

PERCIVAL EVERETT'S SIGNIFYING ON RALPH ELLISON'S *INVISIBLE MAN* IN *ERASURE*

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In a series of important interviews, Percival Everett has made it clear that Ralph Ellison's work has been a major influence on his own writing and aesthetic principles. In a 2003 conversation with Forrest Anderson, he listed *Invisible Man*, *Moby Dick*, and *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* as significant sources of inspiration for him (Anderson 56). In another interview during the same year, he emphatically stated "I love *Invisible Man*" (Mills et al. 84). Two years later he observed to Anthony Stewart that *Invisible Man*, like *Moby Dick*, is a novel that he revisits on a regular basis because of the stylistic brilliance and thematic depth (Stewart 143). In that same conversation, he stressed that Ellison was a writer who provided him with a literary foundation upon which he could build his own work: "It's because of his arguments that I get to assume [my] position with ease" (Stewart 137). To use terminology that Ellison was fond of, he regarded Ellison as a literary "ancestor," a writer integrally related to him in terms of his artistic visions rather than a "relative," a novelist who simply operated in the same time period and perhaps came from a similar background (*Shadow* 145).¹

It is not surprising, therefore, that many of Everett's best novels make significant reference to Ellison's work, especially *Invisible Man*. *Glyph* (1999), for example, centers on a boy "genius" (26) named Ralph who reads *Invisible Man* at the age of four and undergoes two experiences that strongly echo key scenes from Ellison's novel: the battle royal and the hospital episode. At one point in the book, Everett presents a dialogue between Ellison and Aristophanes in which the novelist points out that art "strips away the illusory veil covering our culture" (79), revealing a condition of "war" (79) between the individual and society. This strongly reverberates against the grandfather's advice to the hero of *Invisible Man* that his life would be a "war" (16) against white society. *Glyph* also meditates enigmatically on the number of lights in the invisible man's underground abode. *American Desert* (2004) employs an impor-

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tant setting central to Ellison's novel, a vast "underground" (214) beneath a military base in New Mexico. As the protagonist is descending into this dark, ominous world, he wonders, "Would he be another Lucius Brockway [...] tommying through the paint factory?" (163). By the end of the novel, he becomes a kind of Rinehart, lost in a bewildering series of roles but having no core self (Brockway is referred to briefly in *Assumption* (2011) but never actually materializes in the plot, becoming another of Everett's invisible men who simply disappear.) *Zulus* (1990) at one point contains a puzzling passage: "E is for Ellison and his optic white sitting invisible outside of history, watching what can never be his" (143). *I Am Not Sidney Poitier* (2009) has a character who closely resembles Ellison's vet, Percival Everett himself, who as a college professor advises the central character to "Be yourself" (124). Unlike the invisible man, who finally understands this advice from the vet and achieves a kind of existential selfhood, Everett's bewildered antihero is never quite up to the task and settles for an amusing assortment of empty roles.

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This extremely persistent pattern of direct allusion in a series of texts by one novelist to the work of another writer is highly unusual, and it would be very difficult to find anything quite like it in American or African American literary traditions. But the book that signifies on Ellison's work in the most complete, artful, and significant way is *erasure* (2001). In that novel, Everett constructs very elaborate, meaningful patterns of references to *Invisible Man* as a way of defining how contemporary America has developed new ways of rendering black people "invisible" by erasing their individuality and encasing them in empty social roles. Like Ellison, Everett emphasizes that, while African Americans are particularly victimized by what the protagonist of *Glyph* calls "self-erasure" (9), all Americans, and indeed all citizens of modern culture, suffer a similar fate.

