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**IDENTITY ERASURE IN PERCIVAL EVERETT'S *ERASURE*
AND *I AM NOT SIDNEY POITIER***

*PERCIVAL EVERETT'İN SİLİNTİ VE BEN SIDNEY POITIER DEĞİLİM
ROMANLARINDA KİMLİK SİLİNMESİ*

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to examine two of Percival Everett's satirical novels *Erasure* and *I Am Not Sidney Poitier* elaborating on the issues of racism and identity crisis. In *Erasure*, to criticize the stereotypical novels representing the standardized idea of blackness Monk, the author-protagonist, writes a novel named *Fuck* under the pseudonym Stagg R. Leigh. Monk acts against his sense of self and creates a dual identity by writing that novel with the intention of satirizing the racial stereotype expectations of the publishing market. However, the irony of *Fuck* goes unnoticed and Monk begins to suffer from dual personalities and loses control of Stagg. In *I am Not Sidney Poitier*, the protagonist has no sense of self-awareness and gradually takes the characters of Poitier movies and experiences an identity crisis. The novel critiques media for its negative

effects on the perception of real world and disconnecting individuals from reality. This article not solely explores identity crisis of the narrators but also explains several similarities between Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* and both Everett novels as their narrators are judged by their identities since they don't fit into the racist expectations of society. Therefore, racism remains the most significant obstacle performing identity. Through the media, American society reinforces standardized representations of so-called African-American experience and obliges individuals to live up racial stereotypes which lead identity erasure. Everett in *Erasure* critiques racist criteria's of publishing industry while in *I Am Not Sidney Poitier*, he criticizes media and movies which serve to promote prejudice and racism in community.

Key Words: Identity, Racism, Racial Stereotypes.

Öz

Bu çalışmanın amacı, Percival Everett'in iki hiciv romanı olan *Silinti* ve *Ben Sidney Poitier Değilim*'i ırkçılık ve kimlik krizi konuları üzerinde durarak incelemektir. *Silinti*'de, yazar-kahraman Monk siyahiliğin standardartlaşmış düşüncelerini temsil eden kalıplaşmış romanları eleştirmek için Stagg R. Leigh takma adı altında *Fuck* isimli bir roman yazmaktadır. Monk kendi benlik duygusuna karşı gelir ve yayıncılık pazarının ırksal stereotip beklentilerini hicvetmek niyeti ile bu romanı yazarak ikili bir kimlik geliştirir. Ancak, *Fuck*'taki ironi farkedilmez ve Monk çift kişiliğinden zarar görmeğe başlar ve Stagg'in kontrolünü kaybeder. *Ben Sidney Poitier Değilim*'de ise anlatıcının kişisel farkındalık duygusu yoktur ve giderek Poitier filmlerindeki karakterlere bürünür ve bir kimlik krizi yaşar. Roman, gerçek dünya algısı üzerindeki olumsuz etkileri ve bireyleri gerçeklikten ayırdığı için medyayı eleştirir. Bu makale, sadece anlatıcıların kimlik krizlerini araştırmakla kalmaz ama aynı zamanda anlatıcıları toplumun ırkçı beklentilerine uymadıkları için kimlikleri yüzünden yargılanmakta olan Ralph Ellison'ın *Görünmez Adam* romanı ile her iki Everett romanı arasındaki birçok benzerlikleri de açıklamaktadır. Bu nedenle, ırkçılık kendi kimliğini sergileme hususunda en önemli engel olmaya devam etmektedir. Medya aracılığıyla, Amerikan toplumu sözde Afrikalı-Amerikalı deneyiminin kalıplaşmış temsilini pekiştirir ve bireyleri kimlik silinmesine yol açan ırksal streereotipleri yaşamaya zorlar. Everett *Silinti*'de, yayıncılık sanayiinin ırkçı kriterlerini eleştirirken *Ben Sidney Poitier Değilim*'de ise medya ve filmlerin toplumdaki ön yargı ve ırkçılığı desteklemeye hizmet etmesini eleştirmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Kimlik, Irkçılık, Irksal Stereotipler.

Racial segregation, stereotyping as well as the effects of media and publishing industry on performing an identity are among issues demand attention in American society. Everett's novels, *Erasure* and *I Am Not Sidney Poitier* explicitly engage with these issues while satirizing popular culture in the United States, social degradation and identity crisis of protagonists.

In *Erasure*, reacting against the racial expectations of the publishing market, the author-protagonist Monk Ellison writes a novel with the intention of satirizing these expectations that first entitled *My Pafology* later renamed *Fuck* under the pseudonym Stagg Leigh and creates dual identity. However, to Monk's surprise, his book, *Fuck* receives overwhelming praise from both the black and white community and the irony of it goes unnoticed which shows slipperiness of language. Everett's novel *Erasure* which is at the same time Monk's journal, thus, deconstructs the language and puts it under erasure claiming that subjectivity of the words.

Both novels invoke Jacques Derrida's famous concept of 'under erasure' *sous rature* which is originally developed by Martin Heidegger meaning the crossing out of a word within a text, but allowing it to remain legible and in place and later adopted and improved by Derrida. This technique is applied in the deconstructive literary theory to mark potential impossibility of presence of meaning and inadequacy of signifier to represent the concept fully.

Everett first invokes Derrida's notion of erasure by the title of his novel, *Erasure*. The novel is also composed of different sections which belong to various literary genres including notes-for-a-novel sections, autobiographical parts, philosophical thoughts, imaginary dialogues between famous painters and philosophers. Given fictional exchanges between famous figures from the world of art, and allusions from Ellison's *Invisible Man* which do not following the plot makes his literary work less accessible to the less educated reader since it requires analyze beyond its surface. Not limited with *Erasure*, Monk Ellison's other novels are also found incomprehensible by common audience like the works of Ralph Ellison.

