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Source: *The Southern Literary Journal*, Vol. 37, No. 2 (Spring, 2005), pp. 119-139

Published by: University of North Carolina Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20078416>

Accessed: 25-09-2019 10:43 UTC

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Knowing Their Place: Three Black Writers and the Postmodern South

by William M. Ramsey

The year 2002 must have been an enigma to professional South-watchers. On December 5, celebrating South Carolina Senator Strom Thurmond's 100th birthday, Mississippian Trent Lott uttered words that soon led to his resignation as Republican majority leader of the U.S. Senate. Noting that in 1948 Mississippi had proudly voted for segregationist Thurmond in his presidential bid, he added that if Thurmond had won we "wouldn't have had all these problems over all these years." According to Lott's hometown newspaper, the Jackson *Clarion-Ledger*, the words echoed what he said on November 3, 1980: "You know, if we had elected this man 30 years ago, we wouldn't be in the mess we are today." Homespun toast-making though it was, Lott's speech seemed a throwback to a pre-civil rights era South that many assumed and hoped no longer is.

Yet even as Lott was embroiled in this controversy, H. K. Edgerton, a black North Carolinian and former president of the Asheville NAACP, was halfway through his 1300-mile, self-proclaimed March Across Dixie from Asheville to Houston. Setting out on October 14, dressed in Confederate military uniform and carrying a Confederate flag, Edgerton was marching in support of the message "Heritage Not Hate," of the rightfulness of the Confederacy's cause, and of southern symbols long believed by critics to condone racial exclusion. Interviewed earlier in

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the year by Ron Holland, editor of the *Dixie Daily News*, he explained: "if we Southerners don't stand together we will lose our culture, heritage, religion and region to outsiders who sadly have no appreciation of the unique culture of being Southern" (Holland). Young blacks, he bemoaned in the *Asheville Tribune*, have been wrongly taught about their history, including the institution of slavery: "God and his infinite wisdom brought these people here. He brought about a love between master and slave that has never happened before. . . . the only one who cared about the African was the man in the south" (Davis).

How then, in the year 2002, was one to *read* the postmodern South? In a retro manner of 1865 (Lott) or as a contemporary, hyperreal fantasy (Edgerton)? Despite their apparent differences, Lott and Edgerton had something in common. Each man seemed to inhabit a South of his own construction, personal memory having diverged from public history most dramatically. For his part, Lott was puzzled that his off-hand, convivial praise of Thurmond's segregationist campaign was offensive to anyone. His was an astonishing lapse of memory, dismissive of the white burden of defensive self-consciousness about the South's pained and tragic history. Emptying language of substantive historical reference, Lott believed his remarks could not be offensive simply because he said they weren't. Edgerton, for his part, enacted a stunning appropriation of traditional white cultural symbols. The Confederate flag and uniform, with their origin in defense of states rights (including the constitutional right to own private property such as chattel slaves), once belonged to a cultural system of meaning that was fixed and hierarchical, excluding blacks from social, political, and economic power as the marginalized Other.

Whatever Edgerton's motives, his appropriation of Confederate history evinces a postmodern impulse to *construct* rather than *explain* the culture of the South, to replace once stable symbols with their simulacra, or false copies, once the original no longer exists in its first purity. As a consequence, that objectivistic and abstract entity we call the *idea* of the South has collapsed. No longer anchored to a collective public tradition, it no longer binds us with a monolithic narrative. Expressed as individual social creation, as seen in Lott's vacuous and Edgerton's revisionist constructions, the South is not so much a place as an amorphous cultural space where history yields to symbolic simulations that have no stable correspondence to reality. If one recalls the controlling power the idea of the South held over Strom Thurmond in 1948, or in the symbolic axe handles promoted by Lester Maddox in the 1960s, Lott and Edger-

ton both show that public symbols of the southern past no longer rigidly organize individual perception.

The implications of this postmodern shift are of course evident in literary representations of the South. For black writers, the issue of the South is especially intriguing because monolithic perspectives only recently have altered. For white writers the story was different. Scholars often have argued, somewhat simplistically, that a monolithic southern consciousness (i.e., white consciousness) started to crumble in World War I, when southern thinkers like Faulkner were pulled into contact with modern culture and then self-critically challenged post-bellum representations of the Old Order. But because long after the advent of the Southern Renaissance southern society continued a segregationist agenda of racial oppression, black perspective remained firm and nearly univocal—the South seemed rigidly, aggressively monolithic to black citizens disadvantaged in it. The black literary tradition aptly reflected that view. Updating the slave era view of the South as a hell of bondage, writers from the time of Richard Wright and Langston Hughes to Ralph Ellison and Alice Walker took as a given that the South was a land of oppression. Only in writers emerging during the last twenty to thirty years does the idea of the South show subtle shifts and altering perspectives.

YUSEF KOMUNYAKAA, BORN in 1947 in Bogalusa, Louisiana, and winner in 1994 of the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry, has written considerably of core personal issues that are rooted in his southern sense of place and familial heritage. This southern core, I argue, is integral even to well-known poems such as “Facing It,” about the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington’s mall, where he seems to seek a national, nonracial posture rather than a regional one. Here, where a displaced southerner faces his pained memories of the national catastrophe in Vietnam, his deep ambivalence toward America is, akin to Quentin Compson’s shock at the modern world, a southern response as well as a deeply black and subtly postmodern one.

