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Digging Up the Past, Complicating the Present, and Damaging the Future: Post-Postmodernism and the Postracial in Percival Everett's *The Trees*

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Abstract: Percival Everett has published almost thirty books of fiction in forty years, and *The Trees* is his 22nd novel. It revisits ideas from Everett's earlier works while asking questions that, in some ways, tie his oeuvre together—these questions can be linked to temporality and history, problematic literary ideas such as post-postmodernism, and both racialised trauma and the flawed cultural concept of the postracial. In this article, I argue that *The Trees* specifically problematises claims of the postmodern end of history by suggesting that African American literary narrative can productively reckon with a history of mistreatment by literally digging up the past and actively (impossibly) changing it.

Keywords: Percival Everett; *The Trees*; post-postmodernism; postmodernism; the end of history; Francis Fukuyama; Fredric Jameson; the postracial

1. The End of (African American) History

In a 2002 essay on Toni Morrison's 1987 novel *Beloved*, Kimberly Chabot Davis acknowledges Francis Fukuyama and Fredric Jameson's postmodern end of history while underlining the imperative of, despite this end, retaining "an African American and modernist political commitment to the crucial importance of deep cultural memory, of keeping the past alive in order to construct a better future" (Duvall 2002, p. 75). Davis refers to Fukuyama and Jameson's use of the term postmodernism as a historical condition that has ostensibly come to an end; but in this article, I will apply this understanding to postmodern literary form, which transforms the possibility of ending (and creating the past) into an aesthetic of exhaustion and excess. Using postmodernism in this way, while there are points of connection between Morrison's work and Percival Everett's—particularly concerning reanimated ghosts and the physicality of memory, which take centre stage in *Beloved*—this article will use Davis' idea as a launching pad for an investigation into the role of the past exclusively in Everett's work. I will explore this by looking at his twenty-second novel, *The Trees*, published in 2021. Thirty-four years on from *Beloved*, *The Trees* demonstrates a continuation of "cultural memory" after the end of history by suggesting that African American literary narrative can productively reckon with a history of mistreatment by literally digging up the past and actively (impossibly) changing it. *The Trees* is one of Everett's most explicit negotiations between reality and invention due to its merging of historical/empirical reality and constructed/fictionalised reality, though this interest takes different forms in *Erasure* (2001), *American Desert* (2004), *A History of the African-American people (proposed) by Strom Thurmond, as told to Percival Everett and James Kincaid* (2004), *I Am Not Sidney Poitier* (2009), and *Percival Everett* by Virgil Russell (2013), to name a few comparable Everett novels.

This balance between reality and invention is clear from *The Trees'* premise: Jim Davis and Ed Morgan, two detectives from the Mississippi Bureau of Investigation (the MBI), investigate a series of murders connected by what first seems to be the strategic placement of Emmett Till's body—"the body of a small black man"—at each crime scene. Till was the 14-year-old boy who was abducted, tortured, and lynched in Mississippi in 1955 after being



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accused of offending Carolyn Bryant in her family's grocery store. This second body, which resembles Till's and is thought to be his until this theory is later debunked, is first described as "the body of a small Black man. His face was horribly beaten, his head swollen, his neck scarred and seemingly stitched together" (Everett 2021, p. 13). This body is introduced as both "not bleeding, it seemed, but there was no doubt that he was dead" and as having "exposed legs" that "looked strangely alive" (both *The Trees* 13). In this scene, perception is playing with fact, undermining the conviction of "no doubt" through the initial observation of the body looking alive. This observation anticipates discussions later in the novel of how the lasting impact of Till's murder has lived (and lives) on, which come after the concrete possibility that his body is being moved around to different locations as if it was still alive. The idea that this body is, paradoxically, both Till's and *not* Till's (and both alive and not alive) establishes a simultaneity to historical identity here, both recalling the negation logics of *I Am Not Sidney Poitier* and anticipating the interests of Everett's 2022 novel, *Dr. No*. This spectral duality and state of in-betweenness also recall *Beloved*'s story of Sethe, a formally enslaved woman living in 1873 Cincinnati, who is haunted by the novel's eponymous ghost: the daughter she had killed after running away from her plantation. The reality of specifically Till's moment in African American history is that it remains painful and traumatic for both his family and, more widely, the African American community. These characteristics inform the distorted, simultaneous reality of *The Trees*: a present tense that may be over sixty years after Till's murder, but one that is still haunted by and experiencing the ramifications of it.