In *I Am Not Sidney Poitier* Everett parodies Poitier films and puts the Poitier movies under erasure creating his own narrative while making references from them which cause abrupt changes within the text and absurd plot. Some of the references of these movies were melted in plotline while others appeared as dream sequences of Not Sidney's. However, these references cause the distortion of reality, confusing the identities of Not Sidney and Sidney Poitier.

As *Erasure* is close out non-academic audience since it includes imaginary conversations of famous artist and makes references to philosophical and literary notions, the novel *I Am Not Sidney Poitier* also becomes incomprehensible to those who are not familiar with Poitier films or not aware the existence of the allusions from

them. With these dream sequences and allusions from Poitier films Everett juxtaposes media with our interpretation and understanding of reality.

Derrida puts the Author under erasure when he discuss that “the proper name of the author is disappearing in a constant equivocal motion of death and safe-keeping or salvation, the name is only in fact in hiding: it conceals itself behind the screen behind ... the death” (*Dissemination* 328). While in *Erasure* writing a novel of Monk’s journal affects the reality of Everett and draws a distinction between Monk and his pen name Stagg, in *I Am Not Sidney Poitier*, Percival Everett is happens to be one of the characters in the novel who is a professor teaching “Philosophy of Nonsense” (Everett, *I Am Not Sidney Poitier* 87) and this also disturbs the reality of the author. In pre-narrative “disclaimer” he not only mentions the fact that the character whose name is the same as the author’s is fictitious but also warns his reader to not confuse the narrator Not Sidney Poitier, with the Academy Award winning actor Sidney Poitier.

Everett in *Erasure* erases preconceived ideas held by society -both White American and African American- through his character Monk who as a black man wants to make his subjectivity visible and acts for himself in response to the American public and the publishing industry that categorize him racially and literarily.

In one scene, Monk read his father’s letters and discovered that his father’s love affair with an Englishwoman. He tracked the information in the letters and found his half black sister who lived in bad conditions. He realized that he had skinhead half cousin with a ring in his lip and large tattoos who repulsed him considerably. This discovery of his relatives who happens to be the opposite of his identity can be called another act of erasure in the novel.

Erasure also happens in the identity of Monk who performs Stagg role, his pseudonym. Monk’s subjectivity replaces with the standardized idea of blackness which is fabricated by the society thus causes ‘erasure’ of his real self to become a stereotyped identity.

Erasure not only happens in Monk’s identity, and also in his mother’s who slowly loses her coherence to Alzheimer’s disease, which destroys her complete identity and erases her memory. “Her personality disappear[s] ...los[ing] her abilities to think, perceive and speak.”(Everett, *Erasure* 162) During one of his visits, his mother said ““Monksie, we are all such vain creatures. The hard part is seeing myself, what I’ve become. I see for a couple of seconds and then I don’t know where I am. I wish I could tell you I’m in here looking out...” (Everett, *Erasure* 284)

In one of the “notes-for-a-novel” section of *Erasure* includes an imaginary conversation between Willem de Kooning and Robert Rauschenberg in which Rauschenberg erases De Kooning’s drawing to subsequently reappropriate and entitles as “Erased Drawing”:

Rauschenberg: Well, it took me forty erasers, but I did it.

de Kooning: Did what?

Rauschenberg: Erased it. The picture you drew for me.

...

Rauschenberg: Your drawing is gone. What remains is my erasing and the paper which was mine to begin with.

...

Rauschenberg: I've already sold it for ten grand.

de Kooning: You sold my picture?

Rauschenberg: No, I erased your picture. I sold my erasing. (Everett, *Erasure* 254)

For Rauschenberg, his intention was to find out "whether a drawing could be made out of erasing" (75) and he creates a new work on the old one using the eraser as a drawing tool. Once the picture belongs to de Kooning is no longer important since Rauschenberg has altered it into his own creation and receives financial gain with it. In the same light, Everett like Rauschenberg, erases Ellison's novel and formed it into his own narrative. As Eaton notes "The multi-layering of the creation of art within another artist's piece reveals that Everett has composed a series of narratives that exist both within and in contradiction with each other" (224).

Everett in *Erasure* deconstructs Ellison's *Invisible Man* making implicit or explicit references to the text and put Ellison's novel under erasure. He makes abrupt allusions to *Invisible Man* and erases *Invisible Man* while leaving traces of it. For instance, Everett took some phrases of *Invisible Man* and reinscribed with a postmodern way. These phrases and references sometimes appear in the text as direct quotations within the narration. However, they appear instantaneously without introduction or explanation in the text. Moreover, the reader unfamiliar with *Invisible Man* will not be able to realize these allusions and may suppose that the narrator is becoming psychologically disposed.

Monk and the *Invisible Man* undergo somehow the same experiences. Both protagonists saw the sign reading "KEEP AMERICA PURE" (Ellison 192, Everett, *Erasure* 272). Van Go shows up in Snookie Cane Show in "Optic White" Studios (Everett, *Erasure* 126) which is the paint that covers everything belongs to Liberty Paint Factory in *Invisible Man* (Ellison 196). "Jelly, Jell/Jelly,/All night long" (Ellison 475, Everett, *Erasure* 238) is a song that plays on a jukebox during a scene in *Invisible Man* and the song also appears in *Erasure*. The specific reference made to *Invisible Man* also includes the doctor's name "Dr Bledsoe" (Everett, *Erasure* 241) when Monk

and his mother visit for her illness. The protagonist's name in *Erasure* 'Thelonious Monk Ellison' comes from black modernist musician Thelonious Monk and the expressionist novelist Ralph Ellison. Everett creates a connection between Monk to his surname, which happens to be the same surname of Ralph Ellison.

