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Mysteries of the Mountain: Environmental Racism and Political Action in Percival Everett's *Watershed*

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Hydrologist Robert Hawks has escaped to the mountains somewhere north of Denver to get away from the city and from his personal problems with his girlfriend. In the solitude of the wintery landscape the black protagonist of Percival Everett's 1996 novel *Watershed* hopes "to fish and think and be alone" (4). But what was planned as a Thoreauvian wilderness retreat quickly turns into an ecological murder mystery when two FBI agents are found dead in the nearby lake. Almost against his will, Hawks, who regards himself as a disinterested and apolitical scientist, becomes involved in the Plata Indians' desperate fight for environmental justice—and for their very survival. The mountain, as one of the rebellious Indians puts it, "is dying" (19), and so will the Plata Indians if they cannot prove what the US government is doing to them. A secret depot of Anthrax and other biological weapons high up on the mountain has begun to leak into the groundwater and the government tries to cover up the fact by diverting a poisoned creek into the nearby reservation of the Plata tribe. This way, it is explained, no white Americans will suffer harm.

Watershed thus rather unambiguously connects the poisoning of the fictional Plata Creek to what Rev. Benjamin Chavis has termed "environmental racism": the deliberate targeting of minority communities for exposure to toxic and hazardous waste sites and facilities.[1] The fact that the deadly contamination

1 Rev. Benjamin Chavis, the former head of the NAACP, coined the term in the early 1980s while he was executive director of the United Church of Christ's Commission for Racial Injustice (CRJ). He became aware of the possible relation between racism and exposure to environmental hazards when the predominantly African American residents of Warren County, NC asked the Commission for help in their struggle to prevent the establishing of a PCB disposal site in their community. Chavis—who was arrested in the course of the (unsuccessful) protest—decided to conduct a national study and published the influential *Toxic Wastes and Race: A National Report on the Racial and Social-Economic Characteristics of Communities with Hazardous Waste Sites* in 1987. The findings of the study suggested a strong correlation between race and hazardous waste dumping and a deliberate targeting of minority communities for waste facilities.

is brought into the reservation through a river is of particular significance. Contaminated water supply, as countless advocates of environmental justice have shown, is one of the many ways in which environmental hazards continue to affect Indian reservations.[2] In 1980, the *Report of Women of All Red Nations* declared that "to contaminate Indian water is an act of war more subtle than military aggression, yet no less deadly" (qtd. in Brook 111). Viewed from this perspective, the US government in Everett's novel has declared war on the Plata Indians; a war characterized by an extraordinary callousness. The government might not contaminate the environment *in order to* kill Native Americans, but their death is tacitly accepted as insignificant collateral damage. And while we do not find an environmental justice battle in the many flashbacks to Robert Hawks's youth as a black boy in Denver, the unbridled violence of American police officers that we encounter there is just another expression of the same ideology of racism.[3]

Hawks learns to understand this continuity in the course of the novel. His scientific and personal connectedness to the Plata mountain range and his experiences with individual Plata Indians slowly erode his detached attitude. The title of Everett's novel thus points toward two inseparable and interrelated forms of watershed. One is geological, the other personal. It is through his experiences with the land and the people that live on it that Hawks arrives at his personal, life-changing watershed moment. When he finally discovers

2 Daniel Brook goes so far as to call the injustices imposed on Native Americans "environmental genocide" ("Environmental Genocide: Native Americans and Toxic Waste"). Other discussions of environmental inequity in relation to Native Americans include: Jace Weaver's *Defending Mother Earth: Native American Perspectives on Environmental Justice* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1996); Gail Small's "Environmental Justice in Indian Country" (*Amicus Journal* (1994): 38-40); and Kristin Shrader-Frechette's *Environmental Justice: Creating Equality, Reclaiming Democracy* (New York: Oxford UP, 2005).

