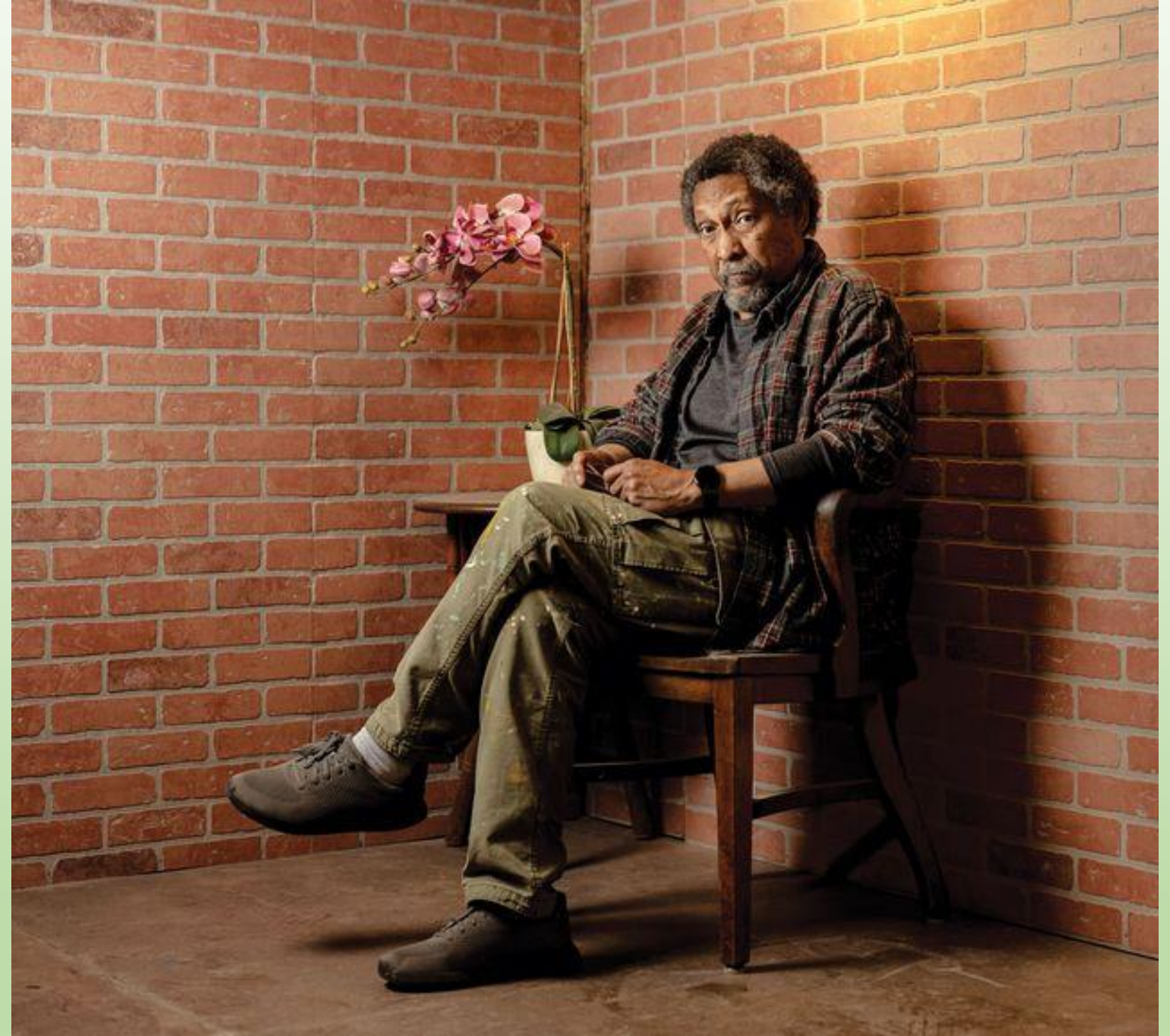


“The Appropriation of Cultures”

Percival Everett
(1956-)

- Raised in Columbia, South Carolina
- He lives on the West coast
- Versatile and experimental writer: his stories often feature African-American characters who transcend the stereotypical image of the black experience (uneducated /poor African Americans living in the ghetto)
- His novel ***Erasure*** inspired the critically acclaimed movie *American Fiction*
- His latest novel ***James*** Everett reimagines and rewrites Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* according to Jim's perspective



Novels (a selection) :

- ***Erasure* (2001)**
- *I Am Not Sidney Poitier* (2009)
- *So Much Blue* (2017)
- *Telephone* (2020)
- ***James* (2024)**

Short-stories collections (a selection) :

- *Big Picture* (1996)
- *Half an Inch of Water* (2015)

