

The Body Out of Place:

Reading Percival Everett through Sara Ahmed

Keywords: Ahmed, Everett, affect, queer, race, intersectionality, erasure

Abstract: Ahmed's notion of comfort and discomfort between bodies and spaces helps to expand upon the purposes of movement and geography in Percival Everett's *Erasure*. The constant rejection the protagonist Monk Ellison faces in public and private spaces, and manifests internally toward himself, requires that his body respond. When we track his geography, we see a man in constant motion who, because of his out-of-place-ness, is forced first to express himself through the creation of a pastiche that mocks prevailing notions of blackness. When this fiction is met with widespread commercial success and critical acclaim, Monk creates of himself and his character an avatar that exists between these two bodies. This avatar, Stagg R. Leigh, embodies the political dissent Ahmed describes as indicative of queer bodies that do not adhere to the behavioral governances of compulsory heterosexual spaces: by establishing himself as passably black according to hegemonic expectations, but then being revealed as a fiction, he upends and threatens social order by escaping its rubrics for functional black bodies.

Through this Ahmedian-affective lens, one sees that black bodies in compulsorily racist environments, as queer bodies in compulsorily heteronormative environments, are forced to navigate expectations for their forms by glossing over, ignoring, suppressing, attempting to obscure, or having to acknowledge that which makes them different. A consequence of this interpellation is that society, for both black and queer bodies, rejects their forms and more readily accepts fictitious, derivative bodies in their stead, thus creating new forms to make invisible those stitches in the social skin that identify and alienate the individual from the space surrounding.

Introduction

Percival Everett's novel *Erasure* tells the story of an academic novelist who finds himself incapable of meeting social expectations until he transfers his identity to an alternate personality.

* Zach Linge is a graduate student at The University of Texas at San Antonio, and a UT Austin alumnus, with poems published in *Nimrod International Journal*, *Permafrost Magazine*, and *HotHouse Literary Journal*, among others. His critical foci include queer and affect theory, the history of witchcraft, and the contemporary novel.

“Monk,” the narrator-protagonist, demonstrates why a person upon whom expectations are imposed may choose to restructure himself to accommodate his surroundings. This essay expands upon Sara Ahmed’s treatment of the relationship between body and environment by considering how Monk responds to incongruence between self and space. An affective reading observes Monk’s movements as direct consequences of misalignment between a self-ascribed identity and a “complex matrix of nested and interacting ideo-affective formations” (Nathanson 25). What one sees in Monk’s reactions to incongruence with complex normative expectations is a body in constant motion, and a physical environment that reflects this transience. Everett notes, “A story is a document that has a beginning and end, but has no beginning or end” (“Modality” 153). By reading Monk and other figures in *Erasure* through the notion of a “social skin,” this essay examines similarities between black bodies in racist environments and queer bodies in compulsory heterosexual environments to suggest that all bodies out of place, and not only exclusively queer or exclusively black bodies, respond in like to this out-of-placeness.

In “Queer Feelings” from *The Cultural Politics of Emotions*, Ahmed discusses what constitutes comfort and discomfort, specifically in the relationship between body and environment, and applies this notion to experiences of queer persons in heteronormative societies. Comfort, according to Ahmed, is a consequence of congruency between body and environment: as a body sinks into a comfortable chair, for example, “The sinking feeling involves a seamless space, or a space where you can’t see the ‘stitches’ between bodies,” of the chair or the person inhabiting it (148). This phenomenon is social as well as physical. A queer person might experience seamlessness while in a social space that emphasizes queerness more than compulsory heterosexuality, that is, he or she does not particularly *feel* space at all. That same

person then placed in a heteronormative environment, however, begins to *feel* the incongruence of his or her place in space.

Language itself directs our attention to the differences between self and other—such as the queer woman who, when asked, “Who’s your boyfriend?” must choose either to divulge or not to divulge information about herself (Ahmed 147). Ahmed purports that the repeated imprinting of social cues that indicate or suggest that one is in the wrong place damages the body: “...those moments of interpellation get repeated over time, and can be experienced as a bodily injury; moments which position queer subjects as failed in their failure to live up to the ‘hey you too’ of heterosexual self-narration” (147). The queer figure in a heteronormative environment demonstrates how some bodies extend with ease into the space around them while others are forced to consider that which sets them apart. It is at this moment that those out-of-place bodies are responsible in a manner others are not: they must acclimate by glossing over, ignoring, suppressing, attempting to obscure, or having to acknowledge that which makes them different.

