Beyond Multiculturalism

Invisible Men and Transculturality in *The Human Stain* and *Erasure*

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Introduction

AMERICAN MULTICULTURALISM before 9/11 can be understood as a policy-oriented movement that advocates equality between races and peoples in American society by emphasizing cultural specificity and communication between majority and minority groups. As in many other countries, multiculturalism has been the subject of much debate in the USA.¹ In the 1990s, a number of American critics expressed concern over what they saw as multiculturalism's tendency to define culture and cultural identity in essentialist terms and to undermine a sense of national unity.² In the novels *The Human Stain* by Philip Roth (2000) and *Erasure* by Percival Everett (2001), multiculturalism is depicted as essentialist and moralistic.

¹ Will Kymlicka, "American Multiculturalism in the International Arena," *Dissent* 36.4 (Fall 1998): 37.

² These works include Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987); Dinesh D'Souza, *Illiberal Education: The Politics of Race and Sex on Campus* (New York: Vintage, 1992); Todd Gitlin, *The Twilight of Common Dreams: Why America Is Wracked by Culture Wars* (New York: Henry Holt, 1995); Nathan Glazer, *We Are All Multiculturalists Now* (Cambridge MA: Harvard UP, 1997); James Davison Hunter, *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America* (New York: Basic Books, 1991); Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of the World Order* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996); and Arthur M. Schlesinger, *The Disuniting of America* (Knoxville TN: Whittle Direct, 1991).

Both novels present black American male protagonists who feel victimized by multiculturalist attitudes and policies. Critics have argued that, through their respective novels, Roth and Everett support a universalist view of American identity that emphasizes the importance of a shared nationality and a shared value-system regardless of race.³ The argument made in this essay, by contrast, is that the critique of multiculturalism in *The Human Stain* and *Erasure* is better understood in transcultural terms. According to Wolfgang Welsch, transculturality refers to the increasing interconnection among contemporary cultures that are themselves becoming crossbred.⁴ Transculturality appears in society both on an individual level, or micro-level, and on a macro-level.⁵ On an individual level, transculturality equals cultural hybridity, or being “cast by differing cultural interests.”⁶ Welsch argues that the individual’s recognition of the foreign or plural within him- or herself is a first step towards accepting transculturality on a cultural and social macro-level.⁷

Roth’s and Everett’s protagonists do not demonstrate any transcultural self-awareness. Instead, they conform to multiculturalist definitions of identity by constructing new identities, which, as the novels demonstrate, cannot incorporate all of their experiences. Indeed, it is only on a meta-structural level that a notion of transculturality makes its appearance in the novels. The meta-structures of Roth’s and Everett’s respective novels question the multiculturalist concept of a knowable and static identity in favour of a more intermixed, changeable, or fragmented notion of identity. As will be demonstrated, Roth juxtaposes characters of different ethnic origins to highlight the complex affiliations that they have, both with each other and with society at large. By allowing one character to speak for another, he offers a response to the question of how experiences that do not fit neatly into multiculturalist definitions of ethnicity and race can be expressed. Everett’s novel consists of two texts that are distinguished from one another by their literary style as much as by

³ See Timothy L. Parrish, “Ralph Ellison: The Invisible Man in Philip Roth’s *The Human Stain*,” *Contemporary Literature* 45.3 (Autumn 2004): 431; and Bernard W. Bell, [untitled], *African American Review* 37.2–3 (2003): 477.

⁴ Wolfgang Welsch, “Transculturality: The Puzzling Form of Cultures Today,” in *Spaces of Culture: City, Nation, World*, ed. Mike Featherstone & Scott Lash (Thousand Oaks CA & London: Sage 1999): 197.

⁵ Welsch, “Transculturality: The Puzzling Form of Cultures Today,” 197.

⁶ “Transculturality: The Puzzling Form of Cultures Today,” 198.

⁷ “Transculturality: The Puzzling Form of Cultures Today,” 201.

their distinct content and African-American narrators. As this essay will argue, the appearance of these texts in the novel implies that African-American experience, like all experience, is multi-faceted and contradictory, demanding multiple literary expressions.

