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PARODY OF RACIAL CLICHÉ IN PERCIVAL EVERETT'S *ERASURE*
PERCIVAL EVERETT'İN SİLİNTİ ROMANINDA IRKÇI KLİŞE PARODİSİ

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Abstract

In Percival Everett's novel *Erasure* Monk, the author-protagonist writes a novel to criticize stereotyping 'the African-American novel' as a genre and also to present a critical repetition of Wright's novel *Native Son* which promotes the idea of violent and discriminated black identity performances but, it turns out to be a runaway bestseller which doesn't serve its original satirical purpose. The readers and the publishing market are pleased deeply with the book since it satisfies their pre-conceived beliefs on racial clichés and represents 'the authentic' experience of black life which pictures African-American ghettos as 'savages'. Therefore, Monk deconstructs the language and questions the intentional meaning. Everett/Monk criticizes Foucault's discursive practice that sees the author as a function and Barthes' argument in the "the Death of the Author" that the author cannot claim any absolute authority over his text.

Monk's parody which goes unnoticed by his readers leads to his adoption of the black identity performances that he has always resisted. This duality splits his identity in the process. He begins to talk with his alienated self in the mirror which is connected to Lacanian theory of mirror phase and suffers from an identity conflict.

This study attempts to explicate issues of racism and identity conflict in Percival Everett's novel *Erasure* while demonstrating the compelling impacts of media and publishing industry regarding racial clichés and prejudices. Everett with *Erasure* questions the racist expectations of society based on skin color and critiques the publishing market and media which obliges African-American authors writing only race-related issues.

Keywords: Racial Clichés, Identity Conflict, Mirror Stage.

As postmodern racism claims that skin color puts an individual to a narrowly defined culture causing stereotypes. Racial identity and expectations adhere to that identity of standardized idea of blackness. In Percival Everett's *Erasure* the protagonist Monk criticizes the society which judges his self through looking at his skin color. "While in college I was a member of the Black Panther Party, defunct as it was, mainly I felt I had to prove I was black enough. Some people in the society in which I live, described as being black, tell me that I am not black enough. Some people whom the society calls white tell me the same thing" (Everett, 2001: 3, 4). Monk's positioning is under-recognized and marginalized by society because his social and cultural experiences do not fit

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into the existing notions of blackness. As Broeck claims “cultural identities and subject positions have never been inherently pure” (2007: 53). Biological arguments for racial superiority and discrimination were discredited, as Appiah rejects the biological concept of race stating that “people are owed treatment independently of their biological characters” (1992: 18). He argues racialism as wrong and he opposed that there are essential characters that allow us to classify people into distinct races that therefore justify treatment differently.

This article intends to demonstrate that racism obliges the individuals to construct stereotyped identity and African-American authors are valued not for their literary craftsmanship but their illustration of the so-called African-American experience in their works. This study explores how racist prejudices and racial clichés are promoted by the society causing identity conflicts.

The representation of people based on race leads to stereotypes and false perception of individuals. However, these stereotypes are marketable and promoted by media. In *Against Race* Gilroy having a neo-humanist positioning against racializing discourse (2000: 41), mentions stereotyping which is used in marketing and the media: “Imaginary blackness is being projected outward, facelessly, as the means to orchestrate a truly global market in leisure products and as the centerpiece of a new, corporately directed version of youth culture centered not on music and is antediluvian rituals but upon visuality, icon, and images” (Ibid.: 270).

Stereotypes are promoted by media causing imaginary assumptions and misperceptions. As Hardt and Negri pointed out postmodern marketing sees every difference as an opportunity (2000: 152). Therefore, Ghetto stories which tell stereotyped blackness according to the expectations of the society become the only types of books that African-American writers are allowed to write if they want their works to be sold.

Robert Fikes Jr pointed out the fact that in the New York Times list of Notable Books of the year 2000, “13 of the 15 black-authored titles focuses on racial themes or featured blacks in central roles. Predictably, The Times ... did what the rest of the mainstream press does consistently: namely, selectively publicizing those books that reinforce the majority group perception that blacks are experts on themselves and little else.” (2001: 110). Being an African-American writer doesn't mean to experience the stereotypical black life and know ghetto lifestyle. Furthermore, the media's expectations regarding African-American characters described in these novels require being in high levels of poverty, involving with a crime and living in urban ghettos.

Fikes also criticizes that African- American periodicals ignore black authors if they don't deal with race-related issues which restrict their writings. In the reviews of these magazines “no reference was made to the author's race because the author's race was essentially irrelevant due to the fact that the books have little if anything to do with “the black experience” per se” (Ibid.).

Everett avoids rigid categories when creating his art, especially racial ones. In his foreword to *Making Callaloo, Twenty Five Years of Black Literature*, Percival Everett stresses that up to the 1970s black authors, the publishing industry looking for “the next, blacker work...” that did not “upset the way America wants to see black people and itself” (2002: xvi).

