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## Deconstructing the Canon: Linguistic Code-Switching and Narrative Authority in Percival Everett's *James*

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### ABSTRACT

Percival Everett's *James* (2024) retells *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* in the first-person voice of the enslaved man Twain called Jim. This article argues that the novel's deconstructive work is done less by its plot than by its treatment of language. Everett's enslaved characters speak precise standard English among themselves and perform an exaggerated dialect, the "slave filter," whenever white people can hear them; the dialect Twain's "Explanatory" certified as ethnography is re-described, from inside, as a taught and rule-governed survival performance. Drawing on sociolinguistic accounts of listener-conditioned style shift, Gates on Signifyin(g), Du Bois, Fanon, Lott and Butler, we trace how this single device transfers narrative authority from the white adolescent witness to the Black adult subject. We give weight to a neglected material fact: the novel opens with "The Notebook of Daniel Decatur Emmett," reproducing genuine minstrel lyrics that the narrative then overwrites, so that the book performs the palimpsest by which its narrator claims to have written himself into being. We also read the dream disputations with Voltaire and Locke, where the Enlightenment defense of slavery as a continued state of war becomes a warrant for revolt. The article closes by answering the two strongest objections, that its narrator is anachronistic and that its linguistic scheme flatters standard-language ideology, and argues that both mistake the target of Everett's satire.

### INTRODUCTION

Few characters in American literature carry a heavier interpretive burden than Jim, the enslaved man who flees down the Mississippi beside Huck Finn. Hemingway's claim in *Green Hills of Africa* that all modern American literature comes from Twain's novel arrived with a caveat even he could not suppress: stop reading, he advised, before the final chapters, where Jim becomes the plaything of Tom Sawyer's romantic schemes (Hemingway, 1935, p. 22). Defenders of the book have always pointed to Huck's crisis of conscience, the moment he resolves to "go to hell" rather than betray his companion (Twain, 1885, Ch. 31). Critics have pointed to nearly everything around that moment: the slur that saturates the text, the minstrel comedy of Jim's superstitions, an ending in which a grown man's freedom is converted into a boy's game. Ralph Ellison (1964) put the problem most durably when he observed that Twain had fitted Jim into the outlines of the blackface minstrel tradition, so that the man's dignity shows only in glimpses around the edges of the mask. The quarrel, reviewed in the next section, has never closed. What nobody in it could produce was the one perspective the text structurally forbids: Jim's own. *James* produces it. Everett retells the river journey in the first-person voice of the enslaved man, renamed by himself and for himself. He does it through one governing conceit. The novel's enslaved characters speak fluent, analytically exact standard English among themselves, and they perform an exaggerated dialect, what the narrator calls his "slave filter," whenever white people can hear (Everett, 2024a, Pt. 1, Ch. 6). The dialect that

Twain's prefatory "Explanatory" offered as painstaking ethnography is re-described from inside as a technology of survival, a mask of "correct incorrect grammar" (Pt. 1, Ch. 1) drilled into children because white comfort, and therefore Black safety, depends on white feelings of superiority. Nearly everything distinctive about the novel radiates from this device: its comedy, its dread, its philosophy, and its transfer of narrative authority from the white witness to the Black subject.

Three terms in our title need fixing before the argument begins. By canon we mean the body of works granted authority in American literary education and criticism, and *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* in particular, whose standing rests partly on the claim that it renders American speech faithfully. By code-switching we mean, following sociolinguistic usage, a speaker's alternation between languages or language varieties within a single exchange. By narrative authority we mean the right to tell the story and to be believed: who narrates, whose interiority the reader is given, and whose speech is presented as transparent evidence of mind.

Three questions follow. First, how does *James* redistribute the code-switching that Twain's novel presents as fixed dialect, and what does that redistribution do to the authority of Twain's text? Second, if the enslaved characters' dialect is a performance rather than a property, what governs the switch, and do the standard sociolinguistic descriptions of register variation actually fit it? Third, does making standard English the sign of the narrator's full interiority reinforce the very language ideology the novel attacks? Our answers, in order: the

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novel reverses Twain's equation of dialect with mind and completes the reversal materially through a palimpsest; the switch is conditioned by the identity of the listener rather than by domain, so it is better described by audience design and markedness than by diglossia; and the charge of standard-language ideology fails, because what the characters perform is not African American Language but a white-authored written fiction of it, a claim we test against the novel's own orthography in Two objections. Everett inverts the sociolinguistic architecture of Twain's novel. In Twain, dialect indexes what a speaker is; in Everett, it becomes a genre performed for a white audience, while standard English migrates into the private interiority of the enslaved. The inversion extends rather than rejects the Black rhetorical tradition of Signifyin(g) and masking, which is why the novel reads less as a replacement of Twain than as what Everett himself calls a conversation with him (Everett, 2024b). The transfer of authority is finally completed in material form, through the palimpsest. James, the novel's narrator, steals the notebook of the minstrel composer Daniel Decatur Emmett and writes his own story into it, and Everett's book opens with that notebook's songs. Authority in James is not petitioned for, and it is not conferred by a white amanuensis. It is taken, with a pencil.

The article enters a fast-growing critical conversation rather than an empty field. Booker (2025) reads James through Bakhtinian dialogism and the politics of postmodern pastiche. Kocić Stanković and Stamenković (2026) read its minstrel episode through Butler's resignification and Lott's account of blackface. Stepto (2025) traces literacy, naming, and selfhood in the novel, arguing that its narrator, like Douglass and Du Bois before him, writes himself into being. Fishkin (2025) situates Everett's Jim within that character's longer afterlives, and Sullivan (2025) supplies a substantial critical essay. We are indebted to all of these, and we note in particular that our reading of the pencil, the palimpsest, and the closing act of self-naming in under 'Pencil, palimpsest, and the name' below develops ground that Stepto opened. What we claim as new is narrower and specifically linguistic: a formal account of the slave filter as listener-conditioned register shift, better described by audience design and markedness than by the diglossia model to which it is often assimilated; a reproducible orthographic analysis of the novel's dialect, reported in Section 4.5, which we have not found attempted elsewhere; and the argument that the book's own paratext stages, in advance, the palimpsest its narrator will later describe.