Monk thinks he is invisible when he is on stage receiving the book award and quotes these lines from *Invisible Man*: "'Now you're free of illusion.' ... 'How does it feel to be free of one's illusion?'" (Everett, *Erasure* 293, Ellison 557) and he realizes his invisibility in the end stating that "I know those lines...knowing I was saying them to no one" (Everett, *Erasure* 293). No one notices the irony he makes in his novel, no one understands his point. Actually these lines are the declaration of accepting his invisibility like the narrator in *Invisible Man*. Both protagonists are "free of (their) illusions" that the world perceives them as individuals. In the beginning of the *Invisible Man* the protagonist is aware of his invisibility stating that "I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me...When they approach me they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination- indeed, everything and anything except me" (Ellison 3).

Both the protagonist of *Invisible Man* and Monk disguised like the character 'Rinehart' but in different terms. Narrator of *Invisible Man* misidentified as Rinehart while running from Ras wearing dark glasses accidentally (Ellison 471,472). He decided to test it buying a wide hat. With his excitement "they hadn't recognized [him]. It works, [he] thought. They see the hat, not [him]" (474). The simple disguise hides the narrator from the crowd who sees Rinehart when they look at him. When he disguises like Rinehart a woman asks him "Aint you Rine the runner?"(480) Everett uses the exact line right before Monk meets with Morgenstein "Aint you Rine the runner?"(242). Everett evokes the potential danger of being Rinehart, having different identities. Rinehart is a mysterious character in *Invisible Man* who never appears in the novel, and the narrator only learns of his existence when other people mistake him for Rinehart while he is in disguise.

The disguise like Rinehart, helps Monk to get economic profits by writing a book of so-called African American experience that market desires nevertheless, he regrets it since he "promised [him]self once that [he] not compromise [his] art" (Everett, *Erasure* 285). However, compromising his artistic integrity to gain economic fortune causes the total loss of his original sense of self. By invoking the Rinehart character in his narrative, Monk shows that his role of "being black enough" captures his own self and loses his real identity into Stagg role.

The disguise of (?) both the narrator of *Invisible Man* and Monk wearing and the prescribed roles limit their complexity as individuals and force them to play an inauthentic part. Therefore the narrator of *Invisible Man* asks himself: "What on earth was hiding behind the face of things? If dark glasses and a white hat could blot out my identity so quickly, who was actually who?" (Ellison 482). But "it is similarly an

existential condition for the modern individual confronting the shock of meaninglessness”(Moore 133).

The narrator of *Invisible Man* accepts that “his will is pulled in several directions at the same time” (Ellison 560). Therefore he decides to live life his way as opposed to those of others: “I was pulled this way and that for longer than I can remember. And my problem was that I always tried to go in everyone’s way but my own. I have also been called one thing and then another while no one really wished to hear that what I called myself. So after years old trying to adopt the opinion of others I finally rebelled. I am an invisible man” (560). The narrator acknowledged that he has no sense of self-awareness and he just followed the ideology of the college and the Brotherhood without questioning them or trusting his own self. However, now, he understands that his own identity is the only way to be free. Rinehart, a master of many identities, though offers to the narrator the limitless identity variations, it lacks authenticity. He does not want “the freedom of a Rinehart So [he’s] remained in the hole” (Ellison 562) to avoid being in the world of chaos as “Rinehart [who] is a master of it” (563).

The protagonist in *Invisible Man* depicts his basement apartment as “a hole in the ground” (Ellison 6), a place he discovers while trying to escape. We may also find the “hole” notion in *Erasure* when Monk is playing Stagg Leigh role. Monk states that he “would let Mr. Leigh continue his reclusive, just out-of-the-big-house ways. He would talk to the editor a few more times, then disappear, like down a hole” (Everett, *Erasure* 184). For Invisible man ‘the hole’ is his hiding place from reality and for Monk it is where he can avoid from the visibility of Stagg, his alter-ego and expectations of the standardized roles the society gives him due to his race.

The allusion to ‘hole’ also can be found in *Erasure*. While he is waiting in the back stage of Kenya Dunston show, Monk asks Yul, “[I]s it too late to jump into my hole and hide?” (Everett, *Erasure* 275). Though he describes it as “my hole”, actually it is Stagg’s hole, the place the visibility of Stagg disappears. So the hole may connect the Stagg performance of Monk with the *Invisible Man*’s Rinehart performance.

The novel *Invisible Man* begins and ends with his underground life where he explore his own identity without interference from others and understands that a single ideology can not constitute an entire existence and thus emerges from his underground “hibernation,” (Ellison 568) and leaves the hole to make his own contributions to society demonstrating others to acknowledge the existence of beliefs and behaviors outside of their prejudiced expectations. With ending his hibernation, the narrator implies that he is in the process of rebirth. In the same way, Monk needs to kill Stagg and end this hibernation to save his identity. “I had to defeat my self to save my self, my own identity. I had to toss a spear through the mouth of my own

creation, silence him forever, kill him, press him down a dark hole and have the world admit that he never existed" (Everett, *Erasure* 287).

Therefore Monk decided to reveal his identity when he walked forward to accept National Book Award for Stagg. He stood in front of the microphone considering how he was possessed by the mask of Stagg: "Then there was a small boy perhaps me as a boy, and he held up a mirror so that I could see my face and it was the face of Stagg Leigh" (Everett, *Erasure* 293). Monk experienced a traumatic moment and his self-consciousness fell to pieces and he doubted himself whether he saw his actual self as a child or Stagg's face reflected by the mirror. He was unable to distinguish reality from imaginary as in Lacan's well known theory of mirror phase which presents the aspect of identity formation. (a short definition of the theory would be great)

Lacan proposes that human infants pass through a stage anywhere from six and eighteen months of age in which the infant sees his external image of the body reflected in a mirror and identifies with the image perceiving his selfhood but because the image of a unified body does not correspond with the underdeveloped infant's coordination of the body and motor skills, infant struggles with its first identity conflict. For Lacan this perception of the image as distinct Other causes great confusion and 'libidinal dynamism' (Lacan, *Ecrits*). Separation also creates a sense of loss and a lifelong desire to regain wholeness and the desire for individual perfection and dependence upon external objects. As the infant gets mature he still feels uncomfortable about himself as integrated and whole individual as the image somehow looks alienated. The mirror separates us from our selves. In order to recognize myself, I have to be separate from my self. Thus identity as a notion I can consider appears.

