

Rewriting The American Totality: Race, Ideology, and The Political Unconscious in Percival Everett's *James*

Dr. Dulfqar Mhaibes Abdulrazzaq

Department of English, Al-Iraqia University, Baghdad, Iraq

[dulfqar.m.abdulrazzaq@aliraqia.edu.iq/](mailto:dulfqar.m.abdulrazzaq@aliraqia.edu.iq)

Abstract

This article reinterprets Percival Everett's *James* through Fredric Jameson's theory of totality and the political unconscious to examine how the novel exposes the ideological structures organizing American freedom. Rather than presenting domination as a series of discrete injustices, the study argues that James renders race, language, belief, mobility, and narrative form as interdependent mediations through which the American totality sustains and reproduces itself. Within Jameson's framework, totality functions as a structural horizon that absorbs contradiction rather than resolving it, shaping experience at the level of everyday practice and narrative organization. Everett's reimagining of the enslaved subject foregrounds this process by depicting language as a survival discipline, religion as a stabilizing ritual under crisis, and flight as a condition that reveals the persistence of ideological constraint rather than its transcendence. The analysis demonstrates that literacy, speech, belief, and movement are not emancipatory in themselves but are governed by the same totalizing logic that regulates violence, exchange, visibility, and racial legibility. Moments of crisis and mobility do not dismantle this system; instead, they expose its adaptability and reach across social and narrative space. By attending to the novel's refusal of narrative closure and its sustained maintenance of contradiction, the article shows that *James* offers not a redemptive narrative of escape but a structural diagnosis of American freedom as a managed and deferred condition. Grounded exclusively in Jameson's dialectical method, the study positions *James* as a major intervention in contemporary American fiction that renders visible the political unconscious binding freedom and domination together.

Keywords: Fredric Jameson; totality; political unconscious; Percival Everett; race and ideology

م. د. ذو الفقار محيبيس عبد الرزاق
الجامعة العراقية - قسم اللغة الانكليزية
dulfqar@gmail.com

المخلص

يعيد هذا المقال قراءة رواية جيمس لبيرسيفال إيفرت من خلال نظرية الكلية واللاوعي السياسي لدى فريديريك جيمسون، لفحص الكيفية التي تكشف بها الرواية البنى الإيديولوجية المنظمة للحرية الأمريكية. فبدلاً من تقديم الهيمنة بوصفها سلسلة من مظالم منفصلة، يجادل البحث بأن جيمس تُصوّر العرق واللغة والمعتقد والحركة والشكل السردي بوصفها وسائط مترابطة تتكفل، عبر تفاعلها، بإدامة الكلية الأمريكية وإعادة إنتاجها. وضمن إطار جيمسون، تعمل الكلية أفقاً بنويًا يستوعب التناقض بدلاً من حلّه، مُشكّلةً الخبرة على مستوى الممارسة اليومية وتنظيم السرد. وتبرز إعادة إيفرت تخييل الذات المستعبدة هذه العملية عبر تصوير اللغة بوصفها انضباطاً للبقاء، والدين بوصفه طقساً مُتّيناً

في ظلّ الأزمات، والفرار بوصفه شرطاً يكشف استمرارية القيد الإيديولوجي لا تجاوزه. ويُظهر التحليل أن محور الأمية والكلام والمعتقد والحركة ليست تحررية في ذاتها، بل تخضع للمنطق الكلي نفسه الذي ينظم العنف والتبادل والظهور والقابلية للقراءة العرقية. ولا تُفكّك لحظات الأزمات والحركة هذا النظام؛ بل تكشف قابليته للتكيف واتساع نطاقه عبر الفضاءين الاجتماعي والسرد. ومن خلال الانتباه إلى رفض الرواية للإغلاق السردى وإلى محافظتها المستمرة على التناقض، يبيّن المقال أن جيمس لا تقدّم سردية فدائية للهروب، بل تشخيصاً بنويًا للحرية الأمريكية بوصفها حالة مُدارة ومؤجّلة. واستناداً حصرياً إلى المنهج الجدلي لجيمسون، يضع البحث جيمس بوصفها تدخلاً رئيساً في السرد الأمريكي المعاصر يجعل اللاوعي السياسي الذي يربط الحرية بالهيمنة مرئياً.

الكلمات المفتاحية: فريدريك جيمسون؛ الشمولية؛ اللاوعي السياسي؛ بيرسيفال إيفرت؛ العرق والإيديولوجيا

Introduction

Percival Everett's *James* arrives as a striking intervention in the long and troubled history of American literary self-representation, a history that has repeatedly attempted to reconcile ideals of freedom with the structural realities of racial domination. Scholars of the American canon have long argued that this contradiction is not incidental but constitutive, embedded in foundational narratives that elevate freedom while displacing the violence that sustains it, a pattern Sundquist identifies as central to the formation of a national literary tradition organized around racial exclusion (Sundquist, 1993). By rewriting Huckleberry Finn from the perspective of the enslaved man renamed James, Everett does far more than revoice a silenced character; he disrupts the ideological architecture that has allowed the American canon to imagine itself as both universal and innocent. As Toni Morrison demonstrates in her analysis of American literary history, Black presence has functioned as a structuring absence, since "the subject of the dream is the dreamer," while the Africanist presence remains indispensable yet denied within the literary imagination (Morrison, 1992, p. 6). The novel's sharp intelligence lies not only in the story it tells but in the way it exposes the larger social and historical structures that determine what can be told, by whom, and for what cultural purpose, a dynamic Henry Nash Smith famously traced in his account of how national myths of innocence and freedom organize American cultural narratives (Smith, 2004). It is here that Fredric Jameson's concept of totality becomes indispensable, understood as a theoretical horizon that connects narrative form to the social and historical conditions from which it emerges, since "the work of interpretation demands that we rewrite the text in terms of the social and historical subtext which is the absolute horizon of all reading and all interpretation" (Jameson, 1981, p. 60). In any case, the concept of totality provides a framework through which Everett's narrative reveals the deep, often subtle, connections between personal experience and racial ideology, economic power, and national myths. Therefore, rather than treating the novel's scenes as isolated moments of linguistic play or survival and resistance, the Jamesonian approach can be interpreted as expressions of a broader ideology. Therefore, what Jameson aptly termed the political unconscious of social life. In this sense, *James* is not merely a reinterpretation of Twain's work, but a reinterpretation of the American imagination itself.