One convention should be flagged, because this article discusses a novel whose title is also its narrator's name. Italicized James always denotes the novel; unitalicized James always denotes its narrator. Names given with a date in parentheses, such as Gates (1988), are cited scholars and appear in the reference list; names given without one, such as Huck, Lizzie, Norman, or Judge Thatcher, are characters. Where a surname is shared, initials distinguish the two, as with A. Bell on audience design and B. W. Bell

on the neoslave narrative.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Criticism of Twain's novel has divided, for seventy years, over a single question: whether the book's treatment of Jim is an indictment of racism or an instance of it. This section traces that division only far enough to show what it never produced, which is any account of what Jim knows. The midcentury consecration of Huckleberry Finn came through two famous introductions, Trilling's of 1948 and Eliot's of 1950, the first praising Huck's vernacular as a triumph of moral style, the second raising the river to myth. Leo Marx's rejoinder accepted the novel's greatness and refused its ending, arguing that the "evasion" at the Phelps farm betrays Jim and the book's own logic alike, dissolving a quest for freedom into burlesque (Marx, 1953, pp. 423–440). That structural complaint was never so much answered as absorbed; even the novel's warmest advocates treat the ending as a problem to be managed. The racial critique gathered force later. Ellison (1964) located Jim's characterization in minstrelsy while insisting on the dignity that keeps breaking through the mask. Smiley's Harper's polemic charged that the book banks a moral seriousness it never spends, since Jim's humanity matters chiefly as an instrument of Huck's education (Smiley, 1996, pp. 61–67). Smith answered that Twain weaponizes the period's racist discourse against itself, and that Jim repeatedly outplays the terms in which white characters describe him (Smith, 1984, pp. 4–12). Morrison (1996), in her introduction, declined to resolve the tension: the book's greatness and its wound are the same thing, because Huck's freedom is imagined through, and against, the presence of an enslaved man. She had generalized the point in *Playing in the Dark* (Morrison, 1992).

The language question, moreover, has a scholarly history of its own. Shelley Fisher Fishkin's *Was Huck Black?* (1993) argued three decades ago that Huck's celebrated vernacular is itself indebted to African American voices Twain knew and admired. The finding complicates any simple account of the novel's linguistic politics, and it anticipates, from the other direction, the argument developed below.

Two features of this tradition matter here. It is conducted, almost without exception, over Jim's head; the question is always what Jim means, almost never what Jim knows. And language sits at the center of the case on both sides, because Twain's "Explanatory" makes the book's one unironic claim to authority, that its dialects, "the Missouri negro dialect" first among them, were rendered "painstakingly" and from "personal familiarity" (Twain, 1885, Explanatory). The claim underwrites the novel's realism, and with it a quieter assumption: that Jim's speech is a transparent window onto Jim's mind. That assumption, the equation of rendered dialect with rendered intellect, is what James was built to break.

Everett's novel enters this field through an established genre. B. W. Bell (1987) named the "neoslave narrative,"

and Rushdy's (1999) study traced how late-twentieth-century novelists took up the old form to contest the politics of voice. The classical slave narrative came wrapped in an authenticating apparatus: white prefaces, appended letters, and the certifying formula "written by himself," all meant to persuade skeptical white readers that a Black author could have produced the text. Douglass made literacy the hinge of his 1845 Narrative, concluding that his enslaver's warning against teaching a slave revealed "the pathway from slavery to freedom" (Douglass, 1845, Ch. 6). Everett writes inside this tradition deliberately. His narrator reads Venture Smith's as-told-to narrative, fixates on its claim to be related by himself, and decides that his own story will be self-written (Everett, 2024a, Pt. 1, Chs. 10 and 16). The difference between relation and inscription is, as we argue in as we argue under 'Pencil, palimpsest, and the name' below, the novel's theory of itself.

The governing conceit has a nineteenth-century Black precedent worth naming. The opening chapter of Frances E. W. Harper's *Iola Leroy* shows enslaved characters passing war news in a coded "market speech" beneath their enslavers' notice (Harper, 1892, Ch. 1). Everett's slave filter systematizes what Harper sketched: not a private channel hidden inside public talk, but an entire counterfeit register maintained across a community and taught to its children.

There is also a narrower lineage, what Booker (2025) calls post-Huck fiction: direct novelistic answers to Twain, among them Jon Clinch's *Finn* (2007) and Robert Coover's *Huck Out West* (2017). Booker reads James as the most dialogically complex of these, engaging Twain in the kind of critical dialogue Bakhtin (1981) describes, in which a new utterance quotes, parodies, and reaccentuates a prior one rather than deleting it, and he distinguishes this from the "blank parody" Jameson attributed to postmodern pastiche. Everett has endorsed the description, telling the Booker Prize organization, no relation to the critic cited above, that he sees himself not as a corrective but "in conversation" with Twain, hoping to have written "the novel that Twain did not and also could not have written" (Everett, 2024b). A corrective would concede that the precursor holds the authority worth seizing; a conversation asserts equal standing.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

### Texts, editions, and citation

The study is a qualitative, comparative close reading. It moves between paired scenes, paired registers, and paired paratexts. Two editions anchor the analysis. Quotations from James follow the Doubleday first edition (2024); quotations from *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* follow the public-domain Project Gutenberg text (ebook 76), which reproduces the 1885 first American edition. Neither the digital James nor the Gutenberg *Huckleberry Finn* carries stable page numbers that would recur across devices, so both are cited by chapter, and James additionally by part, in accordance with APA guidance for

sources without stable pagination, which directs authors to cite a stable division such as a chapter (American Psychological Association, 2020). The frequency counts reported in reported under 'Standard-Language Ideology' below come from exhaustive case-insensitive string searches of these two electronic texts, not from estimation. Throughout the analysis, parenthetical references consisting of part and chapter numbers alone refer to Everett (2024a); references to Twain's novel are given in full.

Quotations from James are kept brief, for purposes of criticism of a work in copyright.

John McWhorter's commentary appeared as a New York Times opinion piece in February 2025; we cite his position, and the responses of akua naru and Jaye Padgett, as discussed in the UC Santa Cruz Humanities Institute's freely accessible Deep Read materials.