Like Quentin’s, Komunyakaa’s response to his family and regional past is deeply ambivalent. This perspective is intensively explored in the 1992 book *Magic City*, where searing family tensions are vividly recalled. In the poem “Venus’s-flytraps” the five-year-old narrator says, “I know things / I don’t supposed to know,” then, hinting of running away, imagines, “I could start walking / and never stop.” The poem concludes with this disclosure: “My mama says I’m a mistake. / That I made her a bad girl.” He is just starting to glean the family troubles because “My

playhouse is underneath / Our house, & I hear people / Telling each other secrets" (*Pleasure Dome* 258). Komunyakaa's father was an intelligent but illiterate carpenter, whose disadvantaged situation in the Jim Crow era may have contributed to his abuse of his wife. The marriage failed, and "My Father's Love Letters" recalls poignant scenes in which the father dictated to Yusef letters to the mother pleading for reconciliation: "He would beg / Promising to never beat her / Again." Suppressing anger toward the father while feeling protective love for the mother, the poet reveals, "I was happy / She was gone." The father's use of abstract love sentiments is ironic: "Words rolled from under the pressure / Of my ballpoint: Love, / Baby, Honey, Please." But these are undercut by the harsh and ominous concreteness of the milieu: "We sat in the quiet brutality / Of voltage meters & pipe threaders," and Yusef grimly wonders what his mother does with the letters, "if she laughed / & held them over a gas burner" (293).

Intertwined with the emotional violence of family is the region's racism, which mangled countless black lives in both physical and psychic ways. In "History Lessons" Komunyakaa as a youth receives from his mother three lessons that are a necessary part of his black southern heritage. The first is her recollection of a black man's lynching, twenty-five years earlier, at a picturesque poplar on the cleanly mown and manicured courthouse lawn. In the second, white vigilantes seek all night a man accused of raping a white woman. At dawn they conveniently find "a young black boxer" who is routinely "running & punching the air at sunrise." His death is by tar and feathers, followed by a dragging behind a Model T. The senseless yet persistent violence of southern culture is underscored when days later the real killer is found, a white man, "dead under the trestle / In blackface . . . / his head on a clump of sedge." The third lesson is a personal incident, witnessing his mother's being racially insulted by a white laundry worker. Komunyakaa's anger at the time is dangerous: "The hot words / Swarmed out of my mouth like African bees / & my fists were cocked / Hammers in the air." Protectively, his mother pulls him into her arms to offer some warning advice: "*Son, you ain't gonna live long*" (*Pleasure Dome* 283–284).

Komunyakaa's attraction to black jazz heritage, formed after his adult return to the South, was a response to the pain that he now saw was the historical experience of African Americans. Doubtless it was also intensified by his tour of duty in Vietnam, in the late 1960s, where disturbing images of violence and death repeated what he had absorbed from southern culture in youth. In a public program of the 1989 "Southern

Jazz and Poetry Experience,” in Macon, Georgia, he connected jazz to his formative roots: “It helps me to get to a place I thought I had forgotten. What I mean by that is a closer spiritual connection to the land and the place I came from.” What he saw in jazz was that “Historically, the African American has had to survive by . . . sheer nerve and wit . . . forced to create everything out of nothing” (Komunyakaa and Matthews 645). His thinking at this time was not fully postmodern because, in an era of strong cultural nationalism, he was connecting personal identity to an overarching, spiritual black essence. “Music kept us closer to the essence of ourselves” (645–646), he said, and added: “Music is serious business in the African-American community because it is so intricately interwoven with our identity.” Yet in recognizing that jazz was “an act of sabotage,” he was edging closer to a rejection of America’s binary, fixed cultural codes regarding race. Thus he said, “This is almost Hegelian. We refused to become only an antithesis—lost and incomplete.” Indeed music “linked us to the future, was a process of reclaiming ourselves. Being in motion—improvisation, becoming—this was the root of our creativity” and its affirmation was “the theft of possibility” (646). When the construct of race becomes not a fixed and antithetical polarity but a “becoming,” a “being in motion,” an “improvisation,” and a “possibility,” it is moving toward postmodernism’s free play of creative instabilities.

In *Dien Cai Dau* (1988) Komunyakaa poured out long repressed recollections of the Vietnam War, in which he served as a military correspondent and received a bronze star. As he explained, “It took me fourteen years to write poems about Vietnam . . . in a way I had been writing systematically around it” (Weber 193). He had evidently entered the war already doubting its rightfulness. Once there, the resemblances of Vietnam, a land of lush vegetation and agrarian peasants, to the American South, intensified his doubts. Empathizing with the Vietnamese, he found it hard to hate them and to engage in war’s impersonal violence. His sense of the parallels between the southern black historical experience and the peasants’ situation left him feeling more deeply ambivalent toward American involvement. After the war, his strong kinship with fellow veterans conflicted with his sympathy for those protesting the war, fueling the poetry’s creative tensions.

The powerfully surreal effect of the book grows from his conflicted anger at America’s tendencies toward violence and destructive cultural values, qualities he knew from his southern experience. As he said, “I grew up with guns around me. . . . In our culture we celebrate violence.

