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## Introduction: Playing Metafictional Games with Percival Everett

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This introduction to the special issue on Percival Everett provides a general overview of his work for new readers and then discusses it in terms of metafiction and play, focusing especially on his 2022 novel *Dr. No*. The text concludes with brief summaries of the essays contained in the special issue.

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When an article on *Oprah Daily* opens by saying that a writer’s “widespread acclaim [is] finally catching up with his talent” (Bell), it basically proves its own point. In 2023, Percival Everett—the writer in question—is receiving not only the popular attention that was long overdue but also critical recognition on a new public scale, such as most recently the PEN/Jean Stein Book Award for his novel *Dr. No*. On top of that, there was and is a substantial readership across the spectrum of professional and non-professional readers who treat Everett like a favorite band, knowing they can buy by default any new work he publishes because they *will* enjoy it—even though, or precisely because, it will entertain and challenge them in ways in ways they didn’t see coming. All in all, the complaint about Everett’s relative popular and critical neglect that was all too common for decades, with all the expected phrases of a “cult following” or a “writer’s writer” in the mix, is finally baseless today. From an academic perspective, the ever-growing bibliography curated on the website of the Percival Everett International Society<sup>1</sup> attests to this steady and solid canonization as much as the existence of that organization itself. At the same time, this scholarly engagement is very much an ongoing project, not least because the man publishes novels at a rate that must make even reviewers nervous about not keeping up. This special issue of *Orbit* adds to this growing body of critical work, as we may no longer be in a situation where Everett’s novels don’t get enough attention, but we are still in a situation where they deserve more of it.

If you ever need to tell someone very concisely what Everett is up to in his fiction, look no further than the 2021 reissue of his novella *Grand Canyon, Inc.* by Picture Books/Gagosian, originally published in 2001. The tale itself has many of the hallmarks of an Everett piece, to be sure: a Western setting that evokes, draws on, and subverts the symbolic inscriptions by a cross-medial aesthetic regionalism that has for centuries tied it to particular imaginations of Americanness, along with those of masculinity, ethnicity, etc.; a satirical mode of humorous critique whose spectrum covers the laugh-out-loud-funny joke and the smile freezing bitterly on your lips; or finally a wildly exaggerated but just-credible-enough premise in the Mark Twain tradition of the tall tale<sup>2</sup> that continually escalates into the fantastic in the Donald Barthelme tradition. Yet the tale itself,<sup>3</sup> remarkably, is less succinctly illustrative of Everett’s fictional methods than its juxtaposition with Richard Prince’s photograph *Untitled (Original Cowboy)* in that edition.

The complicated way of connecting Everett’s fiction to Prince’s photo is to suggest a parallel between Everett’s use of genre, convention, and trope and Prince’s

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<sup>1</sup> <https://percivaleverettsociety.com/bibliography/>.

<sup>2</sup> See Brown on the American tall tale in general and Wonham on Twain’s tall tales in particular.

<sup>3</sup> See Meylor for a fine discussion of the novella itself with regard to real-life conflicts over the use of public lands.

practice of rephotography. Prince is known best for photographing advertisements<sup>4</sup> and manipulating them in various ways “to intensify their original artifice,” as the website of The Met has it. Introducing Prince’s most famous work, *Untitled (Cowboy)*, an appropriation of the Marlboro Man, the anonymous author explains that Prince’s modifications “undermined the seeming naturalness and inevitability of the images, revealing them as hallucinatory fictions of society’s desires.” This parallels Everett’s engagement with the West (and occasionally the genre of the Western) that may well be one of the most persistent features<sup>5</sup> of his massively diverse oeuvre, starting with his second novel *Walk Me to the Distance* (1985) and including *God’s Country* (1994), *The Body of Martin Aguilera* (1997), *Wounded* (2005), or short stories such as those collected in *Half an Inch of Water* (2015), or indeed his children’s book *The One that Got Away* (1992). As mentioned above, Everett’s Western tales are never simply parodies but multifaceted reworkings of familiar and well-established patterns and motifs alongside unexpected elements that play with the former without entirely dismissing them either, and in that sense they parallel Prince’s critical practice of appropriation and modification—although it would be remiss to suggest that Everett’s reworkings are as derivative as Prince’s.

However, the photo that accompanies Everett’s novella is not appropriation art in any stricter sense but a kind of rephotography. The publisher’s shop website points out that Prince took an original photograph that is deeply unoriginal, as he “visited the area to seek out quintessential viewpoints established by preceding photographers” (Gagosian Shop). But again, that’s not even the most salient point. The simple way of connecting Everett’s fiction to Prince’s photo is to point out that the novella about the Grand Canyon comes with a photo of Monument Valley. Unless one takes—as series curator Emma Cline does—the really abstract route of explaining how both Everett and Price are “tricksters who take a sideways look at the mythology of the West and reveal it anew” (Gagosian Shop) to argue that their work has something in common on that level, this juxtaposition of text and image is simply and plainly wrong, and it’s also funny. It would have been terribly boring and conventional to include any image of the Grand Canyon, making it no more than a derivative illustration of the primary text, just like it would have been pretentious or distracting to include any work of art that is too

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<sup>4</sup> It is worth noting that Prince’s appropriation art became more legally and ethically controversial once it moved away from the doubly-mediated advertisement photography. His 2008 use of photographs by Patrick Cariou led to a landmark lawsuit that was ultimately settled (see Boucher), while his 2014 use of an Instagram post by Emily Ratajkowski raised concerns about owning one’s own image, the privacy of public figures, and not least once more the gender politics of men representing women (see Ratajkowski’s own 2020 essay “Buying Myself Back”).

<sup>5</sup> This prominence is appropriately matched by the number of critical approaches to the West and the Western in Everett’s works; see Bonnemère, Feith, Johnson, Krauth, Munby, and also Sarah Nolan’s contribution to this special issue.

different from the novella, subjecting it in turn to the primacy of another medium. The publication hits the sweet spot between these extremes by including an image that is so blatantly and self-consciously out of place, an image that is staged like an illustrative piece of landscape photography but actually represents the wrong site while being still kind of Western enough to still kind of make you see how the mistake could have happened—especially as it reenacts a normalized, stereotypical view of a cliché instead of granting an actual view beyond a preformed one.

