



Article

Reading the “Slash” in Percival Everett’s *American Desert*

Joe Weixlmann

Department of English, Saint Louis University, Saint Louis, MO 63108, USA; weixlmj@slu.edu

Abstract: This article explores Percival Everett’s multi-dimensional use of a concept he has termed the “slash” (i.e., the line that both separates and conjoins signifier/signified) in his novel *American Desert*. In effect, this slash is a trope Everett deploys to compel readers not to align themselves with what might otherwise be perceived as the author’s message but rather to explore a wide range of the possible ideas and provisional meanings his fiction might generate, challenge these perceived meanings, constructively play with his text, and eventually tease out some (inevitably contingent) concepts that may, upon further consideration, morph into newer, richer sets of understanding. Although Everett’s use of the slash is not unique to *American Desert*, it is arguably the novel in which he uses the trope most pervasively.

Keywords: Percival Everett; slash; *American Desert*

Anthony Stewart: You did say . . . that maybe what holds [your literary corpus] together is the line between the signifier and the signified.

Everett: Well, philosophically that’s what interests me. Trying to understand how that line between the meaning that we might intend and the meaning that we do perceive or receive . . . at once divides and holds it together.

Stewart: The line of the fraction.

Everett: The line of the fraction. (Stewart 2007, p. 121)

It is clear not only from Percival Everett’s pronouncements but also from any careful reading of his many fictional texts that the tension described in the above exchange forcefully animates the author’s conceptually rich literary corpus. As Everett brings challenging ideas and ambiguities to life in his writing, he expects his readers to respond with a similar openness to both the words on the page and the multiple meanings these words might engender. Stated differently, his challenge to the reader of his fiction is decidedly not to *align* with the author’s perceived messages or ideologies but rather to explore them, challenge them, constructively play with the text, and tease out some (inevitably contingent) meanings that may, upon further consideration, morph into a newer, richer set of understandings. Everett has at various times framed this sense of a complex, fecund search for meaning through the figure of the slash, “the line of the fraction” that is designed to link even as it might appear to separate. And nowhere in his more than 30 books is this slash more clearly foregrounded than it is in his scantily studied¹ but nonetheless important 2004 novel *American Desert*, which features a protagonist who, after the first 10 pages of the novel, is found to be simultaneously alive and dead.

Next in line to the voluminous critical explorations of *erasure* and *I Am Not Sidney Poitier* are the studies of Everett’s novels set in the American West, especially those that can be—and often are—considered under the banner of Westerns. Yet, the rich corpus of his book-length fiction rooted in the West extends well beyond this subset of his books to works far removed from any association with genre fiction, including *Glyph*, *American Desert*, and *The Water Cure*.² Indeed, if anything aside from geography truly binds his books with a Western setting together, it is the fact that extremist behavior is on vivid display in them all. Consider, for example, not only Hraboy’s dispensing what passes for frontier



Citation: Weixlmann, Joe. 2023. Reading the “Slash” in Percival Everett’s *American Desert*. *Humanities* 12: 104. <https://doi.org/10.3390/h12050104>

Received: 1 July 2023

Revised: 18 August 2023

Accepted: 31 August 2023

Published: 19 September 2023



Copyright: © 2023 by the author. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

justice to a rapist in *Walk Me to the Distance* and the obsessively egotistical protagonist of *God's Country* cold-bloodedly attempting to gun down the Black tracker who has repeatedly saved his life, but also the perverse kitchen-table abortion John Livesey performs on his pregnant daughter-in-law in *Cutting Lisa* or the actions of the single-minded torturer in *The Water Cure*. It is, however, in Everett's under-examined 2004 novel *American Desert*, set in the American Southwest, that his meditation on extremism arguably finds its broadest exploration, often through his overt, repeated figurations of the slash.³

1. Warming Up

"The slash is also for me an action against injustice, if not a violent strike, then an attempt to sever some tie or ties to the sources of injustice in the world. The disconnection I have sought is from the actions of my government. But of course the slash that severs also unites." (Everett 2014)

