

VOLUME XXIV, NUMBER 2, SPRING 2024

# CLAREMONT

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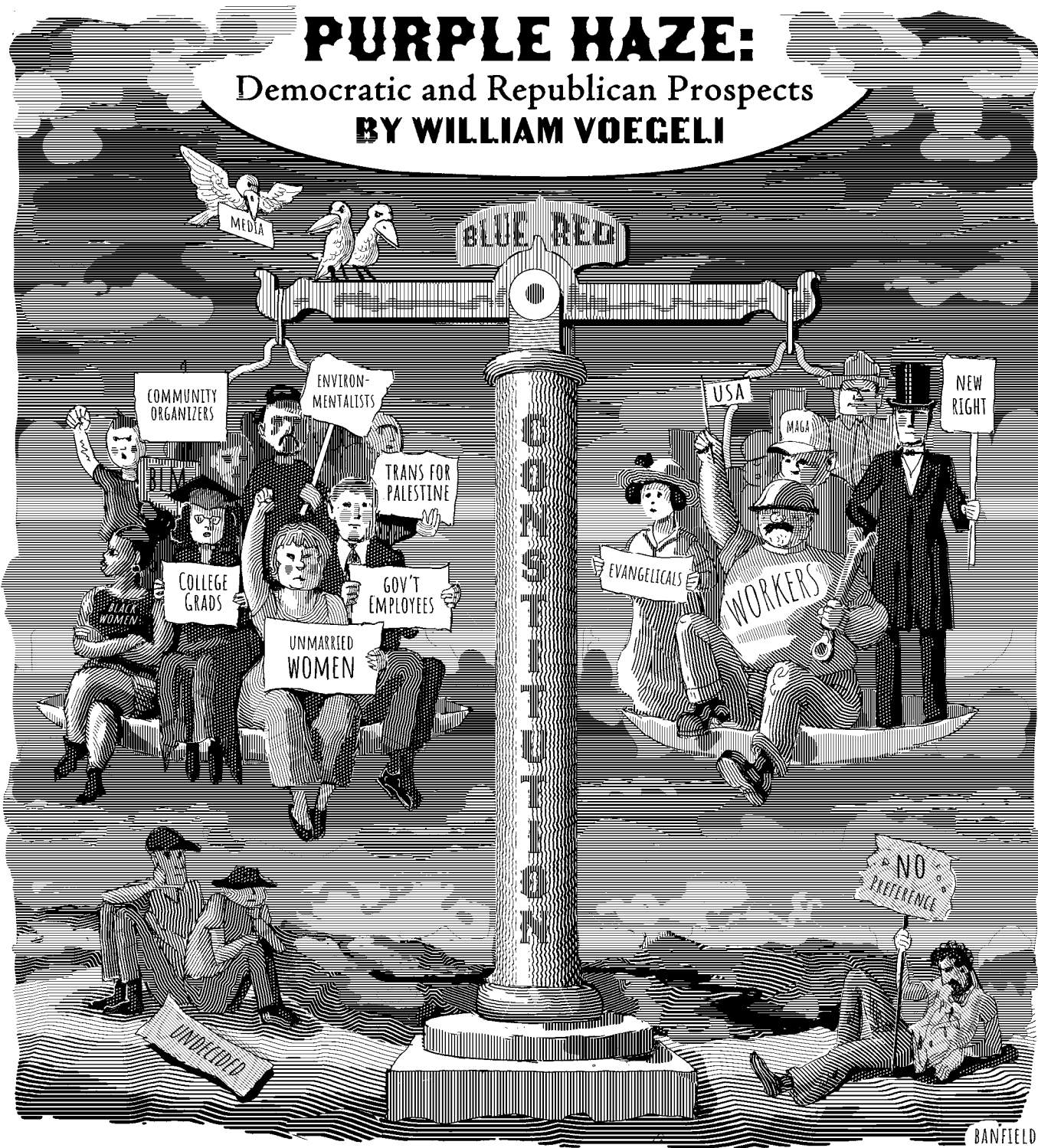
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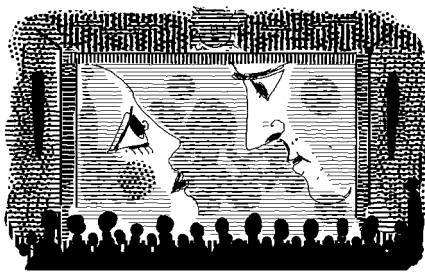
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## SHADOW PLAY

by Martha Bayles



## Monk's Tale

**A**MERICAN FICTION, STARRING JEFFREY Wright and written and directed by Cord Jefferson, is based on a 2001 book called *Erasure*, by the California author Percival Everett. Like many people, I got a kick out of the film's opening sequence, which aims a rare satirical barb at the current academic obsession with silencing anyone—faculty, speaker, student—who in the interest of teaching and learning sets off one of many speech-related tripwires on campus.

