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America's Deserter: Forms of Racialised Mistreatment and Escaping the Need to Escape in Percival Everett's *American Desert*

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In this article, I consider the protagonist of Percival Everett's *American Desert* (2004) – Theodore “Ted” Street – and his treatment as a short-lived cultural phenomenon after inexplicably coming back from the dead. I read Ted's experiences alongside Saidiya Hartman and Fred Moten's ideas on the impacts of racial inequality on Black experience and writing. I discuss Hartman's work on the “afterlife of slavery” in “The Belly of the World: A Note on Black Women's Labors” (2016), and Moten's *Black and Blur: consent not to be a single being* (2017), where he discusses the “predication of blackness” as “immersion” in the aftereffects of the slave trade.

American Desert's episodic narrative problematises Ted's efforts to escape mistreatment by persistently placing obstacles in front of them. Ted's afterlife leads to different forms of mistreatment, including unwanted media attention, harassment towards him and his family, and being held captive in two different settings, which are all intensified because Everett invites us to read his character as African American. In line with Hartman and Moten's work, as the novel progresses Ted realises that to end his cycle of futile escapes he must escape the *need* to escape, which is a necessary response to the racialised mistreatment he is subjected to.

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1. Reality vs. Fantasy, Subversion vs. Replacement

Arguably Percival Everett's most conceptually audacious novel, *American Desert* (2004) is constructed around the premise that college professor Theodore Street wakes up in his coffin at his funeral after his car is hit by a van and he is decapitated on his way to commit suicide. Ted's resurrection causes a media frenzy and he is abducted and held captive first by a religious cult and then by scientists. He adopts a biologically impossible (but narratively possible) position at the centre of a fantasy determined by his state of being, as the novel's narrator puts it, "Hyper-alive? Meta-alive? Sub- or super-alive?" (*American Desert* 30).¹ In his contribution to *Reading Percival Everett: European Perspectives*, Michel Feith suggests that Ted "endows the novel with the subversive potentialities of fantastic fiction, and undermines the cognitive consensus underlying the construction of 'reality' in contemporary America" (par. 12). In this article, I will challenge this view and analyse how *American Desert's* impermanent fantasy temporarily replaces – rather than subverts or transforms – its original reality. Ted's superhuman powers of replacement only increase his struggles, rendering both his desired escape via suicide and his accidental first death obsolete while also justifying his second death at the end of the novel.

Feith's "subversive potentialities" suggest an element of co-dependence or line-blurring between Ted's original reality and his fantasy afterlife, which is evident in the continuation of his struggle despite the transgressive promise of his resurrection, but I think replacement is a more suitable concept than subversion here. Concerning the ability to create meaningful change – to how he is (mis)treated by others – Ted is powerless in his afterlife. His agency is such that he can neither subvert nor transform but only replace, which he does again in the end by replacing his afterlife, his failed second chance at living, with a second and irrevocable death. Besides Feith, Richard Schur aligns *American Desert* with philosophy by suggesting that in this novel Everett "challenges Descartes' theories about the mind-body split and rejects common sense wisdom about the body" (75). I contend that Ted's reality-fantasy and life-afterlife splits, taken together, are failed attempts to end his misfortune and mistreatment, which reoccur and take the form of unwanted attention but escalate to harassment, then force, then incarceration. Building on the work of Feith and Schur, this article claims that mistreatment in *American Desert* can be more directly discussed in the context of race rather than in more abstract philosophical terms, as it can be approached as something replaced but unresolved instead of something transformed, subverted, or improved. This article also looks closely at the *results* of Ted's life-afterlife split, moving beyond the language games of decollation and decapitation—Ted losing his

¹ *American Desert* will be cited as *AD* in subsequent references.

head or keeping it, prompting the reader to do headwork (so references or allusions do not go over their head) or laugh their head off at the novel's absurdity—that Patricia Bleu-Schwenninger focuses on in her essay on the novel.

