

# BLACK AND WHITE IDENTITY IN TODAY'S SOUTHERN NOVEL

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## ABSTRACT

The essay deals with race, prejudice, and identity in two 2009 novels: Percival Everett's *I Am Not Sidney Poitier* and Madison Smartt Bell's *Devil's Dream*. Both novelists attach importance to skin color; they make ready use of the ethnic reality in past and present lives and its presence in fiction, TV, movies, and history. The novelists' common goal is to irritate everybody with preconceived racial notions into thought.

## KEYWORDS

Civil War; southern history; Hollywood and race; contemporary southern fiction; southern biography; Percival Everett; Madison Smartt Bell

The separation between past, present, and future is only an illusion, although a convincing one.

—Albert Einstein, letter to Michele Besso  
(Madison Smartt Bell's epigraph for *Devil's Dream*)

If we judge by southern novels of the last twelve years, is there still a pattern of past ideas and conduct embedded in the society reflected in the new fiction? In the new novels, are there still great differences based on a past divided by race, gender, and class? Do Charles Frazier, Ron Rash, Chris Offutt, Pam Durban, Josephine Humphreys, Kaye Gibbons, Madison Jones, Steve Yarbrough, Richard Ford, Cormac McCarthy, Percival Everett, Madison Smartt Bell, and others see themselves in a place defined by an unforgettable past and still consider the past a storehouse of values and guidelines for living?<sup>1</sup>

I am interested in the attitudes and events that have not only made the South unpopular, but have permanently stained the region's reputation. The spiritual leftovers of hard-core conservatism, religious fundamentalism, celebrated agrarianism, romanticized myth, abject poverty, grotesque violence, and, above all, rampant prejudice (against: you name it) play an important part in the discrediting of the South. What has happened to southern writers as the South has been changing? Has the stain of past sins, in this post-segregation era of Dixie Resurgens, faded so much that contemporary writers can write of other issues and without reflecting the

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1. More on the development of contemporary southern fiction can be found in Jan Nordby Gretlund, ed., *Still in Print: The Southern Novel Today* (Columbia: University of Southern Carolina Press, 2010). In the book, the international cast of literary scholars comment on eighteen recent southern novels that, in their opinion, deserve not to be forgotten.

racist burden of the past? Here I will focus on two writers, one black and one white, who both published a novel in 2009.

In Percival Everett's most recent novel, *I Am Not Sidney Poitier* (2009), the main character is not an Uncle Tom, nor is he a militant Bigger Thomas; he is a black American of the 21st century. However, he has trouble in being seen fully by the people he meets, black or white. In the Ralph Ellison tradition the "blindness" includes himself, as the main character also has a hard time "seeing" himself. In a sense he is also nameless, like the invisible man, because his mother named him "Not Sidney Poitier," including the "Not" as a part of his name.

His mother died early and the boy does not know his father. The vision metaphor is used throughout the novel to describe how "Not Sidney" gains insight into his position in the American racial hierarchy of today. He journeys into the heart of darkness and runs into a southern sheriff, and suffers violence, incarceration, and a wall of classic white racism in Georgia and Alabama—complete with a burning cross. In short, all the classic elements of the African American slave narrative and novel are here. But there is more—and this is what makes it a noteworthy novel of the present.

Some of that extra the novel has to offer is the remembered parallels to movies featuring Sidney Poitier, the actor. In *The Defiant Ones* (dir. Stanley Kramer, 1958) a black protagonist escapes from jail handcuffed to a white person, in *Lilies of the Field* (dir. Ralph Nelson, 1963) the sisters expect the heaven-sent stranger to help them build a church, in *A Patch of Blue* (dir. Guy Green, 1965) a blind girl finds out that a helpful man is black, in *In the Heat of the Night* (dir. Norman Jewison, 1967) a black stranger solves a murder he himself has been accused of, in *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* (dir. Stanley Kramer, 1967) the "liberal" family does not expect their daughter to bring a dark man to dinner, in *They Call Me Mister Tibbs* (dir. Gordon Douglas, 1970) nobody expects the black sheriff to be successful, and in *Brother John* (dir. James Goldstone, 1971) a black man returning to his hometown is regarded as a labor agitator. All these movies share a strong racial statement.

Good novels mostly become mediocre movies but Everett takes a new look at this translation from one medium to another, as he creates his fictional story of Not Sidney Poitier through scenes and plot sequences from the Sidney Poitier movies. When Not Sidney Poitier gets himself into such scenes, the distinction between him and the actor becomes blurred. Not does not have his own identity; the one he has been given is just a negation, defined by what he is: Not. His life becomes a long line of repetitions, "quotations" from Hollywood's staging of the American racial situation in the 1960s and 1970s. However, the novel has substantially expanded the dialogue between text (=script) and film, adding new elements, and if the novel is ever made into a movie, it will be crossing the border between media again: texts ⇒ films ⇒ text ⇒ film. In theory the progression could be never-ending.