3 As Kate Berry reminds us in "Race for Water" (1998), "using the term race in conjunction with Native Americans seems inappropriate to many scholars, and, more particularly, to the many Native Americans who do not consider themselves to be a racial minority . . . The connection is with a particular band, community, tribe, or nation of origin, not with a generalized racial group" (102). However, I share Berry's insistence that despite this fact "the impact of race . . . cannot be easily brushed away" (102). Rather, when approaching the issue of environmental justice, we must recognize "the significance of race as an idea around which social action and political practices are organized," particularly in the US (Berry 102-03). Historically, race and racism as ideas and ideologies have definitely informed and continue to inform the environmental injustices imposed on Native Americans, without much regard for their own self-understanding.

the dam that has been secretly built high up on the mountain to divert the poisoned water into the reservation, the monstrosity of that fact fills him with a rage so deep that he cannot help but follow in the footsteps of his grandfather, a committed civil rights activist who was willing to risk his life for his beliefs. Unlike his grandfather, however, Hawks engages himself on behalf of an ethnic community that is not his own, supporting a group of Native Americans in their struggle against environmental racism. The story of the unwilling environmental justice activist, whose fear, weakness, and tremendous courage make him so refreshingly human, thus shows some remarkable parallels to the history of the multifaceted environmental justice movement as a whole. After all, Robert Bullard and many other influential scholars in the field understand the movement as a continuation or renaissance of the civil rights movement of the 1960s and '70s, a renaissance that, in spite of its inevitable shortcomings, aims to transcend both ethnic and other boundaries in order to fight for a common social and ecological agenda.

Watershed does not pretend that such a common fight is easy or natural. As Lawrence Buell points out, Everett successfully avoids "simplistic polarizations of citizens and authorities . . . as well as simplistic conflation of nonwhites" (257)—a fact that has also impressed Native American writer Sherman Alexie. In his introduction to *Watershed*, Alexie writes that he "used to believe that only Native American writers should write about Native Americans" (vii)—only to explain in what follows how reading Everett's novel changed his mind in this regard. "In *Watershed*," Alexie claims, "Percival Everett portrays African-American and Native American characters that are startlingly original and eccentric" (x), and he lauds the novel for its complex and ambiguous portrayal of *all* of its characters, be they white, black, or Native American. There are no easy or natural alliances in the novel, either in the personal or in the political realm, and Lawrence Buell is right when he insists that "it is the environmental factor that finally brings folks of opposite backgrounds together" (258). The natural environment of the fictional Plata mountain range, and the water that flows through it, is what connects all of the novel's protagonists—friends, allies, and enemies. And it is Robert Hawks's deep understanding of this natural environment, and the various actors that interact with it, that in the end forces him to choose sides and to put his scientific knowledge of the mountain and its aquifer to a new—and now political—use.

Reading *Watershed* as an Environmental Novel

African American writers are not generally considered prime producers of environmental fiction. As Kimberley Smith points out in *African American*

Environmental Thought (2007), people tend to assume that "250 years of slavery would have left black Americans permanently alienated from the American landscape" (1). However, the fact that African Americans developed their relationship to the natural environment of the United States in very peculiar circumstances does not mean that this relationship is non-existent, unimportant, or meaningless. The particular strength of black environmental thought, Smith argues, lies in its interest in the question of "how humans' relationship to the environment is affected—and often distorted—by racially oppressive political, social, and legal institutions and practices" (6). The opposite is true also. Not only do racially oppressive practices shape humans' relationship to the environment, but, as Ian Finseth reminds us in *Shades of Green* (2009), "racial subjectivity matters to how human beings perceive, narrate, and interact with nature" (12). Finseth insists that "when we talk of the 'culturally constructed' status of nature, we need to remain keenly aware of how the racial dimension of 'culture,' as lived individually, enters into the equation" (13-14). People of different racial and ethnic backgrounds and with differing histories, values, and experiences will likely construct nature in very different ways.