Specifically, this article will consider Ted's role as a short-lived media phenomenon in the novel alongside critical texts about race in America from the 2010s. I will use Saidiya Hartman's ideas on the "afterlife of slavery" in her essay "The Belly of the World: A Note on Black Women's Labors" (2016), which further develops ideas from her seminal 1997 book *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth Century America*. I will also use Fred Moten's work in *Black and Blur: consent not to be a single being* (2017), where he frames the "predication of blackness" as "immersion" in the aftereffects of the slave trade. Moten's idea links to Hartman's understanding of racialised mistreatment as a cyclical continuation, as being repeatedly submerged in an ongoing disproportionate struggle. Ted's particular afterlife sees him experience obsessive media attention, brings harassment towards him and his family, and has him held against his will by religious and scientific groups – experiences which, I argue, are intensified and made more complex in their significance because Everett invites us to read his character as African American. These conditions are a continuation of Ted's struggles when living: his personal and professional demise culminated in his plans to commit suicide, which were disrupted when he was accidentally killed by someone else, which then triggers a further complication when Ted's corpse is "re-animated" (AD 168) in his coffin, as the character Dr. Lyons puts it later in the novel. In conjunction, Hartman's article and Moten's book offer a useful recent lens through which *American Desert* can be re-read almost twenty years after its publication, especially as they both draw on Hartman's earlier book *Scenes of Subjection* and underline escape (and escape from the need to escape) as a necessary response to mistreatment. As Moten puts it, establishing the connection between his work and Hartman's, her "event of captivity" pertains to "the constancy of repetition" ("Preface" xii) he is interested in. As Moten sees it, the difficult process of writing about Black suffering threatens to create an "event" of it, unless careful steps are taken to prevent this. The "constancy" of suffering characterises both Hartman's afterlife of slavery and Ted's fantasy afterlife, where the replication of mistreatment underlies a fraught, futile cycle of replacement without improvement, motivated by the false, unfulfilled promise of change or transformation. Ted's own event of captivity is the series of picaresque episodes with reporters, members of a cult, and scientists during his brief second life. Everett highlights the licenses of fiction writing by giving Ted such a hyperbolic, *eventful* narrative, but he simultaneously addresses the expectations that he, an African American author, writes about race (and towards racial progress) by undermining these expectations and

depicting constant, repeated mistreatment. *American Desert* can therefore also be read as a novel about writing, and writing about race.

This article relies on my interpretation that Ted's character is African American, which in part is an extension of Feith's argument:

That Ted is black is not directly stated, but his funeral service takes place in the "Sacred Blood First Church of the Everlasting Spirit" in Long Beach (7), whose preacher, one Larville Staige "[fans] himself using a fan bearing the image of Martin Luther King, Jr., on the one side and advertising a funeral home on the other" (8–9). While the robed choir and the call-and-response form of the sermon confirm Ted's color, the double-sided fan becomes an ironical symptom of the collusion between spiritual and monetary values. Even in the black church, money is a mighty mainstreaming tool. (par. 34)

This process of attempting to "confirm Ted's color" returns to Everett's career-long interest in playing with the revelations of his characters' racial identities, which like his own are often African American. These characters are often reluctant to be labelled as Black, and they highlight the harmful ways others assume that they are Black through social codes and stereotypes. As Anthony Stewart puts it, "Everett's work is 'about' retraining our habits of mind," and "instead of explaining what it's like to be black, Everett's work encourages the perception of both the signals and the noise of information transmission" (*Approximate Gestures* 5, 8). The most notable example of this in Everett's oeuvre is baby genius Ralph's provocation "Have you to this point assumed that I am white?" in the 1999 novel *Glyph* (54). In *American Desert*, this reluctance and counter-assumption expand to never outrightly stating that Ted is black while at the same time playing with the expectation to do just that. This is most evident in the recurrence of bathroom mirrors, which Ted persistently avoids despite being drawn to them by Everett's prose, or which refuse to reveal to the reader what Ted actually sees. In the first section of the novel, Ted "took off his tie and shirt, but made a point of avoiding his reflection in the mirror. He wasn't yet ready to see himself" (*AD* 29). Not long after, Everett's tease escalates when Ted "got up and walked into the bathroom. He looked at the mirror and studied the face that looked back. Was he indeed himself?" (*AD* 51). In between these scenes, a conversation with his wife Gloria alludes to the specificity of skin colour in this process of looking in the mirror to understand oneself: "'Does my skin look a different color to you?' he asked [...]. 'Your skin looks like it always did'" (*AD* 30). Everett's approach to withholding information and revealing the racial identity of his protagonist takes a different form here than in *Glyph* then, but the approach also does not preclude reading Ted as a Black character.