The repeated complication of space, by a failure to meet its ideal, inevitably results in a reaction. The most obvious reaction to being out of place is leaving. If one cannot leave, then one must find another way to either change oneself in order to make the social stitches of out-of-placeness less apparent, or must challenge the unaccommodating space. But what if leaving the environment is not an option? What if that which defines environment is so ubiquitous as to characterize every inhabitable space? If each space is marred by a restriction that says *you do not belong here*—what, then, can one do?

Expectations in *Erasure*

Percival Everett's oeuvre is saturated by such figures that complicate space as they challenge fundamental ontological assumptions—such as the time it takes a mind to develop and mature, as in *Glyph*—as well as contingent understandings of race, which Everett describes as a “bogus yet *real* category” perpetuated by culture (qtd. in Stewart 315). Everett's protagonists break boundaries; they “escape the categories and dichotomies” used to compartmentalize experience (Feith 303). In *Glyph*, the protagonist Ralph elides the oft-separated speech and writing: he communicates only through the written word, fulfilling a Derridean notion of writing as the “precondition of language” (Feith 307). Similarly, *Erasure*'s Thelonius “Monk” Ellison obfuscates any black-white race binary through his inability to embody expectations for blackness or whiteness, and fulfills the notion of the Death of the Author through his transformation into an avatar of himself. In Monk's environment, however, there is no escape from an idealized version of blackness as he seeks to continue his career. The image of America Everett's *Erasure* presents is structured upon a ubiquitous stereotype that, when imposed upon the protagonist, limits what he can accomplish. Blackness is presented as a set of restrictions he must either impose upon himself or find a method by which to directly challenge.

Everett does not claim that the restrictive view of blackness maintained by racist cultural design never manifests in reality. Monk visits his sister at her place of work, and meets a patient whose children are named Mystery and Fantasy, “Named after their fathers. One was a mystery and the other a fantasy” (*Erasure* 26). He and his sister later laugh at the names, and Monk says he “couldn't have come up with that,” despite the fact that he writes fiction for a living (*Erasure* 26). This emphasizes Monk's particularized experience of blackness, as gradient: for him, this

patient's signification of paternal absence appears stereotypical and cliché. But he also recognizes how substandard his evaluation of her complexity is when she demonstrates a nuanced understanding of Hurston and Toomer: "I felt an inch tall because I had expected this young woman with the blue fingernails to be a certain way, slow and stupid, but she was neither. I was the stupid one" (*Erasure* 21). Everett provides examples of bodies that fulfill certain expectations, but through the protagonist, he demonstrates how utterly incomplete, and egregiously misleading a picture of race it is Monk's struggle with publishing further illustrates the limitations of such a reliance upon presupposed racial narratives. His first books are met with reviews in the vein of, "*The novel is finely crafted, with fully developed characters, rich language and a subtle play with plot, but one is lost to understand what this reworking of Aeschylus' The Persians has to do with the African American experience*" (*Erasure* 2). The racist, hegemonic normative rejects Monk from black identity precisely because he does not comport himself as it would have him.

Society does accept something about blackness, however: that blackness has an essence, and that essence is tied to some primordial, savage experience inevitably linked with incarceration, violence, vulgarity, stupidity, and negligence. Monk attempts to continue his career in publication, but experiences less popular success than those authors who embody or exploit this essentialist ideal of the "True Black Experience." Juanita Mae Jenkins, for example, who, when she was twelve, "went to visit some relatives in Harlem for a couple of days" (*Erasure* 53), writes and publishes a book written entirely from an outsider's perspective, and sees enormous commercial success. Monk is outraged, for one, by Jenkins's appropriation of a vernacular English that the culture at large views as particularly black. He says, "The reality of popular culture was nothing new... But this book was a real slap in the face" (*Erasure* 29). Jenkins

exploits the ideal with which society structures an environment for African Americans (despite what Everett presents as Jenkins's failure to meet this ideal), and is rewarded with massive success and a three-million dollar film contract.

Jenkins's exploitation of the culturally sanctioned black experience eventually inspires Monk's own behavior. At the same time as he sees Jenkins's success, Monk deals with significant personal stress. He sits overwhelmed, one evening, at his late father's desk and, in Jenkins's fashion, writes a novel that ventriloquizes "the black voice as uneducated, poor, underprivileged, and, in the case of men, violent and sexually voracious" (Sanchez-Arce 145). Everett proceeds to include the full transcript of this novel, *My Pafology*, later retitled *Fuck*, which he writes under the pen name Stagg R. Leigh. The book embodies what Monk abhors in Jenkins's novel. He later describes it as "no novel at all," saying of *Fuck*, "It is a failed conception, an unformed fetus, seed cast into the sand, a hand without fingers, a word with no vowels. It is offensive, poorly written, racist and mindless" (*Erasure* 261). Despite the staggering inauthenticity with which Monk wrote the book, *Fuck* proceeds to gain him, or Stagg Leigh, national celebrity, a film rights request, and a prestigious book award.

