Navigating Blackness in the African Diaspora

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Abstract

This thesis offers a comparative reading of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, Percival Everett's *Erasure*, Zoë Wicomb's *Playing in the Light* and NoViolet Bulawayo's *We Need New Names* in order to explore the diversity of subjectivities included within the terms 'African' and 'black' and to argue for the necessity of renewed definitions of Africa(nness) and blackness which allow for diverse and fluid representations. The diverse historical and political contexts in which these novels are published, as well as the critical and theoretical discussions which surround them demonstrate an evolution in literary portrayals of identity politics. As the categories of race and nation become more fluid, so too do narrative forms. In particular, this thesis is interested in the textual strategies authors use to navigate the various ways in which depictions of blackness continue to be restricted by racism, stereotypes, and the dynamics of a global literary market. As portrayals and discussions of identity politics proliferate in popular culture, they become increasingly commodified, and therefore increasingly restricted by the market.

Contents

Introduction: De-essentializing Blackness

"Blackness is simply too many things to be anything but everything" - Michelle
Wright, *Physics of Blackness* (3).

How did Africans move from a diverse cultural and historical background to being simply 'black' in America? Paul Tiyambe Zeleza argues that this may be due to the systematic devaluation of African cultures and languages that functioned to erase the humanity of black people and justify the horrors of slavery during the transAtlantic Slave Trade (41). The conceptualization of Africa and blackness as synonymous and the definition of Africa and blackness as homogenous is pervasive in the dominant cultural discourse among "those who either have no time for understanding [Africa's] astonishing diversities or [those who] wish to impose an emancipatory Pan-African solidarity" (Zeleza 40). Pan-Africanism, while a useful philosophy of/for African solidarity and empowerment, does not adequately account for either the reality or the diversity of the continent, as it defines and positions Africa as an idealized and homogenized concept. Blackness in the diaspora must be defined separately from, or at least not entirely on, its African origin. The multi-faceted differences in identity politics between Africans in the diaspora, African Americans, and Africans on the continent necessitates this separation. Furthermore, the definition of blackness based on an African origin implies that the notion of a stable Africa exists or has existed at some point in history. In a comparative reading of selected African American and contemporary African fiction, this thesis will examine the ways in which blackness is conceptually critiqued and navigated by the authors in their respective texts in order to argue for the necessity of diverse definitions and articulations of blackness and Africa(nness).

The terms 'African' and 'African-American' encompass permutations of identity that cannot be entirely defined by either term. Chielozona Eze argues that "Africa [. . .] has always been a complex, diverse continent, and Africans have never shared an undifferentiated identity even though the West sought to impose one on them" (234). As scholars have shown, black people have, since the fifteenth century, been

homogenized in order to justify, rationalize, and naturalize human rights abuses against them.[1] Racism in America has been particularly characterized by the erasure of difference between the ethnolinguistic groups which were brought over to the Americas during the transAtlantic slave trade. In order to understand fully how race functions today, one must understand how it has functioned throughout history. If, as Ibram X Kendi argues, race as a social construct is a product of racist ideas, then race is necessarily always imposed from the outside.[2]

The idea that black identity is imposed by the white other is evident in the writings of many canonical black philosophers and authors, including Frantz Fanon and W E B DuBois, who both identify their race as something which is seen through the eyes of their white observers rather than as part of their own cultural self-expression.[3] This racial imposition described by Fanon and DuBois defines Africa in opposition to Europe, and is overwrought with stereotypes and negative connotations. Blackness defined in opposition to a white, European norm does not account for the diversity of black and African identities, especially within an increasingly global and globalized culture. In 1993, Paul Gilroy argued for the hybridity and mutability of black identities in his theory of the Black Atlantic, which positions the Atlantic Ocean as a unit of cultural study for the interactions between Africa, the Caribbean, the Americas, and Europe.[4] He theorizes the trajectory of cultural contact between Africa, the Caribbean, and Europe as a whirlpool, rather than more rigid straight lines as previous theories such as Henry Louis Gate Jnr's *The Signifying Monkey*.[5] Gilroy's Black Atlantic is, however, dependent on a linear historical narrative of the transAtlantic slave trade

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[1] See "Human Hierarchy" in *Stamped from the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America* by Ibram X. Kendi.

[2] It must be noted here, that race and blackness are different concepts, as blackness must be defined not in response to white racism, but as an independent concept. Therefore, while race as a way of categorizing and fitting the world into hierarchies is a product of racist ideas, blackness is not. Blackness is the cultural and self-expression of black people, which existed long before race and white racist ideas.

[3] See Fanon, *Black Skin White Masks*, and DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk*.

[4] See *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double-Consciousness*.

[5] See Wright, "The Middle Passage Epistemology" in *Physics of Blackness* and Gates, *the Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism*.

which is derived from the idea of a stable and clearly defined origin for African Americans. Eze points out that, due to modern globalization, "[i]dentity is no longer shaped exclusively by geography or blood, or culture understood in oppositional terms. On the contrary, identity is now relational" (235), implying that identity can no longer be understood based on its opposition to a white, European 'norm,' but rather in relation to the immediate context in which the subject finds him/herself. In *Physics of Blackness*, Michelle Wright further argues that a consideration of the proliferation of diverse communities necessitates the development of "definitions of Blackness that do not exclude, isolate, or stigmatise" (5). Maintaining that "Blackness functions as a construct [. . .] and as phenomenological" (4), she suggests that blackness is best defined when both its phenomenological and constructed nature are taken into account. For Wright, phenomenological manifestations of blackness take place within "Epiphenomenal spacetime" (4), a term which, deviating from its traditional philosophical meaning, precludes notions of direct and linear causality (4).[6] Her reading of blackness through the past, present and future simultaneously rather than through a linear historical narrative with strict causality affords an interpretive reading of blackness through a more fluid and flexible "now" (4). This delineation correlates with Eze's assertion of the relational aspects of identity in which, independent and de-localized, blackness is susceptible to the moment of interpretation and can thus be differentiated from Africa(nness) (238). This better accounts for the diversity of black subjectivities both in Africa and in the diaspora than the homogenous definition of blackness espoused by traditionally essentialist Pan-African discourses.

Pan-Africanism can be defined as the idea that Africans and those living in the African diaspora, including African Americans, are and should be united under common interests (Nantambu 561). In this thesis, the term 'Pan-Africanism' does not refer to the historical political movement, but rather to the cultural connotations and ideologies which surround it. Originating partly in the diaspora and in response to the transAtlantic slave trade, Pan-Africanism romanticizes and essentializes Africa;

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[6] Where the traditional meaning of the word 'epiphenomenal' refers to the preclusion of causality in general rather than linear causality in particular.

placing it as the source of blackness, and positioning the entire continent as a single concept (Legum 24).[7] As Colin Legum argues: "The intellectual superstructure of Pan-Africanism has meaning only if one constantly reminds oneself that at its roots lie these deep feelings of dispossession, oppression, persecution and rejection" (15). Pan-Africanism, therefore, is arguably a reaction to white racism, and cannot adequately define blackness.

Gesturing towards more adequate, or potentially accurate, definitions of blackness, this project will examine how NoViolet Bulawayo's *We Need New Names* and Percival Everett's *Erasure* resist and critique the homogenization of blackness and Africa(nness), as well as how their writing, implicitly or explicitly, responds to the work of their predecessors, particularly Zoë Wicomb's *Playing in the Light* and Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*. Zoë Wicomb's *Playing in the Light* and Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* are both canonical and critically acclaimed novels. They are therefore held up as examples of their respective postcolonial and African American literary canons. Taking into consideration Bulawayo and Everett's diverse historical, geographic and gendered backgrounds and positions, a comparative reading of *Erasure* and *We Need New Names* will facilitate an examination of the textual strategies that they employ to navigate the two waves of the African diaspora to America (the transAtlantic slave trade and modern migration) as well as the restrictions placed on black authors by the global literary market. Reading *Invisible Man* and *Playing in the Light* in comparison with *Erasure* and *We Need New Names* will also allow the project to examine how, why, and to what ends literary understandings of race and diaspora have shifted over time.

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[7] Legum identifies H. Sylvester Williams, a barrister from Trinidad, as the first known person to speak on Pan-Africanism (24). This evinces the diasporic origins of Pan-Africanism.

Breaking the Black-White Binary

As previously articulated, the theoretical basis of this thesis is the problematization of rigid binaries and the treatment of blackness and Africa(nness) as separate and distinct, although interrelated, concepts. Wright's theory of epiphenomenal blackness, which defines blackness as mutable, fluid, and unstable is helpful in this regard. Alongside the use of Wright's theory, this thesis will examine originary Pan-African and postmodern theories of blackness, Africa(nness) and how Wright, and the novels under study, critique them. What I refer to as originary Pan-African theories of blackness can also be called essentialist.[8] The counterpoint to these originary or essentialist theories are separatist theories of blackness, which define African Americans as completely separate from the continent, and argue for the focus of identity politics to be placed on ethnolinguistic groups rather than a unitary Africa.

Paul Gilroy, in *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, posits the Atlantic Ocean as a unit of analysis for the movement of people across the Atlantic between Africa, Europe, the Americas, and the Caribbean. Gilroy argues that both essentialist and separatist schools of thought amount to two different forms of essentialism. Identifying a "seemingly insoluble conflict" between what he terms "ontological essentialist" and "strategically essentialist" discourses, he argues that the "ontological essentialist view has often been characterised by a brute pan-Africanism [and has] proved unable to specify precisely where the highly prized but doggedly evasive essence of black artistic and political sensibility is currently located" (31). Gilroy asserts that the strategically essentialist view "affirms blackness as an open signifier and seeks to celebrate complex representations of a black particularity that is *internally* divided: by class, age, ethnicity, economics, and political consciousness" (32). Still appealing because of its repudiation of "the authoritarian tendencies of those who would police black cultural expression in the name of their own particular history

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[8] 'Pan-African' here, is used to refer to the cultural ideas and ideologies which view the African continent as one united cultural and political unit rather than to the historical movement itself. These ideas and ideologies are found in the originary politics of Pan-Africanism rather than its modern ideological manifestation.

or priorities," strategic essentialism "has been insufficiently alive to the lingering power of specifically racialised forms of power and subordination" (32). While Gilroy's analysis of the fragmentation of the black subject and of black identity in cultural criticism is indispensable to literary theory, Wright argues that *The Black Atlantic*, albeit less rigid than other canonical theories such as Henry Louis Gates Jnr's *The Signifying Monkey* in terms of its understanding of the origins and development of blackness as a chronological,[9] linearly progressive narrative, remains an example of what she terms the Middle Passage Epistemology (*Physics of Blackness* 59).[10] For Wright, the two main problems with Middle Passage Epistemologies are 1) that a "linear narrative places white racism as the source of Blackness" (38), thus placing blackness as always reaction and never agent, and 2) that "the Middle Passage epistemology implicitly forecloses anything but a male source of agency" (60). Denying both essentialist and separatist theories of blackness, Wright instead offers an epiphenomenal theory which considers the historical construction of blackness, the individual performance of blackness, and the interpretation of the performance of blackness.

Various recent theories of the African diaspora have similarly attempted to bridge the conflict between essentialist and separatist discourses and to avoid the essentialism to which they both fall prey. A recent school of thought to emerge out of the need to critique postcolonial theory is Afropolitanism. As the first person to argue for the Afropolitan as a subject position, the author Taiye Selasi argues for an understanding of African identities in the diaspora as multi-local and decentralized. Achille Mbembe, who is credited alongside Selasi for the creation of the term, defines Afropolitanism as "the way – the many ways – in which Africans, or people of African origin, understand themselves as being part of the world rather than being apart" (Mbembe and Balakrishnan 29). For Mbembe, then, Afropolitanism breaks the boundary between the

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[9] In *The Signifying Monkey*, Gates argues for the understanding of African American and African literature from the continent as part of the same literary tradition.
[10] What Wright calls the Middle Passage Epistemology, is the theory that blackness follows a linear trajectory from Africa through the middle passage of the transAtlantic slave trade (38).

West and Africa, as it places African subjects as citizens of the world in a cosmopolitan sense which does not separate Africa from the rest of the world. Similarly, according to Knudsen and Rahbeck, "the Afropolitan is neither rootless nor homeless or 'caught in-between' host-land and home-land as the conventional migrant of the post-colonial diaspora are believed to be" (92). In this way, Afropolitanism represents a "radical break with a longer intellectual history of emancipatory politics in African studies" which no longer represents racial difference as an insurmountable boundary which must be overcome, but rather argues for the creation of a "world where difference is so superfluous that abject difference, the Other, breaks down entirely" (6–7).

Afropolitanism, as both a subject position and a theory of diaspora remains, however, volatile and contested. Some critics argue that the Afropolitan subject position is inaccessible to most Africans living in the diaspora because of its emphasis on socio-economic class and global movement. Emma Dabiri, for example argues that "the problem with Afropolitanism [. . .] is that the insights on race, modernity and identity appear to be increasingly sidelined in sacrifice to the consumerism Mbembe also identifies as part of the Afropolitan assemblage" (5). So, although Afropolitanism is appealing because of its ability to recognize modern African identities as cosmopolitan and fluid, it is sometimes taken to refer only to those Africans who have the freedom to travel between multiple localities rather than to those who are disenfranchised and trapped by a lack of economic resources and documentation.

Like Afropolitanism, separatist[11] African American theories such as post-blackness have been criticized for erasing the ways in which race and socio-economic class intersect. Post-blackness originated as an artistic African American movement against racial reductionism and the burden, which was placed on African Americans, of representing an entire race with their art (Taylor 625). Paul C Taylor identifies Thelma Golden, the curator of The Studio Museum in Harlem, as the originator of the movement in the art world (624). In a more broadly cultural sense, post-blackness

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[11] By 'separatist' I mean those theories of blackness which separate African American subjectivity from African subjectivity.

argues for an individualistic understanding of what it means to be black in America. Maintaining that, "[i]f there are forty million Black people in America then there are forty million ways to be Black" Touré, a prominent African American journalist, bases his argument that "there is no longer a real centrifugal force to the Black identity," on the growth of the African American middle class following the civil rights movement (20, 21–2). But, In *The Trouble with Post-Blackness*, K. Merinda Simmons points out the tendency of "scholars of identity and race [to] leave untroubled the dominant category – in this case white hegemony" (2). Simmons maintains that Touré's interrogation of racial authenticity is prematurely focused on the nuances of a world in which the internal politics of African American communities are more detrimental to individual African Americans than white racism. In other words, Simmons argues that Touré is too focused on the ways African Americans police black authenticity and ignores the ways in which white racism and white hegemony affect these patterns of policing.

In order to avoid this tendency towards leaving white hegemony untroubled, this thesis includes *Playing in the Light* and *Invisible Man* as interrogations of white racism before the post-black or post-race era. The theoretical component of this thesis, therefore, while keeping both canonical and more recent discussions of race, blackness and Africa(nness) in mind, is based largely on Wright's epiphenomenal reading of blackness, as it combines performance, historical context and the specific moment of interpretation in order to define blackness in a way that encompasses the experiences of race portrayed in the novels under study. This thesis does not seek to define blackness, or Africa(nness), but rather to demonstrate how a fluid, mutable and fragmentary theorization of blackness such as Wright's theory may be more applicable to the novels under study than previous theorizations of race, blackness or Africa(nness), particularly in the context of the modern global literary market.

These texts have been selected because they mark particular moments in their respective canons. Where Ellison's *Invisible Man* and Wicomb's *Playing in the Light* deal with the implications of a society in which racial segregation and racism are legislated, Everett's *Erasure* and NoViolet Bulawayo's *We Need New Names* deal with

the aftermath of the liberation movements which opposed them. Although *Playing in the Light*, at first blush, does not seem to fit into this framework of comparison, I argue that it can be read as part of the Black Atlantic, and thus Afro-diasporic canon.

Playing in the Light serves as an intervention into the Black Atlantic canon in a similar way as *Invisible Man* intervenes in the African American literary canon. By the time of *Invisible Man*'s publication, the African American protest novel was an established literary archetype. Ellison's efforts to write a novel outside of the limitations of the protest form and focus on more individualist subjectivities destabilize the protest novel form, as *Invisible Man* is not straightforwardly a novel written to fight racism, but rather a novel about a man who experiences racism as part of his individual life. Wicomb's novel intervenes in the Black Atlantic canon by destabilizing the linear "third space" narrative in favour of a subject who oscillates between the present and the past and between blackness and whiteness.

Wicomb's interrogation of the formation and function of colored subjectivity in South Africa read in parallel with African American narratives of their communities' formation and function, speaks to the origins of the colored race in South Africa and the ways in which colored identity functioned during and shortly after apartheid. More obviously categorized as postcolonial fiction, Wicomb's *Playing in the Light* deals with many of the same themes as Black Atlantic and African diasporic fiction.[12] On the canonical level, then, *We Need New Names* can be read as an Afropolitan successor to *Playing in the Light*. The relationship between *We Need New Names* and *Playing in the Light*, therefore, is quite similar to that of *Invisible Man* and *Erasure*.

The first chapter of this thesis, titled "Erasing the Invisible Man," demonstrates how Ellison's *Invisible Man* sets up an individuated American subjectivity for the male African American author and subject. The chapter goes on to examine how Everett, in *Erasure*, interrogates homogenous representations of African American men, as well as what constitutes textual and authorial authenticity in/for black America. Everett revises and extends Ellison's definition of the African American subject as separate

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[12] These themes include travel, the liminality of the postcolonial or diasporic subject between the originary home and the diasporic home, and the link between identity and geography.

and distinct from Africa in *Invisible Man* to fit his modern, post-racial historical and political context. While arguably an essentialization of American blackness, Ellison's 'Negro' American is important for anti-racist movements in America, as the very association of black Americans with Africa allows white America to treat them not as an integral and constitutive part of the American nation, but rather as foreigners who should return to an originary homeland. Ellison explains that throughout American history, African Americans have been "[seized] upon [. . .] as a marker, a symbol of limits, a metaphor for the 'outsider'" (Ellison, *Going to the Territory* 110–111) in order to mitigate white American insecurity about its own identity. He elaborates:

> Many whites could look at the social position of blacks and feel that color formed an easy and reliable gauge for determining to what extent one was or was not American. [. . .] [But] something indisputably American about Negroes not only raised doubts about the white man's value system but aroused the troubling suspicion that whatever else the true American is, he is also somehow black. (111)

By the time of Ellison's writing in the 1950s, racism in America was perceived by most white people as simply the natural order of things.[13] For Ellison, however, the cultural contributions of black Americans to American culture as well as the parallel development of black Americans and the American nation places the 'Negro' American as "the true American" (111). Now no longer European due to their rebellion against Britain, the American nation was forced to develop its own identity, and, according to Ellison, invented black Americans as an 'Other' against which white Americans could define themselves, but this could only mitigate white American insecurity to a limited extent. In his more modern context, Everett's protagonist is trapped by his inability to fit into society's inter- and extra-communal expectations of African Americans.

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[13] In his introduction to *Invisible Man*, John Callahan describes American society in 1952 as "a house divided" (x). He goes on to explain that "[s]egregation was the law of the land and Jim Crow customs still prevailed in the South and, for that matter, officially of unofficially, in most of the rest of the country" (x). The isolation and subjugation of black Americans by white Americans was thoroughly entrenched in American society at the time *Invisible Man* was published.

Similarly, Bulawayo's protagonist, Darling, in *We Need New Names* and Wicomb's protagonist, Marion, in *Playing in the Light*, are presented as being caught between two worlds, or more accurately, constantly shifting between them. Significantly, Marion's discovery of her colored heritage is described and experienced in migrational terms in which her parents' racial crossing over as "play-whites" forces her to ponder post-apartheid South Africa's navigability as an "era of unremitting crossings" (Wicomb 107). Wicomb's navigation of South Africa's precarious racial landscape demonstrates how the concept of diaspora can be expanded from the physical act of international travel to encompass more internal, that is metaphysical, diasporic processes and experiences of liminal identity. For Marion, racial categories become an inadequate method for describing the world. In *We Need New Names,* Darling also comes to question the validity of racial categories as she negotiates her identity as a non-American black person living in America. Because Marion is white-passing, however, her racial markers are ostensibly invisible, and she is not affected by race in the same way as Darling. On her arrival in America, Darling discovers that what seemed universal in Zimbabwe is not necessarily so in America. Despite having their race in common, Darling's experience of blackness is different from that of her friends, both African American and Africans living in the diaspora. Her struggle to fit into her American surroundings as well as to resist stereotypes and complete assimilation is more akin to that of Everett's protagonist, although they employ different strategies for dealing with the idea of authentic blackness – due in part to their different nationalities and genders.

Both Wicomb and Bulawayo present female perspectives on migration and race. This gendered, and arguably feminist aspect of the texts provides a contrast to *Erasure* and *Invisible Man*, which are focused on male experiences. While Everett presents an example of black masculinity, Bulawayo privileges a female voice in order to "[challenge] the oppressive Western discourses of Othering," (Fitzpatrick 3) as well as to create a narrative space in which she can critique Zimbabwean patriarchal nationalism (Fitzpatrick 3). This project's comparison of *Erasure* and *We Need New Names* in Chapter three, "Commercialized Representation: Authenticity and Audience

in *Erasure* and *We Need New Names*," therefore necessarily includes the ways in which gender and race intersect in the texts, as gender differentiates the characters' experiences of blackness. This gendered dimension is important, as the black literary and theoretical canon (including *Invisible Man*) has, as Wright points out, historically been criticized for the erasure of the female experience, or presenting it in limited ways (12).

Where Ellison and Wicomb examine how blackness and race are imposed from the outside, Bulawayo and Everett explore blackness as it is imposed both from without and within black communities, and work towards diverse and potentially inclusive definitions and literary representations of blackness. Through an exploration of diasporic experiences, both physical and abstract, and the relationship between the diversity and commonality of blackness across the globe, these authors navigate ever-evolving and constantly intersecting black subjectivities.