“Nu’ott,” in the southern pronunciation used by a character named Ted Turner, is black and rich—“insanely rich.”<sup>2</sup> His hippie mother had saved every dime she could and invested in the Turner Communications Group in 1970. The novel shows how Not Sidney, with growing introspection, learns that it is an illusion to imagine that he could escape the social and psychological effects of his skin color. What he learns in the process is that he has to take advantage of his unique minority position as both black and rich.

Everett’s character learns what Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison knew: true value lies not really so much in belonging to various groups, brotherhoods, or fraternities as in creating an identity with a personal integrity, based on human values. This is difficult for Not Sidney Poitier, who not only carries the name but also looks remarkably like the Hollywood actor. He is beaten up by classmates in school, mainly by other blacks, did not graduate from high school, and had to buy his way into Morehouse College, a prestigious school for rich black people in Atlanta. The education of Not Sidney as outlined by Everett has as its goal to make the young man recognize his social role and responsibility. It is tempting to see the young Not Sidney as Ralph Ellison’s invisible man, finally climbing up from his underground hibernation.

In a single brilliantly crafted guess-who-is-coming-to-dinner episode, Everett reveals that he finds life sterile and barren among the black American elite. Not Sidney is brought by a young woman to the Thanksgiving dinner at her parents’ house. There Not becomes painfully aware of the importance of his skin color, his darker shade of black. In the home of Ward Larkin, one of the most successful African American lawyers in Washington, DC, Not hears Mrs. Larkin say:

“He is just so dark, Ward.”

“Well, how dark is he?” Ward Larkin asked.

“Black.”

It hadn’t occurred to me, but now it did that the Larkins were all very light in complexion. It hadn’t dawned on me that I should have noticed or cared. More fool me, I guess.

“Well, what’s his name?” Ward asked.

“That’s the other thing,” Ruby said. “His name is Not Sidney.”

“Then what is it?”

“That’s it. Not Sidney. The word *not* and Sidney.”

“Hmmp. Some kind of ghetto nonsense, no doubt.” (*SP*, 131, Everett’s italics)

Not Sidney hears Mrs. Larkin repeat: “Ward, it’s just that he’s so dark” (*SP*, 132). And Not becomes “sadly, irritatingly, horrifyingly observant of skin color” (*SP*, 138), especially his own. When he sees that Robert, his rival for the daughter of the house, is appropriately light in color, Not Sidney imagines he hears Mrs. Larkin and her friends repeating to their daughters: “Light not white, girl, light not white” (*SP*, 139).

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2. Percival Everett, *I Am Not Sidney Poitier* (Saint Paul, MN: Graywolf Press, 2009), 6. Hereafter cited in text as *SP*.

But to his surprise Not Sidney finds that the opposition to his person also comes from the very people he tries to identify with. Violet is the cook in the Larkin household, and she declares:

“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. (*SP*, 154–55)

Advised by his friends Ted Turner and his Morehouse professor, named Percival Everett, Not Sidney reacts to the racism that he has encountered in this Washington home by questioning how these upper-class lighter-colored black people have made it into the best schools, as they are now decidedly against quota systems and affirmative action in general. Not points out that his mother never wanted to be white and that the Larkins and their friends almost had him hating *them* because of the color of their skin. He cannot hate them because they are light, but he does dislike them for the way they treat their *help*, who have not been invited to sit down to enjoy any of their own Thanksgiving cooking. Maybe Not Sidney can take comfort in an unexpected late gesture of support. After he has had a big showdown with the Larkin family at the beginning of the Thanksgiving dinner, he has packed his bag and is quietly leaving. Violet is there at the door, the only one, with a paper sack with food for him.

In Hollywood, on the last page of the novel, Not receives a special award, Most Dignified Figure in American Culture, presented by Harry Belafonte and Elizabeth Taylor. Not has once again been mistaken for the actor; once again others have given him an identity. As it is not Sidney Poitier, the actor, who accepts the award, it must be Not, and it enables him to be himself for a moment in his acceptance speech. Not says, among other things: “I have learned that my name is not my name. It seems that 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” (*SP*, 234). He ends his speech by announcing the words he would like on his tombstone, which are also the last words of the novel: “I AM NOT MYSELF TODAY.” He cannot, as he has realized, expect to be allowed to be Not himself until he is dead.