### Theoretical framework

Four bodies of theory organize the reading that follows, and each is worth stating briefly in its own terms before the novel complicates them.

The first term comes from sociolinguistics. Code-switching names the alternation between languages or varieties within a single exchange, and Blom and Gumperz's familiar distinction separates situational switching, cued by setting or participants, from metaphorical switching, where the switch itself carries the meaning (Blom & Gumperz, 1972, pp. 407–434). James stages an extreme situational case in which the conditioning variable has collapsed to one: whether white ears are present. But the direction of travel is reversed from the textbook case. Contemporary code-switchers typically acquire a prestige variety to move through institutions built by its speakers; Everett's characters natively command the prestige variety and acquire, rehearse, and teach the stigmatized one. In the UC Santa Cruz Deep Read, Susan Gillman describes this as a way of speaking that lets the enslaved "pass down," performing toward a white listener's expectations rather than away from them (UC Santa Cruz Humanities Institute, 2025b). Two frameworks account for it more precisely than code-switching alone. Myers-Scotton's (1993) markedness model holds that every interaction type carries an expected set of rights and obligations, and that speakers read which code is unmarked before choosing whether to confirm or challenge it; applied to the novel, this means that the dialect is the unmarked choice under slavery, and that standard English from a Black speaker is not merely marked but punishable, an extension of Myers-Scotton's model that is our own. The audience design model of A. Bell (1984) supplies the trigger, ranking listeners by their standing in the exchange: addressee, auditor, overhearer, and eavesdropper. The novel dramatizes all four. Miss Watson is an addressee, the enslaved men around the fire are auditors, the white boys who creep into earshot are overhearers, and the sleeping James, whose dreaming speech Huck happens to catch, is undone by an eavesdropper. The empirical

warrant is not speculative: Rickford and McNair-Knox (1994) documented substantial style shift in an African American speaker's recorded interviews according to the interviewer's race, so the novel intensifies a measured pattern rather than inventing one. Two cautions attach. Baldwin's (1979) essay reminds us that Black English is a language forged under danger, not a broken code, and Rickford and Rickford (2000) document its systematic grammar. The dialect performed in *James*, we argue in we argue under 'Standard-Language Ideology' below, is a white-authored stage fiction of that language rather than the language itself, and the distinction changes what the novel can be accused of.

The second term comes from Black literary theory. Signifyin(g) is Gates's (1988) name, so spelled to mark the difference between the standard English word and the vernacular practice, for the tradition of indirection, double-voiced revision, and repetition with a signal difference, in which one text critiques another while appearing merely to repeat it. The term does double duty here. It describes what Everett's novel does to Twain's, and it describes what Everett's characters do inside the novel; the enslaved children actually recite the word in their language lesson (Everett, 2024a, Pt. 1, Ch. 2). Behind Gates stands the longer masking tradition, Dunbar's 1896 speakers smiling over "torn and bleeding hearts" (Dunbar, 1896, line 4), and Hurston's (1934) observation that Black expressive culture performed for white audiences while keeping its interior to itself.

The third term comes from Du Bois. Double consciousness is his name for the "peculiar sensation" of "always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity" (Du Bois, 1903, Ch. 1). Fanon (1967) carried the analysis into language itself, arguing in the opening chapter of *Black Skin, White Masks* that the colonized subject is raised or lowered in proportion to mastery of the colonizer's tongue. James literalizes both claims and then arms them: the master's tongue is fully possessed and deliberately hidden, because its display would be lethal.

The fourth pairing comes from performance theory: minstrelsy and resignification. Lott's *Love and Theft* establishes blackface minstrelsy as the founding form of American popular culture, a ritual of simultaneous desire, mockery, and expropriation. Everett does not allude to this history; he casts it. He sells his narrator to Daniel Decatur Emmett, the actual founder of the Virginia Minstrels and composer of "Dixie." Butler's account of resignification supplies the mechanism by which performance becomes resistance: an injurious script, being iterable, can be re-cited in ways that turn its force (Butler, 1997). Kocić Stanković and Stamenković have recently read the novel through Butler and Lott as anti-minstrel fiction, an analysis extended in an analysis extended under 'Minstrelsy literalized' below.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### 'Correct Incorrect Grammar': The Regime of the Slave Filter

#### Two Paratexts

Our first claim is that the two novels declare opposed theories of dialect before either narrator speaks, and that Everett's paratext is not decoration but demonstration. Twain's book begins twice before Huck speaks. The "Notice" threatens prosecution for anyone seeking a motive, banishment for anyone seeking a moral, shooting for anyone seeking a plot. Then comes the "Explanatory," the one place the book asks to be taken straight:

- In this book a number of dialects are used, to wit: the Missouri negro dialect; the extremest form of the backwoods Southwestern dialect; the ordinary "Pike County" dialect; and four modified varieties of this last. The shadings have not been done in a haphazard fashion, or by guesswork; but painstakingly, and with the trustworthy guidance and support of personal familiarity with these several forms of speech. (Twain, 1885, Explanatory)

The two prefaces pull against each other. Distrust this book's meanings, they say together, but trust absolutely its ears. The "Explanatory" positions the white author as ethnographer and the dialects as specimens accurately collected; language, on Twain's front page, is evidence of what its speakers are.

Everett's book also begins before its narrator speaks, with a different document. "The Notebook of Daniel Decatur Emmett" reproduces, without comment, the dialect lyrics of real minstrel standards: "Old Dan Tucker," "Old Zip Coon," "Turkey in the Straw." Before the story starts, then, the reader meets the "Missouri negro dialect" in its true native habitat, a white songwriter's notebook. The paratext only discloses its full meaning much later, when James steals that very notebook while fleeing the troupe (Pt. 1, Ch. 32) and uses it to reconstruct his story (Pt. 2, Ch. 1). The book in the reader's hands is thereby framed, materially, as a palimpsest: a Black man's standard-English narrative written into and over what critics of minstrelsy call blackvoice, the vocal counterpart of blackface that Lott's study of the form describes (Lott, 1993). Where Twain's paratext certifies dialect as ethnographic truth, Everett's exposes dialect as white composition. The whole argument of the novel is present in its first page; 'Pencil, palimpsest, and the name' returns to it.

