080. Black deaths matter in *The Trees* by Percival Everett

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Abstract

The Trees by Percival Everett confounds America's inability to notice the racial violence on which it was founded and it contradicts its main founding principles. The aim of the article is to demonstrate how the writer of the twenty-first century reconstructs America's racial trauma wishing to expose the truth through the violence of lynching. As the novel is both a detective fiction and a horror fantasy, the article shows that through these genres, the story exceeds white cruelty and black victimhood to understand black agency. The article asserts that the theory Everett presents is that in order to perceive a black body, there must be a white one. In *The Trees*, an indictment of America's racial terrorism disguising as police procedural and comedy, Everett provides a satirical narrative answer to Langston Hughes's question, "What happens to a dream deferred?" Yes, he says, a dream deferred does explode, fall and descend. This witty novel of revenge and reckoning is a narrative condemning racial violence with strokes, and what stands at its core is the idea that Black deaths matter.

Keywords: African American Literature, South, Lynching, Racism, Satire, Humor

Percival Everett'in yazdığı *The Trees*'te siyahların ölümü meselesi

Öz

Percival Everett, *The Trees* romanında, Amerika'nın, üzerine kurulu olduğu sistemik ırksal şiddetin varlığını görmezden gelmesini ve bu sorunun, Amerika'nın temelini oluşturan ilkeleriyle nasıl çelişiyor olduğunu kaleme alıyor. Makalenin amacı, yirmi birinci yüzyıl yazarının, Amerika'nın ırksal şiddet gerçeğinin ve travmasının nasıl inşa edildiğini ve geçerliliğini, linç olaylarıyla nasıl ele aldığını göstermektir. Roman hem bir polisiye kurgu hem de bir korku - fantastik olduğundan, yazar; bu türler arasında geçişler yaparak hikayedeki siyahi yaşamların işleyişini anlamamız için beyaz zulmünün ve siyah mağduriyetinin de ötesine geçerek gösteriyor. Makale, Everett'in sunduğu teorinin, siyah bir cesedi algılamak için mutlaka beyaz bir cesedin var olması gerektiğini iddia ediyor. Amerika'nın ırksal terörizminin polis mekanizmalarıyla halen yürütüldüğünün kanıtı olan *The Trees* romanında Everett, Langston Hughes'un "Ertelenen bir rüyaya ne olur?" sorusuna mizahi bir anlatımla; evet, ertelenen bir rüya nihayetinde patlar, düşer ve alçalır, demekte. Bir nevi intikam ve hesaplaşma romanı olan *The Trees*, Amerika'daki ırksal şiddeti kayda değer hasarlar vererek kınayan hiciv ve mizahın harmanlandığı bir anlatıdır ve özünde Siyah ölümlerinin önemli olduğu fikri vardır.

Anahtar kelimeler: Afrikalı Amerikalı Edebiyatı, Güney, Linç, Irkçılık, Hiciv, Mizah

History is a motherfu**er.

FBI agent Herberta Hind, in *The Trees*

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Percival Everett is one of America's most significant living novelists, and the poet laurate of scorching social satire and the master of a rage tempered by his diction. At the center of his work, he grapples with the complexities of race and privilege surrealistically. In *Erasure* (2001), his central character is a Black academic who says egad, dresses like a preppy, plays squash, and writes dense experimental fiction. When his agent cannot sell his latest novel because it isn't Black enough, he furiously dashes off a fake "Black" book which he calls *My Pafology*, the book within the book, is a wicked parody of works that are built to satisfy white readers' interest in the Black underclass. In the novel, *My Pafology*'s title is changed to Fuck, and the book becomes an overnight sensation. In *I Am Not Sidney Poitier* (2009), Everett turns his eye on a young wealthy Black person living in the household of Ted Turner mystifies preconceptions of what Black means, or there is his 1999 novel *Glyph*, in which a baby with an IQ of 475 recalls his infancy and comments on Barthes and Derrida. On the other hand, in *The Trees* (2021), Everett crafts a comic judgment of whiteness and an argument for justice with a Twainian wit and meanness. What stands at the novel's core is the idea that Black deaths matter. The novel begins with the description of the town: Money, Mississippi, looks exactly like it sounds. Named in that persistent Southern tradition of irony and with the attendant tradition of nescience, the name becomes slightly sad, a marker of self-conscious ignorance that might as well be embraced because, let's face it, it isn't going away. The small town in the novel has the characteristics of 19th century values. In some instances the town is defined as stuck in time: "This ain't the city. Hell, this ain't even the twenty-first century. It's barely the twentieth" (52). What makes the town backward is not the undeveloped infrastructure but the old-fashioned mindset of its residents: "Its chock full of know nothing peckerwoods stuck in the prewar nineteenth century and living proof that inbreeding does not lead to extinction" (121). The values and world views of the people are narrated to demonstrate how racism still dominates in the United States. The infamous reputation of the place is repeated as a tangible example of bigotry and white supremacy. Money: "is not a city. It's a shithole where people have put some buildings" (126). The way people speak and behave has many clues about their racist worldview. The use of politically incorrect language dominates the way people in Money talk: "The ni - - - the Black man is missing. Again" (56). Also, many regional stereotypes about the South are used to define the people in the town throughout the book like "backwoods peckerwoods, inbred rednecks, hillbillies…local yokels, bumpkins" (33). Therefore, Ed and Jim being African American detectives were not welcomed in the town. Ed says to his colleague:

> -May I remind you that we're in Money, Mississippi. Maybe I should say that again: Money, Mississippi. The important part of that is the word *Mississippi*. You do understand what I'm saying?
>
> -This is the twenty- first century", Jim said.
>
> -Yeah well tell that to those f…. back there in Trump caps. (44)

When they were investigating one of the murders, they asked the wife of the victim if she has any close Black men as friends or enemies, she answers: "It ain't had no colored people in my house, except for the man from the satellite TV, and in two days three of y'all come in" (61). In another instance another wife of another victim says: "I'm gonna call the police if you don't get off my property. Ed flashed his badge. Ma'am we are the police" (65). In another murder scene, the wife of the victim asks the detectives: "you're actually nice, for a N…. you sound educated. Are you educated?" (163). She continues: "Exceptin' for my cleaning woman, Sadie you the first colored person ever been in this here house" (165). In another instance a woman testifies saying how scared they were seeing the black corpse at the murder scene: "She got all froze up when she seen them takin' Wheat and that n…out. Sorry, no offense" (68). The officers answer her back as "none taken" (43). *The Trees* is an unbiased expression of radical activism

that takes the reader somewhere we could not otherwise reach."In all of those files I read," Damon Thruff tells Mama Z, "not one person had to pay. Not one" (209). What *The Trees* miraculously manages to do with its mixture of comedy and historical rage is to deliver a wildly satisfying dream of retributive justice for all the people in Mama Z's gray file cabinets. Like her library, *The Trees* is a monument to the dead. The setting is a small town called Money, Mississippi, "named in that persistent Southern tradition of irony". We meet a dysfunctional white family unit with its morose matriarch Granny C, her son Wheat Bryant, and her nephew, Junior Junior. This time it's the white folks' turn to be rendered in grotesque caricature, and the actions of this feckless clan are played as broad knockabout, almost like a reverse minstrel show. But an ominous note is struck as Granny C expresses remorse for some past deed: "I wronged that little pickaninny," she broods. As the tone becomes disturbingly gruesome, a deeper purpose to this cruel humour emerges. Wheat is found dead and brutally disfigured, with the mutilated corpse of a young Black man next to him, which subsequently goes missing. The same thing happens to Junior Junior, with the same disappearing cadaver, and all at once we're in a horror story. Supernatural horror and historical reality collide in dreadful revelation. We are presented with a ghostly yet corporeal presence that haunts America's consciousness. Money, Mississippi is a real place. It was where the 14-year-old Emmett Till was lynched in 1955, after being accused by a white woman of making suggestive remarks. We learn that Granny C is that woman, and the corpse is Emmett, returned to take his revenge on her descendants. As this phenomenon is repeated elsewhere, the crime genre comes into play, interrogating notions of justice and law enforcement in a racist culture. Two Black officers of the Mississippi Bureau of Investigation provide a wise-cracking double act full of dry observation. When asked by an FBI agent why they joined the service they reply in harmony: "So Whitey wouldn't be the only one in the room with a gun" (130). A range of characters are called upon to investigate a series of white murder victims found with the bodies of lynched Black or Asian Americans. However, this is not so much a mystery to be solved, rather a greater crime to be addressed: a police procedural that investigates the lack of any due process in the past, where the crime scene is history itself. An academic, Damon Thruff, who meets with Mama Z, a 105-year-old survivor of Money who has chronicled lynchings from 1913 onwards. She has read his book on racial violence, which she criticises as "scholastic", and is curious as to how he was "able to construct three hundred and seven pages on such a topic without an ounce of outrage"(146). As they work through her comprehensive files on historical victims of this atrocity, the author takes