According to Welsch, our understanding of culture is an active factor in our lives, in the sense that it determines our cultural activities, including, presumably, our cultural production.⁸ For Richard Slimbach, “transculturalism is rooted in the quest to define shared interest and common values across cultural [...] borders.”⁹ In this respect, Roth’s and Everett’s aesthetic choices can be understood in both biographical and political terms. Both authors have been categorized as ethnic writers and both have rejected the label.¹⁰ Rather than seeking the origin of their transcultural stance in the authors’ biographies, however, this essay will read *The Human Stain* and *Erasure* in the context of a debate, in the 1960s, over the role of literature in the African-American civil-rights movement. This debate focused on the political significance of the anti-social realist form of Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*, first published in 1947, and a novel to which Roth and Everett make intertextual references in their respective novels. In the debate, critics of Ellison questioned what they identified as a prioritizing of literary aesthetics over politics. Roth and Everett seem to be doing the same in their writing. Nevertheless, transcultural awareness in *The Human Stain* and *Erasure* takes the shape of a reconfiguration of the realist form. References in the following to the debate over Ellison’s novel also serve as reminders that American multiculturalism has roots in the civil-rights movement and in the identity-politics of other 1960s liberation movements.¹¹

⁸ “Transculturality: The Puzzling Form of Cultures Today,” 200.

⁹ Richard Slimbach, “The Transcultural Journey,” *Frontiers: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Study Abroad* 11 (August 2005): 206.

¹⁰ See Timothy L. Parrish, “Roth and Ethnic Identity,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Philip Roth*, ed. Timothy L. Parrish (Cambridge: Cambridge UP): 127; and Margaret Russett, “Race under *Erasure* for Percival Everett, ‘A Piece of Fiction’,” *Callaloo* 28.2 (Spring 2005): 363.

¹¹ Derek Rubin & Jaap Verheul, “Introduction” to *American Multiculturalism after 9/11: Transatlantic Perspectives*, ed. Derek Rubin & Jaap Verheul (Amsterdam: Amsterdam UP, 2009): 8.

The Limits of Multiculturalism

Defenders of American multiculturalism have emphasized its foundation in the 1960s struggle for the equal rights of minority groups.¹² At the same time, sceptics have argued that the movement's definition of identity restricts individuals' right to define themselves outside the confines of their ethnic or cultural group.¹³ Roth and Everett have come under attack from advocates of minority groups. The authors have been defined as Jewish or African-American, respectively; they have also been reproached for not being Jewish or African-American enough.¹⁴ More precisely, both authors have been accused of undermining the struggles of the minority groups with which they are identified, by writing stories that portray less flattering aspects of these groups or that question their presumably homogeneous nature. Despite Roth's and Everett's unwillingness to be identified as ethnic writers, race and identity are still pivotal topics in their works.

Race and identity are addressed with particular poignancy in *The Human Stain* and in *Erasure*. On a plot level, the novels suggest that multiculturalism restricts the lives of individuals; both novels tell the story of a man who constructs a new identity to conform to essentialist definitions of ethnicity and race. In the process, he ends up hiding aspects of himself that do not fit the construction. In *The Human Stain*, Roth explores the detrimental effects of multicultural policies at a college campus at the time of the Clinton–Lewinsky affair. The novel's main character, the Classics professor Coleman Silk, falls victim to a politically correct and multiculturally infused discourse when he is accused of racially insulting two black students. Silk is innocent of the charges, yet still loses his position. He is also a light-skinned black man who has long falsely presented himself as Jewish.

In the novel *Erasure*, Everett explores questions of race and identity by satirizing mainstream publishers' stereotyping of black writers. The novel's protagonist is the black author and academic Thelonious Ellison, referred to as Monk after his namesake the black jazz pianist Thelonius Monk. Monk ends up adopting a fictional identity to comply with his publisher's demands, a strategy which, to his surprise and consternation, gets his work published.

¹² Rubin & Verheul, "Introduction," 8.

¹³ Anne Phillips, *Multiculturalism Without Culture* (Princeton NJ: Princeton UP, 2007): 14.

¹⁴ See Irving Howe, "Philip Roth Reconsidered," *Commentary* 54.6 (December 1972): 69–77; and Bell, [untitled], 477.

By tracing the instant success of Monk as a so-called ghetto writer, Everett exposes racist attitudes hidden behind the publishing business's multiculturalist discourse.