In *Erasure*, Monk, the author- protagonist attempts to erase preconceived ideas held by American society so that he acts for himself to make his subjectivity visible in response to the publishing market which wants to categorize him racially. At the beginning of *Erasure*, Monk recalls a conversation with a book agent he meets at a party in New York who tells him that he could sell more books if he would “forget about writing retellings of Euripides and parodies of French poststructuralists and settle down to write the true, gritty, real stories of black life... [His response was] I was living a black life, far blacker than he could ever know, that I had lived one, that I would

be living one.”(Everett, 2001: 4) His novels are expected to articulate in a narrowly-defined culture that Monk avoids. Monk, most of the time, criticizes the unappreciation of the dense, obscure novels that he writes. Even his brother and sister “found them unreadable, boring, mere curiosities” (Ibid.: 6). His sister confesses that “[she] just wish [he]’d write something [she] could read” (Ibid.: 9).

In Everett’s book *Erasure* the author- protagonist Thelonious Monk Ellison writes a book which is originally titled *My Pafology* and later renamed *Fuck*. *Fuck* is come out in a depressive state of Monk’s when he reads Juanita Mae Jenkins’s novel which portraits stereotypical life style of African American ghettos and which becomes a bestseller and whose movie writes is sold for 3 million dollars. It is the ironic work of Thelenious Monk proving his reaction not only against Juanita Mae Jenkins’s novel *We’s Lives in Da Ghetto* but also “Native Son and The Color Purple and Amos and Andy” (Everett, 2001: 70).

Bell Hooks complains about stereotypical roles that are given to African-American writers and for her postmodernism “challenges colonial imperialist paradigms of black identity which represent blackness one-dimensionally in ways that reinforce and sustain white supremacy” (1991: 11). Publishing market that forces African-American novelists to write the authentic African-American experience and promotes those reiterated, so-called true to life stories both hooks and Everett complain. However this approach would limit the author to write only about his authentic experiences which is impossible and cause false representations and stereotypes. hooks criticizes the publishing industry that limits African-American writers’ works in regards to market expectancy: “the creative writing I do which I consider to be most reflective of a postmodern oppositional stability – work that is abstract, fragmented, non-linear narrative – is constantly rejected by editors and publishers who tell me it does not conform to the type of writing they think black women should be doing or the type of writing they believe will sell” (Ibid.: 13).

In Everett’s novel *Erasure*, Monk also experiences that kind of rejection from editors and through his agent he is told “the market won’t support this kind of thing” (2001:69). His agent offers him to “write something like The Second Failure...[His] realistic novel. It was received nicely and sold rather well. It’s about a young black man who can’t understand why his white-looking mother is ostracized by the black community. She finally kills herself and he realizes that he must attack the culture and so he becomes a terrorist, killing blacks and whites who behave as racist” (Ibid.: 69, 70). This type of writing is accepted black enough and it conforms the marketability the editors’ demand. As Brown noted “the statement issued by the literary market [is obvious]: stereotypes wanted” (1999: 78). This approach obliges the author to perform his art based on recognizable stereotypes in order to be commercially viable. If an African American author creates his books with issues outside of Blackness, media and press would ignore his works.

Racial identifications are not apparent in most of Everett’s novels. Monk like Everett creates his works outside of the standardized idea of Black experience. However, the publishing market prevents African- Americans to perform postmodern art and any theme that are not related with so-called authentic blackness. His agent Yul explains why Monk’s book is rejected and the expectations of publishing industry:

‘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: 49)

Monk discovers that publishing market, not concerning about quality, demands stories related African American experience from him because of his race. Therefore, Monk creates a

separate racial identity in accordance with this narrowly-defined culture as he pretends to be Stagg R. Leigh, the pseudonymous author of *Fuck*.

We may consider *Erasure* as a semi-autobiographical novel of Everett and identify Everett with the author-narrator Thelonious (Monk) Ellison since their careers paralyzing with each other. Everett places Monk's curriculum vita in *Erasure* which resembles his own (Everett, 2001: 64-66). Like Thelonious (Monk) Ellison, Everett also a professor of literary theory and "a fisherman, an art lover" (Ibid.: 1) and he listens "Mahler, Aretha Franklin, Charlie Parker and Ry Cooder...(and) did not grow up any inner city or rural south" (Ibid.) having doctor relatives like Monk. Moreover Monk is accepted as an experimental novelist by most of the publishers since he is writing "retellings of Euripides and parodies of French poststructuralists (and not writing) the true, gritty, real stories of black life" (Ibid.: 4). On the other hand, Everett's books are all different from each other and two of his works are related with Greek myth; the myths of Medea (*For Her Dark Skin*) and Dyonisos (*Frenzy*). For instance, in *Frenzy*, though the characters have Greek names, they don't belong to any racial or ethnic group. Neither Everett nor Monk Ellison wants to be considered as an experimental novelist or a black writer. In an interview with Kincaid, Everett is asked if he would describe himself as an experimental novelist, his response was: "All novels are experimental. I have written quite a few novels, but I cannot tell you that I know how to write a novel. I know only that I have done it and will probably do it again. Every novel is different, has a different shape, a different mission, a different feel. Either all novels are experimental or none are" (Kincaid, 2005: 377). Everett's novels' diversity of styles and genres makes them difficult to be categorized which may serve his aim well to be not known as an experimental novelist, or a Western, mystery, comic, or a black novelist.

