

PERCIVAL EVERETT'S *THE TREES*: WITH STILL BLOOD ON THE LEAVESEsra Öztarhan¹**ABSTRACT**

After the reconstruction era, racism didn't end but entered a violent phase when white supremacists began killing African Americans with the fear of losing their power in the South. In the era between the 19th century and the civil rights movement, the South witnessed more than 4700 lynching cases which caused the death of African American victims. The wave of violence and its consequences, injustices against the blacks had been one of the primary topics of literary imagination since then. It wasn't only the contemporary writers who witnessed the painful years, but also many artists today still write about the horrors of the past. Percival Everett's 2021 novel *The Trees* is one of the examples that remembers the violence and creates a fictional atmosphere to resist the victimization of African Americans. The novel focuses on a series of homicides in the American South, Mississippi. There is a common situation in all of these homicides: Several white dead bodies are found with the same African American corpse beside them. However, as the detectives investigate, it is determined that these are not simple crimes. They contain the vengeance of an African American who was lynched years ago. Though Everett seems to write crime fiction about a small Southern town, the novel focuses on resisting institutionalized racism which still affects today. The remembering of the lynching of African American people, writing it in a satirical way, and recreating history are all forms of resistance he employs in his novel.

Keywords: Lynching. Racism. Resistance. Percival Everett.

RESUMO**AS ÁRVORES DE PERCIVAL EVERETT: AINDA COM SANGUE NAS FOLHAS**

Após a era da reconstrução, o racismo não acabou, mas entrou numa fase violenta quando os supremacistas brancos começaram a matar afro-americanos com medo de perderem o seu poder no Sul. Na era entre o século XIX e o movimento pelos direitos civis, o Sul testemunhou mais de 4.700 casos de linchamento que causaram a morte de vítimas afro-americanas. A onda de violência e suas consequências, as injustiças contra os negros, foram um dos principais temas do imaginário literário desde então. Não foram apenas os escritores contemporâneos que testemunharam os anos dolorosos, mas também muitos artistas que ainda hoje escrevem sobre os horrores do passado. O romance de 2021 de Percival Everett, *The Trees*, é um dos exemplos que relembra a violência e cria uma atmosfera ficcional para resistir à vitimização dos afro-americanos. O romance se concentra em uma série de homicídios no sul dos Estados Unidos, no Mississippi. Há uma situação comum em todos esses homicídios: vários cadáveres brancos são encontrados com o mesmo cadáver afro-americano ao lado deles. No entanto, à medida que os detetives investigam, descobre-se que não se trata de crimes simples. Eles contêm a vingança de um afro-americano que foi linchado anos atrás. Embora Everett pareça escrever ficção policial sobre uma pequena cidade do sul, o romance se concentra na resistência ao racismo institucionalizado que ainda afeta hoje. A lembrança do linchamento do povo afro-americano, sua escrita de forma satírica e a recriação da história são formas de resistência que ele emprega em seu romance.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Linchamento. Racismo. Resistência. Percival Everett.

Data de submissão: 31.10.2023

Data de aprovação: 30.05.2024

I don't want to go to Money, honey.

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Not Money, Mississippi!
 No, I wouldn't go to Money, honey,
 down in Mississippi
 There's pity, sorrow and pain
 In Money, Mississippi.
 Tears and blood like rain
 (Langston Hughes
 "The Money Mississippi Blues", 1955)

Langston Hughes' poem calls Mississippi, the land of "tears and blood", and especially he mentions a particular town, Money. The poem refers to a lynching event of an African American boy in the 1950s. The trauma of the past and the injustices towards his race affected Hughes like many other African American writers. They aim to reflect the painful experiences they had to live through being black in the United States. Even in fictional narratives, the use of real events from history has been integrated into the plot to make it more effective as it is an inescapable part of their histories. In African American literature, the retelling of the story of Emmett Till's lynching by two white racists in Money, Mississippi reminds us both the injustices against African Americans in the late nineteenth century and also reflects how nothing has changed ever since. Writers of the twenty-first century reconstruct America's racial trauma wishing to expose the truth. This way, black victimhood may turn into black agency. Percival Everett is one of these writers who retells the story of Till's lynching. The article aims to show how the novel is a literary resistance to the centuries-old racist culture of the South. The novel takes revenge on all those who are guilty by remembering the past, using satire, and rewriting the story.