All of our heroes have blood on their hands. I have a real problem with that" (Weber 194). "Camouflaging the Chimera" is about the monstrous unreality of a war in which soldiers disguised their murderous intent by blending into the landscape: "We tied branches to our helmets. / We painted our face & rifles / With mud from a riverbank." Hummingbirds and chameleons play around them in an illusion of agrarian serenity until, climactically, the soldiers are "ready to spring the L-shaped / ambush" (*Pleasure Dome* 191–192). Throughout the book, images of tunnels, myopia, infrared night vision, fragmentation, and immolation comprise a landscape of hell-like agony and spiritual blindness. As Steven Cramer remarks, "visual murkiness is Komunyakaa's metonym for the blurred moral outlines of all wars" (228). As the poem "Re-creating the Scene" implies, this discomfort with the national morality is rooted in southern experience. Three men exit an armored personnel carrier to rape a peasant woman while on the vehicle "The Confederate flag / flaps from a radio antenna" (202).

One of the best poems of this volume is "Tu Do Street," referring to a Saigon area where American servicemen visited bars and prostitutes. The poem opens as Komunyakaa walks into the wrong bar—a white bar where country music plays on the jukebox. The scene is an extension of American social reality into Vietnam, dramatizing American cultural codes by which races are divided into hierarchical, mutually exclusive antitheses. Significantly, the first line reads, "Music divides the evening" (*Pleasure Dome* 209). Glancing at white men who listen to a white southern favorite, Komunyakaa closes his eyes for a second recalling figuratively "men drawing lines in the dust" of his American past: "I'm a small boy / again in Bogalusa. *White Only* / signs & Hank Snow." Hank Snow, the Grand Ole Opry star, embodies an America from which the poet was long excluded. In a sad mirroring of this cultural divide, "Down the street / black GIs hold to their turf also," occupying a binary, opposite space. Komunyakaa wryly comments on the fratricidal fissure in American culture: "We have played Judas where / only machine-gun fire brings us / together." Assuming a common humanity, however, the narrator stays to order a beer, an act that confuses the Vietnamese bar woman, who does not know how exactly to read this cultural moment. So she pretends not to understand the request, "while her eyes / skirt each white face" for a sign of approval or disapproval.

The second half of the poem brilliantly sabotages the idea of discrete racial essences. Komunyakaa soon goes in search of a prostitute, who as an Asian embodies a third ethnicity that does not fit into America's

prevailing binary code. He knows well the absurdity of false divisions: "we fought / the brothers of these women / we now run to hold in our arms." The final lines take us into a surreal, tunneled underworld where, in desperate love, white and black are shown to be as mutually linked as lovers:

There's more than a nation
inside us, as black & white
soldiers touch the same lovers
minutes apart, tasting
each other's breath,
without knowing these rooms
run into each other like tunnels
leading to the underworld. (210)

Though American cultural codes turn paradise into hell, the poet asserts that in love racial oppositions collapse because they are in fact inseparable, each requiring the other to be a defined entity. In other words, whiteness means nothing in America's language system without its contingent term of difference, blackness, and vice versa. In the arms of an Asian prostitute who is visited by a succession of white and black clients, first the white cultural frame is dislodged by the black one that follows, then the black frame is dislodged by the white, and so on. Whiteness and blackness thus are destabilized and brought reciprocally under erasure, each thereby losing a stable essence of its own.

In "Facing It" Komunyakaa likewise sabotages a cultural system of meaning, as he stands one morning facing the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in the Washington national mall. The dramatic tension of the poem grows out of ambivalence. Komunyakaa wavers between a desire to memorialize fallen comrades and, contradictorily, a strong resistance to perform the traditional act of paying tribute to the national cause served by those war dead. Given Komunyakaa's familial and southern experience, both of which greatly sensitized him to violence and cruelty, he perceived American foreign policy through the lens of historical racial oppression and personal pain. Knowing full well that in numerous southern towns were public monuments dedicated to the Confederate dead, he would innately resist grand narratives that sustain themselves by suppressing the truth of micro-narratives pertaining to the oppressed. As I have suggested, his situation resembles Quentin Compson's repulsion toward the modern world of flux and impersonality. Quentin is unable to "take his stand" against such chaos because, unlike the Nashville

Agrarians, he finds in the South no stable grand narrative to fall back on. As *The Sound and the Fury* amply shows, little in his flawed familial and social past is personally sustaining.

"Facing It" is both a rejection of traditional memorializing and a critique of representation itself. As Komunyakaa scans the starkly chiseled list of over 58,000 names he confronts a runic script, for the wall itself is a postmodern monument. Each name is not the essence but the absence of someone lost at war. The original material, the raw, experiential data of the person's life and death, is placed into no signification other than a name. No official script appears on the wall with words like *heroes*, *martyrs*, *democracy*, or *freedom* to articulate national significance or encode the power of the state. Instead of a transcendent referent, grand narrative, or state myth, Komunyakaa sees only the granite solidity of stone. He too offers no abstract words, no totalizing, absolutist narrative of public history, but submits to the free play of personal memory.¹

Flux, fragmentation, instability, and reflective surfaces prevail in the poem, and these militate against stable, monumentalized fixity. Vicente F. Gotera rightly observes, "This poem is literally a reflection about reflections," adding that "Komunyakaa does not declaim, does not decry; instead he presents . . . a series of images" (298). As the poem opens, Komunyakaa faces the black granite, black himself, and finds that how he turns his body determines whether or not he reflects in the wall. Perhaps it is a cloud passing before the sun that first fades his reflected image: "My black face fades, / hiding inside the black granite" (*Pleasure Dome* 234). Soon his reflection returns, destabilizing his sense of immutable self: "I'm stone. I'm flesh." As he fights off tears, in an emotional intensification arising from pained memory, he senses the wall is predatory: "My clouded reflection eyes me / like a bird of prey. . . ." Now, almost Poe-like, he deliberately turns his body to continue the torture: "I turn / this way—the stone lets me go." Then, angling so that his body again casts no reflection, "I turn that way—I'm inside / the Vietnam Veterans Memorial / again. . . ." Passing into and out of the hell of memory, the poem undercuts the self as immutable essence. As an unreliable narrator of sorts, the poet must, ironically, grapple with what the wall signifies, and how it is to be read.

