

Sylvie Bauer (Paris 10 University)

« **Private, turbulent seas** »: « **Painting the moon** » in *Cutting Lisa*, by Percival Everett

Cutting Lisa narrates the summer John Livesey, a retired obstetrician, spends in Oregon with his son's family. Tuned to the changing weather of Oregon, this story unfolds in surfacing tensions and discrepancies, climaxing in repeated experiences of loss. It seems as though a painting were taking shape before the eyes of the reader who is a witness to the small strokes of brush that gradually build up the text. Apparently disconnected scenes or moments seem to follow the pace of the summer, yet partake in the building up of a tension all the more stifling as it is silent. Hence, in spite of the mundane setting of a summer vacation, an increasing form of violence crops up, hardly ever voiced, but perceptible in the pervading feeling of always skirting with the limits of the human. This paper aims at analyzing how this apparently simple novel raises in fact the question of the limits of the human.

Sylvie Bauer is Professor at the University of Rennes, France. She wrote a dissertation on the novels of Walter Abish, Donald Barthelme and Russell Hoban and works on contemporary American fiction. The author of a monograph and of various articles on Walter Abish, she has also published papers on contemporary American writers such as Percival Everett, Donald Barthelme, Philip Roth, Don DeLillo, Colson Whitehead. She is currently working on a book-length project on the work of Percival Everett.

Marguerite Déon (Rouen University)

« **Clichés and cultural icons in Percival Everett's fiction** »

This paper will deal with the various functions of clichés in Percival Everett's literary work, illustrated with examples drawn from *God's Country*, *Wounded*, and *I Am Not Sidney Poitier*. It will dwell more specifically on the critical function of clichés and on the play with the reader's expectations that is created through revisiting references and preconceived ideas.

Marguerite Déon is writing a Masters thesis on clichés in Percival Everett's work of fiction, as part of her Masters Studies in American Literature at Rouen University. She was first trained in « classes préparatoires littéraires » before joining the English Department at Rouen University. She has a passion for literature and started writing poems and narratives in high

school, then took part in the Creative Writing workshops held by British writer James Friel at Rouen University. She draws, taking her inspiration from Egon Schiele and Niki de Saint Phalle, practices drama and often travels in Europe. She worked as a hostess at the Palais Bénédicte in Fécamp, more particularly in the contemporary art exhibition space, then as a trilingual guide (French-English-German) at Cany Castle.

Michel Feith (Nantes University)

“The Well-Tempered Anachronism, Or The C(o)urse of Empire in Percival Everett’s *For Her Dark Skin*”

An irreverent revisiting of the myths of Medea and the Argonauts, *For Her Dark Skin* (1990) is Percival Everett’s first Signifyin(g) on classical myth, characterized by a playful recourse to anachronism. On the lighter side, the transposition of epic and tragedy into a mundane world reminiscent of small-town, or suburban, American amounts to a mildly self-reflexive breaking of the frame, debunking the prestige of the Classics and reminding us of the fact that all readings of the past are anchored in the present.

Yet, the title warns us that anachronism cannot be limited to this light-tempered humor: the fact of racializing the myth’s confrontation between Greece and its barbarian Other, forges a parallel between the course of Empire in ancient myth and the history of imperialism in America. A backward gaze at a much-idealized Greece, the forebear of Western philosophy and democracy, may lead us to reconsider the status of one (or two) system(s) that indulged in expansionism and slavery.

“Race” is a myth, just as the story of Jason and Medea is. Their nature is different, one being a social fiction, and the other a literary one; yet both toy with the line separating civilization from barbarism. The symbolic power of a canonic work can perpetuate ideologies in a covert fashion, just as the power of ideologies can warp our reading of canonic works. Critical Signifyin(g) on the Classics may therefore be equivalent to a mental deprogramming cure, a sort of “verbal rehab,” so to speak.