The one at the mirror is the otherness of the self or the alienated self and when he slips the mask, he sees his actual identity.

Stagg's visibility makes him a presence, an actuality. For Monk, Stagg becomes more than a mask to prevent exposing his own identity.

The masking is central to the major themes of both *Invisible Man* and *Erasure*; the masking of one's identity allows an individual to create a second self. The mask and the second self may help to deal with the cruel reality, but however the mask ceases to be a mask when one lives under the veil of the mask. The protagonists create dual identities since they don't fit the expectations of society.

Both Everett's protagonists establish an imaginary self, in Monk's case it is Stagg, the stereotypical identity that publishing industry and American society see in him; in case of Not Sidney, he is confused with the actor Sidney Poitier who represents African Americans, and thus takes into the identity the audience and the society desire to see in him because of the media's effects on the distortion of reality.

On the other hand, in the case of protagonist of *Invisible Man*, he takes an identity what he thinks another sees in him. Therefore all of these protagonists connect themselves into a Lacanian sort of identity in terms of the relationship to the other. Lacan reshapes Freud's theories regarding identification. For Lacan "man's desire is the Other's desire [and] it is qua Other that man desires" (690). Therefore, our identification with another arises from our desires about how we are seen by the other and we imagine ourselves in relation to the desire of another.

In *Invisible Man*, Ellison questions stereotyped blackness and attempts to create consciousness aiming "to reveal the human complexity which stereotypes are intended to conceal" (xviii). In *Shadow and Act* Ellison also declares "the artist is no freer than the society in which he lives, and in the United States the writers who stereotype or ignore the Negro and other minorities in the final analysis stereotype and distort their own humanity" (44). By using these stereotypes as financial resource writers are stereotyping their own humanity. Everett criticizes the publishing industry to see writers as resources which gain them profits by stereotyped books conforming society's expectations.

Both the narrator of Ellison and Everett believes in equality refusing the standardized ideas of blackness. However, the blackness of both narrators is questioned by the society who see them though the color of their skin. To give an example when the narrator of *Invisible Man* joins the Brotherhood, Emma tells Brother Jack that the narrator is "not black enough" to be the organization's black spokesperson stating that: "But don't you think he should be a little blacker?" (Ellison 295). Monk also not found "black enough" by the society and editors, and writes the book 'Fuck' and presents himself as Stagg to conform the notion of being "black enough" to make a parody out of it.

The postmodernist "notes-for-a-novel" sections in *Erasure* include some part of Percival Everett's short story "Meiosis". Everett writes about a parody of a black, extremely smart boy Tom, seeming to suffer from partial amnesia, who enters a quiz show called Virtute et Armis. Since he is afraid of getting into trouble, he gives a bogus last name which sounds like an African name though he knows that it is a Sioux Indian word.

In the make-up room they turned him someone else thinking he doesn't look black enough.

"Let me see that face," the red-haired woman said. . . . "you ain't half-bad-looking," she said, smoothing his forehead with her thumb. She reached over to the cart . . . and came back with her fingertips coated with a brown cream. "What's that?" "You ain't quite dark enough, darlin'," she said. . . . "This is TV stuff." So while he watches in the

mirror, she rubs the compound into his skin and his oak brown skin becomes chocolate brown. "There now," the redhead said, "that's so much better." (Everett, *Erasure*, 197)

The protagonist Tom also suffers from "not being black enough" notion, and for the sake of not confusing the viewers at home they put heavy make-up on his face. The host of the show *Spades* wish him luck before the show telling him that "I'm sure you'll do fine and be a credit to your race" (Everett, *Meiosis* 199). His statement illustrates his racist attitudes towards him. To the disappointment of producer 'Blancs' and the host of the show 'Spades', and the audience, he wins the quiz with complete success answering each question perfectly while white contestant fails.

The narrator of *Invisible Man* also possesses double-consciousness like Tom in *Meiosis* and decides to test his grandfather's advice "I'd overcome them yeses, undermine them with grins...That was all anyone wanted of us, that we should be heard and not seen...I'd become a supersensitive confirmer of their misconceptions" (Ellison 497-498). Though Monk is against this idea throughout the novel and when he is on the stage for the Book Award he wants to end this misconception by revealing his real identity, he realizes that his parody is incomprehended by the audience and he becomes invisible.

The society in Everett's book wants characters like Van Go who are lack of education, morality, humanity and perceive them as a representation of blackness. The society forces authors to say 'yes' to create their Black characters within these standard identities. Ellison also questions in the introduction of *Invisible Man* "why most protagonists of Afro-American fiction (not to mention the black characters in fiction written by whites) were without intellectual depth" (xv,xvi). This proves that both authors oppose the society's imposed roles.

The allusions to Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* not only allow us to discuss Ellison's protagonist suffers from invisibility whereas Everett's author-protagonist is offended by his visibility because of racial segregations in society which categorize him as the author of African-American literature.

The narrator Not Sidney Poitier is also invisible because most of the time he is confused with the actor Sidney Poitier. Though the novel *I Am Not Sidney Poitier* is not about Sidney Poitier; it is about Not Sidney Poitier, there are numerous references to the films of actor Sidney Poitier. Novel's "fictitious" characters include Ted Turner, Jane Fonda, Bill Cosby, Harry Belafonte and Elizabeth Taylor as well as Percival Everett himself. Everett puts Poitier movies under erasure while making allusions from them. Some of these allusions scrutinized in this article include movies like "Lilies of the Field," and "Guess Who's Coming to Dinner" which were race-centered melodramas. However, when these movies were shot it was an important development in the society regarding racism since most of the roles Poitier played were educated and elite characters and he generated sympathy for black equality.

