The Mutuality of Adaptation in/of Percival Everett's Works

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Abstract: Human being's endeavor 'to fit in' the social world has always been beset with the problems of hierarchy and exploitation across the lines of race, gender, class, caste, nationhood and religion among others; and literature has been chronicling and representing this human adaptation before the adaptation of such predicaments amongst literary and other art forms. The Booker shortlisted and Pulitzer winner African American novelist Percival Everett (b. 1956) can be described to be in the thick of adaptive exchanges, in the sense that his works get adapted into films, and he keeps adapting both real and imaginary people into his poignant and funny and immensely ironic narratives. The proposed paper would endeavor a study of four of his novels: *Erasure* (2001, turned into a film titled *American Fiction* in 2023) that satirizes the adaptation of a narrative and language by a black author that would be considered by the market-driven (and racial) publishing world as 'authentic black'; *I Am Not Sidney Poitier* (2009) employs adaptation of issues from several films starring the first black Academy-award-winning Hollywood male actor Sidney Poitier; *The Trees* (2021), a novel that adapts (while inverting) the real incidents of arbitrary killing of black people starting movements like Black Lives Matter; and the Pulitzer-winning 2024 novel *James* that re-imaginatively adapts *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn.* Everett's Menippean satire thus simultaneously adapts, and is adapted from the Antebellum Period to a post-slavery to a (supposedly) post-racial reality in America. The section on the varied adaptations in Everett's works is prefixed by a brief terminological discussion on 'adaptation' and the opinions of some canonical African American critics on why it is still very difficult by the Blacks to adapt to the American life where the White discourse still marginalizes them.

Keywords: Adaptation; Authentic Black; Menippean Satire; Antebellum Period, Black Lives Matter

I - Adaptation: A Conceptual Clearance

Human life on this earth has been one of evolution and adaptation, and so, in the broader sense, adaptation is the story of human beings' fitting in into the natural scheme of things or realities around them, and gradually adapting their lives from nomadism to sedentism thereby leading to the foundation of societies and civilizations. From its Latin etymology (*adaptare*) through other European languages like Old French (*adapter*), the verb ' to adapt' takes on meanings of 'to fit' (something, for some purpose), 'to adjust', 'to join', and 'to undergo modification'. In comparative literature, 'adaptation' means the process of changing the medium of a text and transforming it into a text in another medium – most commonly the transformation of a novel into a film, and lately, vice-versa, thereby bringing in a comparative and critical estimate of the two texts through two other nearby terms in comparative literature – influence study, and intertextuality. Also, in the context of the discourse on alternative modernity, adaptation couples with hybridity to critique a conventional homogeneous concept of Western modernity by exploring indigenous and local cultures resisting wholesale Western implantation of - say for example, the capitalist mode of economy - and ascribing to local ways of life that can be called 'modern', albeit under the constantly growing forces of globalization.

The fact of human adaptation to their physical realities happened much before their endeavors towards artistic adaptations. Yuval Noah Harari, in his text *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind* (2011), has traced the history of humankind's evolution from the species labelled as Homo Sapiens through their varied adaptations which he has traced as various revolutions – from the cognitive, 70000 years ago to the scientific revolution 500 years ago, to the industrial revolution 200 years ago, to our present age when we are actually in the throes of adapting to a world of artificial intelligence and robots. Included in this history is the representation of the human world through language describing things both real and imaginary. There is an interesting section in this text where Harari shows how the imaginary is not the false thereby making us recollect the distinction Aristotle had made in his *Poetics* between poetry being more *probably* real than factually real making the probable

reveal more essential human actions and behaviors and thus coming closer to universal truths rather than just the temporal ones.

> Over the years, people have woven an incredibly complex network of stories. … The kinds of things that people create through this network of stories are known in academic circles as 'fictions', 'social constructs' or 'imagined realities'. An imagined reality is not a lie. … Unlike lying, an imagined reality is something that everyone believes in, and as long as this communal belief persists, the imagined reality exerts force in the world. (35)

Within the matrix of this communal belief in imagined realities incorporating literature, one theory proposed by archetypal critics like Northrop Frye is the evolution of literary genres and adaptation to their historical and cultural realities through a recurrence of archetypal patterns.

