CHAPTER 4

Erasure, Black Interiority, and the (Post-)Racial Future

The educated Negro, slave of the spontaneous and cosmic Negro myth, feels at a given stage that his race no longer understands him. Or that he no longer understands it. Then he congratulates himself on this, and enlarging the difference, the incomprehension, the disharmony, he finds in them the meaning of his real humanity. Or more rarely he wants to belong to his people. And it is with rage in his mouth and abandon in his heart that he buries himself in the vast black abyss. We shall see that this attitude, so heroically absolute, renounces the present and the future in the name of a mystical past.

-- Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*

To move forward in this moment, given all that has happened, would surely be like committing suicide—of a generational sort.

-- Sharon Holland, *The Erotic Life of Racism*

Imagining a racial future in the black interior that we are constrained to imagine, outside of the parameters of how we are seen in this culture, is the zone where I am interested in African American creativity. ‘The black interior’ is not an inscrutable zone, nor colonial fantasy. Rather, I see it as inner space in which black artists have found selves that go far, far beyond the limited expectations and definitions of what black is, isn't, or should be.

-- Elizabeth Alexander, *The Black Interior*

At the conclusion of *Black Skin, White Masks*, Frantz Fanon repudiates racial history—“the body of history does not determine a single one of my actions”—in order to claim freedom as a “man of color.” This particular phrase, “body of history,” can be read at least doubly, as both the collected events of the past and the representative black body in and on which those events are understood to cohere. The slippage in meaning that “body of history” suggests, between a body of historical evidence and a fleshly body who is tasked, socially, with wearing that other body’s stigmas and traces, occurs throughout *Black Skin White Masks*, but especially in the chapter “The Fact of Blackness,” as when Fanon speaks of Negro identity as “the burden of that corporeal malediction” (111) or notes “I was responsible at the same time for my body, for my
race, for my ancestors” (112), or writes, in response to those familiar, repeated refrains of “Look, a Negro!” that “[m]y body was given back to me sprawled out, distorted, recolored, clad in mourning” (113).

I invoke Fanon here, at the start of this chapter on Percival Everett’s 2001 novel *Erasure*, both for what Fanon recalls to us about a black past—written on and borne by the black body, a body that, as Sharon Holland notes, “is the quintessential sign for subjection, for a particular experience that it must inhabit and own all by itself”—and for how Fanon’s repudiation of that past limns and limits a potential (black) future. The last “black” in that sentence is parenthetical in part because recent conversations about futurity, in the context of race, seem to suggest, if not expect, that we must get past blackness—past, specifically, that black “body of history”—in order fully to inhabit any future space/time. The future, then, is imagined to be “post-racial” in a way that the present certainly cannot be, hopeful pronouncements in the wake of Barack Obama’s historic election notwithstanding. My reading of *Erasure* counters this position, and indeed, accounts for a futurity that recuperates a certain kind of “black” body—or, rather, a certain critical and creative approach to black embodiment.

*Erasure* offers a particularly sharp rendering of the corporeal metaphor I have been outlining throughout this book—the notion that a tension between the privileged black body’s effacement, and its stubborn recurrence, lies at the heart of various narratives of black bourgeois subjectivity, with vital consequences for our understanding of post-soul racial identity. In *Erasure* this tension is made literal, as the protagonist’s corporeally alienated bourgeois personhood is gradually overtaken by the performance of a “black” body that is and is not his own. But as I will argue, the particular constraints of this bodily performance—especially, its indifference to black interiority, as Elizabeth Alexander has used the term—highlight both the unseen possibilities of blackness and the failures embedded in the notion of a “post-racial” future.
I. Black skin, white mind

*Erasure* tells the story of Thelonius “Monk” Ellison, a writer of erudite but unsalable literary fiction (his most recent effort is, in his own words, “an obscure reworking of a Greek tragedy” [28]), and a putatively “black” man who “do[esn't] believe in race,” who “hardly ever think[s] about race” (2). Others seem to do the thinking for him:

I have dark brown skin, curly hair, a broad nose, some of my ancestors were slaves and I have been detained by pasty white policemen in New Hampshire, Arizona and Georgia and so the society in which I live tells me I am black; that is my race. (1)

Monk’s resistance to this imposed racial identity appears obvious, but he nonetheless responds to an agent’s advice that he “could sell many books if [... he] settle[d] down to write the true, gritty real stories of black life” with a retort that seems to stake a peculiar kind of claim on his own authenticity: “I told him that I was living a black life, far blacker than he could ever know, that I had lived one, that I would be living one” (2, emphasis in original). As I will explore later in this chapter, these words, appearing on the second page of Everett’s novel, signal that there is perhaps far more to Monk’s sense of racial self than his initial disavowal (“I don’t believe in race”) might suggest. Indeed the odd shifts in tense—was living, had lived, would be living—one” (2, emphasis in original). As I will explore later in this chapter, these words, appearing on the second page of Everett’s novel, signal that there is perhaps far more to Monk’s sense of racial self than his initial disavowal (“I don’t believe in race”) might suggest. Indeed the odd shifts in tense—was living, had lived, would be living—suggest a coterminous relationship between present, past, and future that will prove particularly relevant to my inquiry, later, into the notion of black futurity.