In certain ways, Percival Everett further complicates the issue. Not only does he resist categorization as an *African* American writer (he wants to be considered an American writer with no ethnic labels attached); in his novels he also often insists on the fluidity and indeterminacy of race, confronting his audience with characters who defy racial stereotyping and broad generalizations. *Watershed* is a particularly fascinating text in this regard because it undermines the long-accepted dichotomy between black urbanism and Indian closeness to "nature," confronting us with a black protagonist who is familiar with both city and country and with young American Indians who have no sense of place on the land of their elders and who know very little about the natural environment. Hawks lives in the urban space of Denver and works at a university, but he is also very familiar with the Plata mountain range, where he has conducted much of his scientific research on aquifers and groundwater flow. As a scientist, he interacts at least on one level with the natural environment in the objectifying way that we consider typical of (white) Western science. However, he also has an affective relationship to the mountains. In a Thoreauvian manner, he loves to live alone in his little cabin in the woods, spending his time fishing and thinking. On the other hand, many of the younger Plata Indians Hawks meets in the course of the story have not grown up in the reservation and in close proximity with their ancestral lands, but in Los Angeles or other big cities. They are quite familiar with urban spaces but they know nothing of Plata mountain, and they thus depend on the by far superior knowledge of the black man Hawks.

Watershed thus collapses accepted preconceptions of African American and Native American relationships to "nature" and forces us to reconsider "racial" subjectivity in the interaction with the natural environment.

Interestingly, despite Everett's resistance to racial stereotyping when it comes to his characters' relation to nature, his protagonist's personal journey in the novel fits surprisingly well into the "recurring pattern" that Ian Finseth has detected in 19th-century African American novels that include a temporary retreat of the main character into nature. Finseth observes in these 19th-century texts the following development:

> a remove from culture to nature that interrupts the flow of daily existence; an intimate sensory encounter of the perceiving mind with its natural surroundings; the stimulation of self-reflective awareness, particularly of the personal past and future; the reevaluation of social relations and social knowledge prompted by the irrealization of the ordinary; and then the individual's turn to the cultural sphere, but in a shifted relation to it. (20)

We will see that Hawks's personal journey indeed passes through all of these stages (and in this order), even as the complex structure of *Watershed* makes it difficult to decide precisely when and where the story truly "begins." We will also see, however, that in this regard, too, Everett complicates things. Not only are the relationships between racialized humans and nature different from what we might have expected—the space of nature *itself* turns out to be no pristine wilderness but instead a realm that has been historically shaped and continues to be shaped (and destroyed) by human interaction and manipulation.

The story, in fact, begins with its ending. Claiming that "my blood is my own and my name is Robert Hawks," the first-person narrator informs us that he is "sitting on a painted green wooden bench in a small Episcopal church on the Northern edge of the Plata Indian Reservation, holding in my hands a Vietnam-era M-16" (1). With him in the church are "seven other armed people," all of them Native Americans, as well as two FBI agents—one of them dead, the other still alive (1). Outside are "two hundred and fifty police" (1). This, we realize after reading through the whole novel, is already the result of the choices that Hawks is going to make in the course of the story. These choices lead him not only to become involved in an environmental struggle against the US government; they also force him into an armed confrontation with the American police. Interestingly, the shootout in the reservation church is also

the moment in which Hawks decides that he must tell the story to the public, "my own incriminations aside," because "there is no one else in whom I place sufficient trust to attempt a fair representation of the events" (2). His storytelling thus becomes a political act. Hawks not only ends up risking his life to get the evidence of environmental crime to the authorities; his personal engagement is also evident in the fact that he feels committed to let the rest of the world know what is *really* happening on Plata mountain.