> Total literary history moves from the primitive to the sophisticated, and here we glimpse the possibility of seeing literature as a complication of a relatively restricted and simple group of formulas that can be studied in primitive culture. If so, then the search for archetypes is a kind of literary anthropology, concerned with the way that literature is informed by pre-literary categories such as ritual, myth and folk tale. (Leitch 1308-09)

Anthropology and history inform us that societies established themselves through establishing different hierarchies amongst human beings, on the basis of division of labor, competence, gender, class, race etc., the last criterion incorporating the long history of slavery from Africa to the Americas and the perception that still lingers on in the White society that people of color are far removed from artistic and intellectual arenas making them invisible from things that matter, especially whitewashed from creative and critical discourses. All through the twentieth century, critics of race and ethnicity studies from W. E. B. Du Bois to Henry Louis Gates Jr. to bell hooks have been engaged to break the implied myths that are perpetuated to ghettoize Black identity and culture, and can be variously enlisted as:

- Blacks were slaves;
- Blacks are laborers;

- Blacks are, and can only be, servants and house-helps;
- Blacks are poorly educated, and therefore are capable of only menial jobs;
- Blacks can't be intellectuals, and therefore intellectual discourses are beyond their understanding;
- Blacks speak a funny lingo with wrong spellings and grammar; and,
- The arts produced by colored people can only be considered under labels such as 'African American' or 'Black', never mainstream.

In an address in Chicago in 1926 – later published as "Criteria of Negro Art" - W. E. B. Du Bois opines that the White society feeds them with the question in a rhetorical and hegemonistic way – "After all, what have we who are slaves and black to do with Art?" (Leitch 870) – suggesting that the basic requirements of food, clothing and housing keep the Blacks so helplessly embroiled that Art is quite beyond their reach, and thus they are deprived, according to Du Bois, of 'Beauty, Truth and Goodness'. This in turn is probably responsible for certain statistical data peddled around as realities about Black communities, that there's more obesity, alcoholism, drug addiction, domestic violence, higher risk of sex under the influence of substances and drug use, etc. Ironically, the hegemony among the Black community that 'white is best' is so deeply entrenched that even when they produce a distinct art form, they are hesitant, even guilt-ridden to claim it as their own, as Langston Hughes writes in an essay titled "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain" (1926):

> [J]azz to me is one of the inherent expressions of Negro life in America: the eternal tom-tom beating in the Negro soul – the tom-tom of revolt against weariness in a white world, a world of subway trains, and work, work, work; the tom-tom of joy and laughter, and pain swallowed in a smile. Yet the Philadelphia clubwoman is ashamed to say that her race created it and she does not like me to write about it. The old subconscious "white is best" runs through her mind. Years of study under white teachers, a lifetime of white books, pictures, and papers, and white manners, morals, and Puritan standards made her dislike the spirituals. And now she turns up

> her nose at jazz and all its manifestations – likewise almost everything else distinctly racial. (Leitch 1195)

Henry Louis Gates Jr., one of the most prominent African American cultural critics and theorists, and W. E. B. Du Bois Professor of Humanities at Harvard is best known for meticulously proving false the stereotype that the Blacks are devoid of intellectuality, and to prove this point he went on to edit with Nellie McKay *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature* in 1997. But in an earlier essay titled "Talking Black: Critical Signs of the Times", Gates Jr. trifurcates Black literature and criticism into three prominent phases: the first one, running almost till mid-twentieth century, where much of the energy is spent in refuting the false White discourse that African American's "*could not* create literature (Leitch 2433)" and therefore, by default, had no literary-critical tradition. Then came the wave of mostly White male European literary theories from Marxism to poststructuralism that African American thinkers and writers learnt 'in the master's tongue' and felt a sense of empowerment that however did not bridge the hierarchy. Yet, with the beginning of a third phase sometime towards the end of the 1980s, the hopeful fact was that Afro-American literature was slowly getting institutionalized in many White colleges and universities. However, the important question was to what extent was this adoption also a co-option. And, an even more important question was that, if African American writers and critics used the critical-theoretical language of the White Europeans and Americans when in reality these theories have always been oblivious to Black literature and life, then "Can we, as critics, escape a "mockingbird" relation to theory? And can we escape the racism of so many critical theorists, from Hume and Kant through the Southern Agrarians and the Frankfurt school ((Leitch 2435)?"

II Percival Everett

Percival Leonard Everett II (b. Dec 22, 1956) has till date written 24 novels, and counting his poetry and short story anthologies, and children's fiction, has written more than 30 books. This paper would endeavor a study of four of his novels, all published in this century, and all bothered by – besides the invisibility of the Black people – the pervading thought of what narratives to adapt, and in what kind

