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Percival Everett’s Truth-Telling Fictions
in Word and Image

In Percival Everett’s *Percival Everett by Virgil Russell* (2013), the author uses words and images to carry out his metatextual investigation of poststructuralist theory even as he builds fictitious worlds of meaning. As in *Glyph: A Novel* (1999) and *Erasure: A Novel* (2001), Everett’s strong wit enriches the semiotic inquiry that underlies his clever tales. The novel unfolds as a methodological field where the author plays with shifting signifiers and meaning-making systems as he does earlier in various poems, stories, and paintings. Paradoxically, Everett asserts a solid reality located in a place he depicts via shifting modes of signification. His patterning toward abstraction in language and in paint involves not only the repetition of figures, tropes, and sonic and visual elements, but also the evocation of earlier twentieth-century conceptual approaches to questions of representation including those that challenge notions of origin, presence, and truth. By examining the way Everett defamiliarizes the world of objects and ideas in *Percival Everett by Virgil Russell* and several of his paintings, mainly from *There Are No Names for Red* (2010), copublished with a poet, Chris Abani, one comes to see that the very ambiguity, indeterminacy, and contradictions of his forms serve as arguably pictorial elements. His works present and enact the often mysterious and even chaotic human experiences of perception and cognition, and in that way involve elements of realism and mimesis. Everett at once revels in verbal/visual language’s ambiguity and semantic openness, and insists on its power to connect people and lend sense to an unpredictable and often surprising world.

The author’s primary concern lies with process rather than product, and he captures the dynamic act or evidence of creativity in his verbal and visual works. In the protagonist father’s words, “it’s not what you’ve made that will give you peace, . . . the only thing you get to take with you is having made it” (*Percival Everett* 171). In a related vein, Everett downplays the completed art-sign as relic or fetish: “I don’t think much about and certainly pay no attention to my paintings once I am done with them” (Email to author). And with respect to his fiction, he states: “I really have very little affection for a book once I’m done with it. I love the process” (Champion 169). Even Everett’s most abstracted signifying in both word and image functions as representation, insofar as it documents the creative act. It also emblematizes language in action as an imperfect medium between fictional characters, between author and reader, between literature and the community. In *Percival Everett by Virgil Russell*, as in Everett’s paintings, we find the trace of that creative act in the sliding/strutting/sulking signifier, in the very effort at connection. Thematically, bonds between people are established, hypothesized, threatened, and broken, to a degree, by death. From the theoretically ornate to the everyday vernacular, conversations between father and son spin out in a Bakhtinian polyphony of dialogic interaction.

For Everett, any sonic fragment, any linguistic gesture, any swipe of paint asserts a form in the world, and form and meaning, like the signifier and the signified that form a sign, are inseparable. As much as the author enjoys poststructuralist theory including the Derridean deconstruction with which he plays, Everett is a meaning-maker. He says, “I don’t think meaning exists without form, and certainly
form does not exist without meaning. . . . If all you care about is form, become a critic” (Shavers 66). He thus avers an inextricable connection between form and meaning and, by extension, form and human connection. As an artist concerned with forms and structures of language, he claims, “I’m not only interested in what stories mean, but how they mean” (Anderson 54). *Percival Everett by Virgil Russell*, like all of Everett’s verbal and visual works, generates meaning through its formal structures in two distinct ways: (1) it creates a methodological field radically open to reader-determined interpretation and (2) it creates its own underlying logic through form and medium to establish certain existential commitments to characters and situations.

We tend to see the novel as *experimental* because it is highly defamiliarized, and *abstracted* because it is highly conceptual and unpredictable as opposed to clearly plot-driven and linear. Everett’s formal pyrotechnics make his prose, poetry, and painting a treasure trove of examples for poststructuralist critics. Yet the works hardly inhabit an alternate modernist world, for they are firmly ensconced in issues of contemporary culture and therefore urgently resist the art/life divide. Furthermore, Everett proclaims his narratives to be *real*, not just documents or reflections of his perceptual and conceptual experience—they stand as autonomous entities in themselves. He uses these formal structures as signs (open to interpretation) and promotes their ontology as objects by focusing on the media of language/paint and the media of culture. The Russian Formalists and Czech Structuralists Everett teaches in his literary theory classes play a significant role in the author’s self-investigations as an artist making art, in terms of methodological fields and a focus on the materiality of the medium. Formalists as Viktor Shklovsky and Jan Mukarovsky haunt his texts in the company of the poststructuralist critics he mocks, cajoles, and embraces. Michel Feith (2013) has delineated Everett’s dedication to the ideas of Barthes, Lacan, Derrida, and Wittgenstein among others, who feature in his fictions not only as concepts but also as characters and caricatures, from time to time. Therefore, the push-back one detects in Everett’s claims about truth-telling, origins for his art in his own experience, and his emphasis on physical location may come as a surprise.

Throughout Everett’s œuvre, a unified whole in his view (Stewart 295), familiar tropes of semantic mutability coexist alongside an overt effort to record, represent, and connect with real-world events, people, and places. By presenting verbal and visual texts as signs, Everett literalizes Ferdinand de Saussure’s claim that “[t]he signs comprising a language are not abstractions, but real objects” (101). We can read these objects—books/paintings—as signs both textual and physical. Everett infers that verbal/visual language’s limited capacity to deliver meaning in words, photographs, paintings, and drawings does not diminish its ability to establish and maintain invaluable human connection between lovers, friends, family members, voyeurs, and even objects envisioned, that may or may not be *there* at all.