Throughout the majority of his career, though he did not want to be mentioned with his skin color, the actor represented African Americans and was being used primarily as a symbol.

As mentioned before, *Erasure* erases Ellison's *Invisible Man* making references of it. There are also some remarkable similarities between Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* and Everett's *I Am Not Sidney Poitier* which are told in the first person. Though being the dominant character in the novel, the narrator of *Invisible Man* remains obscure since his name is never told throughout the novel. The names that he is given in the hospital and in the Brotherhood also remain unidentified. His presence becomes a voice and this obscurity makes him an "invisible man." Poitier's name is obscure as well. As Gretlund pointed out:

he has trouble being seen fully by the people he meets, black or white. In the tradition of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, the "blindness" includes his own, for the main character has a hard time "seeing" himself. In a sense Everett's character is also nameless, like the invisible man, because his mother named him: Not Sidney Poitier, including the "Not" as a part of his name". (1)

His eccentric mother made a fortune investing in Turner Communications Group in 1970. When she died early Not Sidney "became filthy and insanely rich" (Everett, *I Am Not Sidney Poitier* 6). Throughout the novel his father remains unknown. After her mother's death, he placed a house by Ted Turner paying the rent and all his needs by his own financial sources. He wasn't raised by Turner, only lived one of his house under the watch of him and the situation between them bothered Turner:

To Turner's credit even he was not comfortable with the scenario of the rich dogooding white man taking in the poor black child. Television was polluted with that model, and it didn't take a genius to understand that something was wrong with it. My situation was somewhat different as I was in fact extremely wealthy as a result of my mother's business acumen. (Everett, *I Am Not Sidney Poitier* 8)

Not Sidney is not stereotypical poor black child and thus his wealth affects his racial categorization. The novel constantly questions and criticizes the media's influence in our comprehension of racial relationships and class.

The mass media plays a vital role within today's society. One of Not Sidney's teachers Betty said to him regarding the real powers of America: "[t]he mass media and the oil, they're the movers, the facilitators. Politicians are just tools used to make us think we have some choice and a little power." (Everett, *I Am Not Sidney Poitier* 10). The media through the use of television, commercials, jingles, newspaper articles,

reporters, billboards and wording affects our understanding and may create a negative judgment on different cultures.

Ted Turner once said Not Sidney that he prefers airing old shows “again and again until they sit in people’s heads like jingles...That way [the audience] become[s] desensitized to its harmful and consumptive effects by sheer overexposure [like jingles which] become meaningless and innocuous little ditties” (Everett, *I Am Not Sidney Poitier* 12, 13). In this way, media erases the minds of the audience and forbids them to think.

Regarding media’s effects and its changing trend, his mother once told Sidney that “news will be the new entertainment...That’s where we’ve gone. Everything in this country is entertainment. That’s what you need for stupid people. That’s what children want” (Everett, *I Am Not Sidney Poitier* 56). Individuals cannot put their trust on the media as an authority to give news since it leaves its place to entertainment gradually. Thus, the media causes the degeneration of society and viewers get the wrong impression and a distorted view of what life is really like with the destructive effects of television and movies. As Briones notes “Everett uses Not Sidney to depict the results of a media-governed world, demonstrating the breakdown of independent identities and the disconnection from reality characteristic of a hyperreal world” (555).

Since Not Sidney Poitier looks remarkably like the Hollywood actor his name cause miscommunication anybody he encounters. He is beaten up by bullies every time they ask his name. Even his roommate in collage would laugh his name asking:

“What kind of stupid –ass name is Not? He said.

“My name is Not Sidney.”

“Excuse me, Not *Sidney*. I’ll say you’re not Sidney.”

“He had said what probably everyone else meant to say but couldn’t come up

with, or wouldn’t. He had pointed out to me that not only was I Not Sidney Poitier, but also that I was not Sidney Poitier: a confusing but profound and ultimately befuddling distinction, one that might have been formative or at least instructive for a smarter person. (Everett, *I Am Not Sidney Poitier* 92)

He did not graduate from high school because one of his teachers abused him. Though he reported her to Principle, his story didn’t find convincing enough. Knowing grades and diplomas didn’t important for him, he decided to “discover [his] self” and find his identity, “[his] place in this world” (Everett, *I Am Not Sidney Poitier* 43). This novel also shows some relationship with Ellison’s *Invisible man* with regard to discovering one’s identity. Not Sidney decided to abandon his home and form his

identity feeling more independent and he set out road like the narrator of *Invisible Man* came to work in New York. Not Sidney also wanted to find his mother's grave and put some words on her headstone but he came up with nothing. While this journey became Not Sidney's first identity search, the narrator of *Invisible Man* experiences his first awakening after the hospital incident. He wakes with no memory, and a wholly undefined identity. The doctors ask the narrator his name. However, suffering from amnesia the narrator cannot remember it. He remains indifferent to the other questions of doctors relating to his identity. Asked his mother's name, he can think only that a mother is "one who screams when you suffer" (Ellison 235). The narrator of *Invisible Man* cannot remember the identity of his mother like Not Sidney cannot know what to write her mother's gravestone to define her identity.

On his journey of searching identity, Not Sidney faced racism and violence of South. He left Alabama and ran into a southern sheriff in Georgia where he got arrested for driving while black. Officer said to him "This chere is Peckerwood County, boy...And chere, you's a nigger. And it's a crime if'n I say it is" (Everett, *I Am Not Sidney Poitier* 48). He sentenced two year farm work and chained with a young white man who disliked him because he was black and sent for working in a farm by a bus full of twenty black and three white men. A few days later, on the way to farm an accident occurred and Not Sidney and his partner managed to get out of the bus and ran. Running is wisest thing to do as Not Sidney noted: "The Peckerwood justice system had proven to be anything but, and if [he] remained [he] faced perhaps another year tacked onto [his] sentence for surviving the crash" (Everett, *I Am Not Sidney Poitier* 53).