For moments like these, some scholars have described *Erasure* as "a scathing satire on the vernacular aesthetics and identity politics of the 'ghetto novel'" (Feith 312). *Fuck* is rife with violence and violent language; it appeals to the lowest common denominator of expectations for blackness. Nevertheless, Monk is greeted by positive social sanctioning for his willingness to conform to these expectations. The book solves Monk's anxieties about independently financing his mother's hospitalization, while simultaneously presenting him, and the reader with a problem: If Monk can create a fictional author who writes a fictional story about what it means to be black by using tropes that come from stereotype, and *be successful in doing so*, what does it mean to be

black? What does it mean to be Monk? What does it mean to be a body, when the environment more readily accepts a fiction in its stead?

As we examine Monk's out-of-placeness in relation to the publishing environment, we observe the power that space has in (re)defining the self. In order for Monk to achieve commercial success for his artwork, he must assume a different physical appearance. He dons an unconvincing disguise and, like Ralph Ellison's Rinehart, is assumed to be an entirely different person. When we view this transformative power of space upon the body, we might take care also to consider how the body enforces environmental form upon other bodies. This allows us to view yet another complication in the text: that if Monk is willing and he is able to understand and apply hegemonic stereotypes to his body and his art, then he is capable of enforcing his same victimization upon others.

The scene in the clinic belies one such instance in which Monk is complicit in the propagation of false identities; in this scene, the misalignment of body with space is an affront not only to the individual but also to the space itself. The environment is comprised of relationships. The body that may be in one space the victim of discomfort might otherwise be complicit in the production of discomfort, as in the moment Monk advises the patient, a stranger, that she should go to college, without any consideration of whatever path in life she took that resulted in her equal, if not superior, intellect: he presumes to advise the very person who proved him the "stupid one" (*Erasure* 21). Monk's expectation that a woman with blue fingernails would be "slow and stupid" is proved ungrounded when she demonstrates her humble intelligence. The consequence is not only that the person who fails expectations becomes aware of the social stitches between her body and the environment. On the contrary, this patient seems more able to approach Monk than he is able to interact with her. Through stereotype, Monk serves the same

narrative that later rewards his self-fictionalization: he holds her to reductive standards similar to which he is held, using the observable performativity of race and gender to form his assumptions (Powell 102).

The reciprocity between bodies and their environments, as demonstrated in this interaction, speaks to the larger problem between victims of marginalization and their respective roles in that process. Despite his understanding of the fallacies inherent to hegemonic discourses on blackness, Monk's reactions to an unwelcoming environment are not limited to his willingness to appropriate expectations for his own body, but extend into his enactment of similar standards toward other marginalized figures. First, Monk is confronted by his inability to achieve recognition for his work due to his refusal to conform to the publishing industry's belief "that sex, urban plight, the rural South and church encompasses the full scope and imagination of the Black writer" (Penelope 1). Second, and despite his initial refusal to conform to stereotype, Monk's "mobility as a middle-class author" (Farebrother 120) leads to his reinforcement of race-based stereotype upon less privileged bodies.

The relationships between bodies and environments further complicate Everett's already complex protagonists—after all, "there are no simple stories" (*Glyph* 168). Monk demonstrates how the body without the possibility of escape might seek to accommodate environment through the assumption of a false persona. Similarly, he demonstrates how the body out of place can also propagate the violence of the incongruence between body and space. Everett's novels point to the notion that "the self is an illusion produced in fiction, an effect of a web of words" (Wolfreys 346). Through the lens of Ahmed's social skin, one begins to observe in Everett the disturbing possibility that place may more readily make room for fiction than any sort of authentic self.

Comfort and discomfort become no longer the byproduct of an inherent congruence between body and space, but a consequence of the adaptability of self to space.