This project will be structured with the racial and gendered aspects of the novels in mind. Chapter One, titled "Erasing the Invisible Man" examines the evolution of the African American male authorial subject from the modernist protest novel before the Civil Rights Movement until the current, post-modern form of the post-black era. Chapter Two, "We Need New Names to Play in the Light" examines the ways in which literary depictions of diaspora and liminal racial identities have evolved. Whereas the preliminary discussions of *We Need New Names* and *Erasure* focus on their relationships with earlier, more canonical literature, the later discussions of these novels in the Chapter Three, "Commercialized Representation: Authenticity and Audience in *Erasure* and *We Need New Names*," examine the specific textual strategies contemporary authors deploy to navigate the modern literary market. This thesis, therefore, first presents canonical theorizations and depictions of race, and then goes on to examine how contemporary authors navigate current global literary market dynamics. Reading *Erasure* alongside *We Need New Names* also places two differently gendered experiences of blackness in America in conversation with one another. Of the four novels under study, *Erasure* and *We Need New Names* are the most overtly concerned with issues of representation within literary market structures, and the most

experimental in terms of literary form. This increase in literary experimentation evinces the evolution of literary navigations of identity politics.

Chapter One: Erasing the Invisible Man

Introduction

Percival Everett's *Erasure* interrogates homogenous representations of African American culture, particularly the black, heterosexual, male subject as well as what constitutes textual and authorial authenticity in/for black America. As a postmodern revision of Ralph Ellison's modernist interrogation of what it means to be black in America in *Invisible Man,* Everett "interpolates the lingering effect of these [racial] markers in contemporary consumer culture, [. . .] suggesting that the postmodern condition of invisibility manifests itself, ironically, through the public consumption of 'blackness' in literary texts" (Gibson 361). In both *Erasure* and *Invisible Man* the protagonist is perceived as too moderate for the surrounding liberation movements while being simultaneously perceived as too radical to assimilate completely into whiteness. But where Ellison's historical and political context allows him an optimistic vision of a black America united against white hegemony in order to be included equally in America, Everett's *Erasure* offers a more contemporary, 'post-black' reading of blackness that includes the interrogation of racial homogeneity from *within* the black community. *Erasure* illustrates the failure of *Invisible Man*'s optimistic vision to change the racial structures of American society. Through a protagonist who navigates the liminal space between blackness and whiteness, Everett's novel offers a meditation on blackness that further questions the validity of racial categorization.

Published in 1952 and set at the height of Jim Crow, shortly before the civil rights movement began, Ellison's *Invisible Man* registers a national "time of flux," and expresses a growing dissatisfaction with American society (Callahan ix).[14] Ellison's protagonist moves through multiple forms of blackness throughout the novel. At the beginning of *Invisible Man*, the reader is introduced to the protagonist as a man living underground. He narrates the events by which he came to live there. The events of the

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[14] The laws of racial segregation popularly known as Jim Crow were enforced from the late nineteenth century until the 1950s, when the Civil Rights Movement, in 1954, was founded with the goal of creating racial equality in America.

novel proper begin when the protagonist is praised for his graduation day speech in which he espouses the importance of humility. After being asked to give the same speech at a gathering of town leaders, he is tricked into participating in a battle royal. The protagonist then goes on to begin studying at the Tuskegee institute – one of the few educational institutions which allowed the enrollment of African Americans during segregation. When he mistakenly takes one of the white university founders, Mr Norton, to an unsavoury part of the town, the protagonist is expelled. Moving to New York with a briefcase full of what he thinks are recommendation letters from the university president, Dr Bledsoe, he is soon disappointed to discover that Bledsoe's letters have prevented him from working in his chosen field altogether. After taking up a job in a paint factory, the protagonist is involved in an accident and is taken in by a woman named Mary Rambo while he recovers and looks for work. After witnessing the eviction of an elderly black couple in Harlem, the protagonist becomes involved with a liberation movement called the Brotherhood, which leads him into conflict with a man named Ras the Exhorter. Once he has been working with the Brotherhood for some time, the protagonist becomes disillusioned with the movement and decides to leave. When a Brotherhood member named Clifton is killed by police and riots break out in Harlem, he is forced to flee from the violence and falls down a manhole. Choosing to remain in his new underground home, the protagonist is now in the same place where he is introduced at the beginning of the novel.

Thematically, the novel presents a criticism of Pan-Africanism, black nationalism, and essentialist notions of blackness which conflate blackness with Africa(nness) and homogenize both.[15] But insofar as he sets out parameters of authenticity for black American authors and blackness more generally, Ellison is not as far from black nationalist ideology as he purports to be. Daniel Kim maintains that "he shared with his political opponents the view that racial and literary forms of 'inauthenticity' were

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[15] Ellison's inclusion of black liberation movements such as the Brotherhood and Ras the Exhorter's black nationalism make up the bulk of this critique. Because this study is written in a South African context, I find it useful to compare these liberation movements and their aftermath to the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa. This is especially useful when reading *Invisible Man* alongside *Playing in the Light*.

linked to non-normative forms of masculinity, hybridity and interracial homosocial desire" (16).[16] Notwithstanding a problematic representation of women and despite its focus on individual identity, freedom and lived experience, *Invisible Man* appears only to seriously contemplate a heterosexual male subjectivity that conforms to heteronormative paradigms.

Where Everett also focuses on the male subject, his expansion of modernist individualism through his use of postmodern fragmentary narrative leaves more room for diverse subjectivities that Ellison's provides. Rather than the episodic and linearly progressive presentation of different forms of blackness presented in *Invisible Man*, Everett provides multiple modes and performances of blackness existing simultaneously. The simultaneity and fragmented character of Everett's protagonist fits Wright's malleable and inclusive definition of ethnicity as a non-linear, interpretive phenomenon that registers blackness "as the *intersection* of constructs that locate the Black collective in *history* and in the *specific moment* in which Blackness is being imagined" (*Physics of Blackness* 14).

Published in 2001, *Erasure* can be read as a revisionist extension of *Invisible Man*. Confronting a 'post-racial' American society just seven years before the election of the first African American president, Barack Obama, *Erasure* interrogates the contradictions of an antiracialist and 'post-racial' society which simultaneously demands 'authentic' narratives which largely reinforce stereotypical and pessimistic portrayals of African American society and culture. While Ellison focuses mainly on the imposition of blackness and invisibility from outside African American communities, Everett examines the ways in which authenticity is policed and prescribed within these communities. Everett's postmodern extension of *Invisible Man*

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[16] Ellison's ambivalence towards more radical racial politics is evident through his relationship with Richard Wright. Wright is also credited with the creation and prescription of an 'authentic' identity for the black male American author, and his work was often held up as a model for aspiring African American authors. The evolution of Ellison's relationship with Wright from Wright's status as a role model for Ellison and a close friend to that of political and intellectual rivals was essential to the formation of Ellison's literary style and politics, as it made him privy to the shortfalls of the Communist Party, which is analogously presented in the novel as the Brotherhood.

is apparent in a comparative reading of both authors' definitions and articulations of blackness and black masculinities in their respective novels, and an examination of the literary links between the two authors.

Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* and Pan-Africanism

How far is the African American subject removed from her diasporic origins? Harold R Isaacs points out that "[in] trying to think his way through to expressing what he believes to be a distinctive American Negro culture [throughout his work], Ellison has little or no thought at all of any African influence on this culture, past or present, or on himself" (319). It is arguably impossible for a diasporic group – even one that has undergone cultural erasure on the scale of the transAtlantic slave trade – to start over from a blank slate with no influence from its origins and therefore to be defined entirely by its diasporic context. It is, however, similarly problematic to define African Americans exclusively in terms of their links to Africa. Michelle Wright argues that if one is to arrive at a coherent conceptualization of what it means to be African American and, more broadly, black then these two dimensions of African American identity must be interpreted simultaneously and not be privileged one over another. Where the Pan-African movement relies too heavily on a diasporic origin in its definition of blackness, Ellison relies on the diasporic context. What he calls the 'Negro American' is not completely free of African influence, his/her history starts with slavery. The origin of the 'Negro American' therefore is found, not in Africa, but in America. Ellison's interpretation of the history of slavery is more congruent with Michelle Wright's theory than the Pan-African idea of pre-diasporic Africa, and by extension modern Africa, which has been romanticized. Ellison critiques this aspect of Pan-Africanism in his representation of the Brotherhood and Ras the Exhorter in *Invisible Man*.

When the protagonist of *Invisible Man* arrives in New York, after being expelled from the Tuskegee institute, he finds out that the letters of recommendation he had been given by the university president, Dr Bledsoe, are not actually letters of recommendation but rather letters of condemnation. His subsequent failure to find employment in his preferred field forces him to work at a paint factory. Following a factory accident that results in memory loss, including the protagonist's own name, a civil rights organization called The Brotherhood provides him with a new identity as a

political leader and orator. During his successful run as a Brotherhood leader, the protagonist begins to feel as if this identity is out of his control: "it went so fast and so smoothly that it seems not to happen to me but to someone who actually bore my new name" (379). Following his first act as a Brotherhood member, a speech on dispossession, the protagonist is also identified as not being 'Black' enough for a leadership position in the Brotherhood's Harlem work. The wife of another Brotherhood member, "Emma [says] not quite quietly enough, 'But don't you think he should be a little blacker?'" (303). This scene hints at Ellison's critical treatment of the Brotherhood, which can be read as an allegory for the Communist Party. Feeling increasingly commodified, the protagonist asks: "What was I, a man or a natural resource?" (303).

The problem with the Brotherhood is not just its white leadership; it is that the organization masks racial assimilation as racial integration. William W Nichols argues that "the Brotherhood's doctrine of history [. . .] denies the black man any meaningful selfhood" (72). The antiracialist ideology of the Brotherhood ignores the material conditions of race in an effort to be anti-racist. This ideology encourages the protagonist to forget the old evicted couple which motivates him to join the Brotherhood:

> Oh, no, brother, you're mistaken and you're sentimental. You're not like them. Perhaps you were, but you're not any longer. [. . .] You have not completely shed that self, that old agrarian self, but it's dead and you will throw it off completely and emerge something new. *History* has been born in your brain.
> (Ellison, *Invisible Man* 291)

The Brotherhood's doctrine of history is one which ignores the past and present of racism in an effort to achieve an antiracialist society. Ellison is here critical of antiracialism; that is, he challenges the idea that in order to move past racism in society, one need only ignore the existence of race. David Theo Goldberg problematizes antiracialism in his analysis of the differentials between its theoretical premise and its socio-political efficacy:

> Antiracialism is to take a stand, instrumental or institutional, against a concept, a name, a category, a categorizing. It does not itself involve stand-ing (up) against (a set of) conditions of being or living, as it is not always clear what those conditions might in fact be for which race is considered to stand as a sort of shorthand. (10)

Antiracialism problematically amounts to a dismissal of historical racial oppression through a denial of the concept of race itself. As demonstrated in the Brotherhood's ideology, antiracialism often appears under the guise of antiracism and integrationist ideologies.

The Brotherhood's use of rainbow imagery in their poster is particularly interesting from a post-Apartheid South African perspective (Ellison, *Invisible Man* 385). The idea of a 'rainbow nation' recalls its political deployment as a unifying device post apartheid. But Archbishop Desmond Tutu and former president Nelson Mandela's vision of South Africa as a society "in which all South Africans, both black and white, will be able to walk tall, without any fear in their hearts, assured of their inalienable right to human dignity" and "a rainbow nation at peace with itself and the world" has yet to be realised 23 years following his inauguration (Mandela 22).[17] Despite South Africa's seeming constitutional, political, and ideological transition, the majority of its population still falls into the socio-economic patterns of Apartheid in which economic inequality falls along racial lines. The lack of change from the patterns of Apartheid are highlighted more recently in the #rhodesmustfall and #feesmustfall movements on South African university campuses. Beginning in 2015, #rhodesmustfall and #feesmustfall were based on the decolonization of university curriculums, the removal of colonial iconography on campuses (in particular the statue of Cecil John Rhodes at the University of Cape Town) as well as the reduction of the prohibitively expensive cost of tertiary education. The monumentalization of figures like Rhodes, who was one of the most important colonial leaders in southern Africa, speaks to the colonial nature of not only university campuses, but also their curricula. According to Rebecca Hodes,

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[17] Archbishop Desmond Tutu is credited with coining the term 'rainbow nation,' but it was most famously used in Nelson Mandela's presidential inauguration speech in 1994 (Habib 15).

despite the near doubling of university enrolment between 1994 and 2015, "state funding for higher education as a component of total university income decreased from 49 percent in 2000 to 40 percent in 2012" (140). This reduction forced universities to raise funds privately, but also to increase the burden on the students, with "the contribution of student fees to total university income increas[ing] from 24 percent to 31 percent" (140). The inaccessibility of tertiary education means that only those who are already economically privileged can afford to obtain a degree, and therefore high-paying, skilled work. This inaccessibility has thus reinforced the economic imbalances of South African society, evincing the failure of antiracialism to produce a racially equal society.

America here provides and affords a comparative analysis, as the history of slavery and segregation has been marked by an ideological shift towards antiracialism without completely addressing racial inequality. Based on the State of Black America (SOBA) 2017 report, African Americans are only at 72.3% on the equality index (5). This means that "rather than having a whole pie (100%), which would mean full equality with whites in 2017, African Americans are missing about 28% of the pie" (5). African Americans, then, remain subordinate to white America in terms of wealth, education and housing despite the ostensible lack of racial discrimination in modern American society. In her 2016 film *The 13th*, director Ava DuVernay traces the history of racism in the United States from slavery to modern mass incarceration. Through a series of interviews with activists, businesspeople and lawmakers on both sides of her argument, DuVernay maintains that the current culture of mass incarceration in the United States and the manner in which the law treats felons (who are disproportionately Black, Latinx, and poor) amounts to a new Jim Crow.[18] The film reports that, 1 in 3 African American men are expected to serve time in prison at some point in their lives, while only 1 in 17 white men are expected to serve time (1:43:21–1:43:40). The #blacklivesmatter movement – started in 2013 as a response to police brutality and

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[18] The film locates Richard Nixon's presidency as the beginning of this culture of mass incarceration (0:17:00–0:21:00). Jim Crow was a system of laws and ideologies which naturalized the racist treatment of black Americans as inferior to whites from 1877 to the mid 1960s (Pilgrim 2).

particularly the killing of Trayvon Martin and other young black men – is also evidence of continuing racial inequality in the United States. The transAtlantic global eruption of #blacklivesmatter, #rhodesmustfall, and #feesmustfall movements show that antiracialism has not worked to adequately transform either American or South African society.

The Brotherhood's ahistorical definition of race is only half of the reality, as they ignore its historical construction in order to focus on its present. Ras the Exhorter, a black nationalist figure who serves as a political rival to the Brotherhood, has the opposite problem; he focuses on historical oppression and refuses to consider the possibility of collaboration with white people in order to end racism. Ras serves as a foil for the protagonist and the Brotherhood throughout *Invisible Man*. By showing the pitfalls of both the Brotherhood's and Ras's approaches to race, Ellison, in accordance with Wright's theory, shows the importance of considering both the past and the present. In his essay "What America Would Be Like Without Blacks," Ellison argues for the importance of black Americans in the formation of American culture:

> Without the presence of Negro American style, our jokes, our tall tales, even our sports would be lacking in the sudden turns, the shocks, the swift changes of pace (all jazz-shaped) that serve to remind us that the world is ever unexplored, and that while a complete mastery of life is mere illusion, the real secret of the game is to make life swing. (*Going to the Territory* 109–110)

Ellison's theorization of the African American as a source of spontaneity, as well as the source of oppositional identity for white Americans, demonstrates the importance of a contextualized American history for black Americans. For Ellison, this black American history begins with arrival in America, rather than at an earlier point in Africa. Ellison, therefore, defines African American identity in a specifically American context. The specific relation of this identity to context shows the utility of Wright's theory of epiphenomenal blackness.

This accounts for an individuated, malleable black subjectivity. Throughout *Invisible Man*, Ellison's protagonist shifts between positions of blackness. He goes through multiple methods of "confront[ing one's] destiny" outlined in Ellison's essay "Richard Wright's Blues" (*Shadow and Act* 83). These methods are, firstly, to "accept

the role created for them by whites and perpetually resolve the resulting conflicts through the hope and emotional catharsis of Negro religion," secondly, to "repress their dislike of Jim Crow social relations while striving for a middle way of respectability," and thirdly, to "reject the situation, adopt a criminal attitude, and carry on an unceasing scrimmage with the whites, which often flared forth into physical violence" (83). Just before and during his time at the Tuskegee institute, the protagonist of *Invisible Man* accepts his place in society, as instructed by the university president Dr Bledsoe. Bledsoe had, according to the protagonist, "always taught [him] to live content in [his] place in a thousand unambiguous words" (*Invisible Man*, 106). During his initial crisis the protagonist realises that, rather than opting for the first method of confronting one's identity, Bledsoe had been practicing the second. The protagonist continues to be optimistic towards white paternalism, or at least the possibility of white solidarity with black people during his time with the Brotherhood, but ultimately becomes disillusioned when they abandon their work in Harlem. He then accidentally impersonates the mysterious figure of Rinehart while attempting to disguise himself, taking up a fourth, more unstable method of confronting one's identity.

Contrarily, Ras the Exhorter is an example of the third method because he is less optimistic in his response to whiteness and racism. He represents Pan-Africanism and its cognate movements, particularly those which are militant and nationalist. His expression of blackness does not shift throughout the novel, and he is therefore representative of a static and essentialist blackness. In fact, in his representation as parodic and hyperbolic of these essentialist ideologies, Ras is perhaps the most obvious example of Ellison's skepticism towards Pan-African and Afro-centrist movements. His militant conflation of Africanness and blackness underpin his central argument that racial integration in America is impossible. In a fight witnessed by the protagonist occurring between fellow Brotherhood member, Clifton, and Ras, in which Ras states that Clifton's work in the Brotherhood amounts to a betrayal of his race. During this scene, Ras expresses his desire for black solidarity and asserts his definition of blackness: "You *my* brother, mahn. Brothers the same color. We sons of Mama Africa,

you done forgot? You black, BLACK!" (371). His apparently revolutionary reference to a homogenous and feminized "Mama Africa" ironically rehearses colonial ideologies which viewed Africa as something passive, to be conquered and owned. Amina Mire explains that:

> In the process of constituting African nationalist/anti-colonial literature, the female body provided a powerful symbolic space through which pristine, pre-colonial African culture and racial purity can be imagined. In this way, the African female body was symbolically represented as [a] passive, pristine space acted on by active men of letters to carry out the urgent task of creating national culture. (1)

In that the creation of this symbolic space is a reaction to the colonial "denigration and dehumanization of the African female body and feminization and colonization of the African space" (4), Ras's Pan-Africanism simply inverts Africa's historical feminization and sexualization – positively framing Africa as a mother rather than as a sexual conquest. His definition of Africa, therefore, functions within a colonialist narrative and interpretive frame.

Ellison's alternative to Ras and the Brotherhood is articulated when the protagonist leaves the Brotherhood. In order to escape the uprising caused by the Brotherhood's abandonment of their work in Harlem and their conflict with Ras, the protagonist goes down a manhole. He takes up residence underground in a 'hole' that serves as a "spatial metaphor for the social position of African Americans in the first half of the twentieth century" (Hobson 368). This metaphor speaks to the isolated and invisible nature of African American communities in the early twentieth century. It is only in this underground space – isolated from the rest of society – that the protagonist is able to articulate his own identity. The metaphor of going under ground extends to Ellison's nonfiction, as it is also present in his description of the Lafargue Psychiatric Clinic at the beginning of his essay, "Harlem is Nowhere" and his subsequent description of Harlem itself: "To live in Harlem is to dwell in the very bowels of the city" (*Shadow and Act* 295) – further evincing Ellison's use of the underground space as a metaphor for the perceived place which African Americans occupy in society.

The protagonist experiences the social space occupied by African Americans as a transcendent and transformative space. It is in this underground space that the protagonist burns the documents of his Brotherhood identity as well as Clifton's Sambo doll – a symbol of his oppression, returning thus to a state of namelessness. This transition back to namelessness can be read as a gesture to the erasure of slave names during the transAtlantic slave trade. Conversely, Kimberley Benston argues that this "refusal to be named invokes the power of the Sublime, a transcendent impulse to undo all categories, all metonymies and reifications, and thrust the self beyond received patterns and relationships into a stance of unchallenged authority" (153).

The protagonist's use of stolen electricity to illuminate his underground space can therefore be read as an effort to create self-consciousness, as well as to enlighten the space occupied by African America(ns). His (ab)use of the electricity functions subversively against white American economic and political control, recalls South African political rhetorical reference to 'white monopoly capital'.[19] The stolen electricity is arguably a metaphor for white monopoly capital – that is the largely white-owned and controlled United States economy. The term 'white monopoly capital' can also be applied to the United States, as the majority of the economy is controlled by white people, and the United States has some influence over government policy through corporate lobbying. Similarly, in the moment when the protagonist falls through the manhole and goes underground, his blackness and his invisibility become an advantage to him, as his pursuers cannot see him among the coal he falls into. His time underground provides a space to articulate his invisibility and functions as a form of hibernation that allows him the opportunity to resolve his identity issues.

Ellison here asserts the value of complex, individuated lived experience – what his protagonist calls "an area in which a man's feelings are more rational than his mind" and in which his "will is pulled in several directions at the same time" (573). In asserting the multiplicity and multifarious character of his subjective experience, the

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[19] This term is mainly used by the political left, in particular Julius Malema, the former president of the African National Congress's Youth League and the president of The Economic Freedom Fighters. See Jeff Rudin, "What's in a Name? White Monopoly Capital" for a full analysis of how the term has been used.

protagonist asserts an individuated identity: "I always tried to go in everyone's way but my own. I have also been called on thing and then another while no one really wished to hear what I called myself [. . .] I am an *invisible* man" (573). Misrecognized by society and unable to fit in to any racial category, it is through this assertion of invisibility that the protagonist finds that his world becomes "one of infinite possibilities" (574).

Therefore, *Invisible Man*'s references to Pan-Africanism and Afro-centrism highlight that while these were useful first steps in the anti-colonial and anti-racist project, they are arguably simply a reversal and rehearsal of the original, colonial white-black dichotomy and therefore insufficiently account for the diversity of African American experiences. Their predominantly American origins and their homogenous, idealized definitions of Africa also fail to account for the diversity of the continent and modern African diaspora to the West. Ellison's articulation of a Negro American identity is based on the contributions African Americans have made to American culture, and the ways in which America has in turn influenced the cultural development of black Americans and separated them from Africans on the continent. While Ellison's articulation of an individuated Negro American blackness is evidence of his optimism towards America's potential to accommodate all its citizens equally, this optimism has been disappointed by the nation's failure to create true racial equality.