#### The Opening Inversion

Twain opens on the most famous self-introduction in American fiction, Huck warning us that we won't know about him without having read *Tom Sawyer*, then complaining that the Widow Douglas means to "civilize" him (Twain, 1885, Ch. 1). The voice performs unlettered innocence, and the performance is the book's engine: vernacular as authenticity. Everett opens on the same evening from the other side of the yard. James stands

at Miss Watson's kitchen door watching Huck and Tom "hiding out there in the tall grass," reflects that the boys treat him as "their toy," and observes that "waiting is a big part of a slave's life" (Pt. 1, Ch. 1). The first act of the novel is a reversal of surveillance; the watched man was watching all along. The second is the novel's first code-switch. Since "it always pays to give white folks what they want," James steps into the yard, calls out in dialect asking who is there in the dark, and stages a monologue about witches and demons for the boys' benefit (Pt. 1, Ch. 1). This is the hat-trick episode from Twain's second chapter, where Jim is the credulous butt of the joke and afterward embellishes a tale of being ridden by witches; in Everett's version the tale is composed by its teller, knowingly, as theater. Superstition is not a property of Jim's mind but a genre demanded by his audience, and from the first page the reader stands on the performer's side of the curtain.

### The Language Lesson

The novel's methodological core arrives in its second chapter, an evening "language lesson" James gives to seven enslaved children on the packed-dirt floor of his cabin. The lessons are "indispensable," the narration says, because "safe movement through the world depended on mastery of language, fluency" (Pt. 1, Ch. 2). What follows is a pedagogy scene with no real precedent in the plantation fiction it echoes, because the language being taught is not English but a fiction of broken English. When his daughter Lizzie rehearses the sentence she will use to thank Miss Watson for barely edible cornbread, James corrects her toward what he calls the "correct incorrect grammar" (Pt. 1, Ch. 1). The oxymoron holds the whole system. The dialect has rules; the rules must be executed flawlessly; and they must be executed flawlessly precisely because the dialect is a costume that can never be seen to be one.

The lesson proceeds through what James calls situational translations. How do you warn a white neighbor whose kitchen is burning behind her? The direct cry of "Fire" is nearly right and fatally wrong; the correct utterance points without naming, because, as Lizzie recites, they must "let the whites be the ones who name the trouble" (Pt. 1, Ch. 2). A second drill, a grease fire, teaches that even correct knowledge must arrive as a stammering offer to fetch sand, and that tripping over the words is technique rather than failure. Mumble sometimes, James advises, so the listeners can enjoy correcting you; the less they choose to listen, the more can be said around them (Pt. 1, Ch. 2). Pragmatics has a name for the maneuver. Warning a white woman of danger, and above all naming it, is a face-threatening act, and the children are taught to perform it off record, by hinting rather than asserting, the strategy Brown and Levinson (1987) place at the far end of their politeness scale. One qualification matters: their model was built for exchanges where miscalculation costs embarrassment, whereas here the cost of an unmitigated warning is violence. Politeness, in this classroom, is the grammar of staying alive. Epistemic priority, affective comfort, and channel security are all managed by grammar.

And when the children close the lesson by naming the practice in one word, "Signifying," the novel cites its own theoretical lineage: Signifyin(g) as curriculum, transmitted parent to child, priced at survival. The scene also stages what linguistic anthropology calls enregisterment, Agha's (2003) term for the process by which a set of forms becomes recognizable as a register bound to a social type. What James teaches is not a language but a register, one whose social type, the simple and superstitious slave, was manufactured for white consumption. He is teaching his children to inhabit a caricature accurately. Everett has glossed the scene in just these terms: oppressed people use language as everyone does, to communicate, only "in a way that doesn't allow their oppressors to have access" (as cited in Limbong, 2024).

Set against the sociolinguistic literature, the arrangement is stranger than it first appears, and it is worth being exact about why. It is tempting to call this a diglossia in reverse, but the term does not fit. Ferguson's (1959) diglossia describes a stable community split in which a formally learned high variety serves writing and public speech while a native low variety serves everyday life, and his definition specifies that no sector of the community uses the high variety for ordinary conversation. In James the enslaved use standard English precisely for ordinary conversation, in kitchens and cabins and with their children. Nor is the dialect reserved for formal or public occasions. It appears wherever a white person can hear, in the most casual encounter as readily as the most official one. The conditioning factor is therefore not domain but the identity of the listener, which is a different mechanism from the one Ferguson described. The audience design model of A. Bell (1984) names that mechanism directly, and Myers-Scotton's markedness model explains the cost of departing from it. A. Bell's least ratified category, the eavesdropper, the listener a speaker does not know is there, turns out to carry the novel's deepest dread. The switch must run below consciousness to be safe. On Jackson Island, sick and afraid, James dreads sleeping near Huck lest his thoughts escape "without their passing through my slave filter" (Pt. 1, Ch. 6). The filter is not a style. It is a checkpoint on the border of the self, and it never closes.

### The Filter under Load

Everett keeps stress-testing the system. Huck's theological interrogations force James to improvise pious fatalism while the narration registers, in standard English, both the boy's shrewdness and the act's cost (Pt. 1, Ch. 2). Around the fire, a tall tale being traded among the enslaved men modulates mid-story into dialect the moment a warning sign passes and white boys creep into earshot; the group converts its own conversation into a minstrel frame staged for eavesdroppers (Pt. 1, Ch. 1). The filter, that scene shows, is not individual but choral, a coordinated practice with signals and cues. The novel even engineers scenes demanding several registers at once: woken while passing as a white minstrel, James must sound white to an intruder and enslaved to the troupe, and settles on what

the narration drily calls “the racially neutral” cry of alarm (Pt. 1, Ch. 31). Where speech races the speaker, even a yelp must be engineered.

