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Archive, Intertextuality and Genre in Percival Everett's *The Trees* (2021)

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This article reads Percival Everett's *The Trees* (2021) as a novel of racial terror that is both about the reading and interpreting of an archive of this violence and, in some senses, formally archival, too. Drawing on Theodore Martin's theory of the "drag of genre" and "drift of the contemporary," we consider the ways Everett's novel modulates through different generic modes while critiquing and disrupting the ideological currents that move within them and normalize violence via generic conventionality. In *The Trees*, an extensive set of allusions complement the inherent intertextuality of the crime and gothic genres to form an archive which is further constituted by a literal (fictional) archive at the heart of the novel. This archive, kept by an elderly root doctor, features "almost everything ever written about every lynching in these United States of America since 1913" (103). From this point we draw on Saidiya Hartman's and Toni Morrison's critiques of the archives of slavery and an American literary archive, respectively, locating Everett's project as a timely intervention that rightly positions state and state-sponsored terrorism at the heart of America's history.



One of the unrecognized threads running through Percival Everett's famously diverse oeuvre is his interest in terrorism and activities or actions labelled as such. Everett's vision of terrorism is complex and varied. Several of his protagonists have family histories in the Black Panthers, including hydrologist Robert Hawks in *Watershed* (1996), whose memories of his grandfather's activism coincide with his burgeoning involvement with the "American Indian Revolution," and a plot that culminates in a violent standoff with the FBI. Christian extremists assassinate Monk's sister in *Erasure* (2001) because of her work at an abortion clinic; neo-Nazis terrorize Highland, Wyoming in *Wounded* (2005), murdering a young gay man; and more recently, Bradley Sill in *Dr. No* (2022) is a self-described "Bond villain" who wants to "dismantle" America (58). Sill's defense to accusations of terrorism is the familiar phrase "one person's villain is another person's freedom fighter" (91). *The Trees* (2021) adds to this thread in its addressing of America's most egregious history of domestic terrorism, lynching. The novel explicitly identifies lynching as terrorism and it extends this definition to include police killings as a form of lynching, too (and thus as a form of state terrorism).

Though many commentators have rightly questioned the troubling ways the term "terrorism" has been stretched and misused, Everett's gestures are much needed, and we might understand his interest in terrorism – especially in *The Trees* – in relation to the fact that its place in US history has been under-represented. As Marita Sturken notes, "practices of racial terrorism, such as lynching, have evaded being labelled as such," despite the obvious ways such acts meet common definitions (17). This is unsurprising in this new era of book bans and conservative legislative rollbacks of anti-racist curricula across public education in America, in which unambiguous historical truths are suppressed for fear of exposing the brutal facts of the United States' formation. After all, to define lynching and other acts of state terror this way is, as Sturken argues, to "understand terrorism as an integral active force in the origins of the United States and its very social fabric" (18). This fabric includes, of course, the activism of Black Americans in the pursuit of democracy in a climate of racial terror. As Jesmyn Ward notes in her memoir, *Men We Reaped* (2013), "Black people in the South organized to vote under the shadow of terrorism" (250–51).

Importantly, *The Trees*' interest in racial terror manifests in its generic modulation from a crime narrative into sections that evoke the zombie tradition as well as Gothic horror. As the supernatural elements of the novel begin to displace its initial genre coding as a crime novel, other forms of "terror" come into view as an "undulating mass" of potentially "infected" marauders terrorize America (Everett, *The Trees* 238, 253).¹ Just as the detective elements of *The Trees* place it in intertextual conversation

¹ *The Trees* will be cited as *TT* in subsequent references.

with other iterations of that genre, this modulation into the zombie tradition works in similar ways, and in both cases the novel questions the roles genre storytelling plays in upholding white supremacy in America.

This is not to say Everett's engagement with genre is entirely critical of its capacity to support the normalization of racist violence. Indeed, as we will argue, even as *The Trees* demonstrates how generic conventionality can enable and perpetuate white supremacist logics, it also shows how genre frameworks can facilitate visions of resistance and transcendence. Moreover, to the extent that the novel treats generic conventionality as in some ways archival, this essay's understanding of how the novel facilitates these visions of resistance and transcendence is informed by both Saidiya Hartman's and Toni Morrison's critiques of the archives of slavery and an American literary archive, respectively. Among the things we suggest that the three texts have in common is a shared preoccupation with archives' capacities for erasing the humanity of Black subjects and the possibilities for escaping the oblivion of such erasure.

