

Talking About Race, Exposing The Desire for the Post-Racial, and Percival Everett's *Assumption*

Anthony STEWART
Bucknell University

In order to argue why a black writer need not always write about race, we need first to have as clear a sense as is possible what talking about race actually requires of us. By “talking about race,” I don’t mean in the common sense (which inevitably lacks “common sense,” as it turns out) that this term usually invokes, which involves trying to resolve questions of race once and for all, principally so they will not keep coming up and leaving some people feeling embarrassed or uncomfortable. I mean “talking about race” in the sense that recognizes the relatively obvious but difficult to drive home point that people who are explicitly racialized (everyone is actually racialized, it just doesn’t always seem that way) within and by the society in which they live are actually people and not Rubik’s Cubes, that—once solved—may be put in a drawer and not thought about again, at least not until company comes over, at which point they are again brought out so that someone can show off his or her mastery over what appears to be an insoluble problem. The anachronistic sound of the invocation of the Rubik’s Cube is deliberate here, since this tendentious approach to race should really have gone out of intellectual fashion by the second decade of the twenty-first century.

This constructive, challenging sense is the way in which Percival Everett’s novels talk about race. Everett’s work often presents a central character whose sense of identity is under some form of stress, if not actually coming apart at the seams. Just think about Craig Suder or John Livesey, or, for that matter, Ishmael Kidder or Not Sidney Poitier, for instance. What is compelling about these portrayals is how they thematize such a basic question in what appear to be almost endless variations. That basic question is, of course, Who am I?

This is not a question that only black people ask. In fact, much of the lineage of philosophy, literature, and art in its various expressions through European history has suggested that black people did not (perhaps even could not) think about such weighty matters, or at least, that it didn’t matter if black people were asking such questions of themselves or not, since these questions were deemed only germane to the lives of the earth’s white citizens. Even to the extent that some Americans make claims that their nation has emerged into a “post-racial” phase (a term deserving constant derision, but which is nevertheless still insisted upon by some, and therefore must be engaged with), questions of identity along racial lines necessarily persist. As Imani Perry says, in *More Terrible and More Beautiful*, “Similar to the way Michel Foucault noted that Victorian mores about sexuality offered an opportunity to talk about sex, a lot; the ‘postracial’ discourse reflects both anxiety and confusion about what race means and doesn’t mean now. In order to answer these questions, we must approach the enterprise with great rigor and sophistication” (2-3). Quite helpfully, Perry notes that racism “is not deterministic these days, and it is frequently unintentional or unacknowledged on the part of the actor” (7). She goes on to say of racist impulses, whether acted upon by members of groups whose race is conventionally left undiscussed, or by members of explicitly racialized groups, “that the

practices of inequality are a matter of our collective culture” (7). She contends instead that attempts to mitigate racist attitudes through appeals to intent—since “no one wants to be called/considered a racist” (16)—miss a central point. In order to think about race in the rigorous and sophisticated way for which she argues, “We must look to how people make decisions to treat or respond to others, not just how they are situated” (19). Perry argues for a post-intentionality where matters of race and inequality are concerned. This is a “post” we can actually use.

As I discuss Everett’s 2011 novel, *Assumption*, then, I insist upon talking about race, although, as I hope is obvious, in the unavoidable social context of, but also in resistance to, the notion of the post-racial. What appears to be one of the many challenges issued by Everett’s fiction, especially within the context of what is better described as the ‘desire for the post-racial,’ is the mundane, although apparently fine and difficult, balance to strike between being aware that a character is black, on the one hand, while simultaneously resisting the urge to be preoccupied exclusively and reductively by this fact, on the other. This preoccupation works towards the desire for resolution of racial questions that I’ve already mentioned.

One expression of the inability to strike this balance, and the somewhat absurd consequences that follow from it, appears in a review of *Assumption*, which appeared in *The Wall Street Journal*. In the interest of time, this one example will stand in here for the other available instances. First, the reviewer makes the following summary statement:

Mr. Everett's resistance to classification is most pronounced in his brilliant and often cathartically refreshing treatment of race and identity. He likes to introduce a character as black, tease out the reader's expectations of what that label means, and then either subvert such expectations or satirize them by way of startling exaggerations.

Although reductive in the way that reviews sometimes are, there is not too much to be offended by here. It is later in the review where we run into problems, when the following statement is made, describing the organization of *Assumption*, and specifically Ogden Walker’s characterization: “But in the second section—about a drug heist gone wrong that contains such mystery-novel archetypes as a one-armed villain and a daring escape from a moving van—Ogden's race is never mentioned as he investigates the crime; race is treated as irrelevant to his character.” The statement that “race is treated as irrelevant” to Ogden’s character is the desire for the post-racial on full display, trailing along with it the inevitably illogical implications of that desire. In similar ways that the desire for the post-racial leads to counterfactual conclusions about the world in which we live, this desire cannot help but result in insupportable readings, based solely in this irrational and tendentious desire.