Scholars who have written about Everett have noted his relentless pursuit of deconstructing the narratives through which America explains itself, particularly those that conceal and downplay racial hierarchical violence (Booker, 2025). For this reason, many critics

emphasize his broader project of destabilizing dominant cultural narratives about Black people. He was known for his concern with the instability of the narrative authority surrounding Black people and the linguistic manipulation inherent in American literary traditions (Gates, 1988). Twain's empathy for Black people is read as a bold challenge to and outright rejection of the caricatured racial norms that shaped nineteenth-century literature about Black people, a theme explored in early discussions surrounding James's novels. However, despite these emerging discussions, the structural interaction of the novel with the ideological foundations of the American nation has not been fully theoretically framed, as it merely focuses either on the moral aspect, the historical dialogue with Twain, or the linguistic complexity that Everett uses to represent the condition of the Black people. Although it is considered to have literary value, it remains multifaceted and not within a single objective interpretive framework.

What continues to be lacking, however, is an interpretation that approaches James not only as a critique focused on specific characters or individual scenes, but rather as an encounter with the wider system of meanings, or the totality, through which ideas of race, freedom, and nationhood are produced and understood, and this absence becomes particularly apparent when the text is read in relation to Koritha Mitchell's argument that African American cultural texts repeatedly demonstrate how claims to national belonging are grounded in carefully limited stories of innocence, especially since "representations of citizenship often rely on disavowing the violence that secures them" (Mitchell, 2020, p. 4). In this sense, it is precisely this kind of structural logic that a Jamesonian framework enables us to confront, because, as Jameson maintains, "the work of interpretation demands that we rewrite the text in terms of the social and historical subtext which is the absolute horizon of all reading and all interpretation" (Jameson, 1981, p. 60), and when James is read through this lens, it appears not simply as a revision of Twain, but instead as a direct engagement with the ideological totality that has long shaped American literary self-understanding, a totality that has been historically organized around enduring myths of innocence, freedom, and national coherence (Sundquist, 1993; Smith, 2004).

Fredric Jameson's theory of totality provides a clear conceptual framework for understanding the structural in Everett's novel. Jameson does not treat totality as a complete or fixed entity, but rather presents it as a dynamic horizon based on relationships, bringing together the disparate elements of the social order. However, it is only within this horizon that individual experience acquires meaning, which is constrained or distorted that meaning may appear. In this context, Everett's *James* reveals these constraints by portraying the lived experience of an enslaved man forced to interpret, embody, and sometimes consciously and strategically manipulate imposed ideological expectations. Thus, a Jamesonian reading does not isolate the scenes of oppression or the moments of intelligent resistance in the novel, but in fact put them within a broader network of forces like the racial myths, Christian morality, linguistic discipline, and according to Jameson it creates logic which is shape the political unconscious of social life.

As Jameson insists, "the work of interpretation demands that we rewrite the text in terms of the social and historical subtext which is the absolute horizon of all reading and all

interpretation” (Jameson, 1981, p. 60). This emphasis on structural interrelation rather than isolated causality finds resonance in Raymond Williams’s insistence that culture must be understood not as a collection of discrete texts but as “a whole way of life” shaped by material and ideological pressures (Williams, 1977, p. 13). Moreover, this approach particularly appropriate for James, as it does not merely trace the surface of events, but constantly moves it to reveal the broader world order that enables them to occur and gives them meaning. This study, however, aims to show that Everett's narrative not only remains within the boundaries of criticism, but exceed it by entrenching analysis in the concept of the totality, thereby contributing to the reshaping of the ideological framework that has long defined the connotations of black identity within American literature.

The essence of this approach lies in Jameson's insistence that narrative contradictions are not merely stylistic touches, but rather reflect deep ideological tensions within the narratives that concerning Black people. Therefore, the narrative form represents the prevailing social contradiction at the structural level, which is not simply a superficial treatment of social issues (Jameson, 1981, pp. 30–31). For example, when Everett shifts *James's* tone of voice from an affected one to one expressing the character's true inner consciousness, and when he uses language as both a tool of expression and a constraint, the enslaved Black body becomes the embodiment of what is known as logic of the market regarding the Black, which threatens the social structure and even its breakdown. Thus, it is clear that these moments or scenes cannot be described as affected but in fact they reveal deep breaks within the entire structure and reflect the deep tension upon which this structure is built from within.

The Jamesonian reading views these breaks not as points of moral judgment, but as evidence revealing the pressures of a social system that persists only by attempting to cover and reproduce its violence. Therefore, this approach sees Everett's *James* as a conscious dialectical act of addressing an existing condition, not merely a simple correction of Twain. It is, in effect, a rewriting that exposes the ideological structure underlying the previous text, while simultaneously highlighting the persistence of the legal, economic, and even cultural structures that continue to shape American racial consciousness today. As Jameson explains, the narrative functions as "a socially symbolic act," not seeking to resolve historical problems, but rather representing them within an aesthetic form that reveals their presence and makes them accessible (Jameson, 1981, p. 20). In this sense, Everett transcends the rewriting of a literary character to penetrate the political unconscious of a nation that has forged its identity through narratives of innocence, adventure, and the construction of a heroic self, at the expense of erasing and excluding Black subjectivity.

This framework ultimately emerges as a way of reading *James* that treats his narrative techniques not as stylistic elements, but in fact as forms of cognitive and ideological maps that shape an individual experience within the limits of the social totality (Jameson, 1981). However, Everett's reimagining of *James* not only gives a previously marginalized figure greater psychological depth, but much more than that as it also reveals the structural pressures that determine who has the right to speak, how to understand it, and what kinds of knowledge he acknowledges within the American ideological horizon.

