

## Introduction

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The papers gathered here are the minutes of the third conference held on American novelist Percival Everett's work, which welcomed new scholars having recently joined the field of Everett studies<sup>1</sup>. It was further original insofar as it included Everett's painted work, to which a book had been devoted yet, as a hybrid collaboration with poet Chris Albani, and entitled *There Are No Names for Red* (Red Hen Press, 2010). The question of the relations between the two practices and media, in terms of structures, composition and modes of imagination, thus runs throughout this issue.

An exhibition of Percival Everett's paintings was held at the Maison de l'Université during the whole month of March 2013, right at the time of the Printemps des Poètes, from March 9<sup>th</sup> to 24<sup>th</sup>. The whole event was covered and broadcasted by the R2R campus radio, which also broadcasted an interview of the author as well as bilingual readings of Everett's poems, as translated by students of the English department during a weekly workshop. Finally, an event involving Percival Everett was held at the L'Armitière bookstore, thus extending the debate outside the academy.

Indeed the conference was organised with a view to combine scientific quality and openness to the widest possible audience, via the paintings exhibition and the reading at the bookstore, as well as the active involvement of students: in the translation workshop, but also in the conference itself, as some students gave papers during the sessions. This was meant to be a non-normalized collection, including not only different approaches but varying lengths of texts, and different projects –rather a conversation between the work, the artist and his critics, as enhanced by the recorded exchanges during the conference, to be found on the University of Rouen's website<sup>2</sup>. Such diversity of approaches and interests, as well as of speaking individuals, testifies to the ongoing attractive power of Everett's work and to its wide-ranging reach, letting one surmise that those are universal issues that he tackles, universal questions that he raises. Men and women, old and young, students and professors, continue reading Everett's books with the sense that the work is addressed specifically to them, feeling as accomplices even when most disturbed by Everett's unpredictable prose. This may be one of the highlights of his tour de force: when erudition and abstraction strike an intimate note.

**Keith Mitchell**, in his paper "Encountering the Face of the Other", shows how once again, in *God's Country*, "Everett employs the American West as a geographical space in which to explore ethical relationships among people living in very insular communities." Through the lens of Levinasian ethics, Mitchell analyses "the highly problematic, racially vexed encounters between the novel's characters", often coming down to "a reductive totalization of the nonwhite and nonmale Other". **Marguerite Déon** further explores Everett's use of clichés and cultural icons, extending the analysis

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<sup>1</sup> This is the first issue in the *Lectures du Monde Anglophone* series (LMA), an ERIAC research group electronic journal devoted to studies of the English speaking world.

<sup>2</sup> The papers collected in this issue are not given in the order followed during the conference.

