



Maus, DC 2023 “[O]NE Is Lost to Understand What This Has to Do With the [Black] Experience”: Percival Everett, André Alexis, and Racialized Authorial Expectations.’ *Orbit: A Journal of American Literature*, 11(1): pp. 1–20. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16995/orbit.10061>



Open Library of Humanities

## “[O]NE Is Lost to Understand What This Has to Do With the [Black] Experience”: Percival Everett, André Alexis, and Racialized Authorial Expectations

Derek C. Maus, SUNY Potsdam, New York, USA, [mausdc@potdams.edu](mailto:mausdc@potdams.edu)

---

Percival Everett and André Alexis have each affirmed their desire to produce art free from any external obligations by producing fiction designed to provoke and then to destabilize conditioned responses in their readers. One of the many ways in which both of them accomplish this aim is to write about subjects and in modes that confound what Lavelle Porter identifies as a host of “sloppy, simplistic, lazy, and inevitable” presumptions surrounding what Black writers should and should not write about. Both Everett and Alexis have written decidedly contemporary fiction that repurposes characters and plots from ancient Greek literature in various ways, including textual parody, metamythic pastiche, and conspicuous inclusion of Classical characters and forms into otherwise contemporary narratives. By doing so, they engage with a mythic tradition that a grossly reductive view on race and authorship perceives as not-theirs and navigate between a Scylla and Charybdis of cultural appropriation on one side and race treachery on the other. They not only explore their own aesthetic/philosophical interests through their renovations of Greek mythology, but they also hold up a mirror to the ways that the presumptions their readers bring with them affect (and limit) their interpretations.

---

*Orbit: A Journal of American Literature* is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by the Open Library of Humanities. © 2023 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

♻️ OPEN ACCESS



## Introduction

I am guided in writing this essay by the presumption that it will be read – at least initially – by far more devotees of Percival Everett’s writing than by those familiar with the work of André Alexis. After all, this issue of *Orbit* is explicitly focused on Everett while Alexis mostly remains an unknown quantity outside of Canada, despite having won several of the most prestigious Canadian literary awards. Therefore, I’ll begin by petitioning the Everett aficionados out there to learn more about a writer I was tempted to designate as “the Canadian Percival Everett” before remembering that Everett has owned a fly-fishing/writing retreat in British Columbia since the late 1990s, thereby intermittently making *him* the Canadian Percival Everett. Hopefully the copious other parallels between these two authors, their works, and their critical reception that I will expand on below are a compelling enticement to consider Alexis’s work alongside Everett’s.

Born less than a month apart – Everett on December 22, 1956, Alexis on January 15, 1957 – both authors have produced substantial oeuvres marked not only by a staggering diversity of themes, genres, and styles, but also by a conscious intention to frustrate conventionalized readerly presumptions, notably (though far from exclusively) those based on an author’s skin color. Additional correspondences between the two men run the gamut from the relatively trivial to the deeply significant. For example, both are skilled guitarists, and each of them has produced artwork in a non-print medium, Everett as a painter and Alexis as a librettist for several operas. Both men studied somewhat esoteric subjects as undergraduates, ordinary language philosophy in Everett’s case and Russian literature in Alexis’s.<sup>1</sup> Both men have won multiple major prizes for their writing but have chosen to publish primarily with small, independent presses; Everett has published mostly with Minneapolis’s Graywolf Press since 1996, while nearly all of Alexis’s books in the past decade have been published by Coach House Books of Toronto. They have both produced fiction that ranges from fairly straightforward realism – e.g., Everett’s *Walk Me to the Distance* (1985) and *So Much Blue* (2017); Alexis’s *Asylum* (2008) and *Pastoral* (2014) – to strikingly unconventional expressions of form and/or content – e.g., *The Water Cure* (2007) and *The Book of Training by Colonel Hap Thompson of Roanoke, Va, 1843: Annotated from the Library of John C. Calhoun* (2018); Alexis’s *Fifteen Dogs* (2015) and *Days by Moonlight* (2019).<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> As both an undergraduate and graduate-level scholar of Russian literature myself, I feel well-equipped to lovingly call my erstwhile field esoteric within a North American academic context.

<sup>2</sup> My favorite similarity, though, is the number of fictional characters they have produced who bear their own names. Everett has breathed life into metafictional golems named Percival Everett in *A History of the African American People (Proposed) by Strom Thurmond, as Told to Percival Everett and James Kincaid* (2004), in *I Am Not Sidney Poitier* (2009), and in *Percival Everett* by Virgil Russell (2013), while Alexis must surely have set some sort of record in his 1994 short-story “My Anabasis,” which features five distinct characters – two male, three female – named either André or Andrée Alexis.

### “Race is, but doesn’t necessarily mean”

The particular commonality on which I wish to focus here, however, arises from several oft-cited passages in Everett’s novel *Erasure* (2001). The narrator/protagonist Thelonious “Monk” Ellison complains that a large corporate bookstore is ignoring his books’ content in favor of his appearance when shelving his work:

I went to Contemporary Fiction and did not find me, but when I fell back a couple of steps I found a section called African American Studies and there, arranged alphabetically and neatly, read *undisturbed*, were four of my books including my *Persians* of which the only thing ostensibly African American was my jacket photograph. 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. (28, italics in original)

This complaint expands on a previous grievance concerning the personal and professional constrictions imposed on him by external racial categorization:

Some people in the society in which I live, described as being black, tell me I am not *black* enough. Some people whom this society calls white tell me the same thing. I have heard this mainly about my novels, from editors who have rejected me and reviewers whom I have apparently confused and, on a couple of occasions, on a basketball court when, upon missing a shot, I muttered *Egads*. From a reviewer:

*The novel is finely crafted, with fully developed characters, rich language and subtle play with the plot, but one is lost to understand what this reworking of Aeschylus’ The Persians has to do with the African American experience.* (2, italics in original)

He furthermore recalls a party at which “a tall, thin, rather ugly book agent told me that I could sell many books if I’d forget writing retellings of Euripides and parodies of French poststructuralists and settle down to write the true, gritty real stories of black life. 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, italics in original).