“Black life” or no, both Monk and his body of work are accused, repeatedly, of being “not black enough” (43). In a moment of frustration with this circumstance, Monk pens a scathing parody of a “black novel,” a retelling of Richard Wright’s *Native Son* entitled *My Pafology*, that he signs with the pen name Stagg R. Leigh. Shopped
around by his agent without qualification, the parody, much to Monk’s chagrin, secures a lucrative publication deal, and eventually garners the attention of a Hollywood producer, who offers “Stagg” several million dollars for the film rights. Monk abruptly becomes as much of a sellout as foil Juanita Mae Jenkins, whose runaway bestseller *We’s Lives in Da Ghetto*—a stereotypically “black” story inspired by the middle-class, Akron-raised Jenkins’s “visit [to] some relatives in Harlem for a couple of days” as a child (53)—is in part the impetus for Monk’s own parody. Forced by *My Pafology*’s financial success to move through the world as Stagg, Monk’s character becomes increasingly unstable in the final third of the book, finally unraveling in *Erasure*’s final pages as *My Pafology* (now renamed *Fuck*) wins a prestigious book award, ostensibly for being “the real [black] thing” (261).

Monk Ellison as a character is decidedly middle-class; he may be even more accurately described as part of the black elite, given the long history of educational and professional attainment affixed to his surname: “I grew up an Ellison. I had Ellison looks. I had an Ellison way of speaking, showed Ellison promise, would have Ellison success” (151). Monk’s paternal grandfather and uncle, father, brother and sister are or were all medical doctors. Like Colson Whitehead’s Benji Cooper, his family owns a beach house (and a boat). Yet this class privilege seems only partially responsible for Monk’s alienation from blackness, something he has experienced since childhood. Instead, his intellect marks him as different, “awkward, out of place [...] like [he] didn’t belong” (21). In effect, for Monk the classed tension of the black corporeal has devolved into a kind of literal Cartesian dualism, in which his “special mind” (9) operates distinctly from his black body, though both seem capable of betraying him in “black” contexts.

Monk recounts, for instance, playing basketball at age 17, “making safe pass after safe pass”—itself a way of being on the court without engaging, appearing to participate
while “not so much playing the game” (133)—when he is thrown the ball while distracted by his reflections on Western philosophy, a fact that he reveals to a teammate in the aftermath of his disastrous missed shot:

“He [Hegel] was a German philosopher.” I watched the expression on his face and perhaps reflected the same degree of amazement. “I was thinking about his theory of history.”

The order of the following comments escapes me now, but they were essentially these:

“Get him.”

“Philosophy boy.”

“That’s why he threw up that brick?”

“Where the hell did you come from?” [...]

“You’d better Hegel on home.” (134)

In a parallel incident at age 15, Monk arrives with a friend at a party in “a part of Annapolis [he'd] never visited before,” where “the music was loud and unfamiliar, the bass thumping”—signaling, like the basketball court, a racialized, “black” space, and one that also prioritizes being present in one’s body, in this case in order to dance. Before even entering the house or stepping onto the dance floor, Monk is ridiculed for his nickname (“What the fuck kind of name is Monk?”) by two black teenagers named Clevon and Reggie, whose failure to recognize the cultural reference to jazz great Thelonious Monk contained within the nickname “Monk” immediately signals their own, and likewise Monk’s, class positioning.

Clevon and Reggie assume “Monk” is short for “monkey,” a particularly awkward chosen name for a black person given historic racist associations between black people and primates. Monk, for his part, fails to correct this assumption—“Right at that second I didn’t want to tell him my real name was Thelonious” (22)—claiming the name
“Theo” in hopes of avoiding further ridicule. Of course, he fails at this goal as well, and spectacularly so. He finds himself on the dance floor with a pretty young girl named Tina, and Clevon and Reggie cruelly expose his body’s involuntary but inconvenient intrusion:

Her breasts were alarmingly noticeable. Her thighs brushed my thighs and as it was summer I was wearing shorts and could feel her skin against mine and it was just slightly too much for my hormonal balancing act. My penis grew steadily larger through the song until I knew that it was peeking out the bottom edge of the left leg of my pants. Tina became aware of it and said something which I couldn’t make out, but included the words “baby” and “all right.” Then someone switched on the lights and I heard the voices of Clevon and Reggie saying, ‘Look at Monkey’s monkey.” (24)

Like Bertram Ashe in Reginald McKnight’s 
He Sleeps, Monk’s bodily exposure here, in a “black” context, makes him vulnerable, and also like Bertram, his instinct is to flee. He runs in the direction of privilege—“I ran [...] down the street toward the Capitol”—and ends up at the city dock, with his brother on the Ellison “family boat” (24). Monk differs from the protagonist of McKnight’s text, though, in that his body’s betrayal, and the associated humiliation, is not reduced to a problem (immediate or sustained) with black women. Indeed, “Tina” in the anecdote seems to offer only tolerance and discretion; “Clevon” and “Reggie,” however, broadcast and multiply Monk’s embarrassment, suggesting that Monk’s physical awkwardness in black settings has to do with masculine performance among peers.

This gendered racial performance is driven by language, and specifically code-switching, something that Monk, for all his facility with codes of textual signifying (13), cannot master:
I watched my friends, who didn't sound so different from me, step into scenes and change completely.

“Yo, man, what it is?” they would say.

“You're what it is,” someone would respond.