Everett has also resisted labels about “the Black experience”; in fact, many of his works challenge the stereotypical representation of African-Americans as featured in mainstream culture. According to him, the black experience is much wider and much more complex than the usual depiction of black people in the media. In an interview published in BOMB in 2004, Everett noted his family lineage of doctors and his friendships with ranchers, veterinarians, and said:

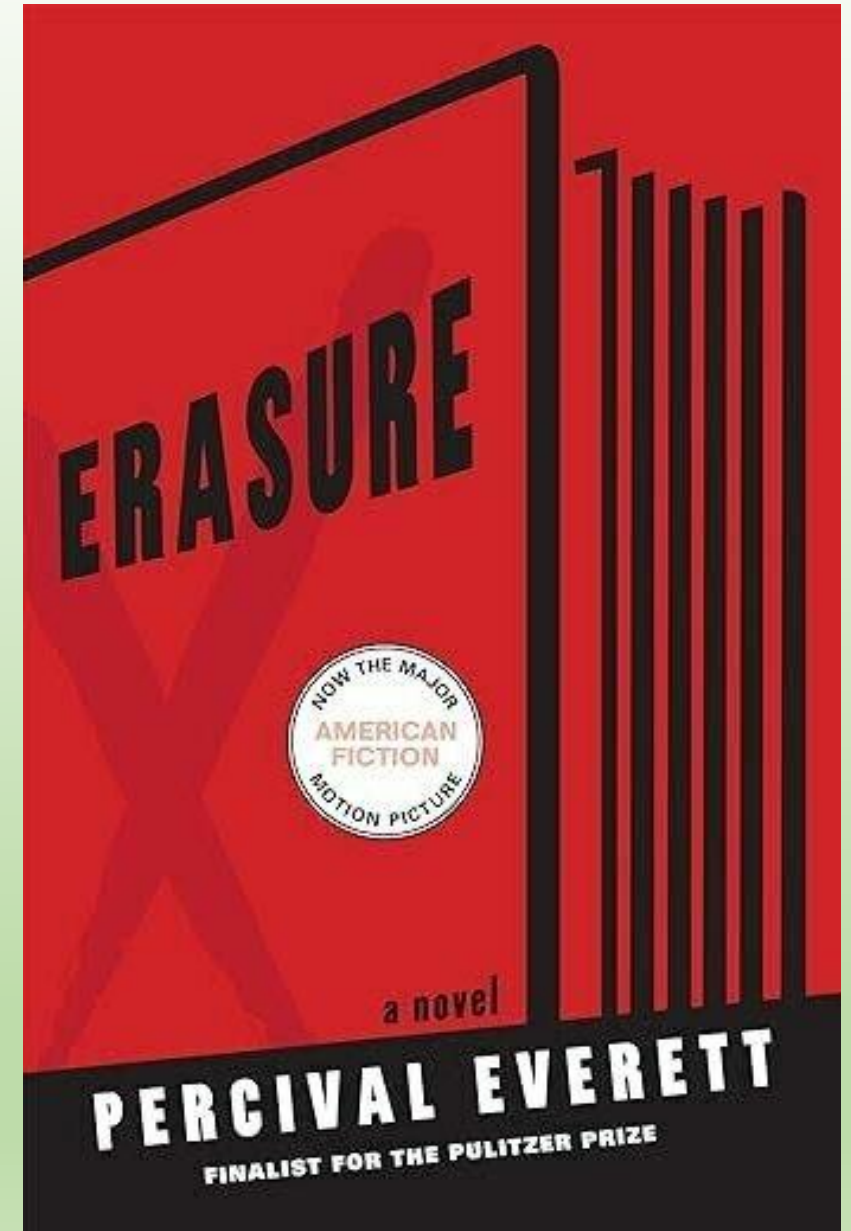
Occasionally someone will say, “That’s not the Black experience.” And I laugh and say, “I’m Black, and that’s my experience.” I know a lot of Black people whose experience is that, but it’s not what people want to think is the Black experience—they want their Black experience to be inner city and rural South.

<https://bombmagazine.org/articles/2004/07/01/percival-everett/>


“The Appropriation of Cultures”

A short story published in *Callaloo*, Vol. 19, No. 1 (Winter, 1996), pp. 24-30.