The sequence starts with Wright as a dour literature professor asking his class, "Who wants to start?" A hand shoots up, and his expression brightens: "Yes, Brittany, kick it off!" But Brittany (played by Skyler Wright) does not kick it off. "I don't have a thought on the reading," she says, "I just think that that word on the board is wrong." The professor turns to the board, upon which he has just written the name "Flannery O'Connor" and the title of her 1955 short story "The Artificial N-gger." Feigning surprise, he says, "Well, I think it still has two G's in it. Last I checked."

This gets a laugh, though not from Brittany. Trying to neutralize her, the professor adopts a patient tone: "This is a class on the literature of the American South," he explains, and "coarse language" is part of "the context." When Brittany repeats, "I just find that word really offensive," his patience runs out. "With all due respect, Brittany, I got over it. I'm pretty sure you can, too." This works as satire because the professor is black and Brittany is white. She storms out of the classroom, followed by his voice: "Does anyone else have any thoughts on the reading?!"

Cut to a meeting room in which the professor, Thelonious "Monk" Ellison, is being interrogated by three white colleagues. Two are dripping with fake solicitude, and the third is

a rival novelist seething with jealousy toward Monk's past success and gloating over what appears to be his present failure. Collectively the trio recommend that Monk take "a break," meaning submit to a suspension without pay. With a sarcastic parting shot, he storms out, much as Brittany did.

Does this opening sequence distort reality by portraying the cancel culture as a pale-

### Discussed in this essay:

*American Fiction*,  
directed by Cord Jefferson.  
Screenplay by Cord Jefferson.  
Orion Pictures

*Erasure*, by Percival Everett.  
Graywolf Press, 272 pages, \$17 (paper)

faced assault on independent-minded African Americans? Such incidents do occur. Black academics who refuse to board the DEI bullet train are harassed by students, shunned by colleagues, and rebuked by administrators. And many of the harassers, shunners, and rebukers are white. But as anyone familiar with today's college campus can attest, such incidents are hardly representative.

Of course, as a work of narrative art, a feature film is under no obligation to represent a particular social reality or support a particular ideology. Still, there are exceptions, and one such is satire. The etymology of the word is disputed, but most scholars agree that satire's original purpose was to attack a rival, ruler, or enemy publicly in a ritual involving speech, song, mimicry, masking, and dance. Digging deeper, some suggest that satire grew out of magical curses with the power to cause physical injury, even death.

Thus, it would behoove the satirist to choose his targets carefully. To a degree, the writer-director Jefferson did so when he decided to tack on this campus contretemps. I say "tack on" because, however newsworthy, this opening sequence is a one-off. There are no further references to either Monk's teaching or to cancel culture in *American Fiction*. And a good half of its screen time is not devoted to satire but to a surprisingly sentimental drama about Monk's troubled relationship with his family.

That drama is a feel-good story of an emotionally uptight writer (Monk) learning to open his heart and let people love him. This lesson is imparted by Monk's sister, Lisa (Tracee Ellis Ross), before she suffers a fatal heart attack, and by his gay brother, Cliff (Sterling K. Brown)—with an assist from Lorraine (Myra Lucretia Taylor), the family's wise and devoted housekeeper, and Maynard (Raymond Anthony Thomas), her equally wise and devoted fiancé. To be fair, this part of the film is saved from going full Hallmark by the clever screenplay, the fine performances of the cast, and the jazzy soundtrack.

### Not Black Enough

**T**HE SAME JUXTAPOSITION OF FAMILY drama and satire can be found in *Erasure*, the novel the film is based on. But it works better there, because in keeping with Percival Everett's ironic sensibility, Monk's family drama is presented without a drop of sentimentality. Still, in both works, the reason for combining these somewhat incompatible elements is the same: the family drama is there to show Monk as a three-dimensional human being; and the satire is there to expose the painful contrast between that humanity and the cardboard stereotypes of African



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Americans favored by academia, Hollywood, and book publishing.