Lynching means to "inflict severe (but not deliberately fatal) bodily punishment (on someone) without legal sanction" (Etymology online). The etymology of the word comes from William Lynch, who organized a committee for order in Virginia during the Revolution. It refers to an action outside of law to bring justice and also it covers the act of punishing someone by the members of a community on their terms. Though the term may cover a general meaning, it usually refers to the unlawful and brutal killings of African Americans by white people after the reconstruction era in the South.

Karlos K. Hill argues in his book *Beyond The Rope: The Impact of Lynching on Black Culture and Memory* about the differences between white and black perspectives on lynching. On the one hand, there are narratives of lynching by white authors that regard blacks as a potential threat against whites. On the other hand, black narratives aim to transform these biased views and the racialization of the lynching of African Americans. He differentiates between victimization narratives, "which stressed what *white lynchers did* to black lynch victims," and consoling narratives, which "emphasized what *black lynch victims did* in response to white lynch mob violence" (HILL, 2016, 68).

In both cases, both sides seek to punish the guilty ones as they do not trust justice (HILL, 2016, 30). The reason why white people attack and kill blacks brutally has justifications in blacks being perceived as potential threats towards whites' property or women. And similarly, blacks feel they have to create their resistance towards white violence. In most of the lynching cases, the criminals got no penalties. Therefore, anti-lynching literature aims to resist practices of institutionalized racism. One of the earliest examples is from Ida B Wells. She has launched a campaign to make known the horrors of lynching across the United States. She claimed that:

lynchings were carried out in retribution for black men raping white women because the overwhelming majority of sexual relationships were consensual or merely a product of fear in white imaginations. She asserted that lynching was the last relic of barbarism and slavery (Bill of Rights Institute).

The racialized violence should be written and told to everyone experienced by African American communities whose and their families' lives are constrained, and challenged by the practice for centuries. Black Americans couldn't forget about the violence and injustices done to them since slavery, even after the Reconstruction. The images and stories of people being tortured, hanged, burned, and cut into pieces are memories that are embedded in the consciousness of African Americans. The brutal memory of lynching, though it remains in the past affects black culture and literary creation even today.

Wendy Harding comments on the dehumanizing aspect of lynching, claiming white supremacy on even the dead bodies, in his article "Spectacle Lynching and Textual Responses". He says the display of victims in public is an act of marking them as inferior:

When the lynching party had done its work, the victim's body would often be displayed in a public place as a message to the community at large. This practice deliberately violates cultural customs that aim at honoring the dead, thereby showing the white supremacists' disdain for the black victims, their families and their community (HARDING, 2017, p. 2-3).

The act of killing black victims unjustly, displaying their bodies to other people so that it would be a warning to anyone who disrupts white supremacy had created reactions in many artistic works.

Percival Everett's 2021 novel *The Trees* remembers the lynching events in Mississippi. Through the act of remembering the haunted past, he was able to resist the destiny of African Americans from slavery to lynching to the black lives matter movement. The novel is about a series of homicides in Money, Mississippi in the year 2000s. In the first chapters of the novel, Junior Junior and Wheat are found castrated, barbed wire separating their necks. Beside each body, a dead African American man is lying in a suit, disfigured as Emmett Till was, that holds the white man's severed testicles in his hand. The investigation is given to two African American detectives from the Mississippi Bureau of Investigation: Ed Morgan and Jim Davis, who are received with hostility by the all-white police force in Money. The series of murders continues when another white man is found dead the same way, with the same black corpse. As the novel proceeds, the murders continue with mystery since they present a puzzle at each crime scene. The plot is centered around the African American detectives searching for the crime. The detectives suspect that these are killings of payback. Moreover, they soon discover that similar murders are taking place all over the country. When the bodies are gathered, the detectives look for answers from a doctor who has been documenting the cases of lynching in the country for years to uncover a history that rejects the burial.