Monk's willingness to fictionalize himself comes with great rewards. However great the benefits, however, the consequence of conforming to the unsuitable structure of a society built with an other in mind is that the body retaliates. Monk balks upon finding Jenkins's book at his lover's bedside, and later realizes the book "reminded [him] of what [he] had become," namely "...an overly ironic, cynical, self-conscious and yet faithful copy of Juanita Mae Jenkins" (*Erasure* 221). To quote at length from the text,

Had I by annihilating my own presence actually asserted the individuality of Stagg Leigh? Or was it the book itself that had given him life? [...] 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? And what did it mean that I was even thinking of Stagg as having agency? What did it mean that I could put those questions to myself? (*Erasure* 248)

If we take the question from Monk's mouth and ask ourselves the same, more broadly, we may see it differently: Has social consciousness, by reducing the multiple forms of its members, actually asserted the individuality of those forms it has created? In other words, when we collectively seek to construct social standards according to our limited understandings of the forms that people take, we might, in so doing, create new people. Monk Ellisons, finding their bodies unfit for expectations, might accommodate space by bending to it, thus becoming Stagg Leigh. Stagg, Monk's eponymous alternate personality, alludes to the folk song "Stagger Lee"

that concerns itself with the notion of the “Bad Nigger” (Henry 462). In this sense, the complex matrix of ideo-affective formations creates new bodies—for Monk, bodies that succumb to systemic cultural constructions of racial oppression.

Geographic Identities

Through the creation of new bodies, *Erasure* operates, in part, as an allegory of space. The public spaces Monk inhabits are rife with expectations that others meet more easily than he. Even activities he enjoys, such as basketball, are cited in the text as occasions of alienation. Monk describes one such instance in which, at age seventeen, the basketball was thrown to him and he “threw up a wild and desperate shot which had no chance of going in” (*Erasure* 134). Though he was on court playing basketball, Monk’s mind was occupied by considerations of “the racist comments of Hegel concerning Oriental peoples and their attitude toward freedom of the self” (*Erasure* 134)—a moment that situates *Erasure* self-consciously in a postcolonial awareness while simultaneously demonstrating the effects of othering upon the protagonist. When asked where his mind was when he made this shot, he explains this, and is told to “Hegel on home” (*Erasure* 134). This comical moment demonstrates another instance in which the protagonist is distanced, alienated, and isolated from his environment by his inability to live up to its expectations for him. He enjoys the exercise of basketball and the sport itself, but is unable to participate.

Even in private spaces, Monk faces constant reminders of pressures to enact a manner of blackness unnatural to him. While kissing his lover Marilyn’s neck, he sees a copy of Juanita Mae Jenkins’s *We’s Lives In Da Ghetto* on her night table and instantly stops moving. “What’s

wrong, baby,” his lover says. He notes that though he “liked the way her voice sounded [...] the sight of that book had called back the troops” (*Erasure* 187-88). In a private moment of passion between Monk and a lover, the mere physical presence of this book renders him impotent. The moment shifts to a conversation, as he is embittered by this reminder of schematic blackness, in which sex and intimacy are of no consideration.

Monk’s awareness of schematic prejudice does not keep him from propagating prejudiced notions. His interactions with both public and private environments relentlessly highlight the affects and behaviors he fails to produce. One of his methods for reacting to this discomfort is to create a fictionalized narrative that speaks to the larger hegemonic ideals for what constitutes blackness, and this creation leads to his formation of Stagg R. Leigh. This enactment of stereotype highlights Monk’s awareness of society’s expectations for him as an African American man, as well as his condescension toward these expectations. He demonstrates a critical awareness of constructed identity as something only loosely based upon that which it attempts to represent.

These moments, and especially Monk’s creation of a fictive alternate personality, ultimately suggest his inability to exist as himself in an environment that does not welcome authentic bodies without conditions. He creates Stagg precisely because he cannot attain his goals by operating in a manner that comes naturally to him. To achieve success, Monk must create a figure to which he condescends, and watch as that figure meets readier acceptance into, approval by, and rewards from the environment that has highlighted his inability to live according to its standards. Monk’s body responds poorly to its environment and creates a second self more capable of meeting its demands. This journey is marked by each character’s physical positioning within the urban geography. The hometowns, histories, and movements through space of Monk,

Van Go Jenkins, the protagonist of *Fuck*, and Stagg R. Leigh serve to illustrate how the affective environment either positively or negatively sanctions each.

This affective environment also characterizes the physical environs Monk occupies and travels through. Early in the novel, Monk establishes himself geographically as a means of communicating his class privilege and upbringing: “I did not grow up in any inner city or the rural south” (*Erasure* 1). He declares, “My family owned a bungalow near Annapolis. My grandfather was a doctor. My father was a doctor. My brother and sister were doctors” (*Erasure* 2). In the first two pages of the book, Everett uses geography to indicate social status. The Ellisons were upwardly mobile, both socially and geographically. Monk was not confined to any one location, and is often seen throughout the text in passing from one place to another. Driving scenes provide further illustration of Monk’s relationship to space. Monk describes the silence of the car as “comfortable” and “quiet,” but says, “Still, I felt out of place behind the wheel of the thing—what else was new. I drove through Georgetown, then up Wisconsin, then back across Massachusetts to Dupont Circle” (*Erasure* 30). His location is constantly in flux. Even the comfortable quiet of the car gives him the feeling that he is out of place. The environments in which he feels out of place, in this case, are those of privilege: he drives throughout the upper east United States at his leisure, arriving finally at Dupont Circle, a name that connotes wealth.

