

“The Mighty Mississippi”: Hydro-Racial Inscriptions and the Liquid Archive in Percival Everett’s *James*

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<p>Received: 11 Feb 2026; Received in revised form: 12 Mar 2026; Accepted: 16 Mar 2026; Available online: 22 Mar 2026</p> <p>©2026 The Author(s). Published by International Journal of English Language, Education and Literature Studies (IJEEL). This is an open access article under the CC BY license (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).</p> <p>Keywords— Percival Everett, Blue Humanities, Hydro-raciality, Liquid Archive, Mark Twain.</p>	<p><i>This research paper drafts an interdisciplinary hydro-racial analysis of the Pulitzer Prize-winning novel of 2025, James by Percival Everett. As a reimagined fiction of Mark Twain’s Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, Everett’s text places Jim, also known as James at the centre of the narrative. Through a Black perspectival lens, the study highlights the Mississippi River as a primary catalyst that underscores James’s journey from property to protagonist. It elucidates how the course of the story of James receives new dimensions only when it comes in contact with the river. The paper also describes James’s life as a constant contestation between the land and the water where the former compels him to mask his intelligence under the disguise of slavery but the latter empowers him to embrace his true identity. It further explains the reciprocal relationship between James and the Mississippi River. Finally, the article demonstrates the river’s role in the preservation of a liquid archive of James’s agency and history.</i></p>

I. INTRODUCTION

According to Steve Mentz, the Blue Humanities is a burgeoning field that focuses on “the many ways humans engage with water, utilizing literary, cultural, historical, and theoretical connections and ecologies to introduce students to the history and theory of water-centric thinking” (Mentz 1). It aims to understand closely the relational domain of the past, present and future between human and water. This interdisciplinary framework suggests that water is not merely a background for human drama but a dynamic force that shapes and is shaped by human interaction. By directing the focus from the stability of the land to the fluidity of the sea and river, it becomes essential for us to uncover the wet histories of marginalized subjects whose lives are inextricably tied to these aquatic networks. Nowhere is this

intersection more critical than in the antebellum American South, where the hydrological became inseparable from the sociological. Walter Johnson, a prominent historian of American slavery is of the opinion that:

The Mississippi River trade – the agricultural goods and cotton, the money and the slaves – gave the institution of slavery a whole new life in the first half of the nineteenth century: it determined the course of African-American history, and it debouched in the largest slave market in North America. (146)

Hence, the Mississippi River is one of the most heavily mapped geographies in the field of literary scholarship of the United States. If inspected minutely, it can be seen that the River of Mississippi most lustrously finds its place as the backbone for the

white-centered narrative of Huck's growth in Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* where Jim is rendered as a passive traveller. But when this tale is re-envisioned in Percival Everett's *James*, the river transforms into a vibrant intellectual landscape, granting James a profound interiority. In this novel, the river is reimagined as a hydro-racial space—a medium where the physical properties of water intersect with the systemic structures of race to create new possibilities for agency. Here, James navigates this environment by inhabiting what W.E.B. Du Bois terms “double consciousness,” which follows his explanation of the Black subject in America who lives behind “a Veil,” which he describes as “the sense 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” (xiii). The encounter with the wreckage of the “*Walter Scott*” provides a stark illustration of this strategic duality (Everett 49). By requesting that Huck decipher the name of the grounded craft, James engages in a systematic theatrical ruse that masks his sophisticated semiotic awareness. His feigned illiteracy before a namesake of the white romantic establishment transforms the river into a site of cognitive subterfuge. Within this hydro-racial context, the “Veil” functions as a protective shroud; while the white observer sees only a compliant servant, James is conducting a private post-mortem of the very cultural icons that seek to define his status as property. In Everett's reimagining, he does not merely suffer from this state rather weaponizes it. On the land, he performs a “correct incorrect grammar” to fulfil white expectations of Black inferiority (5). While on the water, he is a man of intellect with a definite purpose in life. This systemic contrast reflects a tensional relationship between terrestrial thinking of the land and the “water-centric thinking” of the river (Mentz 1). Crucially, this hydro-racial navigation is not merely performed but recorded. Everett frames the narrative as “The Notebook of Daniel Decatur Emmett,” a physical artefact that James eventually carries and protects. By stealing this leather-bound notebook, James transforms the transient aquatic stories of the river into a liquid archive where Black interiority is preserved against the corrosive atmospheric conditions of systemic racial hostility (Everett 6).

II. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

2.1 Fluent Subversions: Hydro-Logic and the Performative Literacy of the Mississippi

In Percival Everett's *James*, the Mississippi River serves as both a literal path and a profound allegory for the fluid, dangerous, and often deceptive nature of freedom and identity for a Black man in the antebellum South. Unlike the ignorant slave as depicted in Twain's original, in this version of the story, James is a literate man. However, he masks it under his act of slavery to lead a life to live and die. But, the atmosphere quickly shifts when he accidentally overhears a conversation between Miss Watson and a slave trader. He learns that he is going to be sold “down the river” to a plantation in New Orleans (Everett 25). This is the inciting incident of the novel. In *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Jim runs away because he hears he might be sold. In *James*, the weight of this tragic news is much heavier because James knows exactly that he is going to be separated from his wife, Sadie, and his daughter, Lizzie, forever. This inciting incident makes James embrace the path of a complete new journey into the unknown blue world of the tale. Even in the times of fear, James thinks to himself about the slave dialect he must use even in his moments of highest fear. He realizes that even his escape must be a perfect show. This linguistic strategy of James is a form of “Signifyin(g)”, which Henry Louis Gates Jr. identifies as the “repetition and revision, or repetition with a signal difference” that characterizes African American literary and oral traditions (Gates 51). This verbal mechanism that deliberately disrupts and removes the lines between literal meaning and allegorical significance of a sentence is embraced by James when he, together with Huck jointly plans to escape through the Mississippi River. He needs Huck's help (or at least the cover he provides), but he cannot fully trust a white person, even a child, with his greatest secret: his intelligence. This intelligence is not merely functional but profoundly theoretical. Early in the novel, James engages in a sophisticated dialogue with a fellow enslaved man, Luke, debating the nuances of their linguistic performance. They question whether a specific interaction constitutes “proleptic irony or dramatic irony?” (Everett 17). This moment illustrates that even within the constraints of the plantation, a fluid intellectual community exists, utilizing the very

hydro-logic of the environment to carve out spaces of shared, coded understanding that bypasses white comprehension entirely. However, James recognizes that internal intellect is insufficient without a material record. His quest for a pencil becomes a central subplot of his liberation. When Young George provides him with a mere “stub of pencil,” James describes this physical instrument of inscription as “amazing” and “huge” (Everett 69), precisely because it allows him to “follow [his] own reasoning” (Everett 68). This pencil is the bridge between the fluid, ephemeral thoughts of the runaway and the permanent, liquid archive of the notebook. It represents a material agency that refuses to let the Black experience be washed away by the literal and metaphorical currents of the Mississippi. In chapter 5, it is informed to us that James embarks alone in the Mississippi River, transmuting the land-based certainties into the fluid dynamics of the river. James says: “I pulled a log from the bank and slid it into the frigid, muddy water. I pushed off and kicked my way straight across, knowing that the strong current of the Mississippi would suck me downstream” (Everett 23). This aligns with Mentz’s concept of “wet globalization,” which he describes as “a globalization structured through maritime labor and technologies” (xxix). Within this liquid landscape, James navigates a world where identity is as volatile as the current, embodying the “wet narratives” that Mentz argues “emphasize disorder, disorientation, and rupture; they narrate experiences in which the usual ways of doing things get broken or fragmented” (xiv). The materiality of the river serves as the primary instrument of this disruption. Unlike the barren logic of the shore, which relies on fixed laws and social hierarchies, the Mississippi is characterized by a deceptive and non-human force. James observes:

The Mississippi is swifter than it looks. It’s scary, for that reason. You can mess around in some branches and backwaters and start to think it’s gentle and then you get out into it and it’s a different story. Because of the recent flood we had to get pretty far from the bank or else we’d get caught up in brush or debris. That made it even more harrowing. (Everett 46)

This passage has multiple connotations. To James, the river is an active antagonist rather than a passive backdrop, articulating his physical and psychological

life. It explores the tension between appearance and reality, safety and danger, and the mastery of environment required for survival. Everett also indicates the readers by alluding to the other side of the story of the Mississippi River as narrated through a white lens in Twain’s *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* where James is placed in the background as secondary character. But in *James*, he obtains the central perspective who precisely understands the dangerous characteristics of the river. He is well aware about the hydro-logic or the logic of the water, unfolding the immense and constant pressure of surviving in a world that denies his humanity.

