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'Tell your story': resignification and minstrel legacy in Percival Everett's *James*

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ABSTRACT

The paper considers Percival Everett's novel *James* (2024) and its peculiar technique as an example of resignification and a contemporary reworking of Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and American minstrel shows. The theoretical framework is based on Judith Butler's idea of resignification and Eric Lott's considerations of the notion of minstrelsy, highlighting the connections between the two. As the key aspect of both Everett's novel and a minstrel show is performativity/performance, this notion is discussed in detail with a special emphasis on its use in the novel. We argue that Everett's innovative and subversive use of language, and his decision to tell the story of the birth of a hero from the point of view of Jim/James, the (in)famous stereotypical slave character of Twain's narrative, represents an instance of anti-minstrel fiction and thus sets new standards in contemporary (African) American literature. We argue that Jim's/James' journey from a runaway slave and a comic relief in Twain's classic to a hero of his own narrative can be interpreted as an example of resignification, i.e., 'enacted critique', a deliberate, deviant, mis-performance (Loxley, 2006, 127) which paves the way for new roles and meanings in contemporary (African) American literature.

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Introduction

Percival Everett's latest novel *James*, published in 2024, has won a National Book Award for Fiction and was shortlisted for the Booker Prize in literature. Although an important member of the contemporary African American literary scene for decades, Everett[1] has recently been in the public eye as his 2001-Pulitzer-nominated novel *Erasure* was adapted into the Oscar-nominated movie *American Fiction* in 2023. *James* was advertised and is often described as a creative retelling of Mark Twain's classic *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884) from the perspective of Jim; the writer himself gives credit to Twain in the Acknowledgment section ('Finally, a nod to Mark Twain. His humor and humanity affected me long before I became a writer' [Everett, 2024]). And, indeed, the novel is written in the first person and Jim/James is the narrator and the protagonist; there are numerous similarities between Twain's classic and Everett's contemporary work in terms of characters, plot points, and the picaresque mode. However, we would like to correct this qualification and argue that *James* represents a contemporary classic in itself and by its own merit as the writer has shaped a narrative that goes well beyond the scope of the themes approached in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. First of all, the major innovation is the characterization of Jim/James and the use of the vernacular – from the earliest pages, we learn that Jim/James is literate, well-read, extremely smart and cunning and that he and the other slaves merely use a grotesque version of the black vernacular in front of white people in order to appear uneducated, simple and naïve. Secondly, the plot of the novel abandons the relatively narrow scope of themes Twain discussed and revolves almost exclusively around Jim's/James' and the other African American characters' experiences of slavery and its multiple perilous aspects. In other words, the novel is set in the antebellum South and

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deals with the African American experience rather than focusing on the white Southern society. Thirdly, Everett's novel incorporates various strands of African American cultural and social history, including the abuse of black cultural heritage in minstrel shows, stereotyping as a form of cultural racism and the issue of double[2] African American identity and consciousness. Finally, we argue that the novel succeeds in reappropriating the language and, especially, the black vernacular with the purpose of expressing a creative, yet authentic vision of the African American contribution to the contemporary American literary canon.

In *James*, we follow Jim, the slave, on his journey to freedom: from his activism in the slave community – educating young African Americans in the practice of signifying, i.e. masking their true meaning in order to survive in the slave-owning and slave-condoning America, running away, spending time among the white minstrel troupe, becoming enslaved again, obtaining a pencil and writing his story, i.e., becoming James, a free man, in the process, and, finally, confronting and killing (some of) his oppressors before setting out to move westwards with his family, towards freedom. The key innovation Everett introduced is a new style, a mixture of realism and fantasy epitomized in the character of James, a true hero-protagonist who is not only able to appreciate the fine nuances of the literary works he is well-versed in, but also to conduct and win imaginary arguments with famous philosophers like John Locke and Voltaire. Furthermore, he is proactive, strong, skillful and ultimately, capable of physically defeating his enemies and protecting his family so that he finally wins his well-deserved happy ending.