Very specific references to Ellison and *Invisible Man* abound in *erasure*. The television studio where Monk Ellison, the central character, is interviewed is called "Optic White Studios" (104), an obvious reference to the blindingly white paint produced at the Liberty Paint factory depicted in Ellison's novel. When the protagonist of *erasure* concocts the false mask of Stagg R. Leigh, he worries, "I might be a Rinehart" (262), a clear reference to Ellison's diabolical confidence man. As Monk contemplates his masquerade, he thinks "Behold the Invisible" (212), a direct quoting of the sign in front of Rinehart's store front church. Monk also quotes the yam vendor directly when he declares, "I yam what I yam" (162). Even Dr. Herbert Bledsoe, the devious president of the college in Ellison's book, is alluded to late in *erasure* when a "Dr. H. Bledsoe" (215) appears as a medical doctor treating Monk's mother. Everett also makes enigmatic references on two occasions to the number 1,369, the exact number of light bulbs in the invisible man's underground abode. The hotel room in

which Stagg R. Leigh stays in New York is numbered 1,369, and the final part of Tom Wahzetepe's false social security number is 1,369.

But perhaps the most meaningful and elaborate way in which *erasure* signifies on *Invisible Man* is the way it consciously and repeatedly echoes the battle royal episode. This central epiphany, which is varied in many of the novel's subsequent episodes, dramatizes the protagonist undergoing a series of public humiliations which he hopes will bring him money, power, and recognition but will result in his being assigned a degrading "place" in a racist society. Everett artfully signifies on this scene by employing a sequence of episodes taking the form of daytime television shows, which are ostensibly designed for entertainment, but which in fact are cultural rituals that enforce dehumanizing racial roles by imposing crude stereotypes on black characters.

The quiz show *Virtute et Armis* (the state motto of Mississippi, which translates roughly as "virtue through force"), is very similar to Ellison's battle royal since it attracts a young black man with the prospect of prizes, but then submits him to insults that "erase" both his individuality and dignity. Tom, like Ellison's protagonist, is eager to participate in the show because he sees it as a way in which he can gain distinction as an American success story. He believes the quiz master who assures him, "This is a golden opportunity for you. There's no telling where you can go from here. The sky's the limit. You might even get a recording contract or a sit-com offer" (174). Like the invisible man, he regards himself as at a pivotal point in his life, "at the threshold of his future" (174). He therefore feels that "He had to win this game" (174) to secure a successful place in American society. He willingly goes along with a game that makes him a comic figure in a modern version of a classic minstrel show, blackening up and donning ill-fitting clothing which makes him appear as a bumpkin who will be easy to defeat. Just as Ellison's young innocent is ultimately revealed by his grandfather as a fool taken in by a "circus" (33) act, Tom feels like a "clown" (174) who will evoke painful laughter at his own expense. Similarly, like Ellison's protagonist, he is acutely aware that he is being scrutinized by an all-white audience, an "ocean of blue eyes" that are "constantly watching him" (174). Also, reminiscent of the white stripper who is reduced to a stereotyped "kewpie doll" (18), Tom is seen as a "doll" (174) by the makeup woman.

The quiz show, like the battle royal, is an elaborately staged game whose outcome is carefully scripted. Its "rules" (174) ensure that Tom will not only lose, but that he will be ridiculed in the process. Hal Dullard, his white opponent, is given incredibly easy questions to answer while Tom is confronted with extraordinarily difficult questions that require highly specialized, arcane knowledge of literature and science. For example, Hal is asked questions such as "Who was the first president of the United States?" but Tom must demonstrate a precise knowledge of Elizabethan drama and a "serial distribution field."

Ironically, the racists who have designed the show have radically underestimated Tom's intelligence and have grossly overestimated Hal's abilities. Hal fails to answer

correctly any of the simple questions put to him, while Tom offers accurate, extraordinarily detailed answers to the obscure questions he must answer. As a result, he wins the cash prize of \$300,000, reducing the shocked audience to a “dead” (178) silence. As Joe Weixlmann has observed, the all-white audience is “erased” by Tom’s extraordinary performance (“Allusions and Misdirections” 148).

