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Literacy and the Quest for Selfhood in Percival Everett's *James*

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Abstract/Introduction

Percival Everett's novel *James* won the National Book Award for Fiction and was shortlisted for the Booker Prize in 2024. This masterful retelling of Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, narrated from the perspective of the enslaved Jim/James, offers a key point of engagement with the questions of who and what regulates access to the means of material and literary production—and who, consequently, is entitled to a voice in the American democratic machinery. In his reading of the novel, Professor Emeritus Robert Stepto explores the ways in which Black identity and literacy interact with, and speak back to, the "whiteness" of Huckleberry Finn's own canonical status.

Stepto boasts a long and illustrious career as a scholar and a critic in African American literary studies, serving as a member of the Yale's English faculty since 1974. In his latest published work, *A Home Elsewhere: Reading African American Classics in the Age of Obama* (2010), he makes a compelling case for the significance of names—especially those assigned to Black folks, fictional or real—and their ability to reveal much "about identities assumed and identities imposed" (42). By bringing former President Barack Obama's writing into dialogue with other autobiographical narratives within the African American literary tradition, such as those by Frederick Douglass or W.E.B. Du Bois, Stepto traces a genealogy of "books that were unto themselves part of each man's effort to create a self and an identity" (3). Like Douglass and Du Bois—and like the fictional protagonist of Everett's novel—Barack Obama quite literally wrote himself into being (and into an already established African American literary canon) with his 1995 memoir *Dreams from My Father*.

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The publication of *James*, as analyzed by Stepto for this special issue, comes at a similarly charged time in the history of American democracy. Over the next four years, we will be reading Everett's novel alongside Twain's and other older and newer classics under a political leader who has made "name calling" the hallmark of his propagandistic campaign. As President Donald Trump reduces his opponents to derogatory epithets like "Kamabla" or "Tampon Tim," Everett reclaims the agency of "James" for "Jim." The novel guides us to hope that we too might imagine and name a different future. Key, interwoven themes in this journey include the layers of power Jim/James and his community gradually awaken to—of naming, of the written record, and of family. Importantly, this preoccupation with family encompasses not only blood ties, but also broader senses of kinship and belonging.

We commissioned Professor Stepto to write this essay on Everett's rereading of Twain as the culmination of many years of research into the ambivalent role that literacy has played for generations of Black Americans striving to escape the brutalities of slavery and segregation while forging their own unmediated history. In his 1986 essay, "Distrust of the Reader in African-American Narratives," first published in Sacvan Bercovitch's anthology *Reconstructing American Literary History* and later reprinted as an afterword to A *Home Elsewhere*, Stepto singles out Twain's "colorist" fiction as an early example of the convergence of American and African American modes of storytelling. Both express "distrust of the reader and of the definitions of literacy represented by that reader." And yet, while "both traditions may pit teller against hearer in terms of country versus city, South versus North, West versus East, commonsense versus booksense, and New World versus the Old," Stepto also observes that "it is mainly, and perhaps exclusively, in Afro-American letters that this match may be fully played out across the ubiquitous net of America's color line" (A *Home Elsewhere*, 169–70).

As the country braces for a second Trump administration, whose policies have historically marginalized Black communities to a large extent, this (mis)match might also be framed as the difference between using "dull tools" versus "sharp ones." The former "are much more dangerous," explains Luke, a fellow slave working for master Henderson in Everett's novel. While Luke

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sees this comparison only in practical terms, a way to mold metal more than society, James pauses "to admire his metaphor" (207). And metaphors, as the father of Cultural Studies Stuart Hall beautifully put it, "are serious things" (Hall 78).

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"Where am I?" I asked.
"You're in Illinois," the old man said.
"So, I'm in a free state?"
The men laughed. "Boy, you're in America," a muscular man said.

During my decades in the academy, I have been a Professor of English, African American Studies and American Studies.[1] I often search for and hold dear the literature and other art forms that enhance and meld my work in all three fields. One such work is Mark Twain's classic tale, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884). You can thereby imagine my immediate interest in Percival Everett's latest novel, *James* (2024), a self-proclaimed reworking of Twain's legendary slave Jim renaming himself James. This gesture, it turns out, represents a significant *literate* way of seeking freedom.