of (English) language, so that literature fulfils its function of authentically representing life, in this case, that of the Black people. One technique employed by Everett is to adapt a famous Black person or a character into his own narrative thereby making a connection between the period of that person or character and the author's own contemporary time. The protagonist of the first novel considered here, *Erasure* (2001), named Thelonious Ellison, nicknamed Monk, is named after the American Jazz pianist and composer Thelonious Monk (1917 – 82). The surname Ellison reminds us of the African American author Ralph Waldo Ellison (1913 – 94), famous for his book *Invisible Man* (1952) where a Black protagonist travels from the American Deep South to Harlem in New York constantly troubled by the feeling that because he is a black man, he is 'invisible' to the majority Whites.[1] Thelonious Ellison, the protagonist in Everett's novel *Erasure* is a nearly invisible author because what he writes cannot prove that he is 'black enough'. So, the paradox between Ralph Ellison's 1950s and Everett's 2001 is that the protagonist in Ellison's novel was invisible because he was Black, and the protagonist and his work in Everett are invisible because they are *not* black. Over half a century then, the American society has changed from being unconscious about the presence of the Blacks to being hyper-conscious about them to pigeon-hole them according to their concept of who is a Black. *Erasure* was adapted into a film titled *American Fiction* in 2023, and like the novel, it too satirizes the adaptation of a narrative and language by a black author that would be considered by the market-driven (and racial) publishing world as 'authentic black'. There are 21 films prefixed 'American' on Amazon Prime alone from *American Beauty* to *American Psycho* to *American Underdog* each one employing the adjective American in a positive sense identifying a typicality that defines the Americanness. *American Fiction*, a debut film by director Cord Jefferson winning three awards for best adapted screenplay in 2024[2], however uses the title with a heavy irony in at least three senses, that, a) if it is an American fiction, then it is not true because it is 'fiction', b) it can only be a fiction and therefore not believable because it is about the Blacks, and finally c) it can never be a book about Black Americans because the English used in it is not African American English. It is like the Langston Hughes poem 'I, Too' where the speaker reminds himself and his readers that he, the black

brother, awaits for a tomorrow to be taken seriously; that his time has not come in the present, that today he is a mere figment, not counted, simply, a fiction. The black brother can sing and speak as eloquently as the white, but unless he sings or speaks in a black tongue, unless he adapts to the stereotypical 'Black', he will never be counted and differentially accommodated.

The next novel, *I Am Not Sidney Poitier* (2009) playfully employs issues of adaptation of personal and social identity as the protagonist of this novel shares his name with the first black Academy-award-winning Hollywood male actor Sidney Poitier (1927 – 2022), one of the last surviving stars from what is termed as the Golden Age of Hollywood[3] that included just three or four actors of color. The protagonist's mother, Portia Poitier – the name Portia reminding us of the legally clever and economically astute character in Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice* – by an eccentric act named her son Not Sidney Poitier, and invested every dime she had in a little-known company in the 1970s called Turner Communications Group, later becoming the famous Turner Broadcasting System. Portia Poitier had amassed so much of the Turner company stock that Ted Turner – who is a character in this novel, very warmly drawn; but not so his one-time spouse, Jane Fonda who is caricatured – pays Portia a visit, and after her death, willingly, and non-exploitatively becomes Not Sidney's guardian. Among the four novels considered here, *I Am Not Sidney Poitier* is the most tender in its portrayal of human relationship, between Whites, Blacks and the Browns too – there's a Gujarati character in this novel named Podgy Patel who is Not Sidney's accountant, is absolutely non-corrupt although he knows he can cheat his master, and is completely focused on increasing his master's wealth according to the rules of the land. Yet, in this quasi magic realist novel with real life people as characters – there's Sidney Poitier, Ted Turner, Jane Fonda, and even the author Percival Everett does a self-adaptation and appears as a character occupying a sizeable space in his own novel, doing what Everett does in real life, teach in a university where the fictional character Not Sidney goes to study – the real issue is perhaps about adapting a life to make a life. In real life, we are born with a name given to us – a name that then for most of us stays till our death – and then grow up adapting and shaping a personality to the name through the challenges of race,

class, gender, ethnicity, religion, nationality etc. – these discourses being woven through language and ideology.

The Trees (2021), nominated for the Booker in 2022, is a novel that adapts (while inverting) the real incidents of arbitrary killing of Black people, often by the police, starting movements like Black Lives Matter. Generically, the novel adapts the plot and pace of a crime thriller mingling with it its sub-genre, the whodunit[4] with more than ample theatricality of the *danse macabre*. Its plot is an adaptation from the historical event in Mississippi in 1955 when a fourteen year old African American boy Emmett Till was violently murdered by two White men just because he allegedly spoke to a White woman at her grocery store. These two killers were later acquitted by an all-White jury under the Jim Crow laws of racial segregation and hierarchy enacted in the American South since late-nineteenth century and were only abolished with the passage of the Civil Rights Act in 1964. The inversion Everett achieves in the novel is that instead of Black people getting lynched in real life, it is the Whites who get killed, and two Black detectives try to solve the murders. The inverse adaptation of reality in this novel is a kind of providing a wishful revenge against years of hate crimes committed by White Supremacists, or a hypothetical narrative for the White readers to make them realize the wrongs they inflicted, and their institutions like the police department still inflicts upon the Black community.