2.2 Vessels of Sovereignty: The Raft as a Transnational Chronotope

The discussion can be deepened by inviting Paul Gilroy’s seminal work, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* where he argues that the ship is the central symbol (chronotope) of Black history. He writes:

I have settled on the image of ships in motion across the spaces between Europe, America, Africa, and the Caribbean as a central organising symbol for this enterprise and as my starting point. The image of the ship—a living, micro-cultural, micro-political system in motion. (Gilroy 4)

In Everett’s novel, the raft functions as this very system. On the land, Jim is a piece of property governed by the rigid slave codes of Hannibal, Missouri. On the Jackson Island, James and Huck form an alliance where the former already had a canoe but the latter had to build a raft. While Mark Twain’s *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* presents the raft as a domestic sanctuary, noting “there warn’t no home like a raft, after all” (Twain 113). Whereas Everett’s James views the vessel as a tactical vehicle rather than a mere abode. On the raft, when he speaks to Huck about philosophy or his own internal state, the raft becomes a “transnational” space where a new and negotiated relationship between Black and white is possible (Gilroy ix). On this raft, the liquid archive expands to include the Western canon itself. While feverish and floating, James experiences “imagined conversations with Voltaire, Rousseau and Locke about slavery, race and, of all things, albinism” (Everett 37). By bringing these Enlightenment thinkers into a shared aquatic

fellowship on the Mississippi, Everett suggests that the oceanic network of the African diaspora is not just a space of labour, but a site of radical intellectual re-mapping where the foundational agreements of civil society are interrogated by those they historically excluded. There James feels a profound sense of relief to be away from the direct gaze of white society. Although James constantly stays hyper-vigilant to keep the “slave filter” intact, he feels a genuine and growing affection for Huck, too, share a mutual feeling (Everett 37).

2.3 Weathering the Wake: Atmospheric Antiracism and the Vigil of Silence

Moving forward, the discourse takes into account Christina Sharpe’s auto-theoretical work *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* to evaluate the narrative architecture of Percival Everett’s *James*. Sharpe conceptualizes “the wake” not as a document of the history but as a persistent reality. She writes: “...to be in the wake is to occupy and to be occupied by the continuous and changing present of slavery’s as yet unresolved unfolding” (9). This state elucidates that the “past that is not past” constantly ruptures the present (6). By mapping Sharpe’s metaphors of the weather, the ship, and the vigil onto the lived experiences of Everett’s James, we can see how the protagonist steers a world where antiracism is not a singular event but a total environment. She defines “the weather” as the pervasive atmospheric condition that dictates Black existence. To quote Sharpe, “the weather is the totality of our environments; the weather is the total climate; and that climate is antiracist” (66). In *James*, this atmospheric pressure is felt in the constant and looming threat that modulates every movement of the enslaved. James reflects on this existential suspension, commenting on the crushing weight of temporal waiting:

Waiting is a big part of a slave’s life, waiting and waiting to wait some more. Waiting for demands. Waiting for food. Waiting for the ends of days. Waiting for the just and deserved Christian reward at the end of it all. (Everett 13)

These lines reflect the psychological and existential toll of enslavement where the act of waiting becomes a primary condition of existence. On one hand, the waiting is inherently a passive state. He describes the

lives of enslaved persons as a series of waits. These individuals have no control over their own time, body, or future. The repetition of the word “waiting” mirrors the cyclic and repetitive nature of them. It suggests a gruelling stagnation where the passage of time is not marked by personal achievement or growth, but simply by the endurance of another day. Also James’s comment on Christian theology where it is written that the only true end to the cycle of waiting is death itself seems to be an ironical yet optimistic view. On the other hand, this waiting is a contingency plan within a climate where violence is as predictable as the seasons. For James, the weather of antiracism manifests as a permanent state of precariousness.