He finally returned to Alabama realizing that he hadn't have a real goal or direction in life when he set out the road and decided to go to college to discover his self, his mission in life. This mission of Not Sidney can be compared with Ellison's narrator in *Invisible Man*. As Gretlund pointed out "It is tempting to see the young Not Sidney as Ralph Ellison's invisible man, who is finally climbing up from his underground hibernation, for the education of Not Sidney that Everett outlines has as its goal to make the young man recognize his social role and responsibility" (2).

Since he was a high school dropout, Not Sidney decided to buy his way into Morehouse College, a prestige school for rich black people, in Atlanta. He joined fraternity called Omega. This social group compels its members abiding its irrational rules and avoids forming one's identity. Prof Everett warned Not Sidney to avoid being a sheep when he subscribed his class implying joining these groups. This fraternity resembles "the brotherhood" in *Invisible Man* since both groups prevent narrators from creating their identity.

The fraternity members found Not Sidney “not black enough to be an Omega” material (Everett, *I Am Not Sidney Poitier* 106) as Monk in *Erasure* was judged by the same “not black enough” notion when he joined a fraternity in College: “While in college I was a member of the Black Panther Party, defunct as it was, mainly I felt I had to prove I was black enough. Some people in the society in which I live, described as being black, tell me that I am not black enough” (*Erasure* 3-4). Both Not Sidney and Monk don’t fit into the existing notions of blackness result either their rejection or leaving of these groups. Not only both narrators of Everett encounter this kind of racism but also the narrator of *Invisible Man* suffers from it by not being “black enough” to be the organization’s black spokesperson when he joined the Brotherhood (Ellison 295). Not Sidney and Monk found not black enough because they don’t perform the standardized blackness the society expected. On the other hand, when he was acting in the Brotherhood, the narrator of *Invisible Man* realized that his social roles limited him from discovering his individual identity and was facing a confliction. So he gradually took on a mask of invisibility in order to hide his conflictions and rebel against this limitation.

There are some similar scenes or expressions in *I am not Sidney Poitier* and *Erasure*. In one of them, Not Sidney was asked if he was from Nigeria by a cab driver: “Where are you from? You look Nigerian.” “I’m from Los Angeles,” I said. Somehow that didn’t feel true. “That’s where I was born” (Everett, *I Am Not Sidney Poitier* 125). Though Not Sidney knew he didn’t have any connection with Africa, he didn’t deny where his ancestors came from either. So he felt somewhat didn’t belong anywhere. In a similar scene with a similar conversation in *Erasure*, Monk got a cab with an Ethiopian driver in Washington D.C. and he was asked if he was Ethiopian and he looked Ethiopian. The satirical answer of Monk was: “No, I’m just Washingtonian” (Everett, *Erasure* 159). In the case of Monk, he is more self confident about who he is while Not Sidney is suffering from identity confusion and tries to discover his self and where he belongs.

It is earlier mentioned that there are quotations or references of Poitier films in the novel. Everett quoted from the movie *Guess Who Is Coming to Dinner* (1967) in one chapter of the novel. In the novel, Not Sidney is brought by a young black woman with a fair skin complexion to the Thanksgiving dinner in her parents’ house. Her aim was to discomfort her parents with her dark skin boyfriend. Not Sidney supposed that she knew “even the simple matter of dark skin would be a cause of consternation for her parents” (Everett, *I Am Not Sidney Poitier* 136,137).

Not Sidney realized that he was judged by his skin color among the liberal family of her girlfriend, Larkin’s since they were very light in complexion whereas he was too dark. (Everett, *I Am Not Sidney Poitier* 131).

Maggie’s friends who also have fair skin tones were talking about the old days in Jack and Jill which was a social club for black children. When Not Sidney asked

“who gets to be in it?”, their answer was, “you have to be sponsored by someone who is in it or who has children in it or was in it” (Everett, *I Am Not Sidney Poitier* 140). And they also mentioned one have to meet other criteria but didn’t specify it but it was obvious that the club was for fair skin black children.

When Not Sidney was asked by Mr Larkin if he considered himself African, his satirical response was: “Well, somebody in my family line was from Africa” (Everett, *I Am Not Sidney Poitier* 134). On the other hand, Mr Larkin strongly objected and offended this idea of being African or any relation with that continent and insisted that he was “nothing but American. [He was] no needy minority” (134).

Though having prejudices towards Not Sidney, Mr and Mrs Larkin began to show him respect when they found out that he was rich. Mr Larkin told his wife:

“It seems the boy owns a television network. NET.”

“Nigger Entertainment Television?”

“He just bought it. Paid cash for it. He’s somehow involved with Ted Turner, but none of this is clear. What clear is that he can buy and sell everyone we know a couple of times over.”

“But he’s so dark,” Ruby said.

“He’s fucking rich is what he is.” Ward paused. “I knew there was something about that boy I liked.”

“He’s so black.”

“We might have to overlooked that. You know, he does look quite a bit like Sidney Poitier.”

“He does that,” Ruby said. “But our little girl. She’s so fair.”

“So, be nice to him.” (Everett, *I Am Not Sidney Poitier* 144,145)

His class and wealth changed the view of Larkin family towards Not Sidney who discriminate him because of the darkness of his skin. This proves that discrimination not only comes by whites but also privileged Blacks.

Violet, the household of the Larkin’s also cared about the skin tone, and she thought Not Sidney is too dark for Maggie:

“Listen boy, Mister and Missus have worked too hard,” she said.

“Too Hard for what?”

“To have a black boy like you come around Miss Maggie.”

"Listen to yourself, Violet. Mister and Missus and Miss Maggie. This is not the antebellum south and you're not a house slave."

"Why, you nigger," she said.

"Violet, you and I are pretty much the same color," I said.

"No, we're not," she snapped. "I 'm milk chocolate and you're dark cocoa, dark as Satan."