This work, with its various iterations of the father-son bond, built up, broken, threatened, and lost, includes several of the most tender moments in his entire prose collection. When the father/narrator in *Percival Everett by Virgil Russell* states that “I am motivated by affections that make me hunger for a connection to some entity” (69), he may crave other beings as well as objectified concepts (even books) borne out in language and paint. Everett’s consistent concern with the juncture between form + meaning and with form + human connection reveals a confidence in the power and value of the creative act and the resulting aesthetic sign. The author/artist insists again and again that despite the semantic variability intrinsic to verbal/visual language, texts in either mode can generate material connection and even truths located in a shared space, physical or conceptual.
Abstraction and Experimentation

Everett rejects standard conceptions of abstraction. Communicating familiar content to others is clearly not his objective, for his mode tends to be governed by Shklovsky’s notion of ostranenie or making strange: to yank the reader/viewer from his or her numbed, habitual perceptual life, the artist intentionally estranges both subject matter and medium. The successful verbal/visual text thus challenges the reader/viewer to engage with the work and, by extension, awaken the senses. Everett advances Shklovsky’s charge to make the stone stony, to wake the masses, in Everett’s terms, “to sign to the blind,” i.e., the North American (non) reading public, until they open their eyes and see beyond their “safe” perceptions of reality (“Signing” 10). The real, for Everett, is neither safe nor commonly held as a consistent phenomenon. On the topic of mimesis, Everett claims,

I think that every one of my novels is a complete and accurate representation of the world around me. I don’t believe they’re abstract at all. I think they’re concrete and absolutely real. So I don’t find that they’re at odds in any way with how I think the world is or how anyone else thinks the world is. (Champion 172)

Abstract thinking, like abstract painting or the linguistic dalliance with nonsense we find in Percival Everett by Virgil Russell (196), belongs to the real, but also opposes it by means of its experimental distortion or removal from the familiar. The abstract qualities so easily identifiable in Everett’s paintings have their corollaries in some of his more complexly rendered prose works and certainly his more obscure poems including the Re: f (gesture) collection. In reference to his graphic work, he explains, “I’m not an illustrator. I paint because I love spreading color and not because I’m attempting to construct an identifiable scene” (Mills, Julien, and Tissut 85). Just as Roland Barthes emphasizes the “action of writing,” and erases the author, Everett focuses on the action of painting and foregrounds, to use Mukafrovsky’s term, the visceral materiality of the medium, paint. When Everett casts the concept of abstraction (in any genre) as a “cutting into the flesh of reality” (Percival Everett 9), we see his interest in the juncture between concepts and objects, between thoughts and physical bodies in space.

For Everett, then, linguistic and visual worlds constitute legitimate realities. Problems of reproducing the real play out in both verbal and visual terms in Everett’s intricately constructed, often mystifying works. When we look into his books and at his visual works, we find the trace of the creative process, evidence of productive, embodied activity. Most surprisingly for an artist acting in the contemporary academic milieu, Everett celebrates this art/life juncture when he calls his strange stories real and true. As our (slippery) narrator proclaims in Percival Everett by Virgil Russell, “Let’s say it and so it is true” (59). His texts and paintings assert their own artificiality by refusing to communicate clearly and by calling attention to their own structures. Everett’s reflections of his world in words, paint, and photographic ink thus act against conventional notions of mimesis. His merger of semiotic investigation and meaning-making theory leads to interesting questions of signifying that his characters and even his brushstrokes enact. According to the poststructuralist and abstract expressionist traditions Everett often evokes, efforts at representing (or clearly communicating) a shared world are futile. Nevertheless, the author/artist insists that his works present, wholly and truthfully, his experiential reality. Yet even the author can be distracted or mystified by the formal qualities of the work. As he explains to Edward Champion, “when a reader comes to [one of my novels], or even when I come to it again, I am immediately reminded of the artifice of the work and so taken away from the fact that it is in fact a reality that is around me” (Champion 172).
Synopsis

The novel's action begins with a seventy-nine-year-old eponymous father's dream that evokes President Obama vacationing on Martha's Vineyard and then switches to a story the father tells his son he himself might have written, “if [he] wrote” (3). So, this unwritten tale, the portrait of an aging father in the voice of his son who speaks repeatedly and repetitiously but doesn’t write, posits a divide between the son and the author of the book in hand. The work spins forward, multiplies, and divides, so that the reader easily loses the narrative thread, as voices merge and stories crisscross and intermingle. Two primary stories emerge in the first half of the novel: Murphy Lang (surely short for language), a carpenter on a California ranch, meets Laura, a veterinarian, when she comes to treat his injured horse. The two, both bereft of lovers who left them, seem like they will get together. The alternate story involves a painter named Gregory Lang, also living in a rural California area, visited by Meg Caro, a young woman who claims to be the daughter he never knew existed. Gregory's wife, who is sometimes named Claire and sometimes Sylvia, takes the surprising news well, but Lang acknowledges that their relationship will never be the same. “I won’t know where to stand when she is brushing her teeth” he mourns (Percival Everett 65), emphasizing the physicality that the author cherishes. Everett’s truth-telling fictions may test one’s credulity, as Gregory sometimes becomes Murphy. Murphy shifts abruptly in occupation from handyman to doctor, and the narrative barrels along relentlessly, with Murphy now treating one of two tubby twins named Donald and Douglass. Not only do the characters and narrators morph unexpectedly, but the text comments on itself, claiming only a conditional course of events: “That is one way it could happen. Perhaps not likely” (56). Embedded tales, philosophical conundrums, examples of semantic mutability, historical events and personas of note including Nat Turner, William Styron, John Lewis, Charlton Heston, Ralph Abernathy, and others anchor the fictional landscape in Western culture, allowing Everett’s non-representational abstractions to cut into our shared reality deeply, indeed.