Furthermore, scenes that may at first seem fleeting details such as a lesson in ambiguous language, submissive tradition-based behavior, or a moment of satirical compliance, all that are transformed into entries that reveal the social structures that regulate racial meaning, what Raymond Williams describes as the organization of social meanings and values as actually lived within specific historical circumstances (Williams, 1977). Moreover, the narrative course of the novel, from the suffocating narrowness of the farm to the uncertain eagerness of escape, reflects the transformations of an ideological system that regulates movement, desire, and imagination, in a process that calls for Louis Althusser's presentation of ideology as the mechanism by which subjects are formed within social structures (Althusser, 1971).

As Jameson insists, "Always historicize!" (Jameson, 1981, p. 9), this methodological orientation illustrates why Everett's narrative strategies should be read as historically imbued responses to the contradictions of American racial ideology. By approaching these elements with Jameson's dialectical lens, he makes the narrative form of the narrative of the political unconscious visible, one that connects freedom to the conditions of its material possibility. Everett reshapes American ideological perceptions in *James*, which makes the central argument of this article much clear, where the novel reveals the broader structures through which the concept of race has been constructed, entrenched, and deepened as a natural thing throughout history. Moreover, the novel establishes a narrative consciousness capable of seeing slavery as a linked global system more than offering a direct coup or a simple response to Twain's perspective, and that based on economic interests, misguided moral perceptions, and even linguistic controls whose effects extend far beyond any single scene of oppression. However, this treatment represents a structural shift in the understanding of ethnic narrative, which has also been pointed out by recent critical readings as a central element in the critical and regenerative power of the novel (Booker, 2025).

Besides, Jameson's reading enables us to trace the interplay of these forces which is sometimes in subtle ways and sometimes through violent clashes, just to understand how the lived contradictions that define the *James* experience are produced, within what Jameson identifies as the horizon and political consciousness of the social totality (Jameson, 1981). However, subsequent analytical readings of these contradictions aim beyond separating the themes from each other, as they seek to show how the novel's scenes reveal the shifting pressures applied by the ideological totality on the course of events and the characters' experience. Moreover, the study shows how *James* makes the political unconscious of an American culture based on unequal freedoms visible and readable, through paying attention to the everyday mechanisms of domination, the disturbing interplay between language and belief, and the confusing crises that test the boundaries of movement and imagination. Eventually, the novel not only questions the classical narrative it rewrites, but also pushes a rethinking of the broader narrative structures that the nation continues to adopt to understand itself.

Ideological Totality and the Performance of Subjection

The ideological construction that governs the world of James is most vividly illustrated by the temporal discipline imposed on the lives of enslaved people, which is a discipline that Everett depicts with remarkable clarity. For example, James reflects “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” (p. 14). However, this seemingly simple observation transforms into an intense depiction of the totality, which reveal an entire social system that manages time as an instrument of domination. In his work on ideology, Jameson asserts that social systems maintain themselves by placing their logic in ordinary everyday activities, so that historically formed power relations become basic rules of life that seem normal and taken for granted (Jameson, 1981). Moreover, James's meditation on waiting shows this mechanism very clearly, which show how the farm's chronological system reshapes submission into everyday behavior, and how constant anticipation becomes an effective tool for control and control. Besides, some researchers of slavery have similarly shown that time served as a technique of discipline, for example Hartman (1997) shows how the plantation reorganized the rhythms of the body and emotional life in order to produce obedience. However, Everett's treatment gives this understanding a special narrative form, which allow the contradictions of the system to be perceived even while living within it. so here Everett makes it clear that totality is not just a theoretical horizon, and through highlighting the monotony, suspense, and postponement of the future that characterize James's days, but in fact a lived experience that feels in every stop, every demand, and every hope that the ideological system formulates.

The temporal experience of James that shaped his ideological structure is also controlled the way he is forced to present himself to the white observers, so that this presentation simply becomes a calculated practice of survival. For example when James stated that “It always pays to give white folks what they want” (Jameson, 1981, p. 14), with this quote he tries to expresses a principle that learned not from just habituation, but in fact from an sharp awareness of the racialized expectations that structure every interaction. Additionally, such performance adjustments are not accidental where according to Jameson's theory of totality, it reflects how ideology deeply programs behavior, so that social hierarchies seem normal and familiar in the details of everyday life (Jameson, 1981).

However, Everett captures this process narratively through his depiction of the transformations of James's speech style, where he becomes simple and modest in the public, while in the private space he becomes clear and sharp, such attitude capture the state of psychological duality which W. E. B. Du Bois described it as double consciousness, where he called it as the the condition of “always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others” (Du Bois, 1903, p. 3). Furthermore, this condition is understood not only as an individual psychological state, instead as a structural effect of living within a system that controls visibility as strictly as it does to work and movement. What is equally important is that, some contemporary studies have developed the ideas of Du Bois, through showing how racialized subjects manage a range of performance roles in order to control

the appearance and reduce risk within existing systems of power (Fleetwood, 2011). Additionally, Everett's depiction of James in a way that clearly illustrates this diversity of roles, where performance becomes both a means of hiding and a protective shield, which clearly show that identity does not stand outside relations of oppression, but instead it shaped and managed within the mechanisms of domination themselves. Besides, the novel through these accurate and constant modifications in behavior and appearance shows once again that the totality is not only dictates to James of what he should to do, but infact dictates how he should look in order to ensure survival.

In Everett's novel, surveillance is not only an external means of control, but it transforms into a force that internally reshape James's consciousness and his self-behavior and at the same time reveal a deeper level of the totality at work. Therefore, even in moments when there is no direct white presence physically, so its clear the novel suggests that James is still forced to expect how his movements or words might be understood, which make watchfulness act like a permanent feature of consciousness. What is equally important, this self-examination relates to with what Michel Foucault identifies as the disciplinary effect of surveillance, where in this case the individual simply becomes "the principle of his own subjection" (Foucault, 1977, p. 203), and that through what he called continual self-regulation. Despite the fact that Foucault is not the primary theorist here, but his ideas helped to illustrate how Everett shows the plantation not as a just site of coercion, but in fact as a social field in which enslaved people are forced to always adjust their presence and visibility. However, the framework Jameson make this meaning much more deep through showing that such disciplinary habits are not just isolated psychological effects, but instead its like expressions of ideological totality, which reproduces itself by instilling norms in lived experience and transforming them into behavior that seems natural and self-evident (Jameson, 1981). Additionally, Everett's narrative reinforces this meaning by portraying how James intuitively understands the needs, moods, and expectations of white observers before they are revealed, which shows how the ability to judge situations in advance becomes a survival skill. Along with this, recent studies on racialized surveillance have also confirmed that black subjects learn to manage their visibility and expect scrutiny as a way for survival within systems that confuse observation and control (Browne, 2015). Moreover, Everett shows how the whole extends beyond external commands through James's constant evaluation of how he appears in the eyes of others, just to regulate perception and imagination, not only that but even the private spaces of thought itself.