Using Davis' words about race, postmodernism, and history, *The Trees* "enacts a hybrid vision of history and time that sheds new light on issues addressed by Jameson and [Linda] Hutcheon in their theories of the postmodern—topics such as the 'fictionality' of history, the blurring of past and present, and the questioning of grand historical metanarratives" (Duvall 2002, p. 75). Everett's novel, I contend, specifically does this by engaging with the possibilities of the *post*-postmodern: a classification or categorisation strategy that comes with the problematic contradictions and active conflicts encouraged by this term. Post-postmodernism is a periodising term which paradoxically both relies on postmodernism and claims to move beyond it after implying that it has reached some form of ending. This indecisive stasis/movement beyond, in line with Mark Fisher's discussion of "lost futures" in his work on hauntology (influenced by Jacques Derrida), signposts how "cultural time has folded back on itself, and the impression of linear development has given way to a strange simultaneity" (Fisher 2014, p. 17). Fisher's ideas can be applied to *The Trees*' post-postmodernism, particularly his suggestion of resetting the ghosts of modernism and postmodernism rather than expelling them: a mobilisation of traumatic cultural memory rather than a process of forgetting it. This premise of necessary mobilisation determines and shapes Everett's use of history in the present in *The Trees*, a novel where tenses are able to simultaneously occupy the same space. As with many late twentieth and early twenty-first century writers, Everett's union with post-postmodernism invites definitional ambivalence, generates aesthetic oppositions, and (as per Everett's typical approach to voice and tone) is imbued with both irony and seriousness. In *The Trees*, post-postmodernism's inherent hybridisation can also be linked to what Davis calls a mediation "between postmodernism and African American social protest" (Duvall 2002, p. 75). Protest is a vital, integral part of African American history but is not often at the forefront of historicised literary postmodernism, so post-postmodernism here brings a reshuffle of priorities and the new treatment of aesthetics as *inseparable* from "social protest" against racial inequality. "Postmodernism has not usually been a mode that writers of colour have opted to use," as the critic Ramón Saldívar puts it. "For many writers of colour, consequently, postmodernism has proven to be simply too distantly removed from the real world of justice and injustice and too pessimistic about the possibility of freedom," whereas post-postmodernism can be a license for reorientation. Saldívar treats it as no coincidence that postmodernism is "a time" that is "contemporaneous, in other words, with the end of the heroic stage of the Civil Rights era" (all Saldívar 2011, p. 519). Post-postmodernism's

twenty-first century moment, meanwhile, aligns with more contemporary movements motivated by racial justice and equality, such as Black Lives Matter.

In *The Trees*, Everett's negotiation between postmodern irony or experimentalism and social issue justifies stepping outside of the term postmodernism and adding the second prefix—"post"—when describing Everett's writing style. As Martin Paul Eve says, deploying "sincerity" via Lionel Trilling's understanding of the term (which, by extension, I am also doing), "the primary targets against which the sincerity group act"—a "group" he includes Everett in—"are a series of, for the most part, white, male writers whose writings were the subject of intense academic scrutiny from the 1970s onward" (Eve 2016, p. 124). This list of authors includes John Barth, Don DeLillo, and Thomas Pynchon. Similar to other "contemporary authors seeking new ways of engaging with sincerity in their fiction," Everett is, therefore, "not rejecting all aspects of postmodern literature; the complexity, fragmentation, and even the historical subject matter often remain," as Eve puts it (p. 125). Yet, he is adapting the postmodern, experimentalist model so it can be used to talk more frankly about race. Similar to his characters', Everett's resistance to the premise of talking about race does not remove the discussion entirely. That is, his work discusses race in order to not only need to discuss race, so the meta-commentary still stands. In Eve's words on *Erasure*, which I think are equally applicable to *The Trees*, Everett "continues to stage this dilemma of [desiring] an environment free of [problems surrounding] racial identity while, at the same time, doing so by strongly reinscribing a discursive focus on race as a real and practical identity aspect" (p. 130). Black authors such as Toni Morrison and Ishmael Reed are rare exceptions to 20th century canonical postmodernism's domination by White men—as well as Barth, DeLillo, and Pynchon, Robert Coover, Donald Barthelme, William Gaddis, and William H. Gass (to name a few). Despite its connection to White American politics, established by DeLillo and Pynchon's novels in particular, it is necessary for a post-postmodern reanimation of politicised fictional narrative, and for postmodernism's decentralisation of race to become certain post-postmodernism's recentralisation of it. This distinction of centrality is at the heart of Everett's aesthetic project, even if he has never explicitly defined himself as a post-postmodern author during a career that has spanned over thirty books of fiction and poetry. For this, Everett's focus can be aligned with other contemporary authors, on both sides of the Atlantic, to whom writing after postmodernism becomes an opportunity to rethink the subject of race in the context of experimental fiction—such as Paul Beatty, Bernadine Evaristo, and Colson Whitehead. Similar to these authors, Everett challenges the concern that continuing postmodernism's interest in experimentalism neglects a grounded, authentic, and real discussion of race. Similar to much of his work, *The Trees* draws on postmodern influence while centralising race, suggesting that post-postmodernism, for its renewed emphasis on affect and sincerity, is an appropriate designation for it.