Both Monk and Everett don't believe in race and don't see themselves as the representative writers of African-American literature. Monk describes his feelings about race:

The hard, gritty truth of the matter is that 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. I don't believe in race. I believe there are people who will shoot me or hang me or cheat me and try to stop me because they do believe in race, because of my brown skin, curly hair, wide nose and slave ancestors. (2001: 4)

Monk describes how others perceive him and how he sees himself and he refuses the label the society puts on him and sarcastically criticizes this socially fabricated identity. In the interview, Kincaid also asked Everett if he perceives himself as a Black writer:

I am a black writer the way you are a white professor or that man over there is a fat banker. You might point me out as a black writer when trying to betray me to the KKK or the Bush administration. If I get lost and you're trying to tell the police what I look like, you will say, 'He's devastatingly handsome, tall and black.' You might then add, 'Look for him in office supply or bookstores; he's a writer. (2005: 379)

Everett as well as Monk, distances themselves from the very stereotypes that mainstream American society has perpetuated about blackness. Monk criticizes that all African-Americans are considered to involve in athletics, the hip-hop culture and the urban and rural settings while dissociates him self describing the very opposite of these stereotypes in the beginning of the *Erasure*. "I am no good at basketball. I listen to Mahler...I am good at math. I cannot dance. I did not grow up in any inner city or rural south" (2001: 3).

We may trace similarities between Monk Ellison's book *Fuck* and Richard Wright's *Native Son*, since both novels protagonist are nearly in same ages, share similar families and life styles in ghettos and become worker of wealthy families and rape the daughter of their employees. Russet states it's an "updating of Richard Wright's *Native Son*, the foundational text in the construction of the category "African-American novel" (2009: 364).

Monk satirizes Wright by erasing *Native Son* and rewriting it as *Fuck* to show that it is not his story nevertheless it serves the expectations of publishing market. Including the whole text of *Fuck* into the center of Monk's journal, which is Everett's novel *Erasure*, Everett juxtaposes lifestyles of Monk and Van Go, the protagonist of *Fuck*. For Cannon, Monk includes it to his journal "to juxtapose what Wright claims as the reality for a Black man in America with what Monk shows as one of the many Black masculinities, his own story" (2009: 67).

To criticize the stereotypical novels like *Native Son*, *The Color Purple* and *Amos and Andy*, Monk writes this novel under the pseudonym Stagg R. Leigh "a book on which I knew I could never put my name" (Everett, 2001: 70). As Feith states Monk wanted to make a parody of so-called African American experience in his book but media missed the reality under the mask:

Doublings and maskings are at the core of parody, which consists in assuming an author's or group of authors' style – here, Richard Wright, Alice Walker, and Sapphire – in order to take a critical distance from it. But the identification of parody implies a knowledge of the original, an understanding of the difference between the face and the mask. This is what media culture and the literary establishments are unable to do, therefore trapping Monk in the virtual image of what he wanted to debunk (sic). (2011: 12)

While Jenkins's *We's Lives in Da Ghetto*, with its female protagonist, parallels that of Sapphire's *Push*, *Fuck* reminds *Native Son* with its aggressive but eventually defeated protagonist.

Monk visits the bookstore 'Border's' that he dislikes and criticized those kind of chains calling as "the WalMart of books" and when he looks for his books, he neither could find them in "Literature" nor in "Contemporary Fiction" sections. However, he finds four of his novels in a section called "African-American Studies" to his anger he criticizes the dubious cataloguing of his works saying that:

[T]he only thing ostensibly African-American was my jacket Photograph...Someone interested in African American Studies would have little interest in my books and would be confused by their presence in the section. Someone looking for an obscure reworking of a Greek tragedy would not consider looking in that section any more than the gardening section. The result in either case, no sale. That fucking store was taking food from my table. (Everett, 2001: 34)

Monk chooses his subject matters beyond the expectations of the market which causes falling of his sale. To compromise one's works and to write novels on the expectations of the market fails the creativity of the authors. Monk writes *My Pafology* to criticize this mindset and the so-called black experience.

Monk's agent's is shocked when he first reads *My Pafology* and asks if he is serious about it. Monk explains his intentions: "Look at the shit that's published. I'm sick of it. This is an expression of my being sick of it." I understand that, Monk. And I appreciate your position and I even admire the parody, but who's going to publish this? The people who publish the stuff you hate are going to be offended, so they won't take it. Hell, everybody's going to be offended." (Ibid.: 151)

When Monk's girlfriend Marilyn tells him that she likes the Juanita Mae Jenkins's book and confirms that it doesn't offend her in any way, which turns him mad, Monk asks: "Have you ever known anybody who talks like they do in that book?" (Ibid.: 213). Everett criticizes that stereotypical dialect several times in *Erasure*, stressing that he "could never talk the talk" (Ibid.: 189) the way they talk in the book like "We's Lives in Da Ghetto". Later he would recall that scene he fought with Marilyn and the reason of his sudden outrage: "I reacted because the book reminded me of what I had become, however covert" (Ibid.: 247). Writing *Fuck*, Monk enacts the very form of black identity that seems the most adverse to his sense of self.