The novel's second major plot line involves a wild, hair-raising geriatric rebellion in the father’s nursing home against the corrupted and grotesque orderly Harley and his hench-people, followed by a triumphal escape to Point Dume in Malibu, overlooking Santa Monica Bay. The nonlinear narrative is further contorted by a reader’s preface that punctures the narrative on page 151. In contrast to the initially humorous nature of this second major section, a son witnesses his father’s castration and lynching at the hands of the KKK, narrated partially in the second person as though reflecting the dominant father/son conversation that carries the novel. In the midst of this horrifying scene, the imagining father, again searching for a guide, for meaning, declares his ironic desire to “find a Virgil so I can fire him and tell him to go to hell” (213). For him, imagined, ARTificial, and real horrors are equally hellish. Woven into this scrap of narrative, we find typical Everettian non-sense that makes all the sense in the world as the child looks back at his dying father and reads the paradoxical signs: “I could see my father’s expressionless face telling me to run” (213). Stories drop unresolved—we never know the truth of Meg’s parentage, for example—yet the novel itself comes to rest gently, with an unexpected emphasis on presence, continuity, and shared knowledge, a gesture to the Invisible Man's grandfather’s deathbed scene, acknowledged and preserved.
Critics infuriate the author-father character when they tell him that his “work [is] postmodern about itself and process and not about objective reality and life in the world” (79). As Percival Everett the author demonstrates, this novel is indeed a self-reflexive celebration of its own seams and strictures, but it can be both—a work about the process of producing realities and about living realities. It is also a document of discovery, the spontaneous telling of a world Everett claims as his own.

The struggle for sense we may experience with and within an Everett narrative or painting energizes the work and conveys, in its very formal structures, some vestige of its creator’s world. Everett presents no idealized alternative aesthetic space (as either a high modernist or an aestheticist might propose), but a trace of his passage, some footprint of his physical and conceptual activity on earth. An Everett novel, short story, or poem functions as a material presence in the contemporary world not unlike one of his weighty oil paintings. Ultimately, Everett presents works of extraordinary freedom, freedom of interpretation and logical, generative abandon.

Everett’s Painting and Writing as Theatrical Practice

Everett’s ostensible desire to wrestle with the act of creation itself comes up not only in the intricate, polyphonous narratives and mysterious poetic voices he devises, but in his visual work as well. In Everett’s self-portrait, an oil painting on wood, one detects the trace of the creative process, the baring of the device as Mukařovský might say, in the brush swipes and in the overt paintedness with the supporting wood still showing. The work calls attention to itself as art rather than proposing itself as a perfect reproduction or resemblance of its referent, here Everett himself. Like the hooded Dante he evokes in Percival Everett by Virgil Russell, the author presents himself in prophetic garb and intentionally estranges his own likeness in unexpected colors. If every portrait is actually a self-portrait, as many have argued, this example may be less recognizable on the level of iconic resemblance, but quite telling for Everett’s orientation toward meaning-making: he presents a familiar yet estranged version of our common reality. Everett’s novels likewise defamiliarize both subject matter and linguistic medium when they present the shifting signifier embodied in a
multiplicity of narrative voices. By foregrounding its being as art, its constructed quality, and the traces of its own making, Everett presents his own creative process as an element of the work.

The performative aspect of the painting, like that of the novel, creates a dynamic sense of process rather than static representation. Instead of pictures of a world we share or even afterimages of conceptual thought, we have an updated example of the Everett story as linguistic interrogation and performance. As Robin Vander has explained in her analysis of *For Her Dark Skin* (1990), one witnesses “Everett’s own breaking through, by means of referential parody and intertextuality, to a meaning making text reimagining narrative itself” (140). Similarly, in *Percival Everett* by Virgil Russell, the theatricality of a heavily dialogic narrative that intentionally confuses the reader as speakers shift suddenly, characters change names, and storylines drop abruptly, lends a sense of spontaneity and immediacy to the work. Pages seem to write themselves before us, as the geriatric father passes the pen to his son, or as someone else entirely picks up the thread, such as the mysterious “I” of the embedded preface (151). The aged father, self-described as a “performative utterance” who carries “the illocutionary ax” (*Percival Everett* 216), enacts language itself in all its semantic plenitude. Along with a Bakhtinian dialogic intersection of multiple narrative fragments, one finds an extravaganza of genre-blurring—prose narrative/dramatic dialogue/photo/intertextual sound bite/poem/epistle/historical persona collage/character sketch/chemical compound notation/theoretical debate. As Vander insists, “Everett’s genre blurring cannot only be regarded as a performance, but can also be read as an act of signifying” (141). So the novel at once engages form-bound attempts at semiotic meaning-making even as its characters (embodied or not) discuss fascinating questions of language and thought. Again, the “physical joy” Everett experiences when he paints (Allen 110) finds its parallel in the potent energy of a narrative line, a plot peopled by complex characters who engender meanings.

In numerous places, Everett comments on the parallel acts of writing and painting and ties both to life as extensions of experiential perception. In an interview with Thea Brown, for example, Everett states,

I was very much attempting to employ my method of painting in writing these poems. I love non-representational art. I avoid the term abstract, because I find it misleading. I think non-representational paintings are realistic, perhaps more realistic than literal representations. (Brown 161)