The poem offers no answers. Komunyakaa simply scans the 58,022 names, a huge script that cannot be assembled into a discursive text of coherent signification. In one moment he sees a battlefield scene: "I touch the name Andrew Johnson; / I see the booby trap's white flash." A flash-

back happening before signification, this is more a raw, psychic image than a representation that mediates knowledge; when it is dropped without further development as an entirely private memory, the mere name “Johnson” does not rise to the level of shared historical text. For the rest of the poem, the wall’s surface is a random mélange of reflections that further veer away from fixed signification. At one point, “Names shimmer on a woman’s blouse,” in the interplay between the wall and a reflected onlooker, but “when she walks away / the names stay on the wall.” Shimmering names, a blouse, a wall, followed by a reflected bird and airplane—these alternate in a slippery text that renders original and scattered moments before they can reach the stage of objectivistic naming. All is a random flow of contingent, accidental associations, connecting to each other laterally but not to the transcendent presence of idea.

The poem’s final segment is quietly stunning, suggesting the impossibility of a mere system of signs to deliver an authoritative reality. When a white vet’s reflection “floats,” ghost-like, toward the poet’s own, “his pale eyes / look through mine. I’m a window.” As a window he has become transparent, a non-self, thus incapable of rendering a text. Now the white vet also dissipates, as his body angle causes his reflection to fragment: “He’s lost his right arm / inside the stone.” Whether he lost an arm in war or simply has rotated his body, the text here is hauntingly unstable, recalling also images of disintegration throughout the volume. Climactically, the poet finally observes the reflection of a woman: “In the black mirror / a woman’s trying to erase names: / No, she’s brushing a boy’s hair” (235). The text provocatively is not clear. Does one read it metaphorically, assuming a woman is brushing the name of her dead beloved as if devotedly stroking his hair, making him a signified presence in the wall’s script? Or, in a surface reflection of bystanders, is a mother just brushing her little boy’s hair? However one reads it, the switching of metaphor from window to mirror shows confusion in modes of representation. Can one look through the window of history to its “essence,” or do its surfaces just laterally refract? In any case, the poet’s fleeting sense that she erases names seems a psychological projection, arising from his desire to erase pained memories in a flight from history, not a public interpretation of it.

In sum, Komunyakaa reads the wall as dubiously as he learned to read the South, skeptical of grand narratives and their imposition of power. Of course “Facing It” does present a narrative, a kind of *Billy Budd* “inside narrative,” which is that the individual tragedies of those lost cannot be put into words and subsumed into totalizing abstractions

promulgated by a state. Instead of monolithic myth, the wall becomes Komunyakaa's subversive, free play of personal constructions. Because each of the 58,022 names points to an absent referent, the wall's script remains a half-formed discourse, or signifiers in search of a concept to signify. Given that transcendent absence, the poet's existential issue becomes how to endure. Presumably the answer will resemble more the personal improvisation of jazz than submission to the idea of history. As Komunyakaa has said, "I like the implied freedom jazz brings to my work" (Komunyakaa and Matthews 661).

BORN IN 1956 AND raised in Columbia, South Carolina, fiction writer Percival Everett has written over a dozen books of short and long fiction, only a small percentage of this work about the South. Indeed he has tried not to make the South or race his primary focus. Living on the West Coast, eschewing traditional racial topics, preferring western settings to southern ones, and working with distinctly postmodern materials, he is a contemporary black southerner who feels willfully free of and unbound to southern place and history. Nonetheless his short story "The Appropriation of Cultures" is one of the most perceptive racial analyses of the South today, a startlingly postmodern treatment of the South's most noted historical cultural symbols, the song "Dixie" and the Confederate flag. Transforming these symbols into black cultural constructs, he foresees the South as a zone of post-colonial, transcultural hybridity.

The story dramatizes a turning point in the life of Daniel Berkley, a black jazz guitarist who goes north to college but comes home to Columbia, where he plays in bars near the state university campus, much as Everett himself played jazz guitar at clubs while an undergraduate at the University of Miami (Ehrenreich). One night drunken white students taunt him by shouting, "Play 'Dixie' for us!" It is a song he has long hated as "the song the whites always pulled out to remind themselves and those other people just where they were." Surprisingly, and on the spur of the moment, he finds a way to embrace it as if his own cultural material. First he resists "the urge to let satire ring through his voice," then gradually comes to mean what he sings ("The Appropriation" 24). He finds that by singing "straight and from his heart" he is "reclaiming southern soil, or at least recognizing his blood in it." That night he dreams that he stops Pickett's men on the way to battle and tells them, "Give me back my flag" (25).

During the rest of this wry, tongue-in-cheek tale, he buys a used truck so that he can show off the big Confederate flag decal in its rear

window. Before long many other black citizens follow suit. Black businessmen and ministers wear “rebel flag buttons on their lapels and clips on their ties.” The marching band of historically black South Carolina State University parades with the flag. It even appears prominently “at picnic sites of black family reunions,” by which time it has faded out of use by the white population (30). In the end, it even disappears from atop the State Capitol building. Published in 1996, the story is an uncanny prediction of the cultural moment to occur just six years later with H. K. Edgerton’s *March Across Dixie*. Though Edgerton and Daniel’s motives differ, both have severed southern history from constructions of the postmodern present. Pointedly, the flag’s removal from the Capitol undoes the state’s ability to impose hegemonic influence through the cultural codes of white superiority.