It's that joke that is typical of Everett's fiction. Actually, it's not just a joke but a trick and a game, a playful act of misrepresentation that deliberately refuses mimetic signification or "realistic" immersion, the kind of gambit that draws attention to itself but still does its job. In short, it is emblematic of *metafiction*. Even mentioning that word here seems akin to taking that same photograph of Monument Valley again that every other photographer has taken there, as the term has moved from the postmodernist avant-garde to being an empty and tiresome cliché, rehashed *ad nauseam*. Yet Everett, along with few others writing in English today (such as Margaret Atwood), is worth the groan that comes with the term, since much of his highly diverse work is not only aptly described by this overarching label but actually demands a contemporary reconsideration of its tradition that does justice to its conceptual roots and not its epigonal depletion. In fact, Everett is probably the best American writer of metafiction since Nabokov, matching him in both range and precision. His work also shares with Nabokov's the quality of occasionally being so subtly metafictional that its metafictionality is hard to recognize. It probably takes a Joycean "ideal reader suffering from an ideal insomnia" (*Finnegans Wake* 120.13–14)<sup>6</sup> to identify *Lolita* as the elaborate language game it is, just like *Telephone* (2020) at first invites a reading that is more concerned with the world created by language than the language that creates a world (and that's not even considering all three textual variants of the novel). To be sure, Everett can be as blatantly self-reflexive as the later John Barth—two of his novels to date even include the author's name in their titles—but for the most part his metafiction really is Nabokovian and not Barthian, if that's the spectrum of American metafiction we'll momentarily and reductively open up here. The aforementioned Donald Barthelme is part of that tradition as well, as is, more uneasily, Thomas Pynchon—just to stick with that same postmodernist moment of the mid-1950s through the early 1970s.

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<sup>6</sup> On this phrase and other forms of readerly address in *Finnegans Wake*, see Cahalan.

## Metafiction

Understood in that lineage, metafiction means not merely the infamous breaking of the fourth wall that is perhaps the most lasting and widespread legacy of literary postmodernism across all media<sup>7</sup>—which is not to say that it may not deploy instances of ontological transgression or metalepsis. It rather conforms to the principles William Gass outlined when first theorizing the term in his 1970 essay “Philosophy and the Form of Fiction,” where he argues that the contemporary writer “is ceasing to pretend that his business is to render the world; he knows, more often now, that his business is to *make one*, and to make one from the only medium of which he is a master—language” (24). Importantly, he adds that

there are even more radical developments. There are metatheorems in mathematics and logic, ethics has its linguistic oversoul, everywhere lingos to converse about lingos are being contrived, and the case is no different in the novel. I don’t mean merely those drearily predictable pieces about writers who are writing about what they are writing, but those, like some of the work of Borges, Barth, and Flann O’Brien, for example, in which the forms of fiction serve as the material upon which further forms can be imposed. (24–25)<sup>8</sup>

Even with the preceding contextualization, this brief final statement remains quite vague and open to interpretation. Gass explicitly distinguishes such metafiction from a self-reflexivity he dismisses as trivial, but what does he mean instead? He immediately connects this metafiction to a genuine “philosophical analysis of fiction” that is still in a nascent state, arguing that so far philosophers “have regarded fictions as ways of viewing reality and not as additions to it. There are many ways of refusing experience. This is one of them” (25). In this sense, the metafiction Gass describes not so much demands attention to its ontological transgressions than rather to the “ontological significance of the subordinate clause” (25): it self-reflexively highlights the *experience* of fiction rather than its own fictionality, but without confusing this experience with the classical narratological categories relating to plot, perspective, etc. (Notably, Gass does not turn this into a philosophy of *reading*, although his notion of fiction is deeply textual, nor does he consider this as a form of medial engagement.)

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<sup>7</sup> See <https://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/BreakingTheFourthWall> for a very exhaustive overview and discussion of the trope especially in contemporary popular culture.

<sup>8</sup> Gass’s explicit reference to Barth as an exemplar of this metafiction certainly complicates the provisional Nabokov-Barth spectrum devised above.

Other canonical texts on metafiction respond to Gass's groundbreaking work, and in doing so they illustrate the shift from this initial philosophical concern with experience to a dominant sense of more general self-reflexivity. Robert Scholes, in the most immediate follow-up on Gass, is still firmly entrenched in the former, as he argues that "the conditions of being and the order of fiction partake of a duality which distinguishes existence from essence" (100). For him, metafiction "attempts, among other things, to assault or transcend the laws of fiction—an undertaking which can only be achieved from within fictional form" (107), and this is as much a philosophical project as an aesthetic (or ethical) one.

The self-reflexivity suggested here then takes center stage in Patricia Waugh's study of metafiction, which would prove to be much more influential than Gass's and Scholes's related but different beginnings (along with Brian McHale's *Postmodernist Fiction*, 1987, and Linda Hutcheon's *The Poetics of Postmodernism*, 1988). Waugh doesn't really engage with Gass or Scholes beyond a nod of recognition, but her initial definition of metafiction gives their still rather vague concern with the relation between being and fiction a more concrete trajectory:

*Metafiction* is a term given to fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality. In providing a critique of their own methods of construction, such writings not only examine the fundamental structures of narrative fiction, they also explore the possible fictionality of the world outside the literary fictional text. (2)

Waugh explicitly sees metafiction as an inquiry into "the function of language in constructing and maintaining our sense of everyday 'reality'" (3), and yet this seems precisely the philosophical, cultural, and indeed political aspect that has continually waned as the theory and practice of metafiction focused much more on irony than critique. The most famous exemplary symptom of this shift is David Foster Wallace's 1993 essay "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction," in which he so routinely speaks of "self-conscious irony" (161) or "irony and self-consciousness" (173) that self-consciousness and irony are inextricably fused by the time he declares that the "next real literary 'rebels' in this country might well emerge as some weird bunch of 'antirebels,' born oglers who dare to back away from ironic watching, who have the childish gall actually to endorse single-entendre values" (192).<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> See Toth for a thorough discussion of Wallace's essay with regard to the concept of irony, but also more generally for a compelling consideration of metafiction after and against the postmodernism from which it arose (which is also typical of how the literary-minded Waugh, McHale, and Hutcheon are central to this theorization instead of the more philosophical Gass or Scholes).

