

American Fiction founders on American reality

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American Fiction is a film written and directed by Cord Jefferson, based on the novel *Erasure* (2001) by Percival Everett. The comedy-drama has been nominated for Best Picture and Best Actor (Jeffrey Wright) at the Academy Awards. The movie has a sharp, amusing bent when it criticizes such legitimate targets as fake “gangsta” culture, but, in the end, it falls back all too lazily on racialist clichés.

Thelonious “Monk” Ellison (Wright) is an African-American professor in Los Angeles, who writes ostensibly serious books. His latest, for example, is a retelling of Aeschylus’ *The Persians*, which has not sold many copies. (Percival Everett, in fact, on whose novel the film is based, published two books in 1990 that reworked Greek myths.)

Meanwhile, Monk becomes aware that another black author, Sintara Golden (Issa Rae), has turned out a lucrative “Ebonics” blockbuster entitled *We’s Lives in Da Ghetto*. (Golden herself is a graduate of “exclusive, bohemian” Oberlin College, who “moved to New York the day after graduation,” where she got “a job at a fancy publishing house.”) Deemed a “heartbreaking and visceral debut” by enthusiastic critics, Golden’s effort is rightly lampooned by *American Fiction*.

Monk, back with his immediate family in his native Massachusetts, comes under financial stress when his mother (Leslie Uggams) develops dementia and needs to be institutionalized. Despite the fact that both his siblings Lisa (Tracee Ellis Ross) and Cliff (Sterling K. Brown) are medical doctors, it largely falls on Monk to pay the bills for his mother’s care, particularly after Lisa’s premature death.

Monk draws the conclusion—including in response to the advice of his agent, Arthur (John Ortiz), to produce “black stuff”—that he needs to follow Golden’s example. He writes his own “ghetto” masterpiece entitled *My Pafology*. To Arthur, he later exclaims, “What’s blacker

than that? It’s got deadbeat dads, rappers, crack ... and he’s killed by the cops in the end. I mean, that’s black, right?” Arthur replies affirmatively, observing that “white people think they want the truth, but they don’t. They just want to feel absolved.”

Monk and his agent concoct a story about *My Pafology* having been written by one “Stagg R. Leigh,” in tribute to the folkloric outlaw Stagger Lee. To up the ante, they also make Stagg a fugitive from justice. Not leaving any stone unturned, Monk changes the book’s title to *F—k*, which of course is a hit with the white publishing team and the work goes on to win a prestigious literary award. Monk cashes in with lavish book and film deals.

Insofar as *American Fiction* opposes and ridicules “gangsta” art, its creators, purveyors, apologists and all those who circle it greedily, vulture-like, Jefferson’s film is on solid ground. And 90 percent of its value lies there. Unfortunately, that satire only takes up a small portion of the movie.

The bulk of *American Fiction*, which panders to petty-bourgeois snobbery and self-involvement, is composed of undeveloped ideas and racialism. How is that possible in a film in which the central character leads off by saying he does not believe in race at all (and is outraged to find that a bookstore has placed his novels in “African-American Studies”)? It emerges inexorably from the current atmosphere in affluent circles where race and gender dominate, and therefore, nothing has to be worked through. That is the ideological default setting.

The basic untruth or distortion here is that while exposing one phenomenon as a semi-fiction, i.e., the partly fabricated and generally sensationalized “ghetto culture,” the film creates its own fiction, which is that the vast majority of the black—and by implication, white—population live like Monk and his family. The movie suggests that the only alternative to the milieu of criminals and drug dealers is the world of the upper

middle class.

Along these lines, Monk laments to Sintara, his fellow novelist, that he is “fed up with ... black people in poverty, black people rapping, black people as slaves, black people murdered by the police, whole soaring narratives about black folks in dire circumstances who still manage to maintain their dignity before they die.” As though poverty, slavery, police killings were not burning questions!

In opposing the phony glorification of “street life” *American Fiction* throws the baby out with the bathwater. It contends essentially that the social facts embellished and exaggerated in that genre do not exist or have been done to death. The snobbery referred to above reaches a high point when Monk, angrily denouncing “ghetto literature,” tells his girl friend Coraline (Erika Alexander) that the only people who like such books are “white people—and people, apparently, like you—[who] devour this slop like pigs at a dumpster to stay current at f——g cocktail parties or whatever.”

Astonishingly, in an indication of the filmmakers’ disorientation, they have Sintara reply to one of Monk’s barbs about her book: “Do you get angry at Bret Easton Ellis or Charles Bukowski for writing about the downtrodden?” To identify those two authors, the first who examines yuppie psychopathology, among other things, and the second who wrote about “barflies,” as chroniclers of the supposedly white “downtrodden” is simply ludicrous.

In an early scene, Sintara complains that when she worked for a publisher in New York City, “no matter how good the books were, most every submission was from some white dude from New York going through a divorce. Too few of them were about my people. And so I’d think, Where are our stories? Where is our representation? And it was from that lack that my book was born.”

This helps expose the fraud of so-called diversity and inclusion. What’s involved, as we have argued before, is not genuine *social* diversity and inclusion, that is, the expansion of culture to include and reflect the concerns of broader layers of the population, above all, the exploited and oppressed. The identity politics agenda merely involves replacing white professionals with minority professionals (or male with female, straight with gay, etc.), with no increased richness or depth in the representation of life.

And the artistic results are appropriately weak and dull. The Inner Life of the complacent African American

professional proves to be no more enthralling than that of his or her white counterpart. The scenes of Monk’s family life are as flat as a pancake. This same essentially anti-artistic tendency also finds expression in the absurdly brief appearance of Tracee Ellis Ross, whose character is killed off almost as soon as we meet her, as well as in the perfunctory introduction of the gay question in the form of Monk’s brother. Events and characters are organized in line with pragmatic plot requirements or the needs of current racial politics, not coherent drama or aesthetics.

In the end, what the film counterposes to “black trauma porn,” as Monk refers to it, which coins fortunes from backwardness, is a bland middle class household full of doctors.

There are initially likable, satirical elements in *American Fiction*. One develops hopes, but Jefferson’s film proceeds to fall to pieces. It has (literally) nothing to say about war, dictatorship, pandemic, climate disaster, police violence and social inequality, which are the great issues dominating the overwhelming majority of lives in America—black, white, Latino, immigrant and every other kind.

The filmmakers speak for that social layer that finds discussion of poverty either tedious, irrelevant or “old hat.” In so far as they envision the working class, it is politely represented by Monk’s housekeeper Lorraine (Myra Lucretia Taylor) and her security guard boyfriend Maynard (Raymond Anthony Thomas). In regard to this excessively virtuous, grateful couple, one can only recall Oscar Wilde’s observation that “the best amongst the poor are never grateful. They are ungrateful, discontented, disobedient, and rebellious. ... Disobedience, in the eyes of anyone who has read history, is man’s original virtue.”

In any case, *American Fiction* founders on American reality.



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