If cultural symbols tell us what to think about the world, Everett’s appropriation of Confederate symbols is a constructionist strategy (not an advocacy of an absolutist political truth) that renders the concept of the South susceptible to postmodern erasure. His move effectually destabilizes two traditional cultural narratives—the white metanarrative of the Old South as high civilization and, from the black perspective, the suppressed story of oppression. At story’s end, neither of these binary opposites can function as a discrete essence, because the black appropriation of white cultural symbols disrupts the essentialist idea of cultural purity. Instead, Everett re-images the South as a hybrid or amorphous mix of white and black cultural infusions, each taking an active role in influencing and constructing the other. This new South is a free play of creative constructions, a fluid social space in which the old white and black polarities alike are emptied of stable content. Everett thus avoids the trap of inversion or of reversing, in the spirit of black cultural nationalism, a “black essence” for a “white essence” and therefore failing to break out of binary thinking. By the story’s end the South has changed through *mutation* rather than a rationalistic clash of abstract ideas.

Everett’s strategy of resistance does not seek an assimilationist erasure of black experience. Neither does it underestimate the historically unequal power of oppressor over oppressed. Rather, Everett recognizes that historically white-black relations never were of a hierarchically active-passive pattern. Daniel Berkley has active agency and exploits the intercultural contact zone for his own interests and identity. Further, Daniel’s appropriations are intended to make the South his home in a way that previously it had not been, because of his former, marginalized alienation. Importantly, although Daniel has gone to college in the North,

his return home reverses the old pattern of alienation and dispersal out of the South. As Everett has said to interviewer Ben Ehrenreich, "I've always felt alienation," adding, "That's one of the things that's culturally African-American in my work; it's the experience of people who've always been outside the center. . . . I take that back, that's just American." Daniel's new psychic sense of being rooted in Dixie, rather than marginalized there, reflects the assumption that all America is an open field where one is always free to construct identity because it is never fixed, never securely at a center. Thus Daniel's return may reflect today's influx back into the South of black Americans willing to view it not as a historical, long abandoned "*down* home"—but to claim it as a personally and newly constructed "home."

The trickster tradition in African-American culture is as old as the slave era's Brer Rabbit, and in fiction such as this Percival Everett is a postmodern trickster. Although Everett might reject the restrictive label "southern writer," I believe his subversive narrative tactics must be understood in terms of his formative southern experience. With his highly individualistic characters as well as his fictional technique, the southern core shows consistently in a refusal to "know one's place" in a culture that repeatedly suppresses assertive black individualism. Thus his first novel, *Suder*, traces the life of Craig Suder from a childhood in Fayetteville, North Carolina, to a professional baseball career on the West Coast, this pattern replicating the direction of Everett's own life. Craig suffers an irrational series of assaults on his manhood including a batting slump, unfair calls by umpires, and sexual dysfunction in marriage, then stumbles through a surreal, madcap series of awkward adventures. As reviewer Jabari Asim has noted astutely, Craig is an inversion of classic black stereotypes: "Everett takes apart various stereotypical images of black men—jock, musician, sexual threat—while putting his hero through a series of comic misadventures." But just as Brer Rabbit was covertly a sexual figure for black manhood, so too is Craig Suder. The novel's climax is a comically grotesque updating of the flying African folk tale, according to which slaves escaped their burden by rising from the fields and flying back to Africa. Craig leaps off a cliff with homemade wings and flies—naked and with an erection—into a mad, screwball sense of personal freedom. Though this scene happens in the Cascade Mountains not the South, it is fundamentally southern in conception.

Everett's constant pushing of the literary envelope shows the same individualistic impulse to repudiate oppressive constrictions. His clearest rejection of artistic conformity is evinced in his recent novel *Erasure*

(2001), which satirizes publishing industry pressures to write formulaic racial fiction and to treat primarily race. Resisting those pressures, the protagonist “Monk” Ellison is a conspicuously edgy, angry author who under the pseudonym Stagg R. Leigh (i.e., Stagger Lee, the bad man folk hero) writes a deliberately bad, clichéd novel—Everett includes the bad novel within his novel—as a hoax on the literary establishment and on narrative form itself.

Throughout his career, Everett’s rejection of traditional social realism and protest has been exhibited in his distinctly surreal and comically implausible narratives. He has said in an interview that he frequently reads Ralph Ellison (Ehrenreich). Clearly Ellison’s blend of western swagger with southern, racial, and jazz themes—these in a mix of surreal and mythic narrative—is an unmistakable influence in much of Everett’s fiction. Notably, in the recent novel *Glyph* (1999) the protagonist is a four year-old boy genius named Ralph (another tribute to Ellison). The toddler, who is highly literate but refuses to talk, is comically angry at the forces of his Oedipal complex, at his toilet training, and at a stupidly tyrannical adult world that he scorns. Little Ralph’s anger—anger in comic guise pervades Everett’s fiction—is an impulse that his ego is taught to treat as unacceptable. Thus toddler Ralph’s maturational issue parallels the author’s literary impulse. In Ralph, infantile and regressive impulses must one day be directed into the acceptable forms of adult behavior. In Everett, personal anger finds mature outlet in the form of artistic sublimation. Everett’s trademark comedy—a grotesque humor, satire, surrealism, irrational character motivation, and the flouting of narrative conventions—is the creative sublimation of his rebellious impulses into a socially productive activity. In the spirit of Ellison’s *Invisible Man*, Everett seeks personal independence from the constricting boundaries of fixed systems, his art asserting personal identity in freely chosen, if unpredictable acts of self-creation.

