

“The separation between, past, present, and future is only an illusion, although a convincing one.”

Albert Einstein, letter to Michele Besso

### Percival Everett: Mediating Skin Color

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Is there still a pattern of past ideas and conduct imbedded in the society we see reflected in the recent novels of the American South? Do today's novelists see themselves defined in the media and the publishing industry by apparently indelible identity criteria based on the color of their skin? Are there in the southern novels of the present still determining differences based on a past divided by skin color? Has the stain of past sins, in this post-segregation era of Dixie Resurgens, faded so much that contemporary writers can write of *other* issues and without reflecting a racist burden? Is the idea that the present and the future will be less racist than the past simply an illusion, and not even a convincing one? In this essay I will look for answers to my questions in the fiction of Percival Everett, an excellent novelist from the American South.

### Skin Color and Movie Identity

Percival Everett gave the 2010 Honora Rankine-Galloway Address at the University of Southern Denmark and addressed the issue of racism, as he often does in his fiction. In *I Am Not Sidney Poitier* (2009), his most recent novel, the main character is not an ‘Uncle Tom,’ nor is he militant like Richard Wright’s character named ‘Bigger Thomas,’ he is simply a black American of the 21st Century. Yet, he has trouble being seen fully by the people he meets, black or white. In the tradition of Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*, the “blindness” includes his own, for the main character *has* a hard time “seeing” himself. In a sense Everett’s character is also nameless, like the invisible man, because his mother named him: Not Sidney Poitier, including the “Not” as a part of his name.

The vision metaphor is used throughout the novel to describe how “Not Sidney” gains insight into his position in the American racial hierarchy of today. He journeys into the heart of darkness and runs into a southern sheriff, suffers violence, incarceration, and a wall of too well known white racism in Georgia and Alabama—complete with a burning cross. In short all the classic elements of the African American slave narrative and novel are here. But there is more and this is what makes it a noteworthy novel of the media-present.

Some of the extra the novel has to offer are parallels to movies featuring Sidney Poitier, the actor. Especially “The Defiant Ones” (1958), “A Patch of Blue” (1965), “In the Heat of the Night”

(1967), “Guess Who Is Coming to Dinner” (1967), “Lilies of the Field” (1967), and “They Call Me Mr. Tibbs” (1970); all movies with a strong racial statement. We are used to good novels becoming, mostly mediocre, movies. The interesting new media-thinking here is that Everett creates his fictional story of Not Sidney Poitier by using numerous scenes from movies starring Sidney Poitier. Not’s life becomes a long line of repetitions, ‘quotations’ you might call them, of Hollywood’s staging of the racial situation in the 1960s and 1970s. In this way the dialogue between text (script) and film has been substantially expanded by the novel, the added text. And if the novel *I Am Not Sidney Poitier* is made into a movie, it will be crossing into new media territory: texts> films> text> film. In theory this progression could be unending.

“Nu’ott,” in the southern pronunciation used by a character named Ted Turner, is *black and rich*—‘insanely rich.’ His hippie mother, who died early, had saved every dime she could and invested in Turner Communications Group in 1970. Not’s father remains unknown. The novel shows how Not Sidney Poitier with growing introspection learns that it is an illusion to imagine that he, through individual action, could escape the social and psychological effects of his skin color, not only in his everyday life but also in the media. What he learns in the process is that he has to take advantage of his unique minority position as both black *and* rich.

Everett’s character discovers, what Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison knew: true value is not really so much in belonging to various brotherhoods or fraternities, as in realizing oneself by creating an identity with a personal integrity, based on human values. This is difficult for Not Sidney Poitier, who not only carries the name but also looks remarkably like the Hollywood actor. His identity is automatically mediated by anybody he meets. He is beaten up by class mates in high school and college, mainly by other blacks, does not graduate from high school, and has to buy his way into Morehouse College, a prestige school for rich black people, in Atlanta. It is tempting to see the young Not Sidney as Ralph Ellison’s invisible man, who is finally climbing up from his underground hibernation, for the education of Not Sidney that Everett outlines has as its goal to make the young man recognize his social role and responsibility.

