

Encountering the Face of the Other: Levinasian Ethics and Its Limits in Percival Everett's God's Country

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Identity is always bounded and particular...
Nobody ever speaks of a human identity.
—Paul Gilroy, *Against Race*

The majority of Percival Everett's novels and short stories take place in the American West and explore notions of black migration, settlement, identity, and African American participation in the region's historical, political, and social formations. Although there are a number of well-known and not-so-well-known African American authors who have written about the West and its importance in the shaping of black and American identity, there has been a dearth of scholarly research on the subject¹. Nevertheless, the American West has been a symbolic geographical and psychological space that black writers have used to interrogate questions of identity, freedom, diversity, community, individualism, and change. Perhaps this is why Everett often chooses to set many of his novels and short stories there. As a black writer, Everett has sought to explode often-stereotypical notions of what constitutes authenticity and legitimacy in African American life and literature. We see this in such novels as *Walk Me to the Distance* (1985), *Watershed* (1996), *Wounded* (2005), and *Assumption* (2011). These four novels, set in the American West, consistently confront the stark realities of violence against people, usually nonwhites, who are viewed and treated as outsiders. For example, *Walk Me to the Distance* is about a psychologically wounded Vietnam veteran, David Larson, who comes to a remote town, Slutshole, Wyoming, to be left alone and to find some peace of mind. Instead, he becomes involved in locating the missing mentally handicapped son of a local sheep rancher; *Watershed's* African American protagonist, Robert Hawks, reluctantly becomes involved in a bloody standoff in Colorado between Native American rights activists and the FBI; and *Wounded* is the story of an African American Wyoming rancher, John Hunt, who helps bring to justice a group of "good old boys" who murder the gay son of one of his best friends. In all of these stories, Everett employs the American West as a geographical space in which to explore ethical relationships among people living in very insular communities².

Often in Everett's work, the protagonists are loners who ultimately find their humanity and a sense of their true selves when they consciously, or by dint of peculiar circumstances, find themselves aiding people in situations perhaps more dire than their own³. Indeed, in these works the actions of his protagonists are informed by a "genuine concern for the

¹ Some of the more prominent black fiction writers who have made the American West the center of their work, in addition to Percival Everett, are Pauline Hopkins, W. E. B. Du Bois, Charles Chesnutt, Arna Bontemps, Ralph Ellison, Wanda Coleman, John Edgar Wideman, Rita Dove, and Walter Mosley. See *The African American West: A Century of Short Stories* (2000), edited by Bruce A. Glasrud and Laurie Champion.

² Everett's 2011 novel, *Assumption*, flips the script and is a murder and mystery in which the outside character is the one who perpetuates violence within a community that has, for the most part, accepted him.

other” (*Humanism of the Other* ix) and an ethical stance that rails against that which “would reduce the human to the inhuman” (*Humanism* ix). In this regard, Everett promotes a “vision of humanism for which the human is central” (*Humanism* xx). Although there is no evidence that Everett is channeling the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas in his novels, this paper will read Everett’s 1994 novel, *God’s Country*, a parody of the American western, through a Levinasian lens as a way of foregrounding his concern with ethics, morality, and our responsibility for the Other.

The ethical horizon Everett takes up in his novels, I argue, in many ways emblemizes the spirit of the Jewish ethical metaphysician, Emmanuel Levinas, who, over the course of the last half of the twentieth century, developed a “postmodern” ethics of human relations. Critics have pointed out that Levinas’s philosophy of human relations is in opposition to that of the German philosopher Martin Heidegger, whose philosophy demonstrates “this sordid correlation between the metaphysical inclination towards the concept of totality in the history of Western thought...[and is] a symptomatic and chronic intellectual tendency in the history of Western civilization” (Sessler 3). Among Levinasian ethical concerns is the notion of imminent humanism. This is a philosophy of intersubjectivity and human sociality that is an attack against “monstrous abstraction” or stereotyping that undermines and “annihilates all values in the face of... might and a Darwinian social ontology that effaces all traces of human dignity” (Sessler 14). Levinas, unlike Heidegger, posits a different kind of ethics, one that opens up a “new framework of transcendence as human responsibility [and that] involves an extensive exploration of the face-to-face relationship between people, [which] opens onto questions of social existence and justice” (*Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*)⁴.

At its foundation, for Levinas, one’s encounter with the face of the other “is an appeal of an imperative given to your responsibility: to encounter a face is *straightaway* [*d’emblée*] to hear a demand and an order” (Levinas qtd. in Perpich 50; emphasis in the original). In order for me to discuss Levinasian ethics in *God’s Country*, however, it is first important to understand what Levinas means by a face-to-face encounter with the Other. As Levinas scholar Diane Perpich points out, the exact nature of what Levinas means by the face of the Other has been debated among Levinas scholars for decades and “the face poses a dilemma that resists any easy solution” (Perpich 51), because Levinas claims that the face-to-face encounter is not grounded in phenomenology or ontology (Perpich 50-53). Perpich goes on to allow that Levinas’s notion of the ethical responsibility of the other is in itself problematic and paradoxical and rather than trying to reconcile his paradoxical thought, it is better to simply acknowledge “the tensions of Levinas’s account... of the face” (Perpich 54). Nevertheless, Levinas’s notion of face-to-face encounters is fundamental to how he views our everyday responsibility to and for one another, for “it begins with the everyday and reaches beyond it,” but not in any real metaphysical sense of transcendence

³ Generally, these characters are racially marked as African American or Native American; however, sometimes, as in his novel *American Desert* (2004), the characters are not racially marked.

⁴ To apply standard meaning of the word “transcendent” to Levinas’s work would be misleading; rather, as Michael L. Morgan points out, for Levinas, transcendence does not “derive metaphysical results from psychological premises” (*Discovering Levinas* 56). Rather, because encounters with the face and responsibility for the Other are everyday occurrences, Levinas does not place transcendental meanings to his ideas.

(Morgan 56). When Levinas discusses “the face” in his work, he is not necessarily speaking of one’s visage; instead, for Levinas, “the face” is not so much representational and thus meaning-making. For Levinas, “the face is neither perceived nor known,” thus Levinasian thought posits that “the face” defies totality (Perpich 58). In addition, a face-to-face engagement involves an “encounter” with another being that resists “adequation” (58). Indeed, rather than the face-to-face encounter being one in which the transcendent ego views itself as unbound from the world which it perceives, as Perpich notes, for Levinas, “The ‘I’ who encounters the face loses its naïve being at home in the world and discovers itself bound by the other in its ethical responsibility” (58). Levinas understands that his notion of the face-to-face encounter is so common that it has to be actively revealed for all of its profound meaningfulness. Bubba, the African American protagonist in *God’s Country*, is one of dozens of Everettian characters who play out a Levinasian face-to-face encounter with the Other that tests his or her ethical and moral stance.

Again, I make no claims that Everett *consciously* invokes Levinasian ethical considerations and their limitations in his novel *God’s Country*; however, I contend that Levinasian ethical thought, to a degree, can be used as a hermeneutic to analyze and interpret the highly problematic, racially vexed encounters between the novel’s primary characters, Bubba, a runaway slave and “the best tracker in the territory” (*God’s Country* 10), and Curt Marder, the racist white homesteader who hires Bubba to help him find and bring to justice a group of outlaws who burn down his house and kidnapped his wife, Sadie.