I was stunned. (Everett, *I Am Not Sidney Poitier* 154-55)

Later in the novel, Violet had not been invited to the table and was mentioned as the help of the house during the thanksgiving reverence, she didn't show any reaction. Baffled by their treatment to Violet, Not Sidney was bothered by Larkin's attitudes.

Not Sidney criticized Larkin's since they were benefitted from the affirmative action while they claimed that they were against it as he asked Mr Larkin:

"Where did you go to law school Mr Larkin?"

"Yale."

"How many black students were there at the time?"

"There were three of us," he proudly said.

"And you three had better grades than all the rest of the black students who wanted to go to Yale?" (Everett, *I Am Not Sidney Poitier* 161)

Not Sidney pointed out that his mother never went to college but invested her money well and if she could have had a chance to go to college she could have managed more. Her mother never wanted to be white or be not black and that the Larkins and their friends now almost had him hating *them* because of the color of their skin. He also told that he heard their mention of his "unfortunate darkness" but they loved the fact that he was rich (Everett, *I Am Not Sidney Poitier* 162). Not Sidney was bothered from the situation that they discriminate people according to their skin color and prosperity.

After his outburst speech during the dinner, Not Sidney returned and paid a visit to Prof. Everett's house since he was confused and considering to drop out the college. He questioned what college could have given him anything but a grade and began to search his aim in life. He decided to go to California by driving since he needed time to formulate a plan and thought it would have been a new experience.

However Not Sidney got lost in Smuteye, Alabama. Here, Everett quoted from *Lilies of the Field*, a 1963 film where Not Sidney encountered the nuns; they didn't mind his mending the car there but asked him to fix their roof. The only difference from the movie was that Not Sidney helped them not expecting for any payment. The

nuns believed that the God had sent him to them and their way of speaking was more commanding than requesting. The other morning one of the nuns ordered him: “It is time to work. It’s time for you to build our church. That is why the Lord has sent you to us poor sisters” (Everett, *I Am Not Sidney Poitier* 180). He left them feeling guilt for refusing them though he knew he was incapable of building a church.

Later in the novel, Not Sidney decided to finance this church though he didn’t believe god or any religion or didn’t looking for his own salvation. It was just an “ironic way to spend [his] ridiculously easy-to-come-by money” (Everett, *I Am Not Sidney Poitier* 185). The sisters thought their prayers answered with the return of Not Sidney. However, he couldn’t have drawn the money for the nuns since no bank had such a large amount of money in that town so he went to a bigger county. Once he drew the money, which is fifty thousand dollars, he realized that his life was on the line since there was the danger of being robbed.

Not Sidney gradually identified himself with Sidney Poitier since he more and more looked just like him. “They stared at Sidney Poitier’s face in the mirror and I stared at it, too. The face was smooth, brown, older than I remembered, handsome. The face in the mirror smiled and I had to smile back” (Everett, *I Am Not Sidney Poitier* 191). Lacan famously describes the imaginary which he calls 'the mirror phase', when seeing one's mirror image induces a strongly-defined illusion of a coherent and self-governing personal identity. When Not Sidney sees his image in the mirror he creates dual identity. He lost himself in the world of appearances or in the world of illusions. He alienates his own self and his world becomes distorted and falsified.

Toward the novel’s end, Not Sidney arrested again, this time for murder. The deputy found the money he drew for the church in his pocket: “This here is a lot of money for a nigger to be carrying around” (Everett, *I Am Not Sidney Poitier* 203). He was scared for this accusation when he was in jail, he thought for an instant that “[he] could just get up and walk out, but [he] knew that was just a way to get [hissself] shot. And [he] didn’t want the last words [he] heard in life to be, “I got me one.”” Fortunately the chief called the bank and found out that Not Sidney drew the money there and couldn’t have killed the man. But the chief wanted him to look at the dead body if he could identify him since they were both black and not around the town.

Everett not only makes the reader questions identity issues but also the common prejudice and racism of South. It ironically depicts the hardships of being Black as Not Sidney gets arrested and even could have been murdered for being Black in South.

Not Sidney found out that the victim was his exact lookalike and has been murdered when mistaken for Not Sidney: “He looked just like me. He looked exactly like me, a fact that was apparently lost on Donald and the Chief. I wanted to say

"That's me." The thought of saying it was strange feeling and scary. My chest was tight, and yet I wasn't. I said "I don't know him." I was lying, I thought" (Everett, *I Am Not Sidney Poitier* 211).

Seeing himself—or his identical lookalike—Not Sidney questions his reality and self-perception:

There were people out there looking for me, wanting my fifty thousand dollars. I knew they would kill me for it and I wondered if in fact they already had. As we stepped out of the makeshift morgue I thought that if that body in the chest was Not Sidney Poitier, then I was not Not Sidney Poitier and that by all I knew of logic and double negatives, I was therefore Sidney Poitier. I was Sidney Poitier. (Everett, *I Am Not Sidney Poitier* 212)

For Jacques Lacan 'the unconscious is structured like a language' (*The Seminar*, 167). The mind defines 'the self' in relation to 'the other'. In the realm of visual images, we find our sense of self reflected back by an 'other' with whom we identify. For Lacan, this does not reflect a dichotomy between self and other, because not only is self always defined in terms of other, but paradoxically, self is other. Thus Not Sidney becomes Sidney and feels a dilemma. He faces identity confusion which demonstrates his lack of integrity and wavering sense of self. His sense of self is fractured which reminds Lacan's mirror image. When Monk in *Erasure* wants to kill Stagg in the same way his sense of self fades and he feels alienated with these lines "there was no such person and yet there was me and he was me" (Everett, *Erasure* 287). Both narrators lose their "selves" in other identities. The feeling of not belonging puts them in a state that is loaded with anxieties, questions and conflicts.