Finally, in the Pulitzer-winning 2024 novel *James* Everett re-imaginatively adapts *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884), but this time from the slave Jim's point-of-view. Jim was the slave in Huck's family in Mark Twain's text, but here he has a far larger textual space, is more intelligent than nearly all the Whites, and is in fact the narrator. In the process, Everett unbinds and unravels the nearly two hundred and fifty official years of the history of slavery in America, and critiques the ongoing inequities and injustice faced by the African American community in present-day America. So, for an author like Everett belonging to the African American community himself, writing in the third decade of the twenty-first century one hundred and forty years after Twain's text was published, his own literary text is a corrective take spanning from the Antebellum Period[5] in

American history to the present with an investigation into the continuous lack of the subject position of African Americans. At one level, *James* is the story of a slave's resurrection – Jim stages his death and manages to flee to the American North with his unmarried 'wife' and daughter adopting the new name James. At a another level, *James* is the remembrance of a few runaway slaves like William Wells Brown (1814-84), whose novel *Clotel* (1853) is generally considered as the first novel written by an African American; and, those like Venture Smith (1729 – 1805), kidnapped and sold into slavery when he was six.[6] Becoming an adult, he could buy his freedom and documented his life through one of the earliest autobiographies by an African American.[7] Thus, as much as Everett makes his character James adapt these early slave prose narratives, by implication, he also asks us to imagine that there were hundreds of runaway slaves who were caught and tortured to death. An attempt to record one's own life is, quite literally, a threat to life; there's an incident in *James* where a young slave is whipped and hung to death for stealing a pencil stub.

Everett's Menippean satire[8] thus simultaneously adapts, and is adapted from the Antebellum to a post-slavery to a (supposedly) post-racial reality in America. At a deeper level *James* – as well as his novels like *Erasure* – is an African American writer's deep rumination on the dilemma of adapting to the version of the English language that would come closest to representing the entire gamut of history and experience of the Black community. Out of this dilemma comes a brilliant strategy where Everett simultaneously lampoons the White stereotype that blacks are poor at language and thought, and reinforces the African American identity through the distinct flavour of the English language used by them. And yet, these two versions of the language is the indicator of the reality (that people like Jim/James are slaves), and the desire (that they want to be free transacting their activities in the world just like the White Americans). And in the meantime, there are two separate and hierarchical worlds, governed by the two versions of the same language. Language – the very material substance of literature – is thus at the same time proof of consciousness, a tool to adapt the lived experience, and a record of reality.

Through cycles of learning and unlearning, ironically, adaptation carries a perception of impurity. Since dominant discourses are always established by those in power the alternative/ emerging discourse cannot fully escape comparison. There is therefore a very thin line of division between adaptation and acculturation.[9] Percival Everett's novels with their depiction of Black lives (both real and desired) make us aware not only of the intra-racial racisms, or, racial discrimination within the African American community, but, at a larger scale, of the insufficient approximations in the concepts of authenticity of human lives; and that meanings in human society are arrived at necessarily through a complex and bittersweet process of adaptation.

Notes

1. The unnamed narrator of *Invisible Man* becomes literally “invisible” after falling into an open manhole while fleeing a racial riot in Harlem. The manhole is sealed, trapping him underground, where he remains in a subterranean space for twenty years.
2. The Academy Award, the Writers Guild of America Award, and the Critics’ Choice Movie Award.
3. Stars of the Golden Age of Hollywood included Humphrey Bogart, Clark Gable, Audrey Hepburn, Gregory Peck, James Dean, Laurence Olivier, Bette Davis, Ingrid Bergman, Marilyn Monroe, and Greta Garbo, among others; these were all White actors.
4. A crime thriller and a whodunit often overlap generically. A whodunit is a subgenre of detective fiction in which the central mystery concerns the identity of the culprit. A crime thriller emphasizes suspense, danger, and the protagonist’s struggle to overcome a crime-related threat, typically with greater urgency and faster pacing.
5. The Antebellum period, or Antebellum South, refers to the era in the southern United States from the conclusion of the War of 1812 to the beginning of the American Civil War in 1861.

6. The name "Venture" was given to him by his first enslaver, Robinson Mumford, who purchased him for four gallons of rum and a piece of calico. He later adopted the surname "Smith" from Oliver Smith, his final enslaver.
7. Venture Smith's autobiography is titled *A Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Venture,* a *Native of Africa: But Resident above Sixty Years in the United States of America,* Related by Himself.
8. Menippean satire is a form of satire, usually written in prose, that attacks mental attitudes or ideological positions rather than specific individuals. It often blends allegory, philosophical reflection, and elements of the picaresque.
9. Acculturation refers to the process of adopting the cultural traits, values, and practices of another culture through sustained contact.

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