Monk writes *Fuck* to criticize stereotyping "the African-American novel" as a genre and also to present a critical repetition of *Native Son* but, it turns out to be a runaway bestseller which

doesn't serve its original satirical purpose. Because of its wrong reception it becomes ironically like one of its targets *We's Lives in Da Ghetto*. Monk states:

The fear of course is that in denying or refusing complicity in the marginalization of 'black' writers, I ended up on the very distant and very 'other' side of a line that is imaginary at best. I didn't write as an act of testimony or social indignation (though all writing in some way is just that) I did not write out of a so-called family tradition of oral storytelling. I never tried to set anybody free, never tried to paint the next real and true picture of the life of my people, never had any people whose picture I knew well enough to paint. Perhaps if I had written in the time immediately following Reconstruction, I would have written to elevate the situation of my fellow oppressed....And I would have to wear the mask of the person I was expected to be. (Ibid.:238)

The mask of the person he is expected to be is someone like Sapphire who writes about a character like Precious and is invested in a notion of blackness predicated on the memories of slavery or Wright who writes about characters like Bigger Thomas as victims of racism. Since there is a conflict between whom Monk is and what society expects Monk to be he needs to wear the mask. As Cannon points out:

He does not allow (the publishing market's and society's) blindness to his subjectivity to become his reality. Instead, he refigures and repositions himself in a way that will allow him to master life and all the possibilities of doing what he wants, even if he has to "wear the mask" to do it. This masking has always been a coping strategy for Black People, and Monk knows that to deal with the White publishing world he must wear it. (2004: 69)

Monk can't stand the idea that the literature that is created by African Americans have to be related African-Americans who live a criminal life in the ghettos and talk through that dialect and wear "yellow, baggy, draping wool pants. Black silk shirt with loose sleeves and several buttons at the cuff. A gray, sharkskin blazer double vented, double breasted with a yellow kerchief peeking from the breast pocket. Gray hose. Tasseled loafers, black" (Everett, 2001:262). If they want to achieve commercial success their novels and outfits should be based on these stereotypical identifications.

Publishing market only demands the stereotypical characters like Bigger Thomas and Van Go. Regarding the market Monk "fe(els) a great deal of hostility toward an industry so eager to seek out and sell such demeaning and soul-destroying drivel" (Ibid.:156). Despite showing an artistic resistance for being labeled an author of African American Novel, when he saw Juanita Mae Jenkins' face on the cover of Time magazine, Monk got furious and started to write *My Pafology*:

The pain started in my feet and coursed through my legs, up my spine and into my brain and I remembered passages from *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, secret and fahvre! and I was screaming 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 to me 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?' (Ibid.:70)

It seems only racial clichés can be recognized and accepted in American society drives him to associate with so-called black language and other performances of identity that signify blackness. His imagining himself sitting on a park bench with switchblades using the black vernacular language that Monk has resisted implies his reaction of that language of violence and oppression associated with black culture, exemplified by novels like *Native Son*. Thus, adapting the plot of *Native Son*, Everett allows us to see how characters like Bigger Thomas in *Native Son* promote the idea of violent and discriminated black identity performances celebrated by American culture.

Monk's *My Pafology* (*Fuck*) is praised for having "[t]he energy and savagery of the common black is so refreshing in the story" (Ibid.:282) and being "the truest novel ...[which] could only have been written by someone who has done hard time." (Ibid.:290). These reviews resemble the ones regarding Wright's novel *Native Son* which offended Wright for the same reason these stereotypical novels frustrated Monk. According to the reviewers, *Native Son* was

'the finest as yet written by an American Negro...a novel which only a Negro could have written: whose theme is the mind of the Negro we see every day.'...(These praises of critics shows) their scope for misreading a racially encoded text, consciously or unconsciously misrecognizing its arguments and misinterpreting its consequences for their lives. He was especially horrified at the possibility that his mass white readership might discover deep pleasures in the image of blacks as victims of racism or, more simply, that they might be completely comfortable with the representations of black pain and suffering which inevitably flowed from attempts to deal seriously with the systematic operation of racism in American society. (Gilroy,1993:153,154)

The readers of *Fuck* and the publishing market are pleased deeply with Van Go character and the book since it satisfies their pre-conceived beliefs on racial clichés and represents 'the authentic' experience of black life which pictures African-American ghettos as 'savages'.

Though "the completely nonironic acceptance of that so-called novel as literature"(Everett,2001:174), however, Monk wanted his book *Fuck* to be understood as a parody of books like Jenkins' *We's Lives in Da Ghetto* and, therefore he left clues like giving the same surname as Jenkins to his protagonist Van Go 'Jenkins'.

While the readers of *Erasure* understand the irony, the audience and publishers of *Fuck* misses it. As Eaton pointed out,

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.(2006: 221)

We may trace slipperiness of language or intentional meaning in the relationship of Monk and his family members. Though knowing his mother's incoherence, since she was suffering from Alzheimer disease, Monk understood that she was trying to say something else: "Anyone who speaks to members of his family knows that sharing a language does not mean you share the rules governing the use of that language. No matter what is said, something else is meant" (Everett, 2001: 38).