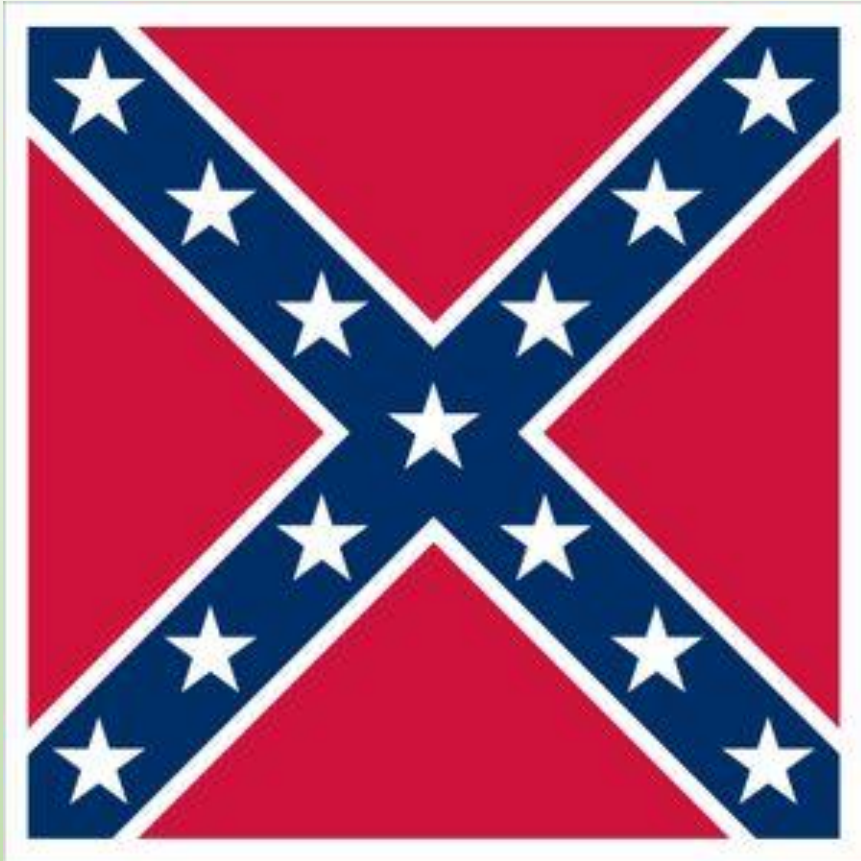
The John Hopkins University Press.



Southern Emblems/Divisive Symbols

- The story revolves around (and debunks) two symbols which are usually associated with the South, especially its dramatic history of hate, white suprematism and racism
- The song “**Dixie**”: “I wish I was in Dixie...” The song was composed by Ohio-born Daniel Decatur Emmett for minstrel shows in 1859
- ‘**Dixie**’  synonym for the Southern United States
- It has always been a divisive song; it was the unofficial anthem of the Confederacy and of the white South

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5OKdbc0DYpM>



- Also known as ‘The Battle Flag’
- Highly **Controversial symbol**, which was meant to represent the Confederate States during the American Civil War
- During Reconstruction and in the following years, the flag became the symbol of a [all-white] rebellious Southern heritage and the myth of the Lost Cause.
- However, it is mostly associated with **white suprematism, slavery and racism, segregation** in Southern states.
- See the heated public debate and controversy on the Confederate flag being flown over the State Capitol building in Columbia (South Carolina), which is also where Everett’s story is set!

<https://www.nationalgeographic.com/history/article/how-confederate-battle-flag-became-symbol-racism>



As Edward Ayers (1996, 79) has stated, “the Confederate flag is a topic of such debate and divisiveness in the South today because it denies all that black and white Southerners share, because it reduces the South to a one-time and onesided political entity.”

For “most black southerners that ‘political identity’ is clearly the antebellum South and its slave-cotton-plantation economy. In short, the Confederate battle flag defines ‘southernness’ exclusively as ‘white Confederate southernness.’”

Webster G., Leib. “Religion, Murder, and the Confederate Battle Flag in South Carolina”, 32



“As he [Daniel, the protagonist of the story] drives around town and whites see a black driver in this vehicle, they are subtly dispossessed of their claim to a unitary southern heritage. **He has entered their white symbolic space as if he were one of them.** [...] Its original content is now culturally **hybridized** as black folks are making themselves co-creators of the concept *southern*.”

William M. Ramsey, “Terrance Hayes and Natasha Trethewey: Contemporary Black Chroniclers of the Imagined South”, 124.

Key features 1

- The **meaning of symbols** (see the song “Dixie” and the Confederate flag in the story) isn’t fixed: it can be **challenged/redefined** and thus **reclaimed**. This is exactly what Daniel does; first when he plays “Dixie” in such a way which makes the song his own anthem; then, he buys the pick up with the decal of the Confederate Flag (commonly associated with Southern white pride and racism) and turns it into the symbol of black power!
- Not only does Daniel claim his right to, but he also **embraces** the song and the flag as symbols of his own Southern heritage
- The idea of a different South represented through public symbols and the rejection of a **monolithic narrative**
- The South is depicted as “a zone of post-colonial transcultural **hybridity**”

Key features 2

- The removal of the Confederate flag from the State capitol corresponds to the removal of **the cultural codes of white superiority**; this is achieved by Daniel's non-violent subversion of symbols
- The story shows how powerful contexts and perspectives (and prejudices) can be in shaping the way in which symbols and/or objects are understood and thus interpreted