Ellison's Articulation of Blackness in *Invisible Man*: A Critique

Invisible Man has been claimed as a universally representative text for black Americans and for American society as a whole. Callahan praises the novel for "[putting] fictional meat on the bones of [Ellison's] conviction that there are countless articulate but invisible men and women in the complex American underground" who share his optimism for America's democratic and utopian potential. For Nathan A Scott Jnr, Ellison's (patriotic) novelistic vision, espoused in its epilogue*:* "America is woven of many strands. I would recognize them and let it so remain" (577), is one of an American society which does not exclude or segregate on the basis of ethnicity or race, but rather acknowledges and celebrates its diversity. But this utopian telos is elusive. Indeed, in a less canonical reading of *Invisible Man*, Daniel Kim argues that Ellison has far more in common with Pan-African and black nationalist ideology than has thus far been acknowledged. This common ground with Pan-Africanism and black nationalism, according to Kim, is based in misogyny and homophobia – both of which were arguably inevitable for Ellison and his contemporaries due to their historical context. Explaining that "[Ellison] shared with his ideological opponents the view that racial and literary forms of 'inauthenticity' were linked to non-normative forms of masculinity, hybridity and interracial homosocial desire," Kim argues that the white male characters in the novel are presented as sexually deviant (16). Significantly, based on an earlier version of Chapter eleven of the novel, Kim argues that the protagonist's imaginary confrontation with Mr Norton during the dream sequence at the close of the novel was originally a confrontation between the protagonist and all the white male characters in the novel who merge into a single figure. This figure, in this earlier version of Chapter eleven, shows a predatory homosexual desire for the protagonist.

A portrayal of the perversion of white men and its vicarious and voyeuristic fulfilment through black bodies portrayed in the finished novel is the Battle Royale scene where a group of black men, including the protagonist, is forced to watch a nude dancer while a group of white men watch them. The Battle Royale scene is the first

time that the protagonist is confronted with the meaninglessness of the praise he had received from "the most lily-white men of the town" (16). Rather than being set apart as superior and being allowed to give his graduation day speech in the dignified manner he was expecting, the protagonist is forced to take part in a fist fight with a number of his schoolmates. Before the battle, the men are subjected to the humiliation of being forced to watch a white woman dance. The protagonist's response to the dancer is ambivalent:

> I wanted at one and the same time to run from the room, to sink through the floor, or to go to her and cover her from my eyes and the eyes of others with my body; to feel the soft thighs, to caress and destroy her, to love her and murder her, to hide from her, and yet to stroke where below the small American flag tattooed upon her belly her thighs formed a capital V. (19)

The protagonist feels a combination of lust, protectiveness and violent impulses towards the dancer whose American flag tattoo suggestively signifies her national metaphoric status. The protagonist's impotent admiration and possessive feelings towards the dancer combined with his inability to possess or protect her supports this interpretation of the dancer, as the protagonist and his peers' experience of the dancer is mediated through the white male gaze. And it is this mediating white male gaze which incites the protagonist's violent impulses which, because of their misogyny, reveal his awareness that his masculinity mediated through the white male gaze (Kim 53). The protagonist is doubly humiliated in this scene; first by being placed at an equal status with black men to whom he feels superior, and secondly by being placed in the same position as the nude dancer.

Ellison appears here to be concerned with the literal and symbolic emasculation of Negro American men. Lawrence P Jackson maintains that, for Ellison, "black men are shorn of phallic manhood; castration is their American birthmark" (233). Recalling the nineteenth and twentieth-century phenomenon of lynching, castration is a recurring symbol in Ellison's work, appearing in a short story of a victim of lynching published in 1940 and entitled "The Birthmark". Lynching has a long and varied history in America, particularly in the American South. According to Randall M. Miller, "[m]ost victims of lynchings were black men, invariably accused of violating white women in

some way" (278). The sexual nature of these accusations points to lynching as a kind of racial castration. The protagonist's vision of being castrated at the end of the novel supports this reading of emasculation as a form of racism, as the protagonist's oppressors and opponents, by castrating the protagonist, allow him to be "free of illusions" (569). It is through his vision of castration that the protagonist becomes fully disillusioned with political activism and the pursuit of historical importance; he ruminates: "there hang not only my generations wasting upon the water [. . .] But your sun [. . .] And your moon [. . .] Your world [. . .] there's your universe, and that drip-drop upon the water you hear is all the history you've made, all you're going to make. Now laugh, you scientists. Let's hear you laugh!" (570).

But Ellison's focus in the novel on a traditionally masculine protagonist delimits his definition of blackness. His female characters are largely limited to sexual contexts or delineated as common archetypes. The first example of this is the white dancer in the Battle Royal scene, who is objectified and used as a metaphor for the American nation. Reading Ellison's essay "Twentieth Century Fiction" to analyse the female characters of *Invisible Man*, Carolyn Sylvander argues that Ellison uses the same stereotyped archetypes he argues against, demonstrating how Ellison's attention to stereotyping is limited to race. Ellison's archetypes from "Twentieth Century Fiction" of "clown," "beast," and "angel" can, according to Sylvander, be applied to the characters of Sybil, Emma, and Mary Rambo (78). Where the two more negative archetypes are used for white women, the more positive archetype is used for a black woman, suggesting Ellison's idealization of black femininity and motherhood. Emma, the wife of a Brotherhood member, is, at first, a threat to the protagonist, as they are equals when they first meet. As an asexual motherly figure who takes the protagonist in after his factory accident, Mary Rambo is an example of the 'angelic'. She is the means through which the protagonist is reborn into his position within the Brotherhood following his accident and amnesia, and when she is no longer useful, she is promptly discarded (79). Positively portrayed, Mary exemplifies a stereotypical "self-effacing, maternal caregiver" – the Madonna of the Madonna/whore dichotomy (Stanford 22). However, in a previous version of the novel, Mary plays an integral role in the protagonist's

escape from the hospital and is "fully described, spunky, physically strong and [a] self-reliant healer" (22–4). While this version of Mary did not make it into the final novel, partly due to space concerns, it is telling of Ellison's political context that the complexity of Mary's characterization was sacrificed to make the novel shorter (23).

By contrast, Sybil, a woman he meets at a bar during a Brotherhood function, is portrayed as a clown – unaware of the protagonist's true feelings about her and becoming the butt of the his joke as he considers the ludicrous nature of her rape fantasies. While his encounter here alludes to the hypersexualized black-man-as-rapist stereotype, the protagonist's rebuff of Sybil's desire suggests his refusal to be objectified and hyper-masculinized. In this way, although Sylvander's argument is useful in terms of showing how the female characters in *Invisible Man* are lacking, Ellison's political and historical context must be taken into account, especially when considering what Ellison may have chosen to remove from the final version of the novel. Indeed, although *Invisible Man* lacks well-rounded female characters, the novel is not silent on gender politics. Ellison, in *Invisible Man*, is critical of the hypermasculinization and hypersexualization of black male subjects. This is first evident in the scene with the woman in the red gown. Under the guise of talking about his and the Brotherhood's ideology, the protagonist is convinced to go home with a woman following one of his lectures on the "Woman Question." The visit turns out to be of a sexual nature, and the woman hypermasculinizes the protagonist; describing him as "primitive," "forceful," and "powerful" (413). Throughout the visit, he feels trapped: "if I were really free, I thought, lifting my glass, I'd get the hell out of here" (414). While he eventually submits to the woman's sexual advances, he immediately regrets it, and there is the sense that he has been used by the woman. His later encounter with Sybil, then, can be read as the protagonist's reclamation of power and autonomy in which he attempts a reversal of the black-man-as-rapist stereotype.

The protagonist's introduction to the "Woman Question" takes place after brother Wrestum accuses him of using his position in the Brotherhood for personal gain. Following this reaction, the protagonist expresses frustration at being forced to give up his work on racial justice in Harlem. While Sylvander reads the protagonist's negative

response to being offered work on "The Woman Question" as an expression of misogyny, it is perhaps more about the protagonist's frustration at being falsely accused by brother Wrestum. When read in context, the protagonist's "sense that [he] had just been made the butt of an outrageous joke" seems to refer more to the discipline the committee for something he did not do than to the "Woman Question" itself (Ellison, *Invisible Man* 407). The protagonist later sees the assignment as the Brotherhood's "unsentimental affirmation that their belief in me was unbroken" (408).

The plot of *Invisible Man* takes place years before the beginnings of the second wave feminist movement, and decades before the rise of intersectional feminism. This chronology, as well as Ellison's focus on the lived experience of the protagonist specifically, problematizes the interpretation of the novel as straightforwardly and intentionally misogynistic. While *Invisible Man* is limited in terms of its almost exclusive focus on the experience of a heterosexual male subject, and cannot then be said to provide a universal depiction of African American lived experience (much less black lived experience), to argue that the text is intentionally and explicitly homophobic and misogynist arguably ignores the novel's attention to gender politics.

Percival Everett's *Erasure* and the Invisible African American Author

Where Ellison uses his protagonist's strong sense of individuality to help him come to terms with his invisible identity, Everett's protagonist does not come to any kind of solution to his invisibility. Published in 2001, just seven years before the election of the first African American president, *Erasure* confronts an American society which simultaneously denies its racism while keeping racist structures in place. After yet another novel fails to sell, Monk writes a parody of the African American novels which are successful. When his parody, *My Pafology*, published under the pseudonym Stagg R Leigh, becomes a commercial success for its perceived authenticity, Monk is forced to decide whether or not to take ownership of the novel. This situation is further complicated by the disintegration of Monk's family, with his mother requiring more care as she succumbs to Alzheimer's disease and his sister being murdered by right wing extremists. Incredulous at the success of his parody as an authentic portrayal of 'African American life,' Monk renames the novel *Fuck*. He is then invited to sit on the judge's panel for a literary prize, for which *My Pafology/Fuck* is a candidate. Because of his lack of success with his genuine work and his ironic success with *My Pafology/Fuck*, Monk Ellison's invisibility is literary. He is invisible to his potential readers because his works are racially (mis)categorized in book shops. In the commercialized literary sphere, Monk experiences himself as invisible while his alter-ego, Stagg R Leigh, is hyper-visible and over-determined.

A similar figure to Ellison's Rinehart, Stagg is arguably an allusion to the black anti-hero Stagolee who became a figure in African American music as "representative of the counterculture working outside and against the white system [. . .] the Bad Nigger stereotype"(Gysin 29). Stagolee's fame began after he shot Blues musician Billy Lyons (Gysin 29). As Fritz Gysin explains: "[Stagolee] is an embodiment of ambiguity and paradox: sexually promiscuous and callous in his actions, he at the same time represents strength, endurance, and courage; above all, despite his showy attire, he remains invisible" (29). Everett makes the link between Rinehart and Stagg explicit in *Erasure*: "I wondered how far I should take my Stagg Leigh performance. I might in

fact become a Rhinehart" (162). Stagg, then, insofar as *Invisible Man*'s Rinehart is a symbol of political progress and a solution to the protagonist's problem of identity, originates as a possible solution for Monk. It is Monk's failure to come to a solution, even through becoming a Rinehart-like figure, that makes up the most important of Everett's departure, in *Erasure*, from Ellison's vision of racial progress in America, as espoused in *Invisible Man*.

Everett draws on both Ellison's *Invisible Man* as well as Richard Wright's *Native Son* (1940). Writing in the mid-twentieth century, both Ellison and Richard Wright are two of the most important figures in the African American literary canon. A discussion of Everett's relationship with his literary predecessors therefore cannot exclude Richard Wright. Richard Wright's influence on Ellison and his work, as well as the African American literary canon, was extensive. Wright was both contemporary and predecessor to Ellison. They met at the dawn of Wright's literary success; in Harlem in the summer of 1937 (Skerrett 206). *Invisible Man* was in some ways a successor to Richard Wright's work, but Ellison held a far more optimistic view of African Americans and their relationship with Western culture than the view espoused by Wright in *Black Boy* (1945) and *Native Son* (1940) (206). In much of his early literary criticism, Ellison held up Wright's work, and *Native Son* in particular, as an example of excellence in African American literature (203), but during the early 1940s, Ellison moves away from Wright both in terms of his literature and his personal life (204). Joseph T Skerrett argues that Ellison's essay "Richard Wright's Blues" was part of Ellison's strategy for stepping out from under Wright's literary shadow, as he places Wright's work within the blues tradition rather than at the genesis of its own tradition (206). Throughout his career in fiction, Ellison struggled with Wright's influence on his work and with how to escape this influence. Both Ellison and Wright cast large shadows over their literary successors.

Everett here follows in Ellison's footprints but critically extends his predecessor's work through a comparative revisionism of the trickster figure. In African American literature, the trickster figure "embodies a narrative method of dealing psychologically with power struggles and self-determination" (Smith 180). Ayana Smith maintains that

in "a society with limited roles available to African-Americans, the trickster provides an outlet for the expression of socially unacceptable themes" (180). Where *Invisible Man*'s Rinehart functions as an optimistic trickster figure similar to Smith's description, *Erasure*'s Stagg functions as an indictment of the ways in which we continue to read race. Everett's use of Stagg to represent Monk's invisibility is evinced in Everett's rewriting of a dream sequence at the close of *Invisible Man*. During a conversation between the protagonist and Brother Jack, Brother Jack says: "Now you're free of illusion [. . .] How does it feel to be free of one's illusions?" and the protagonist replies "Painful and empty" (Ellison 569). In his revision of this scene, Monk imagines speaking to his Stagg persona in a mirror, and Brother Jack's lines are attributed to Stagg. These lines fall at a similar point in both novels, as both protagonists are in a state of crisis demonstrating the parallels Everett draws between Monk and the protagonist of *Invisible Man*. While Ellison follows this passage with an epilogue in which he gestures towards a solution to his protagonist's plight, Everett does not; he ends the novel with Monk in the same position as Van Go Jenkins, the protagonist of Everett's meta-text – marvelling at his presence on television. Monk's freedom from illusions, therefore, does not help him to come to terms with his identity, but rather places him in the same position as Van Go, the personification of those stereotypes in opposition to which he has defined himself.

Even Stagg, despite being the symbol of 'authentic' blackness in *Erasure* is perceived as not 'black enough.' This is evident during Stagg's conversation with Wiley Morgenstein, the man who offers to buy the film rights to his hit-novel, *My Pafology/Fuck*: "'you're not at all how I pictured you.' 'No? How did you picture me?' 'I don't know, tougher or something. You know, more street. More . . .' 'Black?' 'Yeah, that's it'" (217). Stagg R Leigh is therefore one way in which Everett critiques and extends *Invisible Man's* use of the trickster figure. Where in *Invisible Man* the trickster figure, Rinehart, is a symbol of an optimistic anti-racist future, Stagg R Leigh, in *Erasure*, is subject to the same critique as Monk, as he is 'not black enough'. By using the trickster figure for opposite ends, Everett points to the naiveté of Ellison's solution to his protagonist's problem of identity. In an interview with Anthony

Stewart, Everett remarks that Ellison's optimistic vision of uniting diverse American subjects is naive: "the thinking of meeting in the middle ground and forgetting differences as a way to become closer, is, well, it's insane" ("Setting One's House in Order" 313). Everett does, however, attribute this naiveté to Ellison's political context.

Monk and Stagg face the same set of strictures surrounding the authenticity of African American fiction and authorship. Gibson argues that:

> contemporary generic and aesthetic categories generate sublimated forms of invisibility that give the appearance of legitimizing heterogenous African American subjects while simultaneously and subversively regulating the available range of supposedly 'authentic' Black representations. In this process, the rich pluralism of Black culture and aesthetics get reduced to a few subgenres that prove most economically viable to white and Black consumer alike. (354)

For Gibson, the American literary market, while appearing to value diverse representations of blackness, only legitimizes those representations of blackness which are the most marketable to consumers. The categorization of texts by African American authors manifests in Monk's struggle to sell his work, as his novels do not fit into the traditional range of black representations expected by the literary establishment. In his essay, "Signing to the Blind," Everett argues that "[authors] are at the economic mercy of a market which seeks to affirm its beliefs about African Americans" (10). He demonstrates this argument in *Erasure* through Monk's adoption of his literary persona, Stagg R Leigh, whose writing must fulfill the literary market's prescripts of black hypermasculinity and aggression in order to become a commercial success.

As a direct gesture to Ellison and his contemporaries, *My Pafology/Fuck* is a parody of Richard Wright's famous protest novel *Native Son* (1940).[20] *My*

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[20] *Native Son* opens with its protagonist, Bigger Thomas, in the single room he shares with his mother and his younger sister. After he finds employment with the Daltons, a white family, the daughter, Mary Dalton, attempts to befriend him. Penelope's boyfriend, Jan, attempts to recruit Bigger for the Communist Party. After a night out where Mary becomes heavily intoxicated, Bigger tries to cover up her drunkenness by carrying her to her bed and kisses her. Afraid of being discovered, Bigger accidentally suffocates Mary in an attempt to prevent her from alerting her blind mother to his

Pafology/Fuck begins with the protagonist, Van Go Jenkins in the small apartment which he shares with his mother and his sister. He goes about his day, meeting up with two friends and plotting to rob a Korean convenience store and visiting his children and their mothers. At the request of his mother, he finds a job with the Dalton family. After raping Penelope Dalton, the daughter of his new employer, Van Go flees. During his flight, he is tricked by the mothers of his children into participating in a television talk show in which he is accused of avoiding his parental responsibilities. Finally, Van Go is a spectacle of the negative stereotypes of African American men, as he is dragged off the television set by the police. Unlike *Native Son*, *My Pafology/Fuck* does not, however, outline the processes through which young African American men become wrongfully criminalized, but simply gives an account of a young African American man's crimes. *My Pafology/Fuck* also parodies the literary use of African American Vernacular English (also called Ebonics) by exaggerating the phoneticization of words. Monk also alters *Native Son* by collapsing the distinction between the protagonist, Van Go Jenkins, and the narrator. Kimberley Eaton argues that the collapse of this distinction, and the subsequent lack of narrative sophistication allows Everett to demonstrate that "the American public, both academia and readers of Barne's and Noble's best-selling fiction, are in fact unaware of any version of the Black experience" (226), as the readers of *My Pafology/Fuck* not only fail to recognize the similarities between Monk's novel and *Native Son*, they fail to recognize it as a parodic hyperbole.

Monk's decision to have his protagonist work for a black family rather than for a white family (as in *Native Son*), may, according to Eaton, be a way for him to write his own – middle class – experience of blackness into the novel. By presenting Monk's experience of blackness as different from that of Wright's famous protagonist in this way, Everett challenges easy stereotypes of a universal black community. Everett suggests that class status rather than race is what effects Monk's lived experience

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presence in her room. Bigger then, in an attempt to cover up his crime, decapitates and places Mary in the house's furnace, and lies to her parents about her whereabouts. He is later found out and convicted of murder, but not before he comes to terms with his fate.

thereby expanding the range of intersectionalities by which racial identity can be interpreted. By presenting multiple black people who have little to no common experience, Everett critiques the notion of a distinct African American personality. This aspect of *Erasure* can therefore be read as a critique of Ellison's notion of the 'Negro' American. Even though Monk's experience includes instances of racism, he is aware of his complicity in class discrimination and of the very stereotyping he disagrees with. Everett's protagonist, while questioning the validity of racial categories, does not deny their effect on his own life experience: 'I was living a *black* life, far blacker that [the book agent] could ever know, that I had lived on, that I would be living one" (2). Monk therefore does not wish to be 'raceless,' but attempts to extend the parameters of blackness. Similarly, Monk prioritises his blackness as experiential and critiques its essentialist limits. But, as various critics in *The Trouble with Postblackness* argue, this is a privilege of his class which affords him the economic means with which to disrupt authentic blackness without challenging or considering whiteness as a contingent and constructed mechanism of that economy (Simmons 3).

While Monk's blackness affects his life experience, it does so in fairly abstract and personal ways, allowing him to escape many of the discursive, collective consequences of blackness. As such, he is asked to 'prove' his blackness to both black and white people: "Some people in the society in which I live, described as being black, tell me I am not *black* enough. Some people whom the society calls white tell me the same thing" (4). This has an effect on his literary success, as his work is constantly rejected for not being "*black* enough" (4). Monk argues that his race should be irrelevant to his work in much the same way Everett has in interviews.[21] But, despite railing against notions of authenticity, Monk seems to want to fit in: "no one cared about my awkwardness but me, I came to learn later, but at the time I was convinced that it was the defining feature of my personality. 'You know, Thelonious Ellison, he's the awkward one.' *Talks like he's stuck up? Sounds white? Can't even play basketball*" (167). The central irony of the novel, then, is that Monk's commitment to portraying

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[21] See Stewart, "Uncategorizable is Still a Category."

himself and his work authentically is what prevents him from becoming a literary success because he is perceived as inauthentic. He ruminates:

> I was a victim of racism by virtue of my failing to acknowledge racial difference and by failing to have my art be defined as an exercise in racial self-expression. So, I could not be economically oppressed because of writing a book that fell in line with the very books I deemed racist. And I would have to wear the mask of the person I was expected to be. (212)

Here, by choosing to "wear the mask of the person [he] was expected to be," Monk alludes to American minstrelsy traditions. In order to be published, Monk must perform in literary blackface – thereby reinforcing racist stereotypes ironically in order to create a space in which he can critique them. African American comedians were historically only afforded a platform if they conformed to blackface conventions and reinforced racist assumptions and stereotypes (212). Beginning in the nineteenth century, blackface minstrelsy "was organized around the quite explicit 'borrowing' of black cultural materials for white dissemination (and profit)," and "arose from a white obsession with black (male) bodies that underlies white racial dread to our own day," (Lott, "Love and Theft" 23). White blackface performers used blackface as a way to reinforce their control over the image of African Americans in popular culture. Many performances were based around extremely pejorative and stereotypical portrayals of American blackness as (negatively) perceived by white Americans. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, African American comedians took part in blackface comedy performances in order to present their own concerns while remaining palatable to white audiences, and therefore have access to a platform from which to speak (Weaver 36).

Everett points to Ellison's influence on his work not only through his protagonist's name, but also through his protagonist's thoughts on that name: " I grew up an Ellison. I had Ellison looks, I had an Ellison way of speaking, showed Ellison promise, would have Ellison success" (172). Monk's reference to his family name thus alludes and extends to include literary paternity. *Erasure* abounds with references to *Invisible Man*, including the repetition of "Behold the Invisible" (212, 245), the name of Monk's mother's doctor "Dr. H. Bledsoe" (215), and many others. Ramsey argues that Everett

uses these intertextual references to invoke "the spirit of Ellison's *Invisible Man*, [and in so doing,] seek personal independence from the constricting boundaries of fixed systems, [and assert] personal identity in freely chosen, if impracticable acts of self-creation" (131). Everett's use of intertextuality to speak to his desire for personal independence is therefore ironic, as *Erasure* depends on the texts which it parodies and alludes to for much of its meaning.