God’s Country is a very funny parody of the American western, reminiscent of Mel Brooks’s *Blazing Saddles* (1974) but which, like the film, addresses important issues surrounding race, community, Otherness, and responsibility. As a satire, *God’s Country* interrogates myths about the ethics and morality of America’s conquest of the West in the mid-1840s through white settlers’ violent Othering of Native Americans and other nonwhites. His characters, often psychologically wounded loners, find themselves on a journey of self-recuperation through a face-to-face encounter with the Other; they find themselves at great odds with those who do not believe in a vision of alterity and difference that allows the Other to be free within him or herself. The majority of the white characters in the novel do not adhere to an ethics and morality based upon human compassion, understanding, and responsibility to and for the Other.

At the beginning of the novel, we are introduced to Curt Marder, a white man who many years earlier deserted from the Confederate army, informed by cowardice, and above all else, self-preservation. He makes his way out West to seek his fortune and, like Bubba, to maintain his anonymity and thus his freedom⁵. The West offers Marder and Bubba the chance for rebirth, reinvention, and the freedom to Be⁶. But even the vast open spaces of the American West do not allow the characters to become complacent in their newfound

⁵ If the authorities find out that Marder is a deserter, he could be hanged; similarly, if Bubba is found out to be a runaway slave, he, also, could be hanged.

⁶ *God’s Country* signifies on Mark Twain’s *Huckleberry Finn*. Twain has had a major influence on Everett as a writer. For example, the epigraph to Everett’s 2001 novel *Erasure* is from Twain’s travelogue *Following the Equator* (1897) and reads: “I could never tell a lie that anyone would doubt nor a truth that anyone would believe” (*The Writings of Mark Twain* 287). The essays in *Following the Equator* rebuke American imperialism, racism, and religious zeal.

freedom. At the beginning of the novel, Marder literally finds himself waking up with his house on fire:

More than a cozy fire in the hearth, it was my danged house burning to beat all get out. All around it were men, seedy looking from a distance even, riding around screamin' and hollerin'. Two were tossing more torches to the house, two were shootin' arrows every which way into things and one had my wife hung over his saddlelike a rug. [...] They'd shot a sticker into my poor hound and he looked damned pitiful running around in tight circles like he was caught in a twister. I had half a mind to ride down that hill and say somethin', but it was half a mind after all, and I didn't suspect they'd listen at that moment. (*God's Country*, 3)

In this passage, Everett positions Curt Marder as far from the ideal Western gunslinger hero as one can imagine. He does not go after the marauders who kidnap his wife, Sadie, the supposed love of his life. Instead, he is more distraught that the kidnapers and arsonists, whom he assumes to be “Indians dressed like white men” (4), have shot and killed his dog, Blue. He laments, “They stole my Sadie and left old Blue all red and still. [...] They didn't leave a dang thing. Was nothing sacred? I asked the sky, Ain't nothing sacred? And the big, unforgivin' western sky smiled big and said nothing” (4). Marder seems to be invested in a transcendent God for answers to his tragic situation. But, as the scene indicates, God appears to be quite indifferent to his suffering. An indifferent God follows Levinasian thought where Levinas posits that transcendence is not found directly in the “face” of God but rather transcendence is to be found in the quotidian face-to-face encounter between self and Other: “For Levinas, the rationale for ethical inter-subjectivity is transcendence, *illeity* being the term to which he resorts, in order to define complete otherness, and the trace of God is manifested in the face of the human other, *l'autrui*” (Sessler, 1). Marder does not particularly believe in the importance of connectedness to other human beings in terms of responsibility for the Other's well-being. His only interest in other human beings is what they can do for him. Indeed, his actions and words indicate that he doesn't really believe in a transcendent God, but he has been socialized to do so. Throughout the novel he goes to great lengths to force himself to believe in God—not because he actually does believe in God—but because society has told him he should believe in God. In the above passage, he looks to God for answers, but subconsciously he knows that God has no interest in him or his troubles. This is confirmed when his neighbor, Tucker, spitefully tells him, “Fools ride around out here [the West] lookin' for justice” (*God's Country*, 45).

Marder's condition reflects the irony of the novel's title. If, in the nineteenth century, the American West was the physical manifestation of transcendence (most often social and economic), couched in the religious metaphor of “God's Country,” for settlers who slaughtered thousands of Native Americans and displaced millions more, then what does that say about Christianity and the belief in a transcendent God? Levinas would say that “Christian religion was never properly ethical but that, ironically, the Nietzschean notion of the ‘death of God’ has taken religion back to what it is most fundamentally. It has divulged something genuinely religious beneath all of the theological values that led Christianity into decline and the proclamation of the “death of God” (Hutcheon, 114). Christianity, he declares flatly, “has failed politically and socially” (114)⁷. That Marder looks to the heavens

⁷In other novels such as *Zulus* (1990) and *American Desert* (2004), Everett critiques Christianity and American political conservatism, which he sees as near-fascistic institutions.

and asks, “‘Ain’t nothing sacred?’” shows his profound obtuseness in failing to connect the unethical and violent behavior of the Renegades to his and other white settlers’ equally violent, unethical, and immoral project of Manifest Destiny in their desire to “civilize” the West⁸. That Marder cannot make the connection between his suffering and the suffering of the Native Americans demonstrates a profound egoism that does not allow him to empathize or to feel sympathy toward others who are not like him. However, Marder’s sense of superiority toward the nonwhite Other is complicated when he goes into town to tell folks about his tragic circumstances. Although the majority of the other townsfolk are white, it is evident that they have very little regard or respect for Marder: “I rode through the middle of town and then fell off onto the dry, cracked ground that even sounded dusty when I hit. No one rushed to my aid and I figured such heat was bound to slow bodies down, but I was struck with a sad feeling about the way folks don’t care no more about their fellow fellows” (5). The main reason no one in the town cares about Marder is because most think of him as a “no-good, free-loadin’, back-slidin’ dog-lipped son-of-a-mud-rat” (5), who is in debt to practically everyone else in town. That Marder is treated more like a stranger among his fellow white compatriots shows that even though he claims to be a part of their “tribe,” in reality, he is not. When he tells the barkeep, Terkle, about his terrible misfortunes, he is nonplussed:

Marder: Burned my barn.

Terkle: Peterson over at the general store has a few words for you after me.

Marder: They run off with my wife.

Terkle: You’re not taking advantage of our Christian charity anymore.

Marder: Killed my dog.

Terkle: Killed your dog? (Terkle fell to sitting on his butt in the street.) Killed your dog? (He shook his head.) What kind of heathens do we have in these parts?

Marder: Efficient. (6)

Again, ironically, neither Marder nor Terkle are conscious of the fact that if anyone “in these parts” is a heathen it is the white settlers. Because they are white men, they believe that they are superior to the Native Americans whose land they have stolen and who have been forced to live on the periphery of the town. They feel the same smug intolerance and prejudice toward the few blacks who actually live among them. Because the novel is set in the nineteenth century, one would certainly expect Marder and Terkle, as white men, to express racism toward nonwhite Others. However, as a postmodern novel, Everett implicates not only racism and American greed in the nineteenth century but also its legacies in contemporary society.

When Marder enters the bar his ignorance and racism become apparent: “The saloon was a dingy affair with small windows and doors that squawked miserably every time they swung... Blind Mitch, the *nigger* piano player, was banging away at the key that worked, playing that *jig* music that was hard to whistle” (7, emphasis mine). With regard to Blind Mitch, “the nigger piano player,” Marder feels that he is superior simply because he is white and Blind Mitch is not. He thinks about Blind Mitch and all other nonwhites in dehumanizing, abstract terms because he does not see them otherwise. As Sarah Ahmed points out in reference to Emmanuel Levinas’s ethical thought: “To know the other as being in a certain way... [is] thus to ontologise the other as a being, albeit an alien one” (Ahmed,

⁸ Marder’s question is ironic coming from a man who holds nothing sacred.