a chapter to simply list them all in his own act of remembrance, and, in a nod to his earlier work, has Thruff write them in pencil and explain that: "When I'm done I'm going to erase every name, set them free." Mama Z tells him that: "Less than 1 percent of lynchers were ever convicted of a crime. Only a fraction of those ever served a sentence." A footnote to the case of her own murdered father remarks: "No one was interviewed. No suspects were identified. No one was arrested. No one was charged. No one cared" (155). The plot escalates as the lynched dead begin to rise up. There is widespread panic, a sense of an impending reckoning, but also a feeling that any real resolution is beyond these pages. The genius of this novel is that in an age of populism, it goes on the offensive, using popular forms to address a deep political issue as page-turning comic horror. It's both a wake-up call, as well as a literary compensation. What is truly disturbing is that in the 20 years between *Erasure* and *The Trees* we appear at times to be going backwards in terms of consciousness, so that an African American word for Awakening can now be used as a disparaging term. In his earlier work Everett might have wondered that history is a nightmare from which we are trying to awake, but now his analysis is more straight. As the FBI agent declares: "History is a motherfu*ker" (132). In *The Trees*, Everett carries out this multi-tonal storytelling maneuver to perfection, criticizing the legacy of America's deadliest sins with darksome irony. Though the action takes place in the present, the atmosphere and dialogue, much like the town's racial politics of 1950s. When FBI agents are called to investigate a mysterious spate of

murders of white people in a Mississippi town that suspiciously bear the hallmarks of the Emmett Till murder, they find a place stuck in time. There's a corrupt, Klan-loving coroner named Reverend Doctor Cad Fondle and a biracial waitress named Gertrude who goes by the nickname of Dixie, a term almost synonymous with Jim Crow. The diner where Dixie works showcases "weirdly colorized photographs of Elvis Presley and Billy Graham" (43). *The Trees* includes a wild, wide-ranging cast of characters. The frustrated Sheriff Red Jetty fruitlessly searches for clues while monitoring his clueless deputies. Gertrude, working under a pseudonym in a local diner, is the Virgil to the detective's Dante in their trip through Money. Mama Z, Gertrude's great-grandmother, shows the detectives the dark underside of the town's history as a diligent historian of lynching. The hard-nosed Special Agent Herberta Hind is sent by the FBI to assist the baffled detectives but winds up just as confused as them. This gives you only a taste of Everett's scope. These are all main characters. Secondary characters are as numerous as they are colorful. The book snowballs slowly, gathering momentum as the detectives' case progresses and regresses, as the investigators get ever more desperate for leads, and as the violence spreads nationwide. White people start turning up dead with the same body beside them. Meanwhile, racial tensions reach a fever pitch. Local members of the Ku Klux Klan in Money start preparing for a race war. Black characters begin talking ominously about "a little retributive justice." To Jim and Ed, it's an ever-worsening shitshow. Let's just say there's a lot of blood. "Death is never a stranger," Mama Z explains. "That's why we fear it." She shows the detectives her archives when they figure learning about the local history becomes the closest thing they have to a lead. Certainly, death is no stranger to Money, Mississippi, where strange fruit grew abundant. Of course, death is never a stranger anywhere in this country. The soil is laden with the blood of massacres and genocide. Everett appears to have dipped his pen in this blood to write *The Trees*. The book reads like an open wound. A full chapter contains nothing but the names of lynching's victims. Damon Thruff, a young professor of Ethnic Studies, travels to Money on the invitation of Gertrude to scour great-grandmother's copious records. He is the motor of the book, along with Mama Z, who volunteers her files. Seeing them, he is compelled to write down in pencil every name he encounters. He explains to Mama Z:

> "When I write the names they become real, not just statistics. When I write the names they become real again. It's almost like they get a few more seconds here. Do you know what I mean? I would never be able to make up this many names. The names have to be real. They have to be real. Don't they?"
>
> Mama Z put her hand against the side of Damon's face. "Why pencil?
>
> "When I'm done, I'm going to erase every name, set them free."
>
> "Carry on, child," the old woman said. (184)

Thruff occupies a position not dissimilar to Everett's. Both of their work excavates America's racial trauma hoping only to expose the wound, not dress it. But the violence of the book, the violence of lynching, surpasses any attempt to describe it. This explains why Everett employs so many genres to convey the horror of lynching's decades-long reign of terror. A detective novel, a ghost story, a tale of body horror, or any concatenation of genres must tremble before the barbarousness of American racial violence. He must operate within and between these genres to keep the violence at sufficient remove to open space for his use of the god-like third person omniscient. Jim and Ed erect a similar barrier between themselves and their work. Though they may secretly sympathize with the assassin, they continue investigating because it is their duty. Perhaps Thruff's responsibility, and by extension Everett's, is to keep the case permanently open. Really, the book's subject is America's inability to reckon with the violence on which it was founded. Whether that's slavery and Jim Crow laws, the genocide of indigenous peoples, or the exploitation of immigrants, the barbarity contradicts its founding values, so any confrontation with the past must explode its self-conception. Even the seasoned detectives see violence

that beggars belief. The detectives track the disappearing corpse to a cadaver company in Chicago where Jim "realized he was seeing two men playing soccer with a head" (192). Confusing violence is found in the present just as much as in the past. Everett uses humor throughout the novel to depict the degree of racism. He makes jokes about the confederate statue in the town. Jim says: Look at that piece of shit, Looks like big white d…" (121). He uses a joke about the Klan: the way to discover who belonged to the Klan was to wait at Russell's Dry Cleaning and Laundry" (108). He writes phrases like bumper stickers: "Once you go Black, you die. Or, Dead is the new Black" (137). These jokes in a novel about violent serial murders and a town full of people with dangerous racial mindset have an intention to soften the harshness of the situation. The presentation of violence and death with irony and humor also demonstrates how these have become an inescapable part of African American lives. Caricaturing and stereotyping these white supremacist townspeople doesn't decrease the seriousness of the situation which is continuing through centuries, but shows how this mindset which still continues is becoming more and more ridiculous in this century. However, the developments in the town prove the opposite. Indeed, there is a racist organization in the town. Their oath says:

> I have done passed the Yellow Dog and stand here a member of the Grand Invisible Empire. I vow to protect the God given rights of the White race from all aliens, be they Black, yellow, red or Jew. I pledge to follow to the letter the orders of my superior, the Grand Dragon of the Majestic Order of Knights of the Ku Klux Klan, as passed down through the duly elected Grand Kleagle of my chapter. Rocka rocka shu ba day! We is the Klan of the USA. (97)

The group regather after witnessing the murders of white people and "go back to the old tried-and-true ways of our KKK forebears, the sacred ways, the ways of fury, fire and the rope" (97). Everett shows how old-fashioned views about different races can still dominate in twenty-first century. The members of the group defend the superiority of the whites over all other races: "(Hispanics) should all be run out of town, out of the country, just like his grandfather has helped get the n….out of town back in the good old days of the 1920s" (138). One of the main arguments of the novel is how racism still continues in twenty-first-century especially in the deep South with political agenda supporting it. There are many references in the novel which prove that the Trump presidency and evangelicalism feed the racist ideology. At the end of the novel, there is a speech from Trump, as breaking news:

> …it's the Blacks we have to worry about and apparently the Chinese and Indians, but the point is they are not White like Americans are supposed to be. Make America great again. Something terrible is happening in our tows and on our streets. Good White Americans are being targeted for violence, killed like animals…. I wish I could find the leader of the N… . (292-3)