Another original and innovative literary contribution that Everett makes is dovetailing the African American cultural legacy with the criticism of racism and slavery by producing a novel contemporary form of literature that can be termed anti-minstrel fiction. Mixing fantasy and reality as an artistic way of dealing with black history has already been identified as a narrative strategy of 'storying' or 'counter-counterstorying', a 'simultaneously subversive and creative concept' present in African American literature and culture (Maus, 2019, 162; see also Kocić Stanković, 2024). We argue that the foundation for this innovation in form is Everett's application and further development of the concept of performativity and its implications, i.e., resignification. We will first consider the very notion of minstrelsy and its rootedness in the cultural foundation of racism and white supremacy as well as in the socio-economic relations of the antebellum South (see e.g., Tasić & Stamenković, 2025), and then, Butler's notion of resignification and how it was appropriated in Everett's novel.

Blackface minstrelsy

Minstrelsy, a well-known, iconic and notorious American tradition of blackface intended to ridicule African Americans for the purpose of white entertainment peaked in the 19th century in the U.S. Minstrel shows had various roles and functions and some of them were the preservation of the socio-economic status quo based on racism and the exploitation of black labor and culture. Minstrel shows were variety shows with comical skits, dancing numbers, burlesque and parody performances based on stereotypical representations and stock characters of African Americans who were portrayed as stupid/naïve/lazy/childlike/dishonest/sneaky, etc. An important characteristic of minstrel shows was their claim of authenticity and the audiences' perception of blackface characters as truthful and representative of reality. An important point, however, is that minstrel shows were not performances based on real-life experiences or valid research, nor were they authentic representations of African American cultural practices (Bean, 2001, 172). It was always their perception and dissemination as truthful and authentic, a perception rooted in white supremacist ideology, that produced the most damaging and long-lasting effects on American culture. The tension between the semblance of realism of minstrel performances, i.e., their *intended* realistic representations of African American life, and their absolute ethnographic inaccuracy and a lack of any actual grounding in the real lives of African Americans has been highlighted repeatedly in literature dealing with this subject (e.g., Lott, 2013; Tucker, 2007). This is also one of the key plot points in *James*: Jim's performance as an illiterate slave is taken for granted by almost all the white characters; in other words, the underlying racism of minstrelsy prevents the white characters in the novel from even fathoming the possibility of Jim/James only pretending to be inferior.

In his seminal discussion of minstrelsy, Eric Lott (2013, 42–43) identifies commodification of black performance and black culture, underscored by the ideology and economy of slavery as the core

characteristics of minstrelsy. Minstrel shows were at the same time 'a ground of American racial negotiation and contradiction', and the controlling mechanisms which limited the cultural spaces African Americans could take up by enabling 'white America' to absorb and appropriate black culture while at the same time regulating and sanctioning it (Lott, 2013, 30, 41). By reworking the classic character of Jim based on a minstrel stereotype and turning him into a(n) (almost-super)hero, Everett quite literally turns his novel into a new ground of re-negotiation which can be considered a direct link between his work and the legacy of minstrelsy. As many critics acknowledge, 19th-century American classics such as *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* or *Uncle Tom's Cabin* owe a lot to the minstrel legacy and blackface performance, while many important American 19th century authors and critics, e.g., Mark Twain, Margaret Fuller, Walt Whitman, found minstrel representations amusing and even accurate (Lott, 2013, 5, 20).

At first, the performers were white people wearing blackface, but with the inclusion of African American actors and actresses, the long-lasting legacy of 'creativity' and 'resilient stereotypes' in American culture was established (Bean, 2001, 176). In other words, minstrel shows perpetuated stereotypical representations of African Americans but also, somewhat ironically, provided opportunities for African American performers to earn reputation and some money. For example, James Weldon Johnson, a renowned African American artist and Civil Rights activist (the author of 'Lift Every Voice and Sing' and *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*), wrote that minstrelsy was both 'a caricature of Negro life, and it fixed a stage tradition which has not yet been entirely broken… Nevertheless, these companies did provide stage training and theatrical experience for a large number of colored men. They provided an essential training and theatrical experience, which, at the time, could not have been acquired from any other source' (qtd. in Bean, 2001, 177). Still, it cannot be denied that minstrel shows were a commodification of black performance and culture intended for display in front of white audiences (in the North as well as in the South) albeit allowing black performers to 'play for some control' (Lott, 2013, 41).