142). Marder and the other white men do not have to recognize or think about the humanity of Others who are not like them. He and the other citizens' racism, ethnocentrism, and sexism collectivize and totalize nonwhites (and women) as inferior Others. The relationship between Marder, other white men in the town, and nonwhites and women is not based upon a relationship of Levinasian asymmetry in which face-to-face encounters lead to mutual understanding and respect of difference between individuals, but instead constitutes an attempt to exercise power and authority over the Other.

A reductive totalization of the nonwhite and nonmale Other is also noted when Marder and Wide Clyde McBride, one of the saloon's frequent customers and someone who is known for his volatile mean streak, strike up a conversation with a traveling salesman who tries to sell them a bottle of "Indian Dan's Most Potent Elixir, guaranteed to set your clock, clean your clogs and to straighten your crooked" (8); the salesman's name is Greenfeld. Upon hearing the name and giving a knowing glance to Marder, McBride nastily inquires: "What kind of name is that?" (9). He then begins to manhandle Greenfeld as "a playing card shook loose from somewhere and all eyes fell to it." What ensues is a scene of mob violence in which

everybody grabbed Greenfold and managed to get a lick in, exceptin' me [Marder]. I took the opportunity to sneak a taste of the bottle of elixir that had been left unattended on the bar. The stuff made me gag something awful and then I was bent over trying to throw up and making a devilish noise that caused the men to leave off beatin' poor old Greenbelt, and so allowing him to scamper across the floor and out. I take credit for having saved the little man's life. (9)⁹

Ever the opportunist, Marder does not consider intervening in the fracas. Instead, he seizes the opportunity to steal some of Grenfeld's elixir. Marder's retching is so pronounced and distracting that the salesman is able to escape. Much later when again he meets Greenfeld, he boasts that he saved the man's life and that he expects to be rewarded for his efforts. Of course, he doesn't mention stealing Greenfeld's elixir. Notably, Greenfeld's presence deflects the other white patrons' utter contempt for Marder. While they are assaulting Greenfeld, he is provisionally reintegrated back into the community because, as a Jew, Greenfeld is even more hated and marginalized than he is. Greenfeld's insignificance is demonstrated in this passage as the men recurrently *mispronounce* the Jewish traveling salesman's name. Symbolically, this constitutes an annihilation of Greenfeld's identity as human subject in that he is rendered "faceless." They position him as stranger, someone who is not like them; thus, there is no need to think of him in any way other than as alien. Greenfeld is lumped together with other Others, the Native Americans, women, and blacks. Throughout the course of the novel, Marder, despite his low opinion of them, will find himself dependent upon the kindness of Others.

⁹Although the traveling salesman is never identified as Jewish, Marder's misnaming Greenfeld as "Greenfold" and "Greenbelt" are homophones that nevertheless play up to stereotypes about Jews as avaricious. Thus, without even identifying Greenfeld in terms of asymmetry and alterity, the ontological and epistemological violence that is part and parcel of Western anti-Semitism is exposed. One could argue that given the nature of the justice in the Wild West, Greenfeld's cheating warranted his being beaten. Yet, the point Everett may be trying to make is that the punishment for the "crime" is extreme. The men were planning to murder Greenfeld over a card game. In other words, a human life is apparently worth far less than money. These men, who possess no genuine moral or ethical values, are intent on imposing their own brand of justice.

His initial order of business is to procure a first-rate tracker to help him find Sadie and to enact vengeance upon those who are responsible for burning down his house. That man is Bubba: “I knew who Bubba was. Bubba was the black scout. Taharry was right. Bubba was the best tracker in the territory. A legend. A nigger. And for that reason, I suspect, basically agreeable” (10). Juxtaposing the words “legend” which etymologically means a thing to be read and the word “nigger” highlights Marder’s blindness. He believes he knows Bubba through an epistemological and ontological lens in which society abstracts African Americans as simply agreeable “niggers.” Without having ever met Bubba, Marder feels he already has him pegged. He thinks that when he meets him, Bubba will be a docile, willing participant in helping him find Sadie—a kind of black Tonto to his Lone Ranger. Bubba *is* a legend in the area, but to the whites, he is also a nigger, mired in abstraction. And in their eyes, nigger trumps legend. Bubba is legend *and* a nigger, but he is not a human being. Marder believes that Bubba, “as the ‘other,’ is... the weak one, and this weakness is constitutive of what the other, in some sense, is, in a contradictory or paradoxical way, to contain the other within ontology. That is, the nature of being becomes alien being: ‘The other’s *entire being* is constituted by its exteriority, or rather its alterity’” (Levinas, quoted in Ahmed 142). Marder does not respect Bubba at all, despite his legendary status; instead, Marder’s totalizing view of Bubba as a nigger obliterates and abstracts the particularity of his individual being and subsumes him beneath denigrating and dehumanizing categorizations. Now, it would be easy simply to categorize Marder as an ignorant racist, which he is, but if we examine his motivations through a Levinasian lens, then perhaps something deeper can be discerned about his racism.

According to Levinas, the idea surrounding the face and its connection to responsibility for the Other is one that is complicated and often vexed. He acknowledges that it is ethical that one feels a responsibility for an Other; however, feelings of responsibility paradoxically involve a response “to the suffering, need, and destitution that the face expresses to us” (Morgan 57), and which causes us to suffer in turn. Levinas points out that the response to the other’s suffering is often burdensome, especially when the other person’s suffering is so great that “guilt” about the Other’s suffering “is unbearable” (Hutchens 89). Certainly, sociologists and others have theorized this as an important component of race relations in America. The term often used is “white guilt.” Marder, not always completely successfully, forces himself not to feel any guilt about or empathy for other people’s suffering. A close reading of one scene in *God’s Country* supports my reading of this component of Levinasian ethical theory.

When Marder asks the town blacksmith of Bubba’s whereabouts, he tells him, “Don’t keep track of niggers” (14). The irony, here, of course, is that white society consciously and unconsciously *always* keeps track of “niggers” and any others that it deems as Other. Moreover, given the few blacks who live in the area, the likelihood of *not* keeping track of Bubba and other blacks and minorities does not lend itself to the reality of white racism. The whites in the town have as much at stake in keeping track of blacks, like Bubba, and Jews, like Greenfeld, as they do the supposedly more aggressive and hostile Native Americans. Marder and the other men are totally oblivious of their deep-seated racism because for them the way they think is the norm; they do not have to think deeply about their racism and white privilege.

When Marder first meets up with Bubba, he notes, “The black man peeled off his gloves and studied my face” (*God’s Country* 24). Bubba’s response to Marder’s “face” is one of almost immediate disdain. He recognizes that a white man looking for his help does not portend good things to come:

Bubba: I know you?

Marder: Not yet. Curt Marder.

Bubba: What’s your business?

Marder: How do you know this ain’t a social call?

Bubba: Your color and mine.