In this essay we read *The Trees* as a novel of racial terror and terrorism that is both about the reading and interpreting of an archive of this violence and, in some senses, formally archival, too; that is to say that it draws on an archive of violence constituted in part by genres such as crime fiction or the Gothic, to the extent that these help to map in popular imaginings the normalization of state terror. This is not to say it is an instance of maximalism or encyclopaedic fiction but that its use of the inherent intertextuality of genre, alongside an extensive pattern of allusion, forms a kind of archive. This archive is constituted, too, by a literal (fictional) archive presented in the novel of "almost everything ever written about every lynching in these United States of America since 1913" (*TT* 103), the birth year of the 105-year-old archive keeper, Mama Z. This includes a list or index of victims that appears in the text, taking up nearly ten full pages. This depiction of an archive of lynching is then structurally augmented by the novel's unique intertextual moves. From a diegetic performance of "Strange Fruit" to echoes of Claudia Rankine's *Citizen* (2013), *The Trees* combines idiosyncratic patterns of allusion and citation with what Theodore Martin has described as the "drag and drift" of genre. At the centre of Martin's theorization in *Contemporary Drift: Genre, Historicism, and the Problem of the Present* is a notion of the "drag" of genre through history, and the "drift" of "the contemporary" (7). For Martin, genre

describes how aesthetic forms move cumulatively through history. The accretive history of genre is a measure of both change and continuity, diachrony and synchrony, pastness and presentness. [...] Genres lead distinctly double lives, with one foot in the past and the other in the present; they contain the entire abridged history of an aesthetic form while also staking a claim to the form's contemporary relevance. (6)

Martin's theorization of genre in twenty-first century writings sheds light on how *The Trees* is both critical of generic conventionality and reliant on genre for its political critique. Moreover, in a novel that modulates through different genre modes, this "drag and drift" is multivalent and aggregative. This said, we want to acknowledge here that Everett has repeatedly questioned the ways in which scholars and critics have read his work as genre fiction. When Yogita Goyal rightly noted, in an interview for the *Los Angeles Review of Books*, that Everett has "played a lot with genre," his response was sharp: "*God's Country* is my only Western. *Assumption*, *Wounded* and *Watershed* are novels that just happened to be set in the West. I hate that the presence of Native people, mountains, or even a horse causes people to call a work a western." Ultimately, Everett's real aversion is not to genre but to formulaic storytelling: "I hate any work that is formulaic, so 'genre' fiction is something I do not read. Of course, I find a lot of 'literary' work formulaic as well" (Goyal).

While the novels Everett names are certainly not formulaic, they do engage with genre tropes and codes, often through acts of reversal or inversion. *Assumption* (2011), for instance, rejects the assumptions of the procedural drama that truth is discoverable and justice possible, even as it clearly operates within this genre. *Wounded*, as Michael Feith argues, makes its meanings in an "intertextual relation with the Western genre" in which the "land is always apprehended through the cultural filter of this archetypal narrative form" (89). Indeed, as Feith shows, in *Wounded* the "pattern of the original is inverted" as the novel depicts a "group of peaceful black and Native American ranchers, and their gay friends under attack by a savage bunch of white supremacists" (89).

This is not to say that Everett's writing straightforwardly exemplifies the so-called "genre turn," which, as Jeremy Rosen notes, is usually understood as a "continuation of a postmodernist project that mixes high and low forms" that actually remains invested in "high cultural prestige" (n.p.). However, Everett's innovations in genre generally reinforce Andrew Hoberek's argument that "the resources of genre give twenty-first-century fiction a new capacity for understanding the world outside the constraints of either postmodernism or realism," and that "the genre turn opens up the possibility of a fiction capable of broadcasting visions of life not as it is, but as it might be" (73). While Everett "fervently refutes the validity of any formulaic presumptions about the meanings of his writing, whether they arise from his identity, his past works, academic schools of thought, or conventions related to literary genre" (Maus 4), he is certainly interested in the effects of genre conventionality.

In our reading of *The Trees*, we honour Everett's career-long project of challenging assumptions, stereotypes, and formulas. However, just as we celebrate the imagination, craft, and originality of this novel, we focus precisely on how it simultaneously draws

on and critiques the genre traditions it works within. We also note that in recent years – with *So Much Blue* (2017), *Telephone* (2020), *The Trees* and *Dr No* (2022), Everett works between different genre modes within single novels, allowing their different generic associations to come together and aggregate. *So Much Blue* features three narrative strands in three discrete genres, thematically connected by a set of secrets, and *Telephone* moves from a campus novel framework to a Trump-era borderland thriller, connected by themes of misogyny and a plot about femicide. *The Trees*, as noted, begins as a kind of buddy-cop crime story before modulating through sections in the zombie and Gothic traditions. Our reading considers the way it draws on the “abridged histories” of these genres in depicting and creating an archive of lynching.