Everett's novel confirms and deepens the principal arguments I have explored in much of my academic work, especially in one of my first books, *From Behind the Veil* (1979; 2nd ed., 1991). There, I argued that in canonical African American literature, freedom is "presented as being a protean state of literacy to be achieved and safeguarded." It is achieved when people like James acquire the "ability and opportunity to be literate." It is safeguarded when authors like James manage authorial control, which I see to be "a necessary, self-protecting aggression" (xi). Everett's James, in declaring that his name is James, not Jim, is aggressively self-protecting and self-projecting himself. At the same time, he is also manifesting through his mounting anger and sharp self-awareness some of the tendencies discussed in "Distrust of the Reader": his actions quickly become evidence for how "Afro-American

literature has developed as much because of the culture's distrust of literacy as because of its abiding faith in it" (A *Home Elsewhere*, 139).

A prime, arresting feature of *James* is that James's literacy is present in every form imaginable. We discover that he has learned to read and keeps books at hand, but much more is going on. Literacy is not always about sitting comfortably with the classics of Western civilization, in the company of a (white) Shakespeare who "winces not," to borrow from Du Bois's 1903 seminal work, *The Souls of Black Folk* (76). Literacy for James is also about yearning to write, about having the paper, ink, and pencil with which to compose himself into being. It is, most importantly, about being able to tell his own story and compose his own book—the one right in front of whoever is reading *James*—that can supply what the now canonical narratives of Western philosophers and apologists of slavery have maliciously or unconsciously omitted. At one point in the novel, James decides to stop reading his much-treasured books in plain sight, not only because of fear that Huck might find out who he really is—which eventually he will—but more decisively because the "unproductive, imagined conversations with Voltaire, Rousseau and Locke about slavery, race and, of all things, albinism" have failed to satisfy him (Everett, *James*, 52). Remarkably, James not only expresses his frustration with the self-entitlement displayed by white thinkers who claim the right to speak or write on behalf of Black folks; he is also deeply suspicious of how stories supposedly crafted by Black writers themselves have been mediated by their white "protectors" who always "need to name everything" (22). One passage in the novel is revealing: "And my books, once read, were not what I wanted, not what I needed. The so-called self-related story of Venture Smith became more infuriating the more I examined the work, wondering how a five-year-old could have remembered so much detail that made such neat sense. I had already come to understand the tidiness of lies, the lesson learned from the stories told by white people seeking to justify my circumstance" (90). Jim refers here to a pamphlet found during his flight, *The Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Venture, a Native of Africa: But Resident Above Sixty Years in the United States of America.* He refuses to believe that this story, as the work itself claims, was "related by himself" (69)—a verb coming from the Latin participle *relatus*, meaning "to be brought back." Brought back *by*

whom? Is it possible for Black storytellers, whose words were constantly co-opted, diluted or distorted by those negotiating for their life and death, to retain true ownership of their narratives? And what new storytelling devices might they need to deploy in order to do so?

Literacy is no less manifest in the spoken word. Everett's protagonist can control situations because he is verbally multilingual. Of course, he knows slave speech and can speak "in character" through the "slave filter" (52), as he calls it, but he is also James, not just Jim, and that in itself presents the range of his voice and vocabulary. All of this is on view in how Everett has chosen to recreate the relationship between Jim/James and Huck Finn, especially in those moments when speech is an "issue." In many ways, this "speaking back" functions not only as a retort to Twain but also as a challenge to the "white" assumptions embedded in an American "classic" text (as seen in James's engagements with the canonical "big names" mentioned above). The specificity of Everett's own engagement with Twain is worth reiterating too, however, as he is thoroughly and intentionally in dialogue with his source material—reportedly having read *Huckleberry Finn* fifteen times in preparation for writing *James*—and pulls at its omissions (see Grillon). In interviews, Everett has highlighted the importance of "slave speech" as characterization in *Huckleberry Finn* and his own decisions to explore the implications attendant on literacy and expression. "The slaves would have a way of speaking to each other that is unintelligible to their slave owners. In my novel, it happens to be what we would call standard English," as Everett told the BBC ("Why I Rewrote *Huckleberry Finn*"). He has described his writing style as "pathologically ironic," and here he delivers a masterstroke.

We anticipate the moments when Jim will speak in slave character to and with white folk, but how will those moments shape and even differ when he is speaking with Huck? How might their speech to each other be exchanges that will portray how Jim/James and Huck are actually related?

The novel begins with conversations between Jim and Huck about multisyllabic, highly literate words that Jim makes sure to express in "character." Everett brilliantly shows how Jim's slave speech can mask him as sub-literate while he literally (!) takes control of a situation. In one conversation, Jim

declares "Dey [white folk] is the stupidstitiousest people in the world." Huck retorts, perhaps with a grin since he is joking with and correcting a colored man, "You mean superstitious." Jim counters, "Dat what I say" (Everett, *James*, 40). With that response, Jim performs his slave character while declaring his literacy and knowledge of big (white?) words. We later realize that this is part of how James prepares for the moment when he finally informs Huck in his own words, his own English, that Huck is his son.