Even before being presented with the moral choices that result from the events in the story to be told, however, the reader is confronted with the presumably non-fictional statement that "landscapes evolve sequentially"—the first sentence of the novel—followed by a brief excerpt from a 1873 text by Edward Parmele Smith which claims that "such an event as a general Indian war can never occur in the United States" (1). Such fictional and non-fictional fragments frequently interrupt and in obscure ways comment on Hawks's first-person narration. They include excerpts from historical treaties, fictional police and medical reports, as well as Hawks's scientific reports on the watershed of Plata Mountain. In addition, Hawks includes at irregular intervals flashbacks to his own past as a black boy in Denver and to events in the city that immediately preceded his arrival in the mountains. Out of this complicated structure, a narrative emerges that gives us glimpses into Hawks's personal history and psyche. As a boy, he immensely admired his father and grandfather—both committed civil rights activists—but he also learned about the bitter consequences of their engagements in a profoundly racialized society. We learn that the marriages of both father and grandfather failed, and that Hawks's grandfather killed himself after he lost his license to practice medicine as a result of his political activism.

These traumatic experiences have left a deep impression on Hawks. Not only has he become a man who is incapable of committing himself in a romantic relationship, he also declares that he does not "believe in race" or "America" and is not interested in racial politics (153). As a result of his childhood experiences in a racialized society, Hawks has become a deeply antisocial and disconnected person, and we learn that he has chosen the profession of a hydrologist not least because he believes it to be thoroughly apolitical and disinterested. Considering himself "an objective, hired gun" (152), he claims that he puts his scientific knowledge into the service of whoever pays his salary.

This, more or less, is Hawks's situation when he enters stage one of the pattern that Finseth is suggesting: "a remove from culture to nature that interrupts the flow of daily existence" (21). We learn that Hawks frequently retreats to his cabin in the mountains when he has had enough of the city and

other people. This time, he has even taken a leave of absence at the university, and he is planning to spend it alone in the wintery woods. When his girlfriend Karen, with whom he is leading a troubled on-and-off relationship, accuses him of wanting to get away from her, he calmly responds that he only wants "to go fishing. I like fishing. It relaxes me" (5). His remove from the "cultural realm" of Denver to the "natural realm" of Plata Mountain indeed does interrupt the flow of his daily existence, if only for a time. And he also soon experiences an "intimate sensory encounter . . . with [his] natural surroundings" (Finseth 20), enjoying the fishing and somewhat less enjoying the patching of his cabin's flimsy roof when snow begins to fall.

However, this solitary retreat into nature does not last very long. Soon the scene gets crowded with all kinds of people, and Hawks is forced to realize that the ecological space of Plata Mountain is neither lonesome nor peaceful. He first meets Louise Small Calf, a dwarfish Plata Indian woman who fixes his broken truck and hitches a ride to the nearby lake, and who later in the same night shows up half-frozen at the door of his cabin with no explanation of her actions in the meantime. Next, Hawks is confronted with the news that two FBI agents have been found dead in the lake and a number of state officials—local police, state police, and the FBI—turn up at his door, all asking questions about Louise. Hawks, the disinterested scientist in his nature retreat, *lies* to all of them. He protects Louise from the investigators but insists that he does not really know why he is doing so. However, despite his professed unwillingness to engage with racial or political issues of any kind, his curiosity about Louise and her culture leads him deeper into her world than he first admits to himself. Before he knows it, he begins to *care* about the Plata Indians he meets, and—as it tends to be in life—the more he cares the more he gets involved. He not only drives Louise's mother—who is sick with a mysterious disease that might or might not be related to environmental hazards—to the local hospital; he also is invited to and attends a peyote ceremony of the Native American Church. His fascination with the Plata Indians only deepens once he learns that they are involved in a violent environmental justice struggle against the American government.