A final theoretical touchstone for our essay is Saidiya Hartman’s vision of the archive as outlined particularly in her essay “Venus in Two Acts” (2008), which seeks to do what the archivist Damon Thruff does in *The Trees*: “liberate” names and people from the “obscene descriptions that first introduced them to us” (Hartman 6). Indeed, in this unique novel, Everett uses the inherent intertextuality of genre frames to address the same questions Hartman does: “is it possible to exceed or negotiate the constitutive limits of the archive?” (11). Ultimately, in some fundamental ways, *The Trees* follows the calls made by Hartman in “A Venus in Two Acts” and fashions “a narrative, which is based upon archival research... a critical reading of the archive that mimes the figurative dimensions of history... to tell an impossible story and to amplify the impossibility of its telling” (Hartman 11).

A third of the way through *The Trees*, there is an exchange between two Special Detectives of the MBI (Mississippi Bureau of Investigation) and Mama Z, archivist of lynching and root doctor or self-described witch. Their discussion addresses questions about policing and terrorism in the American past and present that are centrally important here. *The Trees* is set in 2018, and the two Special Detectives, Jim Davis and Ed Morgan, both Black officers who are uncomfortable with the structures of law enforcement in which they work, are investigating two unsettling double-murders in Money, Mississippi. Two of the murdered men are Wheat Bryant and Junior Junior Milam, fictionalized sons of Roy Bryant and JW Milam, the men who lynched Emmett Till in 1955, a brutal event now widely understood as a key flashpoint that helped ignite the American Civil Rights movement. But at each crime scene there is also an unidentified dead Black man whose mutilated body resembles Till’s. Adding to the strangeness and spectacle of the murder scenes, and foreshadowing the Gothic turn the novel eventually takes, the dead Black men are clutching the torn-off testicles of the white men. Despite the theatricality of

this gruesome display, somehow the corpses disappear or are lost by the bumbling local police. Unable to make sense of these events, the Special Detectives seek out Mama Z for her deep historical knowledge and understanding of the town and community.

There are two especially noteworthy moments in their initial conversation. First, Mama Z makes a remark that invites a re-reading of the novel's title, which initially appears to be a straightforward reference to the trees that at least 4,743 lynching victims were hung from before 1968. When it is put to her that these recent murders are crimes of revenge that seem to have a supernatural element, she states:

If the spirits are out for revenge, there's going to be a lot more killing around here. Those spirits are going to have a field day around here. Every White person in this county, if they didn't lynch somebody themselves, then somebody in their family tree did. (TT 102)

Mama Z's evocation of the white supremacist "family tree" offers another vector of meaning to the title, as a pointed reminder that many Americans are intimately connected to this form of terrorism and that white supremacy is historically entrenched and culpable. Mama Z's comment also aligns with the formal features of the novel, as it begins to structurally "branch out" at this moment.

We will return to its narrative shape shortly, but thematically, this notion of a "family tree" of white supremacist violence recalls the final lines of Claude McKay's 1917 poem "The Lynching," which emphasizes the intergenerational and participatory nature of these heinous acts: "And little lads, lynchers that were to be, / Danced round the dreadful thing in fiendish glee" (50). McKay conveys here what other writers and critics have highlighted: lynchings in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were community events documented in the many photographs taken by attendees. In *Ordinary Notes*, Christina Sharpe reflects on how some of these photographs that document lynchings as community events, which can now be viewed in lynching memorials, were loaned from private collections, where "the collectors stipulate that their names not be revealed. That their connection to these items remain submerged" (62). Sharpe counters this attempt to remain hidden or deny what we might think of in relation to Everett's novel as a "family tree" of racial terror: "this precaution is beside the point" because "these items are, of course, intimately and completely connected to them" (Sharpe 62). Moreover, "these items and the violence they index and hold are the white person's constitutive outside" (62). Indeed, Sharpe continues: "That this particular spectacular quotidian violence remains largely external to white families in North America is part of what constitutes them as white" (62). That is, whiteness

becomes contingent on keeping any connection to this ugly history of terrorism hidden. Numerous studies have traced the entrenchment of white supremacy in America and the structural connections between the Ku Klux Klan and the US government, but as Sturken and Sharpe suggest, the public discourse of lynching usually stops short of understanding it as a kind state-sponsored terrorism that implicates a significant portion of the public and, moreover, is constitutive of white identity itself. These two things – state-sponsored terrorism and the complicity of the white public – is a big part of what *The Trees*' exploration of the history of lynching in the US, via Mama Z's recording of the names of victims, works to accomplish.