2. *The Trees'* Post-Postmodernism

As this article suggests, post-postmodernism's gesture of bringing together the historically real and the absurdity of the invented is here determined by racial trauma, which unsettles the perceived finality or success of a term such as postracial, which I will turn to in the second half of this article. In *The Trees*, Till's body symbolises both the preservation of traumatic memory and the corrective promise that comes with history's afterlife because past injustice is addressed in a new light from the present. If we consider Till's body in *The Trees*—which as Jim Davis and Ed Morgan say, "appears to have been misplaced" (Everett 2021, p. 28)—as a marker of this afterlife, Davis' suggestions of postmodern "political commitment" can be extended into the realm of post-postmodernism: a concept that, while problematic, is defined by a principle of temporal continuation and thus extends conversations between the past, present, future, and their "strange simultaneity" (as Fisher puts it). Specifically, post-postmodernism's "commitment" can be seen as fusing postmodern aesthetics—high style, trenchant experimentalism, manipulation of the real—with racial politics and both their cemented and emerging histories. Whether we define

twentieth-century (post-war) postmodernism as Jürgen Habermas' obsolescence of "the new" and "alliance of postmodernists with premodernists" (Habermas 1981, pp. 4, 14), as Jean-François Lyotard's "incredulity toward metanarratives" (Lyotard 1979, p. xxiv), or by conforming with Fredric Jameson's insistence that its "celebratory posture" or conclusive "moralizing gesture" must resist "freezing into place" (Jameson 1989, p. 66), the perceived end of postmodern history can be viewed as a component of the traumatic past symbolised by Till's body in *The Trees*.

As such, this body's position in the present tense of Everett's novel—which, not too far from our own present tense as I write this, sees Donald Trump appear as a character (and President) and a senator killed after the White House is broken into by rioters—generates a new, liminal, post-postmodern space. This space in *The Trees* can be defined by the very temporal complications and problems of chronology and lineage invoked by the term post-postmodernism, which in *Post-postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Just-in-Time Capitalism* Jeffrey Nealon claims to signal "the never-ending end of everything" (Nealon 2012, p. ix). By being so fixated on past modernist legacies yet simultaneously wanting to move forward by announcing a new phase of modernism, post-postmodernism creates a paradoxical, chronologically skewed, temporally complicated state. The ghosts of modernism, postmodernism, and the future ghosts of post-postmodernism all leave their fixed temporalities and bleed into one another, collapsing these discrete, distinct periodised phases. Bodies are constantly being dug up and misplaced in a nonlinear drive towards the future, in other words, which is a modernist image established by the legacy of T.S. Eliot's 1922 poem *The Waste Land*. The fractured, permeable, "never-ending" space of post-postmodernism shares the characteristics of Till's body in *The Trees* because, as Charles Harris puts it when, similar to Nealon, attempting to define the notoriously slippery term post-postmodernism, this space contains a "suspiciously lively" postmodern "corpse" (Harris 2002, p. 1). The metaphorical "corpse" here takes up much of the post-postmodern space, despite the implied end of postmodern history brought about by the extra "post," which is ultimately a semantic placeholder proposing futurity when post-postmodernism has and will always have an inescapable dependence on the past.

By engaging with post-postmodern potential, Everett's work implicates postmodernism, even if the categorisation of his writing as postmodern itself does not sufficiently capture the number of layers of irony and metatextuality he has always written with. Everett instead mixes (and complicates the relationship between) postmodernism's exhaustion and constructed reality in a fictional narrative, which is more in line with post-postmodern sincerity. Everett's conflicted relationship with this preceding phase of modernism is well documented in scholarship surrounding his work prior to *The Trees*, but this novel offers a continuation and escalation of this conflict. Eve posits that "it is questionable whether the aesthetic characteristics of Everett's novel [*Erasure*] can be said to advance beyond postmodernism" (Eve 2016, p. 119). As Margaret Russett notes when also discussing Everett's most famous novel, "If the label "postmodern" thus seems inadequate to characterize the novels (or more than a couple of the novels) themselves, it may nonetheless offer a plausible description of Everett's career. It seems questionable, however, whether this name is preferable to those Everett has rejected" (Russett 2005, p. 364). It is no coincidence that the word "questionable" has come up often as critics navigate the contradictions yet temptations in describing Everett's work as postmodernism. Everett himself pokes fun at the association of his work with postmodernism in his metafictional novel *Percival Everett by Virgil Russell*, where the protagonist named Percival Everett asks his dying father in a nursing home, "What was the thing in your career that irked you most? Funny you should have me have you ask me that question. Strange. Son, it was being called a postmodernist. I don't even know what the fuck that is!" (Everett 2013, p. 96).