Monk thinks the art is not limited to definite meanings since the meaning is subjective and each work holds a different place in the artist's oeuvre. When in one scene Monk recalled his past, he complained about an illegible signature on a painting he saw in a museum, his father would say "You don't sign it because you want people to know you painted it, but because you love it"(Ibid.: 39). Monk thought "he was all wrong" (Ibid.) since he believed that each art piece is unique and must be treated individually. Everett, like Monk, always resists stereotypes and all of his previous novels are different from the next.

Monk doesn't want to let the editors know it is a parody of existing stereotypes of African-American novel, he thinks that if they fail to understand, that would be their problem. So he tells his agent to "send it straight" (Ibid.: 151). In a way, it is a manifestation of publishing industry and he prefers to stay in slippery lines of irony.

Monk deconstructs the language and questions the intentional meaning asserting the subjectivity of the words: "It's incredible that a sentence is ever understood. Mere sounds strung together by some agent attempting to mean something, but the meaning need not and does not confine itself to that intention" (Ibid.: 50). Regarding violation of form and authorial intention, Monk feels that he is affirming it instead of violating it: "In my writing my instinct was to defy form, but I very much sought in defying it to affirm it, an irony that was difficult enough to articulate, much less defend. But the wood, the feel of it, the smell of it, the weight of it. It was much more real than words. The wood was so simple. Damn it, a table was a table was a table." (Ibid.: 159). Monk believes the claim of Deconstruction that language is by nature arbitrary and meaning is indeterminate.

Early in the novel, Monk reads a conference paper entitled *F/V: a novel excerpt* in which he parodies Roland Barthes' famous *S/Z*, a structuralist analysis of "Sarrasine", the short story by Honoré de Balzac. Barthes explores the text while defying the codes to explain the meaning and claims the reader is an active producer of interpretations of the text. Monk's parody of Barthes' *S/Z*, entitled "*F/V: a novel excerpt*" is indeed a copy of Percival Everett's own paper called "*F/V: Placing the Experimental Novel*" published in 1999. The placing of this text in *Erasure* shows both the resemblances of the academic choices of Monk and Everett and *Erasure's* relationship with the concept of "The Death of The Author". In paper Monk/Everett writes "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: 18).

In his well-known work *The Death of The Author*, Barthes questions the speaker in Balzac's Sarrasine:

"Who is speaking thus? Is it the hero of the story bent on remaining ignorant of the castrato hidden beneath the woman? Is it Balzac the individual, furnished by his personal experience with a philosophy of Woman? Is it Balzac the author professing "literary" ideas on femininity? Is it universal wisdom? Romantic psychology? We shall never know, for the good reason that writing is the destruction of every voice, of every point of origin. Writing is that neutral, composite, oblique space where our subject slips away [the authorial subject, the real identity of the given speaking subject--that's what slips away] the negative where all identity is lost, starting with the very identity of the body writing." (1977: 142)

To understand the meaning of the text, readers do not appeal to the authority of the author. Barthes continues to question the authorship:

Once the Author is removed, the claim to decipher a text becomes quite futile. To give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing. Such a conception suits criticism very well, the latter then allotting itself the important task of discovering the Author...beneath the work: when the Author has been found, the text is 'explained' – victory to the critic.(Ibid.:147)

While Barthes believes the authorial absence, he also makes a distinction between the author and the sriptor. What Everett criticizes is the idea that "the modern sriptor is born simultaneously with the text, is in no way equipped with a being preceding or exceeding the writing, is not the subject with the book as predicate..." (Ibid.: 145). For Barthes, the sriptor is invisible; however, Monk's take on Stagg's character and his appearance in shows and the book award makes Stagg character visible. Monk questions his subjectivity as author:

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?[...]Would I have to kill Stagg to silence him? And what did it mean that I was even thinking of Stagg as having agency? What did it mean that I could put those questions to myself? Of course, it meant nothing and so, it meant everything. (Everett, 2001:276)

With 'having agency' Stagg becomes the author rather than the sriptor. Monk suffers from dual personalities since Stagg, his pen name captures his self. And Stagg becomes the visible author of *Fuck* rather than the invisible sriptor. Monk's parody which goes unnoticed by his readers leads to his adoption of the duality of black identity performances that he has always resisted. This duality splits his identity in the process.

In contrast of Barthes' claim which makes the sriptor invisible, Stagg becomes visible and famous when he showed up in Kenya Dunston show and later he won the most prestigious book award in the nation. Moreover, Stagg R. Leigh modeled on the virile "bad boy" of the vernacular ballad Stagolee (Gysin, 2007: 74, 75, Feith, 2011: 12). However, this resemblance is never acknowledged within the characters of the novel. Stagg acts like a bad boy figure of African-American folklore of late nineteen and early twentieth century that his name signifies. However nobody could interrogate the etymology of the name or the joke behind it.