The invisible man and Tom, despite their apparent “victories,” are in fact morally and psychologically “erased” by their participation in such degrading rituals. Ellison’s protagonist is blinded by money and power, which he thinks will make him stand out as a “success story,” but he is rendered invisible by acting out and accepting the stereotyped rules developed by a racist society to keep him in his “place” (31). Tom, likewise, is presented as a person lacking any true identity. Like the invisible man, he has no real name, only a bizarre pseudonym of “Tom Wahzetepe,” which he concocts to gain admission to the show. And just as the invisible man is described as dislocated in place, coming from a town vaguely called “Greenwood,” which is never tied down to a particular state, Tom describes himself, perhaps fictitiously, as from “somewhere in Mississippi” (178). Both the invisible man and Tom pay exorbitant prices for the prizes they falsely imagine will make them successful, and both end up grotesquely defaced. Ellison’s character has to give his speech as his fight-swollen face bleeds and as blood is dripping from his nose and saliva is oozing from his mouth. In the same way, Tom’s visage has been disfigured by thick makeup and, when he looks in a mirror, he is repelled by what he sees. When he asks if the blackening can be removed, he is told that the “rules” (174) demand that he wear it so that he can “look good” (172) to a white audience. Tom has indeed become a stereotyped Uncle Tom who feels the same kind of “profound loneliness” (175) that the invisible man experiences throughout the battle royal. Despite his winnings, he resembles some of the game’s former contestants who have come to “ugly ends” (172). For this reason, Everett erases him from the novel, since we never see him again. Joe Weixlmann has pointed out that Everett’s 1997 story “Meiosis” carries Tom’s story ominously forward, revealing that he has been given only a quarter of his earnings and is told to hit the road, leaving him bewildered and fearful for his life (“Allusions and Misdirections” 150).

Invisible Man has been described as structured in terms of an intricate, complex set of variations on the battle royal episode.² In a very comparable way, erasure employs a sequence of three television shows as examples of how contemporary American society reduces individuals to faceless, anonymous stereotypes.³ Van Go Jenkins, the protagonist of Monk’s *My Pafology*, a satiric *reductio ad absurdum* of Richard Wright’s *Native Son*, participates in the *Snookie Cane Show* (a conflation of the *Jerry Springer* and *Ricki Lake* shows) and, like Tom, undergoes a highly organized ritual dehumanization that bears a close resemblance to the battle royal. Like the invisible man, he is an egoist who willingly becomes involved in this experience because he thinks it will reveal his importance to others, but, like Tom and the invisible man, he is revealed as a “fool” (116), much to the delight of the audience who howl with “laughter” (116)

at him. The show, which takes place in “Optic White Studios” (108), attracts Jenkins by appealing to his overblown ego, but then turns on him by subjecting him to the spirited abuse of his former girlfriends, each of whom he has impregnated and abandoned. Jenkins is facially disfigured by heavy black makeup, which encourages his audience to see him as a stereotyped “boy” and “nigger” (116). When he is accused of having “stepped over the line” (118) by raping Penelope Dalton, he is arrested.

Even so, throughout the scene, Jenkins enjoys the show because it gives his anonymous self the fifteen minutes of fame he desires. As he escapes from the police, he eagerly waves to television cameras and when he is caught and labelled as a “dumb fuck” by a policeman, he ignores the insult, so delighted is he by the fact that “The cameras is pointin at me. I be on TV” (131). He now has traded what little identity he possessed to become “the Snookie Lane Show nigger” (127) and “a proper TV nigger” (112), labels that could very well stick with him for the rest of his life. Like Tom, he is erased from the novel. Indeed, Van Go experiences a kind of double erasure. His image of himself as a ladies’ man is obliterated by the testimony of his former lovers who ridicule him as a pathetic deadbeat dad. After being arrested and brought to trial for the murder of the Korean store owner, he will face public obliteration in the form of either execution or life imprisonment.

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Monk Ellison appears on television at the end of the novel in a scene that not only echoes the two earlier television episodes, but also makes important references to the battle royal and other parts of *Invisible Man*. However, Everett makes this scene significantly different from its predecessors by endowing the central character with a lucid consciousness that enables him to become fully aware of the price he must pay if he gives into the enticements and pressures which the world of television offers him. Unlike Van Go, Jenkins, and Tom, who blindly accept the “rewards” of the cultural rituals stripping them of identity, Monk consciously realizes that he must make a choice between these two options:

1. Become a “successful” black writer named Stagg R. Leigh and thus become rewarded with extraordinary sums of money and status as a celebrity, or;
2. Remain Monk Ellison, an independent writer who is committed to his artistic principles, a person who can define himself independently of cultural pressures.