As Michel Feith says, Everett's complex and often contradictory relationship with postmodernism is comparable to his and his work's resistance to racial classification, too: "The question of Everett's relation to "PoMo" culture mirrors another difficulty, that of assigning him a definite position along the "racial" spectrum. On the definitional mar-

gins of both African American literature and contemporary postmodernism, Percival Everett once more wears the trickster's motley cap, and walks the line of liminality" (Julien and Tissot 2007, n.p.). If we are to entertain the possibility of describing Everett's work as post-postmodern, postmodernism and race are inextricable from how we must conceive his brand of post-postmodernism, and this underpins *The Trees* as significantly as it does *Erasure* and many of Everett's earlier works. In her contribution to *Postmodern Literature and Race* on Pynchon, Sue Kim claims that "Despite some optimism about the liberal potential of postmodern art and thought, postmodernism has proved not only politically ambiguous but also ideologically malleable." Kim goes on to say that "In this sense, Fredric Jameson's critique of postmodernism as the dangerous flattening of history seems sadly accurate," which is where post-postmodernism's wilful disruption of chronology, history, and temporal logics generates a *more* productive "liberal potential" (both Kim 2015, p. 264). Jameson points out how postmodernism flattens, so it is at least useful that post-postmodernism fluctuates and mutates, even if this poses its own set of conceptual and definitional problems. *The Trees* offers the most explicit evidence in Everett's oeuvre of giving this double bind of disruption and potential, attributable to post-postmodernism, a narrative stage.

Through the story of Jim Davis, Ed Morgan, Till's body, and many other characters and elements, *The Trees* historicises the theoretical debate surrounding post-postmodernism's link to postmodernism, a link which, after all, is created and problematised by notions of beginning and ending and which relies entirely on the premise of historicisation. The novel escalates Everett's career-long interest in the balance between reality and invention, specifically through the narrative's fictionalisation of and play with historical fact. Till's body appears at crime scenes next to the additional, fresh bodies of known, local, racist, and now castrated White men in Money, Mississippi. This is, of course, where Till was lynched in 1955. The body's fictional reappearances create a frenzy within the version of twenty-first century America Everett sets *The Trees* in. Various levels of local and national law enforcement become involved, despite Jim and Ed being assigned the case. Money's Klan branch becomes nervous but also irate. The longer the novel goes on, the more the scale of the situation grows. In *The Trees'* final third, the situation is about to become, as "Whites for Social Justice Committee" member Morris Lee Morris puts it, an all-out "race war." The Committee debate what to do as White supremacist factions up and down the country are forced into action due to the fact that, as fellow member Harlan Fester says, "Somebody or bodies is killin' White people [...] Our kind of white people" (both Everett 2021, p. 239).

Morris' conversation with fellow members Fester and Pete Rupter in Temecula (California) devolves into a juvenile, *I told you so* performance:

'We got to get the membership together and get prepared. That race war I been tellin' y'all about is here, I fear,' Morris said.

Rupter laughed.

'What you laughin' at, Rupter?' Morris barked. 'And why you cover yer mouth with yer hand like some kinda Korean girl?'

Rupter took offense. 'You know I'm sensitive about my missing teeth. And what you know about Korean girls?'

'I fought in Korea,' Morris said.

'Fuck you, Morris,' Fester said. 'You was too young to go to Vietnam. And you was too old for the Gulf War.'

'Shut up.'

'I'll shut up,' Fester said, sarcastically.

'But what were you laughin' at?' Morris kept on it.

'You rhymed,' Rupter said.

‘What?’

‘You said the war is here, I fear. You rhymed. I thought it was kinda funny. Sorry.’

‘Jesus Christ,’ Morris said.

‘Shut up, both of y’all,’ Fester said. ‘You act like children.’

(p. 240)

Morris ends the chapter with another rhyme, which this time makes both men laugh rather than exacerbating the bickering: “We’d best clean every goddamn gun we got. This thing sounds for real. If it’s true, what will we do?” (p. 241). The sardonic, mocking treatment of Morris, Fester, and Rupter draws on the absurdist sense of humour Everett often writes with and serves to distance the reader from these characters, as is frequently the case in his work. This effect is bolstered by the exaggerated names of these men, particularly Fester’s and its connotations of becoming rotten or septic, a fitting name given the importance of corpses but also a morally bankrupt nation to *The Trees*. The men’s names are comparable to others in the novel, such as Junior Junior (another double, similar to Morris) and Granny C (a fictionalised Carolyn Bryant). Again here, the comedy (which these characters create but which is also, thanks to the novel’s third-person narration, at their expense) belies a more serious and unsettling reality about the access these men have to guns and the political validation their country gives their racist hate. Their racism here manifests as a joke about “Korean girl” stereotypes, but elsewhere in the novel, those contributing to the race war have transformed jokes into violent actions.

