

Huck's Jim Goes Whiteface

by Gorman Beauchamp

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This year Percival Everett published a novel—*James*—which has received a lot of attention. Its jacket blurb informs us that it is a retelling of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, from the slave Jim's point of view, or at least as a companion to it. The first page introduces two white boys, Huck and Tom, lurking in the grass listening to the slaves. No reader with even the most elementary sense of American literature could fail to grasp the significance of those two names, its best-known duet. But how, exactly, are the two books related?

Early in *James*, Huck tells Jim that he has seen boot tracks in the snow with a cross mark in them. I know he was thinking about his father, Jim comments, but says: "I wouldn't study on dat too much." But Huck remains worried about what the cross signs bode. The recent or truly retentive reader of *Huck Finn* will recall all that those signs portend, who his father is—a drunken, illiterate brute—why he has returned, what it will mean for Huck, but *James*

only brushes against this lightly, in these few terse, unexplained lines. How much do allusions like these, particularly in the early part of the book, depend for their importance and resonance on *Huck Finn*? How would the innocent reader of *James*, who had no knowledge of Twain's work, assuming such a creature could exist, begin to understand the interconnectedness of the two? How much of *Huck Finn* does one need to know to fully appreciate *James*?

Literature contains many prequels and sequels. But novels retelling or reinterpreting others, while rarer, seem to be trending. Perhaps the closest parallel to *James* is Alice Randell's semi-parody of *Gone With the Wind*, *The Wind Done Gone*, not only set in the same Confederate South, but an agonistic alternative to the original. As long as *James* follows the events of *Huck Finn*, even when shifting the focus of view from the boy to the slave, it remains dependent on its "source." Then it breaks free, how and why we will see.

Huckleberry Finn exists as probably the most famous and most significant figure in American literature, his adventures known to more readers of all ages and every level of sophistication over a longer period of time than any other. Twain's semi-literate waif, with a magical gift for language and irrepressible urge to see what's on the other side of the mountain, has become iconic, mythic, to be emulated, imitated, spun off from, imagined in widely different contexts—with that wonderfully, inimitable name, Huckleberry. Seven American movies have been made of his adventure, beginning in a 1920's silent version, as well as one in German and one in Russian. In spite of his unique prominence, however, in the last half century or so increasing attention has come to be paid to Jim, not just as Huck's sidekick, but as a significant character in his own right, with all the vexing questions about Twain's racial depictions coming to the fore. These issues have come to dominate in the criticism, but, for now at least, they reach their climax in the shift from Huck to Jim in *James*.

The first thing you notice in Everett's *James* is the language. Or the languages: there are two, both spoken by the black slaves. One is standard, (more or less) grammatically correct English as spoken by most white Americans, in which Jim narrates the novel. The other is the language spoken by the slaves in the presence of any white person, what we might call Ebonics—or Slavephonics. The first constitutes the natural language, seemingly of all the blacks

that Jim encounters along the Mississippi; the second is a learned language taught to slave children to make them seem slow or dimwitted, a means of defense against white aggression.

Jim makes this explicit early on, teaching a group of children that such language lessons are indispensable: "Safe movement through the world depends on a mastery of language ... White folks expect us to sound a certain way and it can only help if we don't disappoint them." There follows a lesson on how to sound dumb. If a lady lets the bacon grease catch fire, don't tell her water will only make it worse, one student offers; she should use sand. "Correct approach," Jim says, "but you didn't translate it," She nodded, "Oh. Lawd, missums ma'am, you want for me to get some sand." "Good," James responds.

The use and distinction of these two languages play a crucial role in the novel. Once inadvertently, Jim uses the word "hilarious" in front of Huck who is puzzled by it. "In all my life, he thinks, that was the first time I ever had a language slip."