The second point that Mama Z makes to the two Special Detectives relates to this argument, and crucially she asserts to them that there is a contemporary manifestation of lynching in America: "You should know I consider police shootings to be lynchings. No offense" (*TT* 103). This idea that police brutality is a form of terrorism – and specifically a form of lynching – is not an original one. In its article on the history of lynching in America, the NAACP home page quotes its president, Derrick Johnson, who characterizes the murder of George Floyd in these terms, describing "that same public spectacle: someone in broad daylight with onlookers around, being killed at the hands of a law enforcement officer who has just complete disregard for human life and felt he was above the law." But Mama Z is uniquely able to make this connection between a deeper history of lynching and contemporary state violence, conceived of here as state terrorism. We learn that her real name is Adelaide Lynch, that she was born in 1913 shortly after her father was lynched, and that she has built an archive of "almost everything ever written about every lynching in these United States of America since 1913" (*TT* 103). The archive fills an entire room in her house, and a later chapter of the novel simply lists each name, including victims of police brutality – names that also appear in the background of the book's US cover, barely visible in small print, in light blue on a dark-blue backdrop.

The first of these two points – about the "family tree" of domestic terrorism in America – is reinforced in the very next chapter, where police-connected Klan activity is explicitly described as terrorism. After a cross-burning viewed by the local Sheriff, Red Jetty, the omniscient narrator observes that "not a single masked member of the terrorist exercise was unknown to anyone in the town. It was a long-running joke in Money, Mississippi, that the way to discover who belonged to the Klan was to wait at Russell's Dry Cleaning and Laundry" (*TT* 107). This is one of several instances in the novel where the shocking nature of Klan violence is juxtaposed with the banal and foreshadows later discussions of how, despite the spectacle of lynching, these events have often been erased from history.

The Trees begins to explore questions about the links between terrorism and policing through such observations, and diegetically through Mama Z, but also at the level of form. Its generic codings begin with a familiar kind of redneck satire before it settles into the crime genre, with a particular inflection of the popular buddy-cop film subgenre. It retains a broad sense of cohesion in this mode through its short chapters, brisk pace, and emphasis on detection and the unravelling of a mystery before ultimately incorporating elements of the zombie and Gothic traditions—and it is in this mode, mostly, that it effects its vision of resistance and generic transcendence. Thus, the novel’s generic modulations give it a sense of propulsion and cohesion that is particularly important given the gravity of its subject and the scope of the narrative, which grows precipitously until the two MBI agents are only barely focalising protagonists. Eventually, it includes 65 characters appearing in 108 chapters that sometimes are only one or two paragraphs long. To extend the titular tree metaphor, the novel discursively traces the branches and offshoots – as well as the roots – of the initial murders and ultimately the growth of an uprising. In one sense, it narrows down to the generic concerns of discovery, cause and effect, and in another it expands outward in ways that suggest connection and implication and invite us to question the ideological currents of genre. In his *New Yorker* review, Julian Lucas understands this oppositional movement as creating a “chasm” that “opens up between form and content” between the “open-and-shut-conventions of the crime novel and the immensity of Everett’s subject.” Though there is clearly tension between form and content, just as there is tension between the novel’s overt humour and its depictions of atrocities, genre here is multivalent. *The Trees* reminds us that the crime genre has often reinforced institutional white supremacy by valorising law enforcement via ideological notions of “law and order,” while also using generic frameworks to explore connections between policing and terrorism. In this sense the novel scrutinizes the historical ideological underpinnings of genre, while also relying on genre for its social and historical critiques.

Among the ways it accomplishes this is through the character Professor Damon Thruff, who is invited by his college friend Gertrude aka Dixie – one of Mama Z’s co-conspirators – to come to Money in order to interpret the lynching archive. We learn, in a typically pointed instance of academic satire recalling elements of *Erasure* (2001), *I am Not Sidney Poitier* (2009), *American Desert* (2006), and *Telephone* (2020), that Thruff has a “PhD in molecular biology from Harvard, a PhD in psychobiology from Yale, and a PhD in Eastern Philosophy from Columbia,” has published three books with Cambridge UP and two books with Harvard UP, and is struggling after a failed tenure bid at the University of Chicago where he is getting a second chance, labelled an “affirmative reconsideration” (TT 111). Gertrude enlists Thruff as an expert who might

write about the archive and the crimes of revenge being carried out. Thruff is awed by power of the archive:

the crime, the practice, the religion of it, was becoming more pernicious as he realized that the similarity of their deaths had caused these men and women to be at once erased and coalesced like one piece, like one body. They were all number and no number at all, many and one, like one body. (*TT* 171)