It didn't make sense to me, but it sounded casual, comfortable and, most importantly, cool. (166-67)

Aware that such performances are just that—“to my ear, it never sounded real coming from anyone” (167)—Monk is nonetheless haunted by his inability to signify racially, convinced that his awkwardness “was the defining feature of [his] personality.” And the progression from class-inflected language performance to gendered bodily failure remains straightforward: “Talks like he's stuck up? Sounds white? Can’t even play basketball” (167).

It seems no coincidence that later in the text the rival for short-lived consort Marilyn's affections is also named Clevon, and that Monk's awkwardness in the face of the other man's black male “cool” brings Monk directly back to his adolescence: “The sound of it, going home to Mother, in front of Clevon made me want to die. I felt like I was a teenager again. When I was gone, he would laugh and then ask her what kind of name was Monk?” (180).

Of course, the “sounds white” in the italicized lines above remains crucial to understanding how Monk's privilege and related racial alienation operate, as it signals the metaphoric relationship between the black middle class and “whiteness”—the sometimes optimistic, sometimes awkward social position of the “cultural mulatto.” Trey Ellis’s use of the term pointed to creative influences from both sides of the racial divide, of which Monk's interest in Western philosophy, music and art provide ready examples, but as with a number of racially-inflected abstractions, Erasure also offers a somewhat perverse extension of the cultural mulatto metaphor in Monk's person. Indeed, we learn later in the novel that Monk was born after his father’s adulterous
affair with Fiona Hanley, a white British nurse whom he met in Korea. Some of Monk’s dissimilarity from his siblings is attributed to this relationship, at least figuratively—Monk, his father’s favored and favorite child, conceived after his return from the war, is cast as a kind of symbolic product of his father’s affair. His “difference” is thus linked intellectually to a kind of whiteness, or more accurately, to cross-racial reconciliation and desire. This is true even as the actual product of that affair, his half-white half-sister, Gretchen, is decidedly not privileged in the same way that he is—indeed, might be understood as peculiarly disadvantaged. Her “difference” from her family of origin, a difference that seems to be as marked as Monk’s if not as openly acknowledged, has not served as any kind of capital, either within or outside the family’s boundaries. Monk and Gretchen—whose name subtly suggests her wretched existence as a single, working mother and now grandmother, a fatherless outsider whose cousin “knew she had nigger in her” (240)—are textual doubles and mirror images of one another, images distorted as they cross a racial line. Gretchen’s “white” poverty and Monk’s “black” privilege have little to say to one another, though ironically both sets of circumstances can be traced back to the presence or absence of Monk’s father.

And Monk’s father is, finally, the key to Monk’s racial alienation, precisely because—convinced of Monk’s difference, his “special mind,”—he trains Monk to think, and to perform intellectually, in a “purposely confusing and obfuscating” (32) manner, a training that even Monk recognizes to be a kind of violence against the possibility of (familial if not racial) belonging. Egged on by his father into expounding upon *Finnegan’s Wake* at the dinner table, for instance, an eighteen year old Monk “looked at Mother and my siblings and felt sick, like I had been seduced into slitting their throats” (185). He later reflects:
I didn’t enjoy being so set apart and I was well aware, painfully aware, of the inappropriateness and incorrectness of Father’s assessment of me[….H]ow bad [siblings] Lisa and Bill must have felt. They were far more accomplished than I at the time (and later). I had done nothing yet. I viewed my father’s favoritism as irrational and saw myself as being saddled with a kind of illness, albeit his.

(185-86)

Monk’s father turns him into an exception, whose unusual intellect marks him as impossibly different from—and, by his father’s unspoken estimation, better than—his siblings, an intimate estrangement that comes to serve as a reference point and point of origin for his broader, racial estrangement. It should perhaps not surprise us that Van Go Jenkins, the protagonist of My Pafology and, arguably, an alter-ego or textual id for Monk, ultimately murders his father—Monk’s resentment of his father’s exceptionalizing treatment simmers just below the surface of the narrative, like the “rumble or hiss” (154) of his father’s submerged volcanic temper. Imani Perry calls racial exceptionalism “the practice of creating meaning out of the existence of people of color who don’t fit our stereotypic or racial-narrative-based conceptions.” While Perry’s focus is the meaning made by those who would conclude that racism is no longer relevant because of the successes of a select few, it is worth considering what meaning Monk makes for himself throughout Erasure, meaning crafted out of his own learned sense of himself as “awkward” racial exile.

Monk’s exceptionalist sense of himself as insufficiently “black,” as irreparably “different” from the Clevons of the world, is particularly relevant considering simultaneous gestures in the text toward Monk’s desire for racelessness, a longed-for escape from race that even his exceptionalism does not seem able to grant him. Monk is a bourgeois black man who “do[n’t] believe in race” (2), precisely the sort of “educated Negro” who, in Fanon’s words in this chapter’s first epigraph, finds “the meaning of his
real humanity” in “the difference, the incomprehension, the disharmony” that exists between himself and other blacks. Yet Monk’s learned racial awkwardness fails to free him from race, and as the text progresses, it becomes clear that his character can only be tied ever more tightly to blackness. As Perry notes, while “exceptionals are deprived of a history by virtue of their identification as [...] ‘different,’” such figures also “are still bound by their bodies to the American race game.” For Monk, the “body” that links him to American racial narrative turns out to be the body of text that he produces under the name “Stagg R. Leigh,” a body of text borne out of Monk’s own corporeal rage against the “black” literary machine. Just before he begins writing the book that will change the trajectory of his creative and personal life, he contemplates Juanita Mae Jenkins’ face on the cover of Time magazine; “[t]he pain started in [his] feet and coursed through [his] legs, up [his] spine and into [his] brain[,]” causing his hands to shake as he “remembered passages of Native Son and The Color Purple and Amos and Andy” (61). And the textual body that results, his parody My Pafology, implicates and animates a host of other bodies in the novel. In the next section, I will consider who My Pafology brings to life as well as how, and why, such creations are accompanied by Monk’s own destruction—if not his death, then certainly his disintegration.