This scene’s tricky fusion of irony and seriousness is representative of the way the novel does this generally, which, as I have suggested, is a defining tenet of post-postmodernism, which is built on aspirations for sincerity despite a debt to postmodern manipulation and play. Everett’s expansion of postmodern irony to bring absurdist comedy together with the vital subject of how Black bodies are treated gives his writing a necessarily uncomfortable tone. The subject of violently abusing Black bodies relates both to 1955 and to *now*—take George Floyd’s 2020 murder by police and its re-energisation of global Black Lives Matter protests (which were initiated by the murder of Trayvon Martin in 2013) as other recent events *The Trees* is in conversation with, albeit not as explicitly as the Trump administration. Eve attributes *Erasure* with “a gross social irony” (Eve 2016, p. 129); I would contend that *The Trees* is an extension of *Erasure* in this way, given how central brutal, graphic murders are to Everett’s 2021 novel. Alongside this scene’s fusion of ironic humour and seriousness, Morris, Fester, and Rupter’s topic of conversation alludes to how we can conceive of post-postmodernism’s temporality. With the fifteen-year gap between the end of the Vietnam War and the beginning of the first Gulf War, Fester’s claim that Morris was “too young to go to Vietnam” yet “too old for the Gulf War” holds up, but it is notable that the men must remind one another of points of overlap between their own biographical details and the chronology of American history. As an idea, post-postmodernism is a similar temporal limbo to Morris’ and is also, by definition, obsessed with its own timeline. This obsession leads to chronological contradictions in looking both backwards and forwards, reinforcing the strangeness of post-postmodern simultaneity. *The Trees*’ present tense is driven by interdependent pasts and futures and the ability for these to occupy the same space as the present. The impending threat of the “race war” Morris reminds Fester and Rupter he has been warning them about is a vector for futurity, completing the novel’s own intersection of tenses. The future race war is the consequence of the past’s intrusion on the present tense of *The Trees*, which can be summarised by the catalytic appearance of the simulacrum of Till’s body at new, fictional crime scenes. The litany of alarming events that come as a result of Till’s body, from the murders of White racists to the death of a senator, escalate until a race war suddenly does not seem so projected or rhetorical. It becomes the constructed narrative reality of *The Trees* despite being an invented digression from the real historical facts about what happened to Till, which are inserted into Everett’s novel, becoming a framework for a story that is persistently suggestive of hypothetical futures. Allowing its treatment of time to become more tangled, this invented digression

from real history, ironically, leads to a situation with a deliberate resemblance to recent American reality.

In another of the novel's many short chapters, the White House is stormed by rioters and "screaming" is said to be "all anyone could hear". "One could not even hear the alarm for the screaming. Secret Service agents ran with their Heckler & Koch MP5s and their FN P90 submachine guns shoulder slung and ready. They ran through the halls of the West Wing of the White House, some to the Oval Office and some to the Roosevelt Room," Everett's narrator describes (all [Everett 2021](#), p. 282). Recalling the events of the 6th of January 2021, the drama of Everett's novel (which was published in September 2021) subverts Trump's role in inciting the attack on the Capitol while rendering him equally culpable within this fictional assault on the White House. "The president cowered under the Resolute desk in the Oval Office" and proceeds to become stuck trying to get out, then responds to the news of the death of one of his senators with a concern for only his own safety and not even his wife's, whose name he forgets in this scene, while demanding "Get me to the fucking bunker. I want my bunker" (pp. 282–84). As this scene shows, containing more scope than the Whites for Social Justice Committee meeting, *The Trees* hypothesises—then shows—what happens after history has ended but is manipulated and tampered with. This afterlife of history stages further damage to cultural memory. Davis' obligation "of keeping the past alive in order to construct a better future" after the end of history directly prevents anything from becoming "better" in *The Trees* then. The central preventative agent is the perpetuation of racialised violence, which motivates the race war instigated by the recurring appearance of a representation of Till's body. But fundamentally, the corpse could not have resurfaced and disrupted the present tense so irrevocably if the actual Emmett Till had not been murdered in 1955, and this most crippling hypothetical lost future hangs over *The Trees* and is the root cause of all the suffering staged by its narrative.

3. The Postracial's "Ideological Endpoint"

A lost future of racial progress undermines the perceived finality of a term such as postracial, which usefully develops the relationship between the end of postmodern history and post-postmodern, futurist potential. As discussed by Anthony Stewart, similar to the implications of post-postmodernism, the "always significant prefix" in postracial awkwardly "suggests not only the kind of great progress that has ostensibly been made, but also, more seductively still, the dizzying prospect of an ideological endpoint that may have already been attained, if not, indeed, surpassed" ([Stewart 2017](#), p. 126). As unconvincingly as the designation post-postmodernism signals an end to postmodernism, *The Trees*' association with the postracial is inseparable from what Stewart calls "the metalinguistic myth of the end of race" (p. 133). In her book *Race and the Literary Encounter*, Lesley Larkin expresses how, similarly, "despite popular claims of America's postracial status, American racial obsessions are alive, well, and very much on the minds of contemporary artists and critics" ([Larkin 2012](#), p. 3). Stewart explains that the subsequent "myth" attached to the postracial is a source of qualification and complication in Everett's work, and I would argue that it specifically extends the chronological entanglements of *The Trees* I have discussed. The potential implications that the work of racial progress has been done, or is anywhere near being done, foreground a reductivity in the term postracial. The only use that can be found in it returns us to the kind of discursive paradox or meta-commentary on race I raised earlier in this article, which, as Stewart puts it, relates to how "believers in the postracial think about race so that they will no longer have to think about race" ([Stewart 2020](#), p. 186). In his work on *American Desert*, Richard Schur suggests that "Everett's resistance to being identified as an "African American writer" might enable readers to simply avoid questions of race altogether" ([Mitchell and Vander 2013](#), p. 91); but I would disagree and argue that it only, dramatically escalates "questions of race." Talking about the problems of talking about race is still talking about race, which is a bottom line that Everett's work relies on, even if it takes pleasure in exposing the absurdity of this. Till's body in *The Trees* operates by the same logic. As the novel accentuates, history's end is not actually an ending; this

