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Peter Schmidt

*Swarthmore College*, pschmid1@swarthmore.edu

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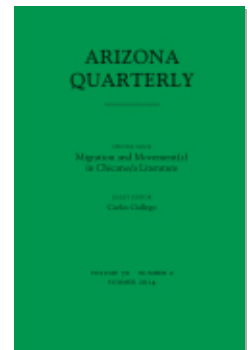
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## The "Raftsmen's Passage," Huck's Crisis of Whiteness, and Huckleberry Finn in U.S. Literary History

Peter Schmidt

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PETER SCHMIDT

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The “Raftsmen’s Passage,”  
Huck’s Crisis of Whiteness,  
and *Huckleberry Finn*  
in U.S. Literary History

“Tell me some mo’ histry, Huck.”

Mark Twain, working notes for *Huckleberry Finn*, C-14

COMMENTARY ON THE “raftsmen’s passage” section of Mark Twain’s *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1885) usually centers on the conundrum of whether or not to include it as part of the text of the novel’s chapter 16. Twain scholarship has reached no consensus on how the passage should be handled editorially, much less on the meaning of the passage for the novel as a whole. In many ways, the raftsmen’s passage is a bit like Huck Finn himself, a kind of outcast child of the parental body of the book.<sup>1</sup>

The relative neglect of the raftsmen’s passage in *Huckleberry Finn* commentary is surprising when we consider the traumatic heart of the episode. After the raftsmen’s boasts and story-telling are finished, Huck is accidentally found hiding in a woodpile at the far edge of the raft at the edge of the firelight; he is roughly pulled from his hiding place and, while naked, interrogated and threatened. He begins crying, though it is questionable whether Huck’s tears are involuntary or a ploy for sympathy, and when made to identify himself he chooses the name of the murdered child in a ghost story that he has just overheard. The best interpreter of the passage, Peter G. Beidler, long ago suggested that Huck

here is “unconsciously identifying with the dead child,” part of a pattern throughout the novel that shows an attraction to death “as a release from the cruelty and suffering that is life—at least ‘sivilized’ life” (248). Readers may argue with equal plausibility, however, that Huck chooses the name strategically, hoping to get a laugh—which he does (273).

What has not been emphasized about the raftsmen’s passage is that it brings to a climax Huck’s crisis of racial identity caused by his identification with Jim’s escape. Questioned by the raftsmen, Huck uses a phrase that appears to be black English, one he has just heard Jim use. Huck’s retrospective narrative itself in this passage also appears to go out of its way to “color” Huck as either blue or black. In addition, Twain’s scene echoes wording he used in his short story, “A True Story,” published two years earlier, in 1874. That tale was narrated by a black character, “Aunt Rachel,” based on a story from her own life told to the Clemenses in Elmira, New York, by their cook, Mary Ann Cord; Twain claimed that the words of the story were entirely hers, not his. Crucial elements of Cord’s tale are, in the raftsmen’s passage, transposed into Huck’s voice—an intertextual confluence that has also so far gone unanalyzed. Of course, chapter 16 is perhaps most well known not for the raftsmen’s episode but because in it Huck for the first time decides not just to trick or insult Jim but to betray him back to slavery, prompted in part because Jim articulates for the first time how much freedom means to him. But only by adding the raftsmen’s passage back to its original place in chapter 16 (between the second and third paragraphs) can we make an important observation: Huck decides to turn Jim in immediately *after* those moments with the white raftsmen when—for the first time in the novel—Huck understands his own racial identity to be ambiguous.