II. ‘Suicide--of a generational sort’

My Pafology, while situated within Erasure as an impulsive act--borne out of Monk’s righteous anger at a publishing industry and a reading public without the critical discernment to appreciate his obscure brand of creative production as appropriate from a “black” author--is also linked in the text to Monk’s very palpable financial exigencies. In the pages immediately prior to his penning of the parody, the text reveals that “Money was tight” (55), and that Monk, while he cannot quite bring himself to accept the “slave wages” (139) being offered by American University for
adjunct teaching, is in somewhat dire financial straits in the wake of his sister's untimely death (“Young doctors have a lot of debt” [54]) and his mother’s gradual succumbing to Alzheimer’s. In spite of the socioeconomically privileged status accorded to Monk and his family in the text, particularly in flashbacks to Monk’s youth, we learn here that “My mother had some savings, but she was not wealthy[,]” and that “what had been my father’s office was a money drain” (54). Again Monk’s father, the enigmatic black patriarch who created Monk and cast him out of racial community, effects, with his absence, Monk’s financial dissolution—just as his absence from illegitimate daughter Gretchen’s life seems to force her impoverished circumstances. In producing and selling *My Pafology*, the work “on which [he] knew [he] could never put [his] name” (62), Monk makes a pecuniary decision that counters the intellectual and creative principles his father has instilled in him: “You don’t sign it because you want people to know you painted it, but because you love it” (32).

Perhaps it shouldn’t surprise us, then, that when Monk contemplates his choice to accept the terms of sale on his “black” parody-cum-novel (Random House acquires the book for a $600,000 advance), he begins for the first time to consider seriously his own suicide—what he fittingly calls “my making my own death” (139)—signaling the more complex, psychic and social, death that this transaction ultimately sets into motion. This larger “death” is effected *through* the name that Monk ultimately signs: “Stagg R. Leigh.” This name, clearly meant to evoke the folkloric figure of the black anti-hero, “Stagger Lee/ Stagolee,” is Monk’s ironic nod to the idea of an authentically “black” writer, one who is assumed by the reading public to have privileged access to the “true, gritty real stories of black life” (2). But how does giving life to such a figure effect Monk’s dissolution? The suicide that Monk contemplates at the moment of Stagg’s emergence—“stopping always at the writing of the note” because he “didn’t want
to see [...] silly romantic notions shattered by a lack of imagination” (139)—speaks, as well, to a fantasy of racial death with troubling consequences.

The title of this section, “suicide—of a generational sort,” which repeats this chapter’s second epigraph, is evocative in relation to Monk’s imagined suicide precisely in that Holland’s words tie a kind of (post-)racial futurity to collective death, specifically the death of the “black” body, a death that must, to some of us, feel like suicide. For Holland, following Gilroy, the question of getting beyond race is one that “involve[s] a vision of the self that does not include the messy materiality of the body,” or, perhaps more accurately, one that excludes “a materiality that mires the body in a location it might not want to occupy.”

Monk’s palpable distaste for the way that his life has been constrained by race, the way his “dark brown skin, curly hair, [and] broad nose” have trapped him in the racialized “location” of (insufficiently) black man, suggest that he is eager to achieve this sort of subjectivity beyond blackness. At minimum, however, Everett’s novel encourages skepticism toward this hope of racial transcendence, given that Monk’s displacement of his body’s “messy materiality” onto the imaginary figure of Stagg R. Leigh not only seems to bind Monk ever more tightly to black excess, but also effects just one death in the text—Monk’s own. This “death” is not a physical one, for Monk, but a psychic and creative one. It suggests that a raceless “self” divorced from its racial “body” cannot survive—or perhaps more fittingly, cannot cohere.

“Stagg R. Leigh,” for Monk, is a self-consciously fictitious figure, a figment of racism’s narrow imagination—but more than that, he is a kind of specter or phantom (a spook in multiple senses of that term) whose hollow figure haunts and threatens to eclipse Monk’s own creative voice. Stagg personifies the racialized misapprehension that finds Monk’s work (mis-)shelved in the “African American Studies” section, a move with both physical and fiscal consequences:
I became quickly irate, my pulse speeding up, my brow furrowing. Someone interested in African American Studies would have little interest in my books and would be confused by their presence in the section. Someone looking for an obscure reworking of a Greek tragedy would not consider looking in that section any more than the gardening section. The result in either case, no sale. That fucking store was taking food from my table. (28)

The rage that registers in Monk’s body at this moment—heightened pulse, furrowed brow—relates directly to Monk’s sense that this mischaracterization of his work adversely affects his bottom line. Thus, for Monk, signing My Pafology with the name Stagg R. Leigh not only functions as angry acknowledgment that in seeking the “real, black” author and text, the publishing industry and most readers have reduced black literature to stereotypical parody and black authorship to a kind of falsehood, a mask or performance embodied by the pseudonym. It also registers Monk’s resentment that these performances are seemingly the only ones that sell.