What is more, the performative quality of minstrel shows helped solidify the idea of 'race as a performance' (Schueller, 1999, 233) in (antebellum) America. This argument is in line with Stuart Hall's (2017, 32) considerations of race as 'a discursive construct, a sliding signifier'. Everett develops this idea of fluid and changeable markers of race *ad absurdum* so that, at one point, his protagonist has to wear blackface over white makeup when performing on stage to hide the fact that he is an African American among a group of white minstrels:

> "Help me understand," I said to Norman. "I'm to look authentically black, but I need the makeup." "Not exactly. You're black, but they won't let you into the auditorium if they know that, so you have to be white under the makeup so that you can look black to the audience" (Everett, 2024).

The absurdity and the double irony of this situation reflect the absurdity of the notion of authenticity of black performance in minstrels when pitted against the racist ideology underlying this cultural practice. In this scene, the only actual African American among the performers needs to have his authenticity sanctioned by white makeup while the entire performance is supposed to emulate the authentic African American entertainment intended for white audiences. Everett's intentional use of irony has a twofold purpose in the novel: to propel the plot forward and to deconstruct and reinvent the performative aspect of minstrelsy, as we will demonstrate further.

Performativity/performance

The crucial point of convergence between the idea of race as performance suggested by minstrel shows and Everett's *James* is fluidity and the instability of performativity or performance, i.e., the implication that 'blackness is performative rather than an essence' (Schueller, 1999, 234). It would then, follow, that minstrel shows, although meant to uphold the racist ideas of 'natural' differences between races and the implied inferiority of the 'black race', at the same time contradicted these notions by reducing race to a mere performance. This is the idea that Everett applies in his narrative by showing that Jim/James and other slaves merely perform the vernacular to deliberately deceive their masters and *appear* inferior. In one of the crucial scenes in the novel, Jim/James is giving a lesson to a group of young African Americans, including his children, in how to code-switch between the regular English and the vernacular:

> "Papa, why do we have to learn this?"
> "White folks expect us to sound a certain way and it can only help if we don't disappoint them," I said. "The only ones who suffer when they are made to feel inferior is us. Perhaps I should say 'when they don't feel superior'. So, let's pause to review some of the basics."
> "Don't make eye contact," a boy said.
> "Right, Virgil."
> "Never speak first," a girl said.
> "That's correct, February," I said.
> Lizzie looked at the other children and then back to me. "Never address any subject directly when talking to another slave," she said.
> "What do we call that?" I asked.
> Together they said, "Signifying" (Everett, 2024).

Signifying was the African American collective strategy of telling the partial truth or not fully disclosing the information asked, one of the consequences of slavery since speaking out of turn as a slave could lead to one's death. Therefore, slaves, and even their descendants, adopted silence and telling partial truths as protective strategies: 'Thus direct denial, lying and the revelation of personal affairs are avoided' (Angelou, 1997, 194). This stylistic approach called 'masking', also defined by Zora Neale Hurston in her autobiography, was first formally introduced and analyzed by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. as a literary strategy of 'signifyin(g)' (Werner & Shannon, 2011, 244). It is obvious to the careful reader that in the previously quoted passage 'uneducated' slaves actually educate themselves in order to *perform* inferiority; i.e., they learn 'the correct incorrect grammar' (Everett, 2024). By adding a dimension of intentionality to this performance, Everett both exposes racist beliefs that fueled minstrelsy and the rest of the cultural propaganda that justified discrimination against African Americans *and* provides his characters with agency, i.e., the active choosing of their roles.