The duality of slave languages, however, surprises, and surely was meant to. It inverts the reality we know. Blacks have a variant of English all their own, with even its own rules—again, Ebonics. This may be taken as, for most, their natural (or at least culturally conditioned) language. To function in the wider world they must master standard English and be able to code switch back and forth between the two, as the occasion demands. This widely accepted

reality (the source of infinite investigation) Everett inverts—standard English the slaves' *true* language, the dumb-ed-down slave patois what they *must learn*—is positing a historical counterfactual that has never been. His hypothesis, while intriguing, rings false.

Why posit it? Everett is a bona fide intellectual: this book lists 33 others to his credit. He is clearly a man of the word, for whom writing is life-fulfilling. And he is black. One suspects that for a man of such linguistic facility, the vernacular language of black people of the past, the language of the black people in *Huckleberry Finn*, is perhaps the most dehumanizing of slavery's cruelties. He can use their language in *James*, even relish what's picturesque and vivid in it, while at the same time standing secretly behind, detached, ironic (his favorite word), superior, in the sense that they knew better—literally.

Fictionally, It becomes a kind of thought experiment in historical revisionism: what if they had *always* known better—and were fooling the rest of us all along? Given that these are *his* people, rather than projecting his ability onto them, he is retrojecting it, making them cleverer than the white world imagined all along. This language craft might be considered a kind of aesthetic reparation.

This Jim is also obsessed with reading, for contrary to the reality of his time, when slaves were forbidden to, he can. He apparently has taught himself this skill from hours secretly spent in the library of Judge Thatcher, who,

given what Jim has been reading there, must be something of an intellectual; for as Jim's dreams reveal, he is something of an intellectual himself, conversant with the *philosophes*. Here again, it defies credulity to believe that he has taught himself to read from Voltaire and Montesquieu (in translation?) instead of from some primer, as any normal person would. Still, in his fever dream from a snake bite, Jim carries on dialogues with such figures, assured of their works' contents. Is implausibility simply not an issue here? Has Everett offered a means that simply could not lead to this end? Can he just posit anything at all because it's his novel, like a squared circle?

Take this instance, where Huck and Jim are discussing getting three wishes from a genie: "The question I played with ... was what would Kierkegaard wish for." Now Kierkegaard was a Danish theologian-philosopher, who lived in the time period when *James* was set, who wrote entirely in Danish, mostly pseudonymously, little known outside Denmark, and who was not translated into English until the 1930s, when he was being hailed as the father of existentialism in some quarters. Are we to believe that Judge Thatcher, a backwoods provincial lawyer, had untranslated volumes of a Danish theologian in his library—and that Jim could read them? Couldn't Jim have wondered just as well about Pascal or Wittgenstein, for isn't this really just name dropping, time and probability be damned? Could Kierkegaard really offer an opinion on

which genie's wishes should be granted? If Everett retrojects tremendous linguistic facility on his whole race, here he imbues a nineteenth century slave with his own twenty-first century knowledge, transmuting himself into Jim or Jim into himself.

This self-identification becomes even clearer in Jim's obsession with writing—to be a writer. He seems to have acquired that writing skill as well in Judge Thatcher's library—again with no teacher, no tools, not even paper—but at several points proves able to transcribe his thoughts in fairly elaborate, even eloquent language. After the first such instance, the beginning of a biographical sketch, he concludes (his italics): “*With my pencil, I wrote myself into being. I wrote myself to here.*” What we have seems to be the wish-fulfilling projection of the novelist into the slave: they are essentially the same. In any case these secret achievements attained in Jim's time in Judge Thatcher's library belie his claim that Miss Watson works him too hard.

When *James* begins its parallel to *Huck Finn*, the two are not even in the same decade, but that becomes significant only much later. Even initially the two works don't synchronize well. Pap returns, in Twain's version, kidnaps and imprisons Huck, who fakes his own death and takes off to hide on Jackson's Island. He's there when Jim, who has learned that Miss Watson plans to sell him to a man in New Orleans, runs away to seek refuge on the same island, in Everett's version.