can be compared to the way in which both post-postmodernism and the postracial supply the prefix “post” without actually leaving behind what they are both claiming to move beyond. Despite these qualifications, the *intentions* to move forward remain in place, even if the intentions are transparent about just how conditional, contingent, and weighed down by obstacles they actually are.

This is where the “post” in “postracial” is “more like the post of postcolonial,” to return to Ramón Saldívar. The postracial is “not a chronological but a conceptual matter”; it does not convincingly suggest “that we are beyond race [. . .] Rather, the term entails a conceptual shift to the question of what meaning the idea of ‘race’ carries in our own times” (all Saldívar 2011, p. 520). Saldívar settles on the idea that “the ‘post’ in postrace may simply be an indication of an attempt to clear out epistemic space for a new way of conceiving what ‘race’ is and has been all along” (p. 529). “This does not mean that race is superseded by the prefix ‘post,’ but that it parodies both the modern and postmodern ways of thinking about race,” as he puts it (p. 529). *The Trees* uses this exact platform of parody. Similar to the race war the novel’s criminal investigation devolves into, a desirable destination for talking about race has not yet been reached, but a different, more alarming destination has instead. This space is a present tense of strange, dangerous simultaneity, haunted by both the damaging past and the projected, unresolved future. This space facilitates a discussion being had regardless of the messy, problematic trajectory required to have reached this point in conversations about race, as well as that which is needed to go much further. But stasis is the position *The Trees* certainly begins from. After arriving in Money and reporting to the local police station, Jim and Ed introduce themselves to the local officers responsible for handling the first crime scene: Sheriff Red Jetty, Delroy Digby, and Braden Brady:

“I’m Special Detective Jim Davis and this is Special Detective Ed Morgan. We’re from the MBI.”

“Special detectives,” Jetty repeated.

“And that’s not just because we’re Black,” Jim said. “Though plenty true because we are.”

This put Jetty off-balance. The receptionist, whose name was really and from birth Hattie Berg, spat out a sudden chuckle.

(Everett 2021, p. 32).

The scene compares to similar moments in other Everett novels, where the handling and timing of the revelations that characters are Black say a lot about the discriminatory cultural expectation to announce race oneself rather than let it be evaluated on someone else’s terms. This generates a defence mechanism of people of colour needing to second-guess the responses these revelations will provoke, rather than letting these too go unacknowledged.

These revelations are often arbitrary narrative moments, a notable example being baby genius Ralph’s provocation, “Have you to this point assumed that I am white?” in Everett’s novel *Glyph* (Everett 1999, p. 54). Elsewhere, the revelations come less directly, via implication, dependent on the reader’s knowledge of the author they are reading and of figures in African American cultural history more widely. In *Percival Everett by Virgil Russell*, the protagonist who shares Everett’s name (but is not a writer) is told by his father (who shares similarities with the real Everett’s father but *is* a writer) that “I’ve written something for you. He looked at my face. Not to you, but for you” (Everett 2013, p. 1). In *A History of the African-American People*, another character named Percival Everett appears, this time over thirty pages in, and is again introduced with how his face looks, with an explicit reference to the colour of his skin: “After several meetings with our full staff and the help of my advisor, whom you know, we could come up with but one name that would seem likely for your purposes—Percival Everett. He has what you want: He is experienced, virtually unknown, and black” (Everett and Kincaid 2004, p. 38). In *I Am Not Sidney Poitier*, on the other hand, Everett’s revelation of the character Not Sidney Poitier’s race is contingent on

the reader's knowledge of Sidney Poitier's: "I am tall and dark and look for the world like Mr. Sidney Poitier, something my poor disturbed and now deceased mother could not have known when I was born, when she named me Not Sidney Poitier" (Everett 2009, p. 17). In a similar fashion to these moments in other Everett novels, the revelation that Jim and Ed are Black and *their* process of second-guessing the response to this fact manifests as a self-deprecatory joke, which they know should not be needed but which events elsewhere in the novel justify as necessary. Similar to the moments scattered throughout Everett's catalogue of work, this idea in *The Trees* underlines something that Everett raises in his essay "Signing for the Blind": "to assume the race of the character[s] betrays not only an unsophisticated eye which cannot read symbolically, but the insidious colonialist reader's eye which infects America" (Everett 1991, p. 9).

