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Rewriting Twain: Reading Necropolitics and Resistance in Percival Everett's *James*

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Abstract

Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* has generated considerable debate about its portrayal of racism. While some critics emphasize the friendship between Huck and Jim and highlight the novel's anti-racist potential, others argue that it is complicit in reinforcing the very racial prejudices it appears to critique. Percival Everett's 2024 novel *James* offers a radical shift in perspective by retelling *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* through the eyes of Jim, the enslaved Black man. This paper examines the novel through Achille Mbembe's necropolitical framework, exploring how the enslaved in the Antebellum South were rendered socially dead, marked by disposability and pervasive violence. Drawing on Lauren Heintz's concept of fugitive performance, it further explores how the enslaved navigated and resisted the very structures that cast them beyond the realm of humanity.

Keywords: Achille Mbembe, Necropolitics, Slavery, Social Death, Fugitive Performance, Resistance.

Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn,* published in 1885, has long been the subject of critical debate, inviting varied interpretations about the novel's stance on racism. Twain grew up in Missouri, where slavery was still legal during his childhood. These early experiences with a slaveholding society shaped the way he portrayed race and slavery in his writing. He began writing *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* after the Civil War, during the Reconstruction Era, when slavery had been officially abolished. However, Black communities continued to face harsh discrimination. Jim Crow laws, a series of statutes that enforced racial segregation in the Southern United States from the end of Reconstruction in 1877 until the civil rights movement, upheld white supremacy and systematically marginalized Black citizens. As Neil Schmitz observes,

> Twain had rendered Jim's liberation in Huckleberry Finn at that precise moment in American history when barely realized liberties were being wrenched one by one from the grasp of the emancipated black man in the South. Between 1876 and 1883, the period during which he worked on the novel, the Reconstruction was nullified, the ambitious programs of the Radical Republicans abandoned and the fate of the Negro restored to the keep of his former master, a fate manifest in the annual toll of lynching. (60)

Against this historical backdrop, this paper seeks to examine how Percival Everett's *James* intervenes in and challenges Twain's narrative by reclaiming the voice of Jim, the fugitive slave. Drawing on Achille Mbembe's concept of necropolitics, a framework that exposes how power assigns differential value to human life, systematically subjecting certain populations to violence, neglect or abandonment (Mbembe 71), the paper explores the politics of death that defined the lives of the enslaved in the Antebellum South.

The entrenched social inequalities of the era have prompted scholars to examine how Twain, in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, engages with the realities of race in America. Structured as a picaresque novel, the book revolves around Huck, the son of an abusive alcoholic who has been taken in by Widow Douglas, and Jim, a runaway slave. Their companionship and evolving relationship form the emotional core of the narrative. Certain scholars have emphasized the friendship between Huck and Jim, suggesting the novel's antiracist potential (Chaleila 31). Others, however, contend that the portrayal of Jim reinforces demeaning racial stereotypes and reflects the prevailing racist attitudes of the time (Schmitz 66). Huck's moments of affection for Jim are juxtaposed with his conflicting thoughts about whether he should turn Jim in. Huck's ambivalence in his relationship with Jim is reflective of the racist values of the white society in which he has been raised. As Forrest G Robinson writes,

> Huck's impulse to play mean tricks on Jim, and his decision to turn him over to the authorities, arise out of an ambivalence about Jim, and about Black people generally, that is in turn rooted in the racist ideology of white society. Huck is free enough of the dominant culture to respond to Jim as a human being; but he is also prone to sudden reversals of feeling that betray his deep immersion in the mentality of the white majority. (369)

This ambiguity in Twain's text provides the ground for Percival Everett's intervention. Everett, one of the most prolific American writers, resists easy categorisation. He identifies himself as an American writer who happens to be Black. Everett's uneasiness with the conventional label of African American writer signals his refusal to conform to the pressures and baggage that often accompany the term. As critics note, "Everett castigates the commercial manipulations of the publishing industry and the imperceptive vision of the average reader that often forces African American writers to write about subject matter and render character types that have been deemed 'blacker' than others" (Mitchell and Vander). Everett's creative output raises important questions about race, language and meaning, and challenges conventional notions of identity, authenticity and African American literary tradition.