What makes his choice so difficult is the fact that he desperately needs the money that Leigh’s cheap protest fiction can bring him so that he can care for his elderly mother who is being “erased” by Alzheimer’s disease. The money is indeed substantial: *My Pafology* will earn a \$300,000 advance from his publishers, the show will “nearly double” (236) this figure, and Hollywood is willing to pay six million dollars for film rights. Moreover, he has severe doubts about his experimental fiction, which has drawn meagre royalties and seventeen rejections from publishers for his current novel. To make matters even worse, his agent is pressuring him strongly to write the kind of sensationalistic, racially charged protest fiction that the American reading public has come to expect and enjoy. Most importantly, he has severe doubts about the potency of the self he is trying to protect and nurture. Throughout his entire

life, he has been plagued by “feelings of alienation and isolation” (152), which have resulted in a nagging sense of inadequacy. As he continues to live in his “own little bubble” (28), he feels “removed from everything” (26), leading to persistent pangs of self-doubt. Monk’s narrative, which he defines in the book’s first paragraph as a “journal” that is “a private affair” (1) that he does not want published until after his death, reveals his deepest psychological fears and writerly insecurities. Ironically, he dreads the thought that his needs for money and recognition will reduce him to the level of two figures he despises, Juanita Mae Jenkins and Van Go Jenkins.

146 However, his own performance on the *Kenya Dunston Show*, at least on the surface, reverses the disastrous performances that “erase” Van Go and Tom in their respective television appearances. He refuses the make-up they insist that he wear to make his skin darker. He also avoids answering the host’s questions in any meaningful way, assuming a Bartleby-like near silence as he sits behind a screen. Wearing dark glasses, he models himself after Ellison’s Rinehart, a consummately skilled confidence man who can manipulate people while assuming a fictive identity. When he abruptly walks off the set, dumbfounding the show’s host and producer, it appears that he has triumphed over the phony world of television.⁴

The novel’s ending makes it clear that Monk is fearful that he is not up to the task of preserving and asserting his personal identity and integrity as a writer. Although he is aware that by participating in the show, he is “walking a thin line” (246) and can “slip into an actual condition of dual personalities” (238), when he seriously thinks of “all this money” (247) that the show will provide him, he worries that he might become “a copy of Juanita Mae Jenkins” (220), a novelist who trades her personal integrity for money when she writes lucrative but fraudulent fiction about the “black experience.” Things get worse for Monk when his novel, now retitled “Fuck!,” wins the equivalent of the National Book Award, thus establishing Stagg R. Leigh as an important public figure and threatening to erase Monk Ellison. Significantly, the novel ends with him not being able to see himself in a “mirror” and staring instead into a TV camera while exclaiming “Egads, I’m on television” (265). He wonders if he might become another version of his perverse creation, Van Go Jenkins, whose story also ends with his expressing approval and amazement that his image has been shaped by modern media: “I be on TV. The cameras be full of me” (131). The ultimate irony of Monk’s televised masquerade, on the *Kenya Dunstan Show*, is that it fails to destroy the image of Stagg R. Leigh with his crass public behaviour. On the contrary, the audience is intrigued and delighted and responds with “approval, endorsement, blessing” (251). Monk’s agent, Yul, is also pleased with this television act, giving Stagg a “thumb-up” (251) because he now realizes his client, Leigh, has been fully established as a marketable celebrity.