His mother echoes this association of difference between internal feelings and physical mobility. Monk notes that she seldom spoke of her family, that she was the only one of them to go to college and, “as so often happens, education functioned as a wedge between them. Perhaps,” Monk says, “my mother understood better than I gave her credit my feelings of alienation and isolation” (*Erasure* 152). Although he acknowledges that there “was no particular event” he can recall that might substantiate this belief, Monk supposes that his mother

experienced feelings of being out of place similar to his own because of the distinctive mobility she experienced that her family did not. As his considerations of Hegel on the basketball court alienated Monk from his peers, he thinks his mother, too, was isolated from her family because of the difference in education.

These class differences are demonstrated in scenes of movement; flux; interstice—both by Monk and Van Go Jenkins. Monk drives around Washington DC, enjoying the comfort of quietness, observing poverty through a window. Van Go Jenkins, on the other hand, finds himself in driving scenes with starkly different conditions and outcomes: he is born into the ghetto to an alcoholic father, restricted by his social class to the confines of his highly limited geographical zone, and drives only when exploited or in escape from the police. Monk's scenes of motion take place in settings where he drives for leisure; he flies from and to Washington, California, Massachusetts, and beyond; he takes strolls across the beach; and he observes his ties to men of greatness through the spaces he inhabits. For example, while on a beach trip with his mother and her caretaker, Monk “walked along the beach then turned to look back at the Douglass house. It had been owned first by the grandson of Frederick Douglass and had fallen into several hands since” (*Erasure* 162). Monk further reflects on the times in his childhood in which he would sneak into the house once owned by Douglass's grandson. One does not expect Van Go to encounter or relive memories from similar places, of similar experiences. His restrictions are marked by space.

If Van Go exists within a pastiche of underprivileged blackness, and Monk lives on the opposite end of the same spectrums, Monk's alternate personality Stagg inhabits an intermediary zone between these two liminal spaces. When we consider the extreme regions of marginalization on either end, we see both Van Go and Monk's environments starkly contrasted by one another.

Monk moves consistently through spaces of flux by his own volition—he drives for leisure, flies for vacation, family, and occupation—and these spatial representations “construct Monk’s black male, middle-class subjectivity” (Farebrother 121). In contrast, Van Go Jenkins cannot escape the confines of his geography until he works for a wealthy man, and almost as soon as he has begun, those with privilege exploit him. Stagg Leigh occupies both of these spaces: he is conceived as a hardened criminal who wrote Van Go’s story based on personal experience. Monk constructs his identity with the ghetto at his origins, and prison as his most recent home, when Stagg comes out of hiding. In contrast to Van Go, Stagg does not communicate in the same vernacular in which Juanita Mae Jenkins wrote *We’s Lives In Da Ghetto* and Van Go spoke in *My Pafology/Fuck*.

Stagg is eventually required to alter his appearance and behavior to accommodate the affective colorings of the environment. At first, Monk encourages his publisher to deny any requests for interviews with Stagg. When the popularity of the book reaches such extremes that this no longer seems possible, we observe Monk as he assumes a hybrid identity that combines elements of his own vernacular with the hardness the environment has rewarded in Van Go. In his first interview as Stagg, Monk notices that his interviewer was “surprised, if not put off by [his] diction, being not at all what she expected” (*Erasure* 156). Rather than changing his vocabulary, he changes his town, becoming abrupt with his interviewer. When he later provides a television appearance, Stagg, in like fashion to the character Rinehart in Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*, minimally alters his appearance and manufactures an aggressive affect to enact social expectations of blackness.