Because *American Desert* is one of Everett's lesser-known works, I begin with a terse summary by way of suggesting the range of the surface-level extremism depicted in the novel. The book's protagonist, Theodore Street, who has been unfaithful to his wife and is also about to lose his job following a tenure denial, travels by car to the Pacific Ocean to commit suicide by drowning only to be decapitated en route in an auto accident. Strictly for appearance, undertakers loosely stitch his head back on, but inexplicably Ted rises from his coffin a symbolically important three days later during what is supposed to be his funeral ceremony.⁴ In turn, he is targeted by the media, by a religious cult leader who twice unsuccessfully attempts to end Ted's second "life", and by a federal black ops agent who drags Ted off to Nevada's Area 51 to be experimented on. No credible explanation for Ted's alive/dead condition is ever provided, and neither science nor religion can determine his ontological status. What we do learn is that, post-accident, Ted becomes a better father, husband, and person generally than he had been, and that after he has been taken to and experimented on at the secret government site from which he subsequently escapes, he saves a group of children from death at the hands of cult leader Big Daddy, who had previously held Ted captive and is alternately figured as Santa Claus and Satan. No longer depicted in the public imaginary as a monstrous freak, Ted becomes celebrated by the media as "a defender of children, a superstar, a champion of justice, a savior" (Everett 2004, p. 281). Yet, at book's end, believing that he remains, on balance, a liability to his family, Ted, at a media-covered event, "grabbed his head in his two hands, removed it and set it in his lap, closed his eyes and stayed dead" (Everett 2004, p. 291).

Because Everett has shown a deep appreciation for the thin linguistic line between *sense* and *nonsense* throughout his writing career, perhaps the best way to locate a provisional answer to the alive/dead conundrum that follows Ted throughout the book is to focus attention on the slanted rule that I am using to simultaneously separate and conjoin *alive* and *dead*, *savior* and *monster*—as well as *sense* and *nonsense*. Everett's theorization of this matter is most fully captured in the little-known piece simply entitled "Slash" that appeared in an obscure French online publication in 2014 and from which I quote repeatedly in this essay: "My fascination has always been with the *slash*, that thing, that ether that both divides and unites a *thing* and its *name* or *signified/signifier*. [For] with that slash comes the business of binary oppositions and Deconstruction Meaning can be ostensibly controlled, but always upon closer inspection we discover that the slash is either a slippery slope o[r] a steep hill. I argue and seek to explore . . . through my fiction the idea that meaning resides in the *slash* itself" (Everett 2014).⁵

Everett then, as well as his novel *American Desert*, offers a warm embrace for both/and thought rather than either/or distinctions. And, in turn, his fiction, if we are reading it carefully, offers an open-ended invitation to further thought in lieu of producing facile answers. Asked by Anthony Stewart in 2007, "... what do you hope people get from your work?" Everett responded, "... I have nothing to tell anyone. [But] I hope that they *experience* something. That in reading the work, it opens up this world or their world to them in a way that hasn't been available before" (Stewart 2007, pp. 146–47; italics

added). What a fitting vision for a self-described “apath”—someone not committed to the existence, non-existence, or even the search for a godhead—but *deeply* committed to fostering humanistic thought that flows from richly created as well as deeply lived experience.⁶

Everett’s use of third-person narration at novel’s end, and indeed throughout the book, is crucially important, because the strategy permits Ted to step into history (as extraordinary figures are wont to do) while simultaneously allowing him to possess what readers associate with first-person agency: “. . . *Ted chooses to relate his own story in third person*, an unusual . . . but acceptable device, given that in a most profound way, *he stood—or stands even—outside himself*, not so much on the parapet of consciousness but of life itself” (Everett 2004, p. 3; italics added). So not only is Ted alive/dead (or dead/alive) throughout the novel, but the operant duality of his condition is foregrounded as a slash from the novel’s opening page to its last line, where Ted’s self-decapitation would suggest that he simultaneously cedes continued life as we mortals typically understand it, yet sustains consciousness by “stay[ing] dead” (Everett 2004, p. 291) to the world that has so often and in so many ways buffeted him.

Extremism also takes many other forms in the novel. Ted’s having been denied tenure means that his academic life, at least as he has been living it, is over, but rare is the person facing this particular crossroad who opts for self-destruction. So one need not peel back too many layers of the onion to understand that Ted’s initial decision to commit suicide originates in an extreme impulse that offers him no viable solution to his situation, either in theory or practice. Doubling down on this point, Everett determines Ted’s initial experience of “death” not by simple, sequential causation (i.e., his walking into the Pacific Ocean to drown, as he had planned), but by chance: As he is “driving at a respectable clip along Ocean Boulevard” to reach the shore and end his life, “a fat man chasing a nails-painted poodle out into the street” engenders a multiple-vehicle crash which sends Ted’s head careening through his “already cracked windshield,” thereby decapitating him (Everett 2004, pp. 3–4). The slashed elements of this initial sequence of events are multiple. Not only is Ted now “dead,” albeit somehow still alive, but though his intended means of committing suicide fails to occur, his presumed death—at least for a short time—still results. Moreover, in the process, he incurs no damage whatsoever to his body or even his face, which “suffered not a single scratch” in the ostensibly fatal crash, but only sustains “a jagged but complete wound around his neck” that results from his head’s having been severed as it passed through the windshield (Everett 2004, p. 4).