Resisting Environmental Racism

Louise and several other Plata Indians whom Hawks meets through her are members of a militant group called the "American Indian Revolution" (AIR), which is trying to prove that the American government is—deliberately or through callous negligence—contaminating Plata land and killing Plata people. The name American Indian Revolution, the personal background of their leader Tyrone Bisset, and the big shootout in an Indian reservation spark—

perhaps not entirely unintentionally—associations to the historical American Indian Movement (AIM) and its eventful history.[4] William Handley maintains that *Watershed* "is a novel in which history weighs heavily" (305) and this certainly is true. Sherman Alexie explains in his introduction to the novel that "Everett fictionalizes the 1970s political battles on the Lakota Sioux Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota, combines them with fictional and real events during the 1960s civil rights battles for African Americans, and sets it all on a contemporary and fictional Indian reservation" (ix-x). Everett himself, of course, writes in the Acknowledgements section of his book that "the Plata Reservation and the Plata Nation presented in this work are fictitious and are meant to bear no direct or indirect resemblance to any existing place or people" (202). However, reading Alexie's introduction one shares Handley's suspicion about whether one "should believe Everett's claim that the Plata Indians do not even bear an indirect resemblance to any people" (307). In fact, interested readers will not only detect parallels to the 1973 Wounded Knee Incident and the 1975 Pine Ridge Shootout—both sited in the South Dakota Pine Ridge Reservation—they will also be able to locate the La Plata Mountain on a Colorado map.[5]

Yet given Everett's insistence that both the characters and the landscape of his tale are "complete fiction," it seems fair to simply take note of such parallels and approach the narrative on its own terms. And in *Watershed*, the escalating conflict between Native Americans and US Government agents centers exclusively on an environmental assault on the lives of the Plata Indians—an assault that has been planned and effected by the American military-industrial complex.

4 Tyrone Bisset, as Hawks remembers not without awe when first meeting him, has "been tried for the murders of yet two other FBI men on the Cold Deer Reservation in South Dakota," but not convicted, because "much of the evidence of the government turned out to be fabricated or altered" (133-34). Despite his acquittal, however, Hawks believes Bisset is "still a fugitive" (134), a man hunted by the American government.

5 During the 1973 Wounded Knee Incident, followers of the American Indian Movement occupied the town of the same name in the Pine Ridge Reservation in protest against the US government. The occupation led to a 71-day standoff with US Marshals, the FBI and other law enforcement agencies, until the AIM activists finally surrendered. The 1975 Pine Ridge Shootout refers to another armed confrontation between AIM activists and the FBI, one that cost the lives of two FBI agents and one AIM activist. The subsequent investigation led to the arrest of three Native Americans suspected to have been involved in the shootout. Two of them were acquitted, one of them, Leonard Peltier, was convicted. The evidence used for Peltier's conviction, however, remains the subject of much controversy to this day. In his acknowledgements, Everett thanks Ward Churchill and Jim Vander Wall, the authors of *Agents of Repression: The FBI's Secret Wars against the Black Panther Party and the American Indian Movement* for sending him "some documents I found helpful."

While the events in the novel might be pure fiction, the environmental hazards generated by military sites which American Indian communities are exposed to are far from fictitious. Sociologists Gregory Hooks and Chad Smith state in a 2004 article that "the geopolitical demands of the world's remaining leading military power pushed the United States to produce, test, and deploy weapons of unprecedented toxicity" (558), and that it is particularly Native American lands, "which are positively associated with the count of extremely dangerous sites" (567).[6] The US military, Hooks and Smith argue, has "systematically used and damaged Native American lands" (563), in their choices of location for dangerous military facilities.[7] In *Watershed*, it is also the US military and not a privately-owned company that stands behind the environmental assault on the Plata people. The American government, Tyrone Bisset explains to Hawks, at some point in the past purchased biological bombs containing anthrax from the British military, which had tested them in the Scottish Gruinard Bay with disastrous results. Ever since, the US army "has been illegally storing anthrax bombs and other kinds of biochemical agents [in underground tanks] on the north end of the reservation . . . Any leaks would be carried by the groundwater . . . right into the Plata or down the Dog into the lake, or simply into the aquifer" (140). As Hawks soon discovers, such a leak exists and is leaking anthrax and/or other extremely dangerous contaminants into the groundwater and thus into the creek that flows through the Plata Reservation.