Monk was trapped living a double-life “So, I had managed to take myself, the writer, reconfigure myself, then disintegrate myself, leaving two bodies of work, two bodies, no boundaries yet walls everywhere.” (Everett, 2001: 285) Monk has to put his two works together: his journal and *My Pafology*. Though being incompatible with each other his two personalities Monk and Stagg like his two works are obliged to coexist together. Monk wears the mask of Stagg R. Leigh:

But the irony was beautiful. I was a victim of racism by virtue of my failing to acknowledge racial difference and by failing to have my art be defined as an exercise in racial self-expression. So I would not be economically oppressed because of writing a book that fell in line with the very books I deemed racist. I would have to wear the mask of the person I was expected to be (Ibid.: 238)

Regarding the phrase of “wear the mask” Cannon points out Paul Laurence Dunder’s poem, “We Wear The Mask” which focuses on the notion that “Blacks have had to disguise their true thoughts about white oppression behind happy facades in order to avoid showing White American Slave owner their true feeling of hate” (2004: 80). In *Shadow and Act*, Ellison pointed out that how masking becomes the attribute of Americans:

For the ex-colonials, the declaration of an American identity meant the assumption of a mask, and it imposed not only the discipline of national self-consciousness, it gave Americans an ironic awareness of the joke that always lies between appearance and reality, between the discontinuity of social tradition and that sense of the past which clings to the mind. And perhaps even an awareness of the joke that society is man’s creation, not God’s. Americans began their revolt from the English fatherland when they dumped the tea into the Boston Harbor, masked as Indians, and the mobility of the society created in this limitless space has encouraged the use of the mask for good and evil ever since. As the advertising industry, which is dedicated to the creation of masks, makes clear, that which cannot gain authority from tradition may borrow it with a mask. Masking is a play upon possibility and ours is a society in which possibilities are many.” (1995: 54)

With this tradition in mind, it is understood that wearing the mask is a coping mechanism for Monk to convince the publishing industry that he is “black enough”.

The first line of *Erasure* was “My journal is a private affair” (Everett, 2001:3). Everett/Monk makes this statement to convince the reader that the sentiments and thoughts in his narrative are real and actually happened. This claim allows Monk to create his own writing avoiding other characters to produce false ideas about him. First-person narrative provides subjective insight into his family life, his career and relationships within the community and how he acknowledges himself and his self-defined subjectivity. Cannon asserts that:

[H]is intent is not to tell a story, which implies an audience, but to reflect intimately about his life and how writing has come to bear on his livelihood as a Black man. Theoretically speaking, Monk aims to dismantle the idea that Black masculine fiction is nothing but protest. In order to do so, he reflects on his own life as a writer as opposed to writing about how others have constructed his subjectivity. He defines his reality in terms of his own experiences versus those constructed about him. (2004: 61, 62)

The opening sentence of *Erasure* continues with “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: 3). Monk not only states its privacy and also implicitly desires that his journal to be read eventually. With these lines, Everett also creates an ambiguity about who is the author of *Erasure*. The narrative audience regards *Erasure* as Monk’s journal since he claims to be his journal in the beginning of the novel which is ironically happens to be Everett’s novel. As Rabinowitz calls it “the authorial audience knows it is reading a work of art, while the narrative audience believes what it is reading is real”(1987:100).

Monk tries to convince the reader that his journal is real while claiming authorial existence opposing Barthes terms related to authorial absence. The loss of authority becomes evident in Roland Barthes' terms, "the death of the author," and in Foucault's terms, the question “What is an

author?" Though both Foucault and Barthes share the same notion of "locat[ing] the space left empty by the author's disappearance" (Foucault, 1989: 266), nevertheless Foucault would not claim filling the space only with the language of text as Barthes would but he acknowledges an author function existing outside of the text. For Foucault a textual field is more firmly structured than Barthes supposes and he questions: "How can a free subject penetrate the substance of things and give it meaning? How can it activate the rules of a language from within and thus give rise to the designs which are properly own--its own?" (Ibid.: 273) By asking these questions he claims that we don't appeal the authority of author to understand the meaning of the text.

Foucault's 'author function' resembles with the consequences of Monk's Stagg R. Leigh performance and Foucault's theory also includes a transformation in his work which expresses the Author-scriptor distinction that Everett claims.

When he is making a nightstand for his mother, Monk recalls discursive formations of Foucault and "how he begins by making assumptions about notions concerning language that he claims are misguided... (though Foucault) does not argue the point, but assumes his notions, rightly or wrongly, to be the case" (Everett, 2001: 152).

In the context of Monk's world, his readers are misguided and they have missed the irony created by *Fuck*. However, the readers of *Erasure* enjoy the irony created by Everett which demonstrates his criticism of Foucault's author function and "the notions concerning language that he claims are misguided" (Ibid.).

Regarding establishing the special role of Foucault's discursive practice Dreyfus and Rabinow assert that "the discursive relations which make serious reference possible are neither objective nor subjective. They are not what Foucault calls primary relations- relations independent of discourse and its objects...nor are these relations "secondary relations"-those found in the way practicing subjects reflectively define their own behaviour" (1983: 63). When Monk was considering Foucault's "discursive formations, [he] stepped away and looked at [him]self" (Everett, 2001:152) which may suggest that Monk is making self-examination for Stagg role he soon will perform since this scene happened right after his agent sent the manuscript of *My Pafology* to the editors.