Marder: Christ, man, it’s 1871, ain’t you people ever gonna forget about that slavery stuff? (24)

Marder’s face/race launches the first racially tinged discursive volley that will typify his relationship with Bubba. The unspoken idea is that no white man would come looking for Bubba unless it meant trouble. Simmering close to the surface of their initial encounter is the historical burden of American race relations. Bubba has escaped from slavery and made a kind of home for himself in “God’s Country.” Even before speaking to Marder, he sees an immediate threat to his freedom. Marder, in reaction to Bubba’s hostility, instinctively knows that Bubba doesn’t trust his motives. His response, is to try to discursively obliterate the past, “forget about that slavery stuff,” of course, also symbolizes a blotting out of Bubba’s personal, painful history, and by extension, the racism and suffering African Americans have endured in this country. The irony in this and almost all of their other verbal exchanges is that Marder never allows Bubba to forget his Othered position as a “nigger.” And so what we end up with is a disturbing circuit of acknowledged yet wished-for erasure of the past. Marder refuses to acknowledge any culpability, personal or collectively, for black Americans’ suffering during and after slavery, yet Bubba’s *face*, no matter how hard he tries, will not allow him to forget his responsibility. Whether he acts ethically and morally upon this responsibility is another story.

In the course of tracking down Bubba, Marder comes across a young man who “was about twelve or so so... His hair was bright yellow with the sun behind him and I had a mind to rub his head for luck” (*God’s Country*, 14). The boy, Jake, like Bubba, is also an outsider whom Marder feels is unworthy of any kind of recognition or consideration, despite the fact that he, too, is similarly white. Instead, Marder dismisses Jake because he is a mere boy—not a man like Marder—and thus, inconsequential to his goals. We learn that Jake’s parents have been murdered; and like Bubba, he is alone in the world. For Levinas our unwavering responsibility to and for the other should never be grounded in utilitarianism—what an/other can do for us. Responsibility for the other should be a given. Marder’s ethics of utilitarianism, what an/other can do for him, also symbolically links Jake and Bubba. Marder feels that it is appropriate to rub the boy’s head for good luck (14). Again, Marder does not see Jake having any importance whatsoever except in relationship to what Marder can get out of him—good luck. Marder’s thoughts and actions symbolically link Jake to Bubba in light of the racist southern custom and old wives’ tale that advances that to rub a black child’s head will invite good luck. This uncalled for intimacy, the need to “pet” Jake, points to Marder’s egoism and unconcern for genuine relationships between him and others whom he feels are not like him. For Levinas, alterity or difference is key in bringing people to feel responsible for others by allowing difference to be a reason to respect another person. In other words, for Levinas, responsibility and justice for all is not

grounded in sameness or the totalization of the Other; it is grounded in the acceptance and respect of differences.

Jake's interest in Marder is because he, too, needs Bubba's help: "He [Jake] looked at the sky. 'A bunch of white men killed my parents.' He turned to me [Marder] with his eyes all teared up. 'I thought we were supposed to worry about Injuns,' Jake tells Marder, who replies: 'Tough luck, boy'" (15)¹⁰. In this scene, Marder's actions are absolutely antithetical to a Levinasian ethics of responsibility. He does not enact a "responsible reflection on the details of the situation in terms of a keen attentiveness to ourselves, the other person, and our relationship" (Morgan 52). Jake eventually comes to realize that it is not "Injuns" that he has to worry about; it is *other* white people like Marder who are the real danger to him. Jake needs Bubba to help him to track down the men who murdered his family. The implication is that the same group of Renegades who burned down Marder's house and kidnapped Sadie also killed Jake's parents. Thus Jake and Marder have a mutual need for Bubba's help; they are both looking for justice. However, this obvious connection between the two of them has little effect on Marder's concern for Jake's misfortune. Instead, even after Jake begs him to take him with him to find Bubba, he tells Jake, "'Go on, boy'" (15). And it is only after much verbal wrangling and Jake's biting a chunk out of Marder's leg, "his crooked little teeth flashing" (16) that he agrees to take Jake with him to meet Bubba. That Jake physically defies Marder's rejection is important to note because Marder is basically a coward who is only able to take advantage of those whom he perceives to be much weaker than he¹¹.

Marder reluctantly takes Jake with him; but again, his main concern is not the development of a relationship based on concern and care; rather the relationship is based upon what he can personally gain by having Jake with him:

So, with the boy riding behind me in the saddle, I steered my horse north out of town. I felt the weight of the boy's head on my shoulders and soon heard his snoring. If he was fifteen, I was a seven foot tall Indian. I had a mind to let him slip from the saddle and to gallop away, but I found myself unable to do it... I mean, the little varmint might have starved to death out in the wilderness though I wasn't exactly offering him any sustenance. Maybe the boy was good at finding food, in which case he'd come in handy. Maybe he knew where all the waterholes were in the territory. Maybe he knew where there was buried treasure. (19)

In Marder's encounter with Jake, a stranger, there will be no moment of Levinasian intersubjectivity through hospitality. In Levinasian thought, "The stranger becomes present in [an] ethical encounter as the one to whom one must give, endlessly, and without return. The endless obligation to give defines the form of hospitality as an opening to the other" (Ahmed, 150). Marder's concerns, Everett makes clear, are the same concerns that led to America's conquest of the West, an unflinching greed for all manner of treasure that the West offered up to those more than willing to do whatever was necessary to get it; of course

¹⁰ It is not until much later that the reader learns that Jake is actually a female in disguise. Jake masks his/her gender because she instinctively knows how vulnerable she is as a female in a patriarchal, sexist society.

¹¹ In the novel, the white community is a closed and totalizing system of relationships in which "Whatever is within the system is legitimate because it is defined by and identical with it. Whatever is outside the system is either incorporated into it (thus repressing its otherness and extending the violent sameness of the same) or is denied any existence whatsoever" ("Levinas, Totality and the Other"). Levinas's ethical concerns extend most prominently in his examination of totalitarianism and totalitarian regimes such as the Third Reich and Stalin's bloody reign.

usually at the expense of nonwhites. Moreover, Marder is correct when he acknowledges that he is not providing Jake with sustenance. Marder, in this instance, is thinking of food, but the implication is that he also does not offer Jake sustenance through human sympathy and friendship. In Marder's mind, Jake and Bubba are not human beings but simply means to an end.

Their arrival at Tucker's homestead, "a fine place, green, gently rolling, and twisting through it was the sweetest river you'd ever put sight to. It was the kind of place that almost made you understand why the Injuns was so mad about white folks taking over" (19) in order to finally ascertain Bubba's location is met with complete indifference:

Marder: I'm trying to find Bubba.

Tucker: Bubba who?

Marder: I don't know his last name. Hell, he's a nigger and he probably ain't got no last name. How many Bubbas you know anyhow?

Tucker: I know one.

Marder: Well, he's the one I'm looking for.