At any event, they are now together, on the run. Jim's account for what now happens must differ from Huck's because the boy becomes involved in situations where the man must be left behind. The first of these, where Huck goes ashore dressed as a girl, only to be discovered by his inability to properly thread a needle, is one of the most delightful in *Huck Finn*, but since Jim is not there, we get only a barebones summary, minus the humor. Instead, in Everett's version, he sends Huck back to Hannibal—the town's name is not changed in *James*—to see how his wife and daughter are faring: “sadly,” Huck reports. Although in Twain's tale they are already far away from home. In both cases, Huck returns with the message “They're after us!” often cited in the criticism as the first statement of their united fate, and they take off together.

For the next stretch of Everett's novel, the two duplicate the “adventures” of Twain's, but in starkly abbreviated form. They board the stranded ship, the *Walter Scott*, where Huck overhears two robbers plan to kill the third, but, having lost their raft, he and Jim take the robbers boat and leave the three to their fate. But this complicated business in *Huck* in *James* only serves as an occasion for Jim to find some books in the robbers' swag for him to cherish, among them Voltaire's *Treatise on Tolerance* and Rousseau's *Discourse on Inequality*, not the sort of reading, one would think, that robbers would care to salvage—but for Jim, oh boy! When later they wreck their raft and are separated, Jim plays

no part in Huck's experience with the Grangerfords, who take him in, or their feud with the Shepherdsons, which plays such an important part in *Huck Finn*. When Huck tells him about it, Jim relates, "I listened without much interest." During the same time, unsure of Huck's fate, Jim finds a hiding place and "read and read"—those stolen books—"but found that what I needed was to write."

He finds a group of slaves seemingly unoccupied whom he amazes with his ability to read and write and expresses his intense desire for a pencil. One of the young slaves steals one for him, but is found out, tied to a tree, and whipped, as Jim watches in hiding. The pencil, only a three-inch nub, becomes a talisman for Jim, symbol of his ambition to write, which he keeps to the very end. "I had developed the habit of periodically touching it through the fabric of my pocket for comfort."

Jim and Huck meet up again and are on their raft down the river when they are invaded by two con men fleeing victims of their scams. They don't know each other but come up with elaborate accounts of their "true" origins, and in both Twain's and Everett's accounts they are referred to as the Duke and the King. Huck and Jim are compelled to take part in some of their subsequent scams, although sometimes just Huck. Accounts begin to differ, however, when the two men are forced to flee with Huck, leaving Jim behind. This is where *James* breaks from *Huckleberry*

Finn, going entirely in a different direction, with an entirely different agenda.

My comparisons of the two works—invidious, for the most part, to *James*—are fair because, in building his work on Twain's greatly familiar foundation, Everett inevitably invites them. Twain's work is ever so much fuller, linguistically richer and far more imaginative, more detailed, funnier. Everett's Huck can lie but doesn't hold a candle to Twain's and lacks his interiority and vivid imagination.

And here is the point: when you undertake to tell an already famous story but alter it considerably, people notice. The alterations call attention to themselves. *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is a comic story, abuzz with humor and good fun. Except for the Duke and King's accounts of their origins, lifted from Twain, I can't recall a single laugh in *James*: Everett is not a comic writer, his Jim is not a comic character. Even before the two plots diverge dramatically, the two versions are not really synchronic narratively or stylistically.

When *James* splits off from *Huck Finn*, the book becomes much darker, more painful. The fate of slaves in the South has all along been depicted as miserable, tenuous, anxiety-inducing, but without Huck as a companion, who could always claim him as his slave, Jim becomes more vulnerable, subject to and of greater abuse. When he tries to escape a cruel owner with two others, they are pursued by men with dogs and guns, shooting to kill. "You can't work a dead slave," his companion pants, "Why

would they shoot?" "Because they hate us," Jim replies.