With this statement Everett has again efficiently used fiction as a weapon in the continued rejection of racism, including that within the black establishment. The novel makes it clear that not all Not’s goals are realizable within the framework of racist and capitalist America. The stain of racism and pestering prejudice is still there and at times in places where you would least expect to see it. With *I Am Not Sidney Poitier* Percival Everett has once again created a significant black novel with a difference. The portrait of the

poor whites in the South is probably too much like Erskine Caldwell's world to rile any of today's poor white southerners. But *I Am Not Sidney Poitier* is liable to irritate quite a lot of today's established black Americans.

What makes the narratives of new southern writers essentially different is the reclaiming of forgotten, or hidden, historical events, the claiming of ignored events in the present, and the acceptance and ready use of the ethnic reality of the South, or of the whole country, if you will, which is a reality of obvious, and sometimes less obvious, prejudice. Madison Smartt Bell made his name as a novelist with his Haitian trilogy, *All Souls' Rising* (1995), *Master of the Crossroads* (2000), and *The Stone That the Builder Refused* (2004), to which he added a biography of Toussaint-Louverture (2007), the leader in the Haitian revolution (1791–1803). With his Haiti-based historical fiction, his eleven other books of fiction, and the fact that he grew up outside Nashville and used to collect bullets from the Civil War battles, Bell has the right background to fictionalize Nathan Bedford Forrest, the most reviled or the most celebrated legendary Confederate cavalry general—depending on your regional heritage and conviction.

The Bedford Forrest of *Devil's Dream* (2009) is as uncouth, fierce, and profane as we expect him to be; his swearing is an art, but he is not simple or predictable. Bell has the idea that we must see Forrest in his pre-war domestic life, back to 1845, throughout the war, and after the war. The technique is based on the idea that a story should be told backward—even if it is only some of the time. The structure jumps around as if it were trying to imitate the old fiddler's tune that the novel is named for and the reader has to work some to keep up with Bell's narrative, for it consists of short, dated chapters that appear in what seems to be a haphazardly mixed structure, all in full agreement with Bell's opening quotation from Albert Einstein's correspondence: "The separation between past, present, and future is only an illusion, although a convincing one." William Faulkner would have agreed. Bell's chronology is, of course, carefully mixed to convincingly flesh out a complex character and his two families, one white and one black, at a time of violent transitions.

The racial topic that is at the core of the novel cannot be seen in an orderly narrative progression, as the racism that made slavery possible is not limited to any time. As a part of the human condition, racism has not been eradicated and will not disappear, so with regard to that topic it does not make sense to distinguish between then, now, and tomorrow; this is historical fiction, but Bell's account is also the history of today and tomorrow. This is perhaps indicated through the lingering presence of Henri, originally from Haiti, who participates in many of the novel's scenes long after Chickamauga, a battle which took place on September 19–20, 1863, where the Confederates stopped the Union offensive, and where Henri might well have died.

Forrest was fundamentally a southern stoic, who did not "practice Christianity" until two years before his death in 1877. His principles include

being honest in dealing with anybody. He likes to talk with people face to face. He never learned to write well. He thinks it is important to be in full control of the senses at all times, so he does not drink and is proud of it. He claims never to have started a fight, but has never walked away from one either and acknowledges to have finished quite a few. He marries Mary Ann Montgomery, of the Tennessee upper classes; her family never lets her forget that she married beneath herself, and a slave trader at that.

“But slave-trading, really!” her mother blurted. “He might have done well enough with the horses and mules.”

“The whole country runs on slavery, Mother. Even the cloth from the Yankee mills. Slaves picked the cotton for the curtain we hang to shut out the sight of them.”

“Well!” said Mrs. Montgomery, working her fingers in her lap. “I’m sure you got those opinions from him.”<sup>3</sup>

By June 1854 Forrest is trying to get out of the slave trade altogether. He wants to be landed gentry, or “a planter anyway” (*DD*, 130). But in August 1857, Forrest is still trading slaves, and Dr. Cowan, Mary Ann’s uncle, echoes Mrs. Montgomery’s statement: “Everybody despises a slave-trader. It’s like he was a man defiled.” But then he adds “there’s nobody in this country that don’t depend on slavery—” (*DD*, 93). The discussion is continued by Ben, one of Forrest’s slaves, during the skirmish at Okolona in February 1864: “I ain’t sayen I loves that man . . . Ain’t nobody love a slave-trader. Even they own people don’t. But I seen him give his word to a black man same as he would to a white and I ain’t never seen him break it” (*DD*, 149). When Forrest bought Ben for his skills as a craftsman, Ben did not thrive among Forrest’s slaves in Coahoma. When Forrest realized that Ben had been sold away from his wife Nancy and pined for her, he promised to go and buy her and bring her to Ben, whatever the cost—and he did. This is what Ben is referring to. It was one of Forrest’s business principles not to break up families, if possible; it was simply “better business not to, he had learned” (*DD*, 290). Throughout the war there were blacks, about forty-five of them, who volunteered to fight under Forrest’s command as teamsters. He had promised to set them free at the war’s end (*DD*, 311). He was a convincing “salesman.” In May 1861, he talked to his slaves:

The war’s agin slavery, that’s what they claim. If the Yankees whup it, they’ll set ye all free. That’s right. You heard me right. They ain’t studied on what’s to be done with ye after but they aim to set the lot of y’all free.” . . .

“I’ve jined up already to fight for the South. . . . Y’all most of ye’ve known me fer quite some time. Have ye ever seen me to take a whuppen?”

*Nawsuh, we ain’t. Don’t spec we will.*

“Well then. If the South whups it, we’ll still have slavery in this country. And that’s the side I’m fighten fer. I’ll tell ye that straight out and no doubt about it.” . . .

“Now here’s what I come down to say to ye. War ain’t just acomen, it’s done already started. I aim to fight for the side I jest said. That’s all they is to it. But any man among

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3. Madison Smartt Bell, *Devil’s Dream* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2009), 31. Hereafter cited in text as *DD*.

ye wants to fight alongside of me—when the war once gits over with, I will set that man free. (*DD*, 73, Bell's italics)

But Forrest has not mentioned the slave women; he has totally forgotten about them and their freedom. When questioned about this, he responds: "Now that's a right reasonable question. Here's what I say. If ye want to carry a gal free with ye, be shore ye step over the broom with her afore ye go to the fight. And not more'n one to a customer, mind" (*DD*, 73). Ben wants to go with Forrest because he figures that if he is free and his wife Nancy is free, they could earn enough to buy their children free. While Bell builds up this scene in a jocular high-spirited fashion that claims more of an identification between the master, known among the slaves as "the wust man in all deh state" (*DD*, 77), and his slaves than was generally true, the novelist uses exactly the intimacy thus created to reveal the true horrors of the system, as brought out in: "to buy their children free" (*DD*, 120). In May 1865 a Yankee officer is attacked by Forrest's blacks and by his horse and complains: "Your niggers fight for you. Your *horses* fight for you. No wonder you were so hard to whip." But Forrest stares back at him and declares, "I ain't been whupped till yet" (*DD*, 283, Bell's italics). When the war is over Forrest returns to his Coahoma, Mississippi, plantation, and some of his former slaves return from Georgia to work for him as freedmen (*DD*, 330).

When the war was over Forrest returned to his plantation in Coahoma, Mississippi, and some of his former slaves returned from Georgia to work for him as freedmen (*DD*, 330). To say that this uncompromising man is "respected" in his community might be an exaggeration; "feared" may be a better word. During what becomes Forrest's final day of gambling (Mary Ann Forrest, his wife, considers gambling not only a vice but a weakness and, as Forrest cannot accept weaknesses, even his own, he stops), his wife and his black servant try to enter the local gambling hall:

"Well, *you* can't go in there—" . . . Someone had risen to block Mary Ann's path.

"Miss, you cain't—"

"Don't you dare put that hand on me." Flaring her nostrils, she drew herself up.

The man fell away from her. "That's Forrest's wife."

"Run the nigger out, at least!" someone called, with a curse, and another man said,

"That's Forrest's nigger." (*DD*, 35, Bell's italics)

Forrest creates many problems for himself. For one thing, he has two families and they live next to each other at 85 Adams St., appropriately screened with wisteria from No. 87, where the slave pens are. In December 1853, he first saw the "brown honey of her [Catharine's] eyes" and he caught a look "that went clean through him" (*DD*, 287), especially after he listened to the "warm syrup of her laughter" (*DD*, 253). As Forrest is keenly aware, Catharine, the house servant, is good at undulating around a room and showing her derriere in tight relief. Bell adds, "He knew he would risk everything, for this" (*DD*, 291) although he does not understand why he would choose this. He realizes he is no longer master of anyone, least of all himself.

At the Thanksgiving table on the Coahoma County plantation in 1857, there is an incident that highlights the situation within the Forrest household:

“Mister Forrest, white meat or dark?” From the opposite end of the table, Doctor Cowan saluted him with the carving knife.

“I like the dark,” Forrest said, with a lip-licking smile. . . .