His novel *James*, shortlisted for the Booker Prize in 2024, is a reimagining of Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* through the eyes of Jim, the enslaved Black man. By telling the story of Jim, a story Twain was not equipped to write, Everett exposes the politics of death that characterised the Antebellum South. By the end of the seventeenth century, racial slavery had become both socially accepted and legally sanctioned in the American colonies, with the South evolving into a stronghold of race-based slavery.

Achille Mbembe, in *Necropolitics* posits that "the ultimate expression of sovereignty resides, to a large degree, in the power and the capacity to dictate who may live and who must die...To exercise sovereignty is to exercise control over mortality and to define life as

the deployment and manifestation of power" (66). Sovereignty, then, is about the violent assertion of power through the exposure of subjects to death, a form of power that operates not by preserving life, but by suspending it, rendering individuals disposable and subject to a logic in which death becomes the ultimate instrument of political expression. Abolitionist William Goodell, observes the paradox which lay at the heart of the institution of slavery in the Antebellum South:

> [T]he slave, who is but 'a chattel' on all other occasions, with not one solitary attribute of personality accorded to him, becomes 'a person' whenever he is to be punished! He is the only being in the universe to whom is denied all self-direction and free agency, but who is, nevertheless, held responsible for his conduct, and amenable
> to law... He is under the control of law, though unprotected by law. (qtd. in Higginbotham and Jacobs 971)

Jim, the protagonist of Everett's *James*, navigates such a realm of state-sanctioned violence, living constantly under the threat and shadow of death. Enduring a life framed by fear and death, Jim observes, "I lived with it daily, the threat, the promise of it. Seeing one lynching was to see ten. Seeing ten was to see a hundred, with that signature posture of death, the angle of the head, the crossing of the feet" (Everett 101). Old Luke, another enslaved man who works for Miss Watson, recounts the lynching of a Black man chained to an oak tree and burned alive, where the spectators were warned that anyone who dared relieve him from his pain would be shot. Old Luke explains the judge's verdict: "Colored people die every day; you know that. The worst part was that the judge told the grand jury that it was an act of a multitude, and so they couldn't recommend any indictments. So, if enough people do it, it's not a crime" (Everett 27). The demonstrative exercise of power through force was crucial in reminding the enslaved of their position within the social order and in shaping their submission.

Mbembe characterises slave life as a form of death-in-life. Orlando Patterson also discusses the status of the slave as a socially dead person and enumerates the different phases of this social death. The first phase involves a process of desocialisation wherein the slave is violently uprooted from his milieu (Patterson 38). As Patterson notes, "Slaves differed from other human beings in that they were not allowed freely to integrate the experience of their ancestors into their lives, to inform their understanding of social reality with the inherited meanings of their natural forebears, or to anchor the living present in any conscious community of memory" (5). In *James*, Jim exemplifies this process. He laments:

> MY NAME IS JAMES. I wish I could tell my story with a sense of history as much as industry. I was sold when I was born and then sold again. My mother's mother was from someplace on the continent of Africa… I had been told or perhaps simply assumed. I cannot claim any knowledge of that world or those people, whether my people were kings or beggars. I admire those who, at five years of age, like Venture Smith, can remember the clans of their ancestors, their names and the movements of their families through the wrinkles, trenches and chasms of the slave trade. (Everett 93)

The second phase of social death involves the introduction of the slave into the master's community as a non-being (Patterson 38). This is an ontological erasure, where the

