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Introduction: “It’s not a good thing. It’s not a bad thing. But it’s a thing. But it doesn’t mean it has to remain that way.”

This marks the third time in the last five years that I have written an introduction or a profile in a special issue of a journal that involved Percival Everett in some way. The first introduction was to a 2013 special issue of the *Canadian Review of American Studies* that presented a collection of essays on Everett’s work. That issue was the product of what was then—and still may be—the largest-ever gathering of Everett scholars to meet in North America, which took place during the 2009 Louisville Conference on Literature and Culture since 1900. Everett also attended that conference, and heard some of the articles in conference-paper form. The second introduction I wrote was published in *Ploughshares*, when Everett served as the guest editor for the Fall 2014 issue, and he recommended to them that I write a short profile of his work. Now, here we are again. Joe Weixlmann, the long-time and now-retired editor of *African American Review*, was invited by Nathan Grant to edit this issue, and Joe generously asked me to join him.

I mention my role in all of this because of the personal way that many scholars of Everett’s work are implicated by the choice of making this writer a subject of study. In my introduction to the *Canadian Review of American Studies* issue, I referred to the relatively small group of critics who study Everett’s work as a “coterie,” an apt description that is used in his 2004 novel *A History of the African-American People [Proposed] by Strom Thurmond, as told to Percival Everett & James Kincaid*, to describe those who read and study his work. This description has stayed with me, and I return to it often in thinking about the still quite small (although growing) group of scholars who read and study Everett’s work. I have now met and worked with many of these people, and am fortunate enough to count them among my friends—hence the personal association I feel with this coterie.

This expression is not appropriate because we are uncritical proponents for or supporters of Everett’s work, but because, as with any group of scholars who give their time to the work of a particular writer, the choice of writer says, I think, something about those within this group. The same may easily be said, obviously, of those who study Morrison, Joyce, Shakespeare, or Wallace, to name writers almost (clearly, almost) at random. In the case of those who work on Everett, there is an agreement, or at least an acceptance, that there is value in doing things a little unexpectedly when, for instance, the subject of race and aesthetics comes up. Discerning that value, especially in a country whose culture is so heavily preoccupied with race, and with specific expressions, understandings, and misunderstandings of it, as well as with arguing over those expressions, understandings, and misunderstandings, carries with it great importance, and few writers present as many potential invitations for these considerations as does Percival Everett. The value, then, is as often in what is *not* present in a recognizable way in an Everett text as in what is. I am tempted to expound here on the proposition that the meaning of absence helps us address a potential absence of meaning, but will refrain for everyone’s sake.

And while I tend, usually, to return to race when I discuss Everett in my own work, primarily because of my own interest in such questions and the myriad inventive and constructive ways that Everett's work helps me consider them from perspectives at which I had not arrived on my own, the scholarship that Joe and I have collected here examines how valuable Everett's work is in the innumerable ways that it presents itself, ways that far exceed certainly my own critical imagination. What we have assembled here are seven essays that together gesture toward the breadth and variety in Everett's work, extending back almost to the beginning of his career as a novelist through to the 2017 publication of *So Much Blue*, his nineteenth novel (twentieth, if one counts *Grand Canyon, Inc.*, which is more accurately a novella), since he started publishing them with *Suder* in 1983 as a graduate student at Brown.

Whenever I mention race with respect to Everett's work, however, I cannot help but feel at least a little self-conscious, and not only because of the criticism that his work is not "black enough" in the eyes of some white publishers, or of some black critics. In talking about how as a culture we are inculcated into reading in ways that give expression to unthinking (or perhaps underthinking) habits of mind, Everett made the following statement in an interview I conducted with him in 2006: "You step in water. Your shoe gets wet. It's not a good thing. It's not a bad thing. It's just a thing. This is the culture in which we live. This is the way we're trained to read. It's not a good thing. It's not a bad thing. But it's a thing. But it doesn't mean it has to remain that way" (125). It is only in returning to this statement in preparation for writing this introduction that I realized the significant understating in which he indulges when he says that it is not a bad thing when we get that metaphorical shoe wet. Sure it is. And it doesn't take much to spin out the implications of this metaphor across the world of cultural representation, not to mention the implications for social justice. If someone can see me only according to the habitual ways in which he or she has always seen tall black men, for instance, then it's possible that more than just a shoe gets ruined. And that is a bad thing.

Yet it is the last part of what Everett says—"it doesn't mean it has to remain that way"—that expresses the sense of hope that is available in much of his work. It is this sense of hope that also holds the following essays together. Irrespective of how many or how few readers and scholars encounter this writer's work, the work itself expresses an unwavering belief that things do not have to remain as they are. It is difficult to imagine a more hopeful sentiment than this.