When Brown probes further, he elaborates, “For me non-representational work is an extension of my vision rather than a replication of my perception” (161). In other words, the painter/poet claims to see through that act of writing, through painting rather using these activities as a means of documenting past experiences of vision and thought. Instead of claiming to represent reality, to hold a mirror up to life, or even to generate an image of the world in a more Romantic sense, his concern remains with the creative, signifying process. Here, the medium becomes gestural, theatrical, not restricted to language or paint, but one that incorporates the very activities of writing and painting, not only documented, but rather prompted and experienced. When Brown asks how fiction can function nonmimetically, Everett replies, “In fiction it seems nearly impossible to be fully non-representational, whatever that ‘fully’ means. I want very much to make a story or novel like one of my paintings” (161). In *Percival Everett* by Virgil Russell, the author realizes this dream by fragmenting a palimpsest of multiple narratives across two hundred twenty-seven pages by incorporating found objects, and by introducing and erasing characters through silence, name changes, and indeterminate voicings.
A consideration of paratextual elements, starting with the title, helps explain Everett’s emphasis on authorship. One plunges immediately into confusion as to the referent for the titular Everett, echoed in the author’s name, presented as epigraphic honoree, actual father, possible autodiegetic narrator, and embedded book-writer. The mysterious Virgil Russell who purports to describe or inscribe this promethean figure seems a composite of literary heroes. Virgil may have many implications, but it clearly references the Roman poet who leads Dante on an epic narrative journey through the Inferno. This Virgil is explicitly evoked when the father rambles into another chapter, “Deep, well past halfway, into the journey of my so-called life, I found myself in darkness, without you and you and you and you, a whole list of you, and stuck on this crooked trail” (43). The father continues his dramatic, run-on adventure until his son yanks him back to some level of grounding conversation and agrees to serve as his figurative Virgil. In a sense, Everett thus equates authorship with leadership and not only education, but risk as well. A less obvious connection to Virgil manifests in the Afterword, which announces that the text is printed in Dante font on thirty-percent post-consumer-recycled wastepaper. Thus, the publisher presents a Dadaesque found object or a literalization of intertextuality. Everett, so fascinated by literary allusions and appropriations (e.g., his reworking of Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner in I Am Not Sidney Poitier or multiple appropriations of Ralph Ellison’s Invisible Man, Richard Wright’s Native Son, and Chester Himes’s If He Hollers Let Him Go in Erasure (Mills, Julien, and Tissut 86) would appreciate this mash-up: one message on paper used to form another.

The name Russell, closer to the more graphically intricate image of two hands on the cover, appears keyed to the theoretical foundation of the novel itself. Sonic connotations of the word possibly conjure the trickster type of a cattle rustler or allusions to gentle movement, the rustling sound of leaves. Everett decidedly signals Bertrand Russell, the Nobel Prize-winning British analytic philosopher and his theory of descriptions. Following Alexius Meinong’s idea that to talk about something (such as a unicorn) is to assert its reality, Russell develops a theory of linguistic generation that leads to an ontology of narrative. To speak about something is to bring it into existence, as the lonely father does his son through narrative, as Billy does his lost daughter through a precious, tattered photograph, and as Everett does with each of his characters.

A more far-reaching implication of Russell’s thought depends on the philosopher’s pragmatic emphasis on the multidimensional context of an utterance as one that insures a pluralism of interpretative possibility (rather than the monism of idealism he initially embraced). In a very practical way, as A. C. Grayling has explicated, Russell demonstrates that the “surface grammar of language can mislead us about the meaning of what we say” (33). The Gertrude Stein touch in the echoing yous in the Dante passage above seems to tie into Russell’s theory of descriptions as well, as the pragmatic sense or the implications of the utterance transcend simple grammatical irregularity. Stein, one of Everett’s favorites, called her characteristic tendency to repeat insistence (Stein 166) and claimed that when the poet creates a name for a thing, the thing is present, alive, and new (236-37). Furthermore, such repetition lends a sense of concreteness to the language. Second-person invocations to speak, Virgilian yous, build up like blocks. The narrative becomes a nearly tangible object, so forcefully are the devices bared and the materiality asserted as per the rules of the text.

If we follow Russell, each painting or text has its own free, generative logic. Repeating patterns and interrelated aspects structure semantic content, yet the
author (dead or negligible in Foucault’s or Barthes’s view) has, like any speaker, no control over its implications. Everett concurs: “Most of my creative process is a literal misunderstanding. I just love the fact that not only can we mean stuff but that we can mean stuff we don’t intend” (Champion 166). According to Everett and Russell, through the action of writing or painting, one brings things into existence—makes an ontological commitment to—entities of which one may not even be aware such as Murphy Lang’s surprise (possible) daughter Meg. The primary narrator’s son, who acts as Virgil Russell, comments on the logic of paintings in a way that echoes his probable namesake: “Every painting has its own lawfulness, its own logic, its own rules” (Percival Everett 9). Yet Everett refuses to worship logic and rationality apart from the object under examination. For example, when Meg requests an explanation for one of Lang’s paintings, he says simply, “This painting is about blue and yellow. Sometimes yellow and blue” (12). Such minimalist rational analysis functions intrinsically to frame the very forms and structures of the work, verbal or visual. The younger narrator argues, “To even consider [the logic of a canvas] away from any singular painting is the cruelty of abstraction, a cutting into the flesh of reality, for as I abstract toward some understanding I necessarily lean toward some example and as I so lean the whole foundation of my argument topples over under the weight of the sheer inadequacy of my example” (9). Everett often pairs physical objects, present bodies, with theoretical concepts that can be equally seductive and elusive.