Instead of embarrassing or offending publishers by thus calling out their racism, however, Monk finds to his dismay that the industry takes the name and the fantasy of “Stagg R. Leigh” at face value. Very quickly, “Stagg” takes on a life of his own in the text, becoming not a cautionary example of the excesses of racist fantasy but a sort of predetermined role that Monk must perform. As Monk himself notes, “the irony” is “beautiful”: “I would not be economically oppressed because of writing a book that fell in line with the very books I deemed racist. And I would have to wear the mask of the person I was expected to be” (212). Offered more than half a million dollars as an advance for the My Pafology manuscript, Monk at first simply “becomes” Stagg on the phone with the editor at Random House (156), but when a Hollywood producer offers several million for the film rights on the condition that “Stagg” appear in person at a meeting, Monk dons sunglasses and a stoic persona, and shows up to lunch (216).
some point discuss the scene in the elevator with one of his fellow judges--he has become truly invisible]

Crucially, Stagg’s appearance coincides with a shift, for Monk, from “middle class”--with the attendant financial demands and uncertainties that accompany that status for a post-soul black man with his training and familial obligations--to “rich” (223). Monk’s newly exalted economic status, directly a result of his inhabiting of “Stagg,” points to the way that certain easily legible black bodily performances are rewarded, financially, in the post-soul moment--examples from reality television and other spaces in popular culture abound, including, for instance, the massive financial rewards that accrue to certain hip hop artists and athletes for their renditions of black (hyper)masculinity. Everett highlights the performative difference between these sorts of “rich,” but securely “black,” figures and the deracinating class status that Monk occupies by birth, his elite pedigree that has always had more to do with position and social standing than money, in a scene where Monk attends the late-in-life wedding of his family’s longtime maid, Lorraine.

After a tense conversation with Lorraine’s future son-in-law, who resentfully calls Monk’s family “rich” because they have “servants” (as Monk corrects, “Only Lorraine”) and because “you’re telling me you’re not working and it doesn’t matter” (194), Monk glances at the baseball game on TV and reflects, “Leon would have no trouble with my having money, no matter how much a figment of his imagination it was, if I were that ballplayer. The problem was the one I had always had, that I was not a regular guy and I so much wanted to be. Can you spell bourgeois?” (195, emphasis in original). Ironically, however, as Monk becomes more willing to play the role of Stagg, what he perceives as a personal inadequacy--his bourgeois inability to be a “regular (black) guy”--is increasingly obscured by the excesses of the “black” mask that he wears. Through Stagg, Monk finally finds the “cool” persona, legible to all as sufficiently and
appropriately “black,” that has eluded him for his entire life. The unintended consequence for Monk, though, is ultimately a complete loss of self.

Not coincidentally, Everett, via Monk, repeatedly invokes Rinehart from Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* in this section of the text; as he wonders how far he will take the ruse, Monk thinks “I might in fact become a Rhinehart [sic], walking down the street and finding myself in store windows” (162), and later, as he physically prepares to meet Morgenstein, the Hollywood producer, the section begins “Aint you Rine the runner?” (216). The allusion is crucial for what it recalls to us about surfaces and interiors. Rinehart, whose very name suggests a figure of all surface and no substance—the rind is the heart—is a phantom just as Stagg is, and Monk becomes as invisible as Ellison’s narrator the more that he assumes Stagg’s mask. While Rinehart’s shifting identity serves as a kind of inspiration to Ellison’s narrator, however, a model for how to comfortably occupy multiple subject positions, Stagg offers no such relief for Monk; instead, Monk’s psyche begins to disintegrate under the pressures that performing as Stagg exert upon him. The more that he must contort his “bourgeois” body into Stagg’s “black” shape, the more that his own black interiority is compromised and, indeed, erased entirely.

This disintegration begins at the moment that Monk agrees to begin passing as Stagg, agreeing to Morgenstein’s request that Stagg meet him for lunch. Monk first loses his ability to understand his brother’s language (“I watched his lips and realized I understood nothing he was saying” [213]) but quickly escalates to a noticeable hallucination while speaking with his mother’s new doctor:

Then the fat doctor was my [dead] sister Lisa. She leaned back in the chair and lit that imaginary cigarette and said my name. I allowed my awareness of my hallucination to serve as evidence that I was not in fact insane, but I had to note that coming on the heels of my brother’s linguistic show I was a bit concerned. (215)
It is more than a coincidence that this striking signal of Monk's coming mental
dissolution happens as he speaks to his mother's doctor about her rapidly deteriorating
condition. Monk's mother's progress towards complete mental incapacitation from
Alzheimer's disease--at this point in the text, she has finally gotten sick enough for
Monk to commit her--serves as a strange kind of foreshadowing for Monk's own textual
transformation. The doctor predicts that Monk's mother will “lose her abilities to
think, perceive and speak[,]” that “[h]er personality will disappear” (142). And the
peculiar incongruity of his mother's progress once this decline has begun (“The irony
was that as her mind failed, her body became healthier” [223]) relates particularly well
to the changes that Monk will undergo, as his own (raceless?) mind and “personality”
are gradually eclipsed by Stagg, a figure who is all body, all (black) surface, “black from
toe to top of head, from shoulder to shoulder, from now until both ends of time” (245).
This is a body whose racialized “health” indeed seems to depend upon a concomitant
mental failure, the breakdown of Monk's creative and social voice.