Everett in his *F/V Placing the Experimental Novel* also critiques Barthes claim of the "the death of the author" pointing out that: "The novelist must accept his or her life as a fact, realizing that it makes no difference whether someone proclaims or even believes that he or she is dead" (1999:18). On the other hand Barthes famous conclusion of his discussion in *Death of the Author* is: "the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author" (1977:148) which places more importance the authority of reader than author.

Actually, in the beginning, Stagg was just a signature name for *My Pafology* and Monk would not put his name to create the parody and would not establish an authorship. Stagg protected his invisibility and Monk remained as the author until he met Morgenstein. Before that he only communicated through his agent or over the phone with the editor Paula Baderman to preserve his invisibility. But when he met Morgenstein for the movie rights, Monk disguised as Stagg and the author-scriptor distinction had begun to diminish. Monk's agent Yul offered him to have lunch with Morgenstein though "[he] ha[sn't] told him that there's no Stagg Leigh yet"(Everett, 2001: 235) proves that Yul understands and preserves Stagg's invisibility. When he accepted to meet Morgenstein, Monk became Stagg and he transformed into the visible Author of *Fuck*. Monk narrates the parts when he wears the mask of Stagg in the third-person to keep a distance from Stagg. When he was preparing for the lunch, "[w]ho are you trying the fool?" he asked the mirror."(Everett, *Erasure* 242). His talking to mirror connected to Lacanian theory of mirror phase which presents the aspect of identity formation. The one at the mirror is the otherness of the self or the alienated self and when he slips the mask, he sees his actual identity. For Lacan, by

viewing himself in the mirror, the subject at the mirror phase begins to establish his own subjectivity through the fantasy image inside the mirror. The desire for the connected whole and individual perfection is a representation of the tension between identity and non-identity (1949).

The mirror image of Monk who actually becomes Stagg is a reflection that Monk must deflect since it damages him replacing his own subjectivity. He faces this conflict several times in the novel and mentions killing Stagg:

I had the strangest of thoughts...if I were to go out into the streets of Washington, say around 14th Street and T, I might find an individual who by all measure was Stagg Leigh and then I could kill him, perhaps bring him home first for a meal, but kill him after all. But there was no such person and yet there was me and he was me. (Everett, 2001: 287)

His desperate search to find an ordinary "individual" replacing Stagg and his acceptance "there was no such person and yet there was me and he was me" (Ibid.) indicates Lacan's mirror image as well. For Monk self-consciousness replaces the alienation from the self in these lines.

When they first met, Stagg ordered a Gibson and with the way he talked, he caused a disappointment for Morgenstein since he didn't conform to the standardized Black looking:

'You know, you're not at all like I pictured you.'

'No. How did you picture me?'

'I don't know, tougher o something. You know, more street. More...'

'Black?' (Ibid.: 243)

Even performing a standardized blackness, he was not found 'black enough'. On the contrary of Morgenstein's expectations Stagg ordered "the carrot and ginger soup... a plate of fettucini and a little olive oil and Parmesan" which remained in Morgenstein "a troubled expression"(Ibid.: 244). However this may have been caused from Monk's unsuccessful performance of being Stagg since he might have been having a hard time to play a stable identity role or he avoided to be possessed by the Stagg performance or he was simply mocking with Morgenstein's expectations.

When Morgenstein asked him for what reason he ended up in prison "Here Stagg was faced with a dilemma. So far, his only lie had been to answer his name. Even owing up to having written the damn novel was honest enough. 'They say I killed a man with the leather awl of a Swiss army knife.' The qualifier they say was a stroke and Stagg smiled to himself, a move that served to underscore the quality of his crime." (Ibid.: 244,245). Stagg's expression of "kill[ing] a man with the leather awl of a Swiss army knife"(Ibid.) made Morgenstein relieved: "Here I was about to think you weren't the real thing."(Ibid.). Monk's ironic behaviors were completely lost in Morgenstein with this expression. For him, to be 'the real thing', a real black man requires being a criminal. Monk/Stagg is "fac[ing] a dilemma" (Ibid.) because he not only lied about his name, but also he pretended to be a criminal for parodying the adopted racial paradigms. He created a false identity that was believed to be representative of blackness. But this is not the only dilemma he encounters: "Dilemma: I refused to admit that I, Thelonus Ellison, was also Stagg R. Leigh, author of *Fuck*. But yet here was the book. I could not disqualify myself, because I would betray my secret. Solution: Ignore it. Who in his right mind would consider giving that novel an award? (Ibid.: 260,261). Stagg the scriptor becomes Stagg the Author again which brings us the critique of Barthes' Death of the Author.