This conflation of irony and self-consciousness is especially unfortunate because it suggests that metafiction is an evasive maneuver, that “an ironist is *impossible to pin down*” (Wallace 183), and that self-reflexivity serves only as a way of not having to assume any actual political, philosophical, or cultural position—a rhetorical safety net that makes any statement provisional, revocable, and in the most weaponized of terms, insincere. The main problem with this argument is that its critique is directed at a straw man of self-reflexive postmodernism instead of actual postmodernist works. It takes a very uncharitable reader to claim that, say, Kurt Vonnegut’s *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969) uses metafiction and irony to avoid being pinned down, when both the narrative method and its content are deeply concerned with ethics and do not shy away from normative moral statements.<sup>10</sup> Even Nabokov, the earliest American postmodernist metafictionalist of note, may have repeatedly (but inconsistently) insisted on an amoral aestheticism by claiming that for him, “a work of fiction exists only insofar as it affords me what I shall bluntly call aesthetic bliss, that is a sense of being somehow, somewhere, connected with other states of being where art (curiosity, tenderness, kindness, ecstasy) is the norm” (314–15)—yet his work is far from being so self-involved that it bears no cultural, ethical, or philosophical relation to the world in which it is read or to the readers who read it.<sup>11</sup>

Perhaps the entire critique of metafiction as ironic self-reflexivity comes down to a misunderstanding of what it means to *play*. David Cowart writes that critics of postmodernism drew “[b]attle lines” between “artists willing to engage real-world exigencies” and “artists committed only to endless, self-indulgent, textual play,” and he then wryly insists on the “simple fact [...] that relatively few postmodernists actually divorce themselves from moral and social issues” (4). In fact, one could describe Gass’s and Scholes’s initial consideration of metafiction as a concern with textual play *as* an engagement with real-world exigencies, and this sense of the deep seriousness of play, its relevance beyond itself, is lost when it is cast to be ‘mere play,’ just playing around instead of being serious. Such is a severely impoverished conception of play that betrays a utilitarian, even Puritanical ideology in which playing is wasting time that would best be spent otherwise; in the face of that, the most self-indulgent aestheticism would actually be a form of rebellion against the real-world exigencies where everything must have a concrete use value and that use value must

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<sup>10</sup> See also Madelyn Jablon’s work on Black metafiction, which is in itself a political act of revising and expanding the overwhelmingly white and male canon of postmodernist metafiction, but which also draws attention to the inherently ethical and political concerns of African-American artistic self-reflexivity.

<sup>11</sup> For recent assessments of Nabokov’s aesthetics and ethics, see Dragunoiu and the collection edited by Rodgers and Sweeney.



never be that of pleasure. But the misconception goes beyond that, insofar as play is a way of being in the world, something that is done *in* and done *with* the world, and something that is deeply meaningful as an individual, social, and cultural activity.<sup>12</sup> There is no need to go into the extensive and multidisciplinary modern consideration of play and games here that started with Johan Huizinga in 1938 and has developed in to a massive discourse in literary studies since the late 1970s<sup>13</sup> and especially in video game studies in the twenty-first century, but the core point is this: metafiction is both *play* and *game*, it is both Roger Caillois's *paidia* and *ludus*, both free-form and rule-bound, so that the "primary power of improvisation and joy [...] is allied to the taste for gratuitous difficulty" (27). If, in Bernard Suits's famous definition, "playing a game is the voluntary attempt to overcome unnecessary obstacles" (43), then reading fiction is playing a game of engaging with a needless complication of language. Metafiction is the game that draws attention to its *being* a game, and this does not make it less but *more* relevant to the world in which it is being read.

"If games, then sometimes dangerous ones" (Gass 5): metafictional play does not disconnect players from the world but entangles them further, and *this* self-reflexivity both demands and provides a positionality that has cultural, philosophical, aesthetic, ethical, and political relevance. This is the opposite of the irony Wallace decried that would eschew such an engagement. It is also what distinguishes genuine metafiction from the trivial trope of breaking the fourth wall, as the latter can be done playfully without reflecting on its own ludic ontology, keeping the reader, viewer, etc. out of the game instead of really involving them—and this keeps the trope from being dangerous, keeps self-consciousness from becoming self-critique, and prevents rather than demands a genuine reflection on one's own positionality.

### Everett's Metafiction

Percival Everett is playing these dangerous games with his novels, or at least with most of them. Everett's novelistic *oeuvre*—not even including his short stories and poetry—defies all too generalizing statements like that of probably no other contemporary

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<sup>12</sup> This shift is enacted in Robert Alter's compelling discussion of Nabokov. He first cites Mark Lilly's assertion that Nabokov's novels "actually become games in which the readers are players, their task being to 'solve' the problems set by the games [of the] master-novelist" (Lilly 89, qtd. in Alter 2), as well as Lilly's position that such "pervasive playfulness is especially welcome in our age of 'heavy seriousness'" (Alter 2–3). Alter then adds that this is not the whole picture: "As dismissive as Nabokov chose to be of reality in his pronouncements about it, the games of his fiction repeatedly lead us to experience the various emotional, moral, and even political aspects of the real world" (3). Thomas Karshan explores this ludic aspect most extensively in *Vladimir Nabokov and the Art of Play* (2011).

<sup>13</sup> See Goggin for a recent overview, and from the 1970s and 80s Bruss, Spariosu, and the special issue of *South Central Review* edited by Rath.



American author. This is due to the massive diversity and range of its narrative modes and content, but also simply because there are just so many of his novels. With most other writers, a critical statement like “they have published seven novels to date” is usually just a mildly historicizing gesture, but with Everett it is basically an admission of being outdated there and then. At the time we’re putting together this special issue in summer 2023, Everett has published 23 novels (including *Grand Canyon, Inc.*), with the 24th—*James*—scheduled for release in 2024; by the time you read this, it is anyone’s guess how many there are. It is imperative to never use the phrase “Everett’s latest novel” in writing about him, as chances are that it won’t be his latest any longer by the time that piece is published. The remarkable thing is that all of these novels are fantastic reads in their own way, and across all their diversity they are still recognizably Everett in style, a family-resemblance aesthetics if there ever was one. This is why his works do invite a broader consideration that identifies patterns and commonalities while being conscious of contrasts and contradictions; the two monographs to date that focus exclusively on Everett’s fiction, Derek M. Maus’s *Jesting in Earnest: Percival Everett and Menippean Satire* (2019) and Anthony Stewart’s *Approximate Gestures: Infinite Spaces in the Fiction of Percival Everett* (2020), are successful testament to that. Any too general argument about this massive body of work will probably be undermined by more than one counterexample, and yet there is no critical need to impose any such grandly unifying framework on them in the first place—nor does this mean that categorization would be impossible on a less comprehensive scale.

In this spirit, my argument about Everett’s games of metafiction does not apply to all of his novels, and also not consistently to all of his novels after a certain point in time (one exception is for example *Wounded*, 2005). His first novels, starting with *Suder* (1983), *Walk Me to the Distance* (1985), and especially the harrowing *Cutting Lisa* (1986) are written in a wry, inventive, but also basically realist narrative mode that does not yet cross over into metafictionality in a significant way—although *Suder* already shows that Everett’s brand of narrative realism may include, as Craig Suder himself summarizes, “a black ballplayer in the mountains of Oregon with an elephant, a smart-ass nine-year-old white girl, and a black Indian tied up in my dead manager’s cabin” (15). However, already Everett’s fourth novel, *Zulus* (1990), is not only an even more consistently fantastic post-apocalyptic tale but also incorporates self-reflexive elements that invite the reader to play the game of fiction (most evidently through the incorporation of epigraphs of alphabetical play that Everett would publish as poetry in his collection *re: f(gesture)* in 2006). While *Suder* already riffed on Greek myth to a certain extent in its references to Icarus, *Zulus* does so more extensively, and *For Her Dark Skin* (1990) and *Frenzy* (1997) focus entirely on the tales of Medea and Dionysos,

respectively. *God's Country* (1994) and *Watershed* (1996) are both set in the West, though only the former is a direct subversive engagement with the genre of the Western, while the latter is a grittily realistic tale about personal responsibility, obligation, and political agency.