The setting of the novel, which is a small town in Mississippi, was chosen by the writer to demonstrate his true intention of writing the book. The homicides in this town were a reflection of decades of racism and its reflections in the South. African American literature in the twenty-first century still remembers and rewrites the history of lynching in the American South.

The story of the novel is based on a real event from 1955, the lynching of a black teenager called Emmett Till in Mississippi. The 14-year-old black boy was tortured and killed in 1955 for allegedly whistling at a white woman. However, the murderers were not found guilty by an all-white jury. At the funeral, the display of his unrecognized body beaten and tormented by the whites was met with so much reaction from the African American community all over the country. Her mother demanded an open casket funeral to show the world his disfigured body as a result of beatings and being thrown into the water. More than 50,000 people visited the funeral. The first impact was that many Southern black youths who are to be called the "Emmett Till Generation" started to resist the unlawful practices of the whites towards innocent blacks. They joined marches and sit-ins (YANG, parag. 19). The murder was regarded

as “the genesis of the [civil rights] movement, giving Rosa Parks the strength to sit down and Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. the courage to stand up” (TELL, 2019, parag. 7) One of the most prominent leaders of blacks right movement Martin Luther King was also affected from the incident and used Till’s name in many of his speeches. The famous “I Have a Dream” speech was delivered on the anniversary day of his murder (YANG, parag. 21)

In the twenty-first century, it seems that little has changed and Everett wants to show his resistance by moving the event to today’s world. The name of the book *The Trees* refers to two things. It represents the generations of people white and black and their descendants, like trees being connected to each other from roots to leaves, following the mindsets and ideologies of their forefathers. At the same time, they are being exposed to the same problems as their family members. In the novel, Mama Z says “Every white person in this country, if they did not lynch somebody themselves, then somebody in their family tree did” (EVERETT, 2021, p. 103). Thus every white Southern is responsible for the guilt of racism: “it was one of them secrets everybody knows” (EVERETT, 2021, p. 165). Secondly, the trees are tangible symbols of black bodies being hanged on them during the lynching that took place in the early twentieth century in the American South. The trees were used as hangman trees for executions and illegal killings of African American people. The detectives listen to the song “Strange Fruit” in a restaurant as a reminder of the racist past. The poem was written by Abel Meeropol, a Jewish American who wrote it as a reaction to the photo of the lynched bodies of two African Americans in the 1930s. He had seen the picture of their dead bodies hanging from the tree, where a white crowd was staring at them. The lyrics likened the bodies of lynched people to strange fruits hanging from the trees. The lyrics of the song are as follows:

Southern trees bear strange fruit
 Blood on the leaves and blood at the root
 Black body swinging in the southern breeze
 Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees.
 Pastoral scene of the gallant south
 The bulging eyes and the twisted mouth
 Scent of magnolia sweet and fresh
 Then the sudden smell of burning flesh!
 Here is fruit for the crows to pluck
 For the rain to gather, for the wind to suck
 For the sun to rot, for the trees to drop
 Here is a strange and bitter crop

Just like the story of Emmett Till becoming a spark of the civil rights movement, the song became an anthem of the civil rights movement and a reflection of the brutality of the past. It resists the myth of the magnolia-scented southern states. They are not gallants but rather hypocrites and racists as the trees would testify. The song became synonymous with Billie Holiday who sang it in the clubs to a white and black audience who were mesmerized whenever they heard it. In the film *United States vs. Billie Holiday*, it is shown that Holiday was constantly being monitored by federal agents who prohibited the singing of that particular song as it might cause the public to revolt (DANIELS, 2021). However, she insisted on adding it to her repertoire as an homage to her race and to show that violence, injustice, and discrimination against her people still exist in the South. The song is an act of resistance in itself.