Then as he utters the word, he tries to correct it: I did not use the word n… I would never say the n-word. I'm the least racist person you will ever meet. Some fake news sources are going to tell you that I used the word n… I would never say the n-word (293). And the speech continues with him repeating the word over and over again and denying it. This exaggerated racist manner of the president is a direct criticism of the Trump administration. Though it is a fictional account, it goes hand in hand with his policies during his presidency. Sometimes even more illogical than his speech in the novel. The novel draws similarities between the horrors of the past and the contemporary bigotry for the twenty-first-century reader. The reminding of the past crimes creates a collective nightmare where the present is no different than the past. History repeating itself, the lynching of thousands of African American people in the South beginning with the reconstruction era in American history dominates the narration although it used to be regarded as something of the past. One of the black residents of the town is a 100 years old Mama Z. Her library is filled with large file cabinets containing the names of the dead and lynched African American people since she was born. She says the names of 7006 people who had been lynched since

1913 are recorded and stored in her room (210). Through the story, Everett stays as a neutral narrator and by refusing to declare the killers whoever they might be, he uses an unsafe technique reflecting the prayers that the American media adopts. All these names explicitly show the injustices done to their races throughout history. The murders happened not because these people are guilty but because they are blacks: "the similarity of their deaths had caused these men and women to be at once erased and coalesced like one piece, like one body. They were all number and no number at all, many and one, a symptom, a sign" (166). Mama Z wants an academic to write these names one by one for them to become not mere hidden files in a closet. Later he explains why he writes them:

> When I write the names they become real, not just statistics. When I write the names they become real again. It's almost like they get a few more seconds here. Do you know what I mean? I would never be able to make up this many names. The names have to be real. They have to be real … when I'm done, I'm going to erase every name, set them free. (184)

The novel also has a chapter consisting of pages and pages of names of the victims only, probably with the same intention of reminding the readers of the reality and horror of these deaths. It is not only about reminding us of the past but also how today these people still face injustices and deaths not different than lynching. Gertrude, one of the leaders of the movement says: "Everybody talks about genocides all over the world, but when the killing is slow and spread over a hundred years, no one notices. Where there are no mass graves, no one notices. American outrage is always for show" (283). This time Everett creates a terrifying environment for the whites in *The Trees*. The serial murders of the whites in the town create panic and increase fear from the blacks. One of the residents say: "I think we're all suffering from mass hysteria around here. You see, there weren't no black man at either crime scene. We're just so afraid of Black people in this country that we see them everywhere" (58). The black corpse which appears near the dead victims acts as a ghost-like figure which kind of represents the conscience of the white public. It reappears every time a death happens, a replica of Emerett Till's unrecognizable beaten body which appears to remind of the bloody past. The reverend says: "Oh Gawd Jesus, I knows you have a plan, but us poor White mortals is scared to death down here with this strange n…, you keep sending. Is he an omen, oh Lawd, a sign, or is he the devil…. (50). These words of the white supremacists in the novel prove the never-ending perception of the whites on blacks as potential criminals. Faulkner had written on the murder of Emmett Till and said: "Fear, not hatred, is what I've experienced from Southern people". Fear rationalized hatred and murder. (How America remembers Emmett Till). This fear of negrophobia (also termed anti-Blackness), one recurrent example of this is the fear of a black male rape of a white woman in such racist societies. Percival Everett aims to create guilt for the descendants who did injustice and who did not pay for its consequences. The figure of Granny C is the woman who had accused Emerett for whistling at her and thus who was responsible for his murder. She says: "About something I wished I hadn't done. About the lie I told all them years back on that nigger boy…I wronged that little pickaninny" (16). Everett had included these real people in his fiction and make them face the results. The plot of the novel shows that it is now the blacks who organize groups to murder the whites, the opposite of what had happened in the nineteenth century. This way Everett disrupts the white supremacist townspeople who got away with all the killings of innocent people on wrong premises, in the name of racial purity. The violent murders they face are a disruptive strategy to show their generational evil to their faces. In the novel it states that the woman should pay back what she had done, wrongly accusing Till and causing his tragic death: "he who digs a pit will fall in it, and he who rolls a stone, it will come back to him" (93). Only after the tragic incidents of whites being killed this time, she come to her senses and she says: "Like it say in the good book, what goes around comes around" (16). Therefore, it is a novel of revenge, revenge from history. People in the town fear that: "if the spirits are out for revenge, there's going to be a lot more killing around here (103). For the black organizations who

aim at fighting racists, this is a never-ending war "one that's been going on for four hundred years, and now we're fighting back" (232).