Thinking Concepts

Everett’s characters tend to be thinkers and talkers. Privileging the conceptual world at the expense of physical, lived experience, however, can lead to disaster. As one of the narrators in Percival Everett by Virgil Russell clarifies, “Not to be anti-intellectual, but my knowing that a photon might look like a long strand that stretches with time direction with an angle toward some other direction will not help me avoid the oncoming bus, especially if that bus happens to have agency, like my friend’s wife, who by the way I was told was terrific in bed” (32). Abstract thinking helps only so far when one must deal with impending, physical realities, like the laundry van that killed Barthes. To think conceptually or abstractly, to forge associations in unexpected places, as Professor Everett obviously loves to do, can entertain and edify up to a point, but does not ultimately solve the cultural problems and everyday crises that factor in Everett’s works. Nevertheless, gestures in language, print, and paint, critical attempts at meaning-making and decoding, do allow for connections between people. This validation saves the sometimes-surly Everett from the brink of cynicism. In a similar gesture of crashing the bus or contrasting abstract thinking with embodied reality, Glyph’s Ralph condemns his pompous, poststructuralist father, nicknamed “Inflato,” for his blind adoration of Barthes by attacking himself at the level of the body: “Inflato hates his senses. He thinks they want to trick him” (Glyph 14). To use language is to operate using conceptual thought, and therefore a danger in itself. Reading Barthes’s S/Z (1970), the infant Ralph complains, “I perceived a claim in the text to point out the remarkable fertility of language, but, in the text, the very practice of language seemed to work like radiation on testes” (19). With a wink to the prudish, and an acknowledgment of criticism’s deadening effects, the author insists on the dangers of overthinking. For Everett, critical thinking is so deeply embedded in his creative process that the two are inseparable. Cutting into the flesh of reality is like cleaning a fish: it’s necessary if you’re going to eat. This vivisection constitutes a good thing
(for the artist, not the fish). We easily recognize elements of our shared world even in Everett’s most abstract paintings. Nevertheless, the painter claims that his works eschew mimesis: “I personally can’t stand any kind of representation in visual art. I produce nonrepresentational paintings. . . . I paint because I love spreading color and not because I’m attempting to construct an identifiable scene. . . . The relationship with visual art is a more immediate, visceral, emotional one” (Mills, Julien, and Tissut 85). Everett operates in a modernist sense of asserting new realities, but new only insofar as they belong to him rather than evoking any idealized modernist sense of autonomous aesthetic spaces. He claims to present his world as he experiences it through embodied perception, and this happens via the creative act. Rather than giving us an easily readable picture, he invites us into the creative process by requiring our active engagement in the work, our struggle to orient ourselves in a confusing textual world, and then our enjoyment in drawing our own conclusions.

Reading Paintings

In similar fashion, Everett’s paintings operate on multiple levels at once and their conversational implicatures rest, like the novel’s, in the hands and minds of the reader/viewer. Some works build up color and scratch it away on the same canvas in a graphic trope equivalent to Everett’s many examples of narrative erasure. Some present recognizable forms that seem to tell stories. Others assert biomorphic forms or geometries of difference that invite affective response despite their refusal to adhere to recognizable objects. Paintings such as this one (Fig. 2) involve great energy of movement, as an abstracted sense of narrative barrels southeast. Due to our customary reading from left to right in the West, and to our first-hand knowledge of gravity’s weighty pull, this painting asserts a strong sense of directionality toward the lower-right corner. Although the bulbous form creates a counter pull to the upper left, the arrowing lunge that looks roughly human dominates a claustrophobic space where enclosing scratches reiterate or insist on the boundaries of the canvas. Although this enclosing effect can relate to the theme of incarceration in the book, the signs of the text function independently as well. Instead of a representation of recognizable objects or places, we have a documentation of qualities of color, articulation, and form that correspond to our experience of the world. Like the snatches of vernacular conversation, swiped philosophical quotes, or caricatured celebrities that function like found objects within Everett’s prose works, one finds the familiar blots and scrapes that transfigure his canvases. Everett speaks of his painting and writing in parallel terms and claims both mimesis and nonrepresentation in his paradoxical assertion of an aesthetic real that questions art’s ontology as distinct or separate from life.
In his prose, photographs, and paintings, Everett merges erasure with meaning-making and connection. If we consider this painting, the deliberate scratches reveal simultaneous activities of creation and destruction, of affirmation and negation, illocution and silence. Most famously in Erasure: A Novel, Monk elaborates on the parallel constitution/deconstruction of identity. This theme plays out in Percival Everett by Virgil Russell in various textual aporia including aborted stories, overt silences, and spots that refuse to deliver coherent meaning. Toward the end of the novel, the father addresses his son in a letter that feels like a final goodbye, even as it validates their connection. He refers to his “last act” (echoing Ellison’s Shadow and Act), and reduces his worldly possessions to “involvement” (165) that one might read in terms of communicative attempts. The father seems to write himself out of the novel in a manner akin to Barthes’s negation of authorship in which his ultimate act of writing, reified as an epistle to be mailed, nevertheless constitutes an erasure “of every voice, every origin . . . [and of] identity” (Barthes 49). In this way, the father hands the tale over to Virgil Russell, the embedded reader-scriptor. As always, Everett resists such deconstructive obliterations, and insists more playfully upon the physical, upon the art sign—here, a letter—that pushes the fiction further, the bit of meaning that changes everything by establishing involvement and conveying the paternal desire to instruct and protect.

In this painting (Fig. 3), as in the self-portrait, one observes the trace of the creative process in Everett’s gestures of unmaking that feature so prominently in the incomplete coverage and scratched parts. Figures 2 and 3 can be called non-representational in the abstract expressionist tradition, yet clearly document and signify acts of erasure. The artist simultaneously builds up and deconstructs two-dimensional space. This cover painting for There Are No Names for Red likewise evidences the removal of a strip of paper or tape at the bottom in a ripping away that invites an affective response. The contrasting red and green colors along with round and square forms create a sense of tension augmented by the impression of movement within a confined space.