Tucker: Why? You family? (21)¹²

Although Tucker is only joking with Marder, his comment about him and Bubba being family points not only to Bubba's outsider status, in terms of the human family, but also that in no way would Marder (or any other white man in the town) regard Bubba as family, even if they were somehow blood related. It turns out that Bubba is actually working for Tucker mending fences. And to an extent, this is Bubba's primary role in the novel. He generally bases the relationship between himself and Jake and Marder on an ethics of responsibility. Bubba, like many of Everett's protagonists, is an outsider because of his ethnicity but also a loner by choice. He knows firsthand what the white world can do to a black man's sense of self, and he wants no part of it. When Jake asks Marder how they will know when they find Bubba, neither having seen him before, Marder replies, "He's a nigger, boy" (24). Marder categorizes or totalizes *all* blacks as niggers. In other words, all blacks look alike, so recognizing Bubba should be no problem at all. Again, we see here Marder's thinking of Bubba in what Levinas terms a symmetrical fashion that does not make allowances for a relationship based on individual particularities. But just as important in Marder's response to Jake is, again, Everett's linking Bubba as Other to Jake as Other. The juxtaposition of the words "nigger" and "boy," the latter referring to Jake and the former referring to Bubba, marks a symbolic concatenation between Bubba and Jake. Moreover, over the course of the narrative, Bubba and Jake establish a friendship that never takes root with Marder. And, when they finally meet Bubba, things do not go well. Bubba is suspicious of Marder, and Marder feels humiliated for having to ask for help, particularly from a black man. He ruminates, "Things were starting to cloud up considerable as far as I was concerned—standing out on the range making land deals with a nigger, watching my estate suffer, to my thinking, coerced division. I had a mind to shoot Bubba for attempting to violate me..." (26).

As ridiculous as Marder sounds, he is quite serious about his supposed humiliation at the hands of a black man. By not accepting Bubba and totalizing him in the abstract as

¹² Although Old man Tucker is being facetious, the idea implied is that since Marder is from the South, he and Bubba could very well be related due to the pervasiveness of miscegenation between slave masters and slave women.

some “uppity nigger,” Marder proves himself incapable of establishing a genuine interpersonal relationship with him. Nonetheless, despite Marder’s profound ignorance, Bubba decides to help him find the people who kidnapped Sadie and burned down his house; in this regard, I would argue, Bubba demonstrates a Levinasian ethical stance. Marder, who has no money, proposes to Bubba that he will give him part of his land, “split it down the middle” (26), in exchange for his help. To view Bubba’s actions through a Levinasian ethical lens, one might conclude that his agreement with Marder is grounded in self-interest. There is an exchange that takes place: Bubba will aid Marder in return for part of his land. This is indeed Bubba’s initial motivation for helping Marder. However, over the course of the novel, we witness Bubba’s motivation for helping Marder veer from materialism to a sense of responsibility for him. In his heart-of-hearts, Bubba knows that more than likely Marder will eventually betray him. Instinctively knowing this, Bubba continues to help him anyway. When his suspicions are confirmed—Bubba learns that the land that Marder has promised him has already been lost in a card game—he continues to help Marder. He empathizes with Marder’s loss and takes responsibility for Marder because it is the right and just thing to do.

Clearly, he is initially more interested in helping Jake than he is Marder. In fact, Jake, “whose tears were flowing” (26) when he tells Bubba about the murder of his folks, is the one who ultimately persuades Bubba to help them. Still, Marder is not satisfied: “Things were starting to cloud up considerably as far I was concerned—standing on the range making land deals with a nigger, watching my estate suffer, to my thinking, coerced division. I had a mind to shoot Bubba for attempting to violate me...” (26)¹³. Marder thinks of his deal with Bubba in terms of a physical violation—a rape—that has wide implications in terms of how their relationship will develop. First, Marder finds it humiliating even to have to negotiate with a black man. He feels that all he should have to do is command Bubba’s help and that should suffice to warrant his aid. Moreover, that Marder sees the negotiation as a symbolic sexual violation symbolically places him in a submissive position in power relations between the two men, undermining the “natural” order of race relations. Marder identifies his sovereign body, his freedom and manhood, through landownership and power over others. As a result of his deal with Marder, Bubba has taken away a great deal of his power and his sense of self¹⁴. In short, Marder has to recognize, to his chagrin, that he cannot get Sadie back without Bubba’s help; and Bubba, although cautious, expects Marder to uphold his end of the deal once they find Sadie. The two are forced to trust each

¹³ Marder’s thoughts foreshadow his actions later in the novel.

¹⁴ During their negotiation, Marder thinks to himself: “He stared hard into my eyes and I knew I had to agree to his terms. This was a new experience for me, having a nigger stare right into my eyes. It kind of unnerved me, like he was working some kind of voodoo magic on me” (*God’s Country* 26). Marder feels psychologically upended because nineteenth-century racial and social mores, generally, forbade blacks from looking directly in the eyes of whites. To do so was seen as a grave violation and could cost the black person his life. What Everett implies in this scene is that the West, in many ways, is unlike the American South, the region of the country from where Marder hails. It is whites, Everett suggests, who brought their ideas of dehumanizing and degrading socially constructed modes of behavior as the natural order of human relations to the American West, a region in its expansive newness, that has always, at least symbolically, proffered the chance for positive changes in the way human beings might relate to one another as a community. However, we see from this passage that rather than accepting the fact that he needs Bubba’s help and that Bubba is a very shrewd negotiator, Marder thinks that Bubba has gotten the best of him through black magic.

other. However, shortly after making his deal with Bubba, Marder loses all of his land in a poker game; and, true to his unethical nature, when they meet up again, he does not tell Bubba¹⁵.

Marder's duplicity constitutes a serious breach in ethics; and it is just such ethical breaches, Everett indicates, that historically led to the subjugation and near-destruction of nonwhite Others in America¹⁶. Marder does not recognize Bubba's legitimacy as a human being, and so he feels his "contract" with Bubba is also nonbinding¹⁷. Despite Bubba's reputation as the best tracker in the area and someone who, despite his race, is *somewhat* respected by other whites in the town for his honesty and integrity, he is still simply a nigger, and as such, absolutely inferior.

Bubba, Marder, and Jake begin their quest to find the Renegades who kidnapped Sadie and killed Jake's parents. As they ride, their conversation highlights the tension between the two men:

I [Marder] was feeling good, sitting up straight in the saddle now, and I decided to try to talk to the black man again. "Where'd you come from, boy," Bubba asks. Young Jake looked at me, but it was Bubba I was talking to. "I mean, you, Bubba." Bubba turned his head slowly and took me in. He spat tobacco juice at the front feet of my horse. "I ain't no boy." "Well, what the hell do you want me to call you?" Marder replies. He [Bubba] looked at the head of his mule and, without facing me, said, "If'n you gotta call me, you might as well use my name, which you know and I don't have to tell you." Marder retorts: "I'll let this uppity behavior slide, Bubba, since I done hired you and all." (51)

In referring to Bubba as a "boy," Marder attempts to reestablish his supposed dominance and superiority. But by not looking at him directly, Bubba denies Marder the satisfaction of seeing the effect that this racial epithet might have on him. He purposefully

¹⁵ After losing all of his land, Marder states: "Like he was some kind of devil... I watched as that fat man (Wide Clyde McBride) raked in his winnings with his forearms. I felt hollow and sick" (*God's Country* 32). Marder's words echo the narrator of T. S. Eliot's poem, "The Hollow Men" (1925). In this famous poem, the narrator mediates upon a soul's journey through the kingdom of death. The poem makes a number of references to landscape reminiscent of the American West. Stanza III: "This is the dead land / this is the cactus land / Here the stone images / Are raised, here they receive / The supplication of a dead man's hand / Under the twinkling of a fading star" (2058). And in Stanza V: "Here we go round the prickly pear / Prickly pear prickly pear / Here we go round the prickly pear / At five o'clock in the morning" (lines 40–44). Marder and the other white men in the town epitomize "hollow men" who ostensibly worship false gods; their god is avarice. Additionally, Eliot's epigraphs to "The Hollow Men": "Mistah Kurtz—he dead" and "A Penny for the Old Guy" refer to Mr. Kurtz, the protagonist, Africa ivory monopolize, and self-styled demigod in Conrad's novel *The Heart of Darkness* (1902), and the Catholic anarchist Guy Fawkes, who unsuccessfully attempted to blow up the English Parliament in 1605, respectively. Both Mr. Kurtz and Guy Fawkes come to a terrible demise. That Everett names Marder "Curt Marder" refers to a parodied version of Conrad's Mr. Kurtz and Guy Fawkes, who attempted to murder members of the British Parliament and was subsequently caught and executed. Later many Catholics view Fawkes as a martyr. The English, however, celebrate the foiling of the Gunpowder Plot by burning straw effigies of Fawkes each November 5. Like Kurtz and Fawkes, Marder is portrayed in Everett's *God's Country* as a hollow or straw man.