When viewing the elements like enforced waiting, strategic performance, and even implicit surveillance that make James's early life as overlapping conditions, it is clear that they create a single integrated structure much more than discrete or accidental practices, just to serve as a living map of the American ideological totality. Therefore, this course is particularly become so when James recalls a moment when he tried to tell a story when he was near the fire, as he stated that "performance for the boys became a frame for my story. My story became less of a tale as the real game became the display for the boys" (Jameson, 1981, p. 18). However, this quote is important because it simply shows *James* is not only telling a story, but instead try to perform it while Huck and Tom watching him, just to

adjust his language choices and posture to meet their expectations. Additionally, Everett uses this shift to show that storytelling, which may often be seen as a field of creative expression or group communication, which does not remain a free space, but instead it subject to an ethnic demand that forces a specific function, which transform into a directed performance that serves a certain expectation. However, the Jamesonian theory helps to understand the significance of this moment, where it simply shows that the totality works not only through forceful institutions, but also in quite ideological processes that program communication and reorganize the narrative itself to serve the needs of the powerful group (Jameson, 1981).

At the same time, this clip reveals that *James* is keenly aware of this mechanism, noting that the presence of the boys changes both the meaning of his words and his function. What equally important is that recent studies on ethnocentrized observation and the logic of review have confirmed that black subjects are often forced to perform understanding and pleasure under unequal viewing conditions, where the narrative itself becomes a response to observation rather than free expression (Browne, 2015). Therefore, through presenting *James's* story as both narrative and performance, the novel shows how the whole extends to the most intimate forms of expression, which ensuring that moments of creativity or collective warmth are reabsorbed within the ideological machine that keeps the ethnic system intact.

Language, Religion, and the Mediation of Totality

Everett's novel presents language not as a neutral medium of communication, but in fact as an essential site through which the American ideological totality is managed and maintained. Therefore, *James* in the early chapters of the novel asserts that language training is "indispensable", which explain that "to move safely through the world, mastery of language, fluency, was required" (Jameson, 1981, p. 23), this quote clearly redefines language as a means of survival technique more than just a tool of cultural refinement where it shows speech as like a risky act controlled by white norms and expectations. Additionally, from Jamesonian point of view this scene shows how ideology incorporates itself into everyday practices, which shape power relations by making their mechanisms seem both self-evident and necessary (Jameson, 1981). Additionally, Everett reinforces this point by showing that fluency is not measured by eloquence alone, but in fact by an individual's ability to anticipate possible judgment and punishment. However, *James's* precise awareness of language with this sense clearly aligns with Bourdieu's assertion that "the power of words is nothing other than the delegated power of the spokesperson" (Bourdieu, 1991, p. 9). Therefore, Language becomes like a map of power relations, which in fact regulating movement, appearance, and safety within the social system, through highlighting language proficiency which is regard as a condition for survival, for that reason the novel reveals that the totality controls not only action and punishment, but also the conditions under which speech becomes possible.

James's linguistic discipline is not limited to word choice, which in fact it also includes practical rules that touch the body itself, such as the way to stand, move, and interact with others, all that shows how the totality controls social existence at its most meticulous levels

of daily life. For example, when he gives the children instructions like “Don’t make eye contact ... Never speak first ... Never address any subject directly when talking to another slave” (Jameson, 1981, pp. 23–24), such lessons and instructions end in naming a rhetorical practice of turning and hinting which can be called "Signifying" (Gates, 1988). Moreover, these commitments reflect a survival style that is formed in the face of the uncertainties of the white gaze, where confrontation or just a direct assertion can result in punishment, while caution and maybe just finding another way can provide a measure of safety and protection. Therefore, reading those events with a Jamesonian point of view of the theory of totality, these rules do not appear to be just accidental habits, but instead ways through which ideology reproduces itself through everyday practice, which transform power into a familiar assumption (Jameson, 1981). What equally important is that, from Jameson point of view of the theory of totality, these rules do not appear to be fleeting habits but instead mechanisms through which ideology reproduces itself through everyday practice which transforming dominance into something that seems self-evident and familiar (Jameson, 1981).

Moreover, Everett highlights that these practices are acquired early and practiced continuously which clearly demonstrating that the social system relies more on their internal acceptance much more than on direct pressure. Therefore, these rules not only regulate what can be said, but also when to be silent, which aligning bodies and voices with an interpretive horizon that controlled by white power. Nevertheless, as Henry Louis Gates Jr. observes, "signifying" appears as a rhetorical style of circumvention and allusion, which shaped under constraints, where a strategy by which black speakers negotiate power relations by saying something different from what they appear to be saying (Gates, 1988, p. 63). Thus, by placing "signifying" within this forced context, the novel shows that cultural strategies do not emerge by free choice, but instead emerge from a structural necessity, and in fact act as adaptive answers within an ideological system that monitors appearance and controls speech.

Everett in his narrative goes beyond the first scenes of teaching and conditioning that clearly shows that linguistic mediation remains active even when the movement of James expands and his mobility becomes much greater, which in fact show how fixed the ideology is and how it stays the same across different spaces. Moreover, when James remanded his secret relationship with books, he stated that “I had read them secretly ... I was able to read without fear of being discovered” (Jameson, 1981, p. 44), before facing the danger which represents in this knowledge with a direct question “What would they do to a slave who had learned how to read?” (Jameson, 1981, p. 44). Furthermore, these reflections shift the focus from spoken language to the act of reading itself, which reveal that literacy and reading are not just neutral skills, but instead a structured form of access to meaning and authority that is subject to control and accountability.