In this way, *American Desert* quite literally enacts the critical idea that race is a fiction, that it is imposed instead of innate, with the mirror acting as a symbol for this external determiner of Black interiority. On the premise of interpreting Ted as an African American character – rather than *confirming* it, as Feith does – I will analyse the novel in terms of the interplay between unwanted attention, harassment, force, and incarceration, which are the four forms of racialised mistreatment I am focusing on. Ted’s experience of these four mistreatments can be understood as a gradual escalation, with the endpoint of racialised incarceration consolidating Ted’s need to desert America for a second time. Justifications for desertion define Ted’s afterlife despite his efforts to use the second chance to redeem himself (after his failed career and an affair with a graduate student) in the eyes of his wife Gloria and his son Perry and daughter Emily. This article will first establish how racialised mistreatment can be theorised, using Hartman’s concept of afterlife and Moten’s concept of immersion as my critical scaffolding. Then I will turn to specific moments in *American Desert* that resonate with these theories and justify Ted’s second replacement/desertion. Finally, I will return to the reality-fantasy distinction I begun with by considering Everett’s alignment of the fiction writer and their often default settings of hyperbole and abstraction with Ted, through which creative, abstract potential ties the issue of mistreatment to the possibility of hope. This is often a useful angle from which to write about racial inequality (and its constancy and repetition) in fictional narrative, but it is not one that Everett’s work straightforwardly adopts. In *American Desert*, this can be seen in how Ted’s replacement of reality with fantasy is not a complete separation, because the fantasy does not resolve Ted’s problems either.

However, before one can apply the spectrum of mistreatment to the abstract potential of fiction writing, it needs to be addressed in a less figurative way. The spectrum ranges from from the physical and corporeal to the non-physical and spectral, and the aspects of unwanted attention, harassment, force, and incarceration can be placed at different points. For instance, during his afterlife, Ted is “tied to a wooden stake about twenty yards from a cannon” (*AD* 144), and in this realm he is also, as he puts it, “a ghost who still has his body” (*AD* 282). His body is the involuntary object of cameras and science lab instruments, and it is abused by touch and mishandling as he is taken to the different settings he is imprisoned within. Yet Ted is also haunted by a history of inequality that cannot be seen or touched, and this cross-generational trauma is dramatised in scenes like the one where Ted says he is his own ghost. It is almost as if he has become his own ancestor by dying and coming back to life, because his second life and self are always conditioned by the constancy of the past, despite the attempt to replace it. Ted’s fantasy afterlife could only ever be

temporary and could never be a *productive* replacement for his original life precisely because of the recurrence of these different forms of mistreatment.

2. Theorising Racialised Mistreatment

Hartman addresses such recurrence in terms of the afterlife of slavery in the context of the black female body, but her suggestion that the prolonged effects of the slave trade are passed down from past generations to new ones – a repetitive cycle of inherited trauma, to be applied to new social eras where inequality has mutated but remains – can be adapted to *American Desert*. Ted's situation is fundamentally different. I venture that his movement between original life and replacement afterlife can be understood as this repetitive, cross-generational cycle in miniature, but Ted only experiences the impacts of this cycle in his afterlife, where they appear as something slightly different to what Hartman is discussing. In her article, Hartman describes this interchangeable, generational process as “the fungibility of the slave” (168), and she discusses the “afterlife of slavery” alongside how “the plantation is the belly of the world” (166). As she says, “to be a slave is to be ‘excluded from the prerogatives of birth.’ The mother’s only claim – to transfer her dispossession to the child” (166). Exclusion and dispossession are also at the centre of Ted's experiences, but these obstacles take different forms in his afterlife compared to the ancestors of female slaves Hartman writes about. At his funeral, right before he comes back to life, it is hoped that, “in that university system in the sky, Ted will, after all, get to publish his book” (AD 11). His decision to take his own life came after a miserable career as “a college professor, teaching old English and various survey courses at the University of Southern California” (AD 7), which is where Everett has worked as a Distinguished Professor of English since 1999. Ted's professional struggles saw him trying to beat the fact that “His salary was small and the ticking of the giant tenure clock was deafening” throughout his career (AD 151). It could only be possible in an afterlife to “get to publish his book”, though this is distracted by other concerns when Ted reaches this state. Furthermore, these obstacles when living are incomparable to the racialised mistreatment Ted is subjected to in his afterlife.