This argument can be connected to Judith Butler's idea of performativity (of gender, but also applied in critical race studies; see, for example, Andreassen et al., 2023; Tate, 2015) and the importance of repetition and potential resignification. In her discussion of Foucault's conceptualization of power, Butler points out the possibility of repetition, the process of constant re-constitution of the subject which actually fuels its power as a 'subject' but also implies its incompleteness:

> What is brought into being through the performative effect of the interpellating demand is much more than a "subject," for the "subject" created is not for that reason fixed in place: it becomes the occasion for a further making. Indeed, I would add, a subject only remains a subject through a reiteration or rearticulation of itself as a subject, and this dependency of the subject on repetition for coherence may constitute that subject's incoherence, its incomplete character. This repetition or, better, iterability thus becomes the non-place of subversion, the possibility of a re-embodying of the subjectivating norm that can redirect its normativity (Butler, 1997, 99).

This idea is the essence of Butler's theory of performativity – the belief that human subjectivity/selfhood is the result of the imposed constant repetition of a certain role (Schaub, 2019, 2). In other words, identity is only apparently fixed and 'this fiction is produced by compulsive (but alterable, and potentially subversive) repetition' (Hey, 2006, 440). This potential for subversion has often been highlighted in various discussions of performativity and this is what Everett applies in his characterization of Jim/James. What Butler defines as 'resignification' is 'enacted critique', a deliberate, deviant, mis-performance (Loxley, 2006, 127). The process of constant repetition of the script may sometimes result in inadvertent or even deliberate 'mistakes' with the purpose of resignification, i.e., strategic repetition which can 'displace dominant scripts', and slowly, across time, 'through repetition and citation', establish new roles, scripts and meanings (Schaub, 2019, 10). Although, according to Butler, resignification and deconstruction of deeply inscribed roles is not easily achieved through agential performance, we argue that this is exactly what *James* attempts to do and what he succeeds in doing through its plot, characterization and use of language.

Another distinction that we need to clarify in this discussion is the one between Butler's understanding of performativity and performance. As we have seen previously, while 'performance presupposes a preexisting subject, performativity contests the very notion of the subject' (Salih, 2007, 56). Both of these aspects are equally important for minstrel shows and Everett's novel as, on the one hand, they promote agency and active choosing, and *becoming* another person. This is what Jim/James ultimately does as

the protagonist of the novel: he chooses his identity deliberately. On the other hand, the aspect of performativity implies fluidity and uncertainty, as well as the potential disruptions of the normative iteration, and this is what Jim/James and other slaves in the novel utilize when they code-switch between the black vernacular and the regular American English in order to play their masters and deliberately hide their true identity. It is this understanding of performativity, not as a 'singular, intentional, and deliberate act', but rather as 'power relations emerging from discourse' (de Souza, 2022, 643) that Everett applies in his narrative. In other words, through the acts of defiance which Everett's characters and James in particular, exhibit, the entire ideology of slavery and the accompanying practices of violence, propaganda, social and psychological conditioning, i.e., power relations, are exposed and deconstructed.

Performativity and language in *James*

Two important themes of the novel are announced right from the start: firstly, the narrative begins with minstrel songs, four authentic classics by a famous troupe called the Virginia Minstrels, announcing the motifs of minstrelsy and authenticity. Secondly, the moment Jim's/James' narrative starts, we learn that, unlike in Twain's 1884-classic, Jim is *aware* that he is a toy for Huck and Tom and that he uses his 'performance for the boys' as a frame for his story (Everett, 2024). In other words, the theme of intentional performance is introduced, which immediately sets this novel apart from Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884).