Where Ellison espouses a specifically American definition of blackness, Everett questions the usefulness of the category itself and asserts an even more individualized idea of blackness because of the limitations of the African American canon. By interrogating racial categories, Everett asserts an American subjectivity rather than an African American subjectivity. This is evident in *Erasure*, as well as his short story titled "The Appropriation of Cultures." The protagonist of this short story asserts his American identity through his ironic appropriation of the Confederate flag.[22] Despite his blackness, Everett's protagonist wishes to take pride in his heritage as part of the American South, and purchases a pick-up truck with the flag on it – referring to it as the "black power flag" (Everett 28). By reclaiming this racist symbol, Everett's protagonist robs it of its power. So, where Everett, like Ellison, dismisses any link between himself and Africa by foregrounding his (or a particular kind of) Americanness, Everett goes further than Ellison in that he questions the links between African Americans and blackness itself. In "The Appropriation of Cultures," Everett effectively questions the meaning behind symbols of race and racism in favour of the formation of national identity rather than racial identity. Where Ellison attempts to assert a contributory and inclusive Negro American presence and identity, Everett

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[22] The Confederate flag was originally the flag of the Confederacy (formed in February 1861), which seceded from the United States of America in February 1861 (Kendi 214). The Confederacy seceded in order to separate themselves from the abolitionist Northern states, now referred to as the Union, and retain their right to keep slaves (215). The Confederate flag, representing a government which was founded on "great truth that the negro is not equal to the white man; that slavery subordination to the superior race is his natural and normal condition" (Alexander Stephens qtd. In Kendi 215) has since become a symbol for white supremacy and racism, but also for pride in Southern American heritage.

argues for a more individuated, contextual approach, where race is only brought up when it is relevant.

Both Ellison and Everett articulate blackness as malleable in their respective novels, but where Ellison's protagonist shifts from each distinct position in a linear and causal progression, Everett's protagonist occupies multiple positions simultaneously. Monk is himself, the artistic persona, and Stagg all at once. This simultaneity is demonstrated in Monk's journey to New York for a meeting of the literary award committee and in Stagg's appearance on television: "Thelonious and Monk and Stagg Leigh made the trip to New York together, on the same flight and, sadly, in the same seat" (265). The conflation of these identities and the dependence of the individual identities on social context is aligned with Wright's theory of epiphenomenal blackness. Everett's use of simultaneous identities when compared with Ellison's protagonist's linear progression between different black identities, is more epiphenomenal. Monk's identity is also more dependent on the specific context in which he is interpreted as variously black or 'not black enough.' He experiences his blackness both "as a construct (implicitly or explicitly defined as a shared set of physical and behavioural characteristics) and as phenomenological (imagined through individual perceptions in various ways depending on the context)" (*Physics of Blackness* 4). He thus exemplifies the diversity of black American male subjectivities within a single individual. Everett in this way uses Monk to extend Ellison's articulation of malleable blackness from linearly progressive to epiphenomenal and simultaneous.

Like Ellison's *Invisible Man*, Everett's novel is critical of antiracialism. The talk show host, Kenya Dunston, who praises *We's Lives in da Ghetto* and later *My Pafology/Fuck* as authentic, insofar as she serves as a parody of Oprah Winfrey, functions ostensibly as a representation of post-racial America. Jonathan Naumowicz argues that Dunston is uncritical of representations of blackness which come from black writers as praising black writers preserves her goal of racial transcendence (38). It is this refusal to critique black authors which prevents her from seeing the intentionally racist and reductionist nature of *My Pafology/Fuck*. Dunston's purpose is to sell aspirational narratives of success, which makes her unwilling and unable to be

critical of the work she discusses on her show. To some extent, her lauding of *My Pafology/Fuck* forces Monk to reinforce the very stereotypes he finds so offensive, as it is the exposure from Dunston's talk show which catapults the novel to commercial success and leads him to choose between financial survival and his authorial integrity.

Underwriting Ana-Maria Sanchez-Arce's observation that "[a]uthors who are relegated to the role only of authentic informers of a given identity-group are like characters who are not allowed to be round and alive,"Everett's literary critique of antiracialism and postracialism is bound up with an interrogation of what it means to be existentially authentic(143). This existential suffocation by the burden of representing his entire race is evident in descriptions of Monk's Stagg persona as suffocating: "What would happen if I tired of holding my breath, if I had to come up for air? Would I have to kill Stagg to silence him?" (Everett 276). Sanchez-Arce aligns rigid discourses of authenticity, particularly as they are imposed on minority or oppressed groups, with the fetishization of the Other. Such discourse relies on the assumption that language is an unmediated method of representing the world and that difference or Otherness is based on an essential and unchanging truth. Locating black authenticity in performance, and thus interrogating the notion of literary authenticity and, more significantly, African American literary authenticity and subjectivity, Everett's position is aligned with Patrick E Johnson's argument that blackness and performance have both a dialogic and dialectical relationship. That is, blackness can be facilitated by performance, but also "supersedes or explodes" performance through its relationship with lived experience (8). The failure of the performance of his Stagg persona to solve Monk's problem of identity is evidence of the limits and insufficiency of performance to encompass or embody blackness. Through the Stagg persona, Everett shows how performing blackness and "living blackness" are at odds because his authentic life is at odds with performances which his society would read as black (Johnson 8).

Arguing for writing about race "when it comes up" rather than for race to be the focus of the black author (315), Everett resists the prescriptive homogenization of blackness – specifically American blackness. Stewart argues that: "[Everett] writes as

if he lives in a world of his own making, a world in which the art of a black writer was evaluated in the same ways as the art of a white – and male, it must be said – writer" (Stewart, "Setting One's House in Order" 222). In this sense, Everett advocates for post-blackness, not as an aversion to the materiality of race, but as a conceptual space that provides for the individuated freedom to choose when and how to write about blackness.

Just as Everett extends Ellison's advocacy for individual freedom, his extension of *Invisible Man* is also apparent in *Erasure*'s structural form. Where *Invisible Man* deploys the episodic form characteristic of modernism, such as the dream sequences towards the end of the novel and the time jumps between chapters, *Erasure* uses a fragmented style characteristic of postmodernism. Everett's use of meta-text and narrative fragments function to draw attention to the novel's status as a text. Similarly, the introduction highlights *Erasure*'s textuality by identifying the novel as a journal. The opening pages of the novel mirror that of *Invisible Man* in its direct address of the reader. As well as the journal format, Everett makes use of diverse textual styles such as an academic paper, Monk's Curriculum Vitae, and fragments of novels Monk has written.

In the academic paper Monk presents early in the novel, he deconstructs language and interrogates its relationship with meaning:

> *The naming has done either the damage or the work and cannot be undone. The naming has created the thing itself and to then go look for that which makes it that thing is to fail to acknowledge that in the first place its existence must be verified; having been named not constituting the same as really being (REF. unicorn).* (20)

The linguistic distance between signifier and signified is a theme that runs throughout *Erasure* as Monk questions the way he is represented by the signifiers 'black,' 'man,' and 'author'. In his paper, Monk points out the arbitrary and constructed nature of the relationship between signifier and signified – name and named – by using the example of a unicorn which has a name despite being an imaginary creature. His suspicion and consequent destabilization of language reveals how "conventional meaning reinforces the narratives that readers are already familiar with and suppresses alternatives" (Eaton

222). Because the signifiers 'black,' 'man,' and 'author' are already institutionally defined, particularly by Ellison and his contemporaries, they create expectations for those who meet Monk or read his work, and his failure to meet these expectations is often to his detriment. By breaking down and interrogating these pre-existing definitions, Monk and Everett are able to resist these expectations.

Everett's attention to naming evinces its complexity in (contemporary) process of identity formation. The name chosen for his protagonist – Thelonious Monk, a prominent jazz pianist in the 1960s who was famous for his eccentricity and improvisational style (Gorney 3), figures him as a "bold, original," thinker, taking black identity to novel places and challenging traditional boundaries," just like the musical genre of jazz (Touré 23). Monk's eccentricity and originality is reflected in the many layers of narrative and non-narrative fragments in *Erasure* including *My Pafology/Fuck*, his academic paper, conversations between famous artists as well as his ideas for novels; disrupting the linear character and teleological intent of the traditional novel form.

In his disruption of the traditional novel form, Everett's use of parody in *Erasure*, is intimately linked to the process of writing.[23] African American art and literature has historically relied on subversive forms in order to reach its audience. Similarly to blackface, parody is bound up in the following paradox: it must necessarily reinforce and reproduce that which it critiques. Furthermore, the processes of both writing and parody are foregrounded for the reader. By drawing attention to parody, Everett narrows the focus of his attention to literary form. Reading *My Pafology/Fuck* as a parody of *Native Son*, *We's Lives in Da Ghetto*, and Sapphire's *Push*, Gysin argues that Everett's use of parody is "triple-voiced" (24). First, Monk transforms the genre of the source of his parody by changing an uplifting novel (Sapphire's 1996 novel *Push*) into "a comparatively absurd black version of the 'American Tragedy,'"(24). Secondly, Monk makes Van Go both victimizer and victim in a parody of Richard Wright's *Native Son*, and thirdly, he provides "a vehicle for the expression of a mixture of frustration and anger, especially on the part of Everett that goes beyond

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[23] See Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody: the Teaching of Twentieth Century Art Forms*.

mere envy and disgust and that is probably the source of the piquant force of the text"
(24). This "triple-voiced," polysemic parody allows Everett to use a stereotyped
version of African American Vernacular English and the institutional narrative of
black male pathology to protest both. It is through the failure and consequent
commercial success of Monk's parody that Everett critiques society's ignorance of the
African American condition, and even further, the assumption that there is a single,
coherent African American condition.

While Everett, like Ellison, focuses on the heterosexual male subject, he presents
more diverse characters in terms of gender and sexuality. Monk interrogates his own
prejudices surrounding homosexuality. The issue of women's reproductive rights is
also raised in the novel, through Monk's sister who is a doctor who performs
abortions. Similarly, as Monk's family unravels – with the murder of his sister by
anti-abortion protestors and the progressive deterioration of his mother's mental state
due to Alzheimer's disease, Monk's identity disintegrates. This disintegration
emphasizes the contingent and constructed nature of the heterosexual male identity.
The discovery of a sister whose existence Monk was not aware of until his father's
death takes a further toll on the security of his identity, as he is no longer able to think
of his father as perfectly responsible patriarch, and define himself as the product of a
normative patriarchal family.

Through his portrayal of Monk's identity as fragmented and epiphenomenal,
Everett extends and critiques *Invisible Man* – in that he does not gesture towards any
solutions or resolutions to his protagonist's struggle with identity. For Monk, there is
no dream sequence in which he comes to understand the potential of American society,
only the destabilization of those aspects of his identity in terms of which he had
defined himself. He extends Ellison's skepticism towards global definitions of
blackness by questioning the inherent value of American definitions of blackness.
Through his focus on the literary world and the construction and the commodification
of literature, Everett poses important questions about the ways in which literature may
reinforce and reproduce stereotypes and rigid notions of authenticity that are unable to
accurately reflect the world.

William Ramsey and Anthony Stewart describe Everett as a trickster or magician – a master of chaos – suggesting that he shares the elusive identity of Ellison's Rinehart. Ellison's and his contemporaries' influence on *Erasure* in both form and content is evident. Notwithstanding the difference in spatio-temporal and ideological context between Everett and the authors of Ellison's era, Everett extends and reinforces Ellison's argument and valorization of individualist ethics over essentialist and homogenized notions of blackness. It is important to note, however, that Everett and Ellison's individualism may be the result of their elite socio-economic status. Both authors resist the global homogenization of blackness, but Everett critiques Ellison's idea of an essential American blackness. Through his interrogation of authorial authenticity and what it means to be authentically black in America, Everett does not gesture towards solutions, but rather poses important questions about the validity of racial categories; he extends Ellison's modernist identitarian project and valorization of black American identity with his postracial, postmodern investigation of the limitations of black American identity.

Chapter Two: We Need New Names to Play in the Light

Introduction

Just as Everett, in *Erasure*, extends and interrogates the parameters of authenticity set out by the African American literary canon, NoViolet Bulawayo, in *We Need Names*, interrogates the parameters of authenticity set out by the African postcolonial, and African diasporic (or Black Atlantic) literary canons. Like the African American literary canon sets up parameters for the authentic African American novel, so do postcolonial and African diasporic or Black Atlantic literary canons. The African postcolonial canon can be defined as the body of literature which is concerned with the aftermath of the colonial encounter in Africa. Elleke Boehmer describes postcolonial literature as, "that which critically scrutinizes the colonial relationship. It is writing which sets out in one way or another to resist colonialist perspectives" and is "deeply marked by experiences of cultural exclusion and division under empire" (3). The postcolonial canon intersects with the Black Atlantic literary canon, as the colonial encounter included the transAtlantic slave trade, as well as other dispersals of African people across the globe. The colonial encounter and the diasporas which took place concurrently created Creolized racial and ethnolinguistic groups. One such ethnolinguistic group is coloured South Africans, who have since moved away from a hybrid or liminal understanding of their identity towards a self-defined racial identity. Where modern African diasporic subjects have previously been understood as liminal and hybrid, the emerging Afropolitan canon seeks to understand these identities as more fragmented and epiphenomenal. This chapter, therefore, examines the ways in which literary depictions of diaspora and liminal racial identities have evolved from stable postcolonial and Black Atlantic theories of identity in *Playing in the Light* to more destabilized, Afropolitan subjectivities in *We Need New Names*.

Published in 2003, Wicomb's *Playing in the Light* deals most obviously with these postcolonial concerns due to its attention to the formation of colored South Africans as a distinct ethnic group. But it is also influenced by the Black Atlantic literary canon, a body of literature delineated in Paul Gilroy's seminal text, *The Black Atlantic:*

Modernity and Double Consciousness (1993), and which deals with the migration of African people across the Atlantic Ocean as well as the triangular pattern of cultural influence between Europe, America and Africa that arose during the transAtlantic slave trade. *The Black Atlantic* has since been critiqued,[24] however, in particular in *Physics of Blackness* (2015) as producing what Wright terms a "Middle Passage Epistemology" (7), which posits Africa as linear, causal source of blackness (38). The emerging Afropolitan literary canon, like *Physics of Blackness*, seeks to disrupt postcolonial and Black Atlantic ideations/ideologies. In particular, Afropolitanism critiques the postcolonial idea of the 'third space' which, argued most prominently by Homi Bhabha, positions the postcolonial and/or diasporic subject in a liminal 'third space' between the originary home (Africa) and the diasporic home (the West).

Bhabha explains how expressions and performances of identity (which he calls enunciations) are always interpreted through both the past and the present:

> The pact of interpretation is never simply an act of communication between the I and the You designated in the statement. The production of meaning requires that these two places be mobilized through a Third Space, which represents both the general conditions of language and the specific implication of the utterance in a performative and institutional strategy of which it cannot, 'in itself,' be conscious (36).

This Third Space of enunciation which Bhabha theorizes is more stable than the epiphenomenal moments in which Wicomb and Bulawayo portray the diasporic experiences of their protagonists. The formation of colored South Africans as a distinct ethnic group and the efforts of Wicomb to deconstruct and interrogate this history, point to the contingent and constructed nature of race. The unique subject position of colored South Africans as portrayed in *Playing in the Light* show the flaws in 'third space' and hybrid theories of postcoloniality.

Emerging Afropolitan theories of blackness position the African diasporic subject, the Afropolitan, as "[belonging] to no single geography, but [feeling] at home in many" (Selasi 2). As a prominent Afrodiasporic author, Taiye Selasi's argument for multiple locality allows for a more epiphenomenal reading of Afrodiasporic

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[24] See *Research in African Literatures*, 27.4 (1996).

subjectivity, as it emphasises identity's dependence on spatio-temporal context and interpretation. Like cosmopolitanism, from which it takes its name, Afropolitanism positions African subjects as citizens of the world, but, unlike cosmopolitanism, Afropolitanism is Afro-centric, as it emphasizes the inclusion of Africa and its metropoles.

Published in 2013, NoViolet Bulawayo's *We Need New Names* can be considered to be part of an emerging Afropolitan literary canon insofar as the novel disrupts and critiques putative categories articulated by the postcolonial and Afrodiasporic canons, such as the stable diasporic home, the stable originary home, and a third diasporic space with clear boundaries. Moreover, the fragmented and episodic form of the novel follows the trajectories of the protagonist, Darling, through first person narration, and those of her community, in the form of a collective narrator, in order to subvert and resist the reader's preconceived ideas of the diasporic narrative. These preconceived ideas largely revolve around the assumption that the diasporic subject's life improves once they are in the West.

By contrast, Zoë Wicomb's *Playing in the Light*, while often read as postcolonial, can also be read as a part of the Black Atlantic literary canon, especially because of Wicomb's expressed acknowledgement of Toni Morrison's explicit influence on the novel.[25] The novel's interrogation of the formation and function of colored subjectivity in South Africa read in parallel with African American narratives of their communities' formation and function, speaks to the origins of the colored race in South Africa and the ways in which colored identity functioned during and shortly after apartheid. More obviously categorized as postcolonial fiction, Wicomb's *Playing in the Light* deals with many of the same themes as Black Atlantic and African diasporic fiction.[26] On the canonical level, then, *We Need New Names* can be read as an Afropolitan successor to *Playing in the Light*. Although Marion, the protagonist, does

[25] See Aretha Phiri, "Black, White, and Everything in-between: Unravelling the Times with Zoë Wicomb."

[26] These themes include travel, the liminality of the postcolonial or diasporic subject between the originary home and the diasporic home, and the link between identity and geography.

not experience international travel as a catalyst for her shift in identities, she does experience her identity in diasporic terms – that is, as a space of travel. A comparative reading of these texts demonstrates the diversity of responses to existential travel across the landscape of race. The following chapter will first outline the ways in which *Playing in the Light* frames race as a spatial metaphor, as well as tracing the influence of the Black Atlantic canon on the novel. The chapter will then summarize the ways in which *We Need New Names* can be read as a successor to *Playing in the Light*, and finally, it will examine how *We Need New Names* explores the ways in which the emerging Afropolitan novel destabilizes the putative categories set out by postcolonial and Black Atlantic fiction.

Zoë Wicomb's *Playing in the Light*: Home, Homesickness, and Racial Place(s)

Playing in the Light follows its protagonist, Marion, the white owner of a travel agency
in Cape Town as she travels across South Africa with a colleague named Brenda, to
find out the identity of her childhood nanny and domestic worker, Tokkie. This
journey begins when Marion sees on the front page of a newspaper the face of Patricia
Williams, a victim of police brutality during apartheid, whose case is being dealt with
by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. For Marion, Williams strongly
resembles Tokkie. As she explores Tokkie's life and uncovers the secrets kept from
her by her parents, she not only discovers that the white racial identity she had taken
for granted is historically inaccurate, but also that racial identities in general are
contingent and socially constructed. Tokkie is revealed to be Marion's colored
grandmother and her parents, Helen Karelse and John Campbell, are revealed to be
colored people who 'passed' as white and were reclassified as white under the
Population Registration Amendment Act of 1962. Thrown into an existential crisis as a
result, Marion retreats to a small apartment in England where she explores the history
of South Africa through literature. She returns to South Africa with no ostensible
resolution to her identity crisis, but with an increased understanding of her national and
family history. Set during the transition from apartheid to democracy, *Playing in the
Light* addresses the ways in which apartheid enabled the repression of histories that did
not fit into the dominant narrative of Afrikaner nationalism and essentialized racial
difference.

   Indeed, as the central motif in the novel, Wicomb uses the notion of the return of
the repressed as a narrative method for dealing with and interrogating historical
trauma. Insofar as she is a symbol for repressed trauma, the spectral emergence of
Tokkie's face from the ocean in *Playing in the Light* can be read as an allusion to Toni
Morrison's *Beloved* (1987). *Beloved* is the story of a woman named Sethe who escapes
slavery with her two children, a girl named Denver, and a baby named Beloved.
Fearing recapture, Sethe tries to kill her children to save them from living as slaves.

She is interrupted before she is able to kill Denver, but she is successful with Beloved. The ghost of Beloved haunts Sethe and Denver, and returns in the physical form of a young woman who emerges from a lake. Both Tokkie and Beloved function as metaphors for repressed trauma at both a national and familial level. By investigating the trauma of the past, both Wicomb, an acclaimed coloured South African writer and Morrison, a renowned African American author, use their fiction to tear the veil over "proceedings too terrible to relate" (Morrison, "The Site of Memory" 91) and as a means of processing and coming to terms with the traumas of South African apartheid and (African) American slavery respectively.

Sam Durrant, who reads this attention in *Beloved* to historical trauma as a practice of mourning which is characteristic of postcolonial fiction, places the novel in the same tradition of writing as *Playing in the Light* (1). Like Morrison's African American project, Wicomb attends to the ways in which colored South Africans emerged as a distinct ethnic group out of the violence of the colonial encounter and neo-colonial systems of racial segregation and oppression. Morrison's idea of 'rememory' is particularly significant to *Playing in the Light* in its implications for cultural and historical memory. 'Rememory,' as delineated in *Beloved*, is a form of collective historical memory.[27] Sethe, Morrison's protagonist, describes 'rememory' as a combination of her own memory and memories which exist "out there, in the world" (43). Significantly, too, a 'rememory' is something that "other people [can] see" (43). Morrison's idea of 'rememory', therefore, refers to those parts of memory which are communal. Caroline Rody argues that "'Rememory' as trope postulates the interconnectedness of minds, past and present, and thus neatly conjoins the novel's supernatural vision with its aspiration to communal epic, realizing the 'collective memory' of which Morrison speaks" (101). 'Rememory' used as a verb, then, means "to use one's imaginative power to realize a latent, abiding connection to the [a communal] past" (101).