In a single brilliantly crafted guess-who-is-coming-to-dinner episode, Everett reveals that he finds life among the black American elite sterile and barren. —In the original movie of *Guess Who Is Coming to Dinner*, a young white woman brings an African-American man, played by Sidney Poitier, to dinner in her home, much to the consternation of her supposedly liberal parents. —Not Sidney is brought by a young black woman to the Thanksgiving dinner in her parents’ house. And there Not is made painfully aware of the importance of his skin color, his darker shade of black, in

the home of Ward Larkin, one of the most successful African American lawyers in Washington D.C.—Not hears Mrs. Larkin say:

“He is just so dark, Ward.”

“Well, how dark is he?” Ward Larkin asked.

“Black.”

It hadn't occurred to me, but now it did that the Larkins were all very light in complexion. It hadn't dawned on me that I should have noticed or cared. More fool me, I guess.”

“Well, what's his name?” Ward asked

“That's the other thing,” Ruby said. “His name is Not Sidney”

“Then what is it?”

“That's it. Not Sidney. The word *not* and Sidney.”

“Hmmp. Some kind of ghetto nonsense, no doubt.” (2009, 131)

Not Sidney hears Mrs. Larkin repeat: “Ward, it's just that he's so dark.” And Not becomes “sadly, irritatingly, horrifyingly observant of skin color,” especially his own. When he sees that Robert, his rival for the daughter of the house, is appropriately light colored, Not Sidney imagines he hears Mrs. Larkin and her friends, also mothers, repeating to their daughters: “Light not white, girl, light not white,” (2009, 139). In the house of black success Everett recognizes prejudice that he would usually associate with poor white Southerners.

To his surprise Not Sidney finds that the opposition to his person also comes from the very people he tries to identify with. Violet is the cook in the Larkin household, and she declares:

“Listen boy, Mister and Missus have worked too hard,” she said.

“Too Hard for what?”

“To have a black boy like you come around Miss Maggie.”

“Listen to yourself, Violet. Mister and Missus and Miss Maggie. This is not the antebellum south and you're not a house slave.”

“Why, you nigger,” she said.

“Violet, you and I are pretty much the same color,” I said.

“No, we're not,” she snapped. “I 'm milk chocolate and you're dark cocoa, dark as Satan.”

I was stunned. (2009, 154-55)

Advised by his friends Ted Turner and his Morehouse College professor, named Percival Everett, Not Sidney reacts to the racism that he has encountered in this Washington home, by questioning how these upper class lighter colored black people have made it into the best schools, as they are now decidedly against quota systems and affirmative action, in general. Not points out that his mother never wanted to be white and that the Larkins and friends now almost have him hating *them* because of the color of their skin. He cannot hate them because they are light, but he does dislike them for the way they treat their *help*, who have not been invited to sit down to enjoy any of their own Thanksgiving cooking (2009, 162). Maybe Not Sidney can take comfort in an unexpected late gesture of support. After he has had a big show-down, with the Larkin family at the beginning of the Thanksgiving dinner, has packed his bag, and is quietly leaving, Violet is there at the door, as the only one, with a paper sack with food for him.

With the novel's statement Everett has again efficiently used fiction as a weapon in his continued rejection of racism, also within the black establishment. The novel makes it clear that not all Not's goals are realizable within the framework of a racist and capitalistic America. With *I Am Not Sidney Poitier* Percival Everett has once again created a signifying black novel, with a difference. The stain of racism and prejudice is still there and at times in places where you least expect to see it.

The decisive factors for our decisions are often values with their origin in the local community, as Everett demonstrates repeatedly. The traditional body of southern thinking, founded and situated in place and community, has changed as the ethnic make-up of the South has changed and has become media-oriented, and the change is reflected in contemporary southern fiction.—The portrait of the poor whites in the novel is probably too much like Erskine Caldwell's 1930s world of *Tobacco Road* to rile any of today's poor white Southerners; but *I Am Not Sidney Poitier* is liable to irritate, maybe even provoke, a good number of today's established black Americans.