### The signifying narrator Collapsing the Frame

The frontier humor Twain came out of typically used a frame: a cultured, standard-English narrator introduces a vernacular storyteller, and the comedy lives in the gap between them. Gillman’s observation about James is that Everett collapses the frame, combining “the cultured and vernacular narrator in one person” (as cited in UC Santa Cruz Humanities Institute, 2025b). The collapse is more than formal economy. In the old frame the standard voice owns transcription and judgment while the vernacular voice supplies entertainment; a hierarchy of registers quietly encodes a hierarchy of persons. Housing both voices in one Black consciousness makes that hierarchy visible as a fiction, because the reader watches a single mind operate both registers at will, the way an actor chooses costumes. The linguist Jaye Padgett adds that hearing an educated English as the voice of James’s “truest” self will unsettle the assumptions many readers bring to the character (as cited in UC Santa Cruz Humanities Institute, 2025b). The unsettling is the design, and it is accomplished by narration rather than by argument.

The resulting voice is continuously double in Gates’s sense. Almost every scene contains an utterance aimed at white characters and a commentary aimed at the reader, and the meaning lives in the interval. Confronted by the overseer Hopkins, James answers in standard English and then, with lethal courtesy, offers to translate himself downward (Pt. 3, Ch. 7). Translation becomes insult. The expected register stands exposed as a service performed for the master’s comfort, and its withdrawal reads, correctly, as a declaration of war.

### Irony as Property

Everett scatters scenes in which the enslaved discuss irony with technical precision. After leading a white man into demonstrating his own pettiness, James and Luke debate whether the man’s coming drunkenness will count as “proleptic irony or dramatic irony” (Pt. 1, Ch. 2). The layers matter. James cannot say the word irony to any white person; asked by Huck what a hard word means, he retreats into calling things funny (Pt. 1, Ch. 5). Yet the enslaved hold the concept with a rigor that the novel’s white characters, from Huck to the judge to the minstrel troupe, are never shown to match; and no white speaker in the book is given a comparable analytic vocabulary. Irony, the master trope of literary sophistication, has been redistributed down the social order. This bears directly on narrative authority as we defined it: the authority to be believed depends on being credited with the capacity for indirection, and Everett grants that capacity exclusively to the enslaved. Twain’s dramatic irony famously worked at Jim’s expense, never more cruelly than in the evasion

chapters, where Jim is tormented while already free. Everett’s runs the other way: reader and enslaved share knowledge from which the powerful are shut out. In Gates’s terms, this is Signifyin(g) on Twain’s irony itself, repetition of the structure with its polarity reversed.

### The Philosopher Dreams

James’s interior life is furnished not only with standard English but with the Western canon, read in secret in Judge Thatcher’s library, and in extremity he debates its architects. Feverish from a rattlesnake bite, he is visited by Voltaire, who professes egalitarianism and then reasons his way, step by cheerful step, into a developmental hierarchy in which the African merely possesses the capacity to become equal through European training (Pt. 1, Ch. 6). A later dream delivers Locke, who, pressed about the Fundamental Constitutions of Carolina, shrugs that it was a job and someone else would have written it (Pt. 1, Ch. 18); pressed again near the novel’s end, he tries the classical line that slavery continues a state of war (Pt. 3, Ch. 3). James accepts the premise and turns it. If this is war, the enslaved hold a combatant’s right, perhaps a duty, to kill the enemy. The Enlightenment’s own casuistry, honestly applied, licenses the revolt it was drafted to prevent, and the novel’s violent final act arrives pre-authorized by the enslavers’ philosophy.

These sequences invite the charge of anachronism, an objection taken up in an objection taken up under ‘Standard-Language Ideology’ below. Inside the novel’s economy of language they do three jobs. They establish that James’s English is not mimicry but membership; he does not petition the republic of letters, he cross-examines it. They articulate the asymmetry the book’s most quoted sentence names, the strangeness of an existence in which “one’s equal must argue for one’s equality” in forums the person concerned cannot enter (Pt. 1, Ch. 6); the reflection is about discourse, about who may speak where. And they are dangerous, dangerously literally. Huck overhears the dreaming James, asks who Raynal is and what hierarchy means, and remarks that he did not sound like himself (Pt. 1, Ch. 6). The filter has no night shift. Philosophy, in this novel, is contraband, and Everett has fused his highest intellectual register to his deepest suspense.

### When the Mask Comes Off

A sequence of controlled unmaskings measures what each register socially means. To Huck, after the paternity revelation (of which more below), James simply stops translating, and the boy’s first question is not about content but form: why is James talking like that (Pt. 3, Ch. 1). To the overseer and the judge, the unmasked voice arrives as terror. To the reader, the unmasking happened on page one, which is why the dialect can never again be heard innocently. Each slip returns the same finding, and the formulation here is our own: in the antebellum linguistic order the novel depicts, Black standard English is not impressive but impossible, and the impossible,

when it speaks, registers as the uncanny. The novel keeps a running account of what the tuning costs; rescuing Huck from the river, James admits to himself that he acted partly because he was tired, tired specifically of the slave voice (Pt. 3, Ch. 1). The mask does not merely conceal the self. It taxes it.

### Minstrelsy literalized

#### Sold to the Author of 'Dixie'

Late in Part One, Everett converts his linguistic theme into stagecraft by selling James to Daniel Decatur Emmett, founder of the Virginia Minstrels, the troupe that codified the blackface show in 1843. Emmett buys James for his tenor, insists he has hired rather than bought him, and offers a handshake so alien to the scene's power relations that the onlookers freeze (Pt. 1, Ch. 27). This Emmett is no cartoon villain, which is what makes him disturbing: a man who profits from the expropriation of Black expression while congratulating himself on his gentleness. He is Lott's love and theft with a face.

The troupe's makeup ritual then produces the novel's most condensed image of race as performance. The audience will not admit a Black man, so James must first be legible as white; the show requires blackness at a particular grotesque wattage, so he must then be blacked up like everyone else. He is, one member observes, not black enough as he is (Pt. 1, Ch. 27). Norman, a Black man passing as white within the troupe, explains the arithmetic: white under the makeup, so that he can look black to the audience (Pt. 1, Ch. 29). Kocić Stanković and Stamenković are right, we think, to read these scenes through Butler: the minstrel script is an iterable convention, and its iterability is what opens it to deviant citation.