In *Playing in the Light*, it is through access to the folk memory of Brenda's community and the literature of South Africa that Marion is able to discover and

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[27] See also "The Site of Memory."

process the truth of her parents' past. Wicomb, therefore, points to 'rememory' as a useful tool for rebuilding a connection to the past in post-apartheid South Africa, where collective historical memory has been and continues to be fractured along racial lines. This concept of 'rememory' is read by Durrant as "racial memory" – a "collective memory of negation that threatens to overwhelm the individual with the consciousness of a 'disproportionate' loss" (21).[28] The overwhelming nature of this collective memory shows the necessity of working through historical trauma on a collective level rather than an individual level. Marion experiences this necessity when she must enlist Brenda and her family in order to deal with her own racial trauma. Although *Playing in the Light* is written in the first person, the narrator is not always Marion, and many sections are ostensibly drawn from the folk archive. For example, the sections on Tokkie's life and Helen and John's reclassification seem to come from the communal historical memory of Marion's family and Brenda's community.

Not unlike African Americans, colored South Africans have a history fraught with slavery and so-called 'miscegenation'; emerging as a distinct ethnic group in the latter half of the eighteenth century. 'Colored' became a generic term for people of mixed racial heritage, Malay indentured servants, and the Khoisan, who until 1828 were enslaved (Adhikari xi). But where African Americans have incorporated their slave history into their lore and literature, colored South Africans appear to have contributed to the near "total erasure of slavery from the folk memory" (Wicomb, "Shame and Identity" 100). Wicomb attributes this repression of slave history to the often sexually violent process of the colonial encounter and the shame surrounding the purported miscegenation. The social stigma of slavery is particularly significant in the South African context due to the apartheid regime's efforts to encourage colored people to assimilate into whiteness. This assimilation necessitated the repression of black ancestry and the converse desire of colored anti-apartheid activists to claim blackness. By claiming blackness, colored South Africans had to repress their white ancestry in order to present a united racial front against apartheid. This ambivalence of identity

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[28] Negation, here, refers to the process by which the racial other's humanity is erased by white racism.

allowed colored people to "be co-opted by – and even [adopt] – an exclusionary white nationalism, or else identifying themselves with an oppositional black nationalism, while nevertheless remaining marginal to both groupings" (Jacobs 77). Patrick Harries argues that colored people claimed blackness partly through repressing their slave history:

> During the struggle against apartheid, individuals repressed the memory of their slave origins for various reasons. For some, slavery was a social stigma best forgotten; for others, the memory of slavery threatened to divide the opposition to apartheid along racial lines. For whites who could be associated with the old slave-owning class, the memory of slavery was as source of guilt and pain that merely served to push 'coloureds' into alliance with African nationalism. (133)

Colored South Africans, therefore, were variously co-opted by larger population groups during apartheid and the anti-apartheid movement, and this co-opting often involved the denial and erasure of their slave history. For white nationalism, as argued by Harris above, it was important to keep colored South Africans from uniting with the black majority.

The beginnings of white nationalism in South Africa were, as in America, accompanied by a profound sense of doubt on the part of the white settlers as to their identity. The creole-like origins of the Afrikaans language, which emerged out of contact between the Dutch farmers, the Khoisan and the Xhosa, meant that Afrikaans was not created by those who identify as white Afrikaners today, but rather dialectically through the interactions of different ethnolinguistic groups.[29] The beginnings of white nationalism therefore necessarily entailed the creation of an Other in order to reassure the dominant white group of their own identity. The word 'Afrikaner' is from the Dutch 'Africaander' and initially referred to first-generation Western European migrants who may or may not have been of mixed racial heritage. Due to the similarities in lifestyle between the early Dutch loan farmers and the Xhosa, there were many instances of intermarriages between the two groups, as well as

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[29] See Susan Newton-King, *Masters and Servants on the Eastern Cape Frontier*.

between the Xhosa and the Khoisan.[30] Colored South Africans are the result of this racial mixing, as well as some intermarriage with South East Asian (often referred to as Malay) slaves who were brought into colonial South Africa by the Dutch East India Company. The close proximity between modern colored identity and early Afrikaner identity meant that colored South Africans were variously co-opted by white nationalism because of their similarities with white Afrikaners and treated as subaltern because of their racially mixed appearance. At surface level, therefore, colored South Africans appeared to be hybrid subjects. However, in "Shame and Identity: The Case of the Coloured in South Africa," Wicomb emphasizes the status of colored South Africans as a distinct ethnic group, rather than simply a community existing in a 'third space' between blackness and whiteness. She argues that "Bhabha's theory of hybridity cannot account for the current coloured politics, where it is precisely the celebration of inbetweeness that serves conservation" (102). By "conservation," here, Wicomb is referring to the conservation of racist, apartheid-era ideologies (102). The narrative that colored South Africans are simply the result of two racial groups mixing has been one of the ways in which their marginality is reinforced. This narrative of miscegenation removes the agency of colored people in the creation of their own identity (Adhikari 13–15). Coloredness, then, cannot be adequately defined as simply 'hybrid.'

Consequently, in *Playing in the Light*, Marion, on discovering her parents' origins, finds herself inhabiting an extended liminal space, not between whiteness and blackness, but a fluctuating liminal space of "unremitting crossings" (107) between whiteness and colouredness. She does not experience her subjectivity as hybrid. This is evinced by her childhood pet name, given her by her father, John: "meermin" or "mermaid" (22).[31] While John repeatedly fuels Marion's fantasies of becoming a mermaid, her mother Helen displays disdain for the idea of hybrid creatures: "[They

[30] The early Dutch farmers in the cape, referred to as Dutch loan farmers, did not own the land they worked on. This land was loaned out to farmers by the Dutch East India Company (Geulke 31).
[31] A mermaid is a mythical creature that is half-fish and half-human. 'Meermin' is the Afrikaans translation.

should be] Ashamed, [. . .] of being neither one thing nor another. No one likes creatures that are so different, so mixed up" (47). It is significant that Marion's mermaid game involves the use of bandages to tie her legs together, since this not only restricts her to lying still, but also has connotations of injury. The choice of bandages for her bonds may point to racial memory of the violence out of which colored South Africans emerged, and the violence of postcolonial subjectivity which necessitates the creation of hybrid subjectivities. Marion's lack of mobility in her mermaid form, as well as Helen's disdain for the mermaid's hybridity, thus points to Marion's inability to navigate the world as a hybrid subject. Moreover, Marion's childhood is fraught with the tension created by her mother's insistent pursuit of whiteness and her father's inability to live up to her mother's expectations, as they would often argue about how to avoid being found out: "John simply did not pay enough attention. He fell short of [Helen's] vision; he did not take the task of reinvention seriously" (126).

After unearthing the story of her parent's reclassification, Marion can no longer unquestioningly identify as white, but she is also unable to retreat to the relative stability of her parents' childhoods living as coloured people. She ruminates that:

> [m]y parents were the play-whites; *they* crossed over; but if those places are no longer the same, have lost their meaning, there can be no question of returning to a place where my parents once were. Perhaps I can now keep crossing to and fro, to different places, perhaps that is what the new is all about – an era of unremitting crossings. (107)

Evidently, because Marion has only found out about her parents' reclassification *after* the end of apartheid, her racial identity does not have the same material implications as that of her parents. In other words, even if she identified as colored, she would not experience this identity in the same way as her parents' generation experienced theirs: unlike the father of her childhood friend Annie Boshoff, the discovery of her colored heritage does not mean that she will be forced to move into a different area or that it will affect her business. Helen and John's choice to raise Marion as white and keep her past from her also means that Marion has no access to the folk memory of colored South Africans and must enlist the help of Brenda and her family.

Watching the televised coverage of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission committee's investigation into South Africa's violent and traumatic past, a bewildered Marion feels like a "reluctant traveller who has landed in a foreign country without so much as a phrase book" (74). Because she was protected from some of the hardship of apartheid by her apparent whiteness, Marion experiences the country described in the TRC proceedings as foreign. Compelled to continue watching by the feeling that "somehow it is the least she can do for the demanding stranger, Patricia Williams, whose face is that of the beloved Tokkie, and whose eyes point at the connectedness of this foreign country with her old familiar world" (74), Marion's compulsion to engage with the TRC despite the discomfort it causes her is further evidence of the importance of 'rememory' in the novel. She discovers Tokkie's identity, and by extension her own, through memory and rememory. It is through contact with the community and the consumption of literature that she is able to come to terms with her identity and her family's past.

Marion's discovery of her parents' reclassification as well as her investigation into the processes of apartheid racial classification, reveals the contingency of racial identities. The novel's citation of the absurd definition of whiteness in the Population Registration Amendment Act of 1962 is evidence of the historical lack of a material or biological basis for definitions of race:

> A 'white person' is a person who (a) in appearance obviously is a white person and who is not generally accepted as a coloured person; or (b) is generally accepted as a white person and is not in appearance obviously not a white person, but does not include any person who for the purposes of classification under this Act, freely and voluntarily admits that he is by descent a native or coloured person unless it is proved that the admission is not based on fact.
> (121)

The apartheid government ironically bases its legal definition of whiteness on the subjective interpretation of physical appearance and discursive constructions. The circuitous phrasing of the definition emphasizes the differential nature of racial classifications, as whiteness is defined in comparison to non-whiteness. Helen and John's ability to fit into this definition further proves its contingency on discourse,

since Wicomb in the novel portrays race as a matter of both performance and interpretation.

It is significant, then, that Marion learns the truth about her parents' past due to an instance of interpretation. Mrs Murray, her host during part of her journey across South Africa to investigate Tokkie's life, initially confirms Marion's suspicions that she is related to Tokkie by commenting on the resemblance between the two: "O gits, it's like seeing a spook, because from down here with your face tilted like that you look the spitting image of Mrs Karelse, my dear!" (97). Marion's parents' reclassification also begins with an instance of (mis)interpretation, as John, ignorant of the racial requirements for the post, applies for a job as a traffic officer, and is mistaken for white. His and Helen's subsequent conscious performance of whiteness thus results in Marion's unconscious performance of whiteness. By hinging Marion's identity on performance and specific moments of interpretation, Wicomb destabilizes essentialist notions of race and ethnicity.

Similarly, the various homes in Marion's memory symbolize different points in the space-time of race. In this way, because her race changes between each epiphenomenal moment,[32] it functions according to Wright's theory in *Physics of Blackness*. Marion's flat, where the novel begins, can be read as a symbol of her state of denial. Discovering a dead guinea fowl on her balcony, and stifled by her furniture, Marion sees Patricia Williams' face on the muslin of her bed's canopy – a canopy bed described as a house within a house and which becomes the site of recurring panic attacks: "that woman has projected her face onto muslin drapes of the four-poster, and with every waft of air the features are dragged hither and thither into grotesque distortions" (74). The bed, therefore, is the place within Marion's space of denial where the repressed re-emerges. Williams' face, here, can be read as a microcosm of the resurgence of repressed histories on a national level.

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[32] There is no clear, linear causality between the events of the novel. Much of Marion's discoveries happen accidentally. For example, she did not directly seek out Mrs. Murray, who confirms her relation to Tokkie, but rather arrives at her house out of necessity.

If her apartment is read as a spatial metaphor for Marion's denial, then the other houses and homes in the novel symbolize different points in Marion's evolution: her father's house is the home of her pleasant childhood memories, her childhood home is a claustrophobic space of unrelenting performance, and the old farmhouse of her father's childhood is a symbol of her origins and repressed history. Tellingly, Brenda's home is the only space in the novel which is described as warm and hospitable, and in direct contrast to the coldness and restrictions of Marion's flat and her childhood home. Indeed, Lidia De Michelis argues that Marion's introduction to the latter space at the beginning of her investigation quickens her desire to find an existential home (75).

Throughout the novel, Marion moves from her flat to her seaside cottage, and then to Mrs Murray's home and then to her aunt Elsie's home. As she moves, she experiences a shift in racial definitions similar to those experienced in South Africa in general during the shift from apartheid to democracy. For Marion and her nation, previously essentialized and putatively stable identities were rendered mutable and unstable. Wicomb's attention to this transition forms part of what Sarah Nuttall describes as a literary turn towards the problematization of race, post-apartheid; herein South African literary and cultural scholarship departed "from earlier work in which race was largely left unproblematized and was treated as a given category in which difference was essentialized" (11). According to Nuttall, the TRC was a study of complicity within the apartheid regime (6). Just as the TRC was tasked with the exploration and mitigation of historical oppression, Marion must reverse her parents' pursuit of whiteness and examine how she, as an erstwhile white South African, may have been complicit in the perpetuation of apartheid structures of power. It is through access to history and communal memory that Marion is able, to some extent, to come to an understanding of this complicity and her now destabilized identity.

Through the motifs of home and travel and the concomitant ideas of belonging, homesickness and unbelonging, *Playing in the Light* interrogates race as an efficacious method for categorising the populations of the world. By drawing on the history of racial definitions in South Africa and the trauma of the colonial and apartheid past, the

novel posits race and specifically whiteness as contingent and constructed categories, and argues for the inclusion of coloredness in a discourse which is too often only concerned with blackness and whiteness. As discourses surrounding race and national identity have evolved from dealing with past traumas to looking forward, novels such as NoViolet Bulawayo's *We Need New Names* have taken arguments for the inclusion of diverse identities in these discourses a step further by arguing for the creation of entirely new identities and subject positions such as the Afropolitan.

We Need New Names and *Playing in the Light*: From Postcoloniality to Afropolitanism

Insofar as it forms part of an emerging Afropolitan literary canon, *We Need New Names* can be read as a revisionist extension of those thematic threads which *Playing in the Light* shares with the Black Atlantic literary canon. Where Afropolitanism argues for multiple locality rather than third space liminality, unmooring studies of the African diaspora from the dichotomy between Africa and the West, it offers a literary articulation of Wright's vision of epiphenomenal blackness. Wicomb and Bulawayo, in the novels under study, point to the impossibility of a truly hybrid diasporic subject as both novels follow their protagonists' shifts in identity to reveal the mutability and instability of racial identities.

While *Playing in the Light* and *We Need New Names* are set in two different historical contexts, both novels deal with the aftermath of colonialism and the neo-colonial white minority rule which followed it in South Africa and Zimbabwe respectively.[33] For Marion, the hierarchies and systems of identity once held together by apartheid are losing their meaning. For Darling, although it is an integral part of her identity, Zimbabwe, her home, is no longer able to provide her with a future in which she can become educated and keep herself out of poverty. The national contexts of the novels, particularly with regard to race, is important to understand. While South Africa and Zimbabwe do share similar histories, the ways in which white nationalism functioned in each country differed.[34] Where, in South Africa, Afrikaner nationalism involved the creation of a creolised group of people who viewed themselves as a distinct and (to some extent) indigenous ethnic group, Rhodesia's white settlers remained far more linked to their colonial origins.[35] Post-Independence Zimbabwe was

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[33] Although it is not explicitly confirmed in the novel that *We Need New Names* is set partly in Zimbabwe, based on historical clues and the author's nationality. For the ease of this analysis, Darling's home will be referred to as Zimbabwe from now on.

[34] Dutch colonial rule started in South Africa in 1652, until the early 1800s when the British took over. British rule lasted until 1934, and apartheid lasted from 1948 until 1994. Zimbabwe was under British colonial rule from 1889 until independence in 1965, after which it was ruled by a white minority until 1980 (South African History Online).

[35] Zimbabwe was called Rhodesia while under white rule.

ideologically defined by a rigid move towards nationalism. South Africa, however, rather than moving towards "a politicized principle of nationally unified subjects," attempted to mend the wounds caused by white minority rule through reconciliation (53). While both Zimbabwe's and South Africa's first democratically elected presidents were the leaders of black nationalist political parties – the African National Congress (ANC) and Zimbabwe African National Union – Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF), the Zimbabwean black nationalist movement was far more aggressive in its land reform policies and desire for homogenous nationalism.[36] The expropriation of white-owned land in Zimbabwe was fast-tracked in 2000, when rising levels of civilian unrest over the government's failure to perform the progressive land redistribution they had promised reached a head. Due to the nepotism and authoritarianism of the government, however, this land expropriation led to a collapse in the agricultural economy of the state, forcing many Zimbabwean citizens to emigrate or become migrant workers in order to survive.[37] The internal displacement of poor people by Operation *Murambatsvina*,[38] following the 2005 elections, removed the poor from the inner cities and forced them into slums on the periphery. One such slum is the fictional Paradise of NoViolet Bulawayo's *We Need New Names*.

Darling, the protagonist of *We Need New Names*, is however doubly displaced, as she is forced from her original home into Paradise, and later into the diaspora. Bulawayo's use of nightmares to demonstrate the effects of Operation *Murambatsvina* on Darling can be read, as in *Playing in the Light*, as the return of repressed trauma. To the extent that Darling's history and the origins of Paradise contradict the dominant Zimbabwean nationalist narrative of Operation *Murambatsvina* as a necessary part of the liberation process, her memory and that of the other residents of Paradise form a counter-narrative to the dominant narrative of patriarchal Zimbabwean nationalism. Through Bulawayo's use of a collective narrator, she is able to give Darling's

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[36] The goal of homogenous nationalism entailed a process of ethnic cleansing commonly referred to as Gukurahundi, where the dominant Shona ethno-linguistic group committed acts of genocide on the Ndebele minority due to the association of political dissidence with Ndebele people (Eppel 44–47).
[37] See James Graham, *Land and Nationalism in Fictions from Southern Africa*.
[38] This translates to Operation 'clean out the rubbish,' (Moji 185).

community a voice. This collective narrator expresses the feelings of both the residents of Paradise as well as, later in the novel, the concerns of illegal African immigrants to America. Bulawayo's collective narrator often reports information that Darling is too young to remember or understand. The collective narrator can, therefore, be read as a folk archive, and, moreover, as a form of historical memory. In an interview with Alice Driver, Bulawayo argues that "it is through writing that we speak the unspoken" (5), an impulse which is similar to Morrison's desire to tear the veil over "proceedings too terrible to relate" ("The Site of Memory" 91). This collective narrator, therefore, is Bulawayo's method of speaking the unspeakable.

Where Bulawayo's novel can be read as a bildungsroman, since it follows Darling's coming of age, *Playing in the Light* can be read as a bildungsroman in reverse. Unlike Darling, who is still forming her identity during her displacement, Marion's already formed identity is retrospectively thrown into question and she must delve into her childhood and that of her parents in order to form a new one. Marion moves spatially, and experientially backwards during this process, from her flat to the previous homes of her parents. Where *Playing in the Light* argues for the use of memory and rememory to deal with present trauma, *We Need New Names* moves forward – demanding new names, categories, and frames of reference for nation, race and subjectivity in general. The form of both novels, therefore, echo the author's literary projects; as *Playing in the Light* moves backwards through Marion's life in its dealings with the past, *We Need New Names* looks to the future. Bulawayo's use of historical memory functions as a way to deal with the past and to contemplate the future. Because the two novels centre on female subjects, part of the trauma Marion and Darling must process, throughout history and in the future, is sexual.

Both *We Need New Names* and *Playing in the Light* deal with sexual violence in a postcolonial context. Historically, women of color have been exploited sexually to the point where they were not considered capable of being raped (Stoler 641). Ann L Stoler maintains that "The gender-specific requirements for colonial living [. . .] were constructed on heavily racist evaluations which pivoted on the heightened sexuality of colonized men" (641). In *Playing in the Light*, requiring an affidavit in lieu of John's

lost birth certificate, in order to become reclassified as white, Helen exchanges sexual favours with Councillor Carter. She visits his office four times, at first hoping that the rumours of his lechery were exaggerated, but eventually resigning herself to the sexual nature of her negotiations with Carter: "If she only knew precisely what Carter required of her, she could prepare herself, talk herself into the necessity of whatever had to be done" (142). This exchange, as far as it can be read as an exercise of Helen's agency, constitutes a reversal of white male sexual exploitation of women of colour during colonialism. Here, Wicomb subverts the historical causal relationship between 'miscegenation' and shame, by showing how for Helen 'miscegenation' "[produces] whiteness and purity, not brownness and degeneracy" (Dass 139). This scene is complex, however, as the transactional nature of the encounter still leaves the power in Councillor Carter's hands. The exploitation which Helen is forced to suffer is similar to that which prospective African immigrants to the West experience in *We Need New Names*: "[f]or the visas and passports [. . .] Nozipho, like Primrose and Sicelokuhle and Maidei, slept with [. . .] Banyile Khoza from the passport office. Girls flat on their backs, Banyile between their legs, America on their minds" (240).

The tension between these women's use of sexual agency for personal advancement and the ways in which they are exploited by the commodification of their sexuality evinces the complexity of postcolonial sexual politics. Like *Playing in the Light*, *We Need New Names* is concerned with the ways in which patriarchal nationalism and religion enables sexual violence. Darling's scepticism towards her local priest, Prophet Revelations Bitchington Mborro, is most evident in the scene where he sexually assaults a woman in a purple dress. Whereas the members of the congregation view the woman as "the devil" (38), Darling compares her to Jesus: "I am sad the pretty woman is just lying there under Prophet Revelations Bitchington Mborro like Jesus after they clobbered him and nailed him on the cross" (40). The comparison of the woman to Jesus emphasizes that, for Darling, she has done nothing wrong, and the community's punishment of her is misguided. In both novels, then, women are subject to sexual violence at the hands of patriarchal nationalism.

Both Bulawayo and Wicomb, in their novels, speak the unspeakable through collective memory and rememory by dealing with sexual and racial traumas which are unpalatable to the mainstream literary market in patriarchal society. Whereas *Playing in the Light* focuses on historical memory and generational trauma without gesturing towards the future, *We Need New Names* points to the need for a future which is a radical departure from the structures of the past. Bulawayo's use of a collective narrator and the bildungsroman allow her to project a future in which the categories and dichotomies of race must be destabilized.

Displacement in *We Need New Names*

In *We Need New Names* Darling is, at the beginning of the novel, already displaced. Due to the post-millennial land reforms and Operation *Murambatsvina*, Darling is haunted by nightmares of the bulldozers that came to demolish her home. After her family is forced to move to the ironically named informal settlement of Paradise, Darling's father leaves to earn money in South Africa, but the promised money never materializes, and he eventually returns home only to die of HIV/AIDS. Now unable to attend school, she spends her days playing and stealing guavas with her friends Godknows, Stina, Sbho, and Chipo, who was raped and impregnated by her grandfather. In the hope of a better life and a brighter future, she goes to live with her aunt Fostalina in Detroit, Michigan, and they, together with Fostalina's husband, Kojo, and son, TK, move to Kalamazoo, Michigan. Torn between the knowledge that living in America should afford her more opportunities and her growing homesickness, Darling finds herself flitting between her unsatisfactory reality in America and memories of her friends in Zimbabwe.