Central to Sharpe’s evaluation is the “American ship of state,” an imperial project that was “authorized by both liberty and slavery” (qtd. in DeLoughrey 53). The “wake” of the ship is the trail of destruction, displacement, and social death it leaves in its path. Sharpe notes:

The overriding engine of US racism cut through my family’s ambitions and desires. It coursed through our social and public encounters and our living room. Racism, the engine that drives the ship of state’s national and imperial projects...cuts through all of our lives and deaths inside and outside the nation, in the wake of its purposeful flow. (Sharpe 2)

She describes the country as a massive watercraft moving through history. In it, racism is the machinery that keeps the ship going. It is not a glitch in the system but the system’s core functionality. In Everett’s novel, this metaphor finds a literal manifestation when the fragile raft of James and Huck, used in their escape is destroyed by a steamboat. Everett describes the raft being “caught by the...passing hull” of the larger vessel (63). In this collision, the steamboat represents the crushing momentum of white commerce and civilization that cuts through the water without regard for the smaller vessel of Black flight. The literal “wake” of the ship destroys the raft, mirroring Sharpe’s observation that colonial expands itself often through the exclusion or exploitation of Black people. The raft, representing a precarious attempt at sovereignty, is consistently threatened by the larger “ships” of the States, demonstrating that even in the pursuit of freedom, the enslaved are forced to embrace the moving, disturbed and messy flow of

the water that the ship leaves, hinting at its historical and physical violence.

Beyond these crucial elements, Sharpe defines the wake as a “vigil” – the act of staying awake to watch over the dead. She argues that this labour is essential to surviving the disaster of slavery: “It is work: hard emotional, physical, and intellectual work that demands vigilant attendance to the needs of the dying, to ease their way, and also to the needs of the living” (Sharpe 7). To perform “wake work” is to recognize the humanity of Black people in a world that consistently fails to provide care (Sharpe 9). James performs this most profoundly when he discovers the body of Huck’s father, Pap, on a floating house and chooses to keep the death a secret from the boy. James explains his reasoning as a necessity for their mutual survival:

Perhaps, fearful of him or not, I had some concern that grief could overcome the boy if his father, hated or not, was dead. Selfishly, I wondered how Huck’s incapacitation might affect me, but I felt only momentary guilt for that. Now that I had withheld the information for several days, Huck might become angry with me. He might betray me and cause my capture. (Everett 42)

James’s silence is a calculated act of protection. He recognizes that in their continuous jeopardized situation, an emotional collapse would be a fatal complication. He absorbs the weight of the death internally in order to ensure that the voyage toward safety remains possible. This management of truth is a demanding form of labour. James stays fully conscious of the tragedy while shielding his companion from its impact. In taking control of this information, James no longer carries the label of hunted object. Rather, he evolves as the lead strategist of their manoeuvre. Ultimately, he demonstrates that surviving the lingering effects of a violent history requires a constant, protective awareness—a way of living that honours the dead by ensuring the living are not pulled under by the past.

2.4 Elemental Emancipation: Trans-corporeal Alliances and the Alchemy of the Forge

“The mighty Mississippi” river in *James* is portrayed as a locus of collision where social hierarchies and material realities dismantle (Everett 175). While the

plantation system attempts to categorize “Jim” as mere sale product with a price tag, the river identifies “James” as a material entity subject to its flows. This dual nature of the river as both a physical and political conduit is best understood through Alaimo’s analysis of environmental literature. Alaimo writes:

I propose, instead, that even as Rukeyser includes a panoply of discourses, she struggles to map an ontology in which the body of the worker, the river, the silica, the “natural,” and the industrial environment are simultaneously material and social, sites where institutional and material power swirl together. (48)

In the novel, this power is evident when James interprets the river’s movement as a discourse of liberation. During a moment of deep reflection on the water, he observes the confluence of the Ohio and the Mississippi, remarking, “It’s the Ohio, Huck. She be tellin’ dat ol’ Mississip ‘bout freedom” (Everett 60). Here, the river acts as Alaimo’s ontological bridge. It is not just a simple aquatic landscape. Instead, it is a material-social location where the literal flow of the current becomes synonymous with the political flow toward emancipation.