Further complicating the stasis–progress paradox of discussing race that we have come to expect of Everett's fiction, Jim unwittingly reverse engineers this introductory scene with Sheriff Jetty and Hattie Berg. Jim becomes somewhat complicit in the same reductive expectations of revealing/knowing someone's race that he is subjected to towards the start of *The Trees*, but also in later scenes, such as when he and Ed, out following up leads, are pulled over by the police and mistaken for civilians, then not believed when they claim to be law enforcement—both misunderstandings that are no doubt due to the colour of their skin. This interaction with Officer Peck—another ironic name, as Jim draws our attention to when he wisecracks: "You are indeed right about that, Officer Pecker" (Everett 2021, p. 134)—sees Peck refer to Jim and Ed as "funny darkies" and make them exit the vehicle and put their hands on the bonnet. Embarrassed at his realisation, Peck stumbles when they ask if they can put their badge away before they do so, then lets them go, leaving Ed saying, "I thought he might actually shoot us" (p. 135). But Jim becomes complicit in making assumptions based on race, albeit more forgivably, earlier in the novel when he is uncertain about the waitress Gertrude's race, who works where he and Ed frequent as they solve the case in Money: "the diner called the Dinah" (p. 68). Jim says: "Excuse me for asking, but are you Black?"; when Gertrude confirms that she is, Jim follows up with "I knew it [. . .] I didn't know that you're Black. I didn't know that, but I knew there was something" (both p. 69).

The effect of this, it seems, is that the fact of employing Jim and Ed in law enforcement indicates that progress towards racial equality both has and has not been made: Jim and Ed are on the receiving end of assumptions made on the basis of their race, but also misstep and make this kind of assumption themselves, even if only on one occasion in Everett's novel. This postracial limbo returns us to Till's body, which similar to the understanding of race embedded in *The Trees*, is a status of not quite being alive (and not quite Emmett Till), which is a status determined by qualification and defined by liminality. Problems surrounding race live on despite markers of progress, such as Jim and Ed being able to serve the law. The problems have simply been handed a new rhetorical strategy in the term postracial, which is as self-contradictory and paradoxical as attributing Everett's fiction with post-postmodern aesthetics. Both terms have a place in the conversation but offer implications that must be unpacked. Similar to Till's status of not-quite-aliveness, postracial America and post-postmodern fiction are equally suggestive of an afterlife underpinned by impossibility. Such impossibility derives from having left certain problems behind while encountering an entire set of new ones, be they aesthetic or social—which, as Everett's work often demonstrates, are fundamentally inseparable.

4. Conclusions

If the term postracial hinders or even precludes the opportunity for racial progress, compounding the inability to get real work done as society conceptualises and periodises the *incomplete* work done thus far, it is worth looking at the moment in recent American history that encouraged a surge in popularity in the word, not least because it relates to Trump's predecessor: the election of Barack Obama, who in some ways can be seen as another (living) ghost hanging over (or from) *The Trees*. Colson Whitehead's op-ed for *The*

New York Times a year on from Obama's election victory (the date Whitehead says America "became" postracial) discusses the possibility that the election result triggered America "officially" becoming a "postracial society" (Whitehead 2009, n.p.). In "The Year of Living Postracially," Whitehead (a novelist contemporaneous to Everett) writes: "Sociologists say that racism is a construct, which means that our predicament is what we in the business world call a 'branding problem.'" The tone of the piece is not dissimilar to Everett's deflections of talking about race in his playful interviews over the years. Whitehead claims that he would "like to throw my hat in the ring for the position of secretary of postracial affairs," because of the temptation of "trying to piggyback on this whole postracial thing." He ironises the chance that American society has "eradicated racism forever" and that "we've come a long way as a country" (all n.p.), illustrating the particular strangeness of the term postracial because using it only amplifies how far the country has *not* come, even if some form of progress may have been made by electing Obama as president.

In a piece for the *London Review of Books* provocatively titled "Phenomenologically Fucked," on the occasion of Everett publishing *I Am Not Sidney Poitier*, Alex Abramovich observes how "Race is America's most enduring fiction. And for all the relieved, Obama-era sighing over America's new, nominally post-racial century, that fiction can be infuriatingly hard to shake, or look past, or write one's way around. Take the career of America's pre-eminent post-racial novelist, Percival Everett" (Abramovich 2009, n.p.). There are myriad contradictions here. Abramovich declares that Everett is a "post-racial novelist" in the same breath as acknowledging how race is so "enduring" that it is "infuriatingly hard" to "look past" (all n.p.). The obstacle undermines the plausibility that America or Everett could be past it or *post* it. Abramovich's subtext, it seems, is that Everett is trying or working to "look past" or go beyond problems surrounding race, so is only entertaining the possibility of a postracial America. But this work-in-progress does not, by definition, warrant the concrete title "post-racial novelist," which has subsequently appeared on Everett book covers including Graywolf Press' edition of his 2011 novel *Assumption*. This is particularly Ironic given this novel's title and the fact that its detective story about Deputy Sheriff Ogden Walker explicitly centralises assumptions around race, among other vexed subjects, such as innocence, trusting law enforcement, and the reliability of the narrator.