There is no real turning point in Everett's oeuvre that would mark a clear shift from fiction to metafiction, but there is a tipping point where for the first time an entire novel is blatantly self-reflexive: Derek Maus rightly identifies "a trend toward more explicit and frequently metanarrative satire that began with *Glyph* [1999]" (37), a novel that for example contains the protagonist-narrator's entire "Theory of Fictive Space" (194) in the style of Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. Appropriately, *Glyph* is also a parody of poststructuralist literary theory, and so it not only plays the game of metafiction but also plays the game *with* metafiction, considering and satirizing the very discursive and disciplinary context that arguably helped give rise to theories of metafiction in the first place. *Erasure* (2001), still Everett's most famous novel but by now also notably well before the half-way point of his career so far, continued in the same vein, as it highlights

(in a manner typical of market metafiction) the pressure on African American cultural producers to exaggerate the social problems of Black urban America to the point of caricature for voyeuristic consumption by a predominantly white audience, and how such pressure militates against the exploration of other forms of literary expression on the part of Black authors. (Crosthwaite 50)

After that, the non-metafictional novels become the exception, and the novels reveal themselves more or less openly to be the dangerous games described above. *A History of the African-American People (Proposed) by Strom Thurmond, as Told to Percival Everett and James Kincaid* (2004) and *Percival Everett by Virgil Russell: A Novel* (2013) announce their metafictionality in their titles, and Mitchum Huehls even calls the latter a "post-theory theory novel" (282); *Assumption* (2011) is not only a crime story but also about the reader's assumptions about it; *So Much Blue* (2017) is a puzzle regarding the meaning of the color of the abstract painting at the heart of its narrative, offering too many clues to have a solution; and even the gritty plot of *The Water Cure* (2007) tends to vanish underneath the linguistic and philosophical musings of its novelist-protagonist. (Though not exactly a novel, *The Book of Training by Colonel Hap Thompson* (2018) deserves an honorable mention here as a rare and impactful instance where Everett crosses from the metafictional into the multimodal and metamedial, not only because the printed text on training slaves is commented on in handwriting but also because the book itself is bound in paper that evokes dark skin in color and texture.)

Among the many ways in which Everett plays his metafictional games with his readers, one is particularly prominent and noteworthy. Speaking most broadly, it is his recurrent practice of playing with *convention* in a way that reveals its rules and then bends them, breaks them, or follows them so strictly that they appear ridiculous or cliché—while at the same time playing them straight enough to keep these games from being simple parodies. The most obvious example of this is Everett’s playing with genre: his stories are neither pastiches nor parodies that would in their own ways deride their generic conventions, but they always work *as* a Western, a detective story, or a spy thriller while they still self-consciously question how they work that way. In short, Everett knows that if you want to play, you need to take the rules of the game seriously, especially if you want to cheat on occasion, and that the true enemy of the game is not the cheater but the spoilsport, who “shatters the play-world itself” (Huizinga 11).<sup>14</sup> (This finds its predecessor in the Nausicaa chapter of *Ulysses*, which is not just a parody of sentimental prose but a complex interplay of constructing self and other, as it is not even clear if these are Gerty MacDowell’s thoughts or those that Leopold Bloom thinks she might be thinking.)

Everett’s genre-bending play also occurs poignantly in *Erasure* and its combination of generic, social, and political conventions, but recent publications see Everett diversifying his practice: *The Trees* (2021) draws on the genre of the TV cop show, especially in the *Twin Peaks/X-Files* lineage, with a solid dose of Blaxploitation and the revenge fantasy of Quentin Tarantino’s *Django Unchained* thrown into the mix; and *Dr. No* (2022) is quite simply the James Bond movie that never was (but more on that shortly). Before that, *I Am Not Sidney Poitier: A Novel* (2009)<sup>15</sup> narrowed down such generic concerns to the more particular realm of Sidney Poitier movies that the protagonist, Not Sidney Poitier, more or less reenacts until he doesn’t (while attending the classes of one professor Percival Everett). And before that, *American Desert* (2004) exploited the narrative clichés of American conspiracy, with various media, cults, and the government pursuing the protagonist after he survived his own beheading, which naturally takes him to Area 51 at some point.

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<sup>14</sup> Huizinga famously proposed the image of the “magic circle” to delineate the game world, which remains one of the most contested and persistent concepts in game studies. Stephanie Boluk and Patrick LeMieux usefully complicate this concept in their book *Metagaming*, whose title already suggests a relevance to a conceptualizing of metafiction that then becomes evident when they define their core term: “Metagames are where and when games happen, not a magic circle within which unnecessary obstacles and voluntary pursuits play out, but a messy circle that both constrains games and makes them possible in the first place” (15). Metafiction can be described in the same terms of a messy circle that constrains fiction and makes it possible, both setting it apart from and firmly emplacing it in the ‘real’ world.

<sup>15</sup> Derek Maus has good reasons to argue that Everett’s “shift to a somewhat more metafictional mode became predominant when *I Am Not Sidney Poitier* was published in 2009” (41),

Christian Schmidt rightly called *I am Not Sidney Poitier* a “meta-parody that thematizes the very difference between original and copy” (116), and this may well be applied to many other Everett novels as well, as their parodic elements are deployed so that they also draw attention to themselves as parodic elements. Thus they not only parody a cliché but also comment on the cliché of parody, and at the same time they revel in the fun of both while using it to hone a critical edge. This is why the initial evocation of metafiction as a cliché in this essay is doubly appropriate for Everett, as his metafiction deals precisely in clichés. Most generally, Everett’s game could be called one of *defamiliarity*, perhaps an awkward term but one that is sufficiently distinct from both the defamiliarization that Viktor Shklovsky famously saw as a defining feature of aesthetics<sup>16</sup> and also from the “critical ‘defamiliarization of the real’” that Michel Feith aptly describes at work in *American Desert*, where the “debunking of empty images and narratives becomes a sort of initiation into a more human, pluralistic awareness” (par. 4). Everett’s metafictional games not only defamiliarize but draw on and expose the manifold rules of the familiar—sometimes to break them, sometimes not—with regard to narrative conventions as well as their reality effects, so that they show how a story may seem “realistic” to us because it creates a sufficiently familiar world in language (or not), but also how that creation itself is built on a familiarity with certain tropes or linguistic modes. To evoke yet another postmodernist cliché, this ‘defamiliarity’ works like Derrida’s term ‘deconstruction’ as a perpetual movement that is neither just destruction nor construction but oscillation and play: Everett’s metafiction works continually with the familiar against the familiar, just like he works against the familiar with the familiar.