Although Everett insists on the interrelation of form and meaning in his interviews, form commands independent value in both graphic and linguistic texts. For example, Glyph’s protagonist Ralph validates form itself apart from meanings that translate into language: “I was moved by the shapes and colors and whereas I recognized forms, trees, horses, houses, whatever, it was not to them that I attended, but something beyond them, or within them” (Glyph 13). Form, even in the pure sense the infant Ralph evokes here, adds to life rather than reduces it to structural properties abstracted from life. In Erasure, Monk similarly celebrates form’s signifying potential when he explains how Joyce’s Finnegans Wake “depends on the currency of conventional narrative for its experimental validity” (Erasure 185) and argues for the differential relationship between established and radically new forms of narration. Monk echoes Oscar Wilde’s earnest celebration of form over truth when he
critiques his father's assessment of a painting: "He was all wrong of course, but the sentiment was so beautiful that I wish to believe it now. What he might have been trying to say, I suppose, though he never would have even thought about it in these terms, was that art finds its form and that it is never a mere manifestation of life" (Erasure 33). Forms reflect but also build up reality for the author and his characters.

Textual Form in Structuralist Terms of Semantic Accumulation and Metatextual Orientation toward the Materiality of the Medium

The formal characteristics of Everett's verbal/visual fictions can be discussed in terms of the formalist and structuralist lenses the author applies to his own subject matter. Fragments build up and comment upon each other so that by the end of the reading/scripting experience, aspects affect each other's signification; semantic accumulation (Mukařovský 74) leads to delivery of meaning that depends on the interrelation of parts. Everett emphasizes (1) the art work as a methodological field open to interpretation in which the relationship between the signifier and the referent can be utterly arbitrary and even nonsensical, yet still generate meaning; (2) contextualized meaning in which certain words, quotations, and sounds take on particular semantic valences according to their relation to other elements of the work; and (3) the metatextual assertion of the materiality of the medium.

(1) The Art Work as a Methodological Field Open to Interpretation

Everett uses the concept of the line that both separates and connects signifier and signified to embrace the openness of meaning making but also to acknowledge the limits on language. Glyph ends with "the line is everything" (208; original emphasis). Everett explains semantic mutability and linguistic tautology in terms of this line in an interview with Anthony Stewart in which he argues that "Uncategorizable is still a Category." He evokes the line Saussure draws between the sound-image or signifier and the signified referent in his explanation of the arbitrary nature of a differential relationship between the two: "philosophically, that's what interests me. Trying to understand how that line between the meaning we might intend and the meaning that we do perceive or receive, how that line at once divides it and holds it together" (Stewart 296). Everett thus theorizes Bertrand Russell's concept of open signification, implying that a message may be interpreted completely differently from what the speaker/author/painter intends.

Everett presents this so-called crisis of signification—language's failure to articulate and communicate intended messages—not necessarily in the trendy terms of silence/absence, or the total collapse of meaning into nonsense, but more often via the confusing procreation of bodies and concepts through language use. As Jonathan Dittman has remarked, "By asking ‘why’ a thing means what it does, Everett is able to confront and challenge the preexisting conventions of identity and meaning that are often times followed blindly by society and reaffirm his statement that ‘knowledge^2 + certainty^2 = squat^2’ " (Dittman 10). In Everett's world, Adam and Eve make meaning (names; stories) with their bodies (Percival Everett 170), and language makes us right down to the DNA. In his short story, "The Devolution of Nuclear Associability" (2004), Everett uses a drawing of the double helix to visualize meaning-making. First, he plays around graphically with how much Saussure's *arbre, tree, arbol, Baum* looks like a nuclear explosion, and then he twists the ladder of meaning into a DNA double helix and lets it split open, not to crumble into incoherence, but to assert new meanings as additional fractured strands float into view. We return to the (un)intentional implicature of these
mutations, the notion of generative language that is never wholly predictable as it moves between speaker and addressee. Language becomes energy, jouissance in Barthes's terms, the Everettean author, literally dead as in *Percival Everett* by Virgil Russell, yet everywhere alive.

(2) **Meaning in Context: The Logic of the Text**

Chris Abani’s and Everett’s *There Are No Names for Red* opens with a painting fragment before any words appear. The logic of this fairly realistic nude both objectifies and humanizes the body through repetition and insistence, to use Stein’s words again. Enough mimetic detail—a recognizable neck, shoulder, and hip—establish it as a human form. The body seems still despite the frenzied activity of the paintbrush. The saturated red, the jagged seams, and the pointed scratches suggest meatiness and a sense of violence even without knowledge that the book’s poems treat the torture of political prisoners in Nigeria. Iconic resemblance aside, meaning develops in context. For example, in the context of a form that matches the typical human shape, the two black slashes in the upper-left quadrant read “shoulder blade.” If the top section designates “neck,” then the two lower lines read “shoulder blade” in a relationship based on the difference between all graphic aspects of the work. The two black lines bear no mimetic resemblance to an actual feature of the torso but only, in an abstracted way, to the shadows that would lend definition to the body perceived in three-dimensional space. Placed elsewhere, outside the painting, these marks could signify letters, wounds, a broken smile, folded arms, etc.

The torso above actually partakes of a trio in *There Are No Names for Red*, yet it is presented both alone and positioned with two others, one male, one female, according to conventional binary gender norms. Now, gender reveals itself in a differential relationship of relative curviness. In other words, the first figure examined appears definitively female only when contrasted with the squarish figure in the center. Furthermore, when grouped with others, a narrative starts asserting itself—a male between two females, that old story? Chris Abani’s sensuous description of a sex worker and a nun on the book’s facing page (Abani and Everett 39) does not
involve a gendered male *per se* (apart from the probable male speaker), but does verbally recapitulate the shadowy darkness that contrasts one questionably “female” form with the other. This discrete signifying in parts happens just the way Everett’s narrative fragments in *Percival Everett by Virgil Russell* coalesce into chunks of meaning as the engaged reader puzzles through patterns, associates parts via similarity and difference, and learns the laws of the text.