After wondering to himself "Maybe because I was tired of the slave voice," James tells Huck that he saved him from death in the river "Because, Huck, and I hope you hear this without thinking I'm crazy or joking, you are my son." Huck laughs and hits back with, "Why are you talking like that?" James's response is "Are you referring to my diction or my content?" This sudden tonal shift is brought home as Huck asks "What's content?" (253). This huge moment in the novel confirms that James and Huck will find their actual relationship once they shed speaking in character, especially "race" character.

Everett's presentations of James's spoken literacy are also noteworthy in that he and other slaves deliberately resort to bilingualism to manage racial incidents and enhance each other's forms of address. As early as chapter two, Jim/James reminds us, "Safe movement through the world depended on mastery of language, fluency." He sits down in his cabin to give his daughter Lizzie and six other children a "language lesson." The lesson prepares the children for their lives ahead and prepares us readers for the rest of the novel. Lizzie straight off asks, "Papa, why do we have to learn this?" Jim responds, "White folks expect us to sound a certain way and it can only help if we don't disappoint them." Lizzie adds, "Never address any subject directly when talking to another slave" (21). Tellingly, the children learn to call this "Signifying"—perhaps a nod toward what Henry Louis Gates Jr in *The Signifying Monkey* (1988) calls the "protective tendency" of the African American tradition "to theorize about itself in the vernacular," a self-reflexive discourse "on the uses of formal language" (Gates xxi). Throughout the novel, black characters code-switch not only for survival (signifying as the enslavers expect them to) but also between each other to ironize,

heighten awareness of surroundings, or communicate shifts in their environment—see, for instance, Norman's self-disclosure to Jim as a fellow escaped slave.

Back to the schoolroom. Jim urges the children: "Let's try some situational translations" (Everett, *James*, 22). The situation they then explore involves how to slave filter urgent talk to a white woman about a kitchen fire. Each child tries out their own translation and each child is named. As I will note throughout this discussion, Jim is naming himself James and making sure that every slave in his story is bestowed a name and an identity. This lesson about talking to white folk ends with "The children said together, 'And the better they feel, the safer we are.'" James asks a girl named February to "translate that." She comes out with "'Da mo' betta dey feels, da mo' safer we be'" (23). The lesson has been successful.

Midway through Part I, Jim loses Huck when their raft breaks apart on the river and Jim is thrown ashore. There, he wakes up to find four black men sitting around him. One of them spies Jim's sack of books and asks, "What are you doing with these?" The oldest man wants to know, "You can read?" Another says, "I can read some" and introduces himself, "I'm Josiah" (85). Much to the point, these Black men have names: as well as Josiah we meet Old George, Young George, and Pierre. They have personalities, ambitions, and a curiosity about what literacy might provide for them.

When Jim tells them that one thing he needs is a pencil, Pierre yells "What in hell does a slave need a pencil for?" Young George, however, declares "I can get you a pencil" and asks, "Can you really write?" (88). With that, he and Jim enter a relationship that emblematizes the book's relationship between expressing literacy and, by extension, selfhood. In Jim's words: "I read and read, but I found what I needed was to write. I needed that pencil" (89). There is a poignancy to Young George's role in Jim's story: he steals the pencil from his master, an object of such potency that it ends up being the cause of his own punishment and brutal death upon discovery. For now, however, Young George praises Jim for being able to write and urges him to tell his story. When Jim/James wonders about how to do this, Young George looks him in the face and says, "Use your ears . . . Tell the story with your ears. Listen" (91).

Jim recalls that he understood that advice to be profound. Your ears hear what and who you need to fear and love.

What soon follows is a passage alerting us through its own special script, indentation, and voice that James is writing: "*With my pencil, I wrote myself into being. I wrote myself* to here." The passage begins, "**My name is James**" (93). All of the passage is utterly remarkable and tells us so much about Jim's quest for literacy. Later, when Young George is being beaten to death for stealing a pencil for him, there is a moment when they actually see and stare at each other, Young George seeming to smile, Jim/James feeling the pencil in his pocket. The last word they share is "*Run*" (96). Note the italics: a link to Jim's writing, the pencil, and what it cost.