For its adherents, the age of the post-racial was generally ushered in by the election of Barack Obama, although its specific genesis might be pinpointed to a particular moment. During his victory speech at Grant Park in Chicago on the night of November 4, 2008, Obama said the following: “It’s been a long time coming, but tonight, because of what we did on this date in this election at this defining moment, change has come to America” (Acceptance Speech, Nov 4, 2008). The declarative “that’s that” feeling of the statement encouraged for many the belief that with this one man’s election, all was done. But, as with any “post,” there must be some antecedent, and for Eric Sundquist, that antecedent is the period following the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision. Sundquist, in discussing

Obama's famous race speech of March 18, 2008, in Philadelphia, in the wake of the Jeremiah Wright controversy, points out:

Questions that have reached a stalemate, however, are questions that have yet to be answered. For all that Obama's diffusing the issue of race might seem to imply about an end to the post-Brown [*v. Board of Education*] age, his choice to designate himself "black"—and black alone—in the 2010 Census acknowledged that a national dilemma centuries in the making could not be resolved by one exceptional man's life story and aspirations, still less by one campaign-saving speech. (Sundquist 11)

We might reasonably add that these stalemated questions have also not been resolved as a result of one exceptional man's election, even to the office of President. But, it is from these stalemated questions, and that exceptional man's declaration and election, that the desire for the post-racial emerges.

Paul Gilroy speaks of "raciological thinking," in his book, *After Empire*, and this idea carries significant weight in a consideration of how the desire for the post-racial interferes with the ability of some to see and interpret the world, part of which is the ability to read. Gilroy writes:

When the idea of "race" becomes a concept, it poses clear and incompatible alternatives. Once we comprehend racism's alchemical power, we do have to choose. We can opt to reproduce the obligations of racial observance, negotiating them but basically accepting the idea of racial hierarchy and then, inescapably, reifying it. Or there is a second and far more difficult and rewarding alternative, in which for clearly defined moral and perhaps political reasons we try to break its spell and to detonate the historic lore that brings the virtual realities of "race" to such dismal and destructive life. (*After Empire* 33-4)

Apart from our now-ingrained suspicion of binaries, there is little in what Gilroy says here to argue against. His discussion of race as a concept points up the kind of tension (he calls them "incompatible alternatives") that Adele Perry relates in her definition of race:

Race is a social construct that changes over time and across place. It has no physical or biological meaning, and its social meanings are always unstable and often subtle. But in the modern world carved out by capitalism, imperialism, and its attendant modes of thought, race has had palpable and enormously consequential meaning for individuals and the communities they reside and make meaning within. Race can include identities and experiences that we might otherwise register as the terrain of ethnicity, religion, or nation. ("Graduating Photos," *Too Asian* 58)

In theory, then, race means nothing; in practice, however, it "remains the self-evident force of nature in society" (*After Empire* 9), to return to Gilroy: "Our being resigned to it supports enabling analogies and provides legitimation in a host of historical situations where natural difference and social division are politically, economically, and militarily mediated" (*After Empire* 9). What comes more clearly into focus is that the desire for the post-racial is not based on observation, historical happenstance, or, indeed, anything quantifiably material. The desire for the post-racial is like any belief. It derives from the believer's need to believe, whether that need is indoctrinated from childhood or the result of some form of conversion hardly matters. The result itself is a belief that reinscribes the conditions that enable the believer to believe.

This characterization of the desire for the post-racial as a belief brings us back to the challenges to the "obligations of racial observance," as Gilroy puts it, posed by *Assumption*,

and what might be read as instructions on how to meet the novel's challenges, as well as those it subtly poses to the society out of which it emerges. The narrator says the following of Ogden's thoughts about Mrs. Bickers, as the novel begins: "He always sensed that the old woman didn't like him because he was black, but that was probably true for half of the white residents of the county" (6). Ogden negotiates the tense scene with Mrs. Bickers—she is, after all, a good enough shot to have put two bullets through the same hole in her front door—quite skillfully, considering his sense of her prejudice towards him. His sense is just that, a sense, as we are later told: "Maybe she was acting strange simply because she was strange, because she had never liked Ogden's skin color, though she had never said as much" (9). His father's attitudes about race make the issue all the more manifest. Ogden remembers his father's attitudes "tinged with the language of race and social indignation" (13), and recalls that his father "moved to New Mexico from Maryland because there were fewer people and so, necessarily, fewer white people" (13). And finally, "He hated white people, but not enough to refrain from marrying one" (13). Ogden finds it difficult "to think that his father hated half of him" (13). All of this information is provided within the first few pages on the novel's first section, "A Difficult Likeness."

The second section, "My American Cousin," is the section in which race is irrelevant, according to the reviewer I've quoted. As the reviewer states, this irrelevancy results from Ogden's race not being "mentioned" in the second section. But apart from the fact that the character has the same name, works at the same job in the same New Mexico town, we are also told he has the same mother, "Ogden Walker. Eva's son" (105), as he confirms his identity for the colourfully named Maggie Muddy, early in the section. But in addition, while perhaps Ogden's race is not mentioned explicitly, it is mentioned obliquely by being gestured at in contradistinction to other characters. Note the following exchange he has with an unnamed motel clerk:

"What does he look like?" Ogden asked.