Later in the twenty-first century, when artists wanted to resist racism, they used lines of “Strange Fruit” in some of the popular songs. Singers like Kanye West and Dwayne Wiggins used their lyrics in their hip-hop songs featuring references that the injustices still exist in different aspects and degrees. A veteran singer Bettye La Vette felt the need to release a new cover of the song after the police killing of George Floyd. She says: “I watch the news all day long, and the language started to change from ‘unarmed black man’ to ‘lynching. So I called the [record] company and told them that it seemed like we keep telling this story over and over and over.” (BROWNE, 2020, parag. 4)

Similar to the song being covered even today, the story of Emmett Till has been told and retold by many authors and poets ever since it happened. After the incident of 1955 many artists, especially African Americans have written novels, poems, songs, and plays as the legacy of the event affected them deeply. As Metress states “Langston Hughes, Gwendolyn Brooks, James Baldwin, Anne Moody, Eldridge Cleaver, Toni Morrison, Audre Lorde, John Edgar Wideman, Bebe Moore Campell, Anthony Walton, and Michael Eric Dyson are just a few of these writers who explored the legacy of Money, Mississippi” (METRESS, 2003, p.89). It became one of the most powerful reminders of racial injustice, where Till became the embodiment of racial violence in these works. In some works, his name was openly used and the story is told as it is. In some other works, he remained as the symbol of resistance, where the real story is changed. Toni Morrison wrote a play about the event. She said: “I wanted to see a collision of three or four levels of time through the eyes of one person who could come back to life and seek vengeance. These young black men are getting shot all over the country today, not because they were stealing but because they're black” (CROYDEN, 1985, parag. 7). Morrison claims that the horrors of the past still continue and nothing has changed since 1955. The killing of Till has become the starting point of resistance against systemic racism not only in civil rights movement but also in literature.

Till has also become a symbol in artworks and cinema even in this century. Lisa Whittington painted his distorted face in her artwork “How she sent him and how she got him back” in 2012. She says in an interview that “creating the picture was like having to watch him being brutalized and only being able to defend him with my paintbrush”. (WHITTINGTON, 2017, parag. 2) Another painting by Dana Schutz entitled “Open Casket” recreates this image as unidentifiable and disfigured. Also in 2022 an American drama film “Till” which was directed by Chinonye Chukwu and written by Michael Reilly was released. His story inspired many artists black and white as a resistance to racism. Elliot J. Gorn, a historian who has published a book about Till explains this as follows:

Racism is a shape-lifting demon that America wrestles once again. Lies proliferate about minorities, the kind that got young Emmett Till lynched. So we continue to retell his story, to probe its meanings, to expose and explain what happened (GORN, 2018b, parag 18).

Percival Everett’s *The Trees* also contributes to this tradition of retelling Till’s story. This time the event takes place in the 2000s and begins with the murder of two white men who were the sons of the killers of Emmett Till in 1955. As Gorn mentions, the remembering and telling of Till’s story will continue as racism continues.

Everett uses satire and exaggeration in his novel narrating the place and the people. Money, Mississippi, the setting of the novel is the same place where the Till murder happened. 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 (EVERETT, 2021, p. 12).

The small town in the novel has all the characteristics of nineteenth-century values. In many 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” (EVERETT, 2021, p. 53). 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” (EVERETT, 2021, p. 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” (EVERETT, 2021, p. 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” (EVERETT, 2021, p. 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, and bumpkins.

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. (EVERETT, 2021, p. 44)

When they were investigating one of the murders, they asked the wife of the victim if she had 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” (EVERETT, 2021, p. 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” (EVERETT, 2021, p. 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?” (EVERETT, 2021, p. 163). She continues: “Exceptin’ for my cleaning woman, Sadie you the first colored person ever been in this here house” (EVERETT, 2021, p. 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” (EVERETT, 2021, p. 68). The officers answer her back as “none taken”.

The Trees has a satirical tone to draw attention to the racist mindset in American society even in the twenty-first century. Michel Feith claims that in Everett’s novels, humor and laughter are embodied forms of resistance to stereotypes, power relations, and narratives. (FEITH, 2023). In the above quotation, the black detectives are faced with white supremacy in the town. The power relations between blacks and whites in Southern society seemed to continue and even black detectives were not regarded as educated or capable of working. Everett makes jokes about the harshest concepts like death, lynching, and racism. In one instance Jim looks at the confederate statue in the town and says: Look at that piece of shit, Looks like big white d...” (EVERETT, 2021, p. 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” (EVERETT, 2021, p. 108). He writes phrases like bumper stickers: “Once you go Black, you die. Or, Dead is the new Black” (EVERETT, 2021, p. 137). These jokes in a novel about violent serial murders and a town full of people with dangerous racial mindsets have an intention to soften the harshness of the situation.