Michel Feith is Associate Professor in American Literature at the University of Nantes, France, and a member of Center for Research on National Identities and Intercultural Studies (CRINI). After a doctoral thesis entitled “Myth and History in Chinese American and Chicano

Literature” (1995), his publications include articles on Maxine Hong Kingston, Gerald Vizenor, John Edgar Wideman, Percival Everett and the Harlem Renaissance. On the latter subject he edited, with Pr. Geneviève Fabre, *Jean Toomer and the Harlem Renaissance* (Rutgers University Press, 2001) and “*Temples for Tomorrow*”: *Looking Back at the Harlem Renaissance* (Indiana University Press, 2001). He has also edited three collections on nationalism and regionalism at the University of Nantes, the latest one being *Nationalismes et régionalismes: Amériques, Modes d’emploi*, Nantes, CRINI Editions, 2008. A volume of conference proceedings entitled *Paroles de vainqueurs, paroles de vaincus: réécritures et revisions* was released in 2012, also at the CRINI.

Brigitte Félix (Paris 8 University)

“Of weeds and words: Percival Everett’s poetry”

Percival Everett’s poetry writing comes as no surprise to the readers of his novels. He has indicated that he envisions poetry as a means of seeking a form of abstraction, or maybe an abstraction in form, that he wishes to achieve in the writing of fiction, but says he has not yet quite found. This paper aims at offering a reading of Percival Everett’s *ars poetica* as it is inscribed in his poetry more specifically, and as part of the writer’s general reflection on the creative and artistic process. We will see to what extent Everett’s poems work as a field for research and experimentation with “pure form” (to borrow the title of a poem from *Abstraktion und Einfühlung*).

Brigitte Félix is a Professor at the Université Paris 8 Vincennes-Saint-Denis where she teaches American literature. Her research is focused on contemporary American fiction in its innovative/experimental forms.

Marie-Agnès GAY (Jean Moulin University – Lyon 3)

“‘Wanted: straight words’ in Percival Everett’s novel *Wounded*”

Although less blatantly reflexive and metafictional than Percival Everett’s most famous works, *Wounded* does offer an insistent reflection on language. Indeed, although it does not shun referentiality in its realistic portrayal of a small Wyoming community confronted to a

sudden outburst of violence borne out of homophobia and racism, the novel – through its homodiegetic narrator, a University-bred cowboy and art collector – also obsessively explores the relationship between words and the world. It is this dimension of the novel that our paper will focus on. After studying the way the novel’s numerous dialogues paradoxically stage the characters’ desperate attempts at direct communication, straight words constantly failing them, we will then show that *Wounded* actually seems to place a ban on linguistic straightness: “Wanted: straight words” thus suggests, as in the common yet ambivalent use of the expression, that straight words are precisely what should be suppressed, eradicated. Indeed, in the face of sterile, and thus deadly linguistic straightness, healing may only come from devious words and their bifurcating meanings, or to quote the author himself, from “nouns and names [that] behave badly and play loose with meaning”. The commitment to the right to difference within the story is thus matched by an apology of *differance* on the textual level, words forever escaping capture.

Marie-Agnès Gay is Professor of American Literature at the University Jean Moulin – Lyon 3. She specializes in 20th- and 21st-century American fiction. She has published on F. Scott Fitzgerald, Richard Ford, Allan Gurganus, a gay writer from the South, and her interest in minority writing has recently extended to Asian American writers.

Claude Julien (Tours University)

“Assumption : ancestry and new development”

The paper will approach *Assumption* as an heir of earlier Everett stories, most visibly among the short stories. Describing the novel's filiation with earlier texts leads to two paths. We will first see how, starting from supposedly familiar ground (Ogden seems not to be a first-comer) the novel leads the reader to a dreamland full of sand pits that culminates with Ogden's question to Warren "What makes sense in this world?" Secondly, the paper will also discuss the novel from the standpoint of Jacques Rancière's distinction between "police", received/assumed opinions and behaviors, vs. "politics", personal standpoints straying from generally accepted truths and conducts. Such seems to be the novel's itinerary.

Claude Julien, now retired from Tours University, has taught American studies, while African-American studies were his research field. He has been a member of the CAAR board.

He organized the first-ever conference on Percival Everett's fiction, and that took place in France. It gave rise to *Reading Percival Everett*, (CRAFT n°4) a collection of essays published by the Tours University Press. Reading has gone on since then, as book after book came out.

