Expectations Beget Disappointment

In modern America, being overtly racist has has become taboo, seen as an improper and primitive thing of the past. However, this does not take into account the subtle, underlying racisms that much of American society has retained. The particular phenomenon posited is the tendency to create a dichotomy of the “Self” and the “Other”, where existence as a white person can be assessed not by its own qualities, but in contrast to the life of a “Black American”. The quote, “There isn’t anything so bad that seeing something worse won’t make it better” (pg. 254) encompasses this notion, acknowledging that more often than not some comfort is derived from the realization that, no matter how badly things are going, life could be worse. Percival Everett’s Erasure addresses this problematic fact in relation to the general perception of life as an African-American, which the rest of America seems all too willing to believe is a gritty struggle rife with violence, crime, and debaucherous lechery. Erasure itself was written in reference to the novel Push by Sapphire, which “details” the life of an impoverished young black woman whose struggles number the stars, including abuse, illiteracy, sexually-transmitted diseases, abandonment, homelessness, teenage pregnancy - brought on, of course, by rape - and so on and so forth. Everett parodies and mocks both Sapphire’s style of writing and the public perception of it within Erasure, using his protagonist, a black author named Thelonious “Monk” Ellison, as a conduit for his own desires, fears, and misgivings as an African-American writer. In particular Everett employs Monk’s novel-within-a-novel, *My Pafology/Fuck* - which is written as an egregiously offensive parody of Push’s fictional counterpart, *We’s Lives In Da Ghetto* -to expose the utter foolishness of believing any such novel to possess even a shred of legitimacy. In this way, Everett relies heavily upon metafictional tactics to convey his disgust with not only ludicrously inaccurate “African-American” novels, but also how they are embraced with open arms by the rest of contemporary America.

Everett’s use of Ellison as his mouthpiece is one of the primary metafictional elements that Erasure employs. Monk’s thoughts, words, and actions often can be seen as extensions of Everett’s own beliefs; the novel even includes the line, “The main character is essentially myself...an unrecognized literary genius” (pg. 38) as a wink to the audience should they catch it. As an upper-middle class, intelligent, and eloquent man, Monk “defies” the stereotype of the struggling black that the rest of America has come to expect. His philosophical publications are swept aside by many due to this lack of “legitimate blackness”, omitting the word “nigger”, afros, broken english slang, and other stereotypically black elements, much like Everett’s own works. Monk is enraged by the incredible success of *We’s Lives In Da Ghetto*, which conforms to and takes advantage of these expectations, and is ironically written by a well-to-do, middle-class black woman who bases the book upon a brief visit to her relatives in Harlem. In this sense, Everett’s own legitimate experience as an African-American writer, which is then expressed by Monk, contrasts this inconsistency. After witnessing a review of Juanita Mae Jenkins’ *We’s Lives In Da Ghetto* on an Oprahesque television show, which hails the novel for it’s “haunting verisimilitude” and calls the protagonist “the epitome of the black matriarchal symbol of strength” (pg. 40), Monk nearly loses it. In his outrage, he pens *My Pafology* as a parody of Jenkins’ novel, encapsulating nearly every single stereotype of the Black American, and taking them to the furthest extreme of the spectrum. He defends his work to his publisher, “Look at the shit that’s published. I’m sick of it. This is an expression of my being sick of it… If they can’t see it’s a parody, fuck them” (pg. 131). Again, it is not difficult to imagine Everett himself uttering these words. *My Pafology*, which is meant to come across as comically extreme, is ironically hailed as yet another “genuine” portrayal of life as a black American, and becomes a runaway success. Monk’s mocking of *We’s Lives In Da Ghetto* mirrors Everett’s own loathing of Push, attempting to expose it as a false representation of what life is like as a black American. He is conflicted by feeling “a great deal of hostility toward an industry so eager to seek out and sell such demeaning and soul-destroying drivel” (pg. 137), and how, out of financial necessity, he continues pretending to be Stagg. R. Leigh (a reference to a black murderer who adopted the same moniker, which seems to sail above the heads of the American population.) and accept money for the book. This can also be seen as a subtle acknowledgement by Everett that, without Push to satirize, Erasure would have never had a chance to succeed, and potentially further his own financial position.