Throughout the novel, white supremacists are shown as idiots in an absurd and satirical style. For example, in one chapter, Reverend Doctor Fondle, tries to find a solution to a killing spree in a Klan meeting, he cannot make the group focus because they mourn the days passed:

“Used to be back when my daddy was alive, we had meetins all the time, every week,” Jared said. “Elections, too” another man said. “They was always voting them back in them days, Right?”
 “And they used to have cross burnins a lot more and family picnics and softball games and all such,” said Donald. “I remember eatin’ cake next to that glowing cross. I loved my mama’s cake.”
 “Yeah,” several voiced their agreement (EVERETT, 2021, p. 97).

These accounts of the Klan members longing for the days of lynching remind us of the photographs and postcards of lynching moments where the white audience watches as an amusement in town. Indeed, in his novel, the tragic scenes of how Klan members continue their racist mindset become something to laugh at. 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 does not decrease the seriousness of the situation which is continuing through centuries, but shows how this mindset which 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 (EVERETT, 2021, p. 97).

The group regathers 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” (EVERETT, 2021, p. 97). Everett shows how old-fashioned views about different races can still dominate in the 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” (EVERETT, 2021, p. 138). Instead of being a strict organization, we witness them chanting stupid rhymes, longing for the old days.

While Klan members get organized, Everett shows how politics support white racism in the town. There are many references in the novel that 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 towns 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... (EVERETT, 2021, p. 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 (EVERETT, 2021, p. 293).

The speech continues with him repeating the word over and over again and denying it humorously. This exaggerated racist manner of the president is indeed the reflection of his real-life speeches and acts. Real life and humor become inseparable as the Trump administration and his supporters make similar racist accounts. As can be seen, humor, jokes, exaggeration, and satire of the first-century South are used to a great extent in the narration of the novel. It is a tool to resist the harshness and violence of the situation for blacks even in the twenty-first century. Humor helps to get over

Everett remembers the lynching of Emmett Till, writes it in a humorous way to criticize the racist society, and lastly rewrites a fictional end to the story. The novel uses the real story of lynching as the basis of the novel. However, in real life, the murders were not punished.

Thus, Everett wants to bring justice. He fictionalizes a huge organization of resistance from African Americans directed towards whites, the ones who are responsible for centuries of murders and injustices. The plot of Everett has a disruptive strategy of converting the historical story of injustices and extra judiciary verdicts. This time in the twenty-first century blacks are brutally killing whites in an organized way like the Ku Klux Klan of the nineteenth century.

The novel draws similarities between the events of the past and the contemporary bigotry for the twenty-first-century reader. The reminder of past crimes creates a collective nightmare where the present is no different than the old days. 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. However, it used to be regarded as something of the past. Racism didn't disappear after reconstruction; America never became a post-racial country even after Obama. The novel provides historical facts together with the social and political atmosphere of the United States. In that sense, the novel is also a criticism of the Trump era's racist mindset.

Recent developments in the twenty-first century prove how racism is an inescapable part of the United States. In March 2022 Biden signed Emmet Till Anti lynching law. In a ceremony, he said lynching is never a thing of the past:

Lynching was pure terror to enforce the lie that not everyone...belongs to America, not everyone is created equal. Terror, to systematically undermine hard-fought civil rights. Terror, not just in the dark of the night but in broad daylight. Innocent men, women and children hung by nooses in trees, bodies burned and drowned and castrated. Their crimes?... Simply being black (SULLIVAN and VAZGUEZ, 2022, parag 3).

The Trees form its plot on the idea that the ghosts of the past follow Americans. These are slavery, discrimination, injustice, and inequality just because they are black. The concept of racial formation theory explains that the meanings ascribed to race are determined by social structures and they are constructions. In *Racial Formation in the United States* racial formation is defined as "...the socio-historical process by which racial categories are created, inhabited, transformed, and destroyed." (OMI and WINANT, p. 68). The politics, economics, and society define race relations at a given time and place.