Keith Mitchell (University of Massachusetts Lowell)

“Encountering the Face of the Other: Levinasian Ethics in Percival Everett’s *God’s Country*”

At the center of Percival Everett’s oeuvre has been an interrogation of ethical dimensions that seek to put forth profound questions of identity and how human beings relate to one another on the basis of what we *think* we know about the other, primarily through visual cues based on race. Of course, race, ethics, and inter-human relationships in America have been at the forefront of the African American literary tradition—from Phillis Wheatley to the present. Everett’s 1994 novel *God’s Country* employs satire and parody of the American Western in order to interrogate past and present breaches of inter-human ethics, particularly white America’s unethical treatment of African Americans and Native Americans. This essay seeks to read Everett’s ethical stance through the theoretical lens of Emmanuel Levinas’ ideas surrounding encounters with “the face of the other” and our (potential) responsibility for the other. In *God’s Country*, I argue that the face-to-face encounter between Curt Marder, the white racist cowboy, and Bubba, the African American tracker whom Marder hires to find his kidnapped wife, Sadie, follows closely many of the ethico-philosophical ideas that Emmanuel Levinas theorizes and expounds in such important works as *Alterity and Transcendence*, *Humanism of the Other*, and *Ethics and Infinity*.

Keith Mitchell is an Associate Professor of English at the University of Massachusetts Lowell. He is the coeditor, along with Professor Robin Vander, of the recently published essay collection *Perspectives on Percival Everett* (University Press of Mississippi, 2013). This is the first collection of essays published in the United States on Everett's work. A second collection of essays on Percival Everett titled *Percival Everett Writing Other/Wise* and also co-edited with Professor Robin Vander will be published by the Xavier Review Press in the fall of 2013. He is also the coeditor of *After the Pain: Critical Essays on Gail Jones* (2006), the first collection of essays published on this important African-American writer. He

is also coeditor of *Xavier Review*. Special Issue. "Reading the Intersections of Sex and Spirit in the Creative Arts" (2007), and book chapters, articles, and reviews in *Obsidian III: Literature in the African Diaspora*, *The Oxford Companion to African American Literature*, *Southern Writers: A New Biographical Dictionary*, *The Bryn Mawr Review of Comparative Literature*, *Oyster Boy Review*, and other publications.

Claudine Raynaud (Paul Valéry University, Montpellier 3)

"Naming, Nonsense and Not Naming in *I am Not Sidney Poitier*"

« En tout langage, une structure d'archi-promesse est irréductible : c'est le moment du nom, de la parole ou du titre qui depuis son insignifiance promet le sens ou le vrai ». (Derrida)

"Then what am I?"

'They'll call you a colored man when you grow up,' [my mother] said. Then she turned to me and smiled mockingly and asked: 'Do you mind, Mr. Wright?'" (*Black Boy*)

I am Not Sidney Poitier relies primarily on the joke of the hero being named by his mother "Not Sidney", a pun that amounts to a "negative" identity or an identity in negation and difference, but that thus opens up a reflection on names and naming. An irreverent reference to (un)naming and to being called out of one's name, or even to Homer's "No name", the text indeed stages a cynical twist on African American nomination and its troubled history. In the wake of *Erasure*, it explores once again the relationship between language and being, being and meaning, as it revisits the major films in which Poitier starred and simultaneously gestures, among others, towards Ellison's *Invisible Man* and Melvin Van Peeble's *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* and their picaresque plotlines. The corrosive humor relies on constant wordplays and non-sequiturs and a foregrounding of the letter in the dialogues. It also rests on the comic portrayal of characters, such as Ted Turner and Jane Fonda, America's cultural icons *par excellence*. Percival Everett "himself" (?) plays the part of a Professor of nonsense in an autofictional *mise en abyme* of his own writing and authorship.

I will focus in this paper on the proper name, an existential emptying out of what stands for identity and uniqueness, here functioning as a sign (of negation) in the "signifyin'" chain. While debunking Hollywood's use and abuse of the magical Negro, *Not Sidney* addresses the

philosophical definitions of nonsense and negation, the fraud of self-identity, and tests the limits of narrative coherence.