Soon thereafter, the narrative briefly introduces a series of lesser extremists who enter Ted’s circle. The first is a walking caricature punningly named Larville Staige, minister of the Sacred Blood First Christ Church of the Everlasting Spirit, who cannot manage to get his foot out of his mouth during his funeral oration, incessantly referring to Ted’s decapitation in an insensitive manner that offers faint possibility of consolation: “. . . Brothers and Sisters, Theodore Street is nothing less than a neon marker in the road of life . . . One minute, you’re driving along and the next, your head is over there and your body over there!” (Everett 2004, p. 9). And later, “. . . we have no idea if he got to the house of God in one piece. Maybe his head got there first and had to wait for the rest of him, but it is no matter, because both parts have moved on” (Everett 2004, p. 9). Next to blow hot air is Ted’s deceitful, corpulent, and flatulent department chairperson Orville Orson, whose life Ted had earlier saved by administering CPR when Orson had suffered a heart attack while the two were discussing Ted’s tenure peril. Orson knows that Ted was a superior teacher, and had published at least two articles and produced a book manuscript that failed to be accepted by a university press which held onto the piece for an unconscionably long time before rejecting it, yet he opens his faux testimonial by stating that, although Ted was “a dedicated teacher” (rather than a *superior* one), he “never published anything or, to my knowledge, wrote anything” (Everett 2004, p. 10). Then, shortly after Orson’s speech winds down, Ted, his head stitched on “sloppy but tight” by uncaring morticians (Everett 2004, p. 6), reanimates, and the flabbergasted (as well as gas-emitting) chairperson,

along with Ted's dean, both drop dead of coronaries. These scenes, no doubt meant to engender laughs in readers—especially those who are academics—also have an underlying nastiness about them as Everett again pairs polar opposites: Would-be religious solemnity clashes with a debased version of the late comedian Flip Wilson's parodic Church of What's Happening Now, and purportedly rigorous academic and personal standards butt heads with academic treachery and loathsome human conduct.

These very patterns, in turn, repeat themselves in different forms throughout the remainder of the novel—as newscaster Barbie Becker exploits Ted's daughter in an attempt to create a what she self-servingly regards as a good story, throwing the family temporarily into tumult; as cult leader Big Daddy tries to ensure Ted's full and complete death; as a federal black ops agent whisks Ted away to Area 51 to be experimented on; and as others within that compound conduct experiments which offer no respect for human dignity. In a variety of ways, all of these menaces, along with the more benign but clearly over-the-top cultist Negatia Frashkart, seek to impose their will and purported values upon the alive/dead Ted.

In *Glyph*, published five years before *American Desert*, Baby Ralph also becomes a target of government operatives because they believe that they can bend this freak of nature to their power. Federal agents seek to deploy the young genius—or, more specifically, young Black genius—as Defense Stealth Operative 1369 (Everett 1999a, p. 139). The government's plan for Ted in *American Desert* is arguably even more sinister: Federal forces wish to discover how he managed to survive his decapitation, then incorporate this knowledge into engineering soldiers who, when slaughtered on the battlefield, can rise up again to continue fighting. In both novels, the freak—or, as Ted is commonly figured, “monster”, “ghoul”, “devil”, “alien”—just happens to be Black, a fact the reader of *Glyph* does not learn until page 54 of that novel, and which is only referenced once, backhandedly, in *American Desert* through a series of racialized descriptors during Ted's funeral service—most overtly the Reverend Staige's attempting to cool himself by waving “a fan bearing the image of Martin Luther King, Jr., on one side and advertising a funeral home on the other” (Everett 2004, pp. 8–9). This revealing signification, in particular, foregrounds the reverend's, and American society's, uncomfortable marriage of the would-be progressive with the crassly commercial in a debased speech that Anthony Stewart has pointed out conjoins “the scriptural and the irreverent” (Stewart 2020, p. 136).⁷

With Ted's racialized designation established,⁸ followed by his apparent return to life, Everett begins to draw on the image historicized in Elizabeth Young's 2008 book *Black Frankenstein: The Making of an American Metaphor*. A reader can, of course, choose to ignore Ted's strongly inferential status as a specifically Black Frankenstein, but making this identification helps explain the extreme antipathy that pseudo-Christian Big Daddy feels toward Ted, as well as an Area 51 doctor's willingness to cut out Ted's internal organs in the name of science and, when she's done, return some, but not all, of them “back into Ted's body much as one might stuff a turkey” (Everett 2004, p. 183). These encounters invite the reader, in the first instance, to hear an echo of the Sons of Cain rhetoric deployed in the nineteenth century by Southern slaveholders by way of evoking Black monstrosity and, in the second, to recall racialized scientific abominations such as the Tuskegee Syphilis Experiment begun in the 1930s. But what merits greater emphasis here is that *American Desert* is the book in which Everett most fully lays bare the destructiveness of dualistic, either–or thought, for it is in Everett's meditation upon Ted's simultaneous both/and status as dead/alive and monster/hero that the novelist's critique of extremism finds its sharpest focus.⁹