In doing so, Everett validates the speculative hope expressed by James Scholes at the end of his *Fabulation and Metafiction* (1979), by which we come full circle to the beginning of this theoretical consideration. After focusing mainly on the metafiction canonized as high-cultural postmodernist “literature” for over 200 pages, Scholes muses on the “rebirth of imagination” while “one dimension of fabulation has become too self-involved, and another is threatened by over-elaboration of its own complexities” (218). The third way he hopefully points out is “another dimension that has renewed its vigor by touching the earth of popular narrative” (218), meaning especially science fiction and authors such as Ursula K. Le Guin or Philip K. Dick. Yet this also describes Everett’s work, which is as much in touch with popular narrative as

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<sup>16</sup> “The goal of art is to create the sensation of seeing, and not merely recognizing, things; the device of art is the ‘enstrangement’ of things and the complication of the form, which increases the duration and complexity of perception, as the process of perception is, in art, an end in itself and must be prolonged. Art is the means to live through the making of a thing; what has been made does not matter in art” (162).

it is with self-involved fabulation and its complexities, who uses the familiar neither to deride or exploit it but to genuinely play with it to take fiction and metafiction into the unfamiliar.

### Dr. No

Everett's latest novel (as of November 1, 2023, 8 p.m.), *Dr. No*, exemplifies this metafictional game of defamiliarity very well. With a minor detour, the novel can be described by way of Thomas Pynchon's *Against the Day* (2006), where a mathematician begins or avoids answering the question "What is a Quaternion?" with a historical reference: "Cambridge personality Bertie ('Mad Dog') Russell observed [...] that most of Hegel's arguments come down to puns on the word 'is'" (538).<sup>17</sup> In the same vein, most of *Dr. No* comes down to puns on the word 'nothing.' This is part of the metafictional game of language and fiction Everett plays here, making it perhaps one of his most challenging novels to translate; at the same time, the game is also one that involves plot and characters. Wala Kitu, a professor of mathematics, studies nothing, and this unique specialization gets him, his one-legged dog Trigo, and his colleague Eigen Vector involved with billionaire John Sill, who aspires "to be a Bond villain, the fictitious nature of James Bond notwithstanding" (6), and plans to steal nothing from Fort Knox because he "'wants to make America nothing again'" (160).

The game also involves genre to no small extent, and its rules—again, whether followed, bent or broken—are those of the conventions of James Bond movies (more than the Ian Fleming novels) and Hollywood action films in general. Sill could not model himself any more explicitly on these conventions as he seeks a rather diffuse revenge on an America whose powers had his father killed for having witnessed their plot to murder Martin Luther King: "But how to become a villain, a cultural disease, an enemy of the system? For that John Milton Bradley Sill turned to what he knew best: James Bond films" (33). The reference is so culturally pervasive that it needs no further explanation, as we have all seen that movie, whether we actually have or not, and regardless which one of them it actually might have been: "He put it like this: 'I want to be a Bond villain.' Simple" (6). Sill even manages to embody both clichés of antagonist and protagonist at the same time, looking "like a supervillain or, worse, an upper-crust English spy, an openly promiscuous and functionally alcoholic heterosexual with an on-and-off-again messiah complex" (37). Similarly, when Eigen Vector gives in to the

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<sup>17</sup> Bertrand Russell actually commented on Hegel's lack of precision when it came to the different meanings and uses of the word *is*, so that "for want of care at the start, vast and imposing systems of philosophy are built upon stupid and trivial confusions, which, but for the almost incredible fact that they are unintentional, one would be tempted to characterize as puns" (49).

temptation of becoming Sill's lover and associate, the best she can do to qualify her statement "I plan to be bad" (52) is to say: "You know, bang, bang, stabby, stabby, spy stuff" (53).

No wonder, then, that Kitu at one point "looked out the window of my bedroom and saw the cliché black sedan parked across the street" (51), or that Sill's submarine does exactly what submarines do: the reference point for its submarine-ness is that of Hollywood movies, and while "it doesn't much look like *Das Boot* or *Run Silent, Run Deep* or *The Enemy Below* or even *Hunt for Red October*" (72), it can produce "that cliché sound of every submarine film I had ever seen sounded" — that "one ping" (75) echoing especially the iconic line "one ping only" from *The Hunt for Red October* (1990) delivered by Sean Connery, of *Dr. No* (1962) fame. The submarine ride is so stereotypical, so much like its own performance, that Kitu "had the brief and unsettling thought that perhaps none of any of that journey was real, that it was all faked. We could have been sitting right where we were now, docked, the boat, if it was that and not a prop, rocking on the water. All on a soundstage" (76).

These movie clichés keep coming and are often even addressed as such. Sill despairs at Kitu's cultural illiteracy when he delivers the line: "We don't need no stinkin' passports. *Treasure of the Sierra Madre*. You ever see it? No? Jesus" (88). Sill's associate Gloria, who later turns out to be a robot (241), explains her status as a villain by saying "One person's villain is another person's freedom fighter. I'm sure you've heard that cliché. Or something like it" (91). When she gives Kitu a rags-to-riches narrative of her childhood that is revealed to be inconsistent and made up, he comments "[t]hat sounds like a familiar story" (96). Kitu himself realizes that he is enacting a trope when he describes how Sill wants to weaponize nothing: "'Someone is seeking to harness that power.' The words sounded stupid in my mouth and worse in the air" (177). Sill also does what is to be expected as he kills his undervillain Aguedo by having him "dropped dramatically from view" (92–93) into a shark pool, which echoes a similar scene in *Thunderball* (1965) that has Spectre number nine electrocuted and then removed from view a bit more slowly along with his chair. And when the US government agent Bill Clinton and his lookalike partner, Mitchell, finally take action against Sill, the latter does so by delivering the appropriate catchphrases first: "'Professor. Ready to save the world?' He pulled out his pistol, pulled back the slide, and peeked in the chamber. 'Ready to rock and roll?' I looked at Clinton. 'Too many movies,' he said" (241). Even the final scene, in which Sill opens the box of nothing, occurs in cliché slow motion: "Sill pulled the string and the bow came slowly undone. The string ends fell away, seemed to float through the air" (262). In sum, the novel is shot through with entire



scenes, phrases, or motifs that will be familiar to readers and are commented on *in* their familiarity, as the tropes are deployed but also undermined at the same time in this metafictional game.

