give 'Eye' meaning with his later insertion of the word into *My Pafology* as a degrading epithet reveals the inconsistencies in a standard meaning of language.

In addition to language, *Erasure* deconstructs the form of the novel. The juxtaposition of the book as Percival Everett's novel and as Monk Ellison's journal creates an ambiguity about to whom this narrative actually belongs. Monk informs his readers in the opening paragraph that this book is his journal. He writes, "My journal is a private affair, but as I cannot know the time of my coming death, and since I am not disposed, however unfortunately, to the serious consideration of self-termination, I am afraid that others will see these pages" (Everett, 2001, p.1). Monk feels concerned that his journal might one day become accessible to others, yet *Erasure* is a published novel. The words 'a novel' are on the bottom right hand corner of the cover of the first edition. On the other hand, the book itself has pages with tattered edges that support Monk's claim of its journal status. One possible conclusion of this ambiguity is that the book exists as both a novel and a journal. David Herman (2002) writes, "[. . .] a given storyworld participant can be both Subject and Object over the course of a narrative" (p.130). According to Herman's theory, Monk can be both the subject that writes his journal and the object of Everett's novel, despite the fact that he writes it in the first person. In addition, his breaking away from novelistic form is actually an asset to the genre because the novel evolved by breaking away from convention (Martin, 1986, p.18). Everett tosses away the boundaries of structural binary thinking in many ways; *Erasure* is a fluid literary piece because it oscillates between genres. Monk is both the subject and the object simultaneously. Jameson claims that genre is a social contract between the writer and the public who must specify the proper use of a literary work (Jameson, 1981, p.106). Everett's presentation of his book as a multi-genre piece of literature illustrates the limitations of current genres to express his narrative.

Everett also breaks the form of the novel through many passages of conversations between artists. These episodes violate literary convention because they exist completely outside of the plot (Aristotle, 1951, 27). The author makes his literary work less accessible to the non-academic audience through his references to highbrow figures. He writes:

> *Rothko: I'm sick of painting these damn rectangles. Renais: Don't you see that you're tracing the painting's physical limits? Your kind of seeming impoverishment becomes a sort of adventure in the art of elimination. The background and the foreground are your details and they render each other neutral. The one negates the other and so oddly we are left with only details, which in fact are not there* (Everett, 2001, p.222).

Everett's inclusion of a conversation between Rothko and Renais, famous artists, excludes the less educated reader, much in the same way that Monk Ellison's novels close out a general audience. From the perspective of *Erasure* as Monk's journal, this conversation is possibly a dream or an idea for a novel. Monk never explains the purpose of these passages, thereby ignoring the narrative convention of causality (Lacey, 2000, p.15). If the audience understood these episodes to be writing ideas, they would be the possible cause of Monk's future literary endeavors. The ambiguity of the purpose of the passages is the exact reason that the reader is unable to discern their possible cause in events of the narrative.

Erasure includes another conversation between two famous artists that deconstructs the notion of the relevance of an original artist in addition to the conventions of the novel. Everett/Monk writes, "*Rauschenberg: Well, it took me forty erasers, but I did it. de Kooning: Did what? Rauschenberg: Erased it. The picture you drew for me.* [. . .] *I've already sold it for ten grand. de Kooning: You sold my picture? Rauschenberg: No, I erased your picture. I sold my erasing* (Everett, 2001, p.227-8). The fact that de Kooning creates the picture is no longer important; Rauschenberg has altered it into his own piece of art and succeeds financially with it. In the same light, *Erasure* is clearly a novel written by Everett, as the publishing information informs the audience; however, Monk Ellison has formed it into his own narrative. There is the objection to this argument that Monk is, to the readers' knowledge, a fictional character. Everett, in his portrayal of the reception of Stagg Leigh's work, shows that the existence of a writer in reality has no bearing regarding the creation of a narrative. Stagg Leigh is also a fictional creation, but he has his own narrative, *My Pafology*, which is Van Go Jenkins's narrative, inside of Monk's journal. This example of a narrative embedded in another narrative, in addition to the conversation episodes, demonstrates a shift in the narrator but not in the narrative level because Monk does not yield to Van Go Jenkins, the intradiegetic narrator (Nelles, 2002, p.343). The multi-layering of the creation of art within another artist's piece reveals that Everett has composed a series of narratives that exist both within and in contradiction with each other.