Everett's own words in "Signing to the Blind" suggest that this kind of title would hardly make him comfortable: "In one of my novels, a character considers the turmoil in his family and recalls the story of the man who, when a fire breaks out in his living room, races about trying to build a stove around it. More often than not this is how I feel as an African-American writer. I will take any fire I can get and I will not put any fire out" (Everett 1991, p. 9). Everett does not directly address Fukuyama and Jameson's ideas here, but his implications of a lack of racial progress and the collapse of past and future into the present can be applied to the flawed end of history (and the postmodern past's complication of the post-postmodern present). To still be putting the fire out implies a present tense, a strange simultaneity, rather than the fulfilment of futurist potential indicated by "post." Later in this piece, Everett discusses how "we should be doing more than insisting that there be canon reformation, a mere replacement of one faulty list with another, but rather we should be about undermining the racist thinking which generates a need for such a construction in the first place" (p. 11). A term such as postracial, similar to post-postmodernism, is precisely this process of "replacement of one faulty list with another," as is the reductive periodising tendency of the academy but also society at large, particularly in the context of issues as important yet undervalued and unresolved as racial inequality. As Everett says, "It is to this problem we need to address our energies, to understanding the dynamics of the African-American reading in this culture and to creating new literary territory in which the African-American reader can find what he or she needs and wants" (pp. 10–11). This in-progress "address" is more productive than the self-congratulatory label "post-racial novelist" when it comes to how we think about Everett and his work. The bottom line, "Signing to the Blind" argues, is to work so hard for significant progress that there is no need to put our collective head up for air and

self-reflexively analyse the small instances of progress achieved thus far. This bottom line would minimise the kinds of scenario where racial progress manifests as one step forward followed by many more back—a scenario similar to, as Everett discusses in this essay, when the film rights to his 1983 debut novel *Suder* were sold and the project was even approached by Sidney Poitier (who wanted to direct and star in a supporting role), before falling apart after the production company requested that Everett make his main character White.

Fundamentally, both the problematic cultural implications of the term postracial and the aesthetic complications of post-postmodernism are inextricably tied to the present's reliance on the past—the past's *disruption* of the present due to the incomplete, unresolved, vitally important situation of race in America. *The Trees* dramatises this disruption by destabilising the cultural claim of an end to history, as popularised by Jameson within the context of postmodernism during late capitalism (after Fukuyama's original diagnosis). To return to Michel Feith, it is inescapably important that "As an African-American writer, Percival Everett's attitude to racial characterizations in literature is two-pronged: on the one hand, he has written several novels dealing with issues of ethnicity and blackness [...] on the other hand, he does not want to be limited to these themes" (Julien and Tissut 2007, n.p.). As Everett himself puts it, "Fiction is unlike geometry, where there is a world set within the world where all things line up and fit and a triangle is merely the mutual intersecting of three straight lines. Fiction is more like mathematics where many things are what they are merely because we say so" (Julien and Tissut 2007, n.p.). Post-postmodernism, postmodernism, the postracial, and racial inequality are best viewed as precisely the "many things" that "are what they are merely because we say so" that Everett mentions here. In his work, these four things collide and fuse in a complicated present tense that recognises the need for future solutions while accentuating the issues that remain unresolved from the past.

Within this distinction between tenses, the relationship between (both historical and constructed) reality and invention remains tangled and complex. Elsewhere in the same piece, Everett discusses how "we are all too aware of the talk that the tricks of fiction no longer work once they have been uncovered and exposed; but that really simply underscores the power of real fictive art" (n.p.). His "tricks" appear variously as postmodern irony *and* post-postmodern sincerity, the manipulation of reality *and* the framework of historical fact, humour *and* seriousness towards the difficult state of race in contemporary America. *The Trees* is a novel written at the meeting point of these interests—one that more explicitly stages the tensions between past and present than Everett's other novels, due to the centrality of a race war to its narrative and the literalisation, through Emmett Till, of timeless violence towards Black bodies. *The Trees* necessarily escalates issues that Everett has explored in his fiction for decades. These issues can be summarised by what, in an interview with Alice Mills on his "troubled relationship with the South and with the United States in general," Everett memorably described as America's "career of being fractured" (Julien and Tissut 2007, n.p.). But by digging up the past and complicating the present, *The Trees* does ultimately look towards the future, where if further damage is avoided, America may not be so "fractured"—where it may eventually begin to pick up its pieces and fit them back together. But beneath its post-postmodern aesthetics, *The Trees* emphasises that before being able to reach this unfractured future, we must confront unresolved conflict, and now.

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