Minority demands for recognition have been so successful in the USA that multiculturalism has become a "master narrative," argues Paul Gilroy.¹⁵ According to Gilroy, American multiculturalism expresses itself in three forms – "corporate, commercial, and oppositional."¹⁶ To Gilroy's three categories can be added a fourth – institutional academic multiculturalism. In *The Human Stain*, multiculturalist ideals influence the college faculty members' criticism of Silk for calling two of his students "spooks."¹⁷ Yet Silk employs language conscientiously and refers to the word's primary meaning. He calls the students spooks, or ghosts, because they have never attended his lectures. Nevertheless, 'spook' is also a pejorative term for a black person and Silk is accused of racism since the absent students turn out to be black. In the novel, multiculturalist policies and attitudes are described as so powerful that they distort logical reasoning and the meaning of language. The power of multiculturalism is demonstrated most strongly through Silk's most adamant adversary at the college, Delphine Roux, who is a newly appointed professor in the department. As a faculty member, she represents an institution that wishes to avoid a possible lawsuit from the two students. Yet Roux has attacked Silk even before he uttered the word "spooks." Earlier on, she had taken up the cause of a female student, who complained that the classical Greek plays discussed in Silk's class were "degrading to women" (184). Faced with new accusations, Silk decides to resign rather than apologize to his students and the faculty board. When his wife dies shortly after his resignation, he begins to write a book about his treatment by the college, but finds that he cannot finish the manuscript, entitled "Spooks." Instead, he befriends his neighbour, the author Nathan Zuckerman – a recurring character in Roth's fiction and the narrator in *The Human Stain* – and asks him to complete the book for him. Zuckerman speculates that the reason Silk cannot finish the book is that it would force him to reveal his racial origin (345).

¹⁵ Paul Gilroy, *Between Camps: Race, Identity, and Nationalism at the End of the Colour Line* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2000): 241.

¹⁶ Gilroy, *Between Camps*, 241.

¹⁷ Philip Roth, *The Human Stain* (2000; London: Vintage, 2001): 7. Further page references are in the main text.

Commercial multiculturalism is the target of Everett's *Erasure*. Monk does not "believe in race," but recognizes with mounting anger that others do.¹⁸ A writer and academic by profession, Monk is told by his agent that publishers are hesitant to take on his poststructuralist novels set in ancient Greece because they are simply not "*black enough*" (4, italics in the original). The agent insists that what publishers and readers want are "the true, gritty real stories of black life" (4). Although some of the people in the black community in which Monk lives likewise tell him that he is not 'black' enough, it is the mainstream, white publishing industry's pressure to conform to the stereotype of blackness that affects him most. Coming from a well-adjusted, middle-class family consisting mostly of doctors, Monk does not fit the stereotype of black authors. As a result, his experiences and his writing appear to be of little interest to mainstream publishers and audiences. The agent's advice to Monk to write stereotypically 'black' novels is steeped in a multicultural discourse that is based on the idea of essential cultural and ethnic identities. Monk's anger with the role he is expected to play as a black author reaches boiling point when he hears of the first-time author Juanita Mae Jenkins' literary success. He finds her bestselling novel *We's Lives in Da Ghetto* hateful for its insincerity, including its idiomatic supposedly black style and ghetto setting (34). Finding out that Jenkins has no more experience than he of the life she describes, Monk decides to write a parody of the ghetto novel. The result is the novella *My Pafology*, which he markets under the pseudonym Stagg R. Leigh.¹⁹ To Monk's dismay, the novella, which tells the story of a small-time criminal and rapist, is immediately accepted by a major publisher as an authentic black story and becomes a nation-wide bestseller.

'Authenticity' is a central concept for American multiculturalism. The demands on the part of minority groups for recognition by the white majority have frequently been articulated in terms that presuppose an authentic minority identity. Since the 1960s, demands for the recognition of black Americans as a group with unique experiences in common have led other minority groups to insist on similar recognition. The moral force behind the demands stems

¹⁸ Percival Everett, *Erasure* (London: Faber & Faber, 2001): 4. Further page references are in the main text.

¹⁹ Anyone familiar with black American culture will know that the name derives from a folk blues-ballad dating from the late nineteenth century based on a murder committed in St Louis, Missouri, and going by numerous variant titles including "Stagolee," "Staggerlee," and "Stack O' Lee."

largely from the assumption of an already established and stable identity. As Charles Taylor argues, this kind of authenticity should be understood as having moral weight precisely because it describes a particular relation to oneself, a kind of self-knowledge and a matter of being true to oneself and by extension to one's ethnic group.²⁰ According to Taylor, authenticity is crucial for a defence of multiculturalism and its demands. Without it, the demands carry no weight. The protagonists' 'false' identities in Roth's and Everett's respective novels presuppose an underlying, more authentic identity. In one respect, the plot of *The Human Stain* supports such an interpretation. Silk never defends himself against the accusations of racism by coming out as a black man, even though this would surely complicate his identity as a privileged, middle-aged, supposedly Jewish male academic. Of course, being black does not preclude a racist attitude. Furthermore, the many years that he has passed for a Jewish man could be viewed as evidence of racial self-hatred and therefore work against him.²¹ Yet his silence could also be interpreted as strategic. This line of reasoning corresponds to the idea that it is in the interest of minority groups to stay silent about their ethnic identity, to remain "unreadable" to white majority culture.²² In the wake of such silence, the representatives of majority society may feel compelled to speak, thereby exposing the arbitrariness and injustice of their dominant position. In *The Human Stain*, Roux's obsession with Silk culminates in an email message where she admits her feelings for him. She accidentally forwards it to all faculty members and students, thereby exposing the personal, possibly unconscious, motivations

²⁰ Charles Taylor, "The Politics of Recognition," in Taylor, *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition*, ed. Amy Gutmann (Princeton NJ: Princeton UP, 1994): 72.