Degrees of visibility come to define each character’s movements through space in response to these expectations. Monk is an academic who gives scholarly lectures, and in this way he is a public figure. Van Go is an unprivileged man whose marginalization prohibits

visibility, and in this way is an invisible, private figure. Stagg is at once public and private. He appears in the limelight, on television and in interviews, yet he discloses little about himself and is praised for his enactment of blackness. His physical environment, as Monk's and Van Go's, mirrors his location in-between. On his way to a television interview, Stagg descends into the underground to take the subway. He is seen in motion only from the moment of his inception, when Monk dons his disguise, to the moment of his reception in the public eye. These movements downward are associated with the subway and elevators, and spatial gestures are "associated with recurring symbols of burial, falling and hiding" (Farebrother 128). Much like Ralph Ellison's narrator-protagonist in *Invisible Man*, Stagg's true identity is forced quite literally underground. "When one is invisible he finds such problems as good and evil, honesty and dishonesty, of such shifting shapes," says Ellison's narrator, "that he confuses one with the other, depending upon who happens to be looking through him at the time" (Ellison 572). Monk, by becoming invisible through the creation of Stagg Leigh, finds his personal convictions compromised and in flux. The environment mimics this fluidity by bringing Stagg to the limelight only through the dark underbelly of the city subway. His movement toward visibility is, in fact, a process of remaining invisible.

Reductive notions of blackness propel these three figures' movements through space, and their reactions to environment. Each of their spaces indicates something of their class, privilege, ability to pass as black, and visibility. Monk is unable to pass as black, and unable to achieve the success he desires because of his uncomfortable awareness of what makes him different. Van Go passes by hegemonic expectations with aplomb, and as such is submitted to the exploitation of those with greater privilege. Stagg exists between these spaces as the ultimate non-entity: he is neither a revealed fiction nor a known person, but is rather a fleeting fusion of the two. Each of

these characters' environments dictates their identities, informing Monk of his difference from the appropriately black African American man, and rewarding Van Go for his blackness with incarceration. Observing the effects that these affective environments have upon these characters by way of racial expectations leads to a new consideration of space in relation to the body out of place regarding race in *Erasure*, and also expands upon Ahmed's notion of stitches in the social skin by seeing how comfortably, to borrow one of her words, compulsory racial expectations align with compulsory heterosexuality.

Stitches in All Social Skins

The notion of bodies out of place in the Ahmed text concerns itself exclusively with queer bodies situated in non-queer or queer-oppressive environments. These environments shape what is possible for these bodies to do, to what they may aspire, and by what moral standards they will be evaluated and ultimately granted acceptance into or rejection from their environments. Ahmed argues, "Compulsory heterosexuality shapes bodies by the assumption that a body 'must' orient itself towards some objects and not others, objects that are secured as ideal through the fantasy of difference" (145). The bodies are, first, shaped by compulsory heterosexuality, which is to say that they are given or prohibited substance and form based upon prevailing values. Furthermore, these bodies "must" in turn orient themselves toward objects accordingly. For Ahmed's purposes, we see how queer bodies in heteronormative environments are discouraged from orienting themselves toward objects deemed inappropriate as recipients of their affections, which is to say same sex objects for same sex subjects. An object of a sex opposite to that of the subject is made ideal by the very laws of any environment that is compulsory in its heteronormativity.

By examining *Erasure*, we see how compulsory racism can operate in similar fashion. Black bodies are shaped by prevailing expectations imposed upon them by their environments. Because Monk neither orients himself toward objects secured for him as ideal—the stereotypes he and Jenkins illustrate in their novels—nor does he orient himself in a manner that is deemed appropriate—using a given vernacular, or accepting exclusive literary concern with African American history—his environment rejects him, until he changes his body’s form.

Ahmed proceeds to make two important points about queer bodies that fail to orient themselves “towards” ideal sexual objects. Concerning the world these bodies inhabit, she purports that the failure of the body to orient itself as the environment would have it threatens the very foundations of that environment. Ahmed says, “Hence, the failure to orient oneself ‘towards’ the ideal sexual object affects how we live in the world, an affect that is readable as the failure to reproduce, and as a threat to the social ordering of life itself” (145). Queer bodies whose aims in orienting themselves toward others do not primarily include reproductive purposes are seen as having failed in a basic capacity to function as bodies. Furthermore, she states that this failure implies an inherent threat to the social order by which all bodies in that environment are instructed to live—both those capable and those incapable of enacting these instructions. Queer bodies, by failing to orient themselves toward other bodies for a specific, socially designated purpose, are both failed as bodies and, consequently, a threat to their environments.