> This morning, in Conway, South Carolina, a roving band of Black men rioted through the streets of the small downtown area. They killed six White males.... This is being called a race riot and a hate crime...Racial tensions are high, and a curfew is now in place. (254)

The incidents in the country increased where nearly in every state, black mobs and sometimes Asian people attack and kill whites. As the novel narrates the incidents like tv news, it says: In New York City, "a fat policeman shot a young black man in Central Park, only to find dirt-encrusted Black men waiting for him at his patrol car" (287). *The Trees* assure the reader that those who do injustice will payback for their crimes. Everett, also known as an "uncategorizable" writer due to his diverse attempt with genre and form, *The Trees* is difficult to name in these terms just as it draws from accepted modes including Southern-style gothic, detective fiction and the buddy cop comedy, it generally avoids basic elements of these modes. The novel ends with uncertainty unlike any other novels of Everett. The detectives found out the responsible for the murder of the first three white victims in Money. However, it is not certain who committed the other crimes in various states of the country. The novel ends when the detectives came across the academic at the house of Mama Z who has been writing one by one about each and every lynching victim in the state since her birth. They saw that she still continues to write the names with handwriting one by one showing the reader that racism and discrimination and hate crimes are still there to last. In twenty-first century, African American people still experience various brutal attacks from society so many years after the Jim Crow laws. These may vary from micro aggressions, and stereotyped representations to brutal and unjust police attacks. The mindset of conservative and racist white people and the system still constitutes a huge problem for African American people. Percival Everett by reminding us of the brutal story of Emmett Till uncovers the horrors of the past; furthermore, he narrates the end of the story which took place in 1955 in Mississippi. It shocks the reader by showing how racism still dominates in the South in the twenty-first century. Fiction enables him to create a different and violent end just like history itself. Though there have been arguments over creating art about Black trauma or racial violence specifically after the murder of George Floyd, Everett presents a complex cast who cannot achieve a catharsis because the lack of justice but figure their dilemmas; Jim, Herberta and Ed struggle with their dual identities and the cultural complexities of being 'Black and Blue'; Mama Z and her archive; Granny C and her guilt. For Everett, justice can only be seen in fiction. Though the novel is fictional justice, by the elements of repetition, and revenge, Everett writes for justice in a way that the real world has not yet noticed. He does not leave anyone behind and writes a new story for the lost ones' blood. This time the revenge is taken from the murderers of the 14-year-old Till. When Mama Z appears partly through the narrative, she comments, "If you want to know a place, talk to its past" (104). Unsurprisingly, while Everett is talking with the past in *The Trees*, he's also talking to the present, about the future. He ends the novel both illuminating and mystifying being Thruff as the writer of all the victims' names and we become readers being Mama Z:

> "He's typing names," Mama Z said. "One name at a time. One name at a time. Every name."
>
> "Names" Ed said. "Shall I stop him?" Mama Z asked. Jim looked at Ed, then Hind. Gertrude was clearly
>
> confused, yet not. "Shall I stop him?" the old woman asked again.
>
> Outside, in the distance, through the night air, the muffled cry came through, Rise. Rise.
>
> "Shall I stop him?" (299)

The most surprising thing about *The Trees* is how funny it is. It's hard to find humor in a book that deals with lynching, but Everett manages it, mostly in the dialogue between Morgan and Davis, both of whom talk with a dry, decisive sense of humor. Everett also has fun with names: his white characters go by Cad Fondle, Delroy Digby, Pinch Wheyface, and Hickory Spit. *The Trees* is a masterpiece of satire that overturns the white narrative around race in America. The novel insists that we consider the lack of national offence about lynching, which still happens today - consider George Floyd, consider Ahmaud Arbery. "Everybody talks about genocides around the world, but when the killing is slow and spread over a hundred years, no one notices," Everett writes. "Where there are no mass graves, no one notices. American outrage is always for show. It has a shelf life" (283). Everett also wants us to think about the lack of consequences for white racism. For every Derek Chauvin who gets sentenced to years in prison, there are many more who never get called to account. In *The Trees*, they finally do, on a scale proportionate with their crimes, with the crimes of this nation. "History," as one character notes, "is a motherfu**er" (132).

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