THE PSYCHOLOGICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF NAMING AND RENAMING IN THE JOURNEY TO SELF IN *JAMES* BY PERCIVAL EVERETT

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Abstract: *The present research paper examines Percival Everett's James. It argues that the act of naming constitutes a central psychological battleground for identity, agency, and resistance against racial trauma. The novel reframes Twain's "Jim" as James, whose deliberate shift from the imposed, dehumanizing slave name "Jim" to the self-chosen "James" signifies a critical evolution from subjugation to self-possession. Everett reveals that external imposition of names like "Jim" functions as a tool of systemic erasure and psychological violence, which perpetuates slavery's "social death" and reinforces hierarchies of white supremacy. Conversely, the act of James's renaming is symbolic defiance and "wake work", becoming a foundational step in trauma recovery and self-construction. The novel then critiques naming's power dynamics, contrasting white characters' grandiose titles with the enslaved community's nicknames, which are both survival tools and covert resistance. Ultimately, James positions self-naming as an essential psychological and political assertion of humanity and liberation within structures of historical and ongoing oppression.*

Keywords: *Percival Everett, James, Self-Naming, Systemic Erasure, Dehumanization, Racialized Identity, Slavery's Afterlife, Narrative Reclamation.*

Introduction:

In Percival Everett's *James*, the act of naming transcends mere identification, emerging as a profound psychological battleground where identity, agency, and resistance collide. This novel reimagines the narrative of Huckleberry Finn's "Nigger Jim," transforming him into James, a self-aware protagonist whose journey from the dehumanizing moniker of "Jim" to the self-chosen "James" mirrors his evolution from subjugation to self-possession. The psychological significance of this renaming lies at the heart of the novel's exploration of trauma recovery and self-construction, positioning language as both a weapon of systemic erasure and a tool for reclaiming humanity. Through the lens of James' transformation, Everett interrogates how imposed names perpetuate psychological violence, while self-named identities become acts of defiance, illuminating the broader struggle of marginalized communities to assert autonomy in a world structured by white supremacy.

James' initial designation as "Jim" reflects the dehumanizing logic of slavery, a name assigned by others that reduces him to property rather than personhood. The novel underscores how such labels are not neutral but instruments of domination, echoing Frantz

Fanon's theories on colonial identity formation, where the oppressed internalize their objectification (Fanon 109). Yet James' deliberate adoption of "James" marks a pivotal rupture—a rejection of external definitions and an embrace of self-authorship. This act of renaming becomes a psychological milestone, aligning with trauma recovery frameworks where reclaiming agency over one's narrative fosters healing (Herman 133). In choosing his name, James asserts control over his story, transforming from a passive figure in others' tales to an active architect of his destiny.

Beyond James' arc, Everett critiques power dynamics embedded in naming practices. White characters, such as the fraudulent "King" and "Duke," wield grandiose titles to legitimize their authority and expose how language upholds racial hierarchies. Conversely, nicknames among the enslaved—like "Young George" or "Caesar"—reveal dual functions: tools of survival within a dehumanizing system and covert expressions of solidarity. These linguistic choices mirror Houston Baker's analysis of African American oral traditions, where coded language preserves cultural memory and resistance (Baker 7). By juxtaposing these practices, Everett highlights how naming becomes a site of psychological warfare and resilience, exposing the trauma of erasure while celebrating the subversive creativity of the oppressed.

Ultimately, *James* positions renaming as central to the construction of selfhood in the face of systemic violence. The novel innovatively frames this act as both a personal and political assertion, arguing that liberation begins with the audacity to name oneself. Through James' journey, Everett invites readers to consider how language, once a shackle, can become a ladder toward self-realization—a testament to the enduring power of identity in the shadow of historical and psychological trauma.

The Imposition of "Jim": Dehumanization and the Erasure of Identity:

In Percival Everett's *James*, the name "Jim" functions as a tool of systemic erasure, reducing the protagonist to an object devoid of personhood. This imposed label reflects what Saidiya Hartman terms the "afterlife of slavery," where dehumanization persists through linguistic violence (Hartman 11). James repeatedly confronts the infantilizing connotations of "Jim," as seen in his exchange with Huck: "What? What's content?" (Everett 127). This moment underscores the deliberate denial of intellectual agency, a tactic Hartman links to slavery's "social death," wherein enslaved individuals were rendered "fungible commodities" stripped of individuality (Hartman 12). The name "Jim", a diminutive, is a linguistic shackle which denies James the dignity of self-identification.

White characters, by contrast, wield names that signify authority. Daniel Decatur Emmett, named after the real-life pro-slavery minstrel composer, embodies the cultural erasure of Black voices. His introduction, "Daniel Decatur Emmett extended his hand to me as if to shake" (Everett 185), juxtaposes the performative gesture of equality with the brutal reality of ownership. As Christina Sharpe argues, such symbolic gestures exemplify the "wake work" of white supremacy, where Black bodies are subjected to "violence and its aftermath" (Sharpe 21). Emmett's historical name legitimizes his domination, while James's truncated identity reinforces his subjugation.