Leigh’s receiving the highly prestigious literary award, therefore, is similar to the so-called “prizes” that Ellison’s invisible man receives at the conclusion of the battle royal. Such “success” traps the “winner” by tying him to a socially constructed role that violates the deepest promptings of his core self. As Monk steps forward to accept

Stagg's award, which will make him a nationally celebrated author, he experiences his deepest psychological anxiety that he is about to destroy himself as a serious writer. As he accepts the award, he mulls over in his own mind language that appears ominously at the end of *Invisible Man*. "Blinded" by flashing cameras, Monk thinks: "But somehow the floor had now turned to sand," an approximate quotation of what the invisible man is thinking in the penultimate chapter of Ellison's novel when he imagines himself a "prisoner" of all the people who have betrayed him and are now intent on castrating him: "But now the floor had turned to sand and the darkness had turned to light" (569). Before Jack attempts to castrate Ellison's hero, he tells him "We'll free you of illusions" (569). Afterwards, he asks his victim, "How does it feel to be free of one's illusions?" and is told "painful and empty" (569). In a strikingly similar way, Monk is asked by Leigh, "Now that you're free of illusion [...] How does it feel to be free of one's illusions?" (264), and he gives the answer "Painful and empty" (265). Monk fears that he has lost his battle royal and is erased both as a man and a writer. Although he had earlier "promised [himself] that I would not compromise my art," he knows he could be seduced by mainstream culture "to reconfigure...and disintegrate [himself]" (257). He is clearly proven right when he had earlier imagined *My Pafology* as a "gravestone" (209), "not a work of art" (208). Chauncey Ridley has observed that *erasure* concludes with what Ellison would call a "cry of despair" ("Novel as Function" 768) because its central character has "erase(d) his "Ellisonian sensibility" (110).



Henry Louis Gates has defined *signifying* as a mode of discourse at the heart of African American literary and musical traditions which creatively engage previous discourse, thus creating a productive conversation between current and traditional texts. As such, it can take two forms:

1. honorific signifying, which deepens and broadens the meaning of a contemporary text by echoing motifs from a previous work in an affirmative manner;
2. ironic signifying, in which the meaning of an earlier work is reversed or undercut (XXVIII).

In *erasure*, Everett artfully signifies on Ellison's *Invisible Man* in both ways, honouring its author as a literary "ancestor" who speaks powerfully to him on what the invisible man calls "the lower frequencies" (581). Everett also sharply contrasts the vision of *erasure* with that of *Invisible Man* in several important ways. He clearly admires Ellison as a fiercely independent artist who resisted the heavy pressures during most of his career to become an ideologically driven "protest writer" who would use his art as a way of superficially reforming American society. Everett's sharp criticism of Richard Wright's *Native Son* in *erasure* closely mirrors Ellison's famous criticism of *Native Son* and the protest novel in "The World and the Jug"

and other essays.⁵ Like Ellison, Everett refuses to be constrained by any narrow prescriptions imposed upon him as a “black” writer. His entire career has been devoted to developing what Monk calls “The new narrative territory” which will knock at the boundaries” of conventional forms (135-56). Ellison’s fiction, which he was fond of regarding as “territory” to be opened up and explored, created fresh space in American literature with its jazz-and blues-inspired experiments. This left a strong and lasting impression on Everett, who, like Ellison, was once a jazz musician.⁶ However, as this study of *erasure* has made clear, Everett is careful to make important distinctions between Ellison’s guardedly optimistic view of American life and his own much more pessimistic, perhaps nihilistic, reading of American experience. In this sense, he is much closer to Chester Himes than Ellison. In a 2007 interview with Anthony Stewart, Everett was careful to make this clear:

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Ellison’s experience is formed, really, pre-Civil Rights, pre-Vietnam, pre-Watergate. And *Invisible Man* comes out after that “unifying victory” over Nazis, over Fascists. For us, that’s wonderfully naïve. But, again, we have the benefit of time, after his thinking. And in that naïve way of thinking, just the thinking of meeting in the middle ground and forgetting differences as a way to become closer, is well, it’s insane. (Weixlmann, *Conversations* 137)

One way to understand this important difference in vision between the two writers is to examine their central metaphors of “invisibility” and “erasure.” While both tropes reveal the racism, mechanization, and depersonalization of modern American society, the implications of Ellison’s metaphor are much more affirmative than Everett’s. By the end of the novel, the invisible man realizes that, even though he is “invisible” in the social world he is forced to inhabit, he is not “blind” because his consciousness has been deepened and humanized by his painful experiences. He sees very clearly that he is a “man” (1) and has developed the strategies to protect his core self and assert it in the above ground world. He is no longer dominated by the obsessions with wealth and power that victimized him in the battle royal and many other episodes. Everett’s characters, however, are far more fragile and victimized, suffering various forms of human “erasure” ranging from his father’s suicide, his sister’s murder, and his mother’s Alzheimer’s disease. Monk himself is dangerously poised on the brink of moral and artistic obliteration and is seriously thinking of suicide, something he has considered for many years. Ellison’s protagonist, though, feels on the verge of rebirth, making a “decision” to “shake off the old skin,” thus ending his “hibernation” (581) so that he can return to and meaningfully engage the above ground world.