Monk’s frustration at being pigeonholed because of his pigmentation mirrors Everett’s repeated insistence that his own Blackness – like any other biographical detail about him – offers no inherent insight into his works’ meanings. As Everett mordantly told his USC colleague James Kincaid, “I am a black writer the way you are

a white professor or that man over there is a fat banker. You might point me out as a black writer when trying to betray me to the KKK or the Bush administration” (Kincaid, “Interview” 379). In a letter responding to a review by Sven Birkerts in the *New York Times*, Everett sarcastically praised the “amazing restraint exhibited by Birkerts as he waited until the *second* sentence of his piece to mention that I am African-American. I feel confident in stating that the color of my skin has little to do with that novel [*Erasure*].... To tell the truth, I simply am tired of people connected with publishing and art in this culture being so amazed that anyone not white can create work, that race is all they can see” (Everett, “Color” 4, italics in original).

Everett has voiced such sentiments throughout his career. His 1991 essay “Signing to the Blind” begins by recounting a series of frustratingly absurd reactions to characters’ explicit racialization (or lack thereof) in his first three novels. He observes that the root problem of such reactions lies in the relationship between publishers and literary audiences in the United States:

[African-American writers] are at the economic mercy of a market which seeks to affirm its beliefs about African-Americans.... I do not believe that the works we produce need to be any different; the failing is not in what we show but in how it is seen. And it is not just white readers, but African-American readers as well who seek to fit our stories to an existent model. It is not seeing with “white” eyes, it is seeing with “American” eyes, with brainwashed, automatic, comfortable, and “safe” perceptions of reality. (10)

Twenty-six years later, Everett remained steadfast in his diagnosis: “[T]he unfortunate marginalization of American writers who happen to be black by calling them ‘black writers’...tacitly acknowledges the existence of something else that would be mainstream, and so ghettoizes the work immediately. That is the unfortunate part. If one allows that, one fails to acknowledge the truth that there is no such thing as a ‘black American experience.’ There are experiences of black Americans, and those experiences are as wide and varied as those of white Americans” (Taylor 61).<sup>3</sup> In sum,

---

<sup>3</sup> Everett revisits the “ghettoizing” of Black intellect in a slightly different vein in *The Trees* (2021) through a character named Damon Nathan Thruff, who is “an assistant professor at the University of Chicago. He held a PhD in molecular biology from Harvard, a PhD in psychobiology from Yale, and a PhD in Eastern philosophy from Columbia. He was twenty-seven years old. He had published three books on cellular regeneration, all issued by Cambridge University Press, and a two-volume work on the biological and philosophical origins of racial violence in the United States published by Harvard University Press. On this particular day, he was sitting at the desk in his tiny university office in the Department of Ethnic Studies (because they *didn’t know where to put him*.)” Thruff is denied tenure “because no one really believed that he was capable of so much work of such quality so quickly,” but is also given a second chance to earn it while holding the “Phillis Wheatley Chair in Remedial Studies” and agreeing not to “publish anything for a year”

Everett sees his own race as irrelevant to the interpretation of his art, and not just when he produces “an obscure reworking of a Greek tragedy”; on the other hand, his use of race in creating characters and plots runs a disruptive gamut from subverting clichéd tropes to challenging readers’ interpretations of characters that are overdetermined by their perceived (or presumed) race. As Mitchum Huehls succinctly observes, in Everett’s fiction “[r]ace is, but it doesn’t necessarily mean” (109), and Everett shifts the workload for teasing out this distinction wholly onto his readers (as befits a Barthesian “dead” author).

Although Everett explicitly critiques “American” readers for their overly rigid significations in “Signing to the Blind,” the reception of André Alexis’s work by primarily anglophone Canadian audiences suggests that the phenomenon that Everett describes and decries is more widespread, though far from uniform in its transcultural implications. For example, the debates surrounding the intersection of Black and Canadian identities prominently involve issues related directly to immigration and cultural assimilation, a situation that reflects not only the significantly different histories of Black populations in the United States and Canada, but also differences in legal status and national rhetoric (e.g., Canada’s official – if also messy and contentious – multiculturalism, which has been federal law since 1988 and stated policy since 1971).

Alexis, who emigrated from Trinidad to Canada at the age of four, often sounds much like Monk and Everett when he bristles against the obligation to represent Blackness in particular ways – or at all – in his art. Upon the completion of his “quincunx cycle” of novels in 2021, Alexis stated his position unambiguously:

You don’t want to come to the point where you deny that being Black or Trinidadian... is a significant aspect of who I am. It clearly is. The problem is that people make assumptions about what it is that they are getting from a Black writer. They also have a sense of what they want from a Black writer: They want somebody to talk about race. They want somebody to talk about inequality in a certain way. They want a speaking of the ugliness.... To be clear: the theme of race doesn’t annoy me, but the expectations that I have to talk about those things do. (Patrick, “Staying”)

Echoing Everett’s response to Birkerts’s review, Alexis has indicated that he does not “like to be thought of as a black writer, largely because I refuse to accept that my race provides a royal road to understanding the fiction I write. Once one has been labelled, reviewers (and readers) almost inevitably comment on the label as much as they do on the work.[...Such] designations lead to the same thing: a prejudgement that clogs

---

in order to “show the proper commitment to his proper place” (111, italics in original).

up important channels between writer and reader” (Alexis, “Of a Smallness” n.p.). He told interviewer Donna Bailey Nurse that “I am absolutely a writer of colour. That’s who I am. But I really want to insist that I have the right to speculate on things that aren’t directly to do with race. I prefer that you don’t take my book and look at it as the product of a black person” (Nurse, “Andre” 149). Not long after his first collection of stories was published in 1994, Alexis penned a controversial essay entitled “Borrowed Blackness,” in which he laments “an absence I feel at the heart of much black Canadian art. I miss hearing black Canadians speak from Canada. I miss black Canadian writing that is conscious of Canada, writing that speaks not just about situation, or about the earth, but rather from the earth. After all, it is our country, and it is our responsibility to add our voices to the white voices that are articulating Canada” (19). Although Alexis acknowledges his Blackness in each of these sources, he also unfailingly parallels Everett in maintaining its inconsequentiality to consideration of his fiction.

