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JUST IN TIME: PERCIVAL EVERETT'S *ERASURE*

Careers are all about timings. As I write this, yesterday was the first anniversary of my PhD viva, for which I submitted a thesis discussing the problems and appeals of post-postmodernism in turn-of-the-twenty-first-century novels by Percival Everett, Jonathan Franzen, Zadie Smith, and David Foster Wallace. Today, I am navigating the notoriously difficult early-career researcher phase from a position many have to take: working for a university (Glasgow Caledonian University London) but not teaching the academic discipline (let alone the research area) I am a specialist in. Trying to succeed despite the punishing academic job market, I have my foot in the door, as they say; but it seems as if different forces keep trying to close that door with my foot still in it.

The career of Percival Everett – a sixty-seven-year-old African American author who has published over thirty books in forty years – is also one determined by timings. As well as being a fiction writer, Everett is a poet and painter, has a bachelor's degree in philosophy and a master's in fiction, teaches at the University of Southern California, has trained horses, and plays instruments. From 2019 to 2023, Everett had a massive five years which saw him finally receive wider recognition in scholarship and at literary (but also film) awards ceremonies. Despite being the object of high praise in specific circles for decades, and publishing his first book in 1983 – the absurdist, picaresque novel *Suder* – Everett had to wait until 2021 for his first major literary-award nomination, which was quickly followed by his second.

Everett's twenty-first novel, *Telephone* (2020), was published by Graywolf Press in three unique versions, with changes as small as the book cover's compass pointing in a different direction, and as big as alternative plot details or narrative outcomes. In 2021, *Telephone* was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize for fiction. A year later, Everett's twenty-second novel, *The Trees* (2021), was short-listed for the Booker Prize. Jarringly, these awards nominations came just before Everett's first "lifetime achievement" recognition: The *Los Angeles Review of Books*'s 2023 UCR Award. Many consider *The Trees* to be one of Everett's finest works. It blends detective fiction, horror, satire, and more into its metahistorical story of present-day Money, Mississippi – where the mutilated dead body of a Black man is mysteriously, methodically placed next to the new bodies of the white men connected to the 1955 lynching of fourteen-year-old Emmett Till.

In scholarship, the first Everett monographs were not published until 2019 and 2020. Derek C. Maus's *Jesting in Earnest: Percival Everett and Menippean Satire* (2019) was published by the University of South Carolina Press. Anthony Stewart's *Approximate Gestures: Infinite Spaces in the Fiction of Percival Everett* (2020) was published by the Louisiana State University Press. In cinema, despite his career-spanning play with genres and film conventions, the first adaptation of an Everett book was only released last year: Cord Jefferson's *American Fiction*, which won both this year's BAFTA and Academy Award for Best Adapted Screenplay (for adapting Everett's 2001 novel *Erasure*). In 2023, the documentary filmmaker Alexandre Westphal

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released *L'écrivain et son double*. In my opinion, compared to *American Fiction*, Westphal's film more accurately captures the spirit, versatility, and positively chaotic tone of Everett's work.

The translation of Everett from page to screen is of particular note considering how there have been adaptation discussions since *Suder* – the film rights for which, as Everett discusses in the 1996 essay "Signing to the Blind," were optioned by "Norman Lear and his recently acquired Embassy Pictures."[1] Everett reveals that "Sidney Poitier had approached them, saying that he wished not only to direct the film but also to portray one of the supporting characters and that they had turned him down," and that ultimately "the movie was not done."[2] Everett writes, "A friend in Hollywood claimed to have seen some of the promotional art work for the project and it depicted Suder [his Black protagonist] as white. This is hearsay, mind you, but it rings true to a fiction writer's ear."[3] Almost two decades later, film adaptations have played an important role in the expansion of Everett's audience, but the timing of this expansion seems late. The obstacles placed in front of Everett's expansion up to this point are unsurprising given the historic inequality in the publishing and film industries, alongside the fact that Everett's *oeuvre* offers the varied, idiosyncratic, often experimental work of an African American author.