²¹ Roth's biography offers an alternative answer. Throughout his career as a writer, Roth has repeatedly been accused of antisemitism by readers and critics, who protest against his fictional portrayals of Jewish characters. Applying the same logic to *The Human Stain* suggests that if Silk were to reveal himself as a black man, he, too, would only be dismissed as self-hating. "Among the letters I receive from readers, there have been a number written by Jews accusing me of being anti-Semitic and 'self-hating', or, at least, tactless." Philip Roth, *Reading Myself and Others* (New York: Vintage, 2001): 193. Timothy L. Parrish draws a similar conclusion regarding the possibility of Coleman's 'coming out' as a black man. See Parrish, "Ralph Ellison: The Invisible Man in Philip Roth's *The Human Stain*," 434.

²² Drucilla Cornell & Sara Murphy, "Anti-Racism, Multiculturalism, and the Ethics of Identification," *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 28.4 (July 2002): 422.

behind her public assault. The email questions the politically correct reasons she has previously voiced to justify Silk's dismissal. From a multicultural perspective, Silk's silence about his racial origin thereby appears strategically sound.

In other respects as well, *The Human Stain* questions the idea of an essential racial or ethnic identity in favour of what appears to be a more universalist view of identity. The novel's title can be interpreted as alluding to the stain on Roux's moral argument. The human stain may equally be a reference to the infamous semen stain on Monica Lewinsky's dress. On a metaphorical level, both kinds of stain symbolize human weakness, a weakness to which even the President of the USA admitted with regard to his sexual affair with Lewinsky. The stain on Roux's character and the stain on Lewinsky's dress suggest that even powerful members of society may have something to hide from the world. Silk's personal secret is his racial origin. Yet Zuckerman informs the reader that Silk did not consciously set out to create a new racial identity. He was never a hater, his sister points out to Zuckerman. As a young amateur boxer, Silk is simply mistaken for Jewish, which enables him to participate in fights from which, as a black man, he would otherwise be barred. At Howard University, he is called "nigger" for the first time and becomes even more aware of the limitations of being a black man in the USA in the 1950s (102). "In the segregated South there were not separate identities," Zuckerman observes (103). Silk's reluctance to identify with the other black students, Zuckerman suggests, is not racial self-hatred but a strong sense of individualism: "Overnight the raw I was part of a we and with all the we's overbearing solidarity, and he did not want anything to do with it" (108). By defining himself as Jewish, Silk seems to be seeking to rise above questions of race and to identify himself on his own terms, as an individual. As a Jewish man, his ethnicity matters less in society than if he were a black man.²³ The price Silk pays for this relative freedom is that parts of his life must be erased, or at least remain hidden from private and public view. In particular, he finds that he must deny his racial origin, cut all ties with his birth family, and lie to his white wife and children.

Silk's reluctance to identify himself as a black man can be interpreted as a call, on the part of the implied author, for a universalist definition of Amer-

²³ On how Jewish Americans have come to be identified in American society as 'white', see Karen Brodtkin, *How Jews Became White Folk and What That Says about Race in America* (New Brunswick NJ: Rutgers UP, 1998).

ican identity. Zuckerman suggests towards the end of the novel that Silk “couldn’t wait to go through civil rights to get to his human rights, and so he skipped a step” (327). Yet the protagonist’s ability to choose a new identity also implies that a person’s identity is always a constructed, changeable, and ultimately unknowable concept. As Zuckerman explains, Silk “could play his skin however he wanted, color himself just as he chose” (109). After finding out that Silk is black, Zuckerman finds that his friend is still a mystery: “I couldn’t imagine anything that could have made Coleman more of a mystery to me than his unmasking [...] he became not just an unknown but an uncohesive person” (333). Indeed, *The Human Stain* and *Erasure* both reject the belief in an essential identity in favour of a much more fragmented and fluid definition of the term.