¹⁶ That Marder breaches his agreement with Bubba ostensibly stems from the fact that Bubba is a black man who should not be allowed to own anything, much less a prime piece of property. Of course, in the nineteenth century, blacks were rarely allowed to make legally binding agreements. Moreover, if they happened to own land, the chances that whites would allow them to continue to own that land was extremely rare. Whites often neither resorted to violence or a manipulation of the law in order to disenfranchise blacks.

¹⁷ I would argue that Marder breaks his "contract" with Bubba not so much in terms of juridical laws, for in the nineteenth century blacks were legally prevented from owning land. Instead, Marder breaches an ethical and moral contract that, Everett suggests, goes beyond the letter of the law.

does not turn to face Marder. Instead, he simply asks Marder to call him by his name as he would any other human being; yet, Marder cannot bring himself to address Bubba by his given name without appending a racial slight. That he thinks Bubba is being “uppity” contributes to Marder’s obtuseness in terms of the recognition and respect from him that Bubba is due. Contrarily, Bubba comes to care for and respect Jake in a way that he could never feel toward Marder. His relationship with Marder is based on a business arrangement; his relationship with Jake is based on genuine regard, respect, and responsibility for him, and this leads to a deeper affiliation between the two.

For example, Bubba allows Jake, who does not have a horse, to ride behind him on his mule; Bubba makes sure to pack an extra blanket for Jake to sleep on when they stop to rest for the night, and Bubba trusts Jake to gather firewood and puts him in charge of the few matches they have: “[Bubba] reached into his vest pocket, pulled out a couple of matches and placed them in Jake’s hand. ‘Don’t waste ’em now.’ Jake enthusiastically responds, ‘Yes, sir, I mean, no, sir.’ To which Bubba replies: ‘Don’t call me sir, son... Just call me by my name.’” (52). By asking Jake to call him by his name, unlike Marder who seeks to sully Bubba’s name, Bubba comes to feel a deep affection for the boy, sympathy and empathy for his plight. Even though Jake feels the same way about Bubba, Levinas would certainly contend that Bubba’s actions do not call for reciprocity from Jake for, “the moment one is generous in hopes of reciprocity, that relation no longer involves generosity but the commercial relation, the exchange of good behavior” (*Alterity and Transcendence*, 101).

These are exactly the kinds of relationships that undergird Marder’s thoughts and actions. Levinas would add that Bubba’s actions are not wholly about feelings of responsibility and obligation but a turn toward justice where “the order of responsibility, in which even what isn’t my business is my business, from mercy to justice” (*Alterity*, 103). Everett also suggests that Bubba and Jake are drawn to each other because they recognize their mutual exclusion and otherness; neither has family: they are both orphans in a racist and sexist society. But now, at least for a while, they constitute a community of two¹⁸. Indeed, Jake feels comfortable enough with Bubba to ask:

Jake: Are you a nigger?

Bubba: No.

Marder: Then what are you?

Bubba: I’m a black man.

Marder: But he said it to the boy and not to me.

Marder: Nigger’s just a word for black man.

Marder: Bubba didn’t say nothing, just kind of shook his head. (55)

Marder cannot conceive of Bubba as anything but a “nigger,” and certainly not a man, even after Bubba tacitly tries to communicate the difference to Marder. Instead, Bubba directly addresses Jake instead of Marder knowing that he has the opportunity to positively influence Jake with an understanding that it is probably too late for Marder.

¹⁸ After Jake kills the man who tries to rape her and who almost murders Bubba, Bubba does not think about how close he came to death but instead immediately goes over to Jake to comfort her: “[Marder] glanced around and there was Jake, holding Bubba’s gun in his lap. His little body was shaking something awful, Bubba went to him and was on his knees, hugging him and talking soft” (*God’s Country* 88). Bubba, unlike Marder, demonstrates his concern and his feeling of responsibility for Jake’s well-being. Thus, he fulfills Levinas’s call for “responsibility that is not a return to self but an irremovable and implacable crispation” (Peperzak, Critchley, and Bernasconi 89).

Philosophically, Marder's discourse stands alongside racist, Enlightenment thinkers such as Hume, Kant, and Hegel, among others. Levinas points out that in the face of prejudice the Other loses its alterity. The paradox is that Marder despises Bubba for his difference, yet he needs Bubba against whom to define himself. Thus, he also totalizes Bubba as a representative of the black race. For Marder, *all* black people are niggers; in his disclosure, he refuses to acknowledge Bubba's particularity, his uniqueness as an individual, and collapses his being under the epithet of "nigger" as he reads Bubba through an established racist "epistemic regime" (Yancy, 96). In this case, "the same dominates, or absorbs or envelopes the other" (Levinas, *Alterity* 103). Thus, throughout the novel, Bubba wages a discursive battle against Marder's ignorance, not to prove to Marder that he is a human being (Bubba already knows this), but to parry Marder's epistemological and ontological assault against him. Still, his relationship with Marder puzzles Bubba's Native American friends, Big Elk and his tribe, whom the townspeople and the federal government believe are the perpetrators of not only the crime against Marder but also other attacks on white settlers:

Running Deer: Why do you help this man?

Bubba: He's gonna pay me in land. Funny ain't it. It used to be your land. Maybe I should give it back to you when I get it.

Happy Bear: You're darker than we are. They won't let you keep it. Do you believe they'll let you keep it?

Big Elk: No one can own the land.

Bubba: No one can own it. But that's the game now, Big Elk. I ask myself every morning what's a man to do. I cry about it. I get sick with it.

Big Elk: How do you answer yourself, my friend?

Marder: I couldn't really make out Bubba's response, but it sounded like "Kill 'em." (60)

Whether or not Marder actually hears these words from Bubba is left in doubt. One could argue that his interpretation of what was said is simply a manifestation of his guilt or, more than likely, words that are actually a part of his *own* thoughts concerning Bubba and the Indians. Levinas explains the paradox of responsibility for the other:

In the face of the other there is always the death of the other and thus, in some way, the incitement to murder, the temptation to go to the extreme, to completely neglect the other. At the same time (and this is the paradoxical thing) the face is also the "thou shalt not kill... Thou shalt not kill" is also the fact that I cannot let the other die alone... in relation to the face, it is asymmetry that is affirmed: at the outset I hardly care what the other is with respect to me, that is his own business; for me, he is above all the one for whom I am responsible. (*Is It Righteous to Be?* 166)