My own introduction to Everett's work was a case of *good* timing – fortunately, it did not come too late for me to include a discussion of his work in my thesis. A few months into my PhD at King's College London, my supervisor, Dr Michael Collins, suggested that I read Everett's most celebrated novel, *Erasure*. My first PhD year was soon disrupted by the first COVID-19 lockdown, but by summer 2020 I had become accustomed to pandemic working patterns and my research was back on track. That June, I devoured *Erasure*. In the days, weeks, and months after, I could not stop thinking about this novel – its pace and eccentricity; its high style and metafictional acrobatics; its mockery of academia and the publishing industry; its serious discussion, via irony, of racial inequality and Black American subjectivity (which particularly resonated in a summer defined by global Black Lives Matter protests). I found *Erasure* a fascinating proposition: a juggling act of different paradoxes … a synthesis of entertainment and intellectual pursuit … more. I wanted to read this book again, study it, and write about it.

By October 2020, as I was beginning my second PhD year, my three-chapter thesis on Franzen, Smith, and Wallace had become a four-chapter one with an opening section on Everett, focussing on *Erasure*. Everett's novel offered solutions to problems that my project was struggling with at that point – problems unearthed and interrogated in a MPhil-to-PhD upgrade I had scraped through with low self-esteem regarding my project's stakes and so-whats. In *Erasure*, I had found a work that brought together all of the connected interests of my project, not just one or two of them. Everett's novel was a hybrid of postmodern experimentalism *and* post-postmodern sincerity. It offered interesting evidence of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's concept of the rhizome. It animated Rita Felski's ideas on "postcritical reading."[4] Its approach to academia was relevant to what Mark McGurl has called the "struggle" of the "Program Era," "between a dominant 'conventional realism' and a minority

[1] Percival Everett, "Signing to the Blind," *Callaloo*, 14, 1 (1991), 9.
[2] Ibid., 10.
[3] Ibid., 10.
[4] Rita Felski, *The Limits of Critique* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 12.

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'radical experimentalism.'"[5] It deepened my project's discussion of Mark Fisher's concepts of "lost futures" and "strange simultaneity."[6]

On the last of these, *Erasure* was the most useful novel I had encountered to my analysis of post-postmodernism's vexed relationship with time. Everett's novel broadened my understanding that legacies of modernism are flawed claims of progress and evolution, signposted by an additional "post" prefix – or two – that only complicate(s) matters. In other words, the timing of my introduction to Everett's work untangled and shaped my PhD's central discussion of time. And now, almost four years after I first read *Erasure*, I have read almost all of Everett's work; have published on *Erasure* and three other Everett novels (with forthcoming work on additional novels and short stories of his); and am trying to secure funding for a monograph on race, labour, and masculinity in his fiction. It is clear to me that my PhD supervisor Mike's recommendation of *Erasure* was *vital* – to the work I hope to continue doing and the academic career I hope to have.

2024 has already seen an adaptation of this novel win an Academy Award, and by the time this piece appears in print, Everett's latest novel, *James*, will have been published. Revisiting *Erasure*'s themes of literary legacy, para- and intertexts, and histories of inequality, *James* looks set to ensure that Everett has another big year. The belated recognition and praise look set to continue, further complicating Everett's timing, which is fitting for a novel that reimagines Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884) from the perspective of Jim, Huck's enslaved companion. Time has always been at the heart of Everett's project.

Erasure's problematic but fascinating relationship with it is announced in its opening lines. The narrative occupies the space of afterlife, generated by the textual impossibility established by the immediate suggestion that we are reading Thelonious "Monk" Ellison's "journal": "My journal is a private affair, but I cannot know the time of my coming death, and since I am not disposed, however unfortunately, to the serious condition of self-termination, I am afraid that others will see these pages."[7] In the same breath as introducing himself, Monk confesses that "it should not much matter to me who sees what or when," as his death has been announced seconds before his character is born, as it were.[8] As is often the case in Everett's work, the authorial decision made is captivating, and the timing of the decision is essential.

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FAILURE AS CONSTRUCTION: ELIZABETH MCHENRY'S *TO MAKE NEGRO LITERATURE*

Elizabeth McHenry's *To Make Negro Literature: Writing, Literary Practice and African American Authorship* was the first book I read after I submitted my PhD

[5] Mark McGurl, *The Program Era: Postwar Fiction and the Rise of Creative Writing* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), 33.

[6] Mark Fisher, *Ghosts of My Life: Writings on Depression, Hauntology, and Lost Futures* (Winchester: John Hunt Publishing, 2014), 17.

[7] Percival Everett, *Erasure* (London: Faber and Faber, 2001), 3.

[8] Ibid.

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