Like Silk, the protagonist in *Erasure* develops a new identity to satisfy society’s expectations, and finds that this action threatens to erase the person he believes he really is. To avoid discovery, Monk rarely appears in public as the ghetto author Stagg R. Leigh, and when he does, he wears a disguise. Eventually, Monk gains institutional recognition as Stagg by receiving a national literary prize, which suggests that Stagg is seen as the more ‘authentic’ identity in society. When Monk becomes one of the jury members on the National Book Association Award panel, he finds his novella among the nominations. Monk tries to persuade the other judges – who do not know he is the author – that the novella lacks value. Despite his protestations, *My Pafology* wins the award for its “true, raw, gritty” and “life-like” depiction of black experience (282). Now under pressure to perform publicly as the very stereotype he originally meant to satirize, Monk finds that what he regards as his true personality is gradually erased, as indicated by the novel’s title. At the end of the novel, Monk must present the award to himself before an expectant audience and suffers a mental breakdown as a result. The novel’s ending suggests that the inevitable outcome for an individual who seeks to escape the confines of multicultural discourse is either invisibility or madness, or both. As Monk himself explains towards the end, “I had managed to take myself, the writer, reconfigure myself, then disintegrate myself, leaving two bodies of work, two bodies, no boundaries yet walls everywhere” (285). Rather than exposing the audience to its own preconceived notions about race, Monk’s sense of identity completely deconstructs at the award ceremony. A similar identity breakdown characterizes the protagonist in Ellison’s *Invisible Man*, the novel to which both Roth and Everett allude in their own work.

Transcultural Meta-Structures

The main character in *Invisible Man* shares his social invisibility with Roth's and Everett's respective protagonists. In Ellison's novel, the nameless main character is unable to identify with either white or black society's definition of who he is. To escape the impossible choice between what he considers to be two equally stifling and static definitions of himself, the novel's protagonist chooses instead to literally go underground, to become invisible. On the run from a group of pursuers, he hides out in a coal cellar, in which he remains for most of the novel. In *The Human Stain*, Silk's "spooks" are intertextually linked to the first two sentences in *Invisible Man*: "I am an invisible man. No, I am not a spook like those who haunted Edgar Allan Poe."²⁴ Silk's first name, Coleman, further links him to the coal cellar in which Ellison's protagonist hides. Intertextual nods to Ellison's novel also appear in *Erasure*. The protagonist's surname is Ellison and the novel's title recalls the title of *Invisible Man*. Indeed, the title of Everett's novel even contains the word race (spelt 'rase'), simultaneously hidden and erased.

A 1960s debate over Ellison's *Invisible Man* offers clues to the transcultural aspects of Roth's and Everett's respective novels. The topic of this debate was the political relevance of Ellison's novel. Addressing the relationship between literature and social experience in the 1960s, the critic Irving Howe argued that Ellison's novel was a "failure" because the author remained too detached from the "ideological and emotional penalties suffered by Negroes" in the USA.²⁵ Howe writes that, like the author James Baldwin, Ellison "hoped to show the Negro world in its diversity and richness, not as a mere specter of protest."²⁶ Yet Howe disparages the political relevance of a literature written by a black author who insists on seeing

America with an awareness of its rich diversity and its almost magical fluidity and freedom [...] unburdened by the narrow naturalism which has led after so many triumphs to the final and unrelieved despair which marks so much of our current fiction.²⁷

As suggested by the quotation above, Ellison advocates a structural departure from the naturalistic novel for reasons that suggest a transcultural perspective

²⁴ Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (1952; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1974): 7.

²⁵ Irving Howe, "Black Boys and Native Sons," *Dissent* 10.4 (Fall 1963): 360.

²⁶ Howe, "Black Boys and Native Sons," 355.

²⁷ Ralph Ellison, "Light on *Invisible Man*," *The Crisis* 60.3 (March 1953): 157.

on American life, which, according to him, is characterized by diversity and fluidity. Howe's reply to his vision is nevertheless sceptical: "As if one could decide one's deepest and most authentic response to society!"²⁸ Howe's reference to authenticity is indicative of his preference for Richard Wright's naturalistic novel, *Native Son* (1940). According to Howe, Wright's novel is steeped in "the black wrath of retribution" and is thereby a more "authentic" example of black literature than *Invisible Man*.²⁹ Howe's comment implies that, for the black author, sociology must always come before literary style.