This seems true; the other fleeing companion is shot dead. The state of fear in which black people live is palpable: when a white woman asks, "Did he jest look at me?" Jim feels a kind of panic, that being one of the taboos that black men had most to avoid. The severe, deliberate white degradation of blacks permeates the last half of *James*—which may be a weakness: *all* the Whites are predatory beings, with no redeeming qualities. When, in disguise, Jim can look at a white woman, "I saw the surface of her, merely her outer shell, and realized she was mere surface all the way down to her core"—not an observation allowing for any complexity or nuance in those he fears. The novel is, in this sense, black and white.

When Jim is separated from Huck, he is left behind to fill in for an injured blacksmith and begins singing at his work, where he is overheard by a man who wants to buy him for a tenor in his traveling entourage, the Virginia Minstrels. The man introduces himself as Daniel Decatur Emmett, a real historical figure, the composer of "Dixie": his troupe here (anachronistically) is a touring Jim Crow act. He pays two hundred dollars for Jim and declares him a free man, but indebted for his cost to be repaid for two hundred performances at a dollar each. Jim, light skinned, can nevertheless not appear on stage as a black man, for only a white man in blackface is allowed to do that. "You're black," one band member explains, "but they won't

let you in the auditorium if they know that, so you have to be white under the makeup so that you can look black to the audience": a black man pretending to be a white man pretending to be a black man in order to mock black men. Jump Jim Crow.

The man who makes this explanation for Jim is Norman Brown, who reveals that he is really black, although able to pass for white, able to speak both languages. They become friends, abscond together from the Virginia Minstrels. When Jim asks why he would prefer to be black when he can pass as white, he says, "Because of my mother. Because of my wife. Because I don't want to be white. I don't want to be one of them."

A slave hectoring Jim immediately becomes subservient when Norman appears, assuming him to be Jim's master, demonstrating the chasm in status and what Norman gives up to be black. When the steamboat they have secretly boarded blows up and they are thrown into the river, Jim faces a terrible choice: helping to save Norman, who can't swim, or Huck, who had also been on the boat, clinging desperately to some flotsam. The air was filled with screams, but I could hear only two sounds clearly, two voices calling my name." He chooses Huck.

Why? [Spoiler alert] Because Huck is his son. This admission comes as a shock, especially to Huck, but to the reader as well. Sometimes in the criticism, a critic would comment that Jim proves more a father to Huck than Pap Finn ever was: Everett makes it so.

When Jim confesses this, Huck at first feels confused that Jim isn't speaking slave anymore, but then it sinks in, "So, I am a nigger?" "You can be what you want to be," Jim replies, presumably one message of the book, but leaving Huck in a quandary which never gets resolved.

There were subtle hints throughout the story, but nothing to prepare readers for Jim's explanation to Huck. "Your mother and I were little children together. We were friends. And we grew up. And . . . And you are my son." Of course, everything is implied by what's not there, behind that single "And . . ." And it doesn't wash.

We know nothing of Huck's mother—did she give him that inimitable name Huckleberry?—in either *Huck Finn* or *James* (other than the bit above). How can we imagine a white girl and a slave, past the age of puberty, "playing together" enough to conceive a child? Where? Under what conditions? When Jim and Huck once talked briefly about his mother, Jim says, "she was real nice ... she didn't live long, but she loved ya. You should know dat." How, indeed, did Jim know? When Huck asks if she was pretty, he replies, "It's a scarry thing for a slave to think such things," meaning that a black man could not, with impunity, look at a white woman with a judging eye. A man who has contempt, on the one hand, and fear, on the other, for white women seems extremely unlikely to have breached the racial barrier for sexual union. "We were friends. We grew up. And. You are my son." Are we

to fill in the blanks here? Jim simply won't fit.