However, Everett's metafiction of defamiliarity goes far beyond this use of cliché. The initial Pynchon reference is more introductory than it first seemed, as *Dr. No* is Everett's most Pynchonian novel, and while it is first and foremost playing with the rules, conventions, and tropes of the James Bond franchise, one might just as well read it as a game of pastiche in the mode of, most of all, *The Crying of Lot 49*. *Dr. No* includes aspects that are classic Pynchon, starting with the Boltzmann constant on the cover that evokes thermodynamics and entropy, but also the inclusion of songs,<sup>18</sup> silly acronyms,<sup>19</sup> a talking dog,<sup>20</sup> paranoia,<sup>21</sup> and even a Hawaiian shirt.<sup>22</sup> The most obvious connection is that the names are positively Pynchonian<sup>23</sup> in that they may or may not be telling names, or that they might be telling a lie: they invite the reader to make meaning but then frustrate their desire for confirmation or closure in that respect, a miniature condensation of their more general engagement with the fictional text and its game of signification.

The antagonist's full name—John Milton Bradley Sill—is the clearest hint regarding this ludic quality, but there are plenty more examples that serve an anti-mimetic, defamiliarizing function, such as General Takitall or the Vice President Neal Shilling, who is Mike Pence converted to a different currency. In a nod to Pynchon's *V.* and the dentist Dudley Eigenvalue,<sup>24</sup> Eigen Vector is introduced with the line "Her specialty was topology, what else?" (12), and this is recognized as a telling name *even by another*

<sup>18</sup> "with precise harmony and the whole barbershop bit" (93).

<sup>19</sup> "the Euler-Fermat Center for Formerly Exceptional Children Who Grew Up to Be Socially Awkward Adults, the EFC-FECWGUBSAA" (81).

<sup>20</sup> "Do you believe that animals can talk?" she asked. "I do." "Has Trigo ever talked?" "Let me get you some water," I said (79).

<sup>21</sup> "The feeling underscored my paranoia, as if my paranoia needed underscoring. Anyway, my feeling was not paranoia, as I was clearly not exhibiting any sort of attribution bias. There were in fact people following me and looking for me and desiring my company for nefarious or other reasons. Paranoia would have me think that Eigen had been allowed to escape with me so that they would know where I was. But of course that was certainly, patently, assuredly untrue" (173).

<sup>22</sup> "This time, however, the general was not in uniform but dressed in a Hawaiian shirt, Bermuda shorts, and orange Crocs on his surprisingly small feet" (227).

<sup>23</sup> Discussing Pynchon's names is as much a traditional staple of the Pyndustry as talking about entropy or paranoia; see for example Caesar, Harder, Hurley, Miller, or Pöhlmann. Everett's works at large certainly lend themselves to similar considerations; for example, *The Trees* plays with names as much as *Dr. No* does; *Percival Everett by Virgil Russell* deeply relies on there being two Percival Everetts, father and son; and Not Sidney Poitier surely has his own thoughts on the matter.

<sup>24</sup> See Hanjo Berressem's 2020 monograph on Eigenvalue for a history and theorization of the concept that combines philosophy, mathematics, and media studies (and includes a chapter on Pynchon).



*character* in a metafictional moment: when Vector asks the atheist Catholic priest Damien Karras how he knew she was a mathematician, he says: “‘You’re hanging out with him.’ Karras pointed at me [Kitu]. ‘Your name is Eigen Vector. I might be a priest, but I’m not fucking stupid’” (179).<sup>25</sup>

Kitu’s own name is also a case in point, as he introduces himself by drawing attention to the double fictionality of his name:

My name is Wala Kitu. Wala is Tagalog for nothing, though I am not Filipino. Kitu is Swahili for nothing, though my parents are not from Tanzania. My parents, both mathematicians, knew that two negatives yield a positive, therefore am I so named. I am Wala Kitu. That is all bullshit, with a capital bull. My name is Ralph Townsend. My mother was an artist, my father was an English professor who ended up driving a taxi. I am, in fact, a mathematician of a sort. But I use the name Wala Kitu. I study nothing. (6)

The rich symbolic interpretation of Wala Kitu’s name is instantly revealed to be “bullshit,” but Ralph Townsend always uses the name Wala Kitu, even though it is not ‘really’<sup>26</sup> his—‘really’ because ‘Ralph Townsend’ is as much the name of a fictional character as ‘Wala Kitu.’ John Stuart Mill famously declared that “[p]roper names are not connotative: they denote the individuals who are called by them; but they do not indicate or imply any attributes as belonging to those individuals” (40), but the names of literary characters are not really proper names, as they cannot be denotative but only connotative, since they do not refer to an actual person but to a character that only exists by virtue of its name and its linguistic environment.

At one point, Kitu contemplates “the rather fantastic revelation that no one is born with a name. And no proper name was a rigid designator, as it seemed all too clear that there were no other possible worlds, though I might have capitulated to the notion of possible futures, allowing that no future actually existed” (61). Later, one chapter subtitle in this book of a fictional possible world alludes to Willard van Orman Quine—“A distinction between names and other words” (157) is a phrase from *Philosophy of Logic* (28)—while another references Gottlob Frege’s treatise “[Über]

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<sup>25</sup> Notably, Kitu only remembered Karras’s name by homophonic accident when Vector said she wanted to give his dog Trigo “a nice caress” (174).

<sup>26</sup> Kitu is stopped by an officer for driving while Black (and, it turns out, without a license), and he calls in his name over the radio: “Individual’s name appears to be Wala, whiskey-alpha-Lima-whiskey, Kitu, kilo-India-tango-uniform” (129). His misspelling may draw attention either to the incompetence of the officer or the fictionality of the text, but the more important aspect is his phrasing that the name *appears* to be Wala Kitu, not *is*.

*Begriff und Gegenstand*” (213). These (and other) examples all evoke the philosophical problem of the proper name as one of reference and meaning, a condensation of a more general issue of language being ambiguous and disconnected from what it designates. This is yet another reason why the initial Pynchon reference is an apt framing for this discussion, as Russell and Frege, “the two giants on whose shoulders analytic philosophy rests” (Beaney 128), were similarly concerned with resolving the ambiguity of everyday language through a formal system of logic—and Frege’s essay “Über Begriff und Gegenstand” is very much about what Russell commented on in Hegel, “die Gebrauchsweisen des Wortes ‘ist’” (Frege 194), the ways of using the word ‘is.’ Kitu, the mathematician who knows nothing, is similarly concerned with this matter of language, and in a novel where the literal is played for laughs—“Aguedo fell through the floor into what we call the shark pool. We call it that because it is a pool filled with sharks” (95)—he is troubled by the imprecisions, paradoxes, and (mis)representational qualities of it.