In order to start a discussion on *James*, it is first necessary to briefly go back to Twain's *Huckleberry*. Twain's major innovation was using the vernacular, different dialects spoken by the characters of different origins, social status, and levels of education. In this way, he managed to achieve a merging of form and function, as Huck's language became more than just a medium of expression but rather a direct correlative of his character, i.e., 'Huck's language *is* Huck' (Brooks et al., 1973, 1277). Percival Everett managed to reappropriate the use of language and dialect in his novel but to a completely different purpose. If Huck's language in Twain's novel is Huck, Everett's major 'twist' is that Jim's spoken language, at least in front of white people, in *James* is *not* Jim. If we start from Tate's (2017, 127) argument that 'Identity clichés show interactants' narration of themselves as positioned by discourses and their repositioning of themselves in relation to these discourses', we can say that the way the slaves in the novel speak when not around white people is not only a deconstruction of the notion of realism in literature but also the resignification of an entire cultural context of slavery and its cultural perception. Namely, by deliberately positioning his slave characters as intellectually (and, often, morally) superior to their white masters, Everett builds a new discourse and presents a new literary way of dealing with the historical legacy of oppression. Contemporary (African) American literature often revisits the geographical and historical context of slavery: from neo-slave narratives (e.g., Octavia Butler's *Kindred*, 1979), to alternate histories (e.g., Terry Bison's *Fire on the Mountain*, 1988) or historical fiction (e.g., Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad*, 2016). *James* shares a concern for the contemporary perception of the past with all these reimaginings of the (African) American past; however, Everett's innovation lies in the fact that he managed to create an ironic distance from that past by intentionally mocking the white perception of African American slaves as inferior. This repurposing of the minstrel legacy to mock those who intended minstrelsy to be seen as mockery[3] is also a contribution to the contemporary representations of the American past with a definitive critical note ingrained in the narrative. This criticism is particularly important if we take into consideration that (popular) culture 'can reveal a lot about how the general public thinks about black America and may conceptualize the black experience' (Dagbovie, 2018, 11).

It is important to highlight one more time that performativity enables 'the subversion of social norms through creative acts of citation and reiteration' (Friedman, 2013, 598), which is exactly what Everett's Jim/James does. A very powerful scene in which the minstrelsy legacy is connected with the process of resignification happens when Jim/James and Norman, two black men (one of them passing as white), discuss white people performing minstrel shows:

> "They even do the cakewalk."
> "But that's how we make fun of them," I said.

> "Yes, but they don't get that—it's lost on them. It's never occurred to them that we might find them mockable."
> "Double irony," I said. "That is amusing. Can one irony negate another, one cancel out the other?" (Everett, 2024)

The cakewalk, a ceremonial comical dance, originally performed by black slaves and then incorporated into minstrel shows was meant to (slightly) mock white masters and their pompous manner of walking. Norman and James discuss this and comment on the double irony: a show in which white people mock African Americans uses the dance that African Americans use to mock their masters. The double irony brings the entire minstrel concept into question, i.e., subverts social norms in a creative act of reiteration, producing an instance of anti-minstrel fiction.

In another scene, Jim/James states: 'I recognized [the Bible] as a tool of my enemy. I chose the word *enemy*, and still do, as *oppressor* necessarily supposes a victim' (Everett, 2024). His language here becomes a powerful weapon of agency, the operative word being 'choice': James simultaneously rejects the role and identity of a victim and correctly names the racist ideology underpinning slavery. By focusing on his protagonist and his intentionality, as well as the eloquence behind his choice of words, Everett also revolutionizes language in his work, just like Twain did in 1884. However, since Everett's focus is on the African American identity and legacy, it is important for his character to articulate the roles of all aspects of white antebellum society that support slavery. Church and religion were instrumental in the dissemination of white supremacy so Everett's character spells it out for the readers *and* for himself in an act of empowerment and self-definition. What is more, Everett uses the repetitive aspect of performativity, as will be explained and discussed further, with a potential for resignification and creates a slave character who is not stereotypical (to say the least) and who has not internalized slavery and slave behavior but rather the potential and wish for resistance. The anti-minstrel position of the whole narrative is strengthened by this insistence on Jim's/James' agency.