In addition to language and the novel, Everett deconstructs the stereotypical black experience by writing about a character that constantly has to fight off the accusation of not 'being black enough.' Monk does not define himself primarily through race, a category in which he claims to have no belief (Everett, 2001, p.2). He insists that his writing does not have to be about race just because he happens to be black. Monk writes novels about scholarly concepts, which have limited success. In his spare time during his trip in Washington D.C., he decides to visit a Barnes & Noble, which he refers to as the Wal-Mart of bookstores (Everett, 2001, p.28).

> I went to Contemporary Fiction and did not find me, but when I fell back a couple of steps I found a section called African American Studies and there, arranged alphabetically and neatly, read *undisturbed*, were four of my books including my *Persians* of which the only thing ostensibly African American was my jacket photograph. I had became quickly irate, my pulse speeding up, my brow furrowing. Someone interested in African American Studies would have little interest in my books and would be confused by their presence in the section (Everett, 2001, p.28).

Monk's initial reaction is irritation that this misplacement of his books is hurting his success, because readers who are interested in African American studies will find that his books do not apply to the subject. Furthermore, readers who are interested in the subjects that Monk writes about will fail to find his novels in the sections that they peruse. Monk makes note of the fact that the only African American aspect of one of his novels is photograph of himself in the jacket, realizing that his physical appearance is a more prominent factor in classifying his literature than the work itself. Monk's primary point, that he does not have to write about race just because he is black, is an argument that must rest on common values, hierarchies, truths and lines of argument that he has with his audience (Fisher, 1987, p.125). Monk is successful in this endeavor by appealing to the value of literature; he does not denigrate the field of African American Studies. He states that those readers would be looking through the wrong books, his books, to explore their interest. Monk's deconstruction of the stereotypical black experience through his avoidance of race in his writing is his establishment of his own experience as a black man.

Monk's frustrations about his writing are not only about the mistaken categorization of his literary work; they are also about outside pressure to write about race. Monk is disappointed

when his agent, Yul, informs him of yet another publishing company's rejection of his latest novel. Yul explains the publishers' desires and expectations of a black writer:

> 'The line is, you're not black enough,' my agent said. 'What's that mean, Yul? How do they even know I'm black? Why does it matter?' 'We've been over this before. They know because of the photo on your first book. They know because they've seen you. They know because you're black, for crying out loud.' 'What, do I have to have my characters comb their afros and be called niggers for these people?' 'It wouldn't hurt.' I was stunned into silence (Everett, 2001, p.43).

Monk realizes that, because he is black, publishing companies want stories about stereotypical black experiences from him. Monk feels the limitations of a market economy, but not in the same manner as the stereotypical poor member of the inner city, black population. The demand for literature about the inner city experience hurts Monk's abilities to publish his books and thereby make a profit from them. Fredric Jameson comments about the shift to the commodification of literature: "With the elimination of an institutionalized social status for the cultural producer and the opening of the work of art itself to commodification, the older generic specifications are transformed into a brand-name system against which any authentic artistic expression must necessarily struggle" (Jameson, 1981, p.107). Publishing companies would rather print popular fiction such as *We's Lives in Da Ghetto* because it will earn money. Monk discovers that profitability, and not quality, is the primary factor for authors to publish. Monk's endeavors to print his work not only to emphasize his refusal to write about race, but also to question the worth of the literature that is available on the market. The implication is that alternative narratives, such as his own, do not sell and thereby do not frequently get published.

Despite misgivings, Monk writes a novel about the stereotypical black experience in the hopes of earning money to support his aging mother. He writes it under a pen name, Stagg Leigh, because he refuses to put his name on a work that he regards as a piece of trash. The novel, *My Pafology,* (later cheekily renamed *Fuck*) is an example of a narrative embedded into another narrative. It is a parody of Richard Wright's *Native Son*. No character in *Erasure* ever mentions this fact, leaving Everett's audience to wonder whether Monk's public is aware of the overlapping in both stories. The fact that no one ever notices this obvious and deliberate similarity demonstrates that the American public, both academia and the readers of Barnes and Noble's best-selling fiction, are in fact unaware of any version of the Black experience. Monk twists many aspects of the basic plot, including a change to the Daltons to a black family. This

maneuver is one way that Monk is able to get his own voice into this novel that he despises; he is able to illustrate a different black experience that more closely resembles his own. Monk introduces Penelope Dalton as a recent Stanford graduate who wants to visit Van Go's neighborhood for fun rather than political aims. Her actions reveal her attitude about the lower class area. "Penelope look at Roger and he look at her and they bust up laughin. 'You're kidding me,' Penelope say. 'Four babies? Are you married?'" (Everett, 2001, p.105). She and her boyfriend, Roger, find the fact that Van Go has four children funny. Their conversation is for entertainment and curiosity's sake; there are none of the speeches about political changes that are present in Wright's novel. Monk is illustrating, through this scenario that not only are there affluent blacks, but that they do not always associate themselves with the rest of their race. Penelope and Roger may make offhand suggestions about college but they clearly have no commitment towards helping Van Go better his life. Monk's depiction of Penelope Dalton reveals a disassociation with race that he himself feels. Even when writing this stereotypical novel, Monk is sneaking in his own ideas about the black experience (or lack there of) that he has been trying to communicate to others throughout his own narrative. *My Pafology* is an example of a narrative that both reinforces the dominant culture while underhandedly putting it into question (J. Miller, 1990, p.70).