Ted's afterlife, which is back on the ground rather than “in the sky,” does not resolve his problems when living, but instead adds exclusion and dispossession to his troubles. His afterlife is a place where working at a university and trying to publish his book are no longer necessary – a place where he encounters new forms of mistreatment, which do not see him excluded but ironically being included for the purpose of exploitation. Ted is suddenly the centre of unwanted media attention, then is obsessed over by a religious cult (run by the character Big Daddy) who consider him a physical manifestation of the Devil, and he is finally the object of intensive

scientific interest (where experimental cloning is also happening, expanding the theme of replacement). In his afterlife, Ted is dispossessed to the extent that he is the possession – to be manipulated, abused, and enslaved for the gain of others, whether economic, theological/existential, or in terms of personal success and prestige. Much of Hartman’s discussion in “The Belly of the World” focuses on the black female body and workers’ rights, but her emphasis on modes of escape – “the shift from the fugitive to the striking worker” (167) – as conditions of the afterlife of slavery echo Ted’s failed process of replacement. Ted’s life is replaced with an afterlife where escaping mistreatment is consistently, systematically unsuccessful, because as a global phenomenon he is exploited by various factions in a short space of time for “the creation of value, the realization of profit and the accumulation of capital,” to use Hartman’s words (167). The experiences that come with this range from unwelcome harassment to being held (with Big Daddy’s cult, then at Area 51) against his will for something he is not responsible for.

The futility of Ted’s attempts to escape – first by replacing his life, then by running away from these different settings in his afterlife – can be further reframed with Moten’s ideas. As Moten outlines in his preface to *Black and Blur*, which collects essays he wrote covering music, painting, philosophy, and other arts: the essays’ “aim” is “blackness,” which “is given nowhere as emphatically as in rituals of renomination” (vii). Moten elaborates, stating that “our resistant, relentlessly impossible object is subjectless predication, subjectless escape, escape from subjection [...] constant escape is an ode to impurity” (“Preface” vii). The paradox Moten discusses is one of needing to escape the need to escape, or reaching the “impossible object” of successful, unequivocal escape – that is, the destination of no longer interrogating the subject of “blackness” because it is an accepted state, not a desired and projected one, nor something that must be externally conditioned and confront obstacles. Moten self-reflexively applies this paradox – and the attempt to transgress it – to himself as a Black theorist/essayist writing about blackness in the essays that follow his preface. Like Hartman’s afterlife of slavery and its repeated cycle of mistreatment, I think Moten’s paradox accurately captures Ted’s intentions and their obstacles in *American Desert*. In his afterlife, Ted’s own cycle sees him escape three further times – once from the reporters surrounding his house and harassing him and his family, and twice after being abducted and held captive by strangers in unfamiliar settings, acting on government orders in the case of the scientists and on Big Daddy’s in the religious cult’s. These minor successes are individually undone by Everett’s narrative, which always returns with another situation/setting for Ted to escape from. The result is that Ted must step back from these qualified “successes,” these momentary escapes.

Ted realises that he must escape his need to escape, which is the only way the mistreatment might come to an actual end, so the novel closes with this more credible attempt: “Ted looked at his wife and offered a silent apology. He then reached to his neck, undid a knot of his sutures and began to remove them. He slowly pulled out each and every stitch [...] Ted grabbed his head between his two hands, removed it and set it in his lap, closed his eyes and stayed dead” (AD 291). But this comes after *American Desert* spends the majority of its length stuck in Ted’s escape paradox, which defines his afterlife of slavery. This paradox is inseparable from Moten’s concept of immersion. Moten’s preface goes on to say that

Neither the violence nor the suffering it induces, nor the alternative to that violence that anticipates even while it cannot but bear that violence, are submissive to the normative ethical calculus from whose exterior some propose to speak, as dissident or supplicant, advocate or prosecutor, in the classic, (self-)righteous, unavoidably contradictory and neurotic stance of the impossible subjectivity that is our accursed share. Against the grain of that stance, which always laments standing from outside of and in opposition to its framework, black art, or the predication of blackness, is not avoidance but immersion, not aggrandizement but an absolute humility. (xi–xii)