Thus much of Everett’s often stated love of the West is actually an outgrowth of a desire conditioned in the South for freedom from oppression. One western story, “Wash,” explicitly connects the themes of rebellious anger and freedom. In the high desert of New Mexico, Lucien Bradley is the son of a white mother and black father who moved into the high country as “a matter of leaving the world and its problem with his race behind” (*Big Picture* 98). Lucien, perplexed one day when the father stops at a roadside zoo to free its caged coyotes, asks if they won’t die. “‘Then they’ll die,’ his father said as they climbed back into the truck. ‘But they won’t be caged. That’s why we live here, Lucien’”

(100). The father's love of freedom is explicitly linked with lessons to the son about anger. Once, while chopping wood, his father said that "being angry was a part of life. His father had worked up a good sweat and stopped to lean on the axe. 'White people don't understand,' he said. 'Your mother's a good woman, as good a heart as you'll find, but she won't know'" (104–105). The father's perspective on how to manage anger takes form in one lesson "about finding the side of the pillow that held the good dreams." Thus, years later in Lucien's adulthood, "a bad dream would cause him to turn his pillow over" (100).

But the West in Everett's stories is never a complete release from the cage of racial oppression. In the story "Dicotyles Tajacu," black artist Michael Lawson drives from his home in Colorado to Laramie, Wyoming, and sees a jolting reminder of the old lynch law for blacks. It is a pole, allowed to remain standing long after the lynching of a black man in 1913, after which a newspaper editorial criticized the populace not for murder but only "for being such poor shots," having left only one bullet in the corpse they had used for target practice (*Big Picture* 68). In another western tale, "Turned Out" (originally titled "Bull Does Nothing"), bull rider Lawrence Miller is the only black person in the rodeo and suspects race explains why he was assigned the most dangerous bull of the lot. When the gate opens, the bull walks out and ludicrously just stands in the ring. With clear parallels to American slave history, the bull's passive-aggressive resistance to being ridden by Lawrence is a refusal to submit to his own oppression (while presumably giving Lawrence a victory). That night, just as Lucien's father freed the caged coyotes, Lawrence opens the pen and in a moment of grace turns out the bull to freedom (*Big Picture*).

Like Ellison's protagonists, Everett's characters often face crises in which, in implausible and comically inappropriate manner, they rise to a moment of grace under pressure. In "Staying Between the Lines," set in Washington, D.C., the unlikely hero is overweight black plumbing contractor Big Gus Jackson. An ordinary man who is more disposed toward social empathy than violence, he defines himself in an absurd act of self-creation, punching a desk officer in a police station where a friend has died mysteriously after arrest (1188). Grotesquely inappropriate, the action nonetheless is his one moment in life of not conforming or "staying between the lines." Thus, in one way or another, Percival Everett's fiction often focuses on individuals who do not "know their place" in a socially hierarchical American culture.

Everett's America, whether in the South or the West, is such an ar-

bitrary assault on individual dignity that often it is mentally disruptive. That is why irrationality and madness appear frequently in his fiction. In *Suder* the inter-cutting of scenes from Craig's southern childhood with his adult crises links the unfair and predatory conditions of each time in life. When Craig is scratched from the starting baseball lineup, it is after he was unfairly called out on strikes. This is a replay of a childhood experience, in which he saw a dog meaninglessly shot just after being freed from the leash. The lesson of both incidents is that life is fickle, unjust, and deadly, but at least one can hope to be free (*Suder* 161). As his adult madness is deepening, Craig one day sees an osprey dive into a pond to retrieve a fish, clearly an arbitrary and deathly fate for the fish. But then an eagle swoops down on the osprey to steal the fish (131–132). Not only is this one of nature's patent injustices, but also the eagle is the predatory symbol of the nation.

The appearance of true-life people in this novel, all of them associated with suffering and mental instability, reinforces the central themes of fickle injustice, pain, and madness. Jazz pianist Bud Powell visits Craig's parents in Fayetteville during the 1950s. Unstated though this subtext is, Powell was in 1945 the victim of a viciously racist police beating (incurred while defending Thelonious Monk from being beaten) and never fully recovered. Sliding into a life of seizures, headaches, drug abuse, and manipulation by exploitive friends and agents, Powell never regained his jazz brilliance and emigrated to France in 1959. In this novel, Powell tells the boy Craig that France for him means freedom. As an adult, Craig replies to a child's asking him why he wants to fly: "I want to be free" (146).

Another jazz great, the gypsy swing guitarist Django Reinhardt, appears as the name of the dog that is meaninglessly shot. Reinhardt himself suffered terribly in 1928, being burned and mutilated by a fire in his gypsy caravan wagon. Also appearing, by proxy, is jazz saxophonist Charlie Parker, who was slowly consumed by his heroin addiction. Craig becomes obsessed with Parker's tune "Ornithology," another of this narrative's links to birds and escape to the freedom of madness, and walks everywhere with a saxophone and a Parker record album. Finally, in Craig's flying leap off the mountain, he soars over a body of water called Ezra Pond, linking him to the madness of Ezra Pound when confined in 1946 to St. Elizabeth's hospital on charges of criminal insanity. Thus in *Suder*, Percival Everett's first novel, the southern and more broadly American themes are set. Surreal but not postmodern, the book anticipates the cultural erasures of his later work. For Everett that transi-

tion would be natural, given his customary literary reference to an external reality that seems fickle and unreal.