The importance of intentionality of active choice illustrated by the deliberate performance of the black vernacular can be seen in the following statement: 'It could have been my turn to experience a bit of guilt, having toyed with the boy's feelings, and he being too young to actually understand the problem with his behavior, but I chose not to. When you are a slave, you claim choice where you can' (Everett, 2024). In Twain's novel, after the famous raft scene when Huckleberry makes fun of Jim, hurts his feelings, and later apologizes, the purpose is to follow Huck's maturing and character development. In *James*, Everett remakes the scene to highlight James' development and transfers the power of claiming a choice to his protagonist. James shows prudence and cunning; he even manipulates the boy, all of this by choice and with the purpose of asserting his own individuality. Quite deliberately, he performs being offended and refuses to feel humbled by the experience. This is another masterful use of the notion of performativity: it is the language, or rather the intentionality in the use of language, in its performance, and the deliberate efforts to interrupt the iteration of normative subjectivities and hierarchies that shapes Jim/James as a hero. This literary strategy proves to be particularly effective in the context of contemporary literary treatments of racism and slavery.

When it comes to the link between spoken language and performativity, it is useful to take into account this argument from Derrida (2002, 74):

> Performativity will never be reduced to technical performance. Pure performativity implies the presence of a living being, and of a living being speaking one time only, in its own name, in the first person. And speaking in a manner that is at once spontaneous, intentional, free, and irreplaceable.

This, in turn, can be connected with the characterization process of Jim/James: he becomes that living being speaking (and writing) in his own name in an intentional manner. It is Jim's/James' intentionality (e.g., the previously mentioned scene in which he teaches young slaves to speak in code in front of white people), the fact that he actively chooses which language to use depending on the situation, that makes the foundation of his character. This characterization technique of Everett's makes his protagonist a truly unique character, yet also serves the purpose of affirming African American identity and honoring the African American cultural legacy but in an innovative and novel manner. If Toni Morrison set out to write 'anti-plantation fiction' with *Beloved*, for example (Kocić Stanković, 2021, 34), we could say that Everett has come up with anti-minstrel fiction in his novel. The deliberate unmasking of the language,

i.e., purposefully *not* using the vernacular as the racial marker, is intended for contemporary readers, to enable them to see the character and the very nature of oppression expressed through language as well. If in *Huckleberry* the vernacular and the dialects served the purpose of realism, the black vernacular that Jim uses could also be a means of perpetuating racism, especially in the eyes of contemporary readers who might merely see a caricature. *James*, on the other hand, eliminates the obsolete language and, at the same time, criticizes and exposes the obsolete institution of slavery that this language expressed and, in a way, upheld. This enables James to become a proper hero-protagonist without any masking, reduction or obfuscation caused by stereotypical representations. In other words, Everett's novel provides a new ground for racial negotiation, resignification and redefinition by counter-storying the minstrel tradition.

A crucial aspect of the plot in *Huckleberry* is Jim being a runaway slave – it is in relation to this fact that Huck defines his moral consciousness and examines his conscience. In *James*, Everett's protagonist clearly identifies the slave/master relationship:

> It pained me to think that without a white person with me, without a white-looking face, I could not travel safely through the light of the world, but was relegated to the dense woods. Without someone white to claim me as property, there was no justification for my presence, perhaps for my existence (Everett, 2024).

What is even more important is how Jim/James goes about resolving this conundrum. He refuses to be reduced to being a slave and comes up with an ingenious plan to travel with Norman and earn money by using the institution of slavery against white people, i.e., by being deliberately sold and resold, and running away in the meantime. In other words, he becomes the agent and maker of his own destiny. To paraphrase Judith Butler (1997, 104), the power that constitutes him is recast as the power he opposes.

The antebellum American context, the American minstrel legacy and the 19th-century stylistic concerns regarding realism provided a perfect experimental ground for Everett to further explore and apply Butler's notion of performativity and her own admission that it is not always possible to 'distinguish between linguistic and theatrical performativity' (Salih, 2007, 60). Linguistic performativity, i.e., scripted repetition of the vernacular as a marker of race converges with theatrical performativity and the fact that Jim/James first has to perform blackness for his white masters, and then performs whiteness *while in blackface* for the entertainment of white audiences. This bizarre situation in which Jim/James finds himself highlights his state of fluidity between being a slave and being free – he is a runaway slave but in the antebellum South. The precariousness of his position is also reflected and expressed through his code-switching, not only between the black vernacular and standard English, but also between oral and written language.