In general, when the issue of “race” in *Huckleberry Finn* is discussed the debate has focused on Twain’s representation of Jim, or whites’ racist language and behavior toward blacks, especially Huck’s. But what if we were to argue that “race” in the novel cannot properly be discussed without considering how a crisis in *whiteness* is at its center, embodied in a boy who occupies a precarious space on the boundaries of white identity? Toni Morrison suggested as much in *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (1992), when she said that

there is no way, given the confines of the novel, for Huck to mature into a moral human being in America without Jim. . . . It is not what Jim seems that warrants inquiry, but what Mark Twain, Huck, and especially Tom need from him that should solicit our attention. In that sense the book may indeed be “great” because in its structure, in the hell it puts its readers through at the end, the frontal debate it forces, it simulates and describes the parasitical nature of white freedom. (56–57)

Morrison’s book has had a salutary effect on Twain criticism over the last decade by energizing some of the best of Twain’s recent readers—Shelley Fisher Fishkin, Eric Lott, Jonathan Arac, Jocelyn Chadwick-Joshua, Elaine and Harry Mensh, and Carl F. Wieck, among others—into disagreement. Nonetheless, there remain unexplored ways to test Morrison’s key generalizations about *Huckleberry Finn*. Morrison’s account of the “parasitical” nature of Huck’s “freedom” cast a more skeptical eye upon Jim’s role as surrogate than any Twain commentator had yet done, but in other ways it followed the majority by suggesting that the early scenes with Huck and Jim may essentially be read as a narrative of Huck’s maturation. Yet there is an unexplored tension in Morrison’s statement between her phrases “mature into a moral human being” and “white freedom.” Although white “civilization” assumes these two terms to be synonymous, the book’s narrative keeps putting them in tension, by making Huck’s maturation dependent not just upon Jim’s aid but also upon *Huck’s* aiding black freedom and Jim’s quest. Jim explicitly makes such a connection between reconstructed whiteness and black freedom in chapter 16, when he praises Huck as a “white gentleman”—the only time in the novel he stresses Huck’s race and rewrites his social status, perhaps as a way to encourage Huck to honor his promises to him (83). Huck’s discovery that his freedom is dependent upon Jim’s, however, causes a crisis in Huck’s sense of identity in the early scenes of the book, including the raftsmen’s passage, not just the later ones.<sup>2</sup>

It was this developing incoherence in Huck’s identity—not just Twain’s problem of explaining why his two fugitives would flee further south—that may have caused Twain’s writing in 1876 to lose its forward momentum and break off, in the middle of the first extended

on-shore episode following Huck without Jim in chapter 18. Indeed, we may think of the developments in chapter 16, including the raftsmen's passage, as a roiling or eruption within Twain's narrative that is a linguistic version (so to speak) of the steamboat that smashes Huck and Jim's raft; it wreaks havoc on any reading we might try to put together of the raft as an Eden-like safe space free from racism or other ills of civilization, in which an autonomous and non-coerced self may be created (these terms are Lionel Trilling's and Henry Nash Smith's, two of the novel's most influential commentators, whose readings Morrison challenges). I present first a brief overview of developments in *Huckleberry Finn* leading up to chapter 16, followed by a more detailed discussion of Huck's racial masquerade in the raftsmen's passage. I then use the textual trouble of chapter 16 as a way of casting new light on recent attempts to place the novel's notorious ending in the context of the post-Reconstruction legal and social history of the U.S.

## I

Although chapters 8–16 chronicle Huck's growing bond with Jim, they provide us with a counter-pattern too. At every stage in which Huck affirms how he values Jim he also (often immediately) engages in behavior that does precisely the opposite, as if to reaffirm Huck's sense of distance and superiority. Chapter 14, for example, may begin in fellowship, but it ends with the famous argument between Jim and Huck about King Solomon and the French language. Fine recent readings of these scenes are done by Emory Elliott and Jocelyn Chadwick-Joshua, who stress that these scenes reveal Jim's intelligence and Huck's petulance when he loses arguments (Elliott xxvii; Chadwick-Joshua 50–54). Or consider the scene in which Huck lies to Jim about their being separated in the fog (chapter 15). Eric Lott has it right: Huck “denies his vulnerability by projecting it onto the slave.” What Twain has done in chapter 15 is give us a new insight into why Huck periodically needs to reassert his illusion of superiority: he is rebelling not just against his dependency on Jim, for which he feels ashamed as well as grateful, but also against Jim's refusal to “learn” his place when Huck feels he needs to assert his superiority. Each time Huck uses words like *fool* or *nigger*, it is Huck's need for whiteness that is really being reasserted. In Lott's words, Huck is “reerecting racial barriers” (“Mr. Clemens” 139).