"Normal enough looking fellow. About your height. White guy. Light brown hair. Blue eyes." (123-24)

It's only after this description, and Ogden asks her if there is anything else that she remembers about him—to which she replies with his California licence plate number, "5QTH769. I think it was a rental" (124)—that the clerk finally volunteers, "Did I mention he had only one hand?" (124). While it is true that black people can have light brown hair, and blue eyes, the description of the "normal enough looking fellow" makes clear that the addressee (Ogden) is not white; otherwise, convention would dictate that the whiteness of the one-handed man under discussion would not have been mentioned at all.

In another exchange, Ogden takes on the descriptive role, as he speaks to two unenthusiastic security guards in a casino: "Did a guy come through here with only one hand? White guy, brown hair, my size?" (129). Again, Ogden's non-whiteness serves as a point of departure to describe the man he searches for. His race is instrumentally relevant to the scene, even as he searches for someone with a considerably more obvious and distinguishing physical characteristic than his race—that he has only one hand. The man's uncommon physical characteristic does not tap into a centuries-old anxiety that might—with the election of November 4, 2008—finally have been put to rest for some of the members of the American populace.

All reviewers are not like the one I've quoted above, of course. In fact, one particularly astute reviewer—Gregory Leon Miller—makes the following observation:

Our assumptions are also upended by the novel's structure, whose three sections aren't connected in any conventionally satisfying sense. Some readers may see the book as a trio of related stories (in fact, Everett has embedded a revision of his nearly 20-year-old story, "Warm and Nicely Buried," into the first part). (Gregory Leon Miller 3)

This astute identification of an earlier Everett text (I can assure you that I'd missed it) is very satisfying, even if the pervasive need for that which is conventional is not. But conventions soothe us in ways that resistance to convention does not.

Ogden Walker is a fascinating creation, precisely in the ways that he enacts resistance to convention. He is not the sheriff, he's the deputy. He's the only black character in the novel, of any note, and he is actually biracial. As we're told, his mother is white. He mentions enough times that he's not necessarily very good at his job, although he appears committed to it, even driven by it. More than this, he is driven by an almost hyper-developed sense of right and wrong. This characteristic is commented upon by both Detective Hailey Barry (who's never heard of the actress) and his occasional partner and fly fishing buddy, Warren Fragua, who both refer to him as having a messiah complex. Ogden puts one in mind of the version of Robert Hawks who appears in "Alluvial Deposits," in the collection *Damned If I Do*, (another version of whom already appeared in *Watershed* (1996), who also has bigger things on his mind than how other people see race. Reflecting on his status as an oddity in Dotson, Utah, where he has driver to as part of some contract work for the Utah Department of Agriculture and the Fish and Game Commission, he thinks: "For reasons too familiar and too tiresome to discuss, I was a great source of interest as I idled at the town's only traffic signal" (42). This statement enacts the kind of complex resistance to racial thinking that confounds the need for resolution inherent to the desire for the post-racial.

For all of his ostensible detachment, though, Ogden searches, looking for something, which turns out to be himself, as he is responsible for the murder of at least five people in the book, before Warren finally figures this out. Perhaps what is so terrifying about *Assumption* (not to mention assumptions) is that where Ogden leads us by the end of the novel does not, in fact, solve anything. This lack of resolution is completely, eerily, uncannily believable. As Warren asks Ogden why he's killed these people, Ogden replies, in part:

I'm out of my fucking mind. I must be. What do you think? Does that have it all make sense for you? I'm an evil man. *Live* is *evil* spelled backward or is it the other way around? I'm evil. I suppose that's what they'll say. I'm possessed by the devil, *lived* spelled backward. Does that have it make sense? I wanted some drug money. I'm hooked on meth. Do any of those reasons help this make sense? I was tired of being a good guy. Was I ever a good guy? How about that? Does that have it make sense for you? How about that? Does that have it make sense for you? This is the way it is, Warren, simply the way it fucking is. (224-25)

The barrage of questions heightens the realization that there is no definitive answer. Life is like that. Race is like that. We do the best we can, and sometimes we don't. This is not nihilism. Ogden does some very good work in the novel, until he doesn't anymore. Warren's need to be given an answer, any answer, mimics the desire for "them" to ascribe Ogden's motivations and actions to insanity. This need to ascribe also mimics the desire for

the post-racial. It's not really about understanding, at all. It's about some palliative, even if wholly inadequate, gesture that can mask our lack of understanding. Perhaps the only salve that Everett leaves us by the end of *Assumption* is Ogden's death. He can't kill anyone else. But Ogden's death ensures that we cannot find out why he did what he did. But that, ultimately, is the point. Sometimes we cannot understand things, but we do our best to try within our limitations. Ogden's final speech is a gesture of honesty that highlights the pointlessness of the desire for the post-racial, a desire to resolve something we cannot definitively understand.