Monk muses, “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?” (248). These queries--which highlight the novel's
preoccupation with relationships between literal and literary bodies, as well as textual
and social death--are not idle ones. Nor is the related question that Monk seems unable
to articulate: “If Stagg survives, can I?” In this chapter's final section, I consider the
question of (Stagg's) life and (Monk’s) death, and how the suicide that Monk both
disavows and threatens throughout *Erasure*--his self-erasure, if you will--is effected by
his artistic choices and speaks to a suggestive relationship between racialized subject
and work of art.
III. A gravestone certainly

Numerous seemingly random inclusions—imagined conversations between historical figures, meditations on the nature of trout and the character of a piece of furniture—pepper the text of Erasure. The novel’s fragmented structure, explained in its very first line with the conceit that the narrative is itself the text of Monk Ellison’s private journal, highlights its postmodern investments while allowing Everett a means of commenting, in ways both subtle and direct, on the philosophical questions circulating in the mind of the protagonist and suggested by the trajectory of his story: what is art? what is the responsibility of the artist? by what measures can a work of art be deemed “authentic”? Circulating through these musings, however, is another question: what is blackness?

Early on in the text, prior to the penning and publication of My Pafology, Monk’s “notes for a novel” include imagined conversations between, first, German sculptor and pacifist Ernst Barlach and German-Swiss painter Paul Klee, commiserating over the Nazi distaste for their art (“They are calling me a Siberian Jew [. . . .] and they are burning any books which contain pictures of our work” [37]), and then Adolph Hitler and Dietrich Eckart. In these latter conversations, the two Nazis complain about Judaism and other threatening incursions to the German national scene, specifically on the terrain of the arts and cultural production—a creative landscape clearly linked to the political one (“They will destroy German culture if we let them” [38]). Notes Monk, “I must admit to a profound fascination with Hitler’s relationship to art and how he so reminded me of so many of the artistic purists I had come to know” (39). Ostensibly, these artistic purists are the same ones who refuse to accept Monk’s writing as sufficiently “black,” whose narrow conception of a “black” novel Monk understands as nothing short of fascist. But Everett positions this scene just before another in which Monk, while on a flight, skeptically reads a favorable review of Juanita Mae Jenkins’s
We's Lives In Da Ghetto and becomes so visibly agitated that he garners attention from his seatmate: “Is something wrong?’ the woman seated beside me asked” (40). While Monk claims to have been inspired by the anti-abortion zealots picketing outside his sister’s clinic (eventually responsible for her murder), whose faces are “washed with hate and fear, wanting so badly to control others” (39), his own palpable outrage over Jenkins’s success marks him, too, as an “artistic purist”—albeit one whose ideals are soon compromised by his own monstrous creation.

Indeed, in the later portion of the book, Monk’s musings on art shift into a more cynical register, as he reflects upon his own hypocrisy, his status as a “sell-out” (160). Crucial to these musings are questions of market value and creative ownership, and the fraught relationship between the two. For instance, he imagines a conversation between Willem De Kooning and Robert Rauschenberg regarding Rauschenberg’s famous 1953 “Erased De Kooning Drawing”:

*de Kooning: You put your name on it.*

*Rauschenberg: Why not? It’s my work.*

*de Kooning: Your work? Look at what you’ve done to my picture.*

*Rauschenberg: Nice job, eh? It was a lot of work erasing it. My wrist is still sore. I call it “Erased Drawing.”*

*de Kooning: That’s very clever.*

*Rauschenberg: I’ve already sold it for ten grand.*

*de Kooning: You sold my picture?*

*Rauschenberg: No, I erased your picture. I sold my erasing.* (228)

The question of who is artist in this exchange is crucial, but so is the fact of the drawing’s sale. Does the erased De Kooning drawing become Rauschenberg’s “work” at the moment he signs his name to it, or at the moment the drawing is “sold” (and given that the drawing is “already” sold in this exchange, the order of these two points in
time is not at all clear)? The link between this conundrum and Monk’s is fairly direct. In a sense, “Stagg” has taken the canvas (body/body of text) upon which Monk’s obscure and insufficiently or illegibly raced artistic vision was drawn, erased/re-raced that vision, and has already sold the lot for three million dollars. Is My Pafology Monk’s work, then, or Stagg’s? Is Monk’s body Stagg’s, or his own? Monk may be the architect of the Stagg R. Leigh/My Pafology ruse, but given subsequent events, it becomes less and less clear in the text that he is the artist.