Bulawayo focalizes her novel through Darling and a collective narrator. Darling and the collective narrator show scepticism towards the narratives of both Zimbabwean and American nationalism by speaking for the marginalized of the society presented in the novel. Darling's constant cynicism towards authority can be read as carnivalesque as the marginalized are empowered to criticize their leaders. The Bakhtinian carnivalesque has been a useful technique for postcolonial authors, as it allows for the subversion of authority and the destabilization of putative imperialist categories. Zimbabwe, in the early 2000s, was characterized by fast-tracked land reform programs. This was aimed at undoing the socio-economic imbalances of colonialism and white minority rule. *We Need New Names* directly critiques the implementation of this ideology in the chapter "Blak Power," in which Darling and her friends watch the eviction of a white couple by a group of militant government officials. The white man's protestation in the eviction scene affords a critical interrogation of Africanness:

"I am an African, he says. This is my fucking country too, my father was born here, I was born here, just like you! [. . .] But nobody minds him [. . .] their chants of Africa for Africans filling the air. [. . .] What exactly is an African? Godknows asks" (119).

For Darling and her friends, the category "African" does not have a clear ideological meaning. Despite the political awareness that the children show in the content of their 'country' games, the children do not seem to care about the process of land expropriation, and are more concerned with staying out of the conflict and collecting the guavas from the tree they are hidden in. Bulawayo's use of marginalized narrators thus allows her to remember the history of post-independence Zimbabwe in differently from the dominant nationalist narrative. The collective narrator's access to collective historical memory is reminiscent of oral literary forms, as well as the concept of 're-memory.' Maurice Taonezvi Vambe argues that "[o]rality as a form of cultural memory is critical in restoring a sense of collective identity" (7). He also notes that the use of orality by Zimbabwean women is part of a tradition of resisting patriarchy and opposing an uncomplicated narrative of the liberation struggle (100). Bulawayo's collective narrator is often critical of the post-independence Zimbabwean government, and is particularly critical in their description of the origins of Paradise as they narrate the residents' forced migration:

> They did not come to Paradise. Coming would mean they were choosers. [. . .] They just appeared. [. . .] they mourned perished pasts [. . .] Wasn't it like this before independence? Do you remember how the whites drove use from our land and put us in those wretched reserves? I was there, you were there, wasn't it just like this? No, those were evil white people who came to steal our land and make us paupers in our own country. What, but aren't you a pauper now? (75)

The narrator's comparison of Paradise to the native reserves of colonial Zimbabwe demonstrates Darling's community's dissatisfaction with their government. The dichotomy between white and black breaks down because of the continued exploitation of Paradise's citizens. The collective narrator meditates on the relevance of their oppressor's identity: "Aren't these black people evil for bulldozing your house and leaving you with nothing now? You are all wrong. Better a white thief do that to you

than your own black brother. Better a wretched white thief. It's the same thing and it isn't" (75). Here, the residents of Paradise are engaged by a neo-colonial Chinese presence as well as NGOs as they come to terms with their poverty. The collective narrator is ambivalent: although on a political level they are now free from oppression, their material circumstances are the same.

Darling and her friends show a surprising level of political awareness in their games and in their criticism of the Chinese and NGO presence in Zimbabwe. Their "country" game shows their cognizance of Zimbabwe's marginalized global positioning, in which the children compete over who gets to play as a global power. The distinction between "country-countr[ies]" such as "the USA, Britain and Canada," (49) and the others is based on their level of prestige. Zimbabwe is not listed as an option, as it is one of the "rags of countries like Congo, like Somalia, like Iraq, like Sudan, like Haiti, like Sri Lanka, [. . .] a terrible place of hunger and things falling apart" (49). Bulawayo's reference here to Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958) shows her debt of influence to the established postcolonial canon. She pays particular attention to the neo-colonial aspects of the post-colonial condition. Kwame Nkrumah argues that "[t]he essence of neo-colonialism is that the State which is subject to it is, in theory, independent and has all the outward trappings of international sovereignty. In reality its economic system and thus its political policy is directed from outside" (ix). There is a tension in neo-colonial states between the theoretical idea that the wealthy countries (often former colonizers) must help poor countries (often former colonies) to 'develop,' and the reality that this network of dependence keeps Western control over Africa in place. The children's interactions with NGOs throughout the novel, and the strong Chinese presence in the country are evidence of the neo-colonial nature of Zimbabwean society. Because Chinese neo-colonialism does not function within the Western imperialist-African subaltern dichotomy of colonialism, it does not function in the same way, as it does not correspond to the imperialist white-black binary. The replacement of the black-white polarity of colonialism with the rich-poor dichotomy of neo-colonial capitalism cannot be resisted in the same way. The rich-poor dichotomy

of capitalist neo-colonialism also allows the rich nation to portray their occupation of poor countries as charity.

Tellingly, the children feel patronized and exploited by the NGO workers: "They don't care that we are embarrassed by our dirt and our torn clothing, that we would prefer they didn't [take pictures]; they just take the pictures anyway, take and take. We don't complain because we know that after the picture-taking comes the giving of gifts" (52). After meeting the NGO workers, the children run off "to kill each other with our brand-new guns from America" (57). The toy guns given to the children by the NGO workers can be read as symbolic of neo-colonial military aid and the West's provision of armaments. According to Nkrumah:

> Military aid [. . .] marks the last stage of neo-colonialism and its effect is self-destructive. Sooner or later the weapons supplied pass into the hands of the opponents of the neo-colonialist regime and the war itself increases the social misery which originally provoked it. (xvi)

With the children being given sweets and ill-fitting clothes emblazoned with corporate branding and the adults receiving staple foods from the NGO workers – the packages are too small to last very long. The frivolity of this aid is evidence of the ways in which neo-colonialism keeps post-colonial states dependent on Western aid. The shame felt by the adults at needing this charity emphasizes the way neo-colonialism robs dependent nations of their dignity: "the adults get small packets of beans and sugar and mealie-meal but you can seen from their faces that they are not satisfied. They look at the tiny packages like they don't want them, like they are embarrassed and disappointed by them" (Bulawayo, *We Need New Names* 55). The novel's portrayal of international aid and neo-colonial globalization is therefore critical of the networks of dependence which such interventions create, as well as the ways in which neo-colonialism fuels the internal conflicts of developing nations.

Bulawayo's portrayal of Darling's life in America also shows a critical perception of the neo-colonial reliance of developing African nations on the West, since Darling, although initially optimistic about America, becomes disillusioned with its ability to provide her with a brighter future soon after arriving. Between the weather, the

problems with her documentation which prevent her from returning to Zimbabwe even for a visit, and the menial labour she is later forced into in order to pay for community college, Darling realises that America is not the perfect land of opportunity she had imagined. When she spots a Lamborghini Reventón in a parking lot, and learns how valuable it is, she is forced to realize that her dream of owning one is impossible to fulfill. In this scene, she also feels a strong sense of nostalgia for how her friends in Zimbabwe would have teased her over her ignorance of the car's price: "If Bastard and Stina and Chipo and Godknows and Sbho were here, they'd be screaming and teasing and howling with laughter and dying now" (225). Darling does not want to admit to herself that what she had dreamed of her life in America is not the reality, or to come to terms with a growing feeling that she should not have left Zimbabwe: "I don't want to say with my own mouth that if the car costs that much then it means I'll never own it, and if I can't own it, does that mean I'm poor, and if so, what is America for, then?" (225). The contrast between this scene and the first time a Lamborghini Reventón is mentioned in the novel is striking, since Darling's "feeling in [her] bones, that the car is waiting for [her] in America" (111) has been transformed into a deep-seated doubt about her reasons for leaving home.

As she grows into adolescence, Darling feels the differences between herself and her peers. Her two friends in America, Kristal, who is African American, and Marina, who is a Nigerian immigrant, experience their ethnicity differently from Darling, who struggles to assimilate into African American culture. For example, she is at one point accused by Kristal of "trynna sound like stupid white folk" (222). Darling's inability to assimilate into the African American community and to connect with Marina on the same level as she did with her friends in Paradise arguably demonstrates the diversity of African identities as well as the distance between Africanness and blackness. Moreover, rather than existing in a liminal space between Paradise and America, Darling seems to shift between them. She often allows herself to sink into memories of Zimbabwe and her friends, and she describes her state not as being in-between, but as being 'in both places at once,' she feels as if "there's two of [her]. One part is yearning

for [her] friends; the other doesn't know how to connect with them anymore, as if they are people [she has] never met" (210).

Like Marion in *Playing in the Light*, hybrid subjectivity does not help Darling to navigate her world. The only hybrid subject in Bulawayo's novel is Tshaka Zulu, an old Zimbabwean man who lives in Shadybrook, a rest home, where Aunt Fostalina used to work. Ironically named after the famously controversial figure Shaka Zulu, who has been portrayed by historians as simultaneously a ruthless tyrant and an icon of military prowess and strength for the Zulu nation,[39] Tshaka Zulu's frail and old portrait subverts narratives of patriarchal nationalism. While at a wedding of a family friend and noting that, "[from appearances] you would never think there was something wrong with him, that he was really a patient at Shadybrook" (178), Darling watches him perform traditional music and dance. Albeit drawing strength from his connections to his home country, Tshaka Zulu is interpreted by the orderlies of Shadybrook as crazy. When Darling and Aunt Fostalina visit him at Shadybrook, he hands her an assegai. As a symbol of bravery and power connected to her home, the assegai recalls the small blade given to Darling by a traditional healer to protect her while in America but which was confiscated at the airport. As such, the demise of Tshaka Zulu can be read as the end of Darling's last strong link to her home and suggests the impossibility of existing as a Zimbabwean or hybrid postcolonial subject in America. This inevitable unmooring from her Zimbabwean identity is directly stated in the novel: "you cannot just be the same once you leave behind who and what you are, you just cannot be the same" (146).

Having left behind her Zimbabwean self, Darling is now trapped in America both physically and existentially. Significantly, the collective narrator directly compares the journey of illegal African immigrants to the transAtlantic slave trade: "In the footsteps of those looted black sons and daughters, we were going, yes, we were going" (241). This comparison emphasizes the continued coercive nature of immigration to the West, as well as the poverty in which illegal immigrants live in America. While ostensibly more autonomous than slavery, African immigration to the West, as portrayed in *We*

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[39] See *Myth of Iron* by Dan Wylie.

Need New Names is not entirely voluntary. Because of the menial conditions under which illegal immigrants work in America, it bears a resemblance to the power structures of slavery. Bulawayo's collective narrator directly addresses the effects of neo-colonial portrayals of Africa as a homogenous place of violence and hunger on immigrants living in the West just after Darling sees Tshaka Zulu's "museum" of a room for the first time:

> And when they asked us where we were from, we exchanged glances and smiled with the shyness of child brides. They said, Africa? We nodded yes. What part of Africa? We smiled. Is it the part where vultures wait for famished children to die? We smiled. Is it there where dissidents shove AK-47s between women's legs? We smiled. Where people run around naked? We smiled. Is it where the old president rigged the election and people were tortured and killed and a whole bunch of them put in prison and all, there where they are dying of cholera – oh my God, yes, we've seen your country; it's been on the news.
>
> (237–8)

The reference to the third person collective 'they' appears to indicate the Western observer whose only exposure to Africa is the predominantly negative news coverage of current events on the continent. The repeated phrase "We smiled," recalls Darling's encounters with NGO workers earlier in the novel, where smiling for photographs became a kind of currency. Here, the phrase "we smiled" is used mournfully, as smiling is the only socially acceptable way for the narrator to respond to their situation. This submission to social acceptability suggests some complicity in the representation of Afro-pessimist narratives. They are forced to forgo their dreams in order to survive as undocumented immigrants.

The last section of the novel narrated by the collective narrator explores the extent to which African immigrants to the West are complicit in Afro-pessimist thinking.[40] In his review of *We Need New Names*, Helon Habila has accused Bulawayo of reproducing the same pessimistic representation of Africa which she critiques in this

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[40] Afro-pessimism is a discourse which "produces the meaning that something is wrong with Africans. The heart of this discourse derives from the fact that Africans are failing to live up to a set of criteria generated by Westerners who want to [. . .] develop Africa in such a way that the continent would mesh neatly into the globalised economy built by Europeans and Americans over the past two centuries" (de B'béri and Louw 337).

section of the novel, and reads the novel as driven by "a palpable anxiety to cover every 'African' topic; almost as if the writer has made a checklist from the morning's news on Africa" (4). While Bulawayo *does* present Paradise as a space of poverty, sexual violence and hardship, her representation of Africa is more nuanced and cautious, that is, self-reflexive, than Habila allows. Further, her cynical portrayal of African immigrant life in America and her resistance to portraying Darling's trajectory as a linearly progressive, 'rags-to-riches' narrative exemplifying 'the American Dream' is evidence of her ambivalence towards both Afro-pessimist discourse and American exceptionalism. And her decision to name Darling's home in Zimbabwe "Paradise" forms part of her carnivalesque, satirical response to post-independent nationalist narratives of sociopolitical and socioeconomic liberation and success.

In an interview with Christine Hartselle, Bulawayo delineates *We Need New Names* as part of a process of mourning for the Zimbabwe which she knew as a child:

> As somebody who grew up knowing a normal country and had a beautiful childhood in it, it was jarring to get used to a country of power cuts, a country of water cuts, a country where a high percentage of people lost their jobs. A country where the health system went down. A country where an election was suddenly marred by violence. (Hartselle 35)

Her repeated emphasis on 'country' suggests the paradoxical the fragility of nation states. In positioning the Zimbabwe of her childhood and the Zimbabwe of Darling's childhood as two different countries, she further she critiques 'third space' theories of postcoloniality by framing the originary home as a shifting and unstable, rather than static, space. This reading of the originary home as fragmented is also evident in Darling's description of the multiple homes that reside in the memories of her mother, her aunt Fostalina and her grandmother, Mother of Bones:

> There are three homes inside Mother's and Aunt Fostalina's heads: home before independence, before I was born, when black people and white people were fighting over the country. Home after independence, when black people won the country. And then the home of things falling apart, which made Aunt Fostalina leave and come here. Home one, home two, and home three. There are four homes inside Mother of Bones's head: home before the white people came to steal our country, and a king ruled; home when the white people came to steal our country and then there was war; home when black people got our

> stolen country back after independence; and then the home of now.
>
> (Bulawayo, *We Need New Names* 191-2)

For these characters, Zimbabwe is not, and has never been, a concrete, stable category. Here, *We Need New Names* can be read as Afropolitan in the sense that the characters are multiply local, and do not exist simply within the binary between the West and Africa.[41] Darling's existence as an epiphenomenal subject supports this reading of the novel as Afropolitan, embracing Wright's theory which similarly challenges the white-black and West-Africa dichotomy.

In its titular expression of the need for new names, *We Need New Names* is driven by a desire to problematize and deconstruct the ways in which the world is categorized and constructed. In an interview with Alice Driver, Bulawayo describes this desire as specific to Zimbabwe, but relevant for the rest of the globe:

> In *We Need New Names*, I was writing about things that were going on at home, so it was my quiet way of saying, "we need new names, you can remove names, we need a new president, new ways of thinking of ourselves, new ways of being." But I also feel like it is something that can transcend the Zimbabwean space. I see it as a movement that can happen anywhere. I think the rest of the world can take something from it or apply itself in the equation.
>
> (21)

This desire for new frames of reference can be extended to global politics. *We Need New Names* disrupts the patriotic history of the ZANU-PF government as well as the neo-colonial global positioning of Zimbabwe and the experiences of the African immigrant to the West in general. By choosing a female child narrator, as well as a collective voice, Bulawayo allows those communities who were and continue to be disadvantaged in Zimbabwe to speak back to dominant nationalist narratives and to remember their histories from different points of view. She also examines the extent to which immigrants to the West can become complicit in neo-colonial representations of Africa.

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[41] Afropolitanism's focus on mobility, however, resists this reading of the novel, as Darling is not able to travel, nor does she travel by choice. This class bias towards voluntary mobility within Afropolitanism is part of why Afropolitanism is so contested. See Emma Dabiri, *Why I Am Not An Afropolitan.*

By the end of the novel, Darling is full of doubt about whether she should ever have left Zimbabwe. However, because she left at such a young age, she could not fully understand the implications of the decision and did not have much of a choice. And once she is old enough to understand the implications of immigration, she is unable to return. In both *We Need New Names* and *Playing in the Light*, the protagonist is unable to return to her originary home as it is constantly in flux and exists predominantly in their memories. In this way Wicomb and Bulawayo problematize race as an adequate mode of representing and categorizing the world. *We Need New Names*, however, rather than focussing on the trauma of the colonial past, gestures towards the future by demanding new frames of reference. Bulawayo is especially concerned with issues of representation in her critique of neo-colonialism and post-independence Zimbabwean nationalism, also problematizes nationality.

Chapter Three: Commercialized Representation: Authenticity and Audience in

Erasure and _We Need New Names_

Both African American and African diasporic literature have, historically speaking, lacked diverse representations of black subjects.[42] Everett's _Erasure_ and Bulawayo's _We Need New Names_ use the novel form to represent epiphenomenal moments of blackness and Africa(nness) in order to resist homogenous representations of Africa and blackness in an increasingly globalized literary market. This discussion will first address the ways in which the formal aspects of the novels allow the authors to navigate the double-bind between the market's demands and the representation of 'authentic' lived experiences, and secondly outline the specific navigations of identity which occur in each novel. In other words, this chapter explores how the authors of both works seek to "change the valences of the burdens of black writing in a society where people presume to know in advance what one will say" (Reed 21).

NoViolet Bulawayo's _We Need New Names_ and Percival Everett's _Erasure_ explore experiences of coming of age in black America. These novels disrupt the (Western) literary market's expectations for representations of Africa(nness) and blackness, and necessitate an ethical process of reading. This ethical reading process may lead the reader to an epiphenomenal process of interpreting Africa(nness) and blackness. Explaining that globality is the "point at which globalization's imperatives (as primarily a force of cultural creolisation) have apparently been 'reached'" (4), Shabangu theorizes such disruption of the market's expectations as a way of navigating the "double-bind" of African migrant writing in which the writer is caught between "the market's demand for the ethnographic imperative [. . .] and the framing of the linguistic operation of globality as cultural globalisation" (30). Although based on his specific study of a selection of African migrant writing, Shabangu's theory is applicable to Percival Everett's _Erasure_, as Everett's metatextual portrayal of a literary market which demands portrayals of 'black America,' can be read as an ethnographic

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[42] See M. Wright _Physics of Blackness_.

imperative insofar as it entails the representation of an ethnic Other. The market's desire for narratives which, on the one hand portray an exoticized, ethnic Other, and on the other hand reassure the reader that their experience of humanity is universal forces the racially and/or geographically Othered author to simultaneously present their subjects as Others as well as parts of a universal globalized culture.

Erasure is as much a parody of what Everett perceives to be the market's desire in terms of African American fiction, as well as the publishing process itself. By writing a critique of the market's concern with identity politics which is ironically and primarily concerned with these very politics, he brings the reader's attention to the processes of writing, and by extension, this highlights the ethics of their own reading processes. The novel's protagonist, Thelonious 'Monk' Ellison, defies his society's expectations at every turn. His failure to fit into his society's expectations of African American masculinity positions him at the margins of African American communities, as he does not fit in with other black men in his age cohort. He is also positioned at the margins of the literary market because there is no market desire for the novels he wants to write. The miscategorization of Monk's novels, which are shelved in bookstores with the work of other African American authors rather than with the obscure genres they more accurately fit into, upends his literary career. Because the literary market expects African American authors to write about identity politics almost exclusively, when Monk fails to do so, his books do not sell. His inability to reconcile his literary projects with the market's desires and expectations thus makes him invisible to his potential readers and robs him of financial success. Everett's use of an author figure as his protagonist and his inclusion of the machineries of the publishing process in the novel's plot, foreground his preoccupation with issues of representation.[43]

While the process and politics of publication are not as overtly examined in *We Need New Names,* issues of representation are a concern for Bulawayo. She explains in an interview with Alice Driver that: "[she] finds [her]self writing women's stories, women at the margins [. . .] [she is] thinking in terms of activism . . . for [her] it's not

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[43] Please see Chapter 1: "Erasing the Invisible Man," of this thesis for a plot summary of *Erasure*.

conscious" (7–9). Albeit presenting her as a full and complex character, positioning her protagonist as fundamentally marginalized through her race, gender, class, fragmented familial relations and (illegal) immigrant status, Bulawayo asserts in *We Need New Names* a feminist (un)consciousness that foregrounds female subjective experiences. Although it focuses on male characters, *Erasure* interrogates the limitations which patriarchy places on black men.

In particular, both novels explore the failure of the heteronormative patriarchal family unit through their depictions of failed and/or absent father figures. Where *Erasure* satirizes the stereotypes surrounding African American masculinity and fatherhood, *We Need New Names* explores the implications of a failing patriarchal system for women and girls. Critiquing the failure of the heteronormative patriarchal family through the use of the carnivalesque, Bulawayo's novel, like *Erasure*, is permeated by satire and dark humour, and the literary subgenres of comedy and parody.

According to Susanne Reichl and Mark Sten, "there is wide disagreement in the critical literature as to what humour and laughter are" (4). Although contested, incongruity theory has been the most common method of analysis for comedy. As Jerry Farber explains, incongruity theory involves the juxtaposition of two incongruous statements to produce humour. This theory, however, does not account for cases of incongruity which are not humorous. In an attempt to work around this problem, Farber argues that:

> When the linked, incongruous [statements] in the humorous situation suddenly and temporarily [alter] the relationship between a pair of well-established counterpositions in the perceiver [. . .] and does so in a way that keeps both of these counterpositions in play, something happens that can be compared [. . .] to current flowing across a spark gap (72).

Due to the combination between performance and specific moments of interpretation, this phenomenological reading of humour bears some resemblance to Michelle Wright's theory of blackness. Because humour takes place in the moment in which the

perceiver's expectations of the relationship between counterpositions are contradicted, it is inherently subversive.