Later in the novel, Monk "imagine[s] a reading given by Stagg Leigh"(Ibid.:261) also turns him into a visible Author. In his day-dream Stagg would be introduced by a representative of the Friends of Books Society when he showed up one of the stereotypical outfits that Monk described. When she announced the name of the book as *Fuck*, the audience would giggle and mutter. She

later stated regarding the book "It opened my eyes to ways of black life and helped me understand the pain of those people" (Ibid.: 262). Then Stagg declared:

This novel is not true factually, but it is the true story of what it is like to be black in America. It ain't pretty...During my time in prison...I learned that words belong to everybody, that I could make my place in this bankrupt society by using my God-given talent with language...Fuck! is my contribution to this wonderful country of ours. Where a black ex-con can become rich by simply telling the truth about his unfortunate people." (Ibid.: 262,263)

Stagg was invited to Kenya Dunston show where he remained behind the screen and didn't say a word during the show. He felt a regret to show up and faced an alienation from his self. Though he wrote *Fuck* to parody the realness of so-called African American novels, not comprehending the joke behind it, his novel was treated the same manner he detested. When Dunston was talking in the show he didn't care about her words "look[ing] down at [his] feet, imagined [his] reflection in the leather of [his] shoes" (Ibid.: 280). He could not see his mirror image in Lacanian sense while performing his Stagg role.

Monk's "personality disintegrates under the pressure of performing the black stereotype he intended to satirize" (Russet, 2005:359). The performance of black stereotype, which was always incomprehensible to him, shattered the singularity of his self-conception: "Thelonious and 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" (Everett, 2001:265). His satirical novel, which was widely received as a serious work whose irony went unnoticed, became such an obsession that he turned that pseudonym into an alter ego.

Monk walked forward to accept National Book Award for Stagg, when he stood in front of the microphone considering how he was possessed by the mask of Stagg: "Then there was a small boy perhaps me as a boy, and he held up a mirror so that I could see my face and it was the face of Stagg Leigh" (Ibid.:293).

For Ellison the "motives hidden behind the mask are as numerous as the ambiguities the mask conceals" (1995:55). Stagg was an aspect that the American society who desired to see in Monk and Stagg did not disappear when the mask Monk was wearing was removed. When Monk was walking towards to stage after Stagg's name was announced for the Book Award, Harnet joked "[i]t's a black thang maybe"(Everett,2001:293) considering the two were separate individuals, proved that Monk's individuality was obscured by his race. In spite of the audience's confusion, he approached to accept the award ready to expose his true identity. "'Now you're free of illusion.' Stagg said. 'How does it feel to be free of one's illusion?'" (Ibid.). Monk was still experiencing a delusional moment thinking he was 'Stagg' and actually talking to himself. Ironically no one knew whether there was an illusion to be free from until this moment of confusion occurred to them. "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'" (Ibid.:294).

The end of both '*Fuck*' and '*Erasure*' are similar since *Fuck* ends with "The cameras is pointin at me. I be on the TV. The cameras be full of me. I on TV"(Ibid.:150) which may show that he has lost his judgement of his self identity as in Lacanian sense and "there is a danger of the stereotypical black experience potentially swallowing up alternate identities through the public only allowing space for only the one" (Eaton, 2006: 228).

Monk speaks in Stagg's voice and uses the same final words "Egads, I'm on television" (Everett, 2001: 294) as his character Van Go Jenkins from *Fuck* who says "I on TV" (Ibid.:150), however Monk's speech act involves the linguistic codes of his own upper-class identity.

Erasure ends with an ambiguous conclusion quoting the well-known phrase of Isaac Newton "hypotheses non fingo" (Ibid.: 294) ("I do not form a hypothesis"). As he does not know where he stands both literally and figuratively and he is not connected to reality, his integration and sense of self is fractured and thus does not form a hypothesis.

Conclusion

Erasure is derived from a real experience of Everett and contains autobiographical inclinations. Everett presents readers with Monk an author like him who suffers creating and living his real identity because of the racist categorization and expectations of society.

Barthes claims the absence of the authorship, a human agency in his well-known work *The Death of the Author*. Everett criticizes Barthes' idea of loss of authorship in the text and his claim that the scripter exists to produce but not to explain the text. On the other hand, the loss of authorship in Foucault's terms becomes the question "What is an author?" Nevertheless for Foucault the author is not death like in Barthes' view, instead he acknowledges an author function which makes the author an instrument existing outside of the text. However, Everett's author-narrator is inside the text, very much alive and can not be ignored.

The scenes where Monk is talking to mirror and seeing himself as Stagg, his dual identity, connects to Lacanian theory of mirror phase which presents the aspect of identity formation. For Lacan, the mirror phase establishes the ego as fundamentally dependent upon external objects, on an other. Monk establishes an imaginary self, the stereotypical identity that publishing industry and American society see in him. When he sees his real self in the mirror, this recognition causes great confusion and makes him struggle due to an identity conflict.

Everett with *Erasure* undermines the standardized representations of so-called African-American experience while also questions the prejudices of society based on skin color. Through the publishing market and media, American society reinforces individuals to live up racial stereotypes. Everett not only opposes being labeled "African-American writer" but also protest the racism which obliges the author writing only race-related issues. *Erasure* makes parody of the criteria's of publishing market and prejudices of society regarding the racial clichés.

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