“Yes,” Mrs. Montgomery said, with an untoward sharpness. “We *know* that you do.” With that she turned her pursed lips and pointedly raised chin toward Mary Ann.

The gravy boat sloshed a bit as Catharine set it down on the table, turned her back, and started for the kitchen. Mary Ann’s large eyes were picked out with blue flame. He could read the thought that flared in her gaze: *How dearly I’d love to whip that slut till her hips stop twitching.*” (DD, 55, Bell’s italics)

When confronted by Mary Ann, Forrest has to tell the truth, both about the “high-yaller brats . . . in the yard” and about the child Catharine is “toting in her belly”: “Her chirren and our’n are brothers and sisters. Well, you ast me” (DD, 58). The worst part for Mary Ann is that she does not know whether Forrest loves Catharine or just lusts for her and in that case has intercourse with a woman he does not love, and she cannot say which is the worse (DD, 95).

Much to his surprise, Forrest learns in April 1858 that he has a teenage “black” son, whose mother died a fancy girl in a house in New Orleans. Forrest persuades Catharine to take in the boy, called Matthew. As she says, “You looks at him once you knows where he come from,” Forrest simply replies: “That’s about the size of it” (DD, 161). A sibling rivalry, which matches that between his wife and his mistress, develops between Forrest’s son Willie, who is white, and Matthew. Both try to earn their father’s praise in battle. Matthew wants more than praise; he wants to be recognized by Forrest, who seems to ignore the young men, but always knows where they are. In August 1864, possibly during Forrest’s raid into Memphis, Matthew insists that his father “owns up” to him, but Forrest blames his wife for his reluctance: “Well, hit’s a limit. Ole Miss’ll only stand for so much. She cain’t he’p it. She’s made thataway” (DD, 237). In this respect Mary Ann Forrest comes to exemplify the whole southern order that is unable to recognize someone like Matthew and yet continues with “the peculiar institution.”

As Matthew does not give up, Forrest advises the young man to live in the now, the way he himself has been doing for the last three years. The permanent interracial ties, for better and for worse, are clear to Forrest:

“You want a free paper? . . . I’ll write ye one. Only reason I ain’t till yet is I got it in mind you’re better off, the way it is now, if folks suppose you belong to me. And—it ain’t no paper on earth as can make ye a white man. Not in this world we’re liven in now.” (DD, 238)

Ironically, Forrest’s full recognition of Matthew comes when the young man argues that Forrest has given free papers to others. For the first time during that conversation Forrest looks straight at Matthew and tells him: “That I have . . . . But them, they warnt none of my blood, don’t ye see?” (DD, 238).



Forrest knows that this is not enough to satisfy Matthew. He knows that the boy will have permanent identity problems, just like William Faulkner's Joe Christmas in *Light in August*,<sup>4</sup> because deep in his soul Matthew has learned that: "White man or a nigger? A body can't be both, can they? Not both of those things jumbled together?" (*DD*, 269). Matthew is the unhappy product of slavery; he cannot just live in the moment and forget his fluid identity. Forrest is finally right when he sums it up: "Tell you one thing I know—you won't ever be free of me. No more'n I could be free of you" (*DD*, 238). This is a truth that is forever young, and it was, unfortunately, a fitting epitaph for the relations between blacks and whites for the following one hundred years of American history. "The separation between past, present, and future is an illusion"—indeed, as regards pestering prejudice and the stain of racism.

As Jim Cobb has pointed out, "the South's experience surely says that any identity—national, regional, cultural, or otherwise—that can be sustained only by demonizing or denigrating other groups exacts a terrible toll, not simply on the demonized and denigrated but ultimately on those who can find self-affirmation only by rejecting others."<sup>5</sup> This is a restatement of the old truth that the enslaver ultimately enslaves himself. *Devil's Dream* will irritate a lot of readers because it gives Forrest a black family, but then it will irritate many others because the novel makes Forrest appear a warm human being. In short, Bell challenges all our preconceived notions about a man and his time.

The two novels would seem to answer my initial question. The stain of racism has not been ignored or suburbanized away in the new southern fiction. On the contrary, racism and prejudice seem forever present. "The world of our fathers resides within us,"<sup>6</sup> as Cormac McCarthy put it in his novel *Cities of the Plain*. Prejudice and racism still exist and today's fiction caters to our needs and realities by accentuating the issues.

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4. Faulkner's Joe Christmas is accepted in both white society and black in Yoknapatawpha County. But like Bell's character Matthew, he cannot live at ease in either one.

5. James C. Cobb, *Away Down South: A History of Southern Identity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 336.

6. Cormac McCarthy, *Cities of the Plain* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1998), 281.

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