The psychological toll of this erasure surfaces in James's internal monologue: "I was sold when I was born and then sold again… I cannot claim to any knowledge of that world or those people" (Everett 3). This severed connection to ancestry mirrors the "disremembering" Hartman describes as central to slavery's legacy, where "the past is not dead but lives in the wounds of the present" (Hartman 113). Names like "Young George" and "Old George" further illustrate the arbitrary assignation of identities, reducing enslaved individuals to descriptors of age or utility—a practice Robert Stam identifies as part of slavery's "narrative of dispossession," designed to fracture collective memory (Stam 89).

Reclaiming "James": Self-Assertion and the Reconstruction of Identity:

James's declaration, "My name is James," marks a radical act of resistance against this erasure (Everett 154). By rejecting "Jim," he enacts what Sharpe calls "wake work" as survival, asserting agency through self-naming: "I am James. I'm going to get my family. You can come with me or you can stay here… My name is James" (Everett 154). The repetition transforms the statement into a mantra of liberation, echoing Toni Morrison's assertion that "the self-knowledge of a people is contingent on naming themselves" (Morrison 81).

Literacy becomes a vehicle for this self-assertion. James's prized pencil—"my prized possession" (Everett 92)—symbolizes his reclaiming of narrative control. When he writes, "I wrote myself into being. I wrote myself to here" (Everett 7), he engages in what David Blight describes as the "radical literacy" of enslaved people, where writing served as both "resistance and self-creation" (Blight 217). Even the pencil's stamp of "FABER" sparks his tentative adoption of a new surname: "James Faber. That didn't sound too bad" (Everett 92). This fluidity of identity aligns with Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s concept of the "Signifying Monkey," where Black protagonists subvert oppressive systems through linguistic play (Gates 104).

James's critique of Venture Smith's narrative—questioning how one could "remember the clans of their ancestors" at age five (Everett 130)—reveals his awareness of the "tidiness of lies" in white-authored accounts (Everett 130). For James, authentic self-representation demands rejecting such fictions: "I am called Jim. I have yet to choose a name" (Everett 215). His journey mirrors the "post-traumatic growth" theorized by Cathy Caruth, where healing emerges through the "reconstruction of a fractured self" (Caruth 5).

White Names and the Illusion of Legitimacy:

The novel critiques white characters who weaponize names to uphold dominance. Emmett's claim to "own" James— "meet your new master" (Everett 185)—ties his name to historical complicity, conflating artistry with exploitation. Similarly, the King and Duke exploit the performative power of names to manipulate others, reducing James to interchangeable slurs: "Caesar, Jim, April, Boyboy, Mandingo, don't make no diff'ence" (Everett 172). This linguistic flattening mirrors the logic of slavery, where individuality was erased to justify exploitation. Yet James resists, asserting, "My name is James" (Everett 154),

a defiance that aligns with Kimberlé Crenshaw's theory of intersectional resistance, which systematically challenges both racial and narrative erasure (Crenshaw 124).

Nicknames Among the Enslaved: Community and Resistance:

Nicknames among the enslaved reveal a duality: tools of trauma and solidarity. James's companions—Sadie, Lizzie, Morris, Buck—are referred to by first names, emphasizing their humanity in a dehumanizing system. When James defiantly lists their names to strangers, he enacts what Gates calls "signifyin(g)," a subversive act of recognition within Black communities (Gates 107). However, white-imposed labels like "Nigger Jim" weaponize race and name to degrade, forcing James to confront the "double consciousness" W.E.B. Du Bois described—a struggle to reconcile selfhood with society's gaze (Du Bois 3).

Psychological Trauma and Agency: Naming as a Path to Healing:

Renaming becomes integral to James's healing, mirroring the "narrative repair" Caruth associates with trauma recovery (Caruth 173). His feverish vision—"I saw Sadie and Lizzie… I could see books in front of me" (Everett 194)—conflates memory, language, and identity, illustrating how self-representation fosters resilience. By teaching enslaved children to "signify," James transforms language into a tool of collective agency: "Lawdy, missum! Looky dere" (Everett 199). This pedagogy echoes bell hooks's notion of "education as the practice of freedom," where marginalized communities reclaim knowledge to resist oppression (hooks 21).

Conclusion:

In Percival Everett's *James*, the seemingly simple act of naming emerges as the novel's profound psychological and political core. The imposition of the name "Jim" exemplifies slavery's dehumanizing logic, a tool of systemic erasure enforcing "social death" and reducing James to a fungible commodity within the "afterlife of slavery." This external designation inflicts psychological trauma, severing connection to ancestry and reinforcing objectification. Conversely, James's deliberate adoption of his chosen name is a radical act of "wake work" and self-authorship. This renaming signifies a pivotal rupture, rejecting imposed identities and reclaiming narrative control. Literacy becomes instrumental in this process, transforming James from a subject of others' stories into an active agent writing himself into being. Everett further critiques the power dynamics inherent in naming, exposing the illusory legitimacy of white titles like "King" and "Duke," while highlighting the complex duality of nicknames among the enslaved—simultaneously markers of survival within oppression and covert expressions of community solidarity and resistance. Ultimately, James's journey from "Jim" to "James" transcends personal identity; it becomes a powerful metaphor for trauma recovery through "narrative repair" and the fundamental assertion of humanity against erasure. Everett masterfully argues that true liberation begins with the audacity to name oneself, transforming language from a weapon of oppression into a vital "ladder toward self-realization" and psychological healing within the enduring shadow of historical trauma. The act of naming, therefore, stands as the ultimate act of defiance and self-possession.

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