In Thruff's observations regarding the repetitive similarity of these deaths and their capacity to homogenize and ironically erase victims, one might notice echoes of Hartman's question about how to register the scale of such horrific repetitiveness in the archive without reinscribing dehumanizing homogeneity. Hartman asks: "how does one recuperate lives entangled with and impossible to differentiate from the terrible utterances that condemned them to death, the account books that identified them as units of value, the invoices that claimed them as property, and the banal chronicles that stripped them of human features?" (3). Here, some similarities between Hartmann's approach to the account books and ledgers detailing the lives and values of enslaved people in terms of property, and Thruff's experiences with Mama Z's archive, come into view. Thruff's attempt to interpret this archive is also an attempt at recuperating and differentiating the lives lost in terrible circumstances of systematized state-sanctioned violence. This sentiment courses through the novel and again finds articulation through Gertrude at a later stage: "when the killing is slow and spread over a hundred years, no one notices. Where there are no mass graves, no one notices. American outrage is always for show" (*TT* 291).

In a metafictional move that evokes Claudia Rankine's famous passage in *Citizen: An American Lyric* (2014) where the names of victims of police shootings are listed on a page as the typeface slowly fades to white, *The Trees* also contains a chapter that simply lists the names of lynching victims. The visualization in both lists shows how erasure can happen through the ways the sheer number of names make individual ones fade from view. In *The Trees*, this list comprises ten pages, and it replicates a list made by Thruff in pencil on yellow legal pad. He tells Mama Z that "[w]hen I write the names they become real, not just statistics... it's almost like they get a few more seconds here. Do you know what I mean? I would never be able to make up this many names. The names have to be real. Don't they?" (*TT* 190).

But if *The Trees* echoes *Citizen* in emphasizing how extreme and brutal violence can be erased through repetition, it also adds another dimension as Thruff plans to do his own erasing, too, only as an act of liberation. Thruff tells Mama Z, finally, that "[w]hen

I'm done, I'm going to erase every name, set them free" (*TT* 190). In the copying the archive of death, then, we can imagine how, in Hartman's sense, one might "rewrite the chronicle of a death foretold and anticipated, as a collective biography of dead subjects, as a counter-history of the human" and in the erasing as "the practice of freedom" (3). This evocative sentiment relates to both the disappearances of the bodies that resemble Till's at the early crime scenes and the wave of revolutionary counterviolence that begins to rapidly expand at this point in the novel – as if Thruff has released vengeful ghosts on the white supremacist nation. This possibility was, of course, neatly foreshadowed in Mama Z's initial conversation with the two Special Detectives, in which she muses: "If the spirits are out for revenge, there's going to be a lot more killing around here" (*TT* 102).

We have suggested that the way *The Trees* "branches out" to reveal a kind of American "family tree" of white supremacy echoes the emphasis that Claude McKay's famous poem "The Lynching" places on the intergenerational dimensions of white supremacist terrorism in America through its imagery of families and communities gleefully participating in the gruesome spectacle. Yet there is another important link between Everett's novel and McKay's poetry. As Jericho Brown notes in his introduction to the 2022 Faber edition of *Harlem Shadows*, McKay "centred his literary studies on the work of British writers," and "his first poetic influences most likely spanned Shakespeare to John Keats and all the other white men in between" (x). This is evident in the formal choices that are so conspicuous in McKay's poetry, notably the use of traditional lyric forms like the sonnet, which was, for McKay and others, "the mark of true achievement for any poet" (Brown x). However, McKay's sonnets – including "The Lynching" – are not the love poems the form was traditionally used for, and in fact he uses the sonnet to "inscribe the fact of his own Blackness and the existence of real-life, feeling, thinking, and reading Black people, thereby interrogating the value of the form itself" (Brown x). McKay's subversive use of traditional poetic forms, partly to imbue Black people with the prestige and value attached to those forms, and partly to interrogate the ideological attachments of these forms, is not unlike what Everett is doing with genre and intertextuality in *The Trees*: where we see both a revelry in the playing with such pervasive and established forms and a desire to expose their ideological dimensions. Even as Everett speaks strongly about work that is "formulaic" in the way genre fiction is, it is not so much that this critique is a dismissal, but rather that the formulaic is exploited in his work via genre. We can understand *The Trees*, then, as exploiting the familiarity of genre in a manner that functions to jolt readers into

thinking about the political implication of conventionality in genres such as detective fiction or the Gothic. That is, to return to the foregoing, the novel asks its readers in various ways to become more attuned to the erasing capacity of repetitiveness and familiarity. *The Trees* blends features from two of the most conventional genres in the American literary landscape reflecting on one hand the conventionality of racialized terror in policing in the United States, and on the other hand how this conventionality is a repressed though nonetheless vitally functional part of a white supremacy that haunts the American imaginary.