#### The Cakewalk's Double Irony

What blackface does to the body, the minstrel dialect does to the voice. On Emmett's stage the slave filter becomes a paid act. James performs, for money and under compulsion, the same exaggerated vernacular he teaches children as armor, in songs written by white men about the contentment of the enslaved. Everett sharpens the vertigo with the cakewalk. Norman mentions that the white performers include it in the show. James is astonished, since the cakewalk began among the enslaved as a parody of their enslavers' pompous promenading. Norman replies that the mockery is lost on them, that it has never occurred to the performers "that we might find them mockable" (Pt. 1, Ch. 29). James, delighted, names the structure a "double irony" and wonders whether one irony can cancel another. It is Gates's Signifyin(g) chain staged as vaudeville: Black parody of white manners appropriated by whites as an image of Black festivity, then re-observed by Black spectators who alone hold the full genealogy. Authority over meaning belongs to whoever sees the most layers, and in this novel that party is never white.

The novel's theory of the racist audience is spoken,

fittingly, from inside the filter. Watching a crowd embrace the King and Duke's transparent scams, Huck asks why people believe what they must know to be false, and James, in dialect, answers that folks take the lies they want and throw away the truths that scare them (Pt. 1, Ch. 21). The sentence generalizes effortlessly from the revival tent to the minstrel hall to the literary canon. A readership that received Twain's Jim as authentic and receives Everett's James as implausible is exercising the same selective appetite, and the novel knows it. Ellison observed that Twain fitted Jim into minstrelsy's outlines; Everett answers by placing his Jim inside an actual minstrel troupe and letting him report, in analytic standard English, on the machinery of the mask. The tradition that consumed the character becomes material the character consumes.

### Pencil, palimpsest, and the name

#### The Price of the Instrument

James is, among other things, a book about the material conditions of authorship, and it puts a price on them. Writing needs an instrument. Hiding on an island among enslaved men, James asks for a pencil (Pt. 1, Ch. 14), and a boy called Young George steals a stub from his enslaver's porch to supply him, along with the novel's poetics in miniature: tell your story, the boy urges, and, asked how, answers that James should tell it with his ears, by listening (Pt. 1, Ch. 15). Young George is then whipped nearly to death for the theft while James watches from the thicket, the pencil in his pocket, and the boy finds his eyes and mouths the word run (Pt. 1, Ch. 16). Three inches of graphite are the most expensive object in the novel; they cost a body. Douglass's equation of literacy with the pathway out of bondage receives its full antebellum accounting here, and the accounting explains why James experiences authorship as debt. He owes it to Young George, he resolves, to write something that matters (Pt. 1, Ch. 15).

Young George's other gift, the instruction to write by listening, quietly answers Twain's "Explanatory." Against the white author's claimed personal familiarity with Black speech, the novel poses a Black narrator's compelled familiarity with white speech. That familiarity is built by the very mumble-and-be-corrected protocol the language lesson teaches, which converts white inattention into an intelligence network. The man who has spent his life monitoring white talk for danger is, by that training, the best-informed witness on the river. The reader may decide which archive runs deeper.

### Self-Written, Not Self-Related

In Judge Thatcher's library James had found Venture Smith's 1798 narrative, the genre's certifying formula on its cover, related by himself. His response is a reader's suspicion, wondering how a five-year-old could recall detail that makes such neat sense, hardened by what he calls the tidiness of lies (Pt. 1, Chs. 10, 15). The as-told-to narrative, transcribed by white hands and shaped for white audiences, belongs for him to the same family as

the other tidy stories told to justify his condition. He sets inscription against relation. The chapter that opens with his name announces a man who can read and write and who will not let his story be self-related, insisting instead that it be self-written, and closes the thought with the novel's most quoted sentence: with his pencil, he "wrote myself into being" (Pt. 1, Ch. 16). The Cartesian echo is deliberate and corrective: not I think, therefore I am, a formula available to those whose being was never in question, but I write, therefore I am, for a man whose legal existence was a ledger entry.

### The Palimpsest Completed

The surface he writes on is Emmett's notebook, stolen in flight, and the theft is ambivalent even to him. He does not tear out Emmett's songs; "somehow they were necessary to my story," he reflects, resolving to rebuild his narrative in the same covers (Pt. 2, Ch. 1). The palimpsest requires its underwriting. James's story cannot go on blank paper because no blank paper exists for him, historically or figuratively; the discursive space where a Black man might appear was already covered, edge to edge, with white-authored blackvoice, from the minstrel songbook to the canon's painstaking dialect. To write himself into being he must write over, and overwriting preserves what it cancels, keeping the lie legible beneath the truth as evidence. The palimpsest is Signifyin(g) made physical, repetition of a prior text with a difference that reverses its authority. It is also, in Butler's vocabulary, resignification at the level of the page, and it gives Bakhtinian dialogue a body: two voices permanently superimposed, which is the relation Everett claims with Twain.

### 'Just James'

The seizure of authority ends in violence and in a name, in that order and connected. Armed at last, James frees a chained coffer by addressing the men, deliberately, as men (Pt. 3, Ch. 10); announces himself to an armed enslaver, over a burning cornfield, as the angel of death and as James (Pt. 3, Ch. 11); and, throughout, prefaces or seals each act of force with the declarative sentence of identity, as though the violence were the enforcement clause of a speech act. Twain's ending is the target, and the contrast is surgical. Twain's Jim exits as the object of other people's sentences: freed, it turns out, by Miss Watson's will months earlier, handed forty dollars by the boy who tormented him, and certified with Huck's highest compliment, that he was "white inside" (Twain, 1885, Chs. 40 and 43). Everett's James exits as the author of his own. Reaching free soil in Iowa, asked by a sheriff whether any of his party answers to the slur and diminutive by which he was owned, he names the others, then names himself, and to the follow-up, James what, answers: "Just James" (Pt. 3, Ch. 12). Two words end the onomastics of slavery, the owner's surname refused, the diminutive discarded, the name self-conferred and complete. A surname is a genealogy, and his was stolen; what remains is the name as a pure act of authorship. The man who wrote himself

into being signs the work.