Based on the risk assessment code (RAC) assigned by the Army Corps of Engineers, the hazard severity of the case portrayed in *Watershed* would have to

6 Glossing the well-known concept of the capitalist "treadmill of production," Hooks and Smith coin the term of a state-supported "treadmill of destruction," which, in their view, better defines the kinds of mechanisms that tend to bring toxic waste sites in close proximity to Native American homes. Native Americans, the two authors explain, did after all "not 'choose' the location of reservations in the context of the markets," and "many of the toxic wastes are generated by the military (not private firms)" (559).

7 Throughout the 19th century, the authors explain, the government sold large pieces of land to white settlers and businessmen or donated it to railroad companies. In the end, the land that remained federal property tended to be in the least attractive or exploitable parts of the western states—and often in close proximity to the similarly disadvantaged Indian reservations. This remaining federal land was where the steadily growing military complex built its facilities, where it stored and tested its new and increasingly toxic munitions—including nuclear, chemical and biological weapons (see Hooks and Smith 563-64). As a result, military-owned hazardous storage and waste sites tended to be—and still tend to be—next to the homes of Native Americans.

be classified as "catastrophic"—the worst case scenario in this code.[8] But while the potentially "catastrophic" drainage in *Watershed* would call for immediate intervention by the American government to prevent the worst, its intervention is limited to the diverting of the contaminated water in a way that it will *only* affect American Indians. The perfidy and deliberateness of this particular plan is, of course, a creation of Everett's imagination. However, the American reality is not far off: As Hooks and Smith point out, we can read in the *Fiscal Year 2001 Defense Environmental Quality Program Annual Report to Congress* that "sites on Indian land often receive low relative-risk scores, which means that cleanup at these sites may be deferred for many years."[9] The real-life callousness and indifference, then, is not necessarily too far removed from the perfidious plan executed in Everett's novel. In *Watershed*, Hawks is deeply affected by this assault on the natural space of Plata Mountain *and* on the lives of a discriminated minority. This, in turn, forces him to make a decision about the level of his own engagement.

From Scientific "Disinterestedness" to Personal and Political Action

As a hydrologist, Hawks cannot help but be aware of at least that part of Native American environmental struggle that concerns water. Even before he becomes personally involved with the Plata Indians, his profession necessitates such knowledge. Early on in the novel, Hawks is confronted with two drunk and aggressive farmers who want to know from him, the expert, "whose water" it is (30). Hawks, clinging to his long-cultivated disinterest, first takes refuge in claiming that he "only stud[ies] water" and that he does not "know whose it is" (30). But, insisting that he *must* have an opinion, one of the men keeps pushing the issue:

> "Them Injuns, they just want all the water for themselves," he said, "they're just fuckin' greedy."
>
> "Well," I said, "what they want it for won't use it all up either. Seems to me there's a lot of water. Besides, the treaty says it's theirs. They were here first." (30)

Here it becomes clear that Hawks knows exactly *whose water* it is. He is familiar with American water law in the arid West of the country, which—following for historical reasons Spanish (and essentially Moroccan) water law—adheres

8 US Army Corps of Engineers 2000: Appendix B.

9 US Department of Defense. "American Indian and Alaska Native Initiatives." *Fiscal Year 2001 Defense Environmental Quality Program Annual Report,* quoted in Hooks and Smith, 566.

to the "doctrine of prior appropriation."[10] This principle, explains Native American Studies expert Jace Weaver, "creates a hierarchy of users based upon the date each first began to first withdraw water from a given source. Those that are first in time are first in right" (85). The priority dates assigned to Indian tribes "was the date when the reservation first came into being, thus effectively ranking Natives first in this hierarchy of appropriators" (Weaver 86). However, this does not mean that Indian American ownership of water rights remained uncontested. "The fight for water rights," Phyllis Young points out in "Beyond the Waterline," "is an ongoing struggle for Indian people all over the Americas" (88). Because of the scarcity of water in the western United States, there have been countless attempts to take away the old rights of Indian tribes.