Instead, as Monk feels his own creative and subjective integrity succumbing to pressure from Stagg’s expanding artistic and financial successes--book advance, movie rights, and finally the major book award, chosen by a selection committee on which, in a final irony, Monk is tapped to serve--he (Monk) functions increasingly as a work of art, though more the “discarded art, shunned art, bad art, misunderstood art, oppressed art, shock art, lost art, dead art, art before before its time, artless art” that remains even once a given piece has been “thrown out of the museum” (227). The analogue to the performative utterance that cannot be undone even with such a throwing or casting out of (artistic) community--“[t]his is a work of art”--is one that applies to Monk himself: this is a black man. Yet that blackness, insofar as it attaches to Stagg, not Monk, seems to imprison Monk in its artifice. Stagg’s “black” body--which is and is not Monk’s own--is a figurative creation, as much a “work of art” as My Pafology/Fuck. Which is to say, a work of art that labors to become one with, and thereby destroy, its creator. After he has insisted to the publisher that the title of My Pafology be changed to Fuck, Monk greets his agent’s skepticism with “This thing is in fact a work of art for me. It has to do the work I want it to do” (221). But this shift from My Pafology to Fuck, ostensibly a creative choice on Monk’s part, also marks a shift of his person from subject to object, as he gradually becomes Stagg.
Consider Monk’s dream in the final chapter of the novel, just at the moment that it becomes clear to him that *Fuck* will win the book award despite his protests. In the dream, Monk hides from Nazi soldiers while watching those soldiers chase an unidentified woman carrying the Van Gogh painting “Starry Night”--only to discover, when the soldiers slash the painting across its face and he begins bleeding profusely from his stomach, that he has become the painting (255). Despite his awareness that he is dreaming, and his repeated affirmations of “This is a dream,” he cannot wake from the scene, which escalates when the painting is set aflame and “the heat [he] felt made [him] scream out” (256). Like his inability to awake from the “dream” of Stagg’s increasing success, Monk senses his own power and agency slipping away as Stagg’s seems to expand, and Monk, as Stagg, feels the *heat* of increasing attention (read: public scrutiny). Later in the dream, after the music changes from “Horst Wessel” (the Nazi Party anthem) to “Stars Fell on Alabama”--this shift marking a return to the American racial context and the geographically specific white supremacy that informs Monk’s own understanding of blackness, particularly Stagg R. Leigh’s blackness--he is unable to answer the final soldier’s question, “Wie heißen Sie? (what is your name)” (256). Is he Monk, or Stagg? (Or, as the dialogue at the end of the novel seems to imply, is he Van Go?)

In fact, Monk has never truly believed that *My Pafology/Fuck* is a “work of art,” not in any way consistent with his father’s training about what art should be. That his agent calls this claim “bullshit” (222) is fitting, particularly when read against Monk’s words at an earlier point in the novel, the moment just before Monk agrees to Wiley Morgenstein’s financial offer. After explaining the material and creative difference between a painting and a chair (“The canvas occupies spaces and the picture occupies the canvas, while the chair, as a work, fills the space itself” [208]) Monk goes on to note:
The novel, so-called, was more a chair than a painting, my having designed it not as a work of art, but as a functional device, its appearance a thing to behold, but more a thing to mark, a warning perhaps, a gravestone certainly. (208-9) Monk perceives the book as an object, not an idea (though de Saussure reminds us that even a chair is only legible to us, linguistically, as an idea of itself), a marker--indeed, finally, a gravestone. But whose death does My Pafology mark?

Not just the novel, but its “author,” Stagg, are Monk’s creations, born(e) out of his reaction to what he perceives as the unfair imposition of race on his work. Monk intends Stagg, and the parodic text that “Stagg” produces, to highlight the folly of race and thereby free him from it--to serve as a “gravestone” for a certain kind of racist reasoning--but instead Stagg’s increasingly “real” presence ensnares him (Monk) further within race/racism. In other words, in his attempt to move “beyond” race Monk allows for—breathes life into, literally—a particularly constricting notion of what blackness is, and this notion becomes his prison. As Monk notes: “I was a victim of racism by virtue of my failing to acknowledge racial difference and by failing to have my art be defined as an exercise in racial self-expression” (212). It seems hardly coincidental that this passage appears directly following the reproduced title page from the retitled book in question—indeed, I would read this moment as a kind of turning point in the novel, another, subtler text-within-a-text, the start of Monk’s mental and social breakdown (or disappearance). From My Pafology to Fuck: the change in name seems to map precisely onto the title’s shift from Van Go’s perspective to Monk’s, from a kind of misspelled (missspoken) and ironic, imagined articulation of the blackest excess to a horrified and frank reaction to the obscene realization that indeed, I as bourgeois subject am (still) implicated in that excess. In Patricia Williams’s words, “[I] must assume, not just as history but as an ongoing psychological force, that irrationality, lack of control, and
ugliness signify not just the whole slave personality, not just the whole black personality, but me.”

Here then, I want to reconsider Monk’s curious comment from the early pages of the novel, that he “was living a black life, far blacker than [Monk’s interlocutor] could ever know, that [he] had lived one, that [he] would be living one” (2). What is this black life of Monk’s? The audacious promise in these words is powerful, a moment in which a character’s utterance seems almost to exceed that character’s capacity for grasping his own meaning; for Monk’s black life is one that does not necessarily resemble the lives he has been told constitute that blackness which is “true, gritty[,] real” (2), and yet he nonetheless stakes a compelling claim for its racial authenticity (arguably, its value—pace Lindon Barrett). Was living, had lived, would be living—black present, past, and future, which Monk claims for himself in the face of all of those who would dismiss such a possibility for a bourgeois figure such as he. (Indeed, given that “the black appears as the antithesis of history (occupies space), [and] the white represents the industry of progressiveness (being in time),” Monk’s situation of his blackness in a temporal framework seems to mark him as a cultural mulatto, that category of being who, as post-soul authors continue to remind us, is at least sometimes able to mark progress through the complex embodiment of his or her “new” black subjectivity). There is something valuable there, the notion that Monk’s blackness can contain his “difference,” the nuance that, if others cannot always see it, he knows is there. This is the interiority that Elizabeth Alexander insists upon in this paper’s third epigraph, source of the creative black self “that go[es] far, far beyond the limited expectations and definitions of what black is, isn’t, or should be” (##).