Within Erasure, Everett also uses Monk to explore *why* novels like *My Pafology*/*Fuck*, and *We’s Lives in Da Ghetto* are successful. The book acknowledges, “That the young would rather be entertained by tales of the extreme rather than the mundane is not arguable. Pirates defeat accountants. Beheading outweighs slivers of wood in buttocks.” (pg.134). This attitude can be extrapolated to include not only youth, but society in general. At one point, in order to trudge through a stack of novels he finds disinteresting, Monk himself says, “I would have to contact my innocent, inner self, the part of me that could be amazed by the dull and commonplace” (pg. 229). However, while Monk’s displeasure with these books comes from his familiarity with novels, society finds works like his mundane because they do not entertain fantasies of a race faced with a neverending struggle. Another reason for the success of these novels is the creation of the Self/Other dichotomy, which allows non-black Americans to draw comfort from inaccurately perceived struggles of the black, reassured by their ability to dissociate and differentiate from this supposedly harsh and brutal way of life. Monk is living evidence that such a method of classification is flawed, and yet he is misunderstood not only by whites, but blacks as well, failing to be accepted fully by either race. He says, “I could never talk the talk… I’d try, but it never sounded comfortable, never sounded real.” (pg.167), and how due to this inability to assimilate, he is ostracized as a teen. Everett plants a number of his own “inconsistencies” of blackness within Monk. His friends as a youth describe him affectionately: “Talks like he’s stuck up? Sounds white? Can’t even play basketball” (pg. 167), expressing their disappointment that he is not what they expect, something he will become quite familiar with throughout his life. Though neither Monk nor Everett adhere to the black stereotype, neither allows this fact to become a solely defining feature; Everett writes Erasure to comment that this is really not such a big deal, while Monk adopts the alter ego of Stagg. R. Leigh to prove just how “genuinely black” he can truly be.

The *Virtute et’ Armis* (By Valor and Arms) episode within Erasure serves as one of the most overt examples of the unspoken racism that persists today. The game show, desperate for a last-minute contestant, accepts Tom, an educated middle class black man (sound familiar?) at the last minute, failing to recognize his wit and intelligence. As Tom is prepped for the show, the helpers dress him in such a way that underscores the darkness of his skin; a starched white shirt is clamped upon his neck ,and brown polish brings out his “natural color”. He is given encouraging remarks by these helpers like, “I’m sure you’ll be a fine credit to your race” (pg. 175), all seemingly failing to realize the remarkable amount of knowledge that this man possesses. Tom quickly catches on to the shenanigans that the game show tries to pull, and even recognizes a black janitor as a former contestant (pg. 173), indicating that Tom is not the first that *Virtute et’ Armis* has attempted to deceive, take advantage of, and portray in a negative light. Despite the show offering him incredibly difficult questions, while offering the stereotypically-white man obnoxiously easy ones, Tom never fails to answer correctly, and is eventually, begrudgingly, named the winner. The slanting of the show against Tom, while exaggerated, serves to expose the racist tendencies that people possess without realizing it; nobody cheers for Tom’s success, the “dead” silence speaking for them and their disapproval. Tom’s actions mirror Monk’s and Everett’s, his actions proving that, “I didn’t sound like *that*, that my mother didn’t like *that*, that my father didn’t sound like *that*” (pg. 61-62), violently breaking the stereotypical mold in which he has been pigeonholed. Everett uses this episode to blatantly expose the unfairness that he, Monk, Tom, and other black Americans face, though it will rarely be as visible as it is within *Virtute et’ Armis.*

The heart and mind of a writer laid bare, the entire narrative of Erasure possesses a genuine feel because Everett is able to transpose his own experiences onto the page, powered by his personal thoughts, feelings, and opinions. Rarely are writers able to be so blatant and honest about what they do, how they do it, and how they feel in the process. He uses the novel-within-a-novel to highlight underlying racial stereotypes, making them painfully and comically unbearable. *My Pafology/Fuck* is a self-aware novel within a self-aware novel, which contains other self-aware episodes that serve as commentary upon society. Everett crafted Erasure as a work of metafiction with the specific intent of mocking the abomination known as Push as an accurate representation of life as a black American, and to expose the flawed perception of “African-American” literature and it’s supposed role within society. At the end of the book, Monk asks his audience(s) “How does it feel to be free of illusions?” (pg. 264), leaving the reader to reflect upon their now hopefully-enlightened perspective.