(3) *The Metatextual Assertion of the Materiality of the Medium*

As a further move away from mimesis, Everett’s texts emphasize the way formal aspects build into works of art by calling attention to their own artifice as material objects, compositions in language, paint, or pixeled print. To borrow the famous trope from José Ortega y Gasset, Everett’s self-reflexive texts and canvases provide no window on the world or glass passage to meaning but rather point to their own constructedness as ARTifical works. According to Ortega y Gasset’s metaphor, the eyes rest on the glass itself, caught by the patterns and structures of the work, rather than passing through to a vision of the (depicted) garden below (10). Johannes Kohrs has argued that this metatextual move on the author’s part allows for “art’s articulating its own artificiality” because the metadiscursive nature of the narrative saves it from “self-contained formalism.” Artificiality no longer creates a stumbling block on the way to perfect resemblance because critical attention shifts from a futile query into the authenticity of the signified to the affective and generative signifying potential of the art-sign. How does Everett do this?

Again, several formalist and structuralist approaches that date back to the early twentieth century can guide an examination of experimental aspects of *Percival Everett by Virgil Russell* in which the author (1) bares the device in a metatexual way, (2) defamiliarizes both the subject matter and the medium of expression, and (3) asserts the materiality of the medium. Each of these moves demands the attention of an alert reader/viewer and his/her/their increased involvement in the meaning making of the text through interpretation. The author functions as reader-coder as well.

A metadiscursive focus on storytelling naturally calls attention to the formal characteristics of narrative as in Monk’s discussion of *Wake* above. *Percival Everett by Virgil Russell* continues this conversation and dramatizes the creative act behind such constructions as the father repeatedly takes up the theme of his own authorship and the novel comments on its own artificiality. Christian Schmidt has described the way *Erasure* “thematizes authorship” by using the device of *mise en abyme*, of placing “(representation) at the abyss:”

The idea behind *mise en abyme* is that it muddies the distinction between the subject and the object of representation; that it continuously questions the relation between artifice and reality; and most importantly, that it meta-narratively directs attention to the very process of representation by pointing out its boundaries. (Schmidt 153)

The confusion of narrators and other characters in *Percival Everett by Virgil Russell* surely presents this scenario more overtly than does *Erasure*. The intentional confusion that arises between the subject depicting/object depicted, particularly between the often-indistinguishable father-and-son narrators, creates this effect of infinite mirroring. The narrative constitutes a simulacrum in this way, an image of a reality that does not and could not exist, a novel-sign without a referent. Yet Everett would argue for the element of truth in the representation itself. For example, if quasi-author Meg believes her own story (that she is Lang’s daughter), then she has done nothing wrong (53) whether or not her tale maps onto real events.

As if to create a visual pun on the gaps between arbitrary signifier and signified, between narrative and reality, or on the figure of *mise en abyme* itself, *Percival Everett by Virgil Russell* wraps up with not one but two identical photographs of the
Grand Canyon. This first and eighth of eight photographs in the final section of the novel (*Percival Everett* 202, 227) enable the reader to consider the arbitrary nature of the signifier in yet another way. The elderly, wheelchair-bound father requests a camera to employ “one finger that works, a shutter finger, and so I want a camera. . . . I’m chronicling all that I, rather, my lap sees, indiscriminate and unjudging, no framing, no pictorial editorializing, just mere reception of, if not reality, then the constituent elements of what we call or choose to call the world” (*Percival Everett* 9). Author/artist/father insists upon the created world as a modest, random fragment, as does Everett himself when he explains, “[w]hat’s interesting about artists usually is that they have a fairly narrow vision, and that’s what makes us interested in what they create. I mean, a painter is not trying to paint the whole world. They’re just trying to paint a piece of it” (Stewart 294). The father, speaking in the persona of Dr. Lang—who also requests a camera when nostalgic for his dad (49)—explains a similar narrative commitment to this narrow artistic vision, explaining that “there are no utterances in the world but only sentences, cut off from the actual world by their beginnings and their periods, question marks, or nothing but the fact that they end, cut off even from any real exchange between so-called speakers. Very Zen of me, indeed, in deed” (*Percival Everett* 27). The sharp-edged photographs that interrupt the narrative flow of the novel (like the final, ruptured phrase), play up the discontinuities that abound throughout the text.

Everett’s hybrid novel *Percival Everett by Virgil Russell* employs particular effects of pacing and spatial organization by incorporating visual elements and refusing to restrict linguistic signification to linear time. Language and photography’s representational capabilities are overtly compared in multiple instances throughout *Percival Everett by Virgil Russell* and Everett’s extended œuvre. Earlier on, a photograph of the bare branches of a tree is juxtaposed with an elaborate philosophic treatise on ideological oppression, and the son queries, “[t]he tree makes you think of that?” The father, yanked back to the vernacular, replies, “Hey, it’s what the camera was pointed at” (*Percival Everett* 58). Like the rich characters Everett claims to hang on negligible plotlines (Kirsch 5), the father’s critical thinking appears to rest upon if not be uttered by tree branches. Although the father describes the trace of his own creative act using the past tense, the photograph suggests a permanent presence (as object) and being present in time. As young Ralph hypothesizes, unlike the majority of analeptic narratives, “a photograph [is] always present tense” since people describe its contents that way (*Glyph* 49). In this instance with the tree, the narrative progression halts again, as conceptual thought appears to clump among the graphic branches.