Immersed in “the violence” and “the suffering” Ted’s Blackness “induces,” the afterlife of Everett’s novel depicts racialised struggles episodically, moving setting and never siding with those who are responsible for Ted’s mistreatment, but constantly showing how little improvement his situation sees. Ted’s escape paradox is not only in the service of final, achieved escape (and the concrete, factual ending of Everett’s novel). While breaking out of the paradox is a necessary narrative and character destination, arriving there does not eliminate what has been experienced up to that point, because the trauma will always linger. The novel’s means are as important as its ends. This is not avoidance of immersion but immersion in the problem, which for Ted is the different modes of racialised mistreatment he experiences after coming back to life. Ted “anticipates” the “alternative to that violence,” to use Moten’s words and maintain a reading into how Blackness adds meaning to Ted’s suffering; this can be seen in his efforts to resist and his multiple attempted escapes during his afterlife. But this is never more than anticipation, due to the nullification of escape in *American Desert*. This uncomfortable reality may occupy Ted’s fantasy, and it may be beneath the surface of the novel’s aesthetics of absurdity and farce, but it is the anchor of Everett’s novel.

3. Dramatising Racialised Mistreatment

This violence, suffering, and mistreatment varies in form. As I have indicated, at times it is corporeal, at others it is spectral. It is usually physical, but often begins more suggestively. The physical mistreatments are anticipated by Ted's first interaction as he is driven away from his botched funeral with his family. Ted's taxi driver draws attention to what can be seen or touched, asking him "What is wrong with your neck?" (AD 21). Ted then "reached to his throat and moved his numb fingers along the bumpy stitches" (AD 22), which mirrors the undoing of his "sutures" at the end of the novel. In this scene, the confirmation that Ted is defying biological possibility also comes by physical touch: "Now, he wondered if his heart was beating at all. He put his hand flat against his chest and searched, but found no pulse" (AD 23). These moments anticipate the tangibility and (threatening) physicality of the media in this first section of Everett's novel. The crowd of reporters outside his house are referred to as a "horde" that Ted's doctor (who visits him early on) is "frightened by" (AD 67). Ted is also said to be "caged in his own home" (AD 69). Again, Everett points to the impending physicality of mistreatment; he uses structure both here and in the taxi scene in a similar way to his teasing and deferral of Ted's appearance in the mirror scenes I drew attention to earlier.

After "the lawn and street in front of the house" become "teeming with people" (AD 62) and the police have "roped off the house and three stood guard in the front yard" (AD 63), the reporters outside Ted's house must be pushed past as the "sea of legs and waists" (AD 71) separates Ted and Gloria from their daughter. Gloria is described as "slapping at microphones and camera lenses" as she desperately tries to get to Emily, and Ted as having "fought his way back to his wife" (AD 71–72). They make it back into their house without their daughter, where Gloria "fell sobbing into his arms" and Ted's son Perry is "shaking, crying" from "under the table" (AD 72). The mistreatment has quickly moved from impending to physically abusive in this scene where Emily is forcibly separated from her family. It then becomes increasingly manipulative in a non-physical way as reporters interrogate her: "'Somebody get a camera on this.' 'Is your father different?' 'Is your mom okay in there?' 'Are you getting this?' Emily was crying" (AD 73). Ted's solution, deflecting the harassment away from his daughter, is to sit down for a television interview where he begs: "Please, leave me and my family alone. I'm asking the media to leave our house" (AD 86). The rapid escalation of Ted and his family's mistreatment in this section of the novel sets the tone for his afterlife, which repeats this cycle in different settings.

The mistreatment remains physical as this episode of the novel transitions into the next, when Ted is abducted by members of a cult. The narrator states that once the reporters have left the house, Ted's family go to the shop as if everything is normal:

“They were slowly moving between towers of pork ‘n’ beans and dry dog food when the voices became shouts, indiscernible, though soon his family’s screams joined in” (AD 99). The scene goes on:

Ted could not see, but he felt cloth cover his face, his arms wrested behind his back. He felt a brief tug at his shirt and he knew that it was Perry, but soon his son’s hands were gone. Ted was horizontal, his head engulfed in a sack, though this time still connected to his body and he was being carried by several people, big men by the feel of their arms and strength. Ted squirmed, twisted, afraid for his family [...] He was thrown onto a surface so hard his head bounced. He hoped it would stay attached. He was in a truck or van, that much was certain. (AD 99)