Everett's Jim/James often uses irony to highlight the lack of agency that slavery and minstrelsy meant for African Americans. After being beaten by his new master, Jim/James is asked by an incredulous Norman: '"What did you do?' Norman asked. 'What did I *do*? I'm a slave, Norman. I inhaled when I should have exhaled. What did I *do*?'" (Everett, 2024). James' answer to this absurd state of being an object is reclaiming agency, first through the act of running away, then through code-switching, then through writing, and ultimately, through open violence directed at his enemies. He literally writes himself into being, chooses his identity, thus also anchoring this new position he holds – James, a free man who moves westwards, '*a man who will not let his story be self-related but self-written*' (Everett, 2024).

'*With my pencil, I wrote myself into being. I wrote myself* to here' (Everett, 2024). Here James, and indeed, Everett, highlights the importance of written language as more permanent and maybe even more *true* than the spoken language which can be misleading and deceitful (among other things, Jim's/James' performance proves it). Jim's/James' successful pretense when speaking to the white people in the novel is counterpointed to his truthful written account intended for contemporary readers. A lot of the plot revolves around Jim/James obtaining a pencil and using it to write his story. This could also be interpreted as resignification, especially when compared to Twain's novel and Jim's role in it. A runaway slave who tells his story in writing is a mis-repeated performance which results in a completely new script and a new role, that of a bard.

> "And you can write. If you can write, you need a pencil. I wish I could.
> What are you going to say, Jim?"
> "I don't know."
> "Tell your story," he said.
> "What do you mean, Young George? Tell my story? How do you suggest I tell my story?"
> He looked at his feet. I did, too. They were bare, his toes grabbing the wet grass. He looked at my face. "Use your ears," he said.
> "What's that?"
> "Tell the story with your ears. Listen."
> "I'll try, Young George" (Everett, 2024).

Jim/James thus becomes a spokesman for himself but also for an entire generation, for an entire group of people. Young George who sacrifices his life to obtain a pencil for Jim/James realizes the importance of the written record of African American suffering. This could be interpreted as another instance of deconstructing minstrel shows which were supposed to be orally transmitted authentic representations of African American life, commodified and made palatable for white people's consumption. This type of a written account, (which, despite its happy ending, sometimes humorous and optimistic tone, is still very graphic in terms of showing the violence that slavery involved) counteracts minstrelsy and morphs into an anti-minstrel show with a foundation in written language.

In the scene when James takes vengeance against his white enemies, it is again his language and not the actual gun he is holding in his hand that takes precedence:

> "I had never seen a white man filled with such fear. The remarkable truth, however, was that it was not the pistol, but my language, the fact that I didn't conform to his expectations, that I could read, that had so disturbed and frightened him" (Everett, 2024).

Again, Everett utilizes the power of language to build the character of his protagonist and to underscore the point that the unscripted repetition may be a key point of resignification and resistance. James and the way he speaks, writes, and thinks is that deliberate, deviant, mis-performance which completely deconstructs the system of racist propaganda that minstrel shows were. If we take Hall's (2017, 33) argument that racism is 'also a *system of meaning*, a way of organizing and meaningfully classifying the world', James' philosophical argumentation followed by active resistance undermines that system of meaning and suggests new principles of organizing the world. This instance of 'retributive (and ahistorical) justice' is something that fuels not only (contemporary) literature but also popular culture, especially movies, e.g., Tarantino's *Django Unchained* (2012) (see, for example, Kocić, 2017), and the means of achieving it also involve mixing truth and fiction (Dischinger, 2017, 93). The final chapters of *James* follow this trend: he becomes a vengeance-exacting justice bearer through the power of language and resignification. In the course of the novel, James imagines himself, writes, and acts himself into being. The novel and its protagonist become a new ground for re-negotiation of meaning(s), redefining the minstrel legacy and counter-storying it to reflect the resilience of the African American cultural and historical legacy.