Thus Everett also wanted to remind the reader of each and every black person who died by lynching to create awareness. The date of the novel coincides with two developments that claim that the life of each individual black person matters. One of them is the motto "Say Her Name" during the black lives matter movement. It was:

launched in December 2014 by the African American Policy Forum (AAPF) and Center for Intersectionality and Social Policy Studies (CISPS), the #SayHerName campaign brings awareness to the often invisible names and stories of Black women and girls who have been victimized by racist police violence, and provides support to their families (aapf).

Another development is the opening of The National Lynching Memorial in 2018, Alabama, constructed to commemorate lynching victims. Steel rectangles are hanging from the ceiling and each steel plate has the names of the lynched victims on it (COTTER). Everett should have been affected by these naming and defining of the dead ones. They are not numbers or nameless bodies, each of them like Emmett Till has their own stories.

One of the black residents of the town is a 100-year-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 (EVERETT, 2021, p. 210). 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” (EVERETT, 2021, p. 166). Mama Z wants an academic to write these names one by one for they become not mere hidden files in a closet. Later the academic 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 (EVERETT, 2021, p. 185).

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” (EVERETT, 2021, p. 284).

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 among the blacks. One of the residents says: “I think we’re all suffering from mass hysteria around here. You see, there weren’t no black men at either crime scene. We’re just so afraid of Black people in this country that we see them everywhere” (EVERETT, 2021, p. 58). The black corpse that 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 Emmett 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.... (EVERETT, 2021, p. 50). These words of the white supremacists in the novel prove the never-ending perception of the whites of blacks as potential criminals.

Faulkner had written about the murder of Emmett Till and said: “Fear, not hatred, is what I’ve experienced from Southern people. Fear rationalized hatred and murder” (GORN, 2018a, parag. 13). 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. This suspicion has created a moral panic in society for ages. It is defined as institutionalized racism:

public campaigns in which some person, group or series of events is perceived-experienced, represented, constructed- as an imminent threat to normal civilized society, to our way of life...The public is mobilized via the agencies of social control (the police, the courts), the moral guardians of society (the religious establishment, politicians, the judiciary) and other orchestrations of public opinion (newspapers, community leaders, education and so on) to stamp out this threat lest it bring catastrophe to us all (JORDAN and WEEDON, 1995, 273-4).

Everett rewrites the story in a way to make all these false assumptions and perceptions about blacks come to life. As an artist, the only means to end racism and injustices is through creating fictional worlds. Percival Everett aims to create guilt for the descendants who did injustice and did not pay for its consequences. The figure of Granny C is the woman who had accused Emmett of 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” (EVERETT, 2021, p. 16). Everett had included these real people in his fiction and made 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 happened in the nineteenth century. This way Everett resists 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” (EVERETT, 2021, 93). Only after the tragic incidents of whites being killed this time, she come to her senses and says: “Like it say in the good book, what goes around comes around” (EVERETT, 2021, p. 16). Everett constructs an unusual ending to centuries-old violence against blacks. It becomes more unjust and horrible when it is against whites. It is his way of creating literal and literary justice.

CONCLUSION

At the end of the novel, it is time for white people to fear blacks’ organized race riots towards them.

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 (EVERETT, 2021, p. 254).

This is the fictional reaction and justice to a hundred years of violence blacks have faced from the time of slavery to the police brutality in the first century. 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 come across the academic at the house of Mama Z who has been writing one by one about every lynching victim in the state since her birth. They saw that she continues to write the names with handwriting one by one showing the reader that racism, discrimination, and hate crimes are still there to last.

In the 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 microaggressions, 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. 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?” (EVERETT, 2021, p. 299).

The injustices will continue and many more names will be added to the list.

Many writers and artists have returned and retold the stories of lynching victims like the story of Emmett Till. These narratives aim to transform the racist views that have justifications for the killings of African Americans. *The Trees* also contribute to the canon by resisting

unlawful practices and prejudices against blacks. The choice of remembering Till, a symbolic event from the past, tells so much to the modern reader about racism then and today. Everett uses several writing techniques like humor and satire to resist the illogical behaviors and mindsets of white supremacy. Lastly, *The Trees* rewrites an ending with justice to the never-ending problem of the United States, the trees with blood on their leaves.

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