With regard to Hollywood, Jefferson has said that when he first started working in film, he was eager to invent “fictional worlds” and “write about aliens and unicorns and anything I want to.” But the more people asked him to write about “this slave” or “this crack addict,” the more frustrated he became with their seeming “inability to see Black people’s lives as ones with breadth and depth and interiority.”

The same is true of book publishing, which is the main target of the satire in both Everett’s novel and Jefferson’s film. In an interview, Everett has described the character of Monk as “alarmingly similar to me, but...not me, thank goodness.” That is because, unlike Monk, who cannot find a publisher for his latest novel, Everett has published 24 novels, four collections of short stories, and several books of poetry—almost all with Graywolf Press, a small nonprofit based in Minnesota.

Monk is not so lucky. Arthur, his Puerto Rican agent (John Ortiz), keeps trying the Big Five trade houses in New York, which increasingly resemble the empires of Europe on the eve of World War I. And Monk’s novel keeps getting rejected, not because it is bad, but ironically, because it is good. In *Erasure*, the problem is made clear in a review of Monk’s previous book: “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.”

In a nutshell, Monk may be a fine writer but his books are not *black* enough. His annoyance at this verdict is aggravated by the runaway success of *We’s Lives In Da Ghetto*, a stereotype-ridden potboiler set in an impoverished black neighborhood, written by an elite-educated young woman whose sole claim to understanding her topic is the color of her skin. This potboiler keeps surfacing in Monk’s life, fueling his anger. And his desperation, because his mother (Leslie Ugams) has been diagnosed with Alzheimer’s and will soon need costly round-the-clock care.

Finally at the breaking point, Monk sits down and dashes off his own “black trauma porn” novel. Calling it *My Pafology*, he signs it with the pseudonym “Stagg R. Leigh.” (Just as Monk’s name is a play on the names of jazz artist Thelonious Monk and renowned author Ralph Ellison, this pseudonym is a play on “Stagger Lee,” the legendary gambler who in 1895 shot a fellow lowlife to death in a St. Louis saloon for stealing his hat. Perhaps be-

cause the hat was a Stetson, the incident was immortalized in a folksong.)

Rather than divulge the full contents of *My Pafology*, Jefferson’s film includes a brief scene in which two of Monk’s characters, a one-eyed gangbanger and a grizzled wino claiming to be his father, appear in the room where Monk is writing, and act out the dialogue as he types it. The grimness of the scene, which ends with the younger man shooting the older, is mitigated by the cleverness of the pauses in which Monk and his characters consult one another about the exact wording of the lines.

In *Erasure*, by contrast, we are treated to 66 pages of *My Pafology*, narrated by a potty-mouthed punk called Van Go Jenkins. When his mother finds him a job, he tells his fellow punks that he plans to quit as soon as he has earned enough cash to buy a gun and “rob that K’rean muthaf-cka over in the plaza” who “be lookin at me...like he think I gone steal from his ass.” When one of his crew comments that he was in fact planning to steal from the Korean, he says, “So?...That ain’t give him no right.” The two begin trading insults but quickly run out of vocabulary. “F-ck you,” they say to each other for half a page, followed by “You ain’t sh-t” and “Well, you is sh-t.”

*My Pafology* also regales us with Van Go’s sex life, which consists of hooking up with as many “fine-ass bitches” as possible, and “thinkin up names” for all “the babies I’m gone make.” When we first meet him, he has already fathered “fo’ babies” by “fo’ different womens,” and named them “Aspireene,” “Tylenola,” “Dexatrina,” and “Rexall.” He has quite a few other names in mind, but I will not mention them here, because it would involve too many hyphens.

### Aiming at Easy Targets

**I** UNDERSTAND THAT THIS IS SUPPOSED to be satire. But who, exactly, are the targets? The correct answer, in both *Erasure* and *American Fiction*, is white cultural elites who, motivated by racial guilt, “woke” ideology, or old-fashioned *nostalgie de la boue*, get a thrill out of vicariously experiencing the self-destructive behavior of the most socially isolated and despised group in America: the black poor.