Zach Linge asserts that "the hyper has not, in fact, failed to maintain as a form, but has instead restated itself in the printed text and in so doing has challenged the technological limitations imposed upon its physical predecessors." This is the core of his argument in "Retracing the Hype about Hyper into Percival Everett," in which Linge reads several of Everett's short stories, in part through a lens created by another of our contributors, Judith Roof, in her 2013 essay "Everett's Hypernarrator." Linge deploys the work of François-Marie-Charles Fourier to explicate the heavily allusive nature of Everett's stories as well as the complex relationship between hypertext and the function of the narrator.

Judith Roof offers a compelling take on Everett's most recent novel in "*So Much Blue: The Equanimity of Passionate Desperation.*" Roof writes of the novel, "Dimensions are more than simple narratives or emotional vectors; they engage a depth of mood and feeling through and beyond their trajectories. Both temporal and spatial, dimensions are the means by which the narrator describes the canvas upon which he has been working, a canvas he had hidden in a barn and lets no one

see, but whose dimensions occupy the novel's first paragraph." This speculative invocation of the notion of "dimension," punctuated by its startling return to the detailed and textual, provides only a hint of Roof's incisive reading of this novel.

My coeditor's "Revealing the Artistry of Percival Everett's *So Much Blue*" offers a completely different and equally revealing account of this novel—a detailed, thorough, and perceptive analysis that highlights Everett's work as a visual artist. Weixlmann places *So Much Blue* in the company of a visual art exhibition curated by Glenn Ligon and held at the Pulitzer Arts Foundation in St. Louis in the summer of 2017. The resonant words *blues*, *blood*, and *bruise* haunt Ligon's exhibit and, in turn, Weixlmann's reading of Everett's novel, in a multi-allusive collage that enables a richer understanding of all of the texts involved.

In "Intimate Realities and Necessary Fictions in *Percival Everett by Virgil Russell*," Leah Milne confronts the challenge of one of Everett's most moving novels, taking on the under-discussed notion of intimacy as it is represented there and explaining how this sometimes-ineffable emotional capacity contributes to broader understandings of African American identity. Imbricated within the demands of establishing a sense of identity and autonomy while living in an often-hostile social and political field is, as Milne points out, an underlying experience of melancholy in the understanding expressed by Ta-Nehisi Coates that, as African Americans, "acceptance depends not just on being twice as good but on being half as black." This sense of ontological threat—we might even say a threat of erasure—cannot help but interfere with the kind of emotional relationship that plays out in this novel.

"Notes of a Native Novelist: Institutional Blackness and Critical Uplift in Percival Everett's Self-Help Satire *Glyph*" is Johannes Kohrs's wide-ranging contribution. Like Milne's essay, Kohrs's work carries an undertone of the significance of intimacy within all the events and relationships limned in what may be Everett's most dizzying novel. Instead of *Virgil Russell's* exchange between an adult son and his father, in *Glyph* readers are asked to contemplate an intimate relationship between a toddler and his mother. Deploying Du Bois and Baldwin as well as Foucault and Lacan, Kohrs shows how Everett's representation of a two-and-a-half-year-old baby with an IQ of 475 may be read as, among other things, a "satiric commentary on the establishment of African American literature as an object and discipline of literary inquiry." The institutional implications of Kohrs's argument suggest why the practices of categorizing the artistic production of minoritized artists persist, even as we complete the second decade of the twenty-first century.

James Donahue's "Voicing His Objections: Narrative Voice as Racial Critique in Percival Everett's *God's Country*" picks up from where preceding criticism of *God's Country* leads, with this novel serving as a critique of "the racism of the Western genre in order to expose the racism of Western, American ideology." Donahue usefully and perceptively takes this argument at least one step further, though, "laying a foundation to read not only this one novel, or even Everett's body of work as a whole, but perhaps all fiction that consciously engages race." This is a worthwhile, ambitious enterprise, demonstrating not only Everett's skill as a novelist but, just as importantly, Donahue's skill as a critic.

Finally, "Philosophy Embedded in Space: Rethinking the Frontier in Percival Everett's Western Novels," is Michel Feith's contribution to our discussion. Feith puts Frederick Jackson Turner's theory of the frontier into conversation with John Locke's thinking about individualism and Colonial America to examine what Everett's representations of the frontier in his Western novels might have to tell us about familiar claims of manifest destiny and American identity. Feith's erudite and yet at times amusing style has always struck me as an apposite complement to Everett's work.

The essays collected in this issue of *African American Review* represent much that continues to make Everett's work compelling while pointing in the direction of much more that remains to be said. Intimacy, aesthetics, racial identity, and national ontology find expression in the Westerns, short stories, and other narratives that transit through time and place in Everett's work and in the scholarship included in this collection. As the number of scholars and readers of Everett's work continues to grow beyond the dimensions of a coterie, it is exciting to ponder what future readers will find in the work of this challenging and prolific writer. After all, the point he makes about our reading practices more generally may also be applied to the size of his own readership: Just because it is what it is now does mean it has to remain this way.

Work Cited Stewart, Anthony. "Uncategorizable Is Still a Category: An Interview with Percival Everett." *Conversations with Percival Everett*. Ed. Joe Weixlmann. Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 2013. 119-47.