IN WRITERS SUCH as Komunyakaa and Everett, the black cultural nationalism of the 1960s-1980s has been redirected toward an understanding of race as social construction. If separatist politics of that former era were grounded on a strong binary, by which white essence was to be rejected for black essence, today the binary is collapsing, with race and region characterized more by fluidity and cultural amorphousness. Such is the point of James McBride's title, *The Color of Water: A Black Man's Tribute to His White Mother* (1996). In this hybrid autobiography/biography, the "color" and fluidity of water are the author's hard-earned understanding of race. Son of a black father and a southern white mother who had converted from Judaism to Christianity, McBride grew up in massive confusion about his identity, worsened by his mother's reluctance to discuss race. "I asked her whether God was black or white," says James of one of his boyhood ploys to get her to talk of it. Her response, meant to evade race, is that "God's not black. He's not white. He's a spirit" (50). Persisting, he asks:

"Does he like black or white people better?"

"He loves all people. He's a spirit."

"What's a spirit?"

"A spirit's a spirit."

"What color is God's spirit?"

"It doesn't have a color," she said. "God is the color of water.

Water doesn't have a color." (51)

This answer is deeply dissatisfying to him in his teens. Growing up in the predominantly black Red Hook housing projects of Brooklyn, he is absorbing the attitudes and style of the black power movement with its strong valorizing of black essentialism. These threaten his sense of self as a mixed race person, a contradiction containing both the white oppressor and the black Other. His sense of self is all the more ambiguous because his mother Ruth does not admit to her whiteness: "Mommy was, by her own definition, 'light-skinned'" (22). Ruth refuses to clarify James's ancestral heritage, remaining silent about her southern childhood and Jewish faith, trying hard to expunge the pain of her own scarring childhood. Angrily running from race and identity issues, McBride drops out of school while turning to drugs, alcohol, and petty crime. Nonetheless he is pushed by his mother's strong belief in education to

go to Oberlin College on scholarship, then he becomes a successful journalist. But the personal issues persist. Psychologically unable to commit to lasting love relationships or a steady job, knowing that he must confront his identity issues, he goes south to recover his mother's roots. What he discovers there is a South of unpredictable realities.

Driving to Suffolk, Virginia, in November 1982, he carries a map drawn by his mother Ruth showing the spot on which his grandfather Rabbi Fishel Shilsky's store once stood. In a keen irony, what he finds on that spot is not a regional artifact of southern essence but a McDonald's restaurant, sitting on generic asphalt, selling its bland simulacra of home cooking. McBride tracks down an old acquaintance of his mother's family, a Jew named Aubrey Rubenstein. With a broad southern accent, Rubenstein kindly accepts him as a fellow Jew and connects him with the Jaffe family, in whose slaughterhouse the rabbi had bled animals for ritual fitness. McBride notes, "Like most of the Jews in Suffolk they treated me very kindly, truly warm and welcoming, as if I were one of them, which in an odd way I suppose I was. I found it odd and amazing when white people treated me that way, as if there were no barriers between us" (224). At age 34, James McBride has a southern epiphany in which for the first time he feels whole: "Now, as a grown man, I feel privileged to have come from two worlds. My view of the world is not merely that of a black man but that of a black man with something of a Jewish soul" (103). He adds, "I belong to the world of one God, one people" (104). Though the concept God is universal and essentialist, McBride accepts rather than suppresses the pluralistic historical sources of his heritage. Race is as fluid as water.

For that reason he decides that he must face the present, with a positive and courageous outlook, to make meaningful the sacrifices of his Jewish ancestors. In his second visit to Suffolk in 1992, McBride stands outside the town's old synagogue, where his grandfather conducted services, feeling the weight of thousands of years of Jewish history "because some of my blood runs through there, because my family has a history there, because there's a part of me in there" (221). At the end of his difficult journey of personal growth, McBride finally comes to accept his mother's wise rejection of racial exclusiveness. "It's not about black or white," she says, "It's about God and don't let anyone tell you different" (233).

McBride's southern immersion experience thus reverses the pattern of migration from southern oppression to the promised land of the North, rendering those traditional binaries irrelevant. He has escaped a northern bondage of housing projects, drugs, violence, and crime, discovering

a newly expanded racial inclusiveness in the Jews of Suffolk, Virginia. His mother's life is another reversal. As a white rather than black person, she escaped the South to be rid of bigotry and sexual abuse, and fell in love with Harlem of the 1930s and 1940s. Not surprisingly, the narrative form of McBride's book is likewise amorphous. The son and mother's stories alternate with each other in contrapuntal effect. The son's narrative is James's impressionistic autobiography, but the mother's "autobiography" is really a nonfiction fiction, being his imaginary rendering of her life as if in her own words. A postmodern social narrative of a postmodern family line, *The Color of Water* is not an objectivistic inquiry. Indeed the truths that Ruth and James construct subvert the stabilities of traditional social assumptions.