Norman is the other new brother relative that Jim comes upon by chance, and who deserves our special attention. He is an even lighter-skinned slave than Jim, passing as white and performing with Daniel Emmett's Virginia Minstrels and blackening up in order to sing. Emmett hears Jim singing and buys him to be the new tenor in the Minstrel group. Performed identity and translation reappears as Norman blackens Jim up for the stage. When Jim asks, "Dis gone hurt?" Norman looks to see if the white man nearby has left and leans in with, "And you can drop the slave talk." Jim is suspicious that an (apparently) white man knows about this secret signifying, until Norman replies, "A slave can spot a slave." They talk a bit more and Jim swiftly concludes that Norman is "bilingual, fluent in a language no white person could master" (165–66). The other Minstrel performers have no idea.

Daniel Emmett arrives and Norman asks him if he needs to "add any white around his mouth"? Emmett takes a look and muses, "Looks pretty authentic" and then urges Norman to blacken the top of Jim's feet and add more white around his eyes. *Authentic*. Nothing could be more authentic than this race performance in preparation for a minstrel race performance. The chapter ends with Jim touching his face and asking Norman, "What about my language?" Norman's advice: "Don't talk at all—that's the best thing. And don't rub the makeup" (167–68). Once again, Jim and another slave are counseling each other on how to speak and perform and in the process finding each other and a shared, familial literacy.

As the Minstrel episode develops, Jim and Norman decide to flee, with Norman posing as Jim's white owner and selling him to raise money to buy their respective families (Jim is then to escape and the process repeated). Tellingly, as well as food and clothes Jim packs Emmett's leather notebook full of songs. As they pack up to move on and perform this slave ownership, Norman spies Emmett's notebook and asks, "Why did you take that?" Jim declares, "I wanted the paper" (192) but "I had not torn out Emmett's songs—somehow they were necessary to my story. But in this notebook I would reconstruct the story I had begun, the story I kept beginning, until I had a story." He adds, "Still, I had my pencil" and touches it for comfort (196).

Much is in view here. Like Jim's life, Jim's story will be *reconstructed* in the midst of America's lyrics of race performance. The lyrics are necessary to Jim's story and indeed no less than four songs found in Emmett's notebook appear as an epigraph to *James*. That in itself tells us that Everett's novel will be the story James will write. As the story moves on, Norman sells Jim to a slaver named Henderson. When Jim escapes after being horribly beaten he does so with a fifteen-year-old girl named Sammy. Together, they flee seeking freedom with Jim hoping that he will come upon Norman in the wilderness. Sammy finds him first, screams, and Jim almost beats Norman before he realizes who he is straddling. The family theme returns as we sense that Jim was not just trying to protect and save Sammy, he was saving a daughter. As he wrote before, he is a man who loves family and is fleeing slavery to save his family, and that now includes Sammy. It also included Young George, and now includes Norman.

Let us turn now to the last appearance of the notebook involving Norman. Norman and Jim are doing their sorry master-slave performance on a riverboat that explodes, throwing both of them into the river. Jim hears two voices calling him, Norman's and then Huck's, "equidistant from me but not near each other" (247). Jim needs to choose in which direction to move, whom to try to save, both of them dear souls calling *his name*. He ends up dragging Huck's live body onto the beach. When looking for Norman's dead body, what Jim finds is Emmett's notebook. Huck asks, "What is that? [...] You can read? [...] write?" (260). This moment explores the power and complex-

ity of familial relations (Norman, as mentioned above, is "family" too), but the theme of literacy and the power of the book are also pulled back into focus.

Norman and Huck have both called out Jim's name. That brings me to the last part of this discussion about Jim/James's literacy: what does he seek in deliberately naming the Black folk he encounters, and renaming himself James? Why James? Why embrace the name, the word, that Jim originates from? Might that be another way that he is literate and "a man who has a family" (93)? Early in the novel, Jim tells about the first time in his life he had paper and ink. When he wrote his first words, wanting to be certain they are his and not from some book, he wrote "*I am called Jim. I have yet to choose a name*" (55). Chapters later, Jim writes, "**MY NAME IS JAMES**. . . *With my pencil, I wrote myself into being*" (93). The words stand out. We remember this as the story goes on.

Towards the end of the novel, Jim and Huck return to where they originated: Hannibal, Missouri. Jim rushes to the slave quarters, only to learn that Sadie and Lizzie, his wife and daughter, have been sold. Distraught, Jim crosses over to an island. He tells us that while there, "I fished, ate, slept, thought and wrote. I wrote to extend my thought, I wrote to catch up with my own story, wondering all the while if that was even possible" (280). Huck comes with news: when Sadie and Lizzie were sold they were taken away to "Graham Farm." Neither Huck nor Jim know where Graham Farm is or what it produces.