Secondly, Ahmed considers the affective repercussions upon queer bodies that fail and threaten socially- or environmentally-designated purposes for orienting themselves toward other bodies. Ahmed observes how “the psychic as well as social costs” of bodies oriented toward objects deemed inappropriate “may include shame and melancholia” (Ahmed 146). She uses this affective consequence to explore the politics of relations,

And finally, I will reflect on the role of pleasure in queer lifestyles or countercultures, and will ask how the enjoyment of social and sexual relations that are designated as ‘non-(re)productive’ can function as forms of political disturbance in an affective economy organised around the principle that pleasure is only ethical as an incentive or reward for good conduct. (Ahmed 146)

Ahmed positions pleasure as an alternative motivating factor for bodies to orient toward other bodies. This illustration relies upon her argument that the prevailing environmental logic set in opposition to queer bodies is that their orientations toward each other do not serve a productive or reproductive purpose, which is to say that bodies that attract to each other without reproductive aim are nonproductive, failed bodies. Ahmed uses this rhetoric, which is popular in social environments compulsory in their heterosexuality, to illustrate the gaps in logic. One considers heterosexual bodies who do not orient toward each other for reproductive purposes, or heterosexual bodies that are incapable of reproduction for medical reasons. Bodies that similarly do not orient themselves toward each other for the purpose of reproduction, and are not oriented toward the ideal sexual object, alternatively fulfill a function as forms of political disturbance. Orienting themselves toward each other, they threaten environment by placing pleasure as something other than an incentive or reward for socially accepted orientations.

We see both of these repercussions throughout Ahmed’s book: bodies that suffer the social and psychic costs of failing to orient themselves according to compulsory standards, and bodies that orient themselves according to these standards and suffer as a consequence of their complicity. The heterosexual couple that cannot reproduce retains acceptance into an environment, but is still viewed as a failed coupling of bodies due to the nonproductive quality of

their union. What defines their success is not productivity but the bodies' abilities to orient themselves toward objects to which political principles of acceptable coupling would have them oriented. It is not their production as a couple but their willingness to follow rules that earns them reward for good behavior. It is important to note that this behavior does not extend across moral questions, but applies only to that of orientation. The heterosexual couple that is not joined together for the purpose of reproduction is still considered a successful coupling, not because they reproduce, but because they are exclusively oriented toward each other, unlike the queer coupling which is always positioned as failed both in their inability to reproduce and in their orientation toward what compulsory heteronormative environments deem the "wrong" bodies.

Compulsory racism functions similarly for Van Go Jenkins. He is punished for his behavior within the *mise-en-abyme* story, but within the larger story of *Erasure*, he is triumphantly received by society at large *because* he is oriented toward his environment in an expected manner. His experience in the ghetto, fulfilling the stereotype, is described as nothing short of "the real thing," despite the fact that he and his experiences were created as a caricature of blackness by an author who has consistently failed the same social expectations (Everett 261). That author, Monk, writes this novel in response to a heightened emotional state brought on by the stresses of familial difficulties, and the ongoing pressure to comport himself according to environmental design,

The pain started in my feet and coursed through my legs, up my spine and into my brain and I remembered passages of *Native Son* and *The Color Purple* and *Amos and Andy* and my hands began to shake, the world opening around me, tree roots trembling on the ground outside, people in the street shouting *dint, ax, fo, screet*

and *fahvre!* and I was screaming inside, complaining that I didn't sound like that, that my mother didn't sound like that, that my father didn't sound like that.

(Everett 62)

Again, the relationship between Monk's body and his environment highlights the affective stressors he endures as a consequence of his inability to relate to, identify with, or reproduce culturally constructed behavioral schematics assigned to him due to race. The world for him literally opens up *en abyme*, and what emerges from this is the entire story of Van Go Jenkins and, eventually, the hybrid character Stagg R. Leigh who functions as a body positioned somewhere in between Monk's and Van Go's.

Monk's experiences with space leads him to physical alienation and rejection from his peers ("Hegel on home"); the physical manifestation of an African American author who is rewarded for her good behavior (*We's Lives In Da Ghetto* on the night stand) renders him physically impotent; his body is constantly in motion as he observes the world from on high in planes, or from positions of privilege, such as the driving scenes in which he observes poverty in D.C. as a spectator; or the moment he relates to the great history of homes in his vacationing neighborhood while walking on the beach of the neighborhood pond. Monk's navigation of the urban environment reflects his simultaneous privilege and rejection from society. Stagg's navigation of environment is located between extremes. His fictional life is granted more reality, greater accolade, and wider positive reception because his body navigates expected terrain. His alleged time in prison serves as an indicator of his authentic experience of blackness, and his combative personality further enables him to pass as black in the public eye. His descent underground marks the transition of Monk's body, as an invisible man, to a visible, passable

body ready for public spectatorship and reward. He reaps the benefits of blackness because he claims to have navigated acceptable terrains, and so he is rewarded for good behavior.