Ted’s abduction by Big Daddy’s disciples sees him accept “the fact that he was blindfolded and bound and let his body go limp” (AD 101). As he is driven out to the desert, where the cult is based, Ted’s defence mechanism to prevent physical mistreatment is to manipulate his body, to “go limp” to survive. When Ted is transported from the truck to the base, “[t]he man whose name was Gerald kicked Ted’s rear end not once but twice,” and even “though Ted winced at each coming blow, neither blow was painful” (AD 105). There is a complication to the mistreatment here. Because he is biologically dead, even though he is impossibly alive, “[i]t wasn’t that Ted was numb, without tactile sensation; he sensed the kicks, but the strikes to his body did not hurt him. He only felt them” (AD 105). If we are reading Ted’s experiences with the cult as racialised – the subtext beneath Big Daddy’s messianic intentions, of setting an example of him as the Devil – Ted can be viewed as a symbol of routine violence against Black bodies. He is representative of a numbness to pain over time, a process of getting used to mistreatment, and his impossible existential state in his afterlife facilitates this numbness.

Ted knows exactly what is coming and therefore how best to prepare his body for it, because it is what has happened to people like him for generations. This painful familiarity extends to when Ted is then held in a cell in the desert, and later shown “a Civil War bronze six-pounder, smooth-bore cannon” (AD 144), which has specific connotations of traumatic African American history due to the centrality of race to the Civil War, which was fought between the Union and the Confederacy after a dispute over the expansion of slavery. Ted is tied to a stake and this cannon is fired at him, the ball “hit[ting] his chest with a perceptible thump” (AD 145) with no effect, and then he “remained staked throughout the day” and is left to hang there (AD 146). But he is later freed by one of Big Daddy’s disciples and runs west as “rifle reports split the

warm air” and a “bullet hit Ted’s back” (AD 147). Once again, he paradoxically “felt that it failed to penetrate” and carries on running, showing how mistreatment and abuse in the novel, whether able to harm Ted or not, are always *felt* (AD 147). The idea of mistreatment being felt by Ted but not hurting him directly puts his character into the position of a symbol—not simply an individual character with specific actions, but an elected representative of a bigger history, a grander narrative.

After being shot but seeming to escape again, Ted stumbles on “a closed diner at daybreak” (AD 151), where a government agent called Clancy begins “making chitchat while we wait for our ride,” as Clancy puts it (AD 153). Clancy appears to be helping, so Ted goes with him willingly, but in the helicopter there are “M-16 armed soldiers already strapped in” (AD 154), and the helicopter takes Ted to Area 51 where there are many more soldiers, confirming that he is again a captive, not a guest. He is introduced to Dr. Lyons, “a scientist, an endocrinologist, and a pathologist” who first manipulates him (like Clancy) and later physically mistreats him (AD 166). Strengthening the connection to slavery when Ted was shot by a Civil War cannon, Clancy tells Ted that the government plan to run tests on him, so they can use “an army of men like you,” involuntarily and for their own gain, in *future wars* (AD 167). The plan is borne out of belief that “people have been coming back to life, so to speak, for as long as humans have walked the face of the planet” (AD 166), but it feels as if Lyons is simultaneously addressing Ted’s reanimation and his race. When Ted questions Lyons’s role in this, he tells Ted that “of course” he works for the military, but that “[t]his is science heaven. I can do whatever I want to whatever or whomever I want and nobody complains. Nobody screams about animal or human or civil rights and safe testing. I’m God down here” (AD 167–68). Civil rights are directly addressed as, in Lyons’s view, a piece of history that should be moved on from; but through Ted’s symbolic body, they are revisited as an urgent, present-tense debate of treatment, agency, and equality.

The rhetoric may have changed with the move from the cult base to Area 51 – Lyons phones a colleague to “escort Mr. Street to his new quarters” (AD 168–69, emphasis added) – but the fact of imprisonment remains. Ted has books but is trapped in a room; he has fresh clothes, but they include a “red-and-gray jumpsuit” akin to a prison uniform (AD 171). The physicality of the mistreatment is further complicated when Ted does escape from Area 51 (after Lyons cuts him open and examines him in a lab), which is again contingent on Ted’s ability to be shot and remain unharmed. As the narrator describes, “Ted was amazed but not surprised by the missing effect of the bullets. Clearly he could not be killed [...]. Ironically, he thought, if the young men [working for the military] had tackled and subdued him, he would have been unable to break free” (AD 191). The novel’s movement from non-physical to physical mistreatment,