However, in Jameson's framework, these literacy concerns highlight how ideology maintains its cohesion by regulating not only speech, but much also the circulation of concepts and forms of abstraction that may confuse and threaten the stability of the social system (Jameson, 1981). What is equally important is that historians of slavery shows that

such logic was central to regulating the consciousness of the enslaved, where illiteracy was forced not only to prevent the transmission of information, but in fact also because its erasure had the power to change the way of perception itself (Williams, 2005). Additionally, Everett escalates this threat when James imagined the consequences of collective knowledge, where he wondering what might happen to “a slave who had taught the other slaves to read” (Jameson, 1981, p. 44) for those who possessed an understanding of abstraction and paradox. However, this passage reveals that the danger lies not in reading as a technical skill, but instead in its ability to reorganize consciousness and enable enslaved selves to name the contradictions that the system relies on keeping in hiding. By situating this realization well into the novel, Everett demonstrates that the mediation of language is not an early lesson left behind but an ongoing site of ideological struggle, one that continues to shape James’s understanding of freedom, risk, and intelligibility within a totality that polices meaning as rigorously as it polices bodies.

Everett in the later chapters of the novel returns to religion not as an inherited doctrine, instead he treats it as a social practice that operates under pressure, which reveal how faith continues to play the role of mediator within the ideological totality even in the face of movement and loss. For example, when James faces death directly, faith does not appear as a firm belief, but it appears as a response forced by circumstances, which first shaped with this question, “Do you believe in God?” (Jameson, 1981, p. 183). Moreover, the dialogue that follows this question makes the logic much clear, where James describes the burial not as a metaphysical reassurance, instead he describe it as a concession of what the dead or the living people might want, which conclude “Isn’t that what people who believe in God want?” (Jameson, 1981, p. 183). However, reading this quote with Jameson's point of view, which it becomes clear how ideology provides ready-made forms of rituals, phrases, and expectations, which organize experience when realism becomes unbearable, as it translating loss into a culturally understandable practice without dismantling the structures that produced this fragility in the first place.

This role played by faith aligns with broader studies on the relationship between religion and domination, which show that religious practice has historically functioned as an ideological strategy which used to “justify systems of racial domination through religious ideologies of domination and practices” (Rahman, 2025, p. 1). Moreover, this scene in Everett's novel is particularly intense because James is presented not as being influenced by the doctrine itself, but in face as conscious of the function of faith and how it operates, which is look like as something that can be adopted, suspended, or performed according to surrounding circumstances (Jameson, 1981). However, religion becomes a language of social continuity, a way of doing something in the face of death, where even when certainty is absent or openly denied, and that done through placing this awareness at the last pages of the novel, it shows that religious mediation is not limited to the first lessons, instead it continues to work at moments of extreme crisis, when individuals are forced to resort to ready-made formulas that make sense, but without touching the violent structure of the totality which produced or created this situation in the first place.

Everett throughout the narrative course make it clear that language and religion do not function as separate cultural elements, instead it works as overlapping mediums through which the American ideological totality contributes to its cohesion and continuity, to make it more clear from the early regulation of speech and physical behavior, to the subsequent management of belief in the shadow of loss, such mediations contribute to shape the way how the individuals interpret danger, meaning, and duty in their life. Furthermore, Jameson's framework allows these moments to be read not as objective repetitions, but in fact as structural reinforcements, which show how ideology reproduces itself through seemingly necessary and natural of everyday practices, more than just externally imposed (Jameson, 1981). However, what distinguishes *James* is the constant focus of the narrative on James's awareness of these mechanisms, as he learns, teaches, and adapts without ever confusing mediation with liberation. To clarify, when circumstances change through movement, crises, or temporary breakaways, in fact the linguistic and religious texts themselves remain available, which is ready to be reactivated in order to stabilize the experience and give it an absorbable form. Accordingly, this passage shows that the totality is not based on a single institution or belief, but instead on a flexible network of mediations that transforms domination into everyday customs, rituals, and norms. Therefore, by tracing these processes across different stages of the novel, Everett reveals how deeply ideology is woven into the conditions of intelligibility itself, preparing the ground for moments of rupture where the limits of this system are tested but never fully escaped.

Crisis, Flight, and the Limits of Totality

The movement to escape in *James* does not represent a clear break with American totality, but instead a moment when contradictions deepen, which leaving the limits of the system visible without being removed or collapsing. Additionally, Everett frames escape as a crisis situation much more than a free choice, where he asserting that the movement emerges under threat, pressure and the blockage of the structural horizon. However, from Jameson's point of view, this framing is important because totality is not just disintegrated by moments of motion, but in fact it reasserts its presence through new formations that absorb resistance within its own logic (Jameson, 1981). Moreover, as James begins to move through multiple spaces, the narrative clearly shows that the danger does not disappear, but instead it started to spread, which reveal that the system goes beyond the boundaries of any particular farm or location, so simply it is just a pattern that is aligned with views of power that show that movement remains under sovereign and economic control, where it is not synonymous with freedom (Mbembe, 2003). However, escape becomes a test of the extent of the totality's reach, which exposing the continued effectiveness of economic, ethnic, and even the ideological forces after legal boundaries have been crossed. Therefore, Everett rejects the romance of redemption through introducing and widespread uncertainty, and reinforcing market logic within moments that may look like a liberatory. What is equally important, this paragraph establishes an understanding of the crisis and the movement not as solutions, but instead as sites where they appear more clearly in the shapes of the political unconscious of American freedom, which in fact paving the way for a deeper analysis of the rupture without violation.