slave is not seen as a full person or a complete human subject. For example, in the novel, when the Duke beats Jim, he justifies the action by telling King that slaves are not proper people and do not experience pain as white people do (Everett 131). This belief in the higher endurance of pain by Black people reflects the systemic dehumanisation of slaves. Even Huckleberry Finn, who is generally sympathetic to Jim, appears to be morally ambivalent about Jim's personhood. In a conversation between Huck and Jim, Huck reveals his conflicted conscience when he questions whether helping Jim escape makes him a thief. His question, "If'n I took a mule from the side of the road and I knew who it belonged to wouldn't that be stealing?" (Everett 78), reveals his uncertainty about Jim's status not just legally but morally as a human being. By comparing Jim to a mule, Huck indirectly equates him with property, reflecting the deep-rooted ideology that denies full personhood to the enslaved. The anguish experienced by the slave over the commodification of his body is presented by Everett when Daniel Decatur Emmett purchases Jim for his troupe. As Jim says, "I had stood and listened to the transaction and never once was I asked for either opinion or desire. I was the horse that I was, just animal, just property, nothing but a thing, but apparently, I was a horse, a thing that could sing" (Everett 158). As Mbembe argues, even though the labour of the slave had a price, he was perpetually kept in a "state of injury, in a phantom-like world of horrors and intense profanity and cruelty" (21). Lauren Heintz observes that in the case of fugitive slaves, fugitivity was seen not only as an act of defiance but as an act of theft. Since the slave was considered property, fugitivity was viewed as the slave stealing himself away. Loss of labour and productivity occurred to the master as a result of this. The fusion of the two meanings embedded in the French word voler, "to steal" and "to fly", encapsulates the legal and cultural logic that underpinned the treatment of fugitive slaves. As Heintz writes:

> To be fugitive is to be in violation of a law that denies human agency even as it reprimands a willful act; to be fugitive is to steal the self that has already been stolen; to be fugitive is to be in debt to something that was never agreed on; to be fugitive is to linger on the temporal edge of a promise that is also always a threat; To be fugitive is to be the unpredictable within the predictable; to be fugitive is a paradox. (685)

Patterson underscores the importance of law, ideology and custom in these phases of social death (38). Everett touches upon this ideological underpinning, which made the slave's condition of social death seem normative. Jim speaks about his uneasy relationship with the Bible and religious apparatuses, remarking, "And so after these books, the Bible itself was the least interesting of all. I could not enter it once and then understood that I recognized it as a tool of my enemy" (Everett 90). To understand the context of Jim's disillusionment, it is important to consider the religious views that prevailed in the Antebellum South. Paul Finkelman, in *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Religion and Politics in the U.S.*, elaborates on the perspectives upheld by Southern theologians. They frequently resorted to the Bible, offering selective interpretations of Scripture to defend slavery as a divinely sanctioned social institution. One of the most quoted biblical justifications was the story of Noah, who cursed his grandson Canaan to perpetual servitude after Canaan's father, Ham, exposed Noah's nakedness. Southern theologians claimed that Africans were the descendants of Canaan and were thus destined for enslavement, presenting racial slavery as a fulfilment of divine prophecy (Finkelman 191). As Jim reflects:" I am called Jim. I have yet to choose a name. In the religious preachings of my white captors I am

a victim of the Curse of Ham. The white so-called masters cannot embrace their cruelty and greed, but must look to that lying Dominican friar for religious justification" (Everett 55).

By framing slavery as divinely ordained, the enslaved were positioned outside the bounds of humanity, stripped of rights and protections. This exclusion parallels the notion of homo sacer, a figure existing in a liminal legal and political state. The term homo sacer, derived from ancient Roman law, describes a paradoxical legal condition in which a person may be killed without the act being considered homicide, yet cannot be ritually sacrificed. Such a figure is excluded from both religious and political life and lives under a continuous, unconditioned threat of death (Agamben 183). In *James*, Jim exists within the reach of the law yet outside its protection. As a socially dead being, he is integrated into society only as a commodity, valued solely for the profit his body can generate. His life is never recognized as fully human but rather as capital to be exchanged and exploited. This is evident, for instance, when Miss Watson plans to sell him, when the Duke and the King repeatedly sell him for their own gain, and when Daniel Decatur Emmett forces him to perform in his minstrel troupe. Each of these moments illustrates how Jim's existence is reduced to a transactional object circulating within economic and social structures. As Ziarek argues,