from anticipating the threat of the reporters camped outside Ted's home and to the way he is treated by the cult and then in Area 51, has gone full circle. Physical mistreatment has been replaced with impending or symbolic mistreatment again, because though shooting at Ted is physically threatening, the impact of the bullets is non-physical and draws attention to a deeper traumatic history. Also, Ted becomes so untouchable that those trying to capture and incarcerate him stop using their hands and only rely on weapons that are ineffective. In some ways, Ted has reached a spectral state; he is now the "ghost who still has his body" (AD 282) I mentioned at the beginning of this article, able to walk through bullets and in or out of any room that previously contained him, of his own accord. But his superpowers are not enough to eliminate the *attempts* to mistreat him and the suggestions of this intent. Ted's powers therefore serve to remind him of a more unsettling historical cycle of repeated abuse of black bodies – a ghost that hangs over Everett's novel – so *American Desert* ends with Ted choosing to kill himself the only way that will work.

4. The Theme of Writing

This takes me back to the idea of writing and structuring a novel around this unsettling cycle. The cycle brings with it a fraught process of replacements without improvements, of escapes without freedom. Through Ted, *American Desert* can be read as a self-reflexive discussion of this decision to depict racialised mistreatment – to be immersed in this problem, as Moten says, or to be mired in the constancy of slavery's impact, as Hartman does. The novel typifies what Stewart describes as "Everett's work" seeming "to fight against the reading process itself" (*Approximate Gestures* 100). It does this by actively staging the processes of reading and writing about race within its narrative. Stewart looks at how this approach brings a variety of "sacrificial caricatures" in Everett's work, but this is where Ted differs from the "Neo-nazis, child murderers, and racist US senators" of other Everett titles (*Approximate Gestures* 96). Ted can be viewed as a "sacrificial," self-deprecating parody of the writer, even if he only shares Everett's place of employment and one of his teaching subjects (Everett is known for primarily teaching creative writing and also philosophy, as well as English) but not his creative writing profession. Everett's novel *Erasure* (2001), for instance, is the reverse: the protagonist Monk Ellison is a writer *and* English professor, but works at UCLA instead of USC. Other Everett novels and short stories move these pieces around, such as *I Am Not Sidney Poitier* (2009), in which a character named Percival Everett teaches at Morehouse College in Atlanta.

Standing in for his author in a different way to these other characters, the replacement world Ted awakens in is a fantasy in which he has no heartbeat and defies

other facts of biological existence, which justifies considering him as a caricature. He encounters multiple larger-than-life scientists and members of a religious cult whose scenes are almost a series of slapstick routines, showing how caricatures are all around him, too. The hyperbole of Everett's worldbuilding – the eventful approach to narrative I have discussed, reframing Moten and Hartman's idea of making an event of slavery's afterlife – generates these pervasive caricatures. The worldbuilding is determined by the narrative fact *American Desert* begins with: Ted is undead, much to the fascination of media, religious, and scientific groups. In this way, Ted can be read as a de facto fiction writer, because he is responsible for an episodic accumulation of events, bringing the introduction of various new characters and settings. Ted is effectively the author of his own fantasy afterlife, and the specific superhuman powers of "immortality" (AD 271) he possesses, which *attract* his unwanted attention, are like a writer's due to his initial ability to contradict reality, to break rules and invent new ones as if he were creating a fiction. Ted's persistent efforts to escape settings in which he is mistreated – efforts which are possible due to his power of being unharmable – effectively give him the role of editor of his own fiction, too. *American Desert's* self-reflexive discussion of authorial control is complicated by the way that Ted's escapes are only replacements of his mistreatments, not freedom from them. He is both author and editor of his afterlife, but there is always a larger force at play, qualifying these creative responsibilities (like publishers would, perhaps) in the same ways that his ability to be unharmed by bullets and his ability to escape are qualified, because he still feels the bullets and always has to escape again.