Hawks, in talking to the two farmers, shows not only his awareness of American water rights per se, his impatience indicates that he is also aware of the Native American struggle for those rights. His interlocutors sense this, too. "See, I knew you had an opinion," one of the men says and seems almost satisfied. "You're on their side." "If I have to be on a side," Hawks answers calmly, "I guess it won't be yours" (30). If pressed to takes sides, he chooses the side of the Native Americans, although he knows nothing yet of what the government is doing on Plata Mountain. Why he does so is not further explained, and it is particularly unclear to Hawks himself, who throughout the majority of the story keeps wondering why he is doing the things he is doing. In the end, however, he has to admit to himself that his "desire to know" what is going on on Plata Mountain has become much more than simple curiosity. Driven "by a longstanding, unanswered, personal quest to understand my grandfather" (153), the man who did not hesitate to sacrifice his license to practice medicine in order to help a shot civil rights activist, Hawks finds out what it means to care about and fight for the lives of other people. Also, he recognizes important parallels between African American and Native American histories of abuse. Louise, Tyrone Bisset, and the other members of the AIR are not, in Hawks's eyes, criminals, even though Bisset has been accused of murder. He sees them as members of an oppressed and discriminated community who fight against an overpowering opponent for their environmental rights and their very lives, and he wants to protect and help them.

10 The water law east of the hundredth meridian in the US is, we learn from Weaver "borrowed from England. The governing principle is one of riparian rights. Simply stated, whoever owns land adjacent to a stream or lake is entitled to the reasonable use of water from it as long as it does not interfere with the rights of other riparian uses. The right runs with the land and may not be sold separate from it" (Weaver 85).

Only after Hawks has confessed his solidarity and sympathy with the Indians do we learn that the two murdered FBI men in Plata Lake were in fact not killed by the AIR, and that the agents were actually allies trying to help the Indians to find out what was happening on the mountain. Almost too appropriately, one of the helpful agents "was an Indian, the other was black" (147), suggesting an interracial alliance between African and Native Americans in this fight against environmental racism. This, of course, casts a different light on the question of who is behind the murders. It slowly dawns on Hawks that the American government might be involved in this, too. He decides to grant the AIR the favor they have asked of him: to help Dicky Kills Enemy, who, as a Plata Indian, "doesn't even know the mountain" (148), because he grew up in Los Angeles, climb up to find out what, exactly, the government has been doing there. Hawks, as Leland Krauth puts it, "knows the mountain. He has mapped it, fished it, traversed it, photographed it, and analyzed it scientifically" (323). Getting to know the Plata Indians, however, and their uneven struggle against the American government, puts his knowledge into an entirely different perspective—and he accordingly puts it to a new use. He feverishly re-reads his own work on the Plata Mountain drainage and realizes that the flow of one creek has been strangely diminishing while at the same time the flow of another creek—which leads directly into the reservation—has been unusually high, although both are fed by the same aquifer. Determined to find the reason for this inexplicable phenomenon, Hawks climbs the mountain in the middle of a major blizzard. There, he finds the answer to his question: "in the middle of Dog Creek was a dam, a real honest-to-goodness poured-concrete dam" (167) as well as a professionally built pipeline that drains the poisoned waters into the creek that leads into the Plata Reservation.

This is the watershed moment in Hawks's life. When soon after Louise, Bisset and the others are trapped in the reservation church, it is he who leads the food transport across the mountain. It is also he who in the end crawls through a—perhaps contaminated—irrigation ditch to bring a roll of film to the Naturalist's Conservancy which will prove the government's illegal and murderous practices and thus help the Plata Indians in their fight against environmental injustice. Despite its postmodern, experimental form *Watershed* thus ends in the way that Finseth sees as typical for the 19th century African American novel: "the individual's return to the cultural sphere, but in a shifted relation to it" (20). Hawks is transformed as a result of his sojourn into the natural environment of Plata Mountain. His time "away" has profoundly changed him and his relation to the world. It is important to note, though, that in Everett's novel "nature" is at no point the remote wilderness that Hawks initially constructs for himself. This,

too, is something that Hawks learns as a result of his experience in and with this environment. The peaceful wilderness he was seeking does not exist in the mountains north of Denver. Instead, this environment has for centuries been the site of environmental, political, and social struggle between Native Americans and the US government. This particular realm of American "nature," then, never has been outside of American culture and politics, and it thus cannot provide an escape from it.