But why would Everett want to suggest something as audacious as Jim's claiming to be Huck's father? Having substantially finished my own review, I decided to consult several others in major publications—*New York Times*, *New York Review of Books*, *London Review of Books*—to see what they said: absolutely nothing, not a word about this shocking claim. Journalists talk about burying the lede: this was eliminating it.

Such a claim in Huck's time or even Twain's would presumably have lowered Huck's status in people's estimation—"just a black boy"—not presumably what Everette wanted. The whole of *James* is his attempt to elevate the idea of the black man—the language, the literacy, the secret superiority of understanding (all reflecting himself). Since Twain's time Huck had become an American icon, the essence of boyish good-heartedness and grit and truth telling (despite his remarkable facility at lying). To recreate him as Jim's son is to confer all his virtues on the slave race, to make the icon black. Thus the twenty-first century novelist can rebirth the nineteenth century child as the product of his own imaginative loins—a neat job of body snatching, if you can carry it off.

Surviving the boat wreck, Huck and Jim head back to Hannibal—Jim to find his wife and child and Huck to ... it's not exactly clear what—to be "civilized" by Aunt Sally, the fate he dreaded? His return from the dead is greeted raptur-

ously, presumably without his revealing his “true parentage”—how would *that* be received?—and reports he can’t even take a piss without someone watching over him. But Jim makes one last plea to him: “Huck, you’ve got to help me,” I said. “Someone has to help me ... Huck?” (A reason for having claimed to be Huck’s father?) His wife and child have been sold away and he is desperate to find where. I’m just a child, Huck protests. “Think of it as an adventure,” Jim urges, not greatly concerned with the boy’s welfare.

His own behavior in the novel’s last part comes actually more to resemble Captain America or Spider-Man type adventures than those of a desperate runaway slave, which he still is: he chokes to death a cruel overseer who he’s seen raping a black woman—and enjoys watching him die; he invades Judge Thatcher’s home to find where his wife and daughter have been sold—and takes the judge prisoner to lead him there; he finds the “breeding farm” where they are held—and sets its dry corn fields afire, shooting the owner to death when he comes out; and leads all the slaves there to freedom—north, to Iowa. “The white people didn’t seem happy to see us, but there was a war on. It had something to do with us.” The Civil War has begun. (*Huck Finn* was set twenty years earlier.) Feeling that he had won the right, Jim discards his slave name and adopts “James.”

Earlier he had pondered what the war meant:

I considered the northern white stance against slavery. How much of the desire to end an institution was fueled by a need to quell and subdue white pain and guilt? Was it just too much to watch? Did it offend Christian sensibilities to live in a society that allowed that practice. I knew that whatever the cause of the war, freeing slaves was incidental and would have an incidental result.

This statement is self-contradictory: if slavery offended Christian sensibilities, why would freeing the slaves be *incidental* to fighting the war? And why would that result be *incidental*? Throughout Jim has been agnostic about God, ironically inconclusive about the efficacy of prayer. But he seems at least as agnostic about any help coming from white people, any political redemption. A current position among many racialist critics diminishes the role that white people played in freeing blacks and maximizes blacks’ own agency and efforts. Everett wants to depict that in *James*, having Jim literally lead his band of slaves out of bondage, in effect his doing. But where has he led them to find safety? North, behind Union lines. And the freedom that he struggled to gain for his wife and daughter (and by extension the other slaves) is being won *for them* all by a great war, the motives for which he considers, somehow, incidental.

Twain’s ending has proved almost universally unsatisfactory, with all conflicts resolved by acts of individual (white) goodness. But *Huck Finn* was a comedy, happy ending obligatory. *James*, by deviating so radically from Twain’s

tale, provides a different kind of happy ending, that of a morality tale, justice done by Everett's heroic black .

Huckleberry Finn fairly bursts with so much imagination, so much unforgettable invention, uniquely Twain, rich, comic, wonderfully absurd that imitation of it is impossible. *James* is ... well, not Twain, whose work, with all its faults, need not fear being superseded, or even equaled.

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