For Levinas, the face is the impetus that drives one to kill the other while at the same time, it should ethically prevent one from killing the Other through a recognition of "the one for whom I am responsible" (166). While perhaps Levinas puts forth the idea that ideally killing should not occur, he does not dismiss the fact that it does. What Levinas does here is put forth an ethical stance that is more ideal than real. When they return to town, Jake is attacked by a man who tries to rape him/her. Bubba returns to the stables just in time and "pulled his fist back and give it to the white man like he was white himself... Bubba left off and turned away. The white man slid his pistol out of his pocket and aimed it at Bubba's back. I wanted to yell something, but I didn't know what. My fear sharpened my vision and I could see his fingers squeezing the trigger clear as anything... But Bubba didn't drop" (*God's Country*, 88). Instead, Jake shoots the white man, thus saving Bubba's life. To

Bubba, the situation is quite clear. He wisely tells Marder, ““With or without you, me and Jake is getting the hell out of here. I ain’t getting lynched by nobody”” (89)¹⁹. Even though Bubba is not the one who committed the murder, he nonetheless realizes that he will be blamed and lynched for the crime. As a black man, he does not expect justice. George Yancy points out that “The meaning of [the black] body is reduced to a transhistorical essence with a fixed teleology” (10) that (white) society and the law does not recognize as innocent, even when such is the case. Here, Yancy’s observations echo Levinas’s proposition concerning the violence that occurs when the asymmetry or alterity of the Other is not respected for itself, when epistemological particularity is subsumed by ontological and epistemological totalization. In a gloss on Levinasian thought, Judith Butler writes, “If ... it is the face of the other that demands an ethical response then it would seem that the norms that would allocate who is and who is not human arrive in visual form. These norms work to give face and to efface” (*Frames of War*, 77). It is how we respond, “through visual and discursive frames” (77), to the face that will determine the Other’s sovereignty or annihilation. The face evokes both “a desire to kill and an ethical necessity not to kill” (*Precarious Life*, 173). In “Is Ontology Fundamental?” Levinas explains that in the face-to-face encounter with the other a “violence and a negation” is in fact only a “‘partial negation’... indicated by the fact that, without disappearing, those beings are in my powers ... [which] denies the independence of a being: it belongs to me to be used and, in the case of the natural world, consumed as I please” (*Basic Philosophical Writings*, 9). In truth, Levinas goes on to explain, even if one murders the Other, the Other can never be fully negated. I will flesh out this elaboration in a reading of the final scene of *God’s Country*.

By not recognizing in the face-to-face encounter with the Other, his responsibility to the Other, Marder commits a series of ethical and moral crimes of partial negation against Greenfeld, the Native Americans, Bubba, Jake, and Sadie. His egoism and self-serving nature short circuits “the epiphany of the face as face” in which he does not understand that “to recognize the Other is to give” (*Totality and Infinity*, 45). Bubba gives sustenance, Marder does not. Marder confesses: ““Like all settlers I looked to taming it [the land] and making it work for me, so I could get rich. My dream had me sitting at a big table, waiting for Sadie, who was walking towards me with a dandy cooked turkey... I told her [Sadie] that the land was mine. I said I had a fine place and stock and that I had me a woman. She started to laugh”” (*God’s Country*, 60–61). Marder’s version of the American Dream of power, greed, conquest, and domination is undermined by Sadie’s laughter. She, like the other characters in the novel, knows Marder better than he knows himself. His life’s ambitions, as Everett indicates, are a joke that everyone else is privy to except him. By the end of the novel Marder is left with nothing—no wife, no friends, and importantly for him, no home and property; in this regard, Everett, as he does in many of his other works, “vex[es] the property-rights base at the core of the American Dream ideology” (Quinn, 130).

It is greed that prompts Marder to inform General Custer and his troops where to find Chief Big Elk and his people in exchange for the bounty that has been placed on their

¹⁹For Levinas, “The encounter with the face is not an act of seeing; it is not perceptual or judgmental. What confronts me is the other person’s need, misery, destitution, and I do not see them, for I do not see yet, at all. I sense and respond. I sense the suffering and give or withhold—that is, I respond, and my sensing, my responding, and my recognizing—acknowledging and accepting the other is all one” (Morgan 75).

heads. Big Elk's tribe is not responsible for the attacks against the white settlers; yet, for General Custer, one dead Indian is as good as another. Marder's betrayal sets off a chain of events where, once they find Big Elk, Marder and Bubba witness "the braves... shootin' arrows from behind trees at the soldiers who fired from clusters on three sides of them. The camp was lousy with dead Injuns. They [the soldiers] wasn't interested in taking prisoners. They shot this way and that way and blindly into teepees and they was high on killing" (*God's Country*, 168–69).

Happy Bear is captured, tortured, and murdered; Big Elk is murdered, and Custer mercilessly scalps him. Angered by what he sees, Bubba decides to help his friends; however, before Bubba can enter the fray, Marder knocks him unconscious. On the surface, it might appear that Marder acts to save Bubba's life. However, one must also recognize that Marder has another, utilitarian agenda that goes against Levinas's ethical metaphysical paradigm. He is intent, no matter the cost, to collect the reward money for the capture of the Renegades and to rescue Sadie. Thus, Marder's saving Bubba's life is not undergirded by a Levinasian ethics of responsibility for the Other. This is not to say that Bubba is perfect: he is also intent on revenge—he plans to murder Custer; and in a scene that parallels Marder's saving his life, Bubba knocks Marder unconscious so that he cannot prevent him from carrying out his intentions. Soon, Marder recovers and goes after Bubba. After all, he still needs Bubba's help to find the Renegades who torched his house and who supposedly kidnapped Sadie. Bubba has the opportunity to kill Custer but does not. He reasons: "Killin' is too good fer him... Man like him should die in a special way, seeing it comin' and scared to death" (186). He simply knocks him unconscious, to which Marder responds: "Bubba, I am afraid I'm gonna have to do my American duty and stop you and then turn you in as a nigger what's gone wild" (184). Regardless of everything that Marder has gone through with Bubba, despite the fact that Bubba has stuck with Marder through thick and thin, Marder still cannot comprehend Bubba's humanity. Marder has totalized Bubba's subjectivity through racist and racialized language; for Marder, Bubba is still simply a nigger. His real attitude toward Bubba changes very little and excises any chance that he might experience an epiphany that would allow him to participate in what Levinas calls an intersubjective relationship, one that would leave Bubba independent of Marder's need for domination and Marder's fear of domination. A Levinasian ethical relationship would mark the validity of each other's asymmetry or alterity rooted in the nexus of the face-to-face encounter²⁰.

Tellingly, as Bubba and Marder make their final move to rescue Sadie, they discuss their dreams for the future. Marder attests, "I want a lot of money and to be able to tell folks what to do and to have me a nice big spread and to have my name mean something" (*God's Country*, 216). Bubba simply wants freedom to be: "All I want is one day where I ain't got to worry about a white man decidin' I looked crosswise at him, one day where I ain't got to worry just 'cause I hear a rider behind me, one day where I ain't called a boy" (216). Marder tells him, "That ain't much of a dream" (216). This exchange emphasizes Marder's inability to understand that what Bubba dreams about is what any human being

²⁰ For Levinas, "The encounter with the face is not an act of seeing; it is not perceptual or judgmental. What confronts me is the other person's need, misery, destitution, and I do not see them, for I do not see yet, at all. I sense and respond. I sense the suffering and give or withhold—that is, I respond, and my sensing, my responding, and my recognizing—acknowledging and accepting the other is all one" (Morgan 75).