From a perspective like Howe's, the protagonists' invisibility in *The Human Stain* and *Erasure* is problematic because it seems to preclude a politically viable alternative to the fixed ethnic identities that the characters seek to escape. Yet an alternative reading of their novels suggests that Roth and Everett believe in "the supremacy of literary art over the issue of racial identity, without ever surrendering the claim that literature affects society."³⁰ To identify the transcultural aspects of the two novels, one must therefore turn to the topic of literary style. Commenting on *Erasure*, Everett states in an interview: "I see it essentially as a book about the creation of art and all the impediments placed in front of some of us as we set out to do that within this culture."³¹ He continues, "I don't want to talk about race, I just want to make art."³² Roth, too, argues:

the world of fiction [...] frees us from the circumscriptions that society places upon feeling; [...] this expansion of moral consciousness, this exploration of moral fantasy, is of considerable value to man and to society.³³

Roth's statement is a reminder that the negation of a stable identity in *The Human Stain* carries with it what Derek Parker Royal calls "the possibility of

²⁸ Irving Howe, "Black Boys and Native Sons," *Decline of the New* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1970): 176.

²⁹ "Native Son is a work of assault rather than withdrawal; the author yields himself in part to a vision of nightmare," according to Howe. He also argues that "Ellison is literary to a fault." Howe, "Black Boys and Native Sons," *Dissent*, 361.

³⁰ Parrish, "Ralph Ellison: The Invisible Man in Philip Roth's *The Human Stain*," 425.

³¹ Sean O'Hagan, "Colour Bind," *The Guardian* (16 March, 2003): <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2003/mar/16/fiction.features> (accessed 23 September 2011).

³² O'Hagan, "Colour Bind."

³³ Roth, *Reading Myself and Others*, 195.

subject re-creation.”³⁴ This is where the many references in *The Human Stain* to fictional creation become significant, Royal observes.³⁵ Silk cannot complete his book, because he cannot make use of his ‘invisible’ or ‘silent’ past without giving up the control that he has always sought to assert over other people’s perception of him. Furthermore, to reveal his racial identity at this stage would be to surrender to the very “identity-logic” that Silk has rebelled against his whole life, rather than being an act acknowledging his racial past.³⁶ From this perspective, it is significant that the narrator in *The Human Stain* is not Silk, but Nathan Zuckerman. Silk’s story begs to be told, but cannot be told by Silk himself.

Zuckerman’s retelling of Silk’s story questions the idea of a knowable and stable identity. A careful reading of the novel reveals that Zuckerman is more than a “writerly conduit” for Silk’s life-story.³⁷ At the end of the novel, it is revealed that Zuckerman is writing a book called *The Human Stain*.³⁸ This meta-fictional moment in the novel serves as a reminder that everything told about Silk, the motives behind his actions and ways of thinking, originates in Zuckerman’s imagination. Indeed, at several points in the novel, Zuckerman accounts for events and thoughts of which he cannot logically know anything. Furthermore, the novel is sprinkled with equivocal words, such as “maybe,” “perhaps,” and “seemed,” which indicate Zuckerman’s unreliability as narrator.³⁹ Eventually, his thoughts lead him to the contents of an anonymous letter sent to Silk, which he suspects has been written by Roux. The letter begins with the phrase, “Everyone knows” (209). This statement makes Zuckerman reflect on the impossibility of ever fully understanding another person:

Nobody knows, Professor Roux. “Everyone knows” is the invocation of the cliché and the beginning of the banalization of experience, and

³⁴ Derek Parker Royal, “Plotting the Frames of Subjectivity: Identity, Death, and Narrative in Philip Roth’s *The Human Stain*,” *Contemporary Literature* 47.1 (Spring 2006): 116.

³⁵ Royal, “Plotting the Frames of Subjectivity,” 117.

³⁶ Parrish, “Ralph Ellison: The Invisible Man in Philip Roth’s *The Human Stain*,” 434.

³⁷ Royal, “Plotting the Frames of Subjectivity,” 117.

³⁸ Parrish, “Ralph Ellison: The Invisible Man in Philip Roth’s *The Human Stain*,” 434.

³⁹ This is also pointed out in Royal, “Plotting the Frames of Subjectivity: Identity, Death, and Narrative in Philip Roth’s *The Human Stain*,” 122.

it's the solemnity and the sense of authority that people have in voicing this cliché that's so insufferable. (209)

In the context of multiculturalism, Zuckerman's reflections challenge the idea of a stable, knowable ethnic identity by reminding the reader of how little we really know about each other. Yet, his reflections also highlight the need to try to make sense of the foreign within ourselves. Such knowledge is a precondition for transcultural understanding, according to Welsch. For a reader familiar with Roth's earlier writing, the quotation above is further reminiscent of the novel *An American Pastoral* (1997). In this novel, Zuckerman, once again the narrator, states that "getting people right is not what living is all about anyway. It's getting them wrong that is living."⁴⁰ Getting people wrong in this context should not be considered a failure on the part of the author, but an opportunity to grapple with one's own and others' subjectivity as constructions rather than as fixed identities. Such an effort implies Zuckerman's and, by extension, Roth's interest in what Royal calls "the dynamics involved in the inscription of the self."⁴¹ By telling his own story through the story of Silk's life, Zuckerman has found "a socially charged premise on which to explore his life as an ageing Jewish man."⁴² In the course of the plot, Coleman's "socially charged" circumstances draw the reclusive Zuckerman out of himself and out of his isolated existence. They encourage him to engage critically with the world.