Pleasure is the politically disruptive alternative to reproduction for bodies in Ahmed's treatment of complex affective environments, and escape is the politically disruptive equivalent for the African American author in Everett's *Erasure*. If Van Go Jenkins were a real figure, he would benefit from a level of acceptance by society because of his ability to fulfill the compulsory, racist expectations for the African American man. His body's orientation would be viewed as a success because its motion followed environmentally sanctioned trajectories for its behavior, and it conducted these behaviors within the socially acceptable confines that are the urban geography of the ghetto. While the heterosexual body achieves its ultimate goal through the process of reproduction within a compulsory heterosexual environment, the African American body attains success according to the standards of compulsory racism by behaving the part of Stagger Lee. In this sense, Van Go demonstrates comprehensive success as an African American man.

Stagg provides the body of political disturbance within this affective environment. He fulfills, first, social expectations by being situated within the geographical context of the ghetto in that he emerges from prison, which Monk strategically employs to fulfill racist expectations of blackness. Secondly, the manner in which he conducts himself adheres to the same expectations of blackness through the demonstration of aggression. His ultimate success as a political body is in his nonexistence. He emerges from the underground, traveling subways and elevators—symbolizing the fall, death, and burial of an actual, physical man, Farebrother says (128)—only to be revealed as nothing more than a Rinehart, a figure constructed to disguise the complex reality of his author. The politics of his body consist of society's willingness to accept it as more

real than Monk's. Monk himself struggles with the questions of Stagg's reality, asking what it means to consider him as something that has autonomy independently of him.

Conclusion

Ahmed's notion of comfort and discomfort between bodies and spaces helps to expand upon the purposes of movement and geography in *Erasure*. The constant rejection Monk faces in public and private spaces, and manifests internally toward himself, requires his body to respond. When we track his geography, we see a man in constant motion who, because of his out-of-place-ness, is forced first to express himself through the creation of a pastiche that mocks prevailing notions of blackness. When this fiction is met with widespread commercial success and critical acclaim, Monk creates of himself and his character an avatar that exists between these two bodies. This avatar, Stagg R. Leigh, embodies the notion of the "Bad Nigger" only insofar as he is located within an urban geographical context imposed upon the African American man as his rightful and acceptable location, and conducts himself with an aggressive affect that further enables him to pass as black in the way that Monk himself could not. Stagg embodies the political dissent Ahmed describes as indicative of queer bodies that do not adhere to the behavioral governances of compulsory heterosexual spaces: by establishing himself as passably black according to hegemonic expectations, but then being revealed as a fiction, he upends and threatens social order by escaping its rubrics for functional black bodies.

Through this Ahmedian-affective lens, one sees that black bodies in compulsorily racist environments, as queer bodies in compulsorily heteronormative environments, are forced to navigate expectations for their form by glossing over, ignoring, suppressing, attempting to

obscure, or having to acknowledge that which makes them different. A consequence of this interpellation is that society, for both black and queer bodies, rejects their forms and more readily accepts fictitious, derivative bodies in their stead, thus creating new forms to make invisible those stitches in the social skin that identify and alienate the individual from the surrounding space.

Works Cited

- Ahmed, Sara. *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. New York: Routledge, 2004. Print.
- Ellison, Ralph. *Invisible Man*. New York: Vintage International, 1995. Print.
- Everett, Percival L. *Erasure: A Novel*. Minneapolis, MN: Graywolf, 2011. Print.
- . *Glyph*. Minneapolis, MN: Graywolf, 1999. Print.
- Farebrother, Rachel. "'Out of Place': Reading Space in Percival Everett's Erasure." *MELUS* 40.2 (2015): 117. Web. 1 November 2015.
- Feith, Michel. "Hire-a-Glyph: Hermetics and Hermeneutics in Percival Everett's Glyph." *Canadian Review of American Studies* 43.2 (2013): 301-19. Web. 15 October 2015.
- Henry, Charles P. "The Political Role of the 'Bad Nigger.'" *Journal of Black Studies* 11.4 (1981): 461-482. Web. 28 November 2015.
- Nathanson, Donald L. "From Empathy to Community." *The Annual of Psychoanalysis*. Chicago: Institute for Psychoanalysis. 25. Web. 28 November 2015.
- Powell, Tamara. "Lord of Allusions: Reading Percival Everett's Erasure through African American Literary History." *Valley Voices: A Literary Review* 12.2 (2012): 100. Web. 15 October 2015.
- Stewart, Anthony. "Uncategorizable is Still a Category: An Interview with Percival Everett." *Canadian Review of American Studies* 37.3 (2007): 293-324. Web. 15 October 2015.
- Wolfreys, Julian. "'A Self-Referential Density': Glyph and the 'Theory' Thing." *Callaloo: A Journal of African-American and African Arts and Letters* 28.2. University of Virginia Press, Charlottesville (2005): 345. Web. 20 October 2015.