As the novel's working title, *Making Jesus*, intimates, many of the book's dualities find their source in religion. The “resurrected” Ted Street, who reanimates during his funeral ceremony three days after an automobile accident in which his head has been completely severed from his body, is thought by some to be Jesus, an angel, and the Messiah; whereas to others he is Satan, a devil, and a monster—or maybe an alien. Ted's principal antagonist, Big Daddy, presides over a nominally religious California desert cult that has an inner

circle of 12 disciples, whom he often refers to as his “sponges.” Although Big Daddy claims to be Jesus Christ, his ironic dress, which simultaneously evokes both Santa Claus (Saint Nicholas) and Satan, along with his actions and his belief in white supremacy, more clearly mark him as a demonic figure. But things are rarely so simplistic in an Everett text. The reader sensitive to Everett’s penchant for allusion can, for example, also understand Big Daddy as a latter-day David Koresh, with all the complexity that surrounds this historical figure as a self-proclaimed prophet of God/gun-toting madman. Not only is Big Daddy willing to sacrifice the lives of the 27 children in his compound—his own and those of his cult members, and the same number of children sometimes cited to have died during the infamous Waco siege¹⁰—but earlier in the novel, in a dream sequence, Big Daddy is paired with a character named Vernon Howell (not coincidentally the name given at birth to the historical figure who later changed it to David Koresh) in a two-on-two volleyball match. Eighty Branch Davidians died in the shootout at Koresh’s compound outside Waco, Texas, on 19 April 1993. And it is ironic, if not intentional, given Everett’s play with dualities, that Bob Ricks, the FBI’s lead negotiator during the Waco siege, recalls communicating with Koresh on that fifty-first and final day of the federal and state governments’ military deployment, using these words: “Lead your people out, David. Be a Messiah, not a destroyer” (Waco 2013). While the majority of those who encounter the novel’s protagonist throughout the book alternately figure him as a savior or monster, Everett, in his act of double doubling here, attaches the same markers to Big Daddy/Koresh.

A very different form of doubling occurs when the reader meets an alienated government employee named Oswald Avery—who is “not that Oswald Avery” (Everett 2004, p. 194), the co-discoverer of DNA, with its doubled double strands. Avery works in an Area 51 lab in which he is attempting to successfully clone Jesus. At the time of the book’s action, he has generated 40 products, 27 of them living—another eerie echo of the children’s deaths in Waco.¹¹ And one of these clones, Jesus 19, is discovered to have at least one superhuman attribute that suggests he could be a somewhat damaged version of “the real thing.” It’s a nice paradox, and one that Everett leaves open even as he builds upon another of the novel’s fundamental conundra—the issue of voicelessness, to which I return in a later section of this essay.

2. “To Sleep, Perchance to Dream”

“My interest in fiction derives from my interest in language, specifically how it is that our sounds and marks can have meaning for others. But my interest is not linguistic, nor would I say that it is strictly philosophical. Saussure provided us with his iconic model of meaning, the picture of a tree/the word for tree.” (Everett 2014)¹²

I would like to spend a moment exploring one of the more curious episodes in a novel laden with curiosities: the dream sequence built upon the ideologies of German philosophical and theological heavyweights in which a two-bodied, one-headed figure composed of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, the arch proponent of dialectical thought, and Martin Heidegger, the existentialist author of *Being & Time*, sits opposite a two-headed, one-bodied figure of theologians Paul Althaus and Karl Heim, and this paired pair begin debating whether the resurrected Ted is dead or alive. Philosophical positions are, of course, a staple of the Everett canon, but rarely are philosophers thrust so directly into his fiction as they are here. In life, Heidegger rather respectfully challenged the thinking of his predecessor Hegel, especially insofar as he sought to deconstruct the latter’s core text, *The Phenomenology of the Spirit*. So, the first double/single figure Everett projects is that of measured difference within a comparatively narrow philosophical space over a protracted period of time (two bodies, one head). Conversely, Althaus and Heim were contemporaries, and while they had differences, they were united in their opposition to precursor Karl Barth’s far more orthodox view of Christianity (thus, one body, two heads). Predictably, Hegel/Heidegger proclaim Ted “alive and dead” and the theologians claim he is “resurrected . . . body and soul” (Everett 2004, p. 50), whereupon an ominous “form

at the end of the table, a body with no head,” asserts that ““the new person is an imitation. The original person is gone. There is no more Ted. There is only Ted-prime”” (Everett 2004, pp. 50–51)—a pronouncement that leaves the awakened Ted confused and agitated not only because the mock debate has not offered him any useful insight into his alive/dead status but because his core identity now seems under attack.¹³ Wracked with guilt and peering into his bathroom mirror, he feels compelled to ponder if he is indeed himself or an imitation, which is to say he finds himself locked for a moment in Lacan’s mirror stage, a thematic Everett had used previously, and more prominently, at the conclusion of *erasure*, to which the author would return with great effect on the final page of 2009’s *I Am Not Sidney Poitier*, and which he also deploys powerfully on the penultimate page of *American Desert* as Ted peers into the lens of the camera that is being used to record his last spoken words.