ONLY SOMEONE STANDING outside the South, as if escaped from bondage, can utter the words "down home." So powerful is the geo-spatial image that I have known persons in California, standing lateral to rather than north of Dixie, referring to it as down home. Of course, the term belongs to a historical trope whose binaries—*up North* and *down South*—mutually construct each other. In the slave era "up north" meant the archetypal Promised Land, the release from oppression, and long after slavery it still meant an alternative, preferred place. Evoking exile and dispersion from a foundational *Ur* source, the concept of a "down home" embodies a collective, public history shared by many thousands gone.

Today that binary is weakening. In cultural constructions of the postmodern South the word *home* is losing its old collective force. Early in Randall Kenan's novel *A Visitation of Spirits* (1989), which depicts tensions in a rural, North Carolina black community, the protagonist is given the age-old advice to get out of the South: "Get out. As if it were on fire. As if, like Sodom and Gomorrah, the Almighty would at any moment rain down fire to punish the wicked for all the evil done on Southern soil." Yet Horace Cross dismisses the idea with a simple answer: "If we all 'get out,' who will stay?" (35). For all those folk who never leave the South, home is not a site of departure. It is where you dig in to live and die, regardless of history, *because it belongs to you*. Though Kenan might deny it, his traditional folk South today is less and less a historical, foundational "down home" and more a hybrid space that one appropriates as "home."

Thus Yusef Komunyakaa of Louisiana, while standing *up* in Washington, D.C., conflates his national and *down-home* experiences. Thus

Everett's Daniel Berkley, in freely appropriating "Dixie" and the Confederate flag, erases the idea of southern history. For James McBride, the South metamorphoses into his Jewish homeland. "Free at last" is coming to mean something new, the free play of unstable cultural codes amidst inventive personal constructions. Perhaps we are witnessing a regional variant of what Francis Fukuyama calls the end of history. He refers not to the always continuing "occurrence of events" but to ideological development, with "history understood as a single, coherent, evolutionary process." His point is that an ideological discourse has reached an end point (liberal democracy has triumphed over other, flawed ideals such as communism and dictatorship), with the result that a "universal" human history evolving in a coherent, directional way has ceased, and with the consequence that "there would be no further progress in the development of underlying principles" (xii). If Fukuyama's thesis can be applied to the South, then an old hegemony has lost its force and will be unable to sustain itself.²

Besides our belletristic texts, other cultural currents suggest we live in a post-colonial, amorphous "Nu South." Spelled that way, it is not the New South that was born in post-reconstruction in order to conceal in new guise the master narrative of white hegemony. A recent manifestation of southern history's fitful "end" may have appeared in Charleston, South Carolina, in 1997. On Wentworth Street in the historic district, two African Americans opened a clothing shop named Nu South Apparel selling tee shirts, denim jackets, baseball caps, and other casual wear that bore tasteful insignias of the Confederate flag re-visioned in the black liberation colors of black, red, and green. Clothiers Angel Quintero and Sherman Evans expanded their business through national nusouth.com catalogue sales, morphing a historical South into the trendy permutations of fashion. It was a fascinating story of surfaces replacing essentialist depth.

Their story began with a late spasm of old history. In 1994, 16 year-old Shellmira Green was expelled from Stratford High School in suburban Goose Creek for wearing a Nu South tee shirt. Principal George McCracken (one smiles at the resemblance of that name to "cracker") stated that the insignia was "disruptive" to white students. In some versions of the story, apparently he was not concerned with the disruptive effect on black students when, with impunity, white students wore tee shirts with the words "100 PER CENT COTTON AND YOU PICKED IT," and "THE ORIGINAL BOYZ IN THE HOOD" beside an image of a hooded Klansman (Hitt).

Quintero and Evans explained to *Gentleman's Quarterly* their strategy of cultural appropriation: "we figured we would take the opposition's worst image and wear it with pride. It's the strategy of going right into the fear and claiming it." They described the appropriation in a metaphor of ingestion, by which one incorporates previously alien matter into the very self: "By wearing it, you look at it, you pronounce it, taste it, digest it. You embrace it and make it mean something else." They added to that a geo-spatial image: "We were claiming our territory." On the front of their original tee shirt was the hip-hop phrasing, "THE FUTURE IS DA PHLAYVA" (*phlayva* meaning individualistically and improvisationally "your talent, your skill" or the way you do things). On the back was their erasure of history: "THE PAST IS THE PAST" (Hitt).

NOTES

1. Kevin Stein also argues that Komunyakaa here "abjures the war's 'objective' history and builds the poem on a tension between 'communal history and the more personal accounts of those who took part in these events' (541). Working from existential rather than postmodernist premises, he draws usefully on Heidegger's distinction between "Historie," or recorded history, and "Geschichte," or existentially felt history (542).

2. Eddy L. Harris, in the memorable travel narrative *South of Haunted Dreams: A Ride through Slavery's Old Back Yard* (1993), motorcycles through the South to "test" its reaction to his blackness. Expecting to find what he terms in essentialist language the "soul," "depth," and "heart" of a racist South (even personifying it in reified abstraction), he discovers variety and amorphousness rather than a stereotypically regional core. Coming to feel at home in a region he once feared, where the malignant often is counterbalanced by kind inclusiveness, in one scene he destabilizes southern symbol. In a restaurant he sits near a burly white man whose cap bears a Confederate flag. Defiantly, Harris puts on his Confederate soldier's cap (a memento from the Gettysburg battlefield), and the two stare at each other: "what he hated more than anything else was that I was wearing a symbol of the old Confederacy on my head . . . I was co-opting this man's symbol and corrupting it, defiling it. He stared at me as if to let me know I didn't belong. I stared at him to let him know I did" (181).

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