Claudine Raynaud is a Professor of English and American Studies at the Université Paul-Valéry, Montpellier III. She has taught in England and the United States (Michigan, Northwestern and Oberlin). A Fellow at the Du Bois Institute (Harvard, Fall 2005), she headed the nationwide African American Studies Research Group created in 2004 and works at the CNRS. She is the author of *Toni Morrison : L'Esthétique de la survie* (1995) and numerous articles on black autobiography. Her most significant publications are: "Coming of Age in the African American Novel," *The Cambridge Companion to the African American Novel* (2004), "Beloved or the Shifting Shapes of Memory," *The Cambridge Companion to Toni Morrison* (2007) and an anthology of articles on Gloria Naylor (L'Harmattan, 2010). A Hurston scholar, she has just published an essay on her anthropological writing (*Afromodernisms*, Edinburgh UP, 2013).

Judith Roof (Rice University)

"Everett's *Eidolon*, or The Story of an Eye"

"Poetry leads to the same place as all forms of eroticism--to the blending and fusion of separate objects. It leads us to eternity, it leads us to death, and through death to continuity. Poetry is eternity; the sun matched with the sea" (25). The image, like Bataille's paean to poetry, matches the sun to the sea, blends and fuses separate objects, becomes another object, another point "decorporealized and transcendental," as Everett's poem "Of Seeing" suggests, present. Everett's *eidolon*--his image of the image--is that which cuts across the eye, which interrupts the meshing of sun and sea, the crossing that makes meshing visible as such. His *eidolon* is a meshing, a cutting that makes the image an event, that which erupts from the cut--in language, in sound, in perspective, in space and time. This cut makes that eternity appear just as disappears, just as its stasis splits

This paper enacts Everett's *eidolon* as one persistent practice of his oeuvre: of his paintings, poetry, and novels, specifically his paintings, *Swimming Swimmers Swimming* and *Assumption*.

Judith Roof is William Shakespeare Chair in English and Chair of the Department of English at Rice University. She is the author of several essays on Everett's work and of several books on drama, gender, multi-media art and literature.

Françoise Sammarcelli (Paris Sorbonne University)

“Vision and Revision in Percival Everett’s *Erasure* »

Erasure (2001) is a highly reflexive novel in which Percival Everett engages in an ironical dialogue with literary and artistic traditions—a dialogue which a number of mock-philosophical conversations between famous artists (such as Rothko and Motherwell, Rauschenberg and De Kooning, etc) cleverly dramatize. Playing with a dynamic of revision on several intertextual and intersemiotic levels, the text denounces the conventions of representation (including representations of “black” identity) and addresses the ambiguous issue of political correctness. Rather than dwelling on the status of the richly parodic and already much-commented embedded fiction “My Pafology”, this paper will focus on the fragmentary quality of Ellison’s journal and its questioning of Western culture. What is it that we remember or forget? How do we make sense of our experience? It is worth examining how this brilliant novel compels its reader to change perspective and revise some of his/her interpretive strategies.

Françoise Sammarcelli

A former student at the ENS Fontenay-St Cloud, Françoise Sammarcelli is a Professor of American Literature at the Sorbonne University in Paris where she is the head of the Research Center on Texts and Images. She is the author of a book on John Barth as well as of many papers on issues of representation, on intertextuality as well as on intersemiotic relations. She recently edited two publications, *Image et mémoire* (PU Paris Sorbonne, 2009) and *L’Obscur* (Michel Houdiard, 2009).

Anthony Stewart (Dalhousie University, Halifax)

Challenging the Post-Racial in Percival Everett’s *Assumption*

A reviewer of Percival Everett's 2011 novel, *Assumption*, recently stated that "in the second section [of the novel]—about a drug heist gone wrong that contains such mystery-novel archetypes as a one-armed villain and a daring escape from a moving van—Ogden's race is never mentioned as he investigates the crime; race is treated as irrelevant to his character." Ogden Walker, the novel's protagonist, is black in the second section of *Assumption*, as he is in the first and third sections of the novel. The reviewer, however, makes the remarkable suggestion that race is irrelevant unless it is mentioned, and, moreover, that it must continue to be mentioned or else it will be rendered irrelevant. This is the kind of crucial error that is actively invited by Everett's work. The reviewer assumes that Everett sees race in the simplistic way that the reviewer does, and that the Everett sees his readership as bluntly as the reviewer assumes them to be.