At one point, he realizes that “[e]verything is about naming,” about the referential function of language that Frege and Russell (and others at the turn of the twentieth century) were so concerned with, and he awkwardly proposes that “[e]verything that is a thing is named. Everything that is not a thing is not named” (165). Yet this thought does not help him understand actual language and its use, and he lacks the understanding that distinguishes the early Wittgenstein from the late one. On the one hand, his belief in the power of names makes it really easy for him to accept his student Vanessa’s change of gender, which he never comments on and even affirms in the very sentence he uses to point out the transition: “Sam just informed us one day that he was now a man named Sam. He said he had no pronoun preference” (35). On the other hand, he still does not get referentiality or fictionality: when Sill asks him to “[t]ell me something that makes no sense,” Kitu responds: “I don’t understand why language allows me to actually say something sensical that is not true” (224). This sense-making makes no sense to him, but it is crucial to the metafictional game of the text, as its language is sensical even though it is not true in any referential, realist sense (*truthful* as it may be). Especially in these sections, *Dr. No* is a self-reflexive language game of and about fiction, and while Kitu never quite manages the ontological transgression that would allow him to recognize he is a product of language or a fictional entity, the novel still points toward the boundaries he would need to cross. The closest Kitu gets at one point is when he quips “[f]rom passage to pastiche was how I might have characterized the last two days, though I wasn’t sure why” (183); perhaps it is Sill, though, who knows best about their ontological rules when he claims Vector, as a mathematician, is “not quite of this world. Like Wala, here. He’s, well, he’s nothing” (67–68).

*Dr. No* as a whole is a game of creating something out of nothing. It offers one answer to the many variations of what Martin Heidegger, in a text that mostly comes down to puns on the word ‘is’ and the word ‘nothing,’ called “the ground-question of metaphysics, which is wrested from Nothing itself: Why is there any Being at all—why not far rather Nothing?” (“What is Metaphysics?” 380).<sup>27</sup> *Dr. No* begins with the chapter title “Existential quantifier” (3), and this is its basic operation, only not in predicate logic but in fiction: it claims that something exists, and it brings that something into existence in and through a language that is sensical but not true. When Vector berates Kitu by saying “I think you’re just making it up. I think there is nothing there” (64), her words indicate this duality: their world is made up, there is nothing there—but it exists nonetheless. Furthermore, it exists because and when we as readers play that game, when we do what Kitu imagines doing with regard to the “complex projective plane orbiter” (134) Sill uses to weaponize nothing: “I would peer through the eyepiece and see the stream of nothing coming from deep space and render it *something* with observational pressure” (189). Reading the text applies observational pressure on it and turns it into something instead of nothing; the game is only a proper game when it is played.

Kitu’s suggestion that “the function of identity is recurrence in discourse” (36) may well describe the discursive identities of the characters that are part of this game, but the more telling reference is his reminiscence about a childhood realization:

“Every child does that experiment with gas and heat and charts that line down to zero Kelvin, minus 273.15 degrees Celsius. Well, when I was five and performed the simple experiment and drew my graph, I realized that only the line itself would ever actually get down to that physically unattainable temperature. It was a magic trick of sorts. But simple reason led me understand that, theoretically, not only should matter disappear at that point, but that there should be no bringing that matter back. Nothing yields nothing.” (64)

This ends as a statement on nothing, but it is really a statement on the game of fiction, “a magic trick of sorts” that can make representation do things that reality cannot, creating its own reality in the process.

We see this fictional, imaginative, unreal power of language at work on a number of occasion in the novel, for example when Kitu

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<sup>27</sup> “Warum ist überhaupt Seiendes und nicht vielmehr Nichts?” (Heidegger, “Was ist Metaphysik?” 20).

dreamed of empty sets. I had two null sets in front of me, so to speak. One set contained real apples that were not fruits and the other contained married bachelors. Trigo argued in his usual calm way that the sets were equal, stating the obvious truth that neither had any elements and therefore held the same number of elements. I argued that the sets could not possibly be equal because what one set lacked was not the same as what the other set lacked. (20)

Just like the reference to “a bald present king of France” (41), these are precisely the kinds of statements about existence that drove language philosophers from everyday language to the abstraction of logic, and they inform the non-dream reality of the novel as well, for example when Kitu comments that Vector wasn’t wearing any shoes “and so they therefore matched” (62). Kitu even directly encounters the problem of punning on the word ‘is’ when Sam leaves him “a note that read: *Sometimes  $2+2$  is 4, at other times it only equals 4.* I liked the note and then tossed it in the waste can” (117). This evokes Wittgenstein’s notebook entry from September 6, 1914, where he describes “the old objection against identity in mathematics. Namely the objection that if  $2 \times 2$  were really the same as 4, then this proposition would say no more than  $a=a$ ” (4e). More importantly, though, this statement on being is directly connected to a curious turn of phrase that reflects on Kitu’s own fictional status, the way he *is*, as he “liked the note and then tossed it” (117), as if liking were an action that could be done consecutively the way it is described here.

Much stranger things happen to him, though: he spends a night at a version of what he calls “Hilbert’s silly hotel, a thought experiment to which I responded that not only will there always be an infinite number of filled rooms, but an infinite number of empty ones as well” (109). This is Sill’s “Complex” (89) on Corsica—and complex it is. Looking for Vector, Kitu ends up “hopelessly, despairingly lost and puzzled all the more because none of the corridors led to anything that might have taken me out of the building. After coming to believe that I had covered the same hallways several times, never seeing a person or a color, I found myself standing in front of a vending machine” (99). Once he finds Eigen, he reflects on the architecture in slightly metafictional terms, playing with words or rather commas to describe the uncanny place they are in: “I glanced back into the corridor, found it still empty and white, or still, empty, and white, or still and empty white, then closed the door” (100). But especially his conversation with Gloria really point toward their existence in a blend of mathematical and philosophical thought experiments:

“How did you know I was in this room?” I asked.

“I knew because you were not in any of the others.”

“You checked them all,” I stated, as a question.

“Of course not. Why would I check for you in a room you’re not in?”

“But how did you know I wasn’t in another?”

“Because you cannot be in two places at once. That would be physically and, especially, logically impossible.”

“Again, how did you know I was in this room?”

She seemed to laugh or sigh. “Because if I had found you in another room you could not be here.”

I didn’t know which of us was Socrates and which was Dionysodorus. I let the matter go. (101–02)

The Complex is the architectural version of a Platonic dialogue, and Kitu’s experience of it is that of a personal encounter with logical fallacies that are manifest to him but also part of the fictional construct he inhabits.