Everett grounds the novel's turn toward flight in moments of acute crisis that reveal how the American totality asserts its power most forcefully through the threat of separation and sale. When James grasps that his family is about to be reorganized by the market, he states with brutal clarity, "They were going to rip my family apart and send me to New Orleans, where I would be even farther from freedom and would probably never see my family again." (p. 34). The violence here is not an accidental rupture but a structural operation, because the system's coherence depends on the convertibility of human bonds into exchangeable units. Read through Jameson, this is precisely how totality becomes visible: not as a background "setting," but as a social logic that can redraw family, geography, and futurity in a single transaction (Jameson, 1981), a process scholars of racial capitalism identify as central to the fusion of market rationality and racial domination (Robinson, 1983). Later, the novel shows that movement does not purify perception; instead, crisis infects interpretation itself, so that James begins to read every encounter through the possibility of sale and betrayal, admitting, "I wondered again if he was even black at all. Maybe he was just some crazy white guy who had just sold me." (p. 173). The line matters because it shows how the market's logic is not merely external coercion but an internalized horizon of suspicion that reorganizes how trust, help, and even racial legibility are understood. However, Everett transforms the act of escape into a narrative based on revelation rather than redemption, and he doing so through distributing these pressures over separated pages, where he asserting that the extension of the totality remains active across different places, not only determining what is happening, but also what can be believed and understood from what is happening.

As the novel nears its final stages, Everett strips the illusion of a final solution from the act of escape, presenting the movement as a continuous state instead of an achievement culminating in an end point. That is clear when James rejects the possibility of settling for a fixed conclusion, he simply states that "No, son. I'm going to keep running." (Jameson, 1981, p. 215), this sentence is deliberately and clearly left without any decoration, where Everett rejecting narrative closure in favor of continuity, while he is revealing how the totality turns escape into a long-term negotiation rather than a sharp break. Moreover, from Jameson's point of view, this scene tell the structural reality of the totality, as it is showing that even the act of resistance is still forced to work within its horizon, because the system does not stop at boundaries or objectives, but instead it reorganizes itself around the movement itself. Furthermore, the definition of Patterson of slavery as "the permanent, violent domination of natively alienated and generally dishonored persons" (Patterson, 1982, p. 13) help us to explain the reason of why James's escape cannot end at a final moment of arrival, so the state from which James is fleeing is not tied to a particular place, instead it is embodied in a social logic that continue even as locations change. Moreover, Everett puts this statement late in the novel to make sure that the experience did not give freedom, instead produce a deeper consciousness, which is an awareness that the forces that govern race, exchange, and in fact fragility keep on no matter how long the path is or how far it goes. Thus, escape becomes a condition of survival more than a path to liberation, and is driven by being caution not just than a hope, where the novel insists that the political

unconscious of American freedom is not defined by access through rejecting the closing resolution, but instead by permanent movement within a structure that remains the same in its essence.

When considered together, the scenes of crisis and escape in *James* show that they offer no more than an alternative narrative of liberation as a structural diagnosis of how the American totality absorbs and redirects forms of resistance. Moreover, Everett insists that movement is not portrayed as an act of redemption or transgression of boundaries, but instead it is regarded as a means of revealing the penetration and breadth of the system's influence, which brings with it its logic of market exchange, ethnic distrust, and what we call it the existential fragility into new spaces. Additionally, Jameson's theory of the totality explains why these moments feel both urgent and suspended, because the crisis does not break with the system from the outside, but instead it pushes the self to live with its contradictions from inside, because of that escape becomes a form of managed continuity more than freedom (Jameson, 1981). What is equally important, some recent critical readings have also confirmed that Everett's rejection of narrative closure offers continuity and a spin on emancipation, which reveal how the movement itself is twisted together with the very economic and ideological structures it seems to resist (D'Amato, 2025). However, the novel's insistence in its last chapters on continuing the movement stands out as a clearer affirmation of this idea, which in fact presents survival itself as a continuous effort forced by deep-rooted ideological conditions that cannot be erased or undone simply by escaping or continuing to run. Therefore, this shape is a conception of the American freedom as structurally deferred, which is clearly maintained by the movement's narratives that promise salvation but at the same time renew constraints. Furthermore, through linking escape to endurance and continuity more than arrival, Everett reveals the political unconscious of a nation that equates movement with freedom, while the foundations of hegemony remain intact. However, this conclusion confirms that the limits of the totality are not discovered at crossings or destinations, but instead the constant need to move within a system that never relaxes.

Narrative Form, Contradiction, and the Political Unconscious

The strength of *James* is evident not only in what it tells, but also in how its narrative form organizes contradiction, delay and inability to create a resolution, as the primary means by which American ideological totality becomes clear. What is equally important is that, Everett builds the novel on a constant rejection of narrative closure, where he replaces the path of progress toward freedom with recurring moments of hesitation, recalculation, and what can be called the strategic retreat in telling the events. Furthermore, from Jameson's perspective, this formal logic cannot be seen as an accidental but it is considered as the mechanism by which the text's political unconscious emerges, as it implies social contradictions within the narrative's internal structure, more than being expressed directly (Jameson, 1981). In this regard Neferti Tadiar notes in her re-reading of *The Political Unconscious*, Jameson's approach is based on maintaining "the negative and methodological status of the concept of 'totality'" (Tadiar, 2022, p. 53), which is an attitude that rejects early access to any final understanding, and makes contradiction an unavoidable

to get full explanation. However, the looping course of Everett's narrative reflects this systematic rejection, where the novel is full with many crises that do not reach for final solutions, as the dualities like movement and captivity, speech and silence, faith and doubt left suspended in a state of nonstop tension. Additionally, the novel accumulates unresolved tensions instead of trying to integrate its elements into a unified and closed narrative, so that the contradiction remains as a formal principle that governs the structure of the text, not as a problem to be solved within the course of the plot. In this sense, *James* does not merely represent ideological conflict; it composes it into the temporal rhythm of the narrative itself, making form the primary site where the political unconscious becomes readable.