Clear echoes of the countless buddy-cop movies (one of the most potent forms of “copaganda”), exemplified by *48 Hours* (1982), *Lethal Weapon* (1987), *Tango and Cash* (1989) or *Bad Boys* (1995), emerge via the playful banter between Jim and Ed. These funny and likeable characters in many ways model the strategies of characterization—central to the genre—that invite sympathy and narrative alignment with the institutions of policing and the project of preserving law and order. This form of generic conventionality is pervasive in various forms of crime fictions. As John Scaggs notes, “the police procedural” is a “powerful weapon of reassurance in the arsenal of the dominant social order” (98). Another dimension of US crime narrative, as Maureen T. Reddy has shown, is to reinforce white supremacism and a normative whiteness. In *Traces, Codes and Clues: Reading Race in American Crime Fiction* (2003), Reddy argues that a long history of crime narrative across a range of subgenres reinforces a logic that “the central white/male heterosexual consciousness is sacred, unchallengeable,” emphasizing the “great degree to which the fiction is about that consciousness” (27). Even after discussing a set of Black-authored hard-boiled fictions that are critical of systemic racism, Reddy remains doubtful about whether US crime fiction will be “able finally to break with its continuing thematization of whiteness as the core American value” (139).

In *The Trees*, while Jim and Ed’s comic interactions evoke just the kinds of popular crime narrative that reinforce these logics, they also remind us of a set of more poignant and critical crime genre texts. An obvious example is *In the Heat of the Night* (1967), in which Sidney Poitier plays Virgil Tibbs, a Black detective from Philadelphia working with a reluctant white chief of police in a small Mississippi town on a murder investigation. Several of the exchanges between Jim, Ed, and the KKK-affiliated local Sheriff, Red Jetty, evoke this film. Moreover, Jim and Ed’s repeatedly stated regrets at their own profession echo some of Chester Himes’s Black detectives or Walter Mosely’s Easy Rawlins. For instance, when Jim and Ed first meet Dixie, the following exchange occurs:

“I hate to tell you, but we’re cops,” Jim said.

“Why do you hate to tell me?”

Jim sipped some coffee and put down his mug. “Because people either love cops or hate them. It’s been my experience that most interesting people hate them. Hell, I’m a cop and I hate them.”

“Me too,” Ed said. “I especially hate him. Hate myself, too, on occasion.” (*TT* 40)

Such moments ensure that Everett’s use of this genre is multi-directional as it offers a sustained critique of the way genre reinforces policing as terror, while also simultaneously using genre to explore connections between policing and terror and to manage or contain an unmanageable tale. In addition to evoking a tradition of critical Black detective fiction, *The Trees* also alludes to Spike Lee’s *Blackkklansman* (2017), which like Everett’s novel features a cameo conclusion narrated by Donald Trump; the previously mentioned poem by Claude McKay; and Claudia Rankine’s seismic 2013 collection, *Citizen*. Perhaps the most potent of this set of allusions is the diegetic performance of “Strange Fruit” at the Bluegum restaurant in front of Jim and Ed. The lyrics to Abel Meeropol’s song, made famous by Billie Holiday, are printed in full, followed by a poignant description of the conclusion of the performance: “[t]he woman did not hold that final note, that final crop, but let it fall as if spoken. Even the reverb offered no echo. Yet the word hung there in the air of the room” (*TT* 223). Just as the final notes and lines of this famous anti-lynching ballad linger in the room, so does the song’s imagery of bodies hanging from poplar trees reverberate across the novel. But if this side of the novel’s intertextual spectrum is explicitly anti-lynching, then it remains in tension with the drive of the crime/detective genre to restore white supremacist law and order.

Toni Morrison’s ideas about the Africanist presence in American literature are central to our understanding of how the novel understands resistance. To be clear, as Morrison suggests, this phrase does not indicate the larger body of knowledge of African and people of African descent, their diversity or complexity. Rather, the term *Africanist* as Morrison uses it in *Playing in the Dark* refers to “denotative and connotative blackness that African peoples *have come to signify*, as well as a range of views, assumptions, readings, that accompany Eurocentric learning about these people” (23, our emphasis). She describes Africanism as a “disabling virus within literary discourse” that “has become, in the Eurocentric tradition that American education favours, both a way of talking about and a way of policing matters of class, sexual license, and repression, formations and exercises of power, and meditations on ethics and accountability” (23).

Of course, the idea of an invented Africa is neither new nor unique to the United States; what makes it exceptional among European and Eurocentric cultures are the ways in which “the process of organizing American coherence *through* a distancing Africanism became the operative mode of a new cultural hegemony” (24, our emphasis).