Monk's outrage at literature's stereotypes based on race culminates in his reaction to Juanita Mae Jenkins best selling novel, *We's Lives in Da Ghetto*.[2] Monk feels chagrined to find this book on the nightstand of Marilyn, his romantic interest. He is irate to find that a person whom he respects spends time reading a novel that he finds to be an affront. He questions Marilyn about her opinion of the book, and although she finds it to be of no great value and states that it lacks depth, he finds her answer dissatisfying. Monk tries to communicate his point that the novel stereotypes blacks: '"Have you ever known anybody who talks like they do in that book?' I could hear the edge on my voice and though I didn't want it there, I knew that once detected, it could never be erased" (Everett, 2001, p.188). Monk does not want to offend Marilyn, but he is unable to prevent his insulting of the book from extending to those who read it. Monk tries to explain to Marilyn the damaging effects of an audience giving writers such as

[2] The sharing of the same last name between the author of *We's Lives in Da Ghetto* and the protagonist of *My Pafology* is Monk's underhanded revenge. His portrayal of Van Go Jenkins as an immoral, worthless person creates a silent implication of the author's feelings of M—Jenkins.

Juanita Mae Jenkins money and attention. Her novel would not be such a success if readers that disagreed with her representation, as Marilyn admits to feeling, refused to be patrons or an audience.

Unlike Marilyn, many readers actually believe in the racial stereotypes of the popular fiction to which Monk objects. The reception of *My Pafology* brings Monk to the realization that the public does believe in black stereotypes. Readers, such as the award committee members, take Monk's parody at face value to be a genuine narrative that has exposed a true black experience. "Thomas Tomad laughed. 'This is the truest novel I've ever read. It could only have been written by someone who has done hard time. It's the real thing'" (Everett, 2001, p.261). The fact that Monk, someone who is completely disconnected from the experience in the novel, is the author demonstrates that the public does not really know what truth is. Monk tells the committee that the book is worthless, but several of them respond that they found it to be an eye opener. If the book is revealing new ideas, then how are the committee members able to discern that only someone who served time in prison could write it? This statement would mean that they already know information about this experience that they claim the novel taught them. J. Hillis Miller, a literary critic, believes that audiences desire narratives that repeat the same stories (Miller, 2002, p.70). Monk's financial success and recognition reveal that the public's desire for literature, which reinforces stereotypes, causes a lack of space for alternative narratives to exist.

The ambiguous ending the novel leaves a question unanswered about whether Monk is sardonically quoting the final line in *My Pafology* or whether Monk has lost his identity through playing a role to sell books. Monk approaches the front of the room to accept Stagg Leigh's award, ready to reveal his true identity. "Then the lights were brighter than ever, not flashes but constant, flooding light. I looked at the television cameras looking at me. I looked at the mirror, still held by the boy. He held it by his thigh and I could only imagine the image the glass held. I chose one of the TV cameras and stared into it. I said, "Egads, I'm on television'" (Everett, 2001, p.265). Monk's quotation could be a way of showing the audience that the affluent Monk Ellison was able to successfully compose a fictional narrative and play the role of Stagg Leigh. Monk's behavior could also mean that he has lost his sanity, that he has now become Stagg Leigh. This second possibility would show a point that Everett could be making, that there is a danger of the stereotypical black experience potentially swallowing up alternate identities through the public only allowing space for only the one. The ambiguous ending makes *Erasure*

successful because it never resolves the dilemma of identity representation in literature that the novel questions (D.A. Miller, 2002, p.275). Everett's avoidance of closure demonstrates that this issue remains prevalent in today's literary community.

Everett deconstructs stereotypical practices through the instances that Monk catches himself in his own suppositions about others. Monk visits his sister's clinic in southeastern Washington D.C., engaging in a conversation with a girl in the waiting room about books. He becomes impressed with her intelligence and feels that he should encourage her to go to college.