Everett deepens his contradictory formalist logic through his management of narrative voice, rejecting any fixed correspondence between the point of view and narrative authority. However, the narrative in *James* moves between moments of closeness and limited revelation, and other moments of deliberate hiding and mystery, so that the reader does not take full understanding of the events and its meaning, but such technique should not be understood as a psychological dysfunction, instead it must be read as a formal response to ideological pressures that practising on the narrative self. Furthermore, Jameson's perspective clarifying this instability as it is not an accidental element, but it is a direct effect of deep social contradictions that cannot be fixed within the framework of narrative harmony, where it is revealing that the contradiction is not conditional on the text, but is embedded in its very formal structure (Jameson, 1981). Moreover, some researchs into the tradition of black expression helps to illustrate this notion, as Fred Moten argues that "the history of blackness is testament to the fact that objects can and do resist" (Moten, 2003, p. 14), so this quote illuminates how the narrative in *James* functions as a form of continuous resistance, without claiming the complete possibility to escape from such structure. Meanwhile, Robert B. Stepto, in his analysis of reading and the selfhood in African American literature, shows that freedom is not understood as a stable state of ownership, but it is "presented as being a protean state of literacy to be achieved and safeguarded" (Stepto, 2025, p. 3). What's more important through reading these ideas within the theory Jameson's totality, it becomes more clear why the novel rejects a unified narrative voice, in which expression remains a tactical and temporary act.

This formal instability in the narrative voice is deepened by the general rhythm of the novel, as the text relies on interruption, repetition, and postponement rather than the continuous linear flow which make the traditional narrative more stronger. However, the scenes accumulate without being organized in a clear developing path, which generating a sense of movement that does not take root in a specific direction. Moreover, this rhythm becomes central to the way *James* embodies the contradiction at the level of form, where the events push the narrative forward and suspend it, which is forcing a recalculation and revision more than a climax or closure. Furthermore, Fredric Jameson emphasizes that "the assertion of a political unconscious proposes that we undertake just such a final analysis and explore the multiple paths that lead to the unmasking of cultural artifacts as socially symbolic acts" (Jameson, 1981, p. 20), this quote allows the narrative to be understood as a

response to deep historical pressures, more than a defect in formal structure or a weakness in the coherence of the text.

Besides, this understanding of contradiction as an active structural element, more than a narrative flaw, which is further illustrated by Fred Moten's when he suggested that black expressions emerge from "a kind of ongoing disruption of the very idea of a finished, completed form" (Moten, 2003, p. 22), where this explanation tell why *James* rejects a teleological narrative rhythm based on the inevitable progress toward a completed end. Recent Jamesonian criticism likewise emphasizes that totality can only be apprehended through uneven effects and unresolved tensions rather than through narrative synthesis or closure (Kornbluh, 2019). Read together, these perspectives illuminate why Everett's novel cannot resolve its contradictions without ideological distortion: delay, repetition, and suspension become the only formally honest responses to social antagonism. By composing the novel through interrupted momentum, Everett aligns narrative tempo with the lived experience of domination itself, transforming pacing into a formal register of the political unconscious that encodes the persistence of contradiction within the American totality.

The formal contradictions that emerge in the narrative's voice and rhythm are deepened by the way the novel manages the narrative's own evolution, which deliberately resists the logic of gradual accumulation that characterizes traditional realistic narrative. In other words, the progressing leads to clarity of meaning or a stable moral conclusion, because of that Everett is careful to introduce moments when the narrative's impulse stops as a result of repeated recalculation, misjudgment, or the return of doubt and uncertainty. In this way, these structural shifts prevent experience from settling into definitive knowledge, and keep it in an open and suspended state that requires constant rethinking. In this regard, Fredric Jameson explaining that "narrative is not merely a neutral vehicle for representation but a socially symbolic act whose very form is an ideological act in its own right" (Jameson, 1981, p. 141), which is a claim that explains why James refuses to transform experience into a complete interpretive control, so this rejection of compromise aligns with Theodor W. Adorno's assertion that modern aesthetic form should preserve contradiction, because "the unresolved antagonisms of reality return in artworks as immanent problems of form" (Adorno, 1997, p. 6). In this way, the loop structure in Everett's narrative registers social contradictions at the level of the form itself, so that the narrative's progression reveals its limitations rather than overcoming or overcoming them. Moreover, Walter Benjamin's analysis make this meaning more clear through pointing out that "there is nothing that commends a story to memory more effectively than the chaste compactness which precludes psychological analysis" (Benjamin, 1968, p. 91), which explains *James's* preference for discontinuity and ambiguity over detailed explanation and direct explanation, where he depriving narrative progress of the logic of accumulation or convenient closure, which a style that Everett formulates a narrative form in which contradictions remain active without a clear resolve, as the situation within the American totality that the meaning keep postponed, disrupted, and renegotiated.

James sets apart at its core is the way in which it's formal strategies prevent contradiction from becoming a kind of narrative consolation, with the novel instead insisting on keeping

the tension active until its last pages. Furthermore, Everett does not allow accumulated experience to turn into firm wisdom or moral authority, but he deliberately keeping experience in a state of instability, open to doubt and review, and away of any ultimate certainty. However, from Jameson's point of view such rejection is so important as "the work of interpretation demands that we rewrite the text in terms of the social and historical subtext which is the absolute horizon of all reading and all interpretation" (Jameson, 1981, p. 60), which makes it clear that narrative closure does not represent a deeper understanding, but rather leads to ideological distortion much more than the production of critical knowledge. The novel's ending therefore withholds reconciliation not as an aesthetic flourish but as a formal necessity, and Levine's account of form helps specify what is at stake, because "affordances point us ... to their limits, the restrictions intrinsic to particular materials and organizing principles" (Levine, 2015, p. 11), a formulation that clarifies why unresolved endings can preserve pressure rather than dissolve it. Ahmed sharpens this same logic at the level of affective politics when she insists, "We must stay unhappy with this world" (Ahmed, 2017, p. 254), a line that resonates with Everett's refusal to convert pain into the emotional satisfaction of resolution. Brooks, finally, offers language for the aesthetic force of such refusal by describing how historical actors transform the condition of being "suspended in time" into "a critical form of dissonantly enlightened performance" (Brooks, 2006, p. 5), which helps articulate why Everett's ending keeps contradiction mobile instead of sealing it into moral closure. By denying narrative closure the status of ideological reassurance, *James* completes its formal logic: contradiction is carried as far as narrative can bear without falsifying history. The political unconscious thus appears not as a problem to be solved but as a structure that continues to exert pressure beyond the final page, binding form, history, and ideology into an unresolved but intelligible totality.