The climax of this pattern of white racial panic in the 1876 portion of the novel is chapter 16. The chapter opens with Jim articulating more clearly than ever before that *freedom* is his goal, for himself and for all his family. This causes Huck to have his most violent attack of principles yet; his unease with Jim's behavior (and with his own tie to Jim) is now expressed by Huck's most sinister trick: for the first time in the novel Huck plots to re-enslave Jim. Suddenly the physical and spiritual symptoms that Huck had previously associated with the loss of Jim's presence or with his shame at his violation of their friendship—"I got to feeling so mean and miserable I most wished I was dead" (82), for instance—are now understood by Huck to be signs of his sin against whiteness, or at least (for Huck never generalizes as I have just done) his sin against Miss Watson's property rights. Even more devastatingly, the very term that Huck had once used to describe the times when he was most comfortable hiding out with Jim—"home" (48; chapter 9)—is now at the beginning of chapter 16 used by Huck to refer to his supposed responsibilities as a white person: "It hadn't ever come *home* to me before, what this thing was [helping Jim to freedom] that I was doing" (82; emphasis added).

Huck's decision in chapter 16 to turn in Jim—and then, at the last moment, his refusal to act on this decision—is of course a rehearsal for Huck's famous spiritual crisis in chapter 31. But it is equally important to see the incident with the slave-hunters as a kind of climax to chapters 1–16, in which Huck's identity undergoes a gradual split. Inspired by his experience of what it feels like to be treated as a social contagion, Huck makes that contagion literal, fooling the bounty-seekers into thinking he is contaminated with small-pox. As with all scenes in which Huck interacts with others, it is possible to interpret his answers not as reflective of some inner state but of how Huck has read his interrogators and improvised a response. In many such cases, Huck appears to play by another's rules. But at other times, as with the slave-catchers, Huck's masquerade challenges the expectations of others, deflecting them from their course. As readers we cannot definitively assign a motive to Huck's actions as either inner crisis or canny improvisation. What is certain is that Huck's interpretation of his actions is decidedly negative, using the language of spiritual crisis and failed white manliness. "I tried to brace up and out with it [to turn Jim in], but I warn't man enough—hadn't the spunk of a rabbit" (83). Huck's self-portrait

here is tragically more traumatic than Mark Twain's simple opposition between health and corruption, Huck's "sound heart" vs. his "deformed conscience." In Twain's formula, which aided the novel's canonization as an icon of American literature in the 1950s, Huck's conscience definitively "suffers defeat" and the "good" Huck wins out, though where this moral Gettysburg in the novel occurs Twain did not say.<sup>3</sup>

After his small-pox trick works, despite Huck's bouts of self-loathing, Huck resolves in the future to "do whichever come handiest" (85). Huck's commitment to Jim seems at least temporarily settled through the rest of chapter 16: Huck speaks of Jim's plans to escape to freedom using the first-personal plural unselfconsciously and repeatedly. Perhaps because Huck has given up making a "show" for himself as a white person, he can temporarily be at peace with aligning his freedom-quest with Jim's. If we have any doubts, we should consider Huck's description of the steamboat that knocks them overboard—ironically, a steamboat heading upriver just like the one on which they had hoped to buy deck passage. The boat suggests not only the mouth of Hell as it usually appeared in illustrated Bibles such as Huck might have seen, but also as an all-devouring industrial machine: "all of a sudden she bulged out, big and scary, with a long row of wide-open furnace doors shining like red-hot teeth, and her monstrous bows and guards hanging right over us" (87; cf. Robinson 197–98). There is no stronger image in *Huckleberry Finn* for the nightmarish world Huck fears will swallow him when his bond with Jim is broken. The Hell that actually engulfs Huck, though, comes from another, unexpected direction.

## II

What if something happens to Huck on the men's raft that gives us a crucial piece of the puzzle of Huck's changes, as described above