One revision remains to be placed: the disclosure, after the steamboat wreck, that James is Huck's biological father (Pt. 3, Ch. 1). The twist is abrupt, and the complaint about its pacing has force, but within the present argument it is load-bearing. Huck, told what he now is, asks exactly that, and James answers that he can be what he wants to be (Pt. 3, Ch. 1), handing the boy the self-authorship James needed a pencil and an uprising to seize. It also recodes Twain retroactively: every gesture readers sentimentalized as a slave's loyalty rereads as a father's love that could not speak its name, the slave filter applied to kinship itself.

### Two objections

#### Anachronism

The strongest objection one can bring against the novel holds that its narrator is a twenty-first-century mind in period costume: double consciousness four decades before Du Bois, Fanon a century early, the sociolinguistics of code-switching before the discipline existed, archival details about Locke's colonial entanglements that no enslaved Missourian could access. On such a reading James fails as historical fiction, its protagonist less a person than a syllabus.

The objection mistakes the genre. Everett is a career satirist, and the novel sits in a satiric tradition defined by violated realist decorum, mixed registers, and ideas staged in dialogue, often literally in dreams. The philosopher sequences announce as much: they are marked as fever dreams, and their comedy, Voltaire taking notes on the man refuting him, Locke and James trading euphemisms in an escalating duel of adjectives, belongs to the satiric symposium rather than the costume drama. Within that genre the anachronisms are not leaks; they are the experiment. Equipping James with the full critical apparatus history denied him levels the discursive field between enslaver and enslaved and isolates the variable actually under test, which is not intelligence, stipulated as equal, but power. The dream Locke does not lose because James is cleverer. He loses because, for once, the premises are not vetted by the party that benefits from them.

The device also carries a blade turned toward the reader. The reflex that finds a philosophical Black man in 1861 unrealistic has coexisted, for well over a century, with readers who found Twain's superstitious Jim realistic. We will concede what should be conceded. The record of enslaved and free Black intellection, Wheatley to Walker to Douglass, is rich enough that a strictly period-accurate James could have been formidably armed, and a reader may prefer that novel. It would be a different one, aimed at documenting the past rather than diagnosing the present. Everett, by his own account, wrote the second on purpose (Everett, 2024b).

### Standard-Language Ideology

A weightier objection comes from the sociolinguistic left. If the novel's sign of James's full humanity is command of standard English, does it not ratify the ideology it means

to attack, the equation of the standard with intelligence and worth? The linguist John McWhorter, in a New York Times op-ed on the novel discussed in the UC Santa Cruz Deep Read, treats the standard-English interiority as continuous with the book's exposure of slave talk as fiction; but the Deep Read's other voices press the worry hard. akua naru questions the premise that a character must command standard American English to be legible as fully human, and Padgett notes that indexing standard features to intelligence stigmatizes African American Language (AAL), which is as rule-governed as any prestige variety and lacks only its speakers' power (UC Santa Cruz Humanities Institute, 2025b). Baldwin (1979) drew the underlying conclusion: what gets honored as a language and dismissed as a dialect is a question of its speakers' power, never of its grammar. On this critique, James risks teaching its mainstream readership that Jim deserved better because he secretly talked white.

The objection also has a deeper genealogy than the sociolinguistics seminar. It is the postcolonial language question in American dress: can the colonizer's language be used to render the experience of the colonized, or does using it reproduce the colonizer's world? Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o answered that question by leaving English for Gikuyu, holding that the colonizer's tongue could only ever reproduce the colonizer's world; Achebe answered it by staying, wagering that English could be bent until it bore the weight of an experience it was never built to carry (Achebe, 1975; Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, 1986). Everett's novel, on the reading offered here, takes Achebe's side of the wager and radicalizes it. The master's English is not merely bent but captured, worn as the private language of thought, while the master is fed a counterfeit of his own devising.

The critique, to restate it, is that the novel makes command of standard English the sign of full humanity and so ratifies the ideology it attacks. It deserves a real answer, and we think the novel contains one, in three parts. The first is philological, which is to say that it rests on the written forms themselves, on spelling and grammar as they appear on the page. It requires saying what AAL actually is before claiming that the novel does not depict it. Linguistic description has established the variety as a rule-governed system with its own tense and aspect machinery. Its morphology carries much of that machinery. Its aspectual markers include *habitual invariant* be, which marks recurrence rather than serving as a copula, *stressed BIN*, which places a state in the remote past, and *completive done*. Its syntax includes negative concord and a copula absence permitted in just those environments where standard English permits contraction, and blocked where it does not. Its phonology includes word-final consonant cluster reduction and stopping of the dental fricatives (Green, 2002; Rickford & Rickford, 2000). These are the features by which linguists identify AAL.

Searching the novel shows that the performed register, by which we mean the variety the enslaved characters produce for white listeners rather than the one they use

among themselves, is not built from these features. Table 1 reports the frequencies. It runs instead on respelling: *dat* appears 139 times, *de* 65, *dey* 56, *jest* 42, *massa* 39, *dere* 29, *lak* 25, *dis* 24. The diagnostic aspect markers are meanwhile thin or missing. *Stressed BIN* never appears at all, *completive done* appears three times, and *invariant be* appears in roughly thirty places, unevenly and without the systematic contrast that governs it in speech. The asymmetry is the point: what the novel reproduces is the visible surface of a stigmatized voice, not the grammatical system that linguists use to identify AAL, which is what one would expect of a written convention rather than a transcription of speech.

One qualification must be entered here, because it qualifies the claim that the performed register is not AAL. Some of those respellings do encode real phonological processes. *Dat* and *de* represent the stopping of the dental fricatives just described, which is attested in AAL and in Southern vernaculars alike, and *jest* and *lak* represent real vowel variants. The performed register is therefore not fabricated out of nothing. It is selected. Two asymmetries govern the selection, and both point away from speech and toward the page. The first is grammatical. The markers that most sharply define AAL as a system are the morphosyntactic ones, and those are the markers the novel's dialect largely lacks, while the phonological respellings are dense on every page. A convention that reproduces the audible surface and omits the underlying grammar is reproducing a sound, not a language.