Everett goes even further, however, in his depiction of the Plata Mountain environment and the people who interact with it. Finseth reminds us that "the natural world . . . functions as both agent and slate in the creation of meaning, and this meaning binds all the qualities of personal experience (memory, desire, pain, curiosity, need) to the larger, social, ethical, and ideological contexts in which the individual lives" (21). In *Watershed,* the natural world is of central importance in the creation of meaning, and it brings together people with very different histories and cultures. "My mother is as much part of this land as Silly Man Creek," explains Louise at some point the close connectedness of the older Plata generation to the natural environment, "our way tells us that when the river dies, so will our people" (18). Hawks learns to accept this truth as a result of his experiences. His own and the Plata Indians' relationship to Plata Mountain are profoundly different, and yet it is their common relationship to the mountain, and their respective knowledge of it, that eventually brings them together in a common political struggle. If the charismatic Hiram Kills Enemy asks Hawks provocatively whether he is "a Buffalo soldier" (35) when they first meet on the reservation—referring to the black soldiers who fought Indian tribes for the American government in the second half of the 19th century—this distrust is overcome when they fight side by side against environmental racism. It is their common relationship to and embeddedness in a particular natural environment that helps them to arrive at a common understanding and a common political cause.

Thus, in *Watershed*, not only does "the desire to know more [become] a historical quest that leads Everett's narrator . . . to discern the connections and differences between African- and Native American experience under American colonialism" (305), as William Handley notes; it also emphasizes the continuity between the civil rights struggle and the environmental justice movement that Robert Bullard and other influential scholars in the field see. After all, as Bullard reminds us, Martin Luther King—who figures prominently in Hawks's memories—was "on an environmental and economic justice mission for the striking black garbage workers" of Memphis when he was assassinated in 1968

(Bullard 151). The environmental justice movement, as Martin Melosi and many other scholars in the field acknowledge, has "its historic roots in civil rights activism" (Melosi 5), and while, as Melosi also points out, there has been a significant amount of tension between environmental justice advocates and traditional environmentalists, the movements have increasingly attempted to find common ground in recent years. Today, major national and international efforts are in progress to synchronize the activities of various environmental justice groups from diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds.

In a way, the story of Robert Hawks parallels this development. Where Hawks's father and grandfather stand for the civil rights movement of the 1960s, he himself seems to stand for the continuation and transformation of that movement in the late 1990s and the first decade of the 21st century. "Race still matters," argues Robert Bullard in his 2001 article on environmental justice; and it does for the very same reasons it matters for Hawks in the novel, despite his refusal to believe in the concept. But that does not mean that one should not continue to aim to transcend the restrictions of race-thinking in a consolidated action on behalf of social and environmental justice. This is what also Sherman Alexie seems to have learned when reading Everett's novel. If he starts his introduction with his well-known statement that "only Native American writers should write about Native Americans" (vii), he ends it by criticizing his own essentialism in this regard, wondering whether he should "care about the identity of the people who write great and challenging books about Indians" (xii). He lauds Everett for making him "doubt [his] closely held beliefs" and forcing him "to look at the world in new ways" (xii). *Watershed* challenges such closely held beliefs, not only about authorial authority, but also about the relationship between race, ethnicity, and the natural environment, and their role in American history and present-day society. In the novel, the protagonist learns to understand this complexity and acts accordingly. Whether this is meant to be a call to political action can only be decided by the individual reader when looking at his or her current environment.

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