Not Sidney felt sorry for the boy thinking it could have been him, offered a help to the Chief to find the killer, however he was refused explicitly. The chief even didn't intend to search for the boy's killer because he was black. Chief states: "There ain't nothing here that makes a difference to nobody. Do what you want" (Everett, *I Am Not Sidney Poitier* 211). Later the Chief got a phone call from Washington wanting this case solved: "They say this is a matter of civil rights. I say it's a matter of a boy being dead" (Everett, *I Am Not Sidney Poitier* 212,213). Everett depicts the racism and prejudice among the southerners in a satirical, humorous way. The chief then asked his help to find out the killer and rent a room of his house because Not Sidney was still in danger exposing himself being rich.

Not Sidney felt that he was investigating his own murder, he "believed somehow that the body [he] had seen in the freezer was [his] own" (Everett, *I Am Not Sidney Poitier* 216) which showed his conflict of self and alienation from reality. He felt guilty for the boy's death since he looked like him.

Not Sidney called Prof. Percival Everett and Ted Turner to help him out since someone was trying to kill him for the money. Not Sidney had still been confused about his identity and his existence when he explained Ted the situation. He thought : “I wanted to suggest to him further that perhaps I had already been killed, but that would have sounded as crazy to him as it did to me” (Everett, *I Am Not Sidney Poitier* 222).

Prof. Everett was arrested as soon as he arrived the town for being black: “I got him, Chief! This time I got me the right one! No question about it!”

“Got who?” The chief asked.

“The killer. Caught him snooping around the outside of the hardware store. He’s a nigger, so I arrested him” (Everett, *I Am Not Sidney Poitier* 223).

There are allusions to Everett’s novel *Erasure* in the text as mentioned before. In one scene towards the novel’s end Ted Turner asks Everett:

“Percival Everett. Didn’t you write a book called *Erasure*?”

Everett nodded.

“I didn’t like it,” Ted said.

“Nor I,” Everett said. “I didn’t like writing it, and I didn’t like it when I was done with it.”

“Well, actually, I loved the novel in the novel. I thought that story was real gripping. You know, true to life.”

“I’ve heard that.” (Everett, *I Am Not Sidney Poitier* 225,226)

Turner likes *My Pafology*, the novel in the novel, taking wrong the parody in *Erasure*. Turner repeats stereotypical praises which Everett mocks in *Erasure*. Everett through his parody of Ted Turner illustrates the media’s negative effects regarding standardized ideas of Blackness and racial stereotypes.

In the end of the novel, Not Sidney flew LAX and in the airport he was taken for Sidney Poitier: “Are you not Sidney Poitier?’ ‘I am,’ I said” (Everett, *I Am Not Sidney Poitier* 231). His driver took him his old neighborhood where he lived with his mother and he felt he didn’t belong there since “some women seemed to recognize [him]. They didn’t wave, they pointed” (Everett, *I Am Not Sidney Poitier* 233).

Afterwards, he joined Academy Awards ceremony and accepted the award of “Most Dignified Figure in American Culture”. Towards the conclusion, he took on Sidney Poitier identity.

The final of the novel reminds the ending of *Erasure*. Not Sidney stands in front of the microphone and now he is “free of illusions” like Monk in *Erasure* and the narrator of *Invisible Man*. He states:

I came back to this place to find something, to connect with something lost, to reunite if not with my whole self, then with a piece of it. What I've discovered is that this thing is not here. In fact, it is nowhere. I've learned that my name is not my name. It seems you all know me and nothing could be further from the truth and yet you know me better than I know myself, perhaps better than I can know myself. (Everett, *I Am Not Sidney Poitier* 234)

Not Sidney finally finds what to write his mother's headstone which would say what his will say “I AM NOT MYSELF TODAY” (Everett, *I Am Not Sidney Poitier* 234).

The protagonist tries to make his world meaningful taking on the person on Lacanian mirror. However, he realizes that his world is fractured and distorted. He doesn't find his identity but his reflection. He concluded that everything is not what it seems.

The inner thread of both *Erasure* and *I Am Not Sidney Poitier* is identity. Both protagonists suffer from racial stereotypes and both novels parodies racism and criticizes media reinforcing these stereotypes. While *Erasure* parodies the stereotypical expectations of publishing industry and media which avoid individuals to develop their identities, *I am Not Sidney Poitier* criticizes media for its negative effects on the perception of real world and disconnecting individuals from reality.

Conclusion

Everett's novels *Erasure* and *I am Not Sidney Poitier* examined in this study remind similar messages of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*. Everett presents readers with Monk and Not Sidney who suffer creating and living their real identity because of the racist categorization and expectations of society like the narrator of *Invisible Man*.

In both novels, identity erasure enters the picture in the important sense that, with change of clothes, all African American men look alike. While Monk became invisible when he disguised as Stagg, like the narrator of *Invisible Man* who became invisible when he disguised as Rinehart, in case of Not Sidney, he even didn't need a disguise to be confused with actor Sidney Poitier. In the end, narrators realized that the invisibility of an individual resulted from the society's blindness of prejudice and standardized expectations.

Both Not Sidney and Monk experience similar mirror image scene which reminds Lacan's theory of mirror phase and create dual identity. While Not Sidney

identifies himself with the actor Sidney Poitier and creates dual identity, Monk's parody of black stereotype, his Stagg performance turns into an alter ego and shatters the singularity of his self-conception. Both narrators are not able to distinguish illusions from reality which make their world distorted and lose their "selves" in other identities.

Everett with *Erasure* and *I Am Not Sidney Poitier* undermines the validity of the construct of racial identity while also questions the knowledge of self. Both novels explore individuals whose sense of self is threatened by racism. As this analysis concludes, both novels offer criticism of standardized representations of so-called African-American experience and prejudice based on skin color. Through the media, American society reinforces individuals to live up racial stereotypes which lead to erasing of one's real identity. Everett in *Erasure* critiques criteria's of media avoiding contemporary authors to write of other issues without discussing racism while in *I Am Not Sidney Poitier*, he criticizes media and movies which serve to promote prejudice and racism in community.

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