of *God's Country to Wounded* and *I Am Not Sidney Poitier*. The author's constant "preoccupation with language and representation" is shown to destabilize the reader's "reassuring reading habits" while more largely questioning perception processes and the making of meaning. Racial prejudice again is at stake in **Anthony Stewart's** analysis, which tackles one of the main "challenges issued by Everett's fiction" for the reader: the "balance to strike between being aware that a character is black, on the one hand, while simultaneously resisting the urge to be preoccupied exclusively and reductively by this fact, on the other". Stewart analyses *Assumption* as a "critique of the post-racial", shown to be a "pointless [...] desire to resolve something we cannot definitively understand." *Assumption* is also chosen as an object of study by **Claude Julien**, who resorts to Jacques Rancière's notion of the politics of literature to show how *Assumption* offers "an unspoken comment on two of American society's sores: race to begin with, and, mostly, violence". This novel can thus be read as "a nightmare founded on an unmentioned national nightmare". **Isabelle van Peteghem-Tréard** focuses on "*jouissance*" in *Damnedifido* to show how the "collection presents the reader with an original and witty criticism of the US by exploring nonsense as what forces society to redefine itself". In her analysis based upon Lacanian and deconstructionist theories, Isabelle van Peteghem-Tréard argues that "As the re-appropriation of meaning, empowerment and sublimation of desire, [*jouissance*] is therefore central to Percival Everett's *Damnedifido* stories and solves on the page the fundamental alienation between the black subject and the Other." **Clément Ulf** investigates the "haunting voices" of "invisible fathers" in Percival Everett's *Zulus* (1990), *erasure* (2001), and *Assumption* (2011), "from the angle of a long-gone father's message", in a view to establish for Everett's considered works "an intimate literary kinship with Ralph Ellison's masterpiece *Invisible Man*. **Michel Feith** contributes an insightful reading of a little-studied piece by Everett, *For Her Dark Skin*, which he analyses as "a tale of globalization, a point brought home by Everett's adroit use of anachronism, which forges a parallel between the course of Empire in ancient myth and the history of imperialism in America." Starting from Everett's apparently sharing with Euripides a definition of literature as "a subversive, critical probing of the accepted truths of society, especially when encoded in canonical narratives", Feith shows how the multiple parallels "between the myths of Medea and the Argonauts on the one hand, and on the other the historical foundations of American society –conquest and colonization, slavery, racial and gender imbalances– make parody an instrument for the radical criticism of dominance and the failings of 'democracy'". As to **Judith Roof**, she chose to analyse Everett's paintings in relation to his poetry, calling upon the notion of the "eidolon": "an image, a phantasm, a ghostly remnant. It is what remains of the seen minus the seeing. It is what is seen that is not there. It streams impressions through time and time through impressions. It is also the Greek root of the word 'ideal'." Judith Roof brings together Everett's visual and poetic work to give an itself poetic and enlightening analysis of his take on, and practice "Of Seeing". **Brigitte Félix's** paper prolongs the exploration of Everett's poetry, by enhancing "the literary value of [...] Percival Everett's 'poetic gesture' in reference to the title of the first book of poems he published [*Re: f(gesture)* (2006)]." Her analysis "reveal[s] the poetic potential contained in the narrative line too.", thus demonstrating how "The poet's attention to 'the word', to sounds and sense, to nouns, naming, and the whole syntax of meaning is at the core of [Everett's] *ars poetica*." Indeed both genres offer space "for questioning the limits of formal language". **Claudine Raynaud** focuses on *I am Not Sidney Poitier* to show how

this “text indeed stages a cynical and hilarious twist on African American nomination and its troubled history”, by “explor[ing] once again the relationship between language and being, being and meaning”. In a carnivalesque mode, “*I am Not Sidney Poitier* addresses the philosophical definitions of nonsense and negation, the fraud of self-identity and the limits of language.” **Françoise Sammarcelli** analyses *Erasure* as “a story both of vision and revision, in individual and collective terms.” Indeed, while “denounc[ing] the conventions of representation (including issues of political correctness)” the novel raises the larger question of “How do we make sense of our experience?” Françoise Sammarcelli demonstrates how *Erasure* aims at bringing its reader not only to share a vision but “to accept constant revision.” **Marie-Agnès Gay** offers a thorough analysis of *Wounded*, often acknowledged as Everett’s most realistic novel, but which soon “turns into a more intellectual and insistent exploration of the relationship between words and the world”. More specifically, *Wounded* “favor[ing] the fertile zones of silence and indirection”, “shows the limits of forthright expression, directness proving inadequate and reductive in the face of a manifold reality, and exposes its delusiveness as language appears fundamentally unstable.” Marie-Agnès Gay demonstrates the “ethical and political dimension” of “linguistic misdemeanor” in Everett’s work. **Sylvie Bauer** focuses her analysis on *Cutting Lisa*, a little studied novel, marked by “a pervading feeling of estrangement that leads to a constant questioning of reality.” With loss of control at its heart, the novel “raises the question of the limits of the human, which has to come to grips with, or to surrender to the inhuman and the sublime.” Calling for contemplation, the novel stages a “failure of language correspond[ing] also to a new form of thinking on the limits of words”. The novel is thus viewed as “an attempt to seize what it means to be part of the world and accepting the indifference of the elements that compose it”. **Gwen Le Cor** draws from trauma studies among other methods of analysis to show how the disruption of all categories in Everett’s *The Water Cure* playfully “turns language into a ‘performative utterance’ materializing trauma on the page.” Taking after Everett’s highly inventive style, Gwen Le Cor’s paper allows plays on words to proliferate, thus doing justice to her object-of-study-as-model. Particularly insightful analyses of Everett’s paragraphs written in invented, nonsensical language demonstrate that “The blinking language of passages such as this one, perform what cannot be voiced or depicted. They capture an effraction—that of our representational system and of language.”

Throughout the collection, such poetic and political “effraction” is being explored, by different voices speaking from various viewpoints.