A thematically parallel dream sequence that appears roughly 60 pages further on finds “Ted and the president of the United States” paired in a volleyball match with “Big Daddy and a man named Vernon Howell”, during which the two wannabe messiah figures get into a protracted argument about which one of them is the real Jesus Christ (Everett 2004, pp. 115–16). Eventually, Howell—in full-bore Koresh, Waco mode—shoots himself in the head and dies, and Big Daddy wrests the pistol from Howell’s death grip and fires it into Ted’s torso. But the bullet does “no harm. The projectile passed through his body and left him standing with no discernible ill effects. Ted was alive, very much alive. He fell to his knees and cried” (Everett 2004, p. 117). As in the philosophical debate, Ted can muster no satisfying answer to his alive/dead state, which weighs heavily on him but which he (like the reader, and like the public in the novel) lacks a means to resolve.

3. The Sound of Silence

“I also seek to distance myself from the slash, as I seek to understand meaning by exploring its opposite, ostensibly nonsense. This is not an easy matter, as the word *nonsense* contains the word *sense* and so there is some sense to it, especially its reliance on our understanding of form and sense to be recognized as nonsense.” (Everett 2014)

The motif of voicelessness hovers over *American Desert* like a storm. When, for example, Ted awakens in the Sacred Blood First Christ Church of the Everlasting Spirit three days after his car accident, he possesses consciousness but, as a result of the morticians’ having sewn his mouth shut, can only utter ““Mumm, mmmmm, mmum”” (Everett 2004, p. 16). Even when one of the morticians manages to remove “all but three of the stitches . . . before fainting” (Everett 2004, p. 17), Ted’s vocalizations cannot readily be understood. And in the days that follow, when he *can* utter distinguishable sentences, he often remains too much the monster in the public imaginary to truly be heard—certainly not enough to allow outsiders to significantly appreciate his unique, and terrifying, situation. Indeed, he cannot really understand it himself!

In turn, this issue of voicelessness sets up what is in many ways the wittiest question posed in the novel: Is Jesus 19 just the least damaged version of Oswald Avery’s cloning experiment, or is he a genuine divinity worthy of worship? Quite apart from the fact that neither the author nor his creations are wont to provide answers to this (farcical) enigma, Everett plays the question for all it’s worth. Jesus 19 can’t tell us because, although “his eyes were soft” but not “empty” like those of the profoundly damaged clones in the “room with the twenty-seven Christs”, he cannot speak, because he “had no mouth at all” (Everett 2004, pp. 206–7). So not only does the text not allow readers to completely rule out the possibility of 19’s divinity (even as they might chortle about it), but Everett actively prompts us to consider it.¹⁴

We know that both Ted and Avery think enough of Jesus 19 to take him with them when they escape from the compound. And we know that the clone can experience fear and that “he had the eyes of a lamb” (Everett 2004, p. 233), a Christlike descriptor. Then—mirabile dictu—we learn that he does not require food to stay alive! ““How could I have missed that?”” Avery exclaims after the escape. ““He doesn’t eat and he’s alive. In fact,

his missing mouth aside, he's the best Christ I made. You don't think—" (Everett 2004, p. 241). But this exchange is cut short when Ted learns that Big Daddy (again Waco-like) has barricaded himself and his followers into their Mojave Desert compound and "vowed that neither he nor his disciples will be taken alive" (Everett 2004, p. 241), and Ted is off to California, leaving the question of 19's divinity an open one. Avery, on the other hand, decides that he must "get Nineteen back into the compound and finish [his] work" (Everett 2004, p. 242)—something the reader discovers in an isolated paragraph near the end of the novel that Avery was unable to do: "While an excited Oswald Avery was attempting to regain entry into the base . . . , he was shot and killed by a young soldier from Alliance, Nebraska. Mouthless Jesus 19 was still stashed away with Negatia Frashkart and her team of fervent believers. Dressed in white shirt and sweatpants as they all were, he was made to wash the clothes and handle the waste, septic and otherwise" (Everett 2004, p. 280).