This subversion is enhanced in both novels by somewhat experimental forms. *Erasure*'s use of Monk's journal as a framing structure for the novel constantly brings attention to its status as a text. *We Need New Names* likewise confronts the reader with its textual status by interspersing Darling's first person narration with chapters written in a collective voice. These experimental expansions of the novel form and their episodic, non-linear plots bring the reader's attention not only to the textual nature of the novel, but to the ways in which the protagonist's identities shift epiphenomenally between specific spatio-temporal moments. By bringing the reader's attention to the medium, these authors confront their audiences with their own expectations; this encourages the reader to interrogate their expectations and their reading processes, and thus afford more complex readings of African and African American novels.

Comedy and the Carnivalesque in *Erasure* and *We Need New Names*

Everett's use of comedy in *Erasure* serves a similar function to that of the child narrator in *We Need New Names*. As literary tools for resistance and subversion, both Everett's comedy and Bulawayo's use of the carnivalesque allow the authors, as Ralph Ellison has theorized, "an otherwise unavailable clarification of vision that calms the clammy trembling which ensues whenever we pierce the veil of convention" ("An Extravagance of Laughter" 146). Ellison here describes the space for resistance and contravention which comedy and strategic inversion afford. Both novels are characterized by strategic inversions: where Everett uses parody as his method of inversion, Bulawayo inverts the power dynamics of patriarchal nationalism by relegating her male characters to the margins of the narrative. These inversions allow Everett and Bulawayo to navigate the double-bind between market expectations and their authorial expressions in which they find themselves by simultaneously foregrounding and subverting the reader's expectations.

The episodic and fragmented forms of *Erasure* and *We Need New Names* allow the authors to express creatively Wright's interpretation of epiphenomenal identities. By portraying his protagonist's identity as multifaceted, fragmented and constantly shifting between spatio-temporal moments, Everett depicts blackness in a way that does not homogenize or essentialize. As he flickers between the persona he uses to avoid acknowledging authorship of *My Pafology/Fuck*, Stagg R Leigh, Monk experiences his blackness differently as he is variously interpreted as authentic and inauthentic. His use of parodic comedy can be theorized as epiphenomenal insofar as it takes place within the moment of interpretation. In this way Everett provides opportunities for the subversion of market expectations.

Linda Hutcheon describes parody as depending as much on the encoder as the perceiver, as the reader of a parody is responsible for recognizing it as parody (26–7). This is demonstrated in Monk's parodic metatext, *My Pafology/Fuck* which critiques what the literary market perceives as authentic representations of African American life. Ironically, though, *My Pafology/Fuck* is not recognized as parody, but rather

praised for its authenticity. In this regard, Hutcheon's definition of parody as "repetition with ironic critical distance" (xii) brings to mind the African American tradition of minstrelsy, in which African American comedians in the early twentieth century used their performances in blackface minstrel shows as polysemic avenues of resisting racism (36). African American blackface performances were a reclamation of the commodification of black bodies (Lott, "The Seeming Counterfeit" 223). Blackface minstrelsy, when performed by its white originators, commodified the image of blackness, and allowed for the proliferation of racist stereotypes (223). Eric Lott reads blackface minstrelsy as an effort to "maintain control over a potentially subversive act [and] to ridicule" (229). Therefore, when used by black performers, blackface minstrelsy can be read as a subversive parody of white blackface performances.

But, in order to be subversive, parody is necessarily dependent on the ability of the audience to recognize it as such, because of the central paradox of parody, which is that it must always reinforce what it critiques. Because "[p]aradoxically, their acts also perpetuated popular racist stereotypes of black people, which had to be part of the content for them to be allowed to perform at all," (36) these comedians would address concerns with American racism from behind the mask of blackface. According to Charles Nichols "black people have learned to survive behind the mask" (105), and Everett's similar deployment of parody in *My Pafology/Fuck* signposts to the reader of *Erasure* that they are responsible for recognizing subversive aspects of the novel as subversive. Indeed, in that Monk uses the persona of Stagg R Leigh to perform his authorship of the novel, *My Pafology/Fuck* itself can be read as a blackface performance. It is an imitation of what Monk sees as a commodified and white-created image of blackness. Everett makes this link explicit by quoting a Rudyard Kipling poem during a description of *My Pafology/Fuck*'s critical reception: "Of all them black-faced crew/The finest man I knew/Was our regimental bhisti, Gunga Din" (254). For Tony Schirato, Gunga Din is a racialized Other who submits to racist treatment

and desires to assimilate into whiteness – in other words, an 'uncle Tom' figure (49).[44] Everett therefore uses this reference not only to link *My Pafology/Fuck* to blackface minstrel performances, but also to align the critics who accept and praise *My Pafology/Fuck* as authentic with the uncle Tom figure.

Bulawayo's mediation of her social and political critique through a layer of carnivalesque subversion in this way bears some resemblance to the African American minstrel tradition of comedy which reinforces stereotypes in order to create a temporary space for protest. She subverts the reader's expectations by alternating between her first person narrator and her collective narrator. This fragmentation of the narrative as well as her carnivalesque inversion of the power dynamics under patriarchy and the children's carnivalesque behaviour form the core of her satire. Hazel Tafadzwa Ngoshi reads Bulawayo's use of the carnivalesque as a way of initiating a postcolonial protest in an environment where overt dissent is not viable (55). In order to be published and read, therefore, Bulawayo must, to some extent, reproduce narratives of Zimbabwe and Africa more broadly as violent and poverty-stricken. The novel's rendering of the carnivalesque, therefore in both form and the children's behaviour becomes a way for Bulawayo to present the reader with their (often stereotyping) expectations and then subvert them; creating a temporary space in which protest can take place without (uncritical) censure either of the children or Bulawayo herself.

The expectation that Bulawayo present Zimbabwe and Africa in general as violent and poverty-stricken comes from a literary prize culture where prizes are awarded to African authors from Western organizations. The Caine prize, which Bulawayo herself won for her short story "Hitting Budapest,"[45] has been accused of creating and/or reinforcing this dynamic. Bulawayo explicitly links the Caine prize with commodification in an interview with Irenosen Okojie for the Caine Prize blog: "When the Caine Prize is mentioned, I remember I've spent all the money" (15). Although made as a joke, this statement links literary prizes and the commodification of

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[44] 'Uncle Tom,' is a derogatory term for black subjects who attempt to assimilate into white hegemony.

[45] This short story later evolved into the first chapter of *We Need New Names*.

literature explicitly. Bulawayo' citation of the prize as what "showed [her] that [she] could make it" (15) emphasizes the level of influence these literary prizes have on the careers of authors who might otherwise not have the time or resources to make a living from writing. The material conditions of literary commodification necessitate the author's navigation of this double-bind through literary subversion.

To this end, Darling and her peers exhibit carnivalesque behaviour throughout the novel. Throughout the Zimbabwean section of *We Need New Names*, Darling and her friends show little regard for authority or the separation between the sacred and the profane. They often flout the rules set by their parents and the law. In the chapter titled "Blak Power," the children defy a security guard who urges them to leave the suburb, Budapest, where they often steal guavas. Leaving Chipo's vomit uncovered,[46] the children defy the security guard by defacing the neighbourhood. The children's mockery of the security guard's overly formal language here as well as their mockery of cutlery use at the end of the chapter, can be read as the mockery of Eurocentric, white standards of civilization.

Darling's skepticism towards authority revealed in her defiance of the security guard, extends to religious authority. The obscenity of Prophet Revelations Bitchington Mborro's name is "symbolic of the vulgarity of his religious authority," where 'Mborro' in everyday language in Zimbabwe translates to 'penis' in Shona when spelt with a single 'r' (Wilkinson 56). Bulawayo's choice of a phallic name for the Prophet emphasizes the vulgarity of his actions and therefore disrupts the sacredness of his position in the community. Throughout the novel, Prophet Revelations Bitchington Mborro manipulates his community. Both Bitchington Mborro and the traditional healer Vodloza demand payment in US dollars for their services. The commodification of spirituality in a community as poverty-stricken as Paradise is exploitative. The contrast between Mother of Bone's mismatched shoes and Bitchington Mborro's new robes for the Easter service show the wealth imbalance between him and his community. In Paradise, religion does not regulate the morality or ethics of the community, but rather reinforces and exacerbates the exploitative

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[46] She is suffering from morning sickness.

patriarchal actions of Paradise's men. Compounding the sexual assault of the woman in the purple dress, the actions of the church congregation demonstrate the scapegoating of women. When asked to admit their sins, the men of the congregation remain seated and silent, highlighting how religion "becomes a means by which women are made inferior, positioned as sinful failing beings who constantly need to seek forgiveness and approval from the more powerful members of society" (Wilkinson 128).

Other than Darling's skepticism towards religious and governmental authority, another prominent example of carnivalesque behaviour in the novel is the children's fascination with excrement. Where Ngoshi reads this fascination as profanation, Joshua Esty's reading of excrement in postcolonial fiction as a "[signal of] a wide cultural reorientation in which questions about nationalist excess began to mute the celebrations of independence" (24). In this way, the portrayal of excrement in the novel can be read as a form of resistance to patriarchal nationalism. The children's lack of access to sanitation is frequently mentioned throughout the Zimbabwean section of the novel, often following the scenes where the children steal guavas:

> By the time we get back to Paradise the guavas are finished and our stomachs are so full we are almost crawling. We stop to defecate in the bush because we have eaten too much [. . .] Nobody says it, but I know we are constipated again, all of us, because it's the only way to kill our hunger, and when it comes to defecating, we get in so much pain it becomes an almost impossible task, like you are trying to give birth to a country. (15)

Bulawayo's emphasis on the digestion and expulsion of these guavas stolen from the white suburb can be read as "a sign of the actively repudiated ex-colonizer, the alien and unwanted residue of a sometimes violent political expulsion" (Esty 30). This particular scene can be read as a metaphor for the postcolonial situation in Zimbabwe, as the children are unable to properly process the resources taken from the white suburb. The defacement of a bathroom mirror using human feces by black nationalists later in "Blak Power" supports a politicized reading of excrement in *We Need New Names*:

we all leave the kitchen to hunt for the toilet. Our stomachs are so full they could explode. We walk like elephants because we are heavy, and the food has made us tired. We find the toilet at the end of the long passage. There is a big white round thing where they bathe, then there is the glass shower, the soaps, the gadgets and things. There is also a terrible reeking smell, and we look at the other end, and there, near the toilet, we see the words *Blak Power* written in brown feces on the large bathroom mirror (130).

Esty argues that "excremental satire operates as a reflexive narrative mode driven by the tension between the postcolonial subject and the demands of national allegory," (44) in other words, excrement can be read as marking the boundary between the private and the public, as well as between nationalist narratives and individual concerns. This tension between the individual and the collective can be read in terms of Shabangu's double bind, as the market expects and prescribes that the concerns of the individual protagonist represent the concerns of their collective. While the concerns of the individual and the concerns of the collective are inextricably entangled, Bulawayo ensures that Darling's story is not the "single story of Zimbabwe" (Coetzee 139).

By refusing to collapse the tension between the concerns of the local collective and migrant individual, *We Need New Names*, foregrounds and then subverts the expectations and demands of the global literary market. Because Darling is not portrayed as representative of her collective, the novel does not fulfill the market's desire for the ethnographic imperative. By presenting Darling's concerns as primarily unique to her, the novel does not fulfill the market's expectation to present the linguistic formation of globality as cultural globalization. Through a similar use of parody, Everett, in *Erasure*, encourages reader awareness of their own role in the narrative, and their complicity in the reinforcement and reproduction of stereotyped portrayals of African American life. Therefore, both *We Need New Names* and *Erasure* use traditionally subversive literary forms in order to navigate the double-bind in which they are trapped.

Gendered Representations of Blackness and the Process of Ethical Reading

Failed Patriarch(ies) in *We Need New Names*

In the absence of adequate male role models in *We Need New Names*, Bulawayo presents maternal love as an alternative solution. The failure of men to fulfill their traditional patriarchal roles of protector and provider creates an environment in which women have no choice but to carry the weight of childcare and the advancement of their society. As with Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions*,[47] despite the failure of traditional patriarchs, Darling's society clings to the patriarchal traditions and male-centric narratives of Zimbabwean patriotism. Bulawayo's critical reading of women, therefore, can be read as a criticism of Zimbabwean nationalism and the heteronormative patriarchal ideologies that inform it.

Throughout *We Need New Names*, the characters who provide parental care for Darling are women, but, because of various social and financial pressures, they are not able to do so properly. The first character who cares for Darling is her biological mother who, having been abandoned by her husband, is forced to take on the sole responsibility for both the emotional and financial well-being of the family. This financial responsibility forces her to go to the border between Zimbabwe and South Africa to trade. Under similar financial pressures, the second character who cares for Darling, Aunt Fostalina, is also often absent. Although at first Darling's living situation in America seems as if it would provide her with more attention and caregiving from adults, Fostalina's long work hours and self-absorption undermine her parenting role.

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[47] *Nervous Conditions* is a canonical postcolonial novel about a young woman named Tambu. Tambu fights to be educated, and is sent to a mission school after her brother dies. Now living with her uncle, Babamukuru, who is the head of the mission school, Tambu is faced with the nervous conditions of postcoloniality. She watches Babamukuru struggle to reconcile his children's westernization with his traditional role as the patriarch of the family, as Nyasha, her cousin, rebels against patriarchal traditions.

The absence of parental care leaves Darling and her friends vulnerable to media they should be protected from. In the chapter titled "This Film Contains Some Disturbing Images," Darling and her friends Marina and Kristal watch and imitate pornography in Darling's basement. Having already exhausted multiple categories of pornography, the girls choose to follow a link sent to them by Kristal's friend Alexis. This link leads them to a video which disturbs them far more than anything they have previously seen:

> The first thing we see is the caption *This film contains some disturbing images*. [. . .] Then this gang of women comes in and pounces on the girl, pinning her down. I am reminded, from the way they are doing it, of how men back home would hold down a goat during slaughter, or how Prophet Revelations Bitchington Mborro and the Evangelists held down the pretty woman on the mountain to exorcise her demon. [. . .] By now I have my legs pressed together tight. I glance at Kristal and Marina and they have the same posture. [. . .] When the knife reaches the girl, Marina gets up, and we hear her running up the stairs. [. . .] Kristal and I sit there, not moving, just staring, and I know, from how we are looking at each other, that we will never talk about what we have seen (213)

Unlike the previous videos, the girls do not imitate or mock the acts they are watching, but rather sit in silence, gradually folding in on themselves. Darling's comparison, here, between the film and Prophet Revelations Bitchington Mborro's assault of the woman in the purple dress in Zimbabwe suggests a similar, albeit mediated and differentiated, vulnerability to sexual violence in America.

The men in Darling's life are also absent. Darling's father and Uncle Kojo are the most obvious renditions of the failed patriarchal family in the novel. Her father's absence, failure to provide for his family and his eventual burdensome return is a reversal of the parent/child relationship, underwriting a failed national patriarchy. This sense of failure is accentuated in Darling's repeated mental negation of him: "Now Father is in South Africa, working, but he never writes, never sends us money, never nothing. It makes me angry thinking about him so most of the time I just pretend he doesn't exist; it's better this way" (22–3). Because she must keep his sickness a secret due to the social stigma surrounding HIV/AIDS, Darling is unable to tell her friends

about her father's return or the real reason that she must stay home. Her father later becomes a financial burden on the family when Prophet Revelations Bitchington Mborro, a priest who exploits the spiritual needs of Paradise, demands US dollars in exchange for an attempt to heal his illness. Although he is physically present, Darling's father does not have a meaningful relationship with her; having seemingly forgotten who she is, calling her "[m]y son. My boy" (90). Despite his physical presence, therefore, he still fails to communicate with or provide for his family, and Darling's desire to forget his existence transforms into a wish for his death. Lizzy Attree argues that "the depiction of the health of the individual male disrupts conceptions of a stable patriarchal masculinity that in turn upholds the hegemony of male power in the nation" (59). Darling's father's illness, therefore, can be read as symbolic of the failure of Zimbabwean postcolonial patriarchal nationalism to function in the Zimbabwean postcolonial situation.

As Darling's uncle and Aunt Fostalina's husband, Kojo acts as a father-figure for Darling once she moves to America. While Kojo encourages Darling in terms of her education, his involvement in her upbringing remains minimal. Hailing from Ghana, Kojo has a different experience of diaspora from Fostalina and Darling who are Zimbabwean. His sense of alienation is highlighted in his inability to communicate with them in their home language. This linguistic isolation is exacerbated by his son, TK's, inability to relate to him culturally because he is born and raised in America. This conflict between Kojo and TK is first introduced during Darling's description of her new home. After commenting on the snow outside, Darling narrates an argument between Kojo, Fostalina, and TK. Kojo is introduced as a controlling and authoritative husband, although his attempts to control Fostalina are ineffective. TK is generally slovenly and disrespectful to his father. Kojo's criticism of Fostalina's self-emaciating, compulsive exercise habits which render her "bones bones bones. All bones" (152) in her efforts to fit into American standards of beauty, are motivated by his sense of a familial loss of African values. His later criticism of the way TK wears his pants (slung low in an Americanized fashion related to hip-hop culture) in this scene further evinces

his disappointment with his family's indifference to Ghanain cultural expression and values.

For Kojo, TK's stereotypical African American masculinity and assimilation into American patriarchy, realized in his desire to join the US army, represents Kojo's worst fears. TK's ambitions reflect national studies on limited career options for African American males in particular.[48] These studies show that, since the early 2000s, African Americans have been overrepresented in the military.[49] While the correlation between military enlistment and race seems to be based more on socio-economic factors than on race, TK's choice to join the military suggests some degree of American patriotism rooted in the desire for racial (African-American) assimilation. He also exhibits American patriotism when he meets Darling: "TK, who is supposed to be my cousin even though I have never seen him before, says, This is America, yo, you won't see none of that African shit up in this motherfucker" (147). As such, despite the educational opportunities and success that America apparently signifies, TK's decision to forgo college in order to enlist in the army underlines Kojo's sense of cultural and familial alienation and his subsequent descent into depression and alcoholism.

Kojo and TK have an antagonistic relationship throughout the novel. He uses the word "motherfucker," to address Kojo so often, that Darling thinks of the word as "TK's word" (167). Kojo's emasculation and failure as a father-figure to TK extends to his relationship with Darling, or rather the lack thereof. Throughout the novel, he is either absent or preoccupied with the television, later he functions continuously as the butt of Darling's jokes. In this regard, the final section written in the collective voice in titled "How They Lived," although framed as a general statement on the particular experience of illegal immigrants to America, can be read as a description of Kojo's experience. The collective narrator's lament, at the general inability of migrants to teach their children their customs and traditions echoes Kojo's attempts to prevent TK's growing Americanization:

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[48] See Kleykamp, "College, Jobs, or the Military? Enlistment During a Time of Way" and Lutz, "Who Joins the MIlitary?: A Look at Race, Class and Immigration Status."
[49] See Kleykamp, "College, Jobs, or the Military? Enlistment During a Time of Way" and Lutz, "Who Joins the Military?: A Look at Race, Class and Immigration Status."

When we got to America we took our dreams, looked at them tenderly as if they were newly born children, and put them away: we would not be pursuing them. We would never be the things we had wanted to be: doctors, lawyers, teachers, engineers. [. . .] And then our own children were born. We held their American birth certificates tight. We did not name our children after our parents, after ourselves; we feared if we did they would not be able to say their own names [. . .] When our children were born, we did not bury their umbilical cords under the earth to bind them to the land because we had no land to call ours. We did not hold their heads over smoking herbs to make them strong, did not tie fetishes around their waists to protect them from evil spirits, did not brew beer and spill tobacco on the earth to announce their arrivals to the ancestors. Instead, we smiled. (241–7)

First-generation immigrants, for the narrator, are not afforded the same cultural protections and traditions as their parents. Bulawayo's choice to name him TK without explaining what the letters stand for positions him as an example of a child whose name "[does] not mean anything [to his parents]" (247). The collective narrator here explains Kojo's transferral of his dreams onto TK and Darling. Although Kojo does hold an American tertiary education, it is unclear whether he was able to follow the dreams he came to America to pursue. The narrator provides further insight into Kojo's feelings about his sacrifices which afford TK an American birth certificate and thus the reasons for his anger at TK's decision to join the military rather than following what Kojo sees as a more meaningful dream. This parental absence evinces the need for revised or transformed familial structures.

Despite the lack of parental supervision in Darling's life and the sexual violence she subsequently witnesses, the novel's tone remains light. In light of her age, her tendency not to narrate how these events affect her emotionally or psychologically may be due partly to her inability to fully understand them as traumatic or violent. Considering the type of violence she witnesses is part of her everyday life, she may also have normalized it. The most disturbing instance of this occurs in the scene where Darling and her friends attempt to perform an abortion on Chipo with a coat hanger. Simulating popular American television and the medical practitioners that it portrays, their graphic description of how an abortion can be performed using a coat hanger

places the children in a precarious space between "innocent and not innocent" (Driver 11), revealing a childish cognitive dissonance between what they know about pregnancy and their naive desire to help Chipo remove her "stomach."

In her interview with Driver, Bulawayo explains her use of a matter-of-fact tone as a way to avoid overwhelming her reader, but also to encourage her reader to interrogate why Darling may view violence as normal:

> What I find interesting is that, as much as the violence that they have experienced has been normalized, they don't get to talking about what has happened to her, and they go on playing. You know, the abortion scene is part of the everyday. It was necessary to bring that light touch as a way of getting people asking why. [. . .] I'm aware that I am a storyteller. I wanted to make it impossible for somebody to put down the book and say, "This is too much." (12–14).

Bulawayo's narrative normalization of violence, while reflecting her child narrator's inability to adequately express or process the emotional impact of the violence she is subject to, necessitates a process of ethical reading. Contrary to Carli Coetzee's observation that some readers may read over the subversive aspects of the novel in order to reinforce their perceptions of the African migrant novel and Africa more broadly (132), the burden of filling in what Darling is unable or unwilling to articulate here rests on the reader.

Because both TK's and Kojo's experiences are mediated through Darling's narration, it is difficult to determine their own feelings about their identities. By portraying TK as fat, lazy and rude as well as aligning him with African American masculinity Bulawayo arguably fails to problematize stereotypical representations of African American men. But, when read in the context of Bulawayo's critique of patriarchal masculinity, Kojo's failures in particular become a critique of patriarchal nationalism. At one point in the novel, Kojo sees Robert Mugabe, the former president and leader of the post-colonial Zimbabwean government, on television: "the president of our country came on TV during the BBC news. He was raising his fists and speaking, saying how our country is a black man's home and would never be a colony again [. . .] [Kojo] saluted the TV and shouted, Tell them Mr President, tell those

bloody colonists" (192–3). Indicatively, in his admiration of Robert Mugabe, Kojo is aligned with patriarchal African nationalism, and can therefore be read as an allegory for failed patriarchy on a national level.