Looking for information, Jim slips into Judge Thatcher's house and eases into the library room where he finds a map that might help him find the Graham farm. The Judge comes in and sees him. After yelling, "Who is that there?" "A nigger?" "Boy," Thatcher stops and asks, "Jim?" Jim replies, "James" (288). This marks a shift which characterizes the novel's final episodes: Jim is back where his life began, but now he is declaring himself as James.

Graham Farm is a slave farm. On arrival there, James comes upon a group of four slave men shackled to a post. He deliberately calls them men ("they needed to hear it" [298]) and unlocks the shackles, telling them, "I want to find my wife and daughter." Personal names again are important: one man

immediately asks his wife's name. Soon thereafter, James tells all, "My name is James. I'm going to get my family . . . My name is James" (299). The slave men immediately come forth with their own names: Morris, Harvey, Llewelyn, Buck.

James enters the compound of shacks and sees a woman he "could not look away from." It is Sadie. She asks, "Jim? Is it you?" Lizzie comes out and is silent but soon whispers, "Papa, Papa, Papa" (301–302). Jim is now James but of course he is still Jim and needs to be Jim (and Papa) when the people dear and true to him utter that name. The contrast between Judge Thatcher and other white folk spitting out that name and Sadie—and Huck—calling "Jim" could not be more stark.

Along with two of the Graham farm slaves who led him to his family, James, Sadie and Lizzie escape north, arriving in what they are told is Iowa. They are not greeted warmly. A suspicious sheriff confronts them and asks, "Runaways?" James replies, "We are."

> Sheriff: "Any of you named Nigger Jim?" James points at each dear one and says, "Sadie, Lizzie, Morris, Buck." The sheriff wants to know who Jim is: "I am James." Sheriff: "James what?" "Just James." (303)

As we have noticed ever since the "translation" lesson with Lizzie and other children at the beginning of *James*, slaves have real names and James will insist on having them said and heard. Here, before the sheriff, he declares in a clear, strong, literate voice that he, too, has a real name, James. Just James. With those words—with that name—the novel ends. Naming may indeed be a path to finding one's self and freedom. I hear James calling out our names.

Robert B. Stepto

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Professor Stepto's stimulating remarks on this novel might further be understood in conversation with the themes of identity, literacy, and canonicity raised throughout this special issue. As *James* speaks to and reconsiders an iconic text from the American literary canon, it is also itself already shaping up to gain canonical status through the popular mechanisms discussed by

many of our other contributors: as well as the prizes mentioned above, film rights have already been acquired (with Steven Spielberg as Executive Producer and Taika Waititi tipped as director), and *James* has featured prominently in numerous "best books of the year"-style roundups across newspapers and literary magazines. Conversations sparked by Percival Everett are continuing to gain visibility and relevance.

By responding to *Huckleberry Finn*, up until fairly recently an unquestioned cornerstone of the American curriculum, *James* is also entering into a conversation around the reappraisal of "classic" texts which no longer align with contemporary values. Twain's work and its place on the curriculum has been a locus of conflict in the culture wars: how might a classroom of 10th graders engage fruitfully with a text which liberally employs racial slurs, stereotyping, and an erasure of unpalatable antebellum realities? Schools which have chosen to remove the book from their curricula have served as grist to the anti-woke mill, whilst in other quarters helping to elicit conversation about how best to move forward (see, for example, Davis below).

With *James* receiving the attention it has in 2024, it is easy to imagine it featuring in the classroom going forward: perhaps even in dialogue with *Huckleberry Finn*. Even standing alone, it would serve as a powerful opener to vital discussions around literacy, identity, and who controls the narratives surrounding each. What can James's quest to write down his own story tell us about the historical figures who did just that (Frederick Douglass would be a natural inclusion here)? If the text is read aloud in class, how best to handle the passages in "slave speak," or indeed Everett's occasional use of the N-word? Everett has spoken in interviews about the vital role of context in its use: "the strange thing of course is that as a black man, I can say the word." It is also a signifier of how to read the white characters who use it: "I really do appreciate a sign at the edge of a minefield that says 'mines'" (Everett, "Why I Rewrote *Huckleberry Finn*").

As for Everett's own statements on book banning in the American education system, he is unafraid to engage provocatively with the debate, arguing that those who ban books are "small and frightened people" (Everett, "Those Who Ban Books") and mischievously expressing a desire that his new book appear

on a few ban lists: “only because I like irritating those people who do not think and read. … States in the US can ban books if they like, but they cannot stop art” (Everett, “Why I Rewrote *Huckleberry Finn*”).

Claire Barnes

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Notes

1. The essay has been copywritten and copyedited by Caterina Domeneghini and Claire Barnes with permission from the author.

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