### Skin Color and Publishing

What makes the narratives of new southern writers essentially different is the reclaiming of forgotten, or hidden, historical events, the claiming of ignored events in the present, and the acceptance and ready use of the ethnic reality of the South, or of the whole country, if you will, which is a reality of obvious, and sometimes less obvious, prejudice. The open and unquestioning prejudice in *Erasure* (2001), Everett's main work, so far, is not limited to white people; according

to Everett racism is just as rampant in black communities. Thelonius “Monk” Ellison is the main character of *Erasure*, the best African American novel in decades. Thelonius describes himself:

I have dark brown skin, curly hair, a broad nose, some of my ancestors were slaves and I have been detained by pasty white policemen in New Hampshire, Arizona and Georgia and so the society in which I live tells me I am black; that is my race. . . . I am no good at basketball. I listen to Mahler. . . . I graduated summa cum laude from Harvard. . . . I am good at math. I cannot dance. I did not grow up in any inner city or the rural south. (2001, 17)

Thelonius is not, in other words, living up to our prejudicial notions of what a black man is, can, or likes—seen from a white or from a black point of view. At one time he tried to do something about that: “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” (2001, 2). Thelonius’ career as a novelist is suffering; because he is being stereotyped by both his publisher and readers as an ‘African American writer.’ But what he is actually writing are retellings of Euripides and parodies of French poststructuralists—as Everett did in his books *Frenzy* and in *Glyph*, respectively—and Thelonius is depressed, because of the seventeenth rejection of his novel:

“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?”

. . . . “They know because of the photo on your first book. . . . 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. . . .

“Yeah, it’s shit. I know that, but it sells. This is a business. Thelonius.” (2001, 43)

Not Sidney was *too dark* to woo a daughter of the established African-American community in Washington, D.C., Thelonius is *not dark enough* to be a successful African-American novelist; the latter is a recent development in American identity politics. Thelonius finally takes the advice and writes a novel called *My Pafology*. It is included in *Erasure* as an actual “we-lives-in-de-ghetto”

novel within a novel. He writes it in the crudest black English, describes beast-like behavior, and places the action in the worst ghetto he can think of—as a parody, under a pseudonym. Much against his own protests Thelonius wins a National Book Award after his parody has been renamed *Fuck*, and as a best-selling new novelist he is interviewed on TV by somebody much like Oprah Winfrey. But first he has to get ready to go on and once again he is *not black enough*:

“Let me see that face,” the red-haired woman said. . . . “you ain’t half-bad-looking,” she said, smoothing his forehead with her thumb. She reached over to the cart . . . and came back with her fingertips coated with a brown cream. “What’s that?” “You ain’t quite dark enough, darlin’,” she said. . . . “This is TV stuff.” So while he watches in the mirror, she rubs the compound into his skin and his oak brown skin becomes chocolate brown. “There now,” the redhead said, “that’s so much better.” (2001, 173)

Everett lets his Thelonius wander away from the supposed cultural norm, so the writer can explore the dialectic between “the normal” and “the marginal” in American society. Is it true that traditional American racial knowledge is so permanently encoded also by the media? Can you only succeed in society if you live up to the stereotypical racial notions that whites and blacks entertain about each other? Do we really use identity politics to subjugate each other until we conform and live down to the expected norms, in the ways Everett shows us?

As Jim Cobb has pointed out, “the South’s experience surely says that any identity—national, regional, cultural, or otherwise—that can be sustained only by demonizing or denigrating other groups exacts a terrible toll, not simply on the demonized and denigrated but ultimately on those who can find self-affirmation only by rejecting others” (2005, 336). This is a restatement of the old truth that the enslaver ultimately enslaves himself; what is new is that we are now doing it through the media.

Percival Everett’s novels would seem to answer my initial question. The stain of racism has not been ignored or mediated away in new southern fiction. Prejudice and racism based simply on skin color exist and seem forever present. It does not help that the media happily serve to communicate and reinforce traditional racist stereotypes and also help invent new ones. Our present indicates that it would, indeed, be an illusion to think the future would be without prejudice and racism.—Fortunately, in the new millennium, there are numerous southern writers, like Percival Everett, who publish fiction that caters to our needs and realities by accentuating the issue.

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