> "Don't laugh," I said. "I think you're really smart. You should at least try." "I didn't even finish high school." I didn't know what to say to that. I scratched my head and looked at the other faces in the room. I felt an inch tall because I had expected this young woman with the blue fingernails to be a certain way, to be slow and stupid, but she was neither. I was the stupid one (Everett, 2001, p.121).

Monk realizes that he has fed into the stereotypes of inner city teenagers, yet these stereotypes are exactly what he seeks to undermine in his protest of the stereotypical black experience. Through his own admission of his own stereotypical tendencies, Monk places himself on the same level as his readers and those that he seeks to educate in his narrative. Monk lets his audience see that he is not perfect; he shares the fault of possessing generalizing preconceptions and an ability to learn that they are incorrect. Monk's revelation of his own flaws demonstrates that he also makes the mistake of closing the space for alternative narratives to exist.

In addition to class, Monk's stereotypes extend to sexuality. While he is eating at a diner, he overhears two men instigate an argument with two homosexual French men. Monk rushes to their aid, threatening to fight the troublemakers that challenge the French men to stand and fight.

> They did and I wished I'd had a camera to capture the expressions of those two provincial slugs. The Frenchmen were huge, six eight and better, and healthy looking. The rubes stumbled over themselves backing away, then scrambled out of the diner. I was laughing when the men asked me to join them, not at the spectacle of the rednecks running out, but at my own nerve and audacity, to presume that they needed my help (Everett, 2001, p.46-7).

Monk realizes that he has inadvertently assumed that the two French men would need physical protection because they are homosexual. In actuality, the men are not helpless victims who are unable to defend themselves, but strong and powerful. Monk shares both his flaws and his ability to learn from them with his readers. Through his revelation of his own fallibility, he

invites his audience to admit their own incorrect assumptions that he seeks to disprove throughout his narrative.

Monk introduces characters, such as Davis Gimbel, that attempt to live stereotypical experiences. After Monk reads his experimental novel using the S/Z concept, Gimbel responds by flinging his keys at Monk and calling him a bastard. Monk reflects, "I could tell immediately that he hadn't understood a word of what I had read; his reaction seemed inappropriate and extreme. But he was eager to appear as though comprehension had come quickly to him" (Everett, 2001, p.18). Gimbel is trying to live an ideal of the academic scholar. He reacts strongly to depict himself as intelligent and make others think that he has a profound comprehension of the material. His compulsion to embody the image of the conventional academic is precisely the action that reveals his ignorance. A few scenes later, Gimbel shouts at Monk, claiming that the narrator missed the movement of postmodern fiction. In actuality, Monk explores the label of the subject and tests the boundaries of language, both of which are postmodern aspects, in his paper that explores the S/Z concept (Lacey, 2000, p.93-4). Monk illustrates the danger of trying to embody stereotypes through Gimbel's foolishness, rather than living a genuine experience.

Linda Mallory, another academic that Monk knows, is attempting to have a picturesque sexual experience. After several offers from Linda, Monk pays a conjugal visit to her hotel room. Linda feels concerned about the way she looks and moves to the point that she is actually disrupting the act. Monk states:

> [. . .] she found need to express these concerns during the course of the event. "Does my hair look nice splayed out across the pillow?" she asked. "It looks fine, Linda." "Am I moving all right, too fast, too slow?" "Move however it feels good to you." And so I suspected she did, as she screamed into my face, startling me somewhat and my reaction must have shown, because she said, "Was that too loud? Was I ugly? Oh, my god, I can't believe I did that" (Everett, 2001, p.230).

Linda's preoccupation with the way that she looks, sounds and moves during sexual activity actually disrupts the experience and prevents her from enjoying it. She claims in her earlier sexual invitations to Monk that she needs self-validation. Clearly, Linda's notion of validation is about embodying her preconceptions of sexual activity rather than engaging spontaneously in the experience. Monk's point about attempting to emulate stereotypes is not just about physical

satisfaction; leaving a place for alternative narratives in oneself is a necessity for happiness in many aspects of life.

Percival Everett deconstructs language, the novel, the black experience and forms of stereotypical practice in *Erasure* to reveal the necessity of expanding space for a greater variety of narratives to exist. Monk Ellison explores language, proving that linguistic meaning is inconsistent because it depends on the common understanding of those practicing signification. The existence of the book as both Everett's novel and Monk's journal tests the boundaries of genre, encouraging a further evolution of literary forms. The deconstruction of the black experience reveals the importance of recognizing that race is not necessarily a primary factor. The representation of Monk's tendencies to believe in stereotypes and of other characters to embody them demonstrates the value of personal and public investments in alternative narratives.

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