Conclusion

This article has argued that Percival Everett's *James* rewrites the idea of American freedom by revealing it as a structural effect of totality rather than an attainable condition that exists outside or beyond it. Through a sustained Jamesonian reading, the novel emerges as a narrative that renders visible the political unconscious organizing race, mobility, belief, language, and survival within the United States. Rather than presenting domination as a series of discrete injustices or moral failures, Everett situates it within a coherent social logic that reproduces itself across everyday practices and narrative forms. The figure of James is central to this exposure not because he transcends the system, but because he learns to read its operations with increasing clarity and strategic awareness. From regulated speech and belief to crisis-driven flight and narrative contradiction, each stage of the novel demonstrates how resistance is continually absorbed, redirected, or deferred within the horizon of the totality. Jameson's concept of totality thus proves especially productive for reading *James*, as it allows moments of tension, irony, and narrative instability to be understood as structural revelations rather than aesthetic excesses or narrative shortcomings. By foregrounding this logic, Everett's novel resists celebratory narratives of

progress and emancipation, insisting instead on a critical reckoning with the systems that continue to determine what freedom can signify, promise, or withhold.

The critical contribution of this study lies in demonstrating that *James* does not simply revise a canonical American narrative but reconstructs the ideological conditions that render such narratives intelligible in the first place. By applying Jameson's concept of totality as the central analytical framework, the article has shown how Everett's novel figures race, belief, language, and mobility as structurally interdependent rather than thematically adjacent concerns. This approach resists readings that isolate moments of resistance or flight as narrative endpoints, instead situating them within a system that continually reorganizes contradiction as a condition of lived experience. The analysis thus reframes Everett's intervention as a critique of American freedom itself, revealing how its promises are sustained through ideological mediation rather than historical rupture or moral transcendence. In foregrounding the political unconscious that governs everyday survival, *James* emerges as a novel that compels readers to confront the coherence of domination rather than its exceptions. Such a reading contributes to contemporary Jamesonian criticism by extending the concept of totality beyond economic abstraction into the narrative textures of language, belief, crisis, and form. Ultimately, the article argues that Everett's novel offers not optimism about escape but clarity about structure, presenting a literary form capable of naming the limits within which freedom is imagined, negotiated, and constrained.

References

- Adorno, T. W. (1997). *Aesthetic theory* (R. Hullot-Kentor, Trans.). University of Minnesota Press. (Original work published 1970)
- Ahmed, S. (2017). *Living a feminist life*. Duke University Press.
- Althusser, L. (1971). Ideology and ideological state apparatuses (Notes toward an investigation). In *Lenin and philosophy and other essays* (B. Brewster, Trans., pp. 127–186). Monthly Review Press.
- Benjamin, W. (1968). The storyteller: Reflections on the works of Nikolai Leskov. In *Illuminations* (H. Zohn, Trans., pp. 83–109). Schocken Books. (Original work published 1936)
- Booker, M. K. (2025). Dialogic revision and post-Huck complexity in Percival Everett's *James*. *Orbit: A Journal of American Literature*, 12(1).
- Bourdieu, P. (1991). *Language and symbolic power* (J. B. Thompson, Ed.; G. Raymond & M. Adamson, Trans.). Harvard University Press.
- Brooks, D. A. (2006). *Bodies in dissent: Spectacular performances of race and freedom, 1850–1910*. Duke University Press.
- Browne, S. (2015). *Dark matters: On the surveillance of Blackness*. Duke University Press.
- D'Amato, G. (2025). Meta-minstrelsy and market logics in Percival Everett's *James*. *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/00111619.2025.2550511>
- Du Bois, W. E. B. (1903). *The souls of Black folk*. A. C. McClurg & Co.

- Fleetwood, N. R. (2011). *Troubling vision: Performance, visuality, and Blackness*. University of Chicago Press.
- Foucault, M. (1977). *Discipline and punish: The birth of the prison* (A. Sheridan, Trans.). Pantheon Books.
- Gates, H. L., Jr. (1988). *The signifying monkey: A theory of African-American literary criticism*. Oxford University Press.
- Hartman, S. V. (1997). *Scenes of subjection: Terror, slavery, and self-making in nineteenth-century America*. Oxford University Press.
- Jameson, F. (1981). *The political unconscious: Narrative as a socially symbolic act*. Cornell University Press.
- Kornbluh, A. (2019). Totality. *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 47(3), 631–636. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S106015031900030X>
- Levine, C. (2015). *Forms: Whole, rhythm, hierarchy, network*. Princeton University Press.
- Mbembe, A. (2003). Necropolitics. *Public Culture*, 15(1), 11–40. <https://doi.org/10.1215/08992363-15-1-11>
- Mitchell, K. (2020). *From slave cabins to the White House: Homemade citizenship in African American culture*. University of Illinois Press.
- Morrison, T. (1992). *Playing in the dark: Whiteness and the literary imagination*. Harvard University Press.
- Moten, F. (2003). *In the break: The aesthetics of the Black radical tradition*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Patterson, O. (1982). *Slavery and social death: A comparative study*. Harvard University Press.
- Rahman, R. (2025). *The racialization of religion in America because of the transatlantic slave trade*. *Interdisciplinary Social Research*, 1(2).
- Robinson, C. J. (1983). *Black Marxism: The making of the Black radical tradition*. Zed Press.
- Smith, H. N. (1950). *Virgin land: The American West as symbol and myth*. Harvard University Press. (Reprinted 2004)
- Stepo, R. B. (2025). Literacy and the quest for selfhood in Percival Everett's *James*. *New American Studies Journal: A Forum*, 76.
- Sundquist, E. J. (1993). *To wake the nations: Race in the making of American literature*. Harvard University Press.
- Tadiar, N. X. M. (2022). Reading the political unconscious at the end of capitalized mediation. *PMLA*, 137(1), 47–62. <https://doi.org/10.1632/S0030812921000866>
- Williams, H. A. (2005). *Self-taught: African American education in slavery and freedom*. University of North Carolina Press.
- Williams, R. (1977). *Marxism and literature*. Oxford University Press.