Bulawayo's focus on female and marginalized characters can be read as a protest of the patriarchal and male-centric narratives of Zimbabwean patriotism propagated by the post-independence Zimbabwe government. Her critique of the narrative of the third *Chimurenga* is clear in the description of Darling's nightmares about Operation *Murambatsvina*: "Gayigusu kicks broken bricks with his bare feet and rips his shirt off and jabs at the terrible scar running across his back and bellows, I got this from the liberation war,[50] salilwelilizwe leli, we fought for this facking lizwe mani, we put them in power, and today they turn on us like a snake, mpthu, and he spits" (67).[51] Gayigusu's bitter tone here emphasizes the disenchantment of disenfranchized Zimbabweans. As victims of Operation *Murambatsvina*, the residents of Paradise do not live there voluntarily. It was the forced move to Paradise which created and/or correlated with the breakdown of the society in which the children stop attending school, fathers are forced to leave the country to find work, and the structure of the family unit breaks down. However, further problematizing the heteronormative patriarchal family unit in America as a solution to Darling's vulnerability and unstable identity, Bulawayo continues and accentuates her global critique of patriarchal

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[50] The liberation war to which Gayigusu refers is the war of the 1970s in which white settler rule was ousted in favour of black majority rule (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 10).
[51] The word 'chimurenga' can be translated loosely to 'revolutionary struggle.' According to Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni, "'Chimurenga,'[. . .] became the rallying cry for ZANU-PF and the foundation for a complex, politically usable narrative in ZANU-PF's bid to [. . .] assume political power at the end of settler colonial rule. It was and is premised on a doctrine of permanent nationalist revolution against imperialism and colonialism; it has involved the harnessing of precolonial and colonial historical moments to formulate an indigenous and vernacular conception of a nationalist revolution that links the resistance of the 1890s to the nationalist struggles of the 1970s" (3). The discourse of *Chimurenga*, therefore, is based on a patriarchal nationalist narrative of ZANU-PF's reclamation of Zimbabwe from colonial and settler control. There are three *Chimurengas* in Zimbabwean history. These three stages mark the transition from colonialism to independence and then to an African nationalism which involved ethnic cleansing and the expropriation of white-owned land in order to create a monolithic nation (7).

nationalism. As such, putative categories and dichotomies between the West and Africa, black and white, and parent and child in *We Need New Names* are universally disrupted and critiqued. Bulawayo's Afropolitan desire to challenge these polarizations, particularly between Africa and the West bears some resemblance to Everett's post-black desire in *Erasure* to break down the dichotomies between black and white in America.

Interrogating Black Masculinities in *Erasure*

Like *We Need New Names*, Percival Everett's *Erasure* interrogates what it means to come of age in black America, including what this means for subjects of different genders. African American masculinities have historically been defined by negative stereotypes. Daniel Patrick Moynihan's 1965 report titled, *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*, is a case in point. It was written in an effort to explain the socio-economic imbalances between black Americans and white Americans during the Civil Rights Movement. One of the most often referenced studies of this kind, according to Roderick Ferguson, it "helped to authorize a hegemonic discourse that understood non heteronormative racial differences as deviant" (111). In the report, Moynihan cites the dissolution of the patriarchal family unit as the main reason for the poverty of African American communities. These stereotypes paint African American men as socially irresponsible, sexually promiscuous, and criminally minded. According to bell hooks, the portrait of black masculinity that emerges from studies of urban black life "perpetually constructs black men as 'failures' who are psychologically 'fucked up,' dangerous, violent, sex maniacs whose insanity is informed by their inability to fulfill their phallocentric masculine destiny in a racist context" (*Black Looks* 89). This is exacerbated by portraits of a pathological matriarchal African American household – of which the Moynihan report is one of the most prominent – in which the simultaneous emasculation and hypersexualization of African American men renders black masculinity both over-determined and under-defined.

Everett's satire of these stereotypes takes place mainly through the protagonist of Monk's parodic novel, *My Pafology/Fuck*, Van Go Jenkins. The literary market's complicity in underwriting African American stereotypes is revealed through the critical acclamation of *My Pafology/Fuck* for its authenticity. This acclamation demonstrates the market's deliberate ignorance and delimiting of alternative expressions of masculinity to those represented by Van Go. Along with Juanita May Jenkin's *We's Lives in Da Ghetto*, the other fictional novel in *Erasure* which is praised

for its 'authentic' portrayal of African American life, the reception of *My Pafology/Fuck* presents stereotyped representations of African American men and women as the standards of authenticity against which Monk and his family are measured.[52] Van Go is an apparently 'authentic' African American male who fathers children he has no intention of parenting, despite his appeals to the contrary. Everett here portrays exactly the pattern of absent fatherhood attributed to the predominant and normative idea that childcare is a primarily female activity and responsibility. With attention brought to his physicality and potential for (gender-based) violence throughout *My Pafology/Fuck*, Van Go is typical of historical representations of the African American man as a body "primarily ruled by brute strength and natural instincts," these being "characteristics that allegedly fostered deviant behaviours of promiscuity and violence" (Collins 152).

Introduced in a dream in which he murders his mother, Van Go aligns himself with stereotypical representations of fatherless African American men as violent: "I stab her cause I scared. I stab Mama cause I love her. I stab Mama cause I hate her. Cause I love her. Cause I hate her. Cause I ain't got no daddy" (Everett, *Erasure* 65). Here, Van Go seems to be teasing out the meaning of his own actions either to justify them, or simply to make sense of them. By drawing a causal relationship between his violence and his lack of a father figure, Van Go shifts the responsibility for his actions onto his purportedly pathological society. But the centrality of "I," here, also shows that this act of violence is not about Van Go's mother, but about Van Go himself. Everett's use of the word "Cause" rather than "cuz," emphasizes Van Go's attempts to create a causal relationship between his circumstances and his behaviour. It is odd that "cause" would be used instead of the more phonetic "cuz," as the vernacular used

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[52] The protagonist of *We's Lives in da Ghetto*, Sharonda F'rinda Johnson, is the single mother of three children as well as the caretaker for her drug addict mother and disabled brother. Sharonda, as the "epitome of the black matriarchal symbol of strength" is offered financial success only through work which commodifies her body – first sex work, and later dance. Her success is measured in relation to her ability to take care of others, as her goal at the end of the novel is to "raise enough money to get her babies back from the state" (Everett 39–40). This narrow definition of African American femininity which hinges on commodified physicality is similarly problematic to the masculinity depicted through Van Go.

throughout *My Pafology/Fuck* is often exaggerated to the point of hyperbole. The use of stabbing imagery and the central "I" in this passage is echoed later in the novel during Van Go's rape of Penelope Dalton: "I spreads her open and stabs her. I stab her again" (108). The literal equivocation of the phallus with a weapon here emphasizes the link between Van Go's sexuality and his potential for violence. Where the theoretical link between the phallus and power has been made most prominently by Jacques Lacan, feminist theorist Elizabeth Grosz reads the phallus as "the crucial signifier in the distribution of power, authority and a speaking position, a kind of mark or badge of social position" (125). Van Go seems to treat sexual conquest as a first resort for expressing power over women and mitigating the insecurities caused by his low socio-economic status. This is evident in his rape of Penelope as well as his earlier rape of Cleona. Deborah Luepnitz reads Lacan's 'phallus' as a symbol of the desire for autonomy. The phallus, if read through a Lacanian lense, therefore, can be read as Van Go's chief (and arguably only) source of power. The link between the phallus and power and the phallus and a weapon positions violence and power as mutually dependent. Van Go's masculinity is therefore inherently violent, and thus toxic. Notwithstanding that his sexual prowess is defined by the ability to reproduce, Van Go can be read as a personification of toxic masculinity which is viewed as a corollary of 'authentic' blackness.

Where Monk identifies himself as "no good at basketball," his protagonist Van Go claims that he had the potential to play on the professional level but was too masculine to submit to coaching: "I wasn't about to suck no coach's dick for a chance to play" (*Erasure* 3, 79). Patricia Hill Collins, in her book *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender and the New Racism*, identifies professional sports as an avenue through which American society continues to exploit and commodify the black male body, and this is explored in the novel through discussions of Monk and Van Go's proficiency at basketball. Whether Van Go exaggerates his basketball ability for the reader's benefit (and is therefore not good enough to play on the professional level), or whether he is simply too self-aggrandizing to submit to coaching and, therefore, sabotages his own potential for success, remains unclear. TK, in *We Need New Names*,

is similarly commodified within the military. African American men in both novels seem to have access to physical and high-risk occupations rather than well-paid intellectual work. This can be read as the universal commodification of the black male body.

The psychological interplay of two different forms of masculinity is evident in Van Go's thoughts about his and his peers' career prospects. He explains:

> There be two lil' niggers in my head. Nigger A and Nigger B. Nigger A say, Be cool bro, you know you ain't gots no money so just let this girl go on back to school and through maf class and English class and socle studies so she can get out an be sumpin. But Nigger B be laughin, say, Shit, take this bitch home to her house and hit it [. . .] Fuck school. She ain't gon be no nurse. She ain't gon be nuffin. (79)

As a stereotyped portrayal of African American masculinity against which Everett posits Monk's intellectual masculinity, the inclusion in Van Go's character of the internal conflict between Nigger A and Nigger B allows Everett to critique the ways in which African American men are socialized without absolving Van Go completely. Van Go is still rendered accountable for his often reprehensible actions regardless of his lack of options and opportunities. Where Nigger A represents the positive ways in which Van Go could respond to his surroundings, Nigger B represents the worst. By giving Van Go a conscious choice between actions, Monk, while holding Van Go accountable to his actions, does not hold his reader accountable for their expectations. Because Van Go expresses, rationalizes and justifies his crimes through his socialization, the reader can feel comfortable vilifying him and read *My Pafology/Fuck* without confronting her/his prejudice. Van Go's performance of negative stereotypes as if they are free and equal choices between Nigger A and Nigger B reinforces negative stereotypes by making them appear accurate and 'authentic,' as well as ignoring the ways in which Van Go may be pressured into either option by his circumstances. In this way, *Erasure* "exposes the capacity of readers to see what they wish to see, reading past whatever does not match their prejudices" (Larkin 149).

After raping his 'baby-mama' Cleona, and ruining her brand new couch with a large semen stain, Van Go takes no financial or emotional role in the upbringing of their son Rexall, but refuses to allow Cleona to live without his involvement in her life. Extending to his relationships with other women, Van Go's avoidance of accountability and responsibility – his absentee fatherhood – underwrites the (white, capitalist) American narrative of the pathological African American household. For bell hooks, however, the idealization of the father figure underwrites a white heteronormative existential and social metanarrative. Furthermore, although often presented as a solution to all problems within the African American family unit and the family unit in general, the focus on the absent father figure obscures instances where fathers are the source of abuse, violence and emotional neglect within the family, as well as elides the fact of female-headed households which produce well-adjusted children.[53] Van Go's constant efforts to mitigate his insecurity through (sexual) violence and anger at Cleona's efforts at career advancement, then, evinces Monk's opinion of his society's expectations. For Monk, his readers expect African American men to take out the emasculation caused by the entrenchment of white patriarchy on their black female counterparts.

Despite his academic achievements Monk remains unsuccessful. Based on his authorial ability, his intellectual masculinity serves as a counterpoint to Van Go's 'authentic,' violent masculinity. Monk and Van Go are complete opposites in terms of their socio-economic class, sports ability, and family structure. Although he asserts an individualistic masculinity, Monk constantly defines himself in terms of stereotypes. His opening description of himself is put in opposition to implied stereotypes:

> I have dark brown skin, curly hair, a broad nose, some of my ancestors were slaves and I have been detained by pasty white policemen in New Hampshire, Arizona, and Georgia and so the society in which I live tells me I am black; that is my race. Though I am fairly athletic, I am no good at basketball. I listen to Mahler, Aretha Franklin, Charlie Parker and Ry Cooder on vinyl records and compact discs. I graduated *summa cum laude* from Harvard, hating every minute of it. I am good at math. I cannot dance. I did not grow up in any inner city or the rural south. My family owned a bungalow near Annapolis. My

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[53] See *We Real Cool*.

grandfather was a doctor. My father was a doctor. My brother and sister were
doctors. (1–2)

Monk implies, in his emphatic use of "I," that this description marks him as different
from his society's stereotypical expectations. Everett's use of implicature in this
section points to the pervasiveness of stereotypes about African American men, as he
is able to gesture towards specific stereotypes without directly addressing them. His
socio-economic status is one of the most important ways in which Monk contradicts
stereotypes about African American society, because it is his wealth which affords him
an education.

Ironically, it is the stereotypically less masculine brother who is able to produce
children. Bill, Monk's gay brother, is closer to the traditional figure of the patriarch
than Monk. Having been socialized into heterosexuality, Bill was previously married
with children and has a traditionally masculine career as a plastic surgeon. In this way,
Everett interrogates the notion that homosexuality is a less accomplished mode of
masculinity, and comments on the socialized nature of gender and sexuality.
Notwithstanding his relative wealth and the presence of a supportive father throughout
his childhood, Monk's family is far from perfect. By the end of the novel, his mother
has succumbed to Alzheimer's disease, his sister has been killed by a right-wing
extremist for performing abortions, and he has discovered a half-sister whom the
family had never known about. Bill has fallen into financial troubles following his
divorce from his wife and the failure of his practice due to his Arizona community's
homophobia. These financial troubles and their sister Lisa's death leave Monk with the
duty of caring for his mother. The disintegration of Monk's family despite their initial
normativity defies societal assumptions that a traditionally heteronormative patriarchal
family is inherently superior to those families which are perceived as pathological.

In *Erasure*, Everett argues for the necessity of diverse African American
masculinities, and interrogates the ways in which negative stereotypes about African
American men are naturalized and justified through the representation of African
American communities as pathological. The inability of *My Pafology/Fuck*'s readers to
recognize it as parody forms the crux of this argument, as the literary market's

acceptance of his actions and identity as a true and authentic representation of African American masculinity despite the hyperbole of Van Go's character demonstrate what Everett sees as his society's – extremely low – expectations of African American men.

The inability of *My Pafology/Fuck*'s readers to recognize it as parody evinces Everett's critique of Ellison's utopian vision for American society. The racially aligned socio-economic imbalances and racist ideologies which continue to pervade American society despite the efforts of Ellison and his contemporaries necessitate the use of increasingly subversive literary forms. Monk's use of literary blackface in his creation of *My Pafology/Fuck* through a more stereotypically black persona and the alignment of this persona with Ellison's Rinehart, as argued previously,[54] critiques Ellison's utopian vision of the Rinehart figure as the solution to the racial inequalities of American society. Monk, because he is a black man who demonstrates an intellectual masculinity, remains invisible.

Bulawayo and Everett's use of subversive narrative forms to navigate the double bind in which *We Need New Names* and *Erasure* are produced point to the necessity of reflexive and ethical processes of reading. *Erasure* represents black masculinities as multiple and diverse and critiques African American fiction which naturalizes problematic representations of African American society as pathological. Everett's inclusion of the machineries of parody and the publishing process in the novel's plot allows him to make his reader aware of her/his own reading process, and, therefore encourages her/him to interrogate their own implicit biases and complicity in the stereotyping of African American men.

Likewise, *We Need New Names* creates a narrative space in which the power dynamics of patriarchy are reversed, and the marginal, female subject is able to critique those aspects of patriarchal nationalism which silence her. Bulawayo's examination of how the traditional patriarchal family unit no longer functions in the Zimbabwean postcolonial situation or in the African diaspora, where families are split apart for financial reasons, contributes to her argument for the necessity of new frames of reference for the world – the need for new names. Because they are inextricably

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[54] See "Percival Everett's *Erasure* and the Invisible African American Author."

located within the double-bind of the global literary market, both novels necessitate a self-aware reading processes which remain aware of and alert to the subversive narrative methods which the authors use to navigate this double-bind. The changing dynamics of the global literary market spur the evolution of literary forms, as unlike their predecessors, *We Need New Names* and *Erasure* must actively subvert the expectations of their readers in order to accurately represent the lived experiences of their subjects.

Conclusion: Gesturing Towards Solutions

Throughout each of the novels under study the idea of speaking the unspeakable has been a recurring theme. Where Ellison urges the readers of *Invisible Man* to "behold the invisible" (496), Wicomb attempts to tear the veil over "proceedings too terrible to relate" (Morrison, "The Site of Memory" 91), Everett interrogates his ability to speak freely in a world where his speech is always influenced by the hearer's expectations, and Bulawayo seeks new frames of reference to reconcile her nostalgic love for her home and the reality of things falling apart. As such, the multiplicity between and within the depictions of blackness in these novels evince the necessity, as Wright argues, of working towards definitions of blackness which "do not exclude, isolate, or stigmatise" (*Physics of Blackness* 5). In order to gesture towards these definitions, recent literary modes of representing blackness have sought to problematize the rigid black-white and Africa-West binaries which pervade colonial and postcolonial discourses, and, in doing so, have developed more fluid, fragmented, and subversive literary forms.

Where the restrictions of the global literary market identified by Shabangu render Wright's project elusive, this is compounded by what Durrant frames as "the impossible task of finding a mode of writing that would not immediately transform formlessness into form, a mode of writing that can bear witness to its own incapacity to recover a history." Postcolonial and African diasporic writers appear therefore, to embrace experimental and polysemic narrative modes in order to navigate an increasingly complex literary landscape (6). Durrant's theorization of the postcolonial project as one which is inevitably incomplete reinforces the reading of blackness in postcolonial fiction as epiphenomenal, as authors are only able to isolate specific moments of a history rather than draw out complete, linearly progressive and causal narratives, which, arguably, do not exist. Wicomb's *Playing in the Light* draws attention to Marion's inability to recover her own history by including information which is ostensibly taken from the folk archive. Marion's continuing existential

instability at the close of the novel points to her inability to make sense of her familial and national history.

We Need New Names similarly demonstrates Darling's inability to properly process both her history and her present through its use of a literary tone which often stands in direct contrast to the seriousness of the novel's subject matter as well as a reliance on a collectively voiced folk archive. Bulawayo's decision to leave space for the reader's interpretation of Darling's narrative reflects the youth of her protagonist and points to the novel form's inability to express the fluidity and mutability of identity and the constantly fluctuating history of the African diaspora. The traumatic events which Darling and her community live through and the necessary solutions to these traumas and the instability of her identity are rendered unspeakable by national pressures to remain patriotic as well as the literary market's expectations that *We Need New Names* reinforces Afro-pessimistic narratives of the African diaspora.

The literary market's preoccupation with African American fiction which is focused on identity politics makes work which only includes race "when it comes up," unspeakable (Stewart, "Uncategorizable is Still a Category" 315). The multiply layered subversions of Everett's *Erasure* attempt to provide a representation of the invisible African American author, who is rendered invisible by his failure to fit his society's expectations. Monk's reliance on subversive narrative methods to express his opinions of negatively stereotyped portrayals of black American men reflect African American traditions of comedic and parodic narrative forms, which can be found in African American literature as well as blackface minstrel traditions. Everett's argument for the ability to choose when and when not to write about race is a radical departure from the parameters which Ellison and his contemporaries set out for the African American author. Unlike Ellison, Everett is not concerned primarily with an identitarian project, but is fueled by a post-black desire to remove the burden of representing black Americans as a cultural group from the individual black American author.

Simmons, however, argues that post-blackness is too reliant on individual personal experience and, as such "[its] paradigm of personal self-possession and authorship is working well within the codified framework of the so-called American Dream,"

leaving this framework untroubled (6-7). This failure to trouble the framework of the American Dream, that is the idea that socio-economic status and prosperity is dependent on individual decisions, erases the ways in which racialized inequality continues to influence the lives of black Americans by holding up individuals who have achieved the so-called American Dream as examples of why race no longer affects American society. Everett, however, does not pursue post-blackness in order to deny the material conditions of blackness in America, but as a method of creating a conceptual space that provides for the freedom of the individual author.

Reflecting literary, artistic and cultural trends towards diverse and mutable representations of identity, theories of black and African identity have, in recent years, evolved from essentialist, nationalist ideas towards more fragmentary and context-dependent ideas of identity and belonging. Whereas for African Americans this has taken the form of arguments which posit America as post-racial and post-black, Africans living in the diaspora have begun to argue for Afropolitanism. An important aspect of these newer and emerging schools of thought, however, is that they are often adopted by wealthy and socially mobile people. Emma Dabiri here maintains that "[t]he enduring insights of Afropolitanism as interpreted by Achille Mbembe should be its promise of vacating the seduction of pernicious racialized thinking, its recognition of African identities as fluid, and the notion that the African past is characterised by mixing, blending and superimposing" (4), and that these insights have been ignored by those who seek to commodify the Afropolitan position. For Dabiri, those who call themselves Afropolitans are often the social and economic elites, who place too much emphasis on consumer culture and lifestyle (5–6). She sees this focus on lifestyle as an attempt at "playing catch-up in a game the rules of which [Africans] did not write" (9).

As discourses surrounding identity politics, African nationalism and the nuances of African American identity become more prominent in popular culture,[55] it becomes

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[55] Recent Afro-centric events in popular culture are Marvel's *Black Panther* (2018), the rise of Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie as both novelist and public intellectual, and the use of the term 'Afropolitan' on the South African radio station, Kaya FM.

increasingly important for literary critics to work towards definitions of identity which are able to accommodate the diversity of global black subjectivities. Blackness and Africa(nness), in modern globalized society, cannot be defined as synonymous, nor can either term be essentialized or represented as homogenous. Because the global literary market expects black authors to produce work which reinforces Afro-pessimistic and racialized portrayals of Africa and black Americans, readers of African American and African diasporic fiction must engage in ethical and self-aware reading processes so as to produce more sophisticated and diverse representations of blackness and Africa(nness). Bulawayo and Everett use experimental and subversive literary modes in order to circumvent these expectations and navigate the various double-binds in which they find themselves. It is the responsibility of the reader of African diasporic and African American fiction to allow the text the right to its own complexity so as to avoid the oversimplification and commodification of representations of blackness, as it is this commodification which restricts the ability of the black author to write what they see as 'true.'

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