At other times Kitu is at least aware of his status as a narrator, though not necessarily of his fictionality:

Whatever, I found myself hanging by my fingernails some eight floors above a sidewalk and fence. One thing was certain. There was no turning back. The suspense here is strange, as of course one would know that I did not fall to my death, though I suppose it is possible that I could have survived to write this from my wheelchair or that life as we understand it is wrong, like in a cartoon world where characters bounce and then reassemble. But forget that. I swung there. (153–54)

This is not quite that cartoon world, but it is the cartoonish world of James Bond movies where billionaires on submarines send out a ping just to mess with the Coast Guard. It is also a world that is curiously responsive to Kitu, as if the entire thing might be staged like the submarine ride: “The gray sky looked like snow. As soon as I had formed that thought, flakes began to fall” (116).

However, the most genuine insight into the nature of this world comes from Trigo the dog, who admonishes Kito: ““You do realize that this is all about surfaces. You know that, right?” (171) The language game of fiction, of creating something out of nothing, works through this creation of a surface that has no reality underneath it, a language that signifies without referentiality, whose mode of ‘as if’ provides one of the most

crucial ways of punning on ‘is.’ Considering the surfaces of writing immediately evokes once again a critical cliché mentioned earlier, one that is perhaps even more worn out than that of metafiction—Jacques Derrida, deconstruction, *Of Grammatology*, the play of signifiers, *différance*, and so on. But true to form, *Dr. No* leans into that cliché as well, and not only because Sill sounds like quite the deconstructionist in describing the effect of his orbiter: “‘That’s the real beauty of this weapon. The resultant destruction is always already there’” (192). Instead, the novel simply uses Derrida’s most famous phrase as a chapter heading, “*Il n’y a pas de hors-texte*” (255), which Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak famously translated as “There is nothing outside of the text,” adding “there is no outside-text” (Derrida 158) and the original phrase in square brackets to indicate the ambiguities of the original.<sup>28</sup> Remembering all the fun Everett had spoofing poststructuralist theory in *Glyph*, this comment on nothingness (in translation) is as playful as the other moves in that fictional game, and yet it works like nothing else to draw attention to there being a game in the first place.

Especially when evoking that infamous phrase, it is crucial to insist that this is Gass’s *dangerous* game of metafiction, and that this is not the kind of self-indulgence that would make it irrelevant to anything outside itself—just like “[o]n no reasonable interpretation does ‘*Il n’y a pas de hors-texte*’ exclude historical or political readings of a text” (Deutscher 100). Everett’s games of metafiction, in *Dr. No* and his other novels, create a messy circle in which it is possible, as Kitu has it, to “put a concrete finger on a particularly important abstraction” (37), just as Marianne Moore famously sought a poetry that has “imaginary gardens with real toads in them” (41). The novel deals with ethnicity in capitalist America, with idiotic presidents, with personal responsibility in the face of corruption, and with many more aspects of the world in which the text is read, and at the same time it also fundamentally demands attention to how this world and all these phenomena are constituted in and through language, and how the fictional and the real co-constitute each other. As the early theorists of metafiction have it, the metafictional game does not detach ‘fiction’ from ‘reality’ but actually connects both in profoundly relevant ways. At the same time, and this is so important that it bears repeating at the end, Everett always manages to not get lost in the funhouse without having fun, and the pleasure of reading is truly the pleasure of playing, however serious the game.

The essays collected in this special issue cover a broad selection of Everett’s novels and relate them to an equally broad variety of contexts, authors, and issues. In alphabetical order, here is what they offer:

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<sup>28</sup> See Deutscher for a recent discussion of the history and meanings of that phrase and its translation by Spivak.



Christa Buschendorf, in “[The Power of Patriarchy: Everett’s Work on the Dionysus Myth in \*Frenzy\*](#),” considers how his 1997 novel rewrites Greek myths to highlight the brutality and cruelty of power relations in patriarchy and capitalism, engaging in a complex intertextual play with Euripides and Nietzsche and using humor as a major strategy of critique.

Martin Paul Eve, in “[Impossible Chess, Close Reading, and Inattention as Disability in Percival Everett’s \*Telephone\*](#),” argues that his 2020 novel continually withholds information from the reader and ultimately frustrates close reading techniques, setting up a parallel to the character Sarah’s progressive neurological condition. This both pathologizes readerly inattention but also passes innovative comment on disability narratives in fiction more broadly.

Sheri-Marie Harrison and Arin Keeble, in “[Archive, Intertextuality and Genre in Percival Everett’s \*The Trees\*](#),” read his 2021 novel as one of racial terror that is both about the reading and interpreting of an archive of this violence and itself formally archival. They show how the novel’s generic shifts disrupt the ideological currents that tend to normalize violence via conventionality and familiarity.

George Kowalik, in “[America’s Deserter: Forms of Racialised Mistreatment and Escaping the Need to Escape in Percival Everett’s \*American Desert\*](#),” analyzes his 2004 novel through the lens of Saidiya Hartman’s and Fred Moten’s ideas on the impacts of racial inequality on Black experience and writing, arguing that the protagonist’s tragicomical series of racialized mistreatments speak not of a need to escape but rather of a metasolution that does away with such a need altogether.

Derek C. Maus, in “[‘\[O\]ne is lost to understand what this has to do with the \[Black\] experience’: Percival Everett, André Alexis, and Racialized Authorial Expectations](#),” connects Everett’s work to that of a Canadian novelist who shares his motivation to undermine, frustrate, and play with external obligations, arguing that they produce fiction designed to provoke and then to destabilize conditioned responses in their readers, as exemplified most concisely by their creative engagement with a mythical tradition.

Kevin Mitchell, in “[‘I Heard You Went to Nam’: Frontier Mythology, Violence, and the Afterlife of the Vietnam War in Percival Everett’s \*Walk Me to the Distance\*](#),” shows how his 1985 novel satirically deploys tropes associated with Frontier mythology and conventions of classical Western genres to connect them to the protagonist’s Vietnam War experiences in a shared structure of violence—making a larger point about the significance of said war for writers of Everett’s generation.



Sarah Nolan-Brueck, in “[Revising National Myths Through Queer Kinship in Percival Everett’s \*Wounded\*](#),” concludes the collection in a similar vein by reading his 2009 novel as a narrative of new regionalism that engages with coalitional politics through a critical reimagination of tropes of the Western genre, arguing that his remediation of Matthew Shepard’s murder exhibits a broader ethic of care that showcases the ways in which crossing social boundaries can create inclusive community in places considered hostile to queer individuals.

On that note, we thank all the contributors for sending their work to *Orbit* and working with us on this special issue in such a kind and professional way. We hope that is only the beginning of an ongoing conversation about Percival Everett on our platform, and we welcome future submissions on his work. Finally, we thank all our peer reviewers for their crucial work—you know who you are, and we really appreciate your support.

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Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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