Conclusion

Our argument is that one of the reasons for the critical success of Percival Everett's novel *James*, and its popularity among readers is the writer's courage to tackle the important and controversial issues in American literature and culture (including Twain's classic), but in a novel and innovative manner. Just like Twain revolutionized American 19th-century literature with the use of the vernacular, Everett almost equaled the novelty in the use of language and the treatment of familiar subjects of slavery and minstrelsy. Building on Twain's classical novel, Everett re-signified the minstrel mode and stereotypical representations of African Americans in order to explore and problematize their realities and constant changes in their cultural significance and perception. This artistic choice is relevant and justified when considered in light of the fact that a contemporary way of representing truth in literature and culture is often multifaceted, fluid, and sometimes even contradictory, in order to include as many various perspectives as possible and to offer new meanings and interpretations.

If we consider that an increased interest in African American literature and culture often went hand in hand with very deliberate silences regarding institutional racism (e.g., in the 1980s and 1990s as illustrated by Larkin, 2015, 113), it is of immense importance to promote literature that offers a very explicit

critique of racism and commodification of black performance in an innovative manner. Everett has been very vocal about it throughout his career and this is a concern of many other celebrated contemporary African American writers (e.g., Colson Whitehead, Jamaica Kincaid). We can say that Everett is another in the long line of prominent contemporary African American artists who 'continue to push the boundaries of storytelling, […] to address the issues of race, identity, and social justice' (Ikenna, 2025, 47). It is particularly important that such efforts are recognized on the part of the readers, as only joint efforts by both writers and readers can lead to significant and substantial changes producing 'antiracist literary pedagogy' (Larkin, 2015, 165). In other words, literature can be a powerful means of repurposing and resignifying old narratives with both creative and teaching purposes.

Making his slave protagonist almost super-hero like in terms of intellectual and physical strength, Everett came up with a completely new story of survival and self-definition, an instance of anti-minstrel fiction. If we understand that minstrel shows represented an important mode of portraying African Americans, as well as an integral part of the racist propaganda with long-lasting and far-reaching cultural consequences and implications, the significance of reworking this mode and attuning it to reflect contemporary concerns cannot be overstated. The power of Everett's novel lies in the fact that it can be read both as an imagined account of antebellum America, as well as a political statement against racism, and many other forms of cultural appropriation, commodification of culture, oppression, and injustice. His deliberate toying with historical accuracy combined with jabs at narrow-minded stereotypes of African Americans result in his character of James who becomes the central figure of power and even eclipses the fame and legacy of Twain's Jim.

Everett masterfully uses the notion of performativity and its implications of fluidity and incompleteness for his own purposes. It is in this incompleteness that Everett recognizes the space for resistance, resignification, and the renegotiation of meaning. Repeating the well-known story of a journey from slavery to freedom, but with a deliberate insistence on agency, choice and self-definition, renders a narrative suited for contemporary audiences, and, additionally, enables readers to form their own interpretations based on multiple sources. A slave who can read and write and discuss philosophy may be a stretch of the imagination, but so is a country founded on slavery and colonialization professing itself to be a beacon of democracy. This is the powerful message of *James* that seems to sink in with the critics and the readers and, simultaneously, opens new spaces for contemporary debates and reinterpretations, a quality of truly great and significant literature.

Notes

1. Everett has written more than twenty novels, numerous short stories and some poetry; his works are regularly anthologized among the best (African) American literature, he has received almost all major American literary awards and fellowships (Maus, 2019, 37–38).
2. As theorized for the first time by Du Bois (2007) in 1903.
3. A similar technique was used by Spike Lee in his 2000-movie *Bamboozled*.

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Data availability statement

The data analyzed in the article is widely available to everyone.

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