*American Fiction* could not be clearer on this point. When Paula (Miriam Shor), an elegantly turned-out white editor at a fictional Big Five publishing house, phones Arthur, Monk’s agent, with an offer of \$750,000 for *My Pafology*, we see Arthur’s astonished expression as she gushes, “It’s as perfect a book as I’ve seen in a long, long while—just raw, and real...that kind of visceral energy cannot be taught!”



During this and subsequent phone calls, Monk stands ready, at Arthur's prompting, to chime in as Stagg. But the first time he gets on the line with Paula, he mistakenly uses correct English. Hearing Stagg say, "This is he," she nearly drops the phone. It takes a shove from Arthur for Monk to catch on and say gruffly, "Yeah, goddammit, motherf--ker." Paula sighs in relief.

Soon afterward, a Hollywood producer named Wiley Valdespino (Adam Brody) expresses interest in acquiring the movie rights to *My Pafology*. On another call with Arthur, Paula is joined by John, the flamboyantly gay marketing director (Micheal Cyril Creighton), who grows giddy at the prospect of a book cover tied to the film, with actor Michael B. Jordan "in a do-rag and a tank top, with those muscles showing." Paula chimes in, "Who! Somebody call the fire department!"

Unable to stand this, Monk grabs the phone and, speaking again as Stagg, tries to kill the deal by demanding a new title: *F-ck*. Taken aback, Paula and John the marketing director make a couple of feeble suggestions, such as spelling "f-ck" with a "ph." But Stagg is adamant, and before long the gushing resumes: "Let's *do* it," says Paula. "We think it is very 'in your face' in the best way possible." John hesitates: "It's very, uh..." and Stagg helps him out: "*Black?*" "Yes!" cries John, "That's it! I'm happy you said it and not me."

The next ripe target is Carl Brunt (J.C. MacKenzie), head of the fictional New England Book Club, who calls Monk in the hope

of persuading him to join a panel of judges for its annual Literary Award. Cluelessly, Carl explains that the Club "was recently rattled by... our lack of diversity" and is "trying to remedy that." When Monk sarcastically thanks him for "choos[ing] me out of all the black writers you could go to for fear of being called racist," Carl even more cluelessly says, "You're very welcome."

These incidents lead up to the *pièce de résistance*: a request from Wiley, the Hollywood producer, for a sit-down with Stagg. Arthur has been fending off all such requests with a concocted story about Stagg being a convicted murderer recently escaped from prison. But Arthur yields to Wiley, who after all has the financial clout to demand an in-the-flesh inspection of Stagg.

It is difficult to say which of the two is more cringe-worthy: Monk's performance as Stagg the pimp-walking, gimlet-eyed thug; or Wiley's sorry efforts to establish his street cred while in the thug's intimidating presence. Watching this scene, the rational part of my brain noted that Monk himself could never have pulled off such a performance; only a consummate actor like Wright could have managed it. But the rest of me was laughing too hard to care.

Less laughable, though, is the way both this novel and this film avoid dealing with the reality behind the stereotypes. If these stereotypes are so inaccurate and objectionable, then why not correct them with more lifelike portrayals of aimless young men, pathetic winos, and convicted felons?

In 2002, one year after *Erasure* was published, a very serious effort at correction premiered on HBO: *The Wire*, which as I wrote in these pages ("Tragedy with a Side of Redemption," Fall 2020) is "far too demanding—and far too grounded in the lived experience, not just of [its creators] but of several cast and crew members" to "cater to the audience's voyeuristic tendencies."

In that same review I commented, as many others have, that *The Wire* would have a hard time getting produced nowadays. On campus and off, in red states and blue, the censors are poised to attack anyone who speaks realistically about race. It is far easier to aim one's satirical barbs at some silly white person grooving on lurid commercialized stereotypes than to extract a drop of bitter but genuine humor from the actual situation of the worst-off Americans.

It is also far safer. Is the satire in *Erasure* and *American Fiction* embarrassing or even upsetting to white people? Based on my own reaction, I would say no. Indeed, I would argue that it is having the opposite effect. Millions of *real* white folks are taking delight in watching a bunch of *fictional* white folks behave like idiots around some *fictional* black folks—because it allows us to step back and say, "That's not me, I would never act that way." And by the same token, everyone is free to identify with those sage and attractive fictional black folks as they sigh, roll their eyes, and stifle laughter at that same idiocy.

In entertainment, this is a win-win. In real life, I'm not so sure.

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