The Materiality of the Medium

Nothing compares with Everett’s depictions of the creative act when he describes his experience of painting: “When I look at a canvas and start spreading paint on it, it’s physical. There it is in front of me and it’s exciting in a very different way than [sic] writing” (Mills, Julien, and Tissut 85). Similarly, in his “Uncategorizable” interview with Anthony Stewart, Everett calls sounds “[t]he basic units of communication . . . of meaning.” As an example, Everett hangs the genius of Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* on the sonic effect of the word *pusillanimous*: “when you come to that word the play stops and it becomes about the sounds. . . . And that’s, to me, the moment of genius in the play” (Stewart 306). Language rubs up against the edge of nonsense such that you feel the concrete nature of words as though you hold them, and their literal implications fall away into a soundscape within a field of signification, a semiotic field. Again, the theatrical pause,
the resistance to a progressive, narrative thrust, adds to the dramatic effect of the sign, here an equally sensuous, linguistic one.

In one relatively tame example of foregrounding the materiality of the medium, Everett includes a poem so replete with anaphoric repetition—“Sometimes stories come and stop and go / Sometimes stories stop and go and go” (Percival Everett 170), using an “aesthetic of endless narrative interpretation and meaning-making” (Anonymous Reader)—that it would please Gertrude Stein, pushing language to its limits via repetition or insistence. As one AAR reader has pointed out, in this passage,

Everett signifies upon the title of Becket’s play Waiting for Godot, in which the word ‘go’ is found nestled among the letters in Godot’s name. Also, he signifies upon the name of the character Go Go in Beckett’s play. . . . [and appears to refer] to Vincent Van Gogh whose last name contains the word “go” and who, of course is a painter. He also allegedly committed suicide, which is a prominent theme in all of Everett’s work.

Again, sound play, intertextual allusion, punning, urban legend, and multimodal referentiality fold together in a dynamic presentation that obscures as much as its riddles reveal.

In a second example of linguistic materiality, in which Everett brackets relentlessly repeating gerunds with unpronounceable chemical compounds (Percival Everett 187-89), sound becomes so insistent that the reader likely ceases to voice the sonic signifiers even mentally, and the pages become more remarkable for their visual effects. Here, we have not only a soundscape of repeating gerunds, words of potential agency, but also the wave-making graphic effect of their repetition so that similarity and difference coexist and create a sense of simultaneous movement and stasis on the page. The narrative trajectory or explosion grinds to a halt here as well. The narrative can be said to progress only in terms of semantic accumulation (Mukařovský’s vertical spatial consideration) but not plot or dialogic development.

Finally, the unpronounceable sounds of a bus crash (Percival Everett 196), that physical danger the father warned about in light of our flirtations with higher-level conceptual thinking about physics, takes the foregrounding of language to the limit of nonsense. The passage, unutterable as a concrete poem, acts as one, dependent on graphic elements, including such pictures as “fuvfuvfuvfuv.” The oblong fragment of text generates patterns of built-up and broken meaning despite its nonsensical appearance:

Shibocraishununacsipopehksanpunckicripsselntcenterchi chinkripdanfipbinghehcririplischicrackripchikpoptapcnkncnscith ingkacrippsisebangabingafrangkrknitticrackshshinbangboo mbinggingesharipbraizfacrinacrashcringsnpsnasnasnasna ppingcrumkanuvmvuuvfuvfuvfuvfuchinkuck

As a complete unit, these five lines seem to qualify as nonsense, yet they contain mimetic nouns such as “chin” and “snap”; embedded onomatopoetic fragments
such as “pop” and “fisssss”; physical verbal descriptors such as “rip,” “crack,” and “crash”; evaluative commentary such as “crazing”; and an affective explicative response: “fuck.” We are left with a buzzing array of sonic signifiers but also with linguistic content that undeniably asserts and affirms an affective, human experience of perception, an astonished visionary moment that reflects the reader’s own.

Conclusion: Truth-Telling Stories of Human Connection

In Percival Everett by Virgil Russell, Everett again takes on the fascinating crisis of signification even as he insists upon the value of truth-telling stories. He explains to Stewart, “I never think about audience at all. I just think about trying to be as truthful as I can to my experience and the culture” (313). But Everett would never claim control over any function of language, and therefore truth never lies fully in his hands. As we learn in Erasure, “For all the aggravation a trout can cause, it cannot think and it does not consider you. A trout is very much like truth; it does what it wants, what it has to” (199). Despite the way “Everett repeatedly illustrates how conceptions of truth are disrupted by the very nature of language,” as he did in The Water Cure (Dittman 16), he insists that linguistic systems, by the very nature of their ambiguity and generative properties can, like his paintings, add to meaning in the world and forge connections. The truth he identifies belongs to his creative process, to his honest confrontation with the materials, both physical and conceptual, before him.

In Percival Everett by Virgil Russell, the father writes from his nursing home, “The role of all this last act, as it were, is to provide a context for the impossible, a home for the contradictory, a bed for the irreconcilable” (166). As clever as both protagonists are with theoretical sleights of hand and the inexhaustible play of signification, father and son insist on embodied experience and the bodily consequences of actions on earth, including: Gregory/Murphy Lang’s new friend Meg Caro, the possible consequence of a forgotten sex act, the valued trace, and a supplement to Lang’s identity as (non)father; the psychosomatic response to a tattered photo of Billy’s dead daughter; and the visceral depiction of race-hatred visited on a father’s body. To return to the performative aspect of Everett’s prose, both the effects of the creative act as process and embodied experience and the consciousness of doing-in-the-world insist on “the presence of the intellectual and physical self, the sensory awareness of one’s engagement and that of the Other” (Vander 140). Signs may signify in seemingly random ways, the messages cross or convey unanticipated sense, but they nevertheless assert a positive presence located in speaking/painting/loving/hating/thinking beings who are hardly obliterated, but rather caught up in and constituted by language. Everett’s fictions and contradictions provide just that “last act,” a resting place.

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