What a marvelous way for the question of 19's would-be divinity to be left!¹⁵

4. (Never) The End

On the novel's final pages, pursuant to Ted's successful defeat of Big Daddy, and in the belief that his wife and children are better off without him, a debilitated Ted decides to end his publicly lived life. But the words Ted speaks there need to be considered in the very specific context in which he delivers them. The text indicates that, prior to speaking, Ted "took the camera, took the world, look[ed] into the lens, f[oun]d his own reflection it, and *talked to himself*" (Everett 2004, p. 290; italics added). To be sure, his words are powerful; the reader has no reason to doubt that they will be of interest to many members of the television audience; and we know for a fact that these words, which occur immediately prior to Ted's self-beheading, variously impact those gathered around him: His wife Gloria rises up from the stairs on which she has been sitting; television host "Barbie Becker's fear ha[s] returned[; and t]he camera operators ha[ve] stepped away from their machines" (Everett 2004, p. 291). But, more importantly, the text makes a specific point of the fact that the words Ted utters during the broadcast are *fundamentally self-directed*. In short, those reading carefully have been prompted both to "watch" Ted and attempt to unpack his second overtly Lacanian moment of the novel—an event far more impactful than the one that occurs earlier in which he narrates his dream encounter with the Hegel/Heidegger and Althaus/Heim figures. At book's end, the protagonist's words may variously impact his local and distant audiences, but *his focus is specifically inward*. And it is here that we see Ted's first and second "lives" (pre- and post-beheading) colliding as he takes stock of a future that does not appear to him to have promise—even if he will apparently live it for a protracted time, and despite the fact that, though he dies, he will go on to compose a novel that ends with his beheading.

Ted proclaims that he "know[s] everything about the meaning of death"; has no theistic inclinations; wishes, in an unspoken but nonetheless startling invocation of Jesus 19, that he "had no mouth, so that [his] silence would mean as much as [his] words"; and emphatically expresses the hope that "his words had no meaning" (Everett 2004, p. 290). Only with all that said does he remove his head, place it in his lap, "close his eyes," and "stay dead" (Everett 2004, p. 291). This might well seem a perfect non-syncretic sendoff for the novel's complex protagonist—especially if it were truly his "end".

Those reading at all carefully, however, know that the book's final words *do not constitute a conclusion*. Rather, these words implicitly call upon the reader to contemplate and attempt to attach deeper meaning to the larger text—including our bedeviling knowledge that so-called *common sense* has once more been breached, this time highlighted by the fact that Ted's narrative consciousness has survived his *second* beheading, because the reattached head finishes narrating the novel, adding even deeper resonance to the concept of dead/alive. Importantly, as the words of the novel's printed text run out, we implicitly find ourselves looped back to the book's literal beginning—unmistakably "lost amid the confusion created by Ted's [second] death, departure, demise, dissolution and further by the fact that Ted chooses to relate his own story in third person, an unusual (the occa-

sional politician and athlete aside), but acceptable device, not so much on the parapet of consciousness but of life itself, it being perhaps the case that neither entails, necessarily, the other" (Everett 2004, p. 3). To state the matter more directly, the novel's "conclusion" finds Ted—and us as readers—awash in the creative chaos of the novel's opening page. It is a situation which critic Anthony Stewart has outlined in impeccable, and exceeding useful, detail, and upon which I hope to have built in this essay: "Convention dictates that the line between life and death is largely unbreachable, at least to those of us not trained as physicians or theologians. But *American Desert* begins with exactly such a breach, as well as a quite elaborate drawing of attention to the breach. An additional breach of convention is just as important to understanding Everett's work, though, and that is the breaching of narrative convention. While a deceased narrator is not without precedent, Everett's deployment of this trope as an introductory salvo (combined with the macabre irony that the narrator was on his way to commit suicide when he is killed in an accident) sets a tone of narrative rule breaking that expands in its significance throughout what follows in *American Dream*. Ted's 'death, departure, demise, dissolution,' in other words, not only does not impede the telling of a good story but adds significantly to the challenges that Everett's fiction poses" (Stewart 2020, pp. 33–34). By funneling the reader back to the book's introduction at its "conclusion", Everett brilliantly highlights some of the key slashed elements his book evokes: End is beginning, dead is alive (as alive is dead), savior is ghoul, and traditional conventions of authorship be damned. And it is on this joyous field of constructive play that the reader—professional or lay—is offered ample fuel for thinking and living.

Any attentive reader of Everett's many interviews will never find him directly answering a question about what one of his texts means, because he regards meaning as always contingent and always subject to change upon rereading or reconsideration. Indeed, the question about meaning in any of his books that is most likely to draw a considered response from him occurs when a questioner posits an interpretation the author may not have intended or previously considered yet finds interesting. In short, the reading process for Everett is always contingent, never truly finished, and very much open to a limitless array of possibilities that have nothing directly to do with authorial intent. This authorial approach, which rests upon the slash, underscores the inventive way in which Everett not only engages the reader in meaning making through creative play but overtly welcomes rethinking and rereading from his reader.