But the flaw in Monk’s specific claim to blackness—which sets his claim apart from Alexander’s expansive theory of black creativity—seems to be that this blackness is derived not from his own, but others’ choices, choices specifically to (mis)read the black
body he wears, the “house that was [his] disguise” (251). When Monk states—just a few lines after he asserts the existence of his own black life—that he doesn’t believe in race, that his own racialization is merely a function of those who would “shoot me or hang me or cheat me and try to stop me because they do believe in race,” specifically tying this belief to his “brown skin, curly hair, [and] wide nose” (2), he speaks precisely to Holland’s notion of a black body marked for death, a black object—not subject—whose very existence “mires the body in a location it might not want to occupy.”

Thus Monk’s efforts to free himself not only draw him further in but distort the possibilities for what a black subject might be, by erasing the creative possibility of the “black interior” that Alexander describes. In creating Stagg, a “black” body that is all surface and no substance, Monk casts himself as Stagg’s (invisible) interior, and ironically erases the possibilities for black nuance, implied by his own “black life,” and by, for instance, the life of the young woman with blue fingernails whom he misjudges (21). Interiority seems to be crucial here, the question of whether it matters (or more precisely, whether the only thing that matters) is the way that blackness is imposed upon us, the narrowness and outrage of that imposition, the sense that it misses so much of who we are. Does embracing that imposition, knowing what we do of our interior selves, in fact expand the possibilities for what blackness can be? And conversely, does casting it off, or seeking to, make that lie at the center of blackness its only “truth”?

Certainly, Erasure’s final line of dialogue seems to suggest as much. Monk’s dazed “Egads, I’m on television” (265), the repetition with a difference of the last words of My Pafology/Fuck’s comically abject protagonist, Van Go Jenkins (“Hey, Baby Girl. Look at me. I on TV” [131]) trap Monk squarely under the camera’s gaze, making him a (racial) spectacle, a “prisoner[r] of the Real,” in Alexander’s words—where that Real is the vacant, “real (black) thing” he has created in Stagg. Yet the book does not end here,
and its final words make for a more powerful, if far more cryptic, gesture towards the meaning of blackness in a post-soul moment.

After a visual break from the previous scene, Erasure concludes with the three italicized words “hypothesis non fingo,” Latin for “I frame/feign no hypothesis,” referencing Sir Isaac Newton’s words about gravity in the Principia:

I have not been able to discover the cause of those properties of gravity from phenomena, and I feign no hypotheses [hypotheses non fingo]; for whatever is not deduced from the phenomena is to be called an hypothesis; and hypotheses, whether metaphysical or physical, whether of occult properties or mechanical, have no place in experimental philosophy. (##)

It should perhaps not surprise us that Monk’s final words--recall that the text of Erasure is meant to be his private journal--make reference to Newton and to his famous refusal to speculate upon the reasons behind the laws of gravity. If we replace “gravity” with “race” or “blackness” we get a sense of what kind of character work Monk’s reference does--reminding us that he will not or cannot advance any theories, metaphysical or physical, spiritual or technical, about what race is, or why, despite the fact that he doesn’t believe in its existence, it continues to constrain his life as it does.

Yet the remainder of the passage from which the words hypotheses non fingo are drawn moves us at least some distance beyond Monk’s perspective, suggesting that it is the what, not the why, that matters. Newton goes on to write, “To us it is enough that gravity does really exist, and acts according to the laws which we have explained, and abundantly serves to account for all the motions of the celestial bodies, and of our sea” (p#). Perhaps, when it comes to race, this embrace of its existence, of the manner in which it accounts for the motions of our diverse bodies--this fact of blackness (with apologies to Fanon) can be enough precisely because it defies explanation. Like a work of art, blackness is open to interpretation, even--and especially in the case of the living art
that is the post-soul black subject--interpretation from within, shaped by an interior
that is formidable precisely in its creative reach.

Ultimately, then, *Erasure*‘s ending suggests that the contrary positions within the
black bourgeois may be irresolvable, and points to the difficulty, and the unintended
consequences, of moving beyond (or striving to move beyond) the racialized body and its
attendant histories. As we look ahead from the present, post-soul vantage—with hope,
with anxiety—and imagine striding into a post-racial future, *Erasure* and the other texts
I examine suggest that living with the complexity of racial subjectivity might be the
most rational and radical possibility.
Notes


3 Citation here of Dubey’s *Signs and Cities* (?), Gilroy’s *Against Race*, as well as Holland’s *The Erotic Life of Racism*, with which I grapple further at a later point in this chapter.


5 [cite Cool Pose, etc. here?]


7 Perry, 137, 147.

8 Info here on Stagger Lee legend.

9 Holland, 8.

10 Holland, 26.

11 Patricia Williams, *The Alchemy of Race and Rights* (publisher/date), 221, my emphasis.

12 Holland, 10. See also Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, pp #?, which Holland’s quote references.

13 Holland, 26.