As Parrish points out, *The Human Stain* can be read on a meta-narrative level as an example of how Jewish and black Americans relate to each other as Americans, as well as members of minority cultures and groups. Such multiple interests suggest a notion of identity that defies multicultural definitions of ethnicity and race, and implies transcultural awareness.⁴³ Bringing together competing ethnic histories and aesthetic forms results in a constant "integration of artistic styles."⁴⁴ By contrast, "cultural separatism" prevents "artists from attaining the kind of imaginative suppleness, or integration that makes great art possible."⁴⁵ Expressed in these terms, stylistic integration or transcul-

⁴⁰ Philip Roth, *An American Pastoral* (1997; New York: Vintage, 1998): 35.

⁴¹ Royal, "Plotting the Frames of Subjectivity," 123.

⁴² "Plotting the Frames of Subjectivity," 123.

⁴³ Parrish, "Ralph Ellison: The Invisible Man in Philip Roth's *The Human Stain*," 431.

⁴⁴ "Ralph Ellison: The Invisible Man in Philip Roth's *The Human Stain*," 431.

⁴⁵ "Ralph Ellison: The Invisible Man in Philip Roth's *The Human Stain*," 432.

tural awareness becomes a precondition for a literature that, in Roth's words, aims to expand our "moral consciousness" and influence our social reality. Entering into a spontaneous dance with Silk on his veranda, Zuckerman observes that "the dance that sealed our friendship was also what made his disaster my subject. And made his disguise my subject" (125). The result of this blending of stories is a story that everyone shares, the novel suggests, "as humans who are fatally stained" (457). References to stains, as already pointed out, suggest that the characters in the novel are connected not just as Americans or as members of any minority group, but equally through the shame associated with their hidden selves.

Erasure, too, establishes transcultural awareness through the integration of two narratives. When focusing on race in *Erasure*, it is tempting to interpret the protagonist Monk as a stand-in for Everett, the author. Like Monk, Everett is "black by genealogical and descriptive convention," comes from a well-educated, upper-middle-class background, and is the author of a number of experimental novels for which he has often struggled to find publishers.⁴⁶ Yet Margaret Russett observes that the irony of drawing a parallel between the novel and Everett's life is that it "collapses the relation between race *and* writing into the kind of label that both Everett and his character resist."⁴⁷ Indeed, any attempt to define Everett as a black author can only be done by ignoring the novel's criticism of the label itself.⁴⁸ Carl Phillips describes Everett as "particularly defiant of the various identity-boxes that are constantly being imposed on writers of color."⁴⁹ Similarly, Russett reads *Erasure* as a warning against "conflating reference with representation, as in the notoriously problematic category the African-American novel."⁵⁰ According to Russett, *Erasure* is less about race than it is about "genre, mimesis, and authorial identity."⁵¹ As his protagonist is similarly quick to point out with regard to his own work,

⁴⁶ Russett, "Race under *Erasure* for Percival Everett, 'A Piece of Fiction'," 359.

⁴⁷ "Race under *Erasure* for Percival Everett, 'A Piece of Fiction'," 358.

⁴⁸ Regarding the term 'African-American literature', Everett states the following in an interview: "Doubleday came in with an eleventh-hour offer for the paperback rights [for *Erasure*...]. My agent rang me and said, 'You're not going to believe this, but they want to publish *Erasure* as the inaugural book of an Afro-American imprint called, wait for it, Harlem Moon.' I mean, did they read the book?" O'Hagan, "Colour Bind."

⁴⁹ Carl Phillips, "Knowing Percival," *Callaloo* 28.2 (Spring 2005): 332.

⁵⁰ Russett, "Race under *Erasure* for Percival Everett, 'A Piece of Fiction'," 358.

⁵¹ "Race under *Erasure* for Percival Everett, 'A Piece of Fiction'," 358.