James’s journey is defined by a constant “material interchange” with the Mississippi (Alaimo 18). Early in the novel, after James flees to Jackson Island, a storm ruins his meagre supplies. This loss, however, is countered by the river’s own agency. Alaimo emphasizes the life-or-death stakes of this connection by quoting Percival Everett’s earlier work, *Watershed*: “Our way tells us that when the river dies, so will our people” (Alaimo 69). This principle is enacted in Everett’s novel when James’s human-made bread is “ruined” by the river, only for him to find “three large catfish” tangled in a trotline (35). The river’s give and take policy highlights a trans-corporeal reality where James’s biological survival is directly tied to the health and offerings of the water. His body does not exist in opposition to the river. Rather, it is sustained by it. This trans-corporeal relationship is further articulated through the elemental process of the forge. When the blacksmith Easter explains that “heating and cooling” steel hardens it, James provides a single-word response: “Metaphor” (Everett 121). This moment encapsulates the non-human entity centered perspective of the novel. James views his own survival

as an alchemical process where the heat of racial violence and the cooling wetness of the river work in tandem to forge a resilient, hardened identity. His body becomes a site where the physical force of the elements such as fire, iron, and water are synthesized into a philosophy of endurance.

Perhaps the most striking aspect of James is how the environment becomes part of James's internal biology. Having received severe flogging from Henderson, James collapses in a rocky gully. When Norman examines his back, he is horrified to see a map of the scars of slavery on his back. In the aftermath, he does not look to human medicine, but to the earth. He gathers the red-flowered "bee balm" plant and "clay mud" to treat his wounds (Everett 171). This act blurs the line between the outside world and the inside body, mirroring Alaimo's evocative imagery: "If there were blood tests for place all I can see is a brackish test tube with a kelp strand... Salt water, red cells, ancestors braided and escaping. A bony geography" (102). This "brackish" identity is further reinforced through Julian Yates's concept of the communion of wetness. Recounting after Stefan Helmreich, Yates expresses that we are baptized "...into the sea (as blood, sweat, tears, milk), was baptized into communion with the planet" (188). When James walks barefoot on the tracks, he refers that: "The wet of the track actually served to cool and soothe my injuries" (Everett 143). He experiences a literal communion. The bodily fluids of him and the wetness of the environment work in tandem to regulate his physical self. Again, James's articulation of a philosophy aligns perfectly with the "disanthropocentric" perspective of Elemental Ecocriticism. The editors conclude their work by stating:

Our blood is saline water, our bones are calcified earth, our breath is volatile air, and our fever is fire—elements that have composed mountains, oceans, and the atmosphere, and have nourished all terrestrial creativities across time and space. (Cohen and Duckert 310).

James echoes this sentiment when he teaches Huck about the interconnectedness of all things, explaining that "Dey's a part of nature and weather be a part of nature and dem parts talk to each other" (Everett 30). For James, freedom is not merely the absence of chains. It is the recognition of his place within this

elemental conversation. By embracing his transcorporeal nature, James finds a form of agency that the social structures of the South could never grant him.

III. CONCLUSION

To conclude, it can be said that above-mentioned discussion is a testament to the fact that Percival Everett's *James* is a radical act of literary archaeology that takes a classic piece of art from the canon of American literature and re-establishes it into the global discourse through the perspective of a Black individual, receiving universal voice. Here, James's transmutation from an escaped slave to a master of hydro-racial navigation is recorded through the lens of the Blue Humanities where the Mississippi River is reimagined not as a backdrop for white maturation, but as a vibrant, fluid archive that sustains and conceals Black intellectual life. He does not simply travel through the River of Mississippi but also journeys from the pretentious illiteracy of the plantation. The river bears the evidence of his metamorphosis from performative survival to archival agency. Along with the river, the raft, the pencil and the notebook guide him to transcend the disguise and the atmospheric pressures of the South. In the ultimate act of archival inscription, when James finally recognizes himself, he declares boldly: "MY NAME IS JAMES" (Everett 71). This uppercase declaration embodies that he no longer fears and, therefore, rejects his slavish name "Jim" by accepting his self-authored personality "James." Ultimately, James's narrative proves that identity is never a static, terrestrial fixture but a fluid, relational process. This resonates strongly with the central statement of the book, *Thinking with Water*:

Water is a matter of relation and connection. Waters literally flow between and within bodies, across space and through time, in a planetary circulation system that challenges pretensions to discrete individuality. (Chen et al. 4)

By embracing his physical merging with the environment, the protagonist achieves more than a mere flight from bondage. He weaves himself into a global movement of ideas and resistance.

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