> What both slavery and homo sacer have in common is the production of bare life stripped of its historically specific form of life, and yet what distinguishes them is the contrast between the sovereign ban and the marginal inclusion of enslaved life. If the sovereign decision on the state of exception captures bare life in order to exclude it, the biopolitics of slavery is confronted with the profitable inclusion of socially dead beings...Since, unlike homo sacer, the socially dead being has to be included within and made profitable, this second stage of the biopolitics of slavery poses the dilemma of "liminal incorporation". (96)

In order to survive within these oppressive structures, slaves often resorted to certain performances. Lauren Heintz introduces the notion of fugitive performance, wherein she explores how the slave drew from the very aspects of his bare life to create a "performative, gestural, and stylized manner of living" (679). The enslaved did not outrightly reject the structures that oppressed them; instead, they reworked and negotiated these very systems to assert their humanity. Such performances functioned not only as strategies of survival but also as subtle acts of resistance against a system that denied them agency and recognition. Heintz draws from Achille Mbembe, who observes that slaves maintained "alternative perspectives toward time, work, and self... the slave nevertheless is able to draw almost any object, instrument, language, or gesture into a performance and then stylize it" (22). One instance of masked resistance is the use of language. Slaves were expected to speak in a certain way or in a particular dialect. Even when they could speak in a more sophisticated manner, they often concealed this ability from their white masters for the sake of safety. Jim recounts an instance in which Judge Thatcher whipped him for not using the expected slave dialect. As he recalls: "I was thirteen and I made the misstep of speaking to a young woman who said 'hello' to me. What I said exactly was 'Hello.' Judge Thatcher has the reputation of being one of the good masters, but the sting of the leather told me what that meant" (Everett 197). Jim educates Black children about the politics of slave language, training them to speak in a less sophisticated manner before the slave owners. He reminds the children that the whites expect them to sound a certain way and that failing to reinforce white superiority can be perilous. As Jim advises: "Mumble sometimes so they can have the satisfaction of

telling you not to mumble. They enjoy the correction and thinking you're stupid" (Everett 23). Even in the presence of Huck, Jim is cautious and strictly adheres to slave diction, whereas he speaks in a more refined and sophisticated language in the company of other slaves. This reflects what Frantz Fanon observes:

> The Black man has two dimensions: one with his fellows, the other with the white man. A Negro behaves differently with a white man than with another Negro. That this self-division is a direct result of colonialist subjugation is beyond question. No one would dream of doubting that its major artery is fed from the heart of those various theories that have tried to prove that the Negro is a stage in the slow evolution of monkey into man. (17)

Another instance of fugitive performance can be seen when Jim devises a plan involving Norman, another enslaved man. He suggests that Norman pretend to be a white enslaver and repeatedly sell Jim in order to raise enough money to buy the freedom of their families. Although Norman is a Black man, his complexion is light enough for him to pass as white. In this scenario, Jim and Norman participate in the system of the slave trade, the very structure that oppresses them, as a means of pursuing liberation. As Ann Stoler states, they "take the form but not the content and valence of that which they are opposed, as they are usurped from within" (qtd. in Heintz 683).

The life of Jim in the Antebellum South serves as an illustration of Achille Mbembe's formulation of necropolitics, where sovereign power asserts itself through the capacity to demarcate populations as either destined for life or condemned to death. He is biologically alive yet symbolically dead in the eyes of both the law and white society. Jim inhabits a liminal space where the boundaries between humanity and disposability are blurred. For the fugitive slave, existence became a constant negotiation with death. Life was not merely lived but endured under the threat of capture, punishment or annihilation. Yet, *James* does not reduce its characters to passive victims. Rather, it shows how even within necropolitical structures, the enslaved carve out spaces of resistance and agency. Building on Lauren Heintz's conceptualization of fugitive performance, Jim's deliberate code-switching and his concealment of literacy can be seen as tools of resistance. These fugitive performances, while rooted in the painful necessity of deception, are also acts of agency within a system designed to obliterate the self. By reimagining *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* with Jim at its centre, Everett foregrounds a voice long marginalised in the literary canon. As critics note, "Death stalks the Mississippi, and its waters are the source of food, tragedy, and freedom, in both reality and fantasy. James insists upon its position as both interlocutor and subject, and the result is a challenge to both readers and the canon" (Crispin).

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