Everett does not “write as an act of testimony or social indignation (though all writing in some way is just that),” or “out of a so-called family tradition or oral storytelling” (238). If anything defines Everett’s work as a whole, it is “narrative experimentation,” argues Russett.⁵² Not only does Everett defy common definitions of a black novelist, he also “refuses to be a Western or comic or fantasy or mystery or, finally, an experimental novelist either.”⁵³ By avoiding the strict social-realist mode, Everett avoids interpretations of his novels as ‘authentic’ stories of black experience. In *Erasure*, he questions such authorial identity further by suggesting that Stagg is in fact a ‘product’ of *My Pafology* rather than its ‘author’ (276).⁵⁴

Seeking to define the transcultural aspects of Everett’s writing, a reader must therefore look beyond the plot. The avoidance of social realism suggests that Everett agrees with Ellison and Roth on “the supremacy of literary art” over multicultural demands for authenticity. Everett’s position in debates over literature’s place in relation to multicultural identity-politics makes it possible to interpret the inclusion of the novella *My Pafology* as a revealing contrast to the novel’s otherwise erudite and satirical tone. According to Ellison, protest may take the indirect shape of “a technical assault against the styles which have gone before.”⁵⁵ However, this argument does not fully explain the function of the novella, which takes up more than eighty pages of *Erasure*. If we read it in relation to the 1960s debate on *Invisible Man*, an additional reason for the novella’s inclusion presents itself. The debate indirectly draws attention to the fact that the novella’s plot reads like an updated version of Wright’s *Native Son*. As observed by Russett, the result is a “double narrative” in *Erasure*, which can be read “as a dialectical reading of ‘the African-American

⁵² Russett, “Race under *Erasure* for Percival Everett, ‘A Piece of Fiction’,” 362. For examples of Everett’s more experimental novels, see Percival Everett, *Frenzy* (St Paul MN: Graywolf, 1996); *Glyph* (1999; London: Faber & Faber, 2004), and *I Am Not Sidney Poitier* (St Paul MN: Graywolf, 2009).

⁵³ “Race under *Erasure* for Percival Everett, ‘A Piece of Fiction’,” 363.

⁵⁴ “Had I by annihilating my own presence actually asserted the individuality of Stagg Leigh? Or was it the book itself that had given him life?” Everett, *Erasure*, 276.

⁵⁵ Ralph Ellison, “The World and the Jug” (1963), in Ellison, *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison*, ed. & intro. John F. Callahan, preface by Saul Bellow (New York: Modern Library, 1995): 183. This is quoted by several critics, including Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literature* (New York: Oxford UP, 1988): 107, and Russett, “Race under *Erasure* for Percival Everett, ‘A Piece of Fiction’,” 362.

novel,' suggesting that this category is less unified than publishers or academic syllabi often imply."⁵⁶

The dialectical reading that the double narrative in *Erasure* demands offers an alternative, less restrictive definition of the category of African-American novels. It is a reading that takes as its starting point the idea of literature as art, and society and culture as fluid, multi-faceted, and contradictory. According to Russett, such an approach does not rely on the ethnicity of the author or his or her ethnic or cultural background, but on a novel that stylistically refers back to earlier African-American novels.⁵⁷ More specifically, *Erasure* is a novel that refers back to both Wright's and Ellison's writing. In this respect Everett's novel resembles *The Human Stain*, which is also a double narrative, a novel that tells the story of Nathan Zuckerman telling the story of Coleman Silk.

Conclusion

This essay has argued that Roth and Everett demonstrate transcultural awareness through the integration of literary styles and stories in *The Human Stain* and *Erasure*. The two novels offer an alternative to multicultural definitions of cultural and ethnic identity as static and distinct. In both novels, identity turns out to be fragmented and fluid. Through their protagonists' respective fates, Roth and Everett imply that human allegiances are never as straightforward as the terms 'ethnic', 'racial', or 'cultural' might imply. Nevertheless, the characters of Silk and Monk are unable to articulate an alternative to a multicultural perspective. Their encounters with preconceived and essentialist notions of ethnic and racial identity end in tragedy. The black character of Silk in *The Human Stain* succeeds in attaining a new, Jewish identity, yet must do so at the expense of rejecting his birth family and lying to his wife. The character of Monk in *Erasure* suffers from an acute identity-crisis once he gives in to the public's expectations of a black American author. Instead, transcultural awareness must be sought on the novels' meta-structural level. By reading the two novels against the background of the 1960s debate over the political significance of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, I hope to have demonstrated that transcultural awareness in *The Human Stain* and *Erasure* takes the shape of a reconfiguration of the realist form.

⁵⁶ Russett, "Race under *Erasure* for Percival Everett, 'A Piece of Fiction'," 365.

⁵⁷ "Race under *Erasure* for Percival Everett, 'A Piece of Fiction'," 365.

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