should already have: Marder takes his freedom, shored up by white male privilege, for granted. He can dream about a relatively unimpeded future; Bubba knows that in all likelihood his own dreams of freedom will go unfulfilled. As Clyde R. Taylor has written “The American Dream is another of the extended productions of Euro-enlightenment where the transcendent condition is premised on its co-definition with non-White invalidity. The “dream” does not exist to the exclusion of people of color; its existence depends on degradation to a lower, ineligible status.” (146) It is Marder’s final act of betrayal that seemingly cuts Bubba’s dreams short. Marder begins to think about his and Bubba’s growing relationship, but concludes that ““Bubba’d already killed one white man and after we was done killing the vermin we was tracking, he’d be like a mad dog what’s got a taste of blood²¹. And the reward money. How was that gonna be split? When all was done, I was gonna have to kill Bubba, shoot him dead. There was nothing else to do. Simple. And he was a nigger. I wouldn’t have to cover it up, justify it or nothing”” (217). There will be no face-to-face intersubjective relationship between the two men, for Marder’s view is that in “God’s Country,” his country, Bubba is wholly unassimilable. On their way to find the Renegades, Bubba realizes that he is being set up and decides to abandon the mission. He informs Marder forthrightly, ““I ain’t dying for nobody exceptin’ myself”” (218). Marder fires a warning shot but Bubba doesn’t stop his slow retreat. Subsequently, the culmination of Marder’s outrage takes hold of him, for he sees in Bubba’s departure all of his dreams dissipating like rain in the desert: ““I was staring at him and I don’t know what come over me, but it was like some kind of blind historical urge and that black man in front of me weren’t no real kind of human being, just a thing. I raised my gun and put a bullet in his back”” (218). Marder’s “ethical failure” (Morgan, 26) proves that he does not feel responsibility for anyone except himself; his egoism and selfishness is supported, he claims, by a “blind historical urge” that precludes him from demonstrating responsibility for the Other. Marder is incapable of understanding, because of social and historical conditioning that “responsibility is not a burden; it does not deflate the self. It does not diminish the self, but rather, by emptying it of imperialism, egoism, and power, this being chosen or elected [to be responsible for an Other] ‘liberates’ the self” (Morgan, 98).

Oddly enough, however, Bubba does not die, even after Marder fires another round into his back. Instead, Marder notes, Bubba turned around and ““looked at me with a hawk’s eyes, not the eyes of a man with two bullets in his back”” (219)²². Bubba then

²¹ In reality, Bubba does not kill anyone in the novel. Perhaps, Marder’s statement is a way to assuage his guilt about his plans to betray and kill Bubba. On another level, Marder’s statement advances the question that many writers of color address in their fiction: Who controls history?

²² Judith Butler asserts that when speaking of the “face,” Levinas does not always literally mean an Other’s visage. Butler contends that in various iterations of his “philosophy,” what Levinas often means by face is not the actual face of the Other. Instead, the “face” can be represented by any part of the body that expresses pain and anguish: “The face is not reducible to the mouth nor indeed to anything the mouth has to utter” (*Precarious Life* 133). In Levinas’s essay “Peace and Proximity,” Levinas elaborates on this notion through his reading of Vassili Grossman’s *Life and Fate* (1960). In Butler’s assessment, Levinas extends the idea of the “face” to describe the body parts such as the human back and neck, “bodily parts... [which] are said to cry and to sob and to scream, as if they were a face with a mouth, a throat, or indeed, just a mouth and a throat from which vocalizations [of pain] emerge that do not settle into words” (*Precarious Life* 133). Moreover, in several places in the novel, Bubba is described as a hawk. For instance, when he confronts General Custer, Marder describes Bubba as “just staring at Custer, his fist opening and closing like a hawk’s talons” (184). Bubba is associated with the natural world. Like the hawk, he has more legitimate ties to God’s Country than

climbs back on his mule and proclaims: “‘I’m goin’ out there to make a life for myself somewhere. You done cheated me, lied to me, and killed my brothers. I ain’t got enough interest in you to kill you. But I’m going down there, like I said. And you or somebody what looks like you or thinks like you or is you will find me and you’ll burn me out, shoot me, or maybe lynch me. But you know something? You cain’t kill me’” (219). Seemingly mortally wounded, he rides away into the sunset²³.

In what is literally a final face-to-face encounter with the Other, greed consumes any ethical responsibility that Marder has toward Bubba. Levinas would acknowledge that “Murder is a banal fact; the ethical exigency is not an ontological necessity” (*Ethics* 87). As a black man, a racialized Other, Bubba knows that his is a precarious life which, unprotected by social and civil law, can be taken in a moment’s notice simply because of his race. Everett reminds the reader that over the course of American (and world) history people have often exercised this kind of power over Others who are different—Others whose humanity is negated. But Levinas does not view the killing of another person as an exercise of power; rather, he views it as an exercise of weakness. He writes:

The Other is the sole being I can wish to kill. I can wish. And yet this power is quite the contrary of power. The triumph of this power is its defeat as power. At the very moment when my power to kill realizes itself, the other has escaped me... I have not looked at him in the face, I have not encountered the face... To be in relation with the other face to face is to be unable to kill. It is also the situation of discourse. (*Eternity and Infinity*, 9)

Everett often writes about the power that discourse has been given to dehumanize and subjugate Others²⁴.

Everett illustrates in *God’s Country* the terrible results that can ensue when people are not willing or able to embrace the face-to-face encounter with the Other that might lead to greater, more genuine interpersonal relationships grounded in a Levinasian ethics of responsibility for the Other. The novel, I have argued, instantiates many aspects of Emmanuel Levinas’s ethics of recognition that seeks to examine the interlocking mechanisms inherent in the acceptance of and care for the Other. Bubba is acutely aware of Marder and the rest of the white community’s attempted objectification of him and their pathological need for domination and a feeling of superiority over those who are not like them. Their desires stem from avarice and egoism that foment to deny the asymmetrical infinity of his Being. That Bubba, although mortally wounded, does not die at the end of the novel but instead is “resurrected” frames him not as a transcendent, postmodern Christ-figure but a being of immanence whose selfhood is grounded in intimate relations with Others, including nature, and whose “transcendence” is not found in what the novel suggests is a corrupt Christian moral and ethical paradigm but from within. In this regard, Bubba, arguably, has greater claims to “God’s Country” than Marder or any of the other white characters in the novel. Through a dignified, quiet resolve he does not allow Marder,

Marder and the other whites in the community.

²³In *God’s Country*, Everett, uses wordplay as commentary on characters’ names. Marder sounds like “murder” and “martyr.” Marder attempts to murder Bubba and it is Bubba, if anyone, in the novel who could be viewed, like Christ, as a martyr, not Curt Marder.

²⁴Everett makes this clear in other novels such as *Zulus* (1990), *Glyph* (1999), *Wounded* (2005), and *The Water Cure* (2007).

through discourse or action, to cast him out of “The Promised Land.” Because Marder’s conception of “The Promised Land,” “God’s Country,” does not exist for Bubba. Bubba will not die alone in the desert, for he takes with him the “faces” of all those that he has met and cared for, particularly the Native Americans and Jake²⁵. In truth, it is Marder who, at novel’s end, finds himself utterly alone and uncared for, dreaming of hopes for a future that will never come to fruition.

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²⁵ In the novel, Jake is kidnapped by a lecherous laypreacher named Phrensie. Phrensie seeks to sell her into prostitution. Bubba rescues Jake and decides that she is in better hands with Loretta, a reformed prostitute, than with either him or Marder. Loretta, though at first reluctant, accepts Jake as her ward (*God’s Country*, 211–12).

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