The second asymmetry is representational, and it is decisive. Only the subordinated speaker's pronunciation is transcribed. When James narrates and when the enslaved speak among themselves, their words appear in conventional orthography, as though those mouths had no phonology at all. Every speaker has one. Conventional spelling encodes a pronunciation just as surely as *dat* does; it simply declines to mark it as deviation. Everett makes the mechanism visible by respelling Huck as well, so that what the convention tracks is social subordination rather than race alone, with the unmarked standard reserved for the narrating voice. Respelling, on this evidence, does not record a difference in speech so much as assign a difference in status.

A register marked in this way is what Krapp (1925) named eye dialect and what Ives (1950) called literary dialect, the conventional written signalling of low status, and its history runs through the minstrel songbook rather than through any speech community. The point is sharpened by comparison. Twain's Jim says "gwyne" more than thirty times; Everett's James spells the word that way exactly twice, and both times while performing, once in the staged witch monologue that opens the novel and once while re-enacting for Huck the hairball prophecy that Twain had played straight (Pt. 1, Chs. 1 and 3). The songbook that prefaces the novel is assembled from the same toolkit (*de*, *hab*, *sabe*), and the filter's *dat*, *dere*, and *missum sit* on the same shelf as Twain's painstakingly shaded Missouri negro dialect. What the enslaved perform, in other words,

is a citation of white writing about Black speech. In Agha's (2003) terms it is an enregistered voice, and the community that enregistered it was white.

Everett has supplied a historical warrant for the point. In a public conversation at Duke he observed that the surviving Works Progress Administration audio of formerly enslaved people does not sound the way the accompanying transcripts look, because the white transcribers rendered that speech in eye-dialect respelling. The recordings do preserve genuine vernacular features; what the transcripts added was the orthography of the minstrel page ("Reading is the most subversive," 2025). The novel therefore does not degrade the in-group vernacular of Black communities, because that vernacular is not what its dialect represents. Its binary is not AAL against the standard. It is the white fantasy of Black speech against the language of thought. Read this way,

**Table 1:** Frequency of dialect markers in Everett (2024a), counted by exhaustive case-insensitive search of the Doubleday electronic edition.

| Marker                         | Category                | Occurrences |
|--------------------------------|-------------------------|-------------|
| dat                            | Orthographic respelling | 139         |
| de                             | Orthographic respelling | 65          |
| dey                            | Orthographic respelling | 56          |
| jest                           | Orthographic respelling | 42          |
| massa                          | Orthographic respelling | 39          |
| dere                           | Orthographic respelling | 29          |
| lak                            | Orthographic respelling | 25          |
| dis                            | Orthographic respelling | 24          |
| invariant <i>be</i> (all uses) | AAL aspect marker       | 33          |
| completive <i>done</i>         | AAL aspect marker       | 3           |
| stressed <i>BIN</i>            | AAL aspect marker       | 0           |

the book's target is the very standard-language ideology the critique fears it serves, since it demonstrates that the broken dialect of the canon was never a record of Black minds at all.

The second part concerns how the novel treats the standard itself, which is to say, as a costume among costumes. James translates himself downward as an act of contempt; the narration's driest jokes land on white characters whose own English is nothing special; and the book's explicit finding, in the Thatcher scene, is that grammar operates on the powerful as terror (Pt. 3, Ch. 9). A prestige variety that functions as a scandal and a

weapon is being exposed, not endorsed. Padgett's point, that the standard owes its status to its speakers' power rather than to linguistic merit, is not a critique the novel misses but a proposition it stages. The third part is the reader. Everett's Erasure had already shown, through its embedded parody of ghetto realism, that the market pays Black authors to perform a white-imagined vernacular. James runs the experiment in reverse. It confines the reader for three hundred pages inside a Black voice the canon has trained them to find impossible. The reported discomfort is the instrument working. A residue of risk survives, admittedly: a hurried reader may keep the surface lesson and miss the satire. That hazard attends all irony, and Everett has been explicit that whatever meaning his work has is generated by its readers (Everett, 2024c). The book wagers, as Twain's did, on being read twice.

The living alternative to Everett's strategy makes the stakes concrete. Fishkin's *Jim*, published a year after Everett's novel, hands a stretch of its narrative over to Jim's dialect entirely, on the stated ground that the voice is not a diminished one and that only prejudice against Black English devalues it (as cited in Sullivan, 2025). Fishkin revalues the dialect; Everett impounds it as white property. The two books disagree about the artifact, and the disagreement is real, but they agree precisely about the reader, whose trained ear is in both cases the thing on trial.

## CONCLUSION

We have argued that James dismantles the narrative authority of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* by exposing, and then reversing, the linguistic contract on which that authority rested. Twain asked readers to accept rendered dialect as rendered essence, certified by a white author's personal familiarity. Everett re-describes the dialect as a script, teaches the reader its rules in a slave-cabin classroom, prices its maintenance in fear and exhaustion, stages it as literal minstrelsy, and finally strips it off in scenes where a Black man's undisguised voice frightens power more than his pistol does.

The broader claim is that James models a distinctive way of deconstructing a canon. It does not ban, replace, or correct its precursor. It converses with it, in Everett's word, and conducts the conversation in the precursor's own medium, language, at the exact point of the precursor's greatest pride, the vernacular. The novel's own figure for the method is the palimpsest, which overwrites without erasing and keeps the original legible as evidence. That method may explain why the book has been received less as an attack on Twain than as a completion of him, and why its most durable effect is likely prospective: it is difficult to imagine a future reader hearing Jim's dialect as a window rather than a mask. The canon is not diminished by such rereading. It is, at last, fully audible. Everett hoped to have written the novel Twain could not write. On the evidence assembled here, he also rewrote the one Twain did.

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## Author Contributions

M. S. Faiyaz: conceptualization, literary analysis, sources, drafting, revision, corresponding author. I. B. M. Shukti: linguistic framework and analysis (code-switching, audience design, markedness, enregisterment, politeness theory), review of the sociolinguistic argument, revision. Both authors have read and agreed to the content of the submitted manuscript.

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## Use of Generative AI

Generative AI (Anthropic's Claude) was used in preparing this manuscript, for drafting and revising prose, locating and verifying secondary sources, formatting, and reference management. The authors set the direction of the argument, verified all quotations and citations against the primary and secondary sources, incorporated external peer review, and take full responsibility for the content, accuracy, and conclusions of the submitted work.

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