### **(Re)imposing the Obligation of Representation**

Perhaps unsurprisingly, such views have not mollified readers and critics who varyingly question, scold, or condemn the lack of Black solidarity they ostensibly evince. Houston Baker, for example, called *Erasure* a “deeply problematic” novel that contains “a not-so-subtle leitmotif of class warfare and resentment toward both the black ghetto majority and the old and nouveau black bourgeoisie.” Baker accused the novel of expressing “masculinist bravado and tongue-in-cheek anti-black-majority sentiment” without “the redeeming grace notes proclaimed by reviewers” (146). Baker also flatly indicts Everett for ignoring “the signal social and political fact of its time, namely, the Ronald Reagan/George Herbert Walker Bush compromise of American decency and rights that has produced George W. Bush.... Where is the contestation or parody or *je refuse!* of *Erasure* with respect to the historical and ongoing ignominy of its own time and place in the literary world?” (149).<sup>4</sup> Everett responded by including a barely-disguised version of Baker in *Percival Everett by Virgil Russell* (2013), in which – among many other things – a “hack academic” named “Housetown Pastrychef or Dallas Roaster, something like that” is mocked by a friend of the narrator for theorizing that “race was not only a valid category but a necessary one.... My friend dismissed the academic, his name might have been Austin Cooker, by saying that of course he believed such a thing, since he had made his living and career out of being the ethnic, you know, cooning it up” (34). Possibly leery of being subjected to such ridicule, few other critics have publicly accused Everett

---

<sup>4</sup> In the same year – 2007 – that Baker published this condemnation, Everett published his only “[self-]designated protest [novel,] *The Water Cure*, which was aimed directly at the Bush administration” (Yeh).

in recent years for supposedly being a race traitor. The widespread acclaim for *The Trees* (2021), a grotesquely comic-satiric commentary both on the legacy of Emmett Till's murder and on lynching in general, may forestall such complaints entirely, though Everett still pointedly and frequently rejects any intimation that he is beholden to *anyone* other than himself in making art.<sup>5</sup>

The pushback against Alexis's assertions of writerly sovereignty has been more voluminous, though also more prevalent during the late 1990s and early 2000s than today. For example, Rinaldo Walcott stopped just short of calling Alexis a sellout, claiming that Alexis strategically "invokes the tropes of Canadian landscape and geography to effectively demonstrate his qualifications for belonging," and that his use of French-English bilingualism in his novel *Childhood* (1998) to "enacts a central dynamic of the myth of belonging to Canada[...that] works to preempt discussions of his blackness and...make his place in the [Canadian] nation appear secure and correlatively less black" (61–62). Walcott even unwittingly echoes both Baker and Monk's fictional reviewer in writing that "[t]here is no doubt that Alexis is a talented writer. His sentences are tight and he can turn words and keep one's attention on the most banal of details in a way few writers can.... It is the politics of his writing, and by extension his art, that might be questioned" (60).<sup>6</sup> Walcott momentarily seems to find common ground with Alexis in positing that "avenues for thinking about blackness by black Canadians do not follow a single path... [I]t seems clear that black Canadians reinvent what they borrow for local purposes," but soon reverts to the stance that Alexis intentionally neglects the transnational dimension of Canadian Blackness:

For while it might be argued that in some limited sense Alexis has a point, his refusal to seriously engage the conditions of black diasporic identifications is puzzling.... [T]his is how black (post)modernity makes crucial links, across national space, to demonstrate some of the ways in which black people sometimes share pain, pleasure,

---

<sup>5</sup> Such views are these days largely confined to the comments sections of Amazon, Goodreads, etc. and thus almost entirely unlikely to be read and/or taken seriously by Everett.

<sup>6</sup> Walcott notes, but seems to discount, the publisher's role in creating what he perceives as the "repression of the text's blackness.[...] *Childhood* has been promoted with little reference to Alexis as a black man.... The promotion of the novel as being in excess of black art is as though a link to blackness in the text would in some way damage the sophistication of the art" (60). Alexis himself noted that at least one paratextual aspect of the book's marketing – the cover – reinforced his authorial intentions regarding race, but that this has not always been the case: "When *Childhood* was first published in Canada, it...had a picture on the cover that was as racially neutral as you can imagine – a butterfly. I liked that image. That was sensitive to me, because as you read the novel you don't find out that a person is of a particular colour until 30 pages in. And that was done on purpose. They put a black child on the cover of the British edition. I told them that the race of the child was supposed to be a bit of a surprise and that you are supposed to identify, whoever you are, with this voice. They went with the image anyway" (Nurse, "Writing Through Race" 18).

disappointments and hope. Alexis's inability to access such understandings, to know why those identifications assert themselves as black commonalities, explains why he fails to acknowledge what it means to be at home in Canada. (146–147)

To varying degrees, other critics have accepted Walcott's premise that Alexis unjustly avoids his own Blackness and/or Caribbean heritage in his aesthetic and thematic choices. For example, David Chariandy considers Alexis's seeming "estrangement" – both in his interviews and his fiction – from the politics of Blackness in Canada a repression of "the everyday traumas of racialization that *Childhood* evokes but never adequately addresses" (823). Winfried Siemerling claims that *Childhood* predominantly "portrays studied attempts at forgetting Caribbeanness" (267) and implies that the narrator's sympathies with such attempts reflect Alexis's own position. Although George Elliott Clarke calls for a middle road between Alexis's "liberalism" and Walcott's "reflex black nationalism," he also sympathizes with Alexis in remaining "wary...of drawing any defining lines around *blackness*: the concept is too malleable for containment... Although it is possible to 'out' Alexis as a black writer, the surface racelessness of his fiction betrays him as a ripe candidate for a charge of race treason. Nevertheless, such charges must be complicated by the recognition that 'blackness' and 'Canadianness' are fluid, unstable identities" ("Treason," italics in original).

It bears repeating that neither Alexis nor Everett is unaware of the effect of skin color on their lives and those of others perceived as Black. Everett unambiguously expressed his pragmatic understanding of Blackness in the twenty-first-century United States in a 2019 interview:

I mean, I would be stupid to think that I'm not seen as black man when I walk into a bar in Arizona, and I have to be on my guard. It's the same if I see blue lights flashing in my rearview mirror. I don't want my sons to forget that they are black men in America, but at the same time, I don't believe the concept of race is a valid notion. There is no such thing as race. But if you go into the world not realizing that other people think a lot about race then you're being stupid, and America and the rest of the world will let you know that really quickly" (Manuel).<sup>7</sup>

Alexis similarly noted in a 2016 essay that "I have never denied the importance of race *in the world*. What I have longed for is a place where my aesthetic concerns might

---

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Monk's comment early in *Erasure*: "The hard, *gritty* truth of the matter is that I hardly ever think about race. Those times when I did think about it a lot I did so because of my guilt about not thinking about it. I don't believe in race. I believe there are people who will shoot me or hang me or cheat me and try to stop me because they do believe in race, because of my brown skin, curly hair, wide nose, and slave ancestors. But that's just the way it is" (3, italics in original).



be given precedence. For the sake of the art I practice, I would almost prefer to have no race at all” (“Of a Smallness,” italics in original). He added, though, that his attitude has evolved in the two-plus decades after the publication of “Borrowed Blackness”:

I have been, since I began writing, split in two. On one side, my writerly self. On the other, my civic self, the aspect of me that is black, Canadian, living in Toronto [...]. For my younger self, fear of meaning something took the form of a fear of “speaking for.” I mean: yes, there’s a difference between “speaking as” a black Canadian and “speaking for” black Canadians, but the border is sometimes difficult to discern and I have been wary of it, wary to the point of paranoia.[...] I have been too steadfastly unwilling – too frightened – to allow both sides of me to speak: the side that loves language and the side that has lived in Canada, from 1960 to the present. (“Of a Smallness”)

Both Everett and Alexis maintain that the persistence of systemic racism in the United States and Canada does not oblige them to represent it in their writing, particularly in the narrow ways to which readers and/or publishers have become accustomed. Scott Fraser lauds Alexis by asserting that because “the white literary mainstream is very comfortable with stories of Black suffering...there remains something remarkable and hopeful about a Black, second-generation artist who writes with the confidence and ability of one who[,] even if affected by racism, has the right to exist as an artist” (Fraser). In describing Everett, Anthony Stewart strikes many of the same notes: “Everett does not write like he’s a white writer or like race doesn’t matter. He writes as if he lives in a world of his own making, a world in which the art of a black writer was evaluated in the same ways as the art of a white – and male, it must be said – writer. In other words, he writes for the world the way it ought to be” (Stewart, “Setting” 222).

### **Ancient Greece, Southern Ontario, and Other Notable Sites of Resistance**

Both Everett and Alexis have affirmed their “right to exist as an artist” in a “world the way it ought to be” partly by producing fiction designed to provoke and then to destabilize conditioned responses like those Monk denounces in *Erasure*. Stewart, who is undoubtedly one of Everett’s most nuanced and astute readers, admits to “feeling kind of caught out” by such a trap when Ralph, the hyperintelligent infant narrator of *Glyph* (1999), self-consciously interrupts his narrative about fifty or so pages into the novel to declare that “you, dear reader, whether you share my pigmentation or cultural origins, probably assumed that I was white” (54). Everett not only correctly surmises that recognizing this presumption made Stewart “feel like shit,” but adds that “This is

the way we're trained to read. It's not a good thing. It's not a bad thing. But it's a thing" (Stewart, "Interview" 300). Ralph himself explicitly shifts the burden of responsibility for perpetuating this "thing" onto the reader – "It [i.e., Ralph's race] is not important unless you want it to be and I will not say more about it" (54). Paul Ardoin insists, however, that Everett's actual critique of hidebound processes of making meaning is more metanarratively complex than perhaps even Ralph seems to understand. Ardoin contends that Ralph's direct address to the reader is "a disruption that winks at its own narrative operation at the outskirts of the story and insists that readers stop to ask which meanings really do not mean, which meanings are ceaselessly meaning without appearing to do so, and why characters and readers might urgently desire to avoid or minimize attending to such meanings at all" (170). Lavelle Porter brilliantly summarizes how Ralph's gesture reflects the whole of Everett's oeuvre: "In his entire body of work one finds an ongoing meditation on all the sloppy, simplistic, lazy, and inevitable ways that we rely upon . . . racial signifiers. Sifting through his books, and the growing critical tradition around them, we find a writer who is committed to confronting, disrupting, and just plain fucking with conceptions of race at every turn" (Porter).

One of the many ways in which both Everett and Alexis accomplish the process Porter describes is to write about subjects and in modes that confound "sloppy, simplistic, lazy, and inevitable" presumptions surrounding Black writers.<sup>8</sup> Such a development is hardly surprising, given the allegations of writing white (or at least "not black enough," as Monk puts it)<sup>9</sup> that have occasionally been leveled at them for indicating non-Black influences on their writing. Everett has cited Laurence Sterne, Samuel Butler, Lewis Carroll, Mark Twain, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Flannery O'Connor, and Samuel Beckett as both favorites and influences in countless interviews (as well as such Black authors as Chester Himes, Zora Neale Hurston, and Ralph Ellison). In a 1998 interview, Alexis affirmed that "I am an African-Canadian writer...[y]et, I think that George Elliott Clarke, for instance, is infinitely more aware of the African-Canadian tradition of literature and writing.... I'm tangentially a part of the African-Canadian literary tradition. Not that I don't want to belong to it. It's just that I wasn't exposed to the tradition at the time in my life when it could enter into my consciousness as a writer. Other things entered instead" (Gorjup 11). Those "other things" include works by Norman Levine, Margaret Avison, Margaret Laurence, Mordecai Richler, Georges

---

<sup>8</sup> "[T]he argument might even be made that the extremity of the circumstances in which many of his characters find themselves demonstrates how far an African American writer must go in order to distract a readership acculturated to fixate on a subject [i.e., race] it has also been acculturated not to understand" (Stewart, *Approximate* 159).

<sup>9</sup> Alexis demonstrated his awareness of this potential reaction in "Borrowed Blackness," noting that "resentment of European influence has led to well-documented problems for black American artists" (16). See also Chariandy 822-23; Clarke; Walcott 59-72.

Bataille, Antonin Artaud, Raymond Queneau, Italo Calvino, Samuel Beckett, and Leo Tolstoy, each of whom he singles out as major influences elsewhere in the same interview. To be clear, I am not contending that Everett and Alexis deliberately invoke these writers in interviews or to allude to them in their fiction *because of their whiteness* (or their not-Blackness); rather, my point is that neither dodges such intertextual connections out of a racialized sense of obligation either.

Like Monk in *Erasure*, both Everett and Alexis have written decidedly contemporary fiction that repurposes characters and plots from ancient Greek literature in various ways, including textual parody (Everett's *For Her Dark Skin*), metamythic pastiche (Everett's *Frenzy*), and a modern-day animal fable involving Greek deities who remain largely distant from and unperceived by contemporary Torontonians (Alexis's *Fifteen Dogs*). By doing so, they engage with a cultural tradition of myth that a grossly reductive view on race and authorship – recall the “lost” reaction of Monk's reviewer to *The Persians* – perceives as not-theirs; such an accusation presents a Scylla and Charybdis of cultural appropriation on one side and race treachery on the other.

Each author has preempted such charges by explicating his interest in adapting particular elements of Greek myths. Everett indicated that *For Her Dark Skin* (1990) and *Frenzy* (1997)

though similar, come from different places, different needs. The Medea novel comes out of my longstanding dissatisfaction with the slant of the existing story – that the excuse for her killing her children was that this woman had gone mad. That seemed too simple. There are all sorts of other tracks. She is a hero in my estimation, and my story came out of that kernel of dissatisfaction. The Dionysus novel proceeds from a desire to understand some notion of deity. I read many translations of *The Bacchae* but couldn't own the material. So, I read more translations and finally did my own. It was awful, a terrible result, but it gave me entry into that material and I finally possessed it in such a way that I could use it. (Mills, Julien, and Tissut 80)

Alexis speaks more generally about how mythic storytelling affords him a breadth of humanism that is lost within a more strictly realistic and/or sociological framework:

For me, *Fifteen Dogs* could be taken as an immigrant story. These dogs don't know who they are anymore and have to come in there to a new sense of their identity and give up their old identity or hang onto the old identity and be able to move efficiently in the new world.... However, if you take it that way principally and only, you lose so much of what is going on in that moment. You lose the references to Greek mythology. You lose the references to philosophy. You lose the references to human

imagination, because that's another thing in which, you know, the ways in which humans imagine the world is paraded before your eyes. (Patrick, "Staying")

Everett and Alexis thus not only explore their own aesthetic/philosophical interests through their renovations of Greek mythology, but they also hold up a mirror to the ways that the presumptions their readers bring with them affect (and limit) their interpretations; this twinned set of writerly acts aligns neatly with their shared desire for representational freedom.

As Everett indicates in the passage quoted above, *For Her Dark Skin* (1990) recalibrates the relationship between Medea and Jason to address his "dissatisfaction" with the conventional view of both characters. In the book's first line, Jason identifies Medea as coming not just from Colchis but specifically from "a land of darker-skinned people" (6). This initiates a conspicuous emphasis on her physical appearance that sets her apart from the other Greek characters, regardless of their respective words or deeds; she is always "black" (read: non-Greek) in symbolic and social opposition to Jason's pale skin and blond hair, his other – and Othering – golden fleece. Jason both fetishizes and maligns Medea for her dark skin, often in the same breath: "Medea was certainly exotic and erotic and extraordinarily beautiful, but she was wild; perhaps a function of her complexion. It was not clear she knew her station as a wife. She had ideas" (69). As the prime target of Everett's parodic satire, the roguish and sexually voracious Jason proves unable to see beyond his preconceptions about Medea's literally and metaphorically "dark" nature. More surprisingly, though, characters like Jason's lieutenant Polydeuces and the Corinthian woman Tamar who seem sympathetic to Medea also remain stuck in the mindset that Medea's dark skin is a distinction that signifies a substantive difference rather than reflecting a constructed way of seeing that justifies and perpetuates a power imbalance. For example, immediately after Jason boorishly sets the initial tone, Polydeuces reinforces the unquestioned linkage of Medea's outward appearance and presumed evil nature: "We all saw her clearly as the witch she was. Her beauty was stunning in the way of most bad things" (8).

Kathie Birat argues that the novel balances an intersectional reexamination of Medea's characterization with a broader literary-historiographic impulse: "Everett's satirical treatment of the Medea myth is related to questions both of race and gender.... However, the specific implications of seeing the story in a racial or gender perspective are less important than the ways in which the novel explores the role of language and storytelling in the creation of the cultural narratives in which racial and gender distinctions are rooted" (82). In such a broader view, Medea's Blackness is not necessarily analogous to African-American Blackness in particular, but rather to discriminatory and prejudicial racializations in general. As long as others presume

to know her *just* because of her dark skin, Medea cannot escape the infanticidal fate that befalls her at the conclusion of both Everett's novel and Euripides's play. Everett, though, offers Medea a measure of vindication and positive agency by suggesting that killing her golden-haired children<sup>10</sup> has at least shown Jason the vulnerability of his presumed superiority: "Why do you cry?...You are alive. You have not been burned. You have not been cut. Oh, I see – your *smile* is gone. Grieve for your *smile*." (152, italics in original).

The title of *Frenzy* (1997) alludes to the ritual ecstasies experienced by the worshippers of the complicated divine entity alternately identifies in the novel as Dionysos, Bakkhos, and Bromius. Narrated by an inherently formless amanuensis named Vlepo, *Frenzy* not only refashions elements of Euripides's *Bacchae* but also parts of the story of Orpheus and Eurydice, as well as the story of Ariadne's covert assistance to Theseus in slaying her monstrous half-brother, the Minotaur. Michel Feith contends that one of Everett's primary acts of reinvention is stitching the libidinous and chaotic presence of Dionysos into all of these myths: "All these narratives seem to be loosely connected, and Dionysos features in the text as a mere witness to many episodes, yet he is present as an actor at crucial moments in all of them" (Feith, "Black" 93). Whereas *For Her Dark Skin* clearly expects the reader to recognize how Medea's dark skin influences her perception by other characters, the same impulse is not present in *Frenzy*, of which Feith observes, "There is nothing obviously 'black' in Percival Everett's rewriting of the myth of Dionysos" (91). Given Everett's stated aim of exploring his "desire to understand some notion of deity" in the novel, this should not be a particularly shocking revelation, provided that one does not presume that "a piece of literature by an African American author [is] necessarily to be interpreted according to 'racial' categories" or that "awareness of the author's ethnic background [may] reveal hidden 'significations'" (92). Feith poses both of these questions, but ultimately – and rightly, in my view – rejects them in the end.

Whereas *Frenzy* is a Everett's attempt to comprehend deity, Alexis's *Fifteen Dogs* (2015) focuses almost entirely on gods and dogs to consider the nature of humanity. The novel is not so much retelling of an existing myth as a tale of contemporary Canada that somewhat incongruously borrows both some of its principal characters and the form of the apologue from Mediterranean antiquity. It opens with the Greek deities Hermes and Apollo engaging in mild dissipation at Toronto's Wheat Sheaf Tavern<sup>11</sup>:

---

<sup>10</sup> No one in Corinth other than Medea has ever acknowledged her offsprings' "skin shone only a bit of my pigment, but enough to mark their distinction from the pale populace" (112).

<sup>11</sup> The website (wheatshaeftavern.com) for the real-life version bills it as "Toronto's Oldest bar," making it an eminently suitable venue for immortals.

They had been drinking, but it wasn't the alcohol that intoxicated them. It was the worship their presence elicited. The Wheat Sheaf felt like a temple, and the gods were gratified. In the men's washroom, Apollo allowed parts of himself to be touched by an older man in a business suit. This pleasure, more intense than any the man had known or would ever know again, cost him eight years of his life. (13)

Amidst their revels, the two wasted gods engage in a brief debate about whether human intellect makes them superior to other animals: "For amusement, they spoke ancient Greek, and Apollo argued that, as creatures go, humans were neither better nor worse than any other, neither better nor worse than fleas or elephants, say. . . . Hermes took the opposing view, arguing that, for one thing, the human way of creating and using symbols, is more interesting than, say, the complex dancing done by bees" (13–14). To test their competing propositions, Apollo and Hermes decide to conduct an experiment and correspondingly bet on whether giving dogs human consciousness would make them happy or not.

In the capricious manner of the Greek deities, they enact their wager by instantaneously making fifteen dogs kenneled at a nearby veterinary clinic self-aware and intend simply to observe the results of this change thereafter. However, unforeseen developments in the dogs' lives as they struggle to integrate their canine and human sensibilities lead to additional divine interventions/meddling not only by Hermes and Apollo, but also "sowed a kind of frenzy among the gods, all of whom immediately made wagers of their own" (92). Upon discovering this situation, Zeus is horrified at the manner in which his sons have upended the nature of suffering and mortality: "They suffer within their own bounds . . . . These poor dogs don't have the same capacities as humans. They weren't made to bear doubt or to know that their deaths will come. With their senses and instincts, they'll suffer twice as much as humans do" (92). He forbids further interference in the dogs' lives, a command that the gods mostly abide by; importantly, though, he violates his own injunction on behalf of Atticus, who has become his "favorite" (92) among the dogs, mainly because Atticus had begun to pray:

He already had a notion of what an ideal or pure dog might be: a creature without the flaws of thought. As time went on, he attributed to this pure being all the qualities he believed to be noble.... Somewhere, thought Atticus, there must be a dog like this. Why? Because one of the qualities his ideal canine possessed was being. An 'ideal' dog that did not exist could not be truly ideal . . . . Atticus followed his feelings. He humbled himself before his pure dog. He found a place away from the den. It was on the other side of Grenadier Pond, among the tall grass and trees . . . . Every evening

at the same time: mice, pieces of bread, bits of hot dog, rats, birds, whatever he had saved from his share of the pack's food. And, speaking the forbidden language, every evening he asked for guidance from the one leader he was prepared to follow. (93)

Zeus hears Atticus's prayers and appears to him in his own image – a Neapolitan mastiff – in a dream, validating Atticus's newfound faith and granting him a single wish, redeemable only at the moment of his death. After a series of “tragedies . . . beset the pack” (97), including a trap of poisoned chicken that ultimately kills Atticus himself, Atticus finds himself in the all-too-human position of using his last breath to wish for divine vengeance: “With his last words, Atticus asked that the one responsible for his pack's demise be punished. Then, the dog died, ever-faithful, filled with the hope that his unseen enemy would suffer at the hands of his god” (98).

Atticus's unquiet death is juxtaposed against that of Prince, the final member of the pack still alive by the opening of the novel's concluding chapter. Like Atticus, Prince has embraced the inspiration that comes along with the use of human language, but he has devoted himself to poetry, not supplication of the gods. As the god of poetry, Apollo is particularly annoyed that he might lose the bet because of Prince and intervenes repeatedly during the dog's final years explicitly to try to make him suffer and die unhappily. However, even as Prince is being euthanized “on a metal table, too tired to object” (167), he recalls one of his poems and succumbs to death in a wave of unmistakable joy: “[I]t occurred to Prince that he had been given a great gift. More: it was a gift that could not be destroyed. Somewhere, within some other being, his beautiful language existed as a possibility, perhaps as a seed. It would flower again. He was certain of it and the certainty was wonderful. And so, against all expectations, Prince's spirits soared. In a word, he was happy as death came for him at last” (168). Hermes wins the bet and comes to realize that he profoundly empathizes with mortal creatures in a way that gives him both power over them and love for them; in one last “magnanimous” gesture, Hermes “reward[s] Prince for his artistry and his unwitting service” by reuniting him with Kim, the human who best understood him after his transformation, in a space that evokes both suburban Toronto and mythic Arcadia. The book's final line leaves no doubt about the scene's intent: “In his final moment on earth, Prince loved and knew that he was loved in return” (171).

Few of the scenes in *Fifteen Dogs* involving the divinities allude especially strongly to particular episodes from the *Homeric Hymns* or other Classical Greek texts;<sup>12</sup> as such, they do not establish the “continuous parallel between contemporaneity and

---

<sup>12</sup> In fact, the gods' initial wager and Apollo's increasingly cruel deprivation of Prince in the final chapter recalls the Biblical story of Job far more than any Greek intertext.

antiquity” that T.S. Eliot called “the mythical method” (177). Neither Atticus’s spiritual awakening nor his form of worship and communion with Zeus is inherently “Greek,” and Prince’s verses echo Wordsworth and Yeats far more than Homer or Hesiod. Their linguistic and behavioral innovations bespeak to the dogs’ struggles at coming to terms with the implications of their newly imposed human consciousness rather than adaptation to particular cultural practices. As with *Frenzy*, there is also nothing “obviously ‘black’” about *Fifteen Dogs*. The only character labeled as “black” in the book is a poodle named Majnoun and the few instances of what might resonate as racial discrimination among the dogs do not correlate closely with real-world anti-Black rhetoric.<sup>13</sup> Although the ethnicity of some of the ancillary human characters is implied by their names, such identifications do not seem to influence their interactions with the self-aware dogs in any ways. Despite this, Alexis has allowed that “there is a genuine racialized reading...of *Fifteen Dogs* that I wouldn’t argue against,” although he adds that he ultimately find it “impoverishing if that’s the sole focus of your reading of my work” (Patrick, “Staying”).

For me, the salient issue is not whether either author is capable of producing fiction derived from Classical Greek literature, as they clearly both are; nor is it whether there is a substantial readerly audience seeking out such fiction (on this score, one has doubts...). The question of “Why is he writing about Greek myth?” is instead turned back onto the reader who asks it in order to metafictionally interrogate the belief that an author’s identity should dictate the nature of their art. As Feith concludes, “contemporary experiments with intertextuality” like the three novels of “mythic metafiction” discussed here, “contradict [...] the notion that black literature should deal with the so-called ‘black experience’, and plead [...] for complete thematic and stylistic freedom on the part of the artist” (“Black” 117).

Alexis incorporates a brief episode into *Days by Moonlight* (2019) that demonstrates this reflexive process somewhat differently. The race of that novel’s protagonist, Alfred “Alfie” Homer, remains unstated for more than half the book, finally being specified when he arrives at a small Ontario town named Schomberg<sup>14</sup> that has a predominantly

---

<sup>13</sup> For example: “The white dogs with black spots were the worst. It wasn’t so much their aggression; other dogs were sometimes more aggressive. It was that they were – without question – the stupidest creatures on earth, and that was even if one included cats. It was useless to try reasoning with them, whatever language one chose. Worse, you could never tell when one of them would come at you. It was not in his nature to hate other dogs, but Benjy disliked Dalmatians the way some humans dislike men named Steve or Biff” (Alexis, *Fifteen* 98).

<sup>14</sup> There is a small town in southwestern Ontario (though not one with a predominantly Black population) with this name, which perhaps is also meant to evoke that of the New York Public Library’s Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, located in Harlem.



Black (and unsettlingly mute) population: “Being Black, I’m comforted by the thought of a town of Black people” (112). Upon arriving in another town named Barrow later in the book, Alfie recognizes it as the setting for a book named *Pastoral*, which also happens to be the title of the third book in Alexis’s quincunx. Alfie claims that he didn’t “remember much of the story” beyond it “being about women fighting over a man, and a priest struggling with himself” (189), a barebones but technically accurate description of Alexis’s real-life novel. Alfie’s recollection of it is only triggered when he notices a ditch filled with the same thistles that are “poignantly described in the novel” (190), a detail that speaks more to his botanical proclivities than to the novel’s central themes.

What initially registers as a playful postmodernist joke takes on a different quality, though, when Alfie meets a priest about whom he observes, “The most surprising thing about Father Thomas Penn – for me, at least – was his Blackness. His skin was darker than mine. But Mr. Stephens had introduced him as the model for Father Christopher Pennant, a character in *Pastoral*. I did not remember Father Pennant being Black, a detail that would have stuck in my mind” (208). Alfie likely does not “remember” Father Pennant’s race because it is never explicitly mentioned in *Pastoral* and does not seem salient to the plot; none of the characters comment on it – not even obliquely – and Pennant himself neither implies nor expresses any sense of being racialized. Alexis’s choice of language, though, suggests that Alfie – whose own sense of Blackness has been heightened during his strange week-long trip through rural Ontario – might be inclined to look for signs of racialization in a fictional character and, therefore, be “surprised” when that character’s “model” is “darker than [him].” Alexis here reminds the reader that Father Penn’s race is only one of myriad traits that might be fictionalized into Father Pennant’s character and if Alexis does not believe that it is germane to the story he intends to tell in *Pastoral*, it is no more necessary to specify than his eye-color or his collar-size. Moreover, Father Penn is himself a fictional character and thus has only the race that Alexis chooses to give him. A reader – whether Alfie or Rinaldo Walcott – may disagree, but Alexis seems to say that if Father Penn’s Blackness feels significant to them, that is a result of the perspective they bring with them to the book rather than his creation.<sup>15</sup>

---

<sup>15</sup> Alexis toys with potentially inflexible readers further by also mentioning a pair of dogs named Frick and Frack in *Days by Moonlight*. Two dogs with those names also appear in *Fifteen Dogs*, though in that novel they are Labrador retrievers, not pit bulls. Moreover, there is no sign that the dogs in *Days by Moonlight* have undergone divine transformation of any kind. Since both sets of dogs are entirely his invention, though, there is no inherent reason for continuity in their identities unless the reader expects it for their own reasons.

## Conclusion

Both Everett and Alexis employ Greek myths in ways that directly subvert the received presumptions that contemporary readers might make about the nature or significance of the characters – human, divine, canine, etc. – found in those stories; as Feith notes specifically about *For Her Dark Skin*, “Critical Signifyin(g) on the Classics may therefore amount to a mental deprogramming cure” (Feith, “Well-Tempered” 10). When Tiresias complains at the end of *Frenzy* that Dionysos has disappointed him, the god does not rebuke the blind sage for his hubris but merely walks off with a rueful, tired smile; one readily imagines Everett and Alexis feeling similarly inclined in response to insinuations about their obligation to satisfy readers’ expectations. Alexis’s bawdy gods understand barely more about either canine or human nature after their wager is concluded, although Hermes continues to find mortal creatures “fascinating, perhaps even at times worthy of the depths he allowed himself to feel for them.” Alexis concludes that it is “this ‘feeling’ whose nature surpasses language or human understanding that kept Hermes – that kept *all* the gods – from wiping mortals out” (170). Thematically, this subversion of divinely-imposed answers – the ultimate “master narratives” in a Greek mythical context – forces the reader instead to ponder grand-scale humanistic questions about mortality, truth, and virtue; after all, if Hermes himself cannot generate compelling answers, we must at least question our own human hermeneutics. At the very least, such a reconsideration of one’s own hermeneutics would also aid in “deprogramming” readerly presumptions arising from the dark skins in authorial photographs.

---

## Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

---

## References

- Alexis, Andre. "Borrowed Blackness." *This Magazine* 28.8 (May 1995): 14–20.
- . *Days by Moonlight*. Toronto: Coach House Books, 2019.
- . *Fifteen Dogs*. Toronto: Coach House Books, 2015.
- . "Of a Smallness in the Soul." *Canadian Notes and Queries* (2 Feb. 2016). Online. <http://notesandqueries.ca/essays/andre-alexis-of-a-smallness-in-the-soul/>.
- Baker, Houston A., Jr. *I Don't Hate the South: Reflections on Faulkner, Family, and the South*. New York: Oxford UP, 2007.
- Birat, Kathie. "Ordinary Voices: The Mocking of Myth in *For Her Dark Skin*." In *Reading Percival Everett: European Perspectives*, edited by Claude Julien and Anne-Laure Tissut. Tours: Presses universitaires François-Rabelais, 2007: 81–89. Online. <https://books.openedition.org/pufr/5461?lang=en>. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/books.pufr.5461>
- Chariandy, David. "The Fiction of Belonging: On Second-Generation Black Writing in Canada." *Callaloo* 30.3 (2007): 818–829. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/cal.2008.0022>
- Eliot, T. S. "Ulysses, Order, and Myth." In *Selected Prose of T. S. Eliot*. Ed. Frank Kermode. New York, Harvest Book, 1975: 175–78.
- Everett, Percival. "The Color of His Skin." Letter to the Editor. *New York Times Book Review* (6 Jun. 2004), 4.
- . *Erasure*. New York: Hyperion, 2001.
- . *For Her Dark Skin*. Seattle: Owl Creek Press, 1990.
- . *Frenzy*. St. Paul, MN: Graywolf, 1997.
- . *Percival Everett by Virgil Russell*. St. Paul, MN: Graywolf, 2013.
- . *The Trees*. St. Paul, MN: Graywolf, 2021.
- Feith, Michel. "Black Bacchus? Signifying on Classical Myth in Percival Everett's *Frenzy*." In *Reading Percival Everett: European Perspectives*, edited by Claude Julien and Anne-Laure Tissut. Tours: Presses universitaires François-Rabelais, 2007: 91–118. Online. <http://books.openedition.org/pufr/5462>. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/books.pufr.5462>
- . "The Well-Tempered Anachronism, Or The C(ourse) of Empire in Percival Everett's *For Her Dark Skin*." In *Percival Everett*, edited by Anne-Laure Tissut. *Lectures du Monde Anglophone* 1, 2015. Online. <http://eriac.univ-rouen.fr/the-well-tempered-anachronism-or-the-course-of-empire-in-percival-everetts-for-her-dark-skin/>
- Fraser, Scott. "The Complicated Place of André Alexis in Black CanLit," *Hamilton Review of Books*, 15 May 2020. Online. <http://hamiltonreviewofbooks.com/blog/2020/5/15/the-complicated-place-of-andr-alexis-in-black-canlit>.

Gorjup, Branko. "From Despair to Childhood. Branko Gorjup speaks with Andre Alexis." *Books in Canada* 27.3 (April 1998): 11–13.

Kincaid, James R. "An Interview with Percival Everett." *Callaloo* 28.2 (Spring 2005): 377–81. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/cal.2005.0051>

Manuel, Douglas. "When the Sh\*t Hits the Fan: A Conversation with Percival Everett." *The Rumpus*, 15 Apr. 2019. Online. <https://therumpus.net/2019/04/15/the-rumpus-interview-with-percival-everett/>.

Mills, Alice, Claude Julien, and Anne-Laure Tissut. "An Interview: May 3rd, 2005." Repr. in *Conversations with Percival Everett*, edited by Joe Weixlmann. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2013. 78–89. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt24hvhs.17>

Nurse, Donna Bailey. "Writing through Race: Black Writers on Being Edited, Published and Reviewed in Canada." *Quill & Quire* 66.5 (May 2000): 18–19.

Patrick, Ryan B. "Staying focused on craft is why André Alexis completed quincunx exploring faith, place, love, power, and hatred." *CBC* 16 Nov. 2021. Online. <https://www.cbc.ca/books/staying-focused-on-craft-is-why-andr%C3%A9-alexis-completed-quincunx-exploring-faith-place-love-power-and-hatred-1.6215403>.

Porter, Lavelle. "Percival Everett by Percival Everett." *New Inquiry*, 5 May 2015. Online. <http://thenewinquiry.com/essays/percival-everett-by-percival-everett/>.

Siemerling, Winfried. *The Black Atlantic Reconsidered: Black Canadian Writing, Cultural History, and The Presence of the Past*. Kingston and Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press, 2015. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780773581876>

Stewart, Anthony. *Approximate Gestures: Infinite Spaces in the Fiction of Percival Everett*. Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 2020.

---. "Setting One's House in Order: Theoretical Blackness in Percival Everett's Fiction." *Canadian Review of American Studies/Revue canadienne d'études américaines* 43.2 (2013): 217–224. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3138/cras.2013.013>

---. "Uncategorizable Is Still a Category: An Interview with Percival Everett." *Canadian Review of American Studies/Revue canadienne d'études américaines* 37.3 (2007): 293–324. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3138/cras.37.3.293>

Taylor, Justin. "The Art of Fiction No. 235: Percival Everett." *Paris Review* 59.221 (Summer 2017): 40–70.

Walcott, Rinaldo. *Black like Who?: Writing Black Canada*. Revised 2nd ed. Toronto: Insomniac Press, 2000.

Yeh, James. "An Interview with Percival Everett." *The Believer*, 1 Dec. 2021. Online. <https://www.thebeliever.net/interview-percival-everett-james-yeh/>.