Unwanted attention is the first obstacle within Ted's fiction, but this opens the door to harassment, force, and incarceration. The theme of writing in *American Desert* can be applied to the subject of race, and it as if Everett is addressing the predictability of this association, because he is an African American author, by having Ted's fiction naturally lead to racialised mistreatment. If we are considering Ted as a writer, it is notable that his ability to invent or abstract does not prevent his experiences of mistreatment, even if his reality can be upturned and transformed into a fantasy. In the context of race, this negation of abstract potential – which I am defining as the manipulation and narrativisation of reality – chimes with Everett's deflections of terms like "abstract" in interviews. For example, in an interview with Rone Shavers for *BOMB* in the year when *American Desert* was published, Everett responded to a question about his approach by claiming, "I don't know what *avant-garde* or *experimental* means. Every novel is experimental" ("Rone Shavers" n.p.). He also tells Shavers that he "play[s] with styles" because he "think[s] they're amusing," and that "the world is unreliable. I'm just trying to give you the real thing" ("Rone Shavers" n.p.). To Everett, abstraction

is such a natural, everyday concept both inside and outside the writing profession that it is not worth using as a provocative term.

Everett returned to this topic of conversation in a 2020 interview with Jared McGinnis for *The White Review*: “I would like to make an abstract novel, but I don’t know how to do it [...] I think every novel is experimental. The term is vacuous” (“Interview with Percival Everett” n.p.). It is as if being abstract or “experimental” stretches beyond novels too, because as Everett implies, these concepts or ideas are everywhere. *American Desert* can be said to extend this limiting of abstract potential, this conditioning of authorial and editorial agency. Ted has the power to rewrite reality, but he cannot prevent racialised mistreatment. Everett’s narrative can experiment, push its events to extremes, and depart from believability, but it does not pretend that abstract potential or powers of replacement and escape could prevent this mistreatment, as befits an issue as layered and difficult as racial inequality. Schur suggests that the novel “could be profitably read as a postmodern allegory about the perils of abstract identities that are always completely socially constructed and distinct from actual lived experience” (“The Mind-Body Split in *American Desert*” 78), but I would take this further and say that *American Desert* is a critique of “the perils of abstract identities,” as well as a critique of fictional narrative’s ability to use abstraction, particularly when confronted with the subject of race.

Resonating with Moten’s concept of immersion, at its core Everett’s novel authentically depicts the constancy of struggle. In line with both this and Hartman’s theory of an afterlife of slavery, the novel is concerned with escape (from escape) when it comes to expectations for African American authors to write about race; but this is an ongoing, often stalled process rather than an endpoint. Ted’s desertion does not successfully leave these problems behind, because where Ted arrives after this death only offers him the tools of being more aware of these problems but not the ones required to solve them. Ted’s second death is a permanent escape/desertion, but the problem is left in a state of irresolution. *American Desert* implicates us in Ted’s incomplete problem-solving process, determined by the limitation that he is only a fictional character – even if this character has authorial and editorial powers. As real people, we have the second set of tools required to do what Ted could not, which is to act on the deeper understanding of racialised mistreatment that *American Desert* leaves both its protagonist and its reader with. Stewart notes that Ted’s surname Street “characterizes the intermediate in itself, since the street can be a destination and also a route to a destination, the route being a place but also a conduit to a place” (*Approximate Gestures* 81). In this way, Ted’s character is “a conduit” between authorship (and editing) and readership. As Feith suggests, ultimately “Ted is the litmus test of the

unknown and irreducible which foils pretences to total knowledge. His liminal, extra categorical, comical nature give him some of the characteristics of the trickster: an enmity for boundaries, a taste for language play” (par. 13). But these “characteristics of the trickster” are a pretence or a performance, fitting a novel that, I have argued, actively stages the processes of making fiction and making characters.

One of the defining aspects of Ted’s character, and by extension Everett’s novel, is the “unknown and irreducible,” which can be understood as a concession of the limitations of an individual novel or character when it comes to a subject as insurmountable as race. This obstacle in the way of “total knowledge” remains when we reach the end of *American Desert*, but there is an afterlife to the experience reading it, comparable to the hope that first came with Ted’s second chance after waking up in his coffin. As Moten puts it, the unavoidable concern with discussing race is “the problem’s diffusion, which is to say that what it thereby brings into relief is the very idea of the problem. Is a problem that can’t be solved still a problem?” (“Preface” xii). On *American Desert*’s terms, the answer is resoundingly yes, but that does not stop it turning it in on itself, repeatedly giving evidence of its “diffusion.” The responsibility to do this is then passed to the reader, who may also not be able to solve the problem. But after enough iterations of this passing on gesture, more insight will have indisputably been provided, more knowledge gained, and more empathy applied.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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