Morrison reflects on “the validity and vulnerability of a certain set of assumptions conventionally accepted among literary historians and critics and circulated as ‘knowledge,’” or more precisely that American literature, and indeed notions of Americanness remain uninfluenced and unimpacted by the presence of people who are African and of African descent in the United States (21). For her, American literature’s notions of nationalism rely on the disavowal of Blackness as among its definitive features. She argues that “this knowledge holds that traditional canonical American literature is free of, uninformed, and unshaped by the four-hundred-year presence of, first Africans and then African Americans in the United States” (20). Instead, this knowledge about the American literary canon

assumes that this presence – which shaped the body politic, the Constitution, and the entire history of the culture – has had no significant place or consequence in the origin and development of that culture’s literature. Moreover, such knowledge assumes that the characteristics of our national literature emanates from a particular ‘Americanness’ that is separate from and unaccountable to this presence. (20)

Even as Morrison focuses only on literature written by white authors—Willa Cather, Edgar Allan Poe and Ernest Hemingway—in order to demonstrate how an Africanist presence is inextricable from how these authors think about whiteness and Americanness, her observations about its disavowal are at the core of much of African American literature and its critiques of white supremacy.

Everett’s interests in genre follow her concerns surrounding the literary, generic conventionality, and the capacity of conventionality in literature to generate exclusionary knowledges that (sometimes unconsciously) underpin white supremacist logics. Here, Morrison’s Africanist presence indexes what is unconscious in the American literary imagination, and in turn is intertwined with how *The Trees* thinks about and uses genre. That is, just as Everett’s use of the crime narrative frame is both a subject of critique and a device that facilitates critique, his engagement with multiple genres also has a fundamentally critical function. These unsettling shifts invite reflection on the way the different genres are connected to larger racial politics. Put another way, before we get comfortable in the highly ideological confines of the crime narrative, Everett modulates to the Gothic terms that confound those ideological currents through the introduction

of the uncanny, the repressed, and the unconscious. Thus, the novel repeatedly depicts a reversal of the typical arrangement of lynching. Instead of Black bodies being bound in barbed wire, castrated, and lynched by white mobs, the novel reverses a horrifically conventional violent tableau to murdered white men whose castrated genitals are clutched in the hands of the corpse of Black – and later Asian – men. And of course, what better way to reveal the unconscious haunting of an Africanist presence in the reader's imagination than by the invocation of violence of lynching whose civil rights iterations coalesce around the now iconic imagery of Emmett Till's murder? Indeed, Till's case is as famous as it is because of the visual exposure of the violence done to the victim, making visible and conscious what could be repressed in discourse.

The narrative horrifically and satirically encourages its characters and readers to assume that the corpse of the Black man that attends each murder scene, with testicles clutched in its palm, is Emmett Till's body, having returned to exact revenge on the families of his murderers. Towards the middle of the novel, though, this is how the detectives crack the case of whether it is or isn't Emmett Till:

“So, it's not the body of Emmett Till?” Ed asked?

They all looked at him.

“Somebody had to ask,” he said.

It's not Emmett Till,” Quip said. (*TT* 124)

In this way the narrative invests other conventionalities within the American literary and cultural landscape, like that of policing, with the aesthetic of terror that is characteristic of the Gothic. Thus the terror articulated in the novel is also about how, through its treatment of the Africanist presence, the American (literary) imagination is haunted in Gothic terms. In *The Trees*, this haunting of the imagination is made most apparent in the repeated instances of murdered white men with severed genitals in the hands of the corpses of men of color. But what is the function of these reversals within the context of our discussion so far? For us, this is best understood through the priorities of the Gothic.

For Allan Lloyd Smith, the Gothic ‘is about the return of the past, of the repressed and denied, the buried secret that subverts and corrodes the present, whatever the culture does not want to know or admit, will not or dare not tell itself’ (1). Grotesqueness, like the uncanny, unconscious, and the repressed, is central to Everett's engagement with Gothic tropes, particularly through the repeated appearance of dead bodies of the violently murdered, in ways meant to be reminiscent of previous grotesque and violent lynchings. Here, by attending to grotesqueness, we consider how in the repeated

appearance of the corpses of Black men – avatars of sorts for Emmett Till and indeed perhaps for every lynched man – is grotesque in the sense that Aaliyah Abdur-Rahman uses the term.