Invisible Man ends, therefore, not with the hero undergoing a nightmare in which he is castrated and reduced to a condition of pain and emptiness, but rather, with his retreating into a vital underground, which is a kind of womb promising new life. This underground, so unlike the dead netherworlds that are often found in Everett’s fiction, is a brilliant metaphor of existential selfhood that enables him to repair himself and assume a “socially responsible role” (581). He can then feel part of a post-WWII America that might rededicate itself to the “principle” (574) of freedom and equal-

ity defined by its founding documents: the Declaration of Independence, The Bill of Rights, and the Constitution.⁷ Although the novel begins with a lonely “I” (3), it concludes with a hopeful “You” (581), suggesting that “on the lower frequencies” (581) Americans have enough in common to build an integrated democratic society. While the invisible man continues to say “no” (579) to a fragmented, racist culture, he does say “yes” (579) to the possibility of a reconstituted America of “infinite possibilities” (576). For Ellison, writing on the cusp of the great triumphs of the Civil Rights Movement, this is not “buggy jiving” (581), but a serious vision.

erasure, however, concludes with Monk’s nightmare of living in a country that has erased its democratic principles and defines itself in terms of the cheap fantasies of daytime television. Unlike the invisible man, who has grown from his experiences and has developed a robust existential self that can move on to “The next conflicting phase” (576) of his life, Everett’s antihero feels suicidally “lost” and “alone” (246), imprisoned by the fear that money and celebrity might erase him. What Everett has called Monk’s “selfless examination of himself” (O’Hagan 32) has finally resulted in a very troubled assessment of the severe dangers and risks of being a black person and artist in contemporary American society.

NOTES

1. Over the past several years, a number of excellent studies have explored the literary relationship between *Invisible Man* and *erasure*, but none of these studies have carefully traced how Everett has signified on Ellison’s work in a series of novels written over a significant period of time. Everett’s repeated references to Ellison in a wide variety of interviews have also received relatively little attention. Moreover, no existing studies have offered in-depth, detailed textual analyses of the remarkable ways in which Everett consciously signifies, especially in *erasure* and *Glyph*, on very specific scenes, narrative patterns, and wording from Ellison’s novel. For example, Scott Thomas Gibson brilliantly illuminates the theoretical underpinnings of both novels and stresses how Everett signifies on a broad range of African American and mainstream texts, but does not engage in a close, nuanced reading in which *erasure* both echoes and revises the meaning of *Invisible Man*. Gibson argues that Everett ironically signifies on Ellison’s novel, claiming that they are radically different in vision, with *Invisible Man* being examined as a “modern” work which is decisively different from *erasure*’s post modern vision of life. I wish to argue that *erasure* closely parallels Ellison’s vision while also revising it in certain ways. Fritz Gysin has observed that “The story of invisible man hovers in the background of Monk’s increasingly difficult life” (Julien and Tissut 76) but does not pursue this point in detail. Uzzi Cannon also notes that Everett is in “direct dialogue with his African American and mainstream ancestors” (Mitchell and Vander 111) and also describes how Ellison’s theories of blues and jazz influenced his fiction, but provides only a limited discussion of *erasure*’s literary dialogue with *Invisible Man*.
2. I have written elsewhere on the elaborate ways in which Ellison employs the battle royal scene as the novel’s central episode and how he consciously resonates nine major scenes with this episode, producing variations that deepen the novel thematically and dramatize the central character’s existential growth. See “Dante’s *Inferno* and Ellison’s *Invisible Man*.”
3. Everett has described in serious detail the careful research he did on daytime television shows as he was engaged in the writing of *erasure*. He spent long hours watching shows such as *The Ricki Lake Show*, *The Jerry Springer Show*, and *Oprah* to understand better how they work and why they have

such enormous audience appeal (Anderson 53).