His authorial commitment to intellectual openness and reliance on reader creativity is, I suspect, one of the two principal things readers find most engaging about Everett's writing. The other, of course, is his deft use of humor (including parody, burlesque, and satire¹⁶) to disarm, or at least mute, potential reader reluctance to engage deeply in sociopolitical issues that his fiction regularly raises.¹⁷ Everett's texts can never be said to end so long as there are readers willing to accept his call to deeply engage his works as they bring their unique insights, experiences, and interpretations to them. And *American Desert* offers an exemplary illustration of this point.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: Not applicable.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Notes

- ¹ Despite *American Desert*'s attracting more than 40 reviews on at least three continents, only 3 of the more than 250 articles devoted to Everett's work focus solely on the novel (see Bleu-Schwenninger 2007; Feith 2007; Schur 2013), and the book has elicited little additional article-length critical comment. The novel does, of course, also receive attention in the two books about Everett by Derek Maus (2019) and, more especially, Anthony Stewart (2020).

- 2 Never one to be bound by simple definitions or common expectations, Everett found himself confronted at a plenary session of the 2018 Western American Literature Association by an audience member who appeared less than enthused by the author's decision to read from *The Water Cure* rather than one of his novels set on the American frontier and pointedly asked the author why he had elected to read from "that book." Without missing a beat, and smiling broadly, Everett laconically observed that the novel "is set California and is one of my favorites."
- 3 I realize that, for a variety of reasons, others might legitimately assign this designation to other Everett works, including his 2021 novel *The Trees*.
- 4 In a first-level inversion of the traditional Christ story, Ted rises from the dead after three days, but only then begins to lead his "public life," thereby engendering the need for a second-level "alive death" at book's end that thrusts him into history.
- 5 In the Spring of 2018, I asked Everett about the genesis of this curious publication, and he said it was likely a transcription of a statement he made to French students while abroad several years earlier.
- 6 Everett has often referred to himself in his interviews as an apath. The following explanation, spoken in a 2005 conversation with a BBC interviewer, ended in laughter, but provides a specific context for the writer's understanding of this variously (mis)understood term: "My grandfather was an atheist, and up until recently my father was an agnostic. . . . I view myself as being somewhat more spiritually involved as an apath; I simply don't care whether there's a God or not" (Power 2005).
- 7 Richard Schur devotes five sentences to delineating markers that clearly identify the church as African American (Schur 2013, p. 80), only to back off from definitively making this identification because Everett does not overtly label it as what it obviously is. Like me, Michel Feith will have none of this: "While the robed choir and the call-and-response form of the sermon confirm Ted's color, the double-sided fan becomes an ironical symptom of the collusion between spiritual and monetary values This little tell-tale detail . . . almost subliminally conditions our reading and responses to the protagonist, proposing, not imposing, a supplementary dimension to the story, an optional decoding key fully accessible . . . to the attentive reader." Feith continues: "This encrypting of race between the lines seems to imply that the cross-cultural dimension of the narrative is privileged over racial preoccupations. Yet one might argue that the full impact of the story is revealed only when this 'ethnic' layer is taken into account" (Feith 2007, p. 198). It is also worth noting in this context that, shortly after Ted is kidnapped by several of Big Daddy's "sponges," cult member Gerald Mander clearly racializes his group as "'Godfearingwhitepeople'" (Everett 2004, p. 104).
- 8 Although Ted's racial identity is marked at the funeral ceremony, his wife Gloria's never is. There is no compelling reason to assume that she is not African American; then again, there is no compelling reason to assume that she is. This is another example, fully dramatized in Everett's 2011 novel *Assumption*, of the way in which he challenges readers to become active participants in the processes of reading and meaning making.
- 9 Everett's commitment to blurred lines—or what Stewart refers to as "the infinite space between categories" in the Everett canon (Stewart 2020, p. 127)—is a central focus of the critic's 2020 book *Approximate Gestures*. In this regard, see especially his discussions of *American Desert* (Stewart 2020, pp. 82–93, 135–37).
- 10 An ABC News report pegs the number as 25 (see [Child Survivors Recall Waco Fire 10 Years on 2003](#)), but other sources cite a range between 24 and 27, the difference apparently not having to do with the number of bodies found at the site of the shootout but rather differing definitions of the number considered as "children" as opposed to "young adults." Three of the deceased youngsters (Bobbie Lane Koresch, 2; Star Howell, 6; and Cyrus Howell, 8) are known for certain to have been fathered by the cult leader, along with perhaps as many as a dozen or so of the other children who perished on 19 April 1993.
- 11 The number 27 is, in turn, a likely reference to 3³, the mystical number 3 to the third power. This number reappears for a third time in the novel when Negatia Frashkart states that 27 is also the size of her group, The Heavenly Order of the Pyromantic Worship of the *Ruach Elohim* (see Everett 2004, p. 233).
- 12 To view how the slash can metaphorically and diagrammatically play out in fiction, see Everett's 1999 short story "The Devolution of Nuclear Associability" (Everett 1999b), which he subsequently included in another of his books from 2004, *damned if I do*.
- 13 Patricia Bleu-Schwenninger offers an extended reading of this episode, concluding that "Everett seems to be convinced that the visible masks reality, while it is impossible to represent the invisible so that the artist, or the writer, may only suggest it in an oblique manner, or invent it as Everett invents Ted Everett's 'body with no head' thus confront[s] the viewer or reader with the enigmatic character of the tangible world" (Bleu-Schwenninger 2007, p. 150).
- 14 Moreover, Avery informs Ted that he used the DNA from a residual sample of what purports to be Christ's blood to clone Jesus 19 and his 26 other living brethren (Everett 2004, p. 197), further raising the reader's interest in the clone's "divine" ancestry, although Avery later concedes that, for all he knows, the sample could have been "'Hitler's blood . . . or maybe Barabbas's'" (Everett 2004, p. 198).
- 15 It is possible to read Jesus 19 as a virtual metaphor for the slash: could-be messiah/compliant servant, unique/common, possessed of superhuman potential/feckless, divine/debased, worthy of worship within a community committed to worship/literally ignored by this community, powerful/powerless, potential for communication/unwilling to attempt communication, etc.
- 16 On the subject of Menippean satire in *American Desert*, see especially Derek Maus's reading of *American Desert* in his book *Jesting in Earnest* (Maus 2019, pp. 109–12). Of particular interest in Maus's analysis is his focus on the "physical and ontological" grotesqueness of Ted's body as well as the protagonist's inability to make any sense of his situation.