Instead, *Assumption* may most productively be read as issuing the sort of challenge that Everett has been laying down to his readers since his first novel, *Suder*, was published in 1983. The challenge is to approach issues of race *along with*, rather than instead of, the other large questions encountered in serious fiction. This challenge is all- the-more significant with the rise of the notion of the "post-racial" in American public discourse. Everett's novel and Barthes's theorizing of the notion of mythology enable a critique of the post-racial and argue for an understanding of the instructive and critical challenges to the post-racial posed by Everett's work.

Anthony Stewart is Professor of English at Dalhousie University, in Halifax, Nova Scotia. His main research interest is twentieth-century African American Literature and Culture. He also teaches twentieth-century British Literature and is the author of two books: *George Orwell, Doubtless, and the Value of Decency* (Routledge, 2003), and *You Must Be a Basketball Player: Rethinking Integration in the University* (Fernwood, 2009). Stewart has published essays on Ralph Ellison, Percival Everett, August Wilson, and on representations of the African American male athlete, and is currently working on a book on privilege, tentatively titled *Notes From a Visitor: On Privilege and Belonging* (under contract with Fernwood Publishing), and a critical book on the work of Percival Everett, tentatively entitled *Approximate Gestures: The Meaning of the Between in the Fiction of Percival Everett* (under contract with Louisiana State University Press).

Isabelle Van Peteghem –Tréard (Classes Préparatoires Lettres and Premières Supérieures – Guist’hau – Nantes)

“*Jouissance in Damnedifido stories by Percival Everett*”

This paper, based upon Lacanian and deconstructionist tools, intends to show in what way Everett’s stories, notably *The Fix* and *The Appropriation of Cultures*, confront the fundamental division of American society in a metafictional way, constantly combining semiotics and politics.

Indeed Percival Everett deals not only with the issue of black identity but also with the structuring of the subject through the symbolic, that is through language and strategies of what Derrida calls *differance*. Desire is thus first differed in the short stories in order to reach *jouissance* (as the symbolical re-appropriation of the usufruct of a property but also as pleasure). As the re-appropriation of meaning, empowerment and sublimation of desire, it is therefore central to Percival Everett’s *Damnedifido* stories and solves on the page the fundamental alienation between the black subject and the Other.

Isabelle Van Peteghem –Tréard defended her PhD thesis on *Jouissance and the Sacred in Alice Walker’s Novels* in Paris III – Sorbonne Nouvelle. She has published articles on Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, Percival Everett, Angela Davis, Rebecca Cox Jackson, Tennessee Williams, Joyce Carol Oates, Vladimir Nabokov. Her book, *La sublimation pourpre d’Alice Walker*, will be released in 2013. She is also currently working on the notion of sublimation in American cinema. She teaches in 1ère Supérieure and Lettres Supérieures in Nantes.

Clément-Alexandre Ulf (Rouen University)

“Invisible Fathers: Investigating Percival Everett's ‘Lower Frequencies’”

I propose to study the unique characterization of fathers and father figures in Percival Everett's fiction. From *Suder* (1983), the author's first published novel, to the freshly released *Percival Everett* by Virgil Russell (2013), fatherhood is arguably a central theme in the author's oeuvre. Surprisingly, it has been virtually absent from any criticism on the author. Using Ralph Ellison's unnamed narrator in *Invisible Man* as the ancestral point of origin of a "disembodied voice" addressing his readers on "lower frequencies", I will trace that voice up

through the trope of the oxymoronic invisible presence of fathers in Everett's work, and their diegetic and spiritual functions for lost son and daughter characters.

Clément-Alexandre Ulf teaches at Rouen University as an ATER. He is currently preparing a PhD at Versailles-Saint-Quentin University, entitled "L'invention de l'Amérique dans l'œuvre de Philip Roth", an author on whose work he already published several papers with the Presses Universitaires de Rennes, in volumes edited by Professor Paule Lévy. His research focuses on ethnic and metafictional writing.