4. The *Kenya Dunston Show* episode is saturated with references to *Invisible Man*. As Monk walks to the studio, he observes a billboard proclaiming “Keep America Pure” (245), an exact quoting of the motto employed by the Liberty Paint Company. This is clearly a reminder that the show on which he will appear, like the Liberty Paint sequence, is another kind of battle royal that can destroy him as an individual person. Stagg R. Leigh’s hotel room is number 1369, the precise number of lights in the invisible man’s underground abode. The producer of the show is a man named Tod, a clear allusion to Todd Clifton and, as he takes the subway, he is aware of going “underground” (246). Two references to the Golden Day are also present: as he walks by the studio, Monk feels it is “a golden day” (246) and when he enters the stage for his interview someone shouts, “I want order” (247), echoing Supercargo’s shouting “I WANT ORDER!” (83) as he tries to impose some degree of control over the people erupting into chaos. All of these references to corresponding scenes from *Invisible Man*, which are repetitions of the battle royal, should alert Monk that he is in for trouble and probably should cancel his involvement in the show. If he fails to do this, he takes the risk that the price he will pay for accepting the show’s “prizes” is psychological dismemberment.
5. Everett’s emphatic rejection of the protest tradition in African American literature, particularly as it is embodied in Richard Wright’s *Native Son*, closely resembles Ellison’s recoil from Wright and politically driven fiction. In his famous debate with Irving Howe, he declares his artistic independence from black protest literature, rejecting the notion that novels are “weapons” (*Shadow* 121) to be used in the reforming of society. He is also sharply critical of “Wright’s harsh ‘naturalism’” (*Shadow* 122), which reduces people to environmentally controlled victims, preferring “more supple modes of fiction” (*Shadow* 122) that enable him to explore black life in freer, richer, more complex ways. As Joe Weixlmann has observed, Everett “rebels against the pigeonholing of black experience” (*Conversations* XV). Everett is fond of reminding critics and interviewers that he has no use for any “rules” (*Champion* 170) that would limit his art. Also, like Ellison, who always insisted that African American life was too richly varied to be contained adequately in any prescribed literary forms, Everett has emphasized that “Black people are as diverse as white people” (Mills et al. 85) and therefore cannot be understood by any of the stereotypes and categories that inevitably find their way into conventional discourse about minorities.
6. Everett, like Charles Johnson and a number of other contemporary African American novelists, calls for new kinds of narratives which explore the ever-increasing diversity of racial experience in late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century America. He would surely agree with Johnson’s call for “new and better stories” that are “open-ended, never fixed” (Early 122). As such, these narratives call into question what Johnson calls “the truth and usefulness of the traditional black narrative of victimization” (Early 115). Everett, likewise, brutally satirizes such stories of victimization in *My Pafology* and encourages Monk to “seek out new narrative territories” that will “knock at the boundaries” (156) of established literary forms. Significantly, Johnson is a long-time admirer of Ellison’s work, which he has praised for its openness and protean view of American life. Everett may also be seen as in agreement with Kenneth W. Warren’s desire “to ground contemporary African American literary practice in a terrain more expansive” (96) than the protest literature of the Jim Crow era. Warren, like Everett and Johnson, calls for a new “literature of identity” (107) that can capture the complexities of contemporary black experience without resorting to the agendas and conventions of protest fiction.
7. See Ellison’s “Perspectives of Literature,” in which he stresses his faith in America’s founding documents: the Constitution, the Bill of Rights, and the Declaration of Independence. Although he deplors the fact that they were poorly implemented, he regards them as “precious” and “sacred” (Callahan 771) texts that provide the principles for a truly democratic society. He stresses that the Constitution is a “work of art” and “a still-vital covenant by which Americans of diverse religions, races, and interests are bound” (Callahan 773).

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