- ¹⁷ In *American Desert*, these issues would include an uncaring, overzealous media, scientific experimentation gone awry, religious zealotry, unfairness in the workplace, and racism.

References

- Bleu-Schwenninger, Patricia. 2007. On the Necessity of Losing One's Head in Order to Keep It in Percival Everett's *American Desert*. In *Percival Everett: Transatlantic Readings*. Edited by Claire Maniez and Anne-Laure Tissut. Paris: Éditions Le Manuscrit, pp. 131–51.
- Child Survivors Recall Waco Fire 10 Years on 2003. April 17. Available online: abcnews.go.com (accessed on 13 March 2017).
- Everett, Percival. 1999a. *Glyph*. St. Paul: Graywolf P.
- Everett, Percival. 1999b. The Devolution of Nuclear Associability. *Callaloo* 22: 116–20. [CrossRef]
- Everett, Percival. 2004. *American Desert*. New York: Hyperion.
- Everett, Percival. 2014. Slash. *La Clé des Langues (Lyon)*. May 16. Available online: <https://cle.ens-lyon.fr/anglais/litterature/entretiens-et-textes-inedits/slash-percival-everett/> (accessed on 13 March 2017).
- Feith, Michel. 2007. Manifest Deathtiny: Percival Everett's *American Desert* of the Real. In *Reading Percival Everett: European Perspectives*. Edited by Claude Julien and Anne-Laure Tissut. Tours: Presses Universitaires François Rabelais, pp. 183–201.
- Maus, Derek C. 2019. *Jesting in Earnest: Percival Everett and Menippean Satire*. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press.
- Power, Chris. 2005. *American Desert*. Interview. London: BBC Collective. Available online: bbc.co.uk/dna/collective/A3932255 (accessed on 6 July 2011).
- Schur, Richard. 2013. The Mind-Body Split in *American Desert*: Synthesizing Everett's Critique of Race, Religion, and Science. In *Perspectives on Percival Everett*. Edited by Keith Mitchell and Robin Vander. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, pp. 75–93.
- Stewart, Anthony. 2007. Uncategorizable Is Still a Category: An Interview with Percival Everett. In *Conversations with Percival Everett*. Edited by Joe Weixlmann. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, pp. 119–47.
- Stewart, Anthony. 2020. *Approximate Gestures: Infinite Spaces in the Fiction of Percival Everett*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP.
- Waco. 2013. Crimes of the Century Series. CNN Films. August 25. Available online: <https://edition.cnn.com/videos/bestoftv/2013/08/23/cotc-waco.crimes-of-the-century> (accessed on 14 December 2016).

Disclaimer/Publisher's Note: The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of MDPI and/or the editor(s). MDPI and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.