We might think about the use of the grotesque in *The Trees* along lines that are like what Abdur-Rahman describes as black grotesquerie. According to her, “rather than merely signifying excess, dread, or decay, black grotesquerie delineates an aesthetic practice of contortion, exaggeration, substitution, inversion, corruption” (683). In this way, the “conception of this aesthetic mode explores disturbed *form* more than it does disturbing content” (683). To the extent that Mama Z’s crew is orchestrating scenes that are deliberately reminiscent of Emmett Till’s now iconic demise, the decision to put the murdered white men’s testicles in the hands of the Black men’s corpses effects a disturbing reversal in the imaginative terrain of values served by the castration of Black men as a part of lynchings. Central to Abdur-Rahman’s black grotesquerie is the Bakhtinian notion of the “degradation of form” as not only a destructive force but also one of regeneration. Where degradation is typically associated with negative terms such as humiliation, monstrosity, and ugliness, Bakhtin suggests a paradoxical generative component: “to degrade” form “is to bury, to sow, and to kill simultaneously in order to bring forth something better ... [Degradation] has not only a destructive, negative aspect, but also a regenerating one” (21). As a central principle of Abdur-Rahman’s “black grotesquerie,” however, this regeneration crucially offers neither remediation nor recovery but rather the creation of texts that might demonstrate how narrative fails “those whose terms of existence are tethered to structural loss — to forms of civil and social death and to the persistent likelihood of their own untimely demise” (Abdur-Rahman 688). Thus, “the grotesque is a *process* of revaluing and repositioning the debased elements of bodily, structural, conceptual, and worldly configurations. The black grotesque discomforts the world, disparaging and reforming the official order of things” (684). In this way, these murders and the repeated set pieces function to degrade longstanding narratives of how lynchings typically occur. Moreover, in the novel, the repositioning of debased elements via corporeal bodes, is literal and as such, the murders are described by Gertrude as “retributive justice” (*TT* 236).

The Trees repeatedly invokes the death of Emmett Till through the corpse of a “small Black man” (*TT* 13), and this positions the novel as concerned with the history of lynching in the United States and all that remains repressed and unresolved from this terror that continues to erupt in the present. Crucially, like the Africanist presence, the unresolved and repressed implications of participating in terror exists in the imagination of white characters and are exploited in the murderer’s choices around how the murders are staged. In the first pages of the novel it is as though Granny C

conjures or even summons the first death through her regret over her role in the lynching of Emmett Till, with the following lengthy exchange. When her daughter-in-law Charlene asks her “what was you thinking on, Granny C?” she responds, “About something I wished I hadn’t done. About the lie I told all them years back on that nigger boy” (*TT* 9). It’s something she still thinks about, given this response from Charlene: “We on that again” (*TT* 9). But Granny C insists, “I wronged that little pickaninny. Like it say in the good book, what goes around comes around” (*TT* 9). Granny C goes on to articulate her complicity: “I didn’t say he said something to me, but Bob and J. W., they insisted he did, and so I went along with it. I wish to Jesus I hadn’t. J. W. hated him some niggers” (*TT* 10). Attempting to assuage her guilt, Charlene says, “well, it’s done and past history now, Granny C. So you just relax. Ain’t nothing can change what happened. You can’t bring that boy back” (*TT* 10). But what if you could? Mama Z, both through her folders that name those who were lynched and her plan to exact revenge on those responsible for Emmett Till’s death, orchestrates grotesque actions that bring Till back in the imagination of characters and readers. As the novel also suggests, however, Granny C’s complicity in Emmett Till’s death is never far from her imagination.

In *The Trees*, we can see how an Africanist presence haunts and shapes a white imagination. Everett uses the Gothic as an anti-genre of sorts in a manner that is in keeping with how Xavier Aldana Reyes describes the Gothic as functioning in the contemporary context. The Gothic, Reyes suggests, “is less a genre than a vestigial type of writing that resuscitates older horrors and formulas and filters them through the echo chambers of a modern pre-occupation with the social value of transgressive literature.” It is the incorporation of Gothic tropes such as the uncanny, the repressed, and the unconscious, that expands the novel’s archive and propels its critique of how grotesque violence against people of colour is a standardized feature of Americanness. As Thomas Bjerre suggests, grotesqueness in Gothic literature “cuts through the veil of civility, through decorum and oppressive normative fabrication to expose a harsh, confusing reality of contradictions, violence, and aberrations” (5). Also crucial to Everett’s engagement with the Gothic is the moveability of the form, that it isn’t bound to the South, and the horrors it enshrines “branch out” as far West as California. Thus, the return of the repressed through the repeated murders attended by ghostly Black corpses, the use of the grotesque in their return, and the geographical expansion of the Gothic’s purview with the US combine to lend aesthetic coherence to the novel’s deployment of these elements in ways that tell the story of lynching as one that belongs to the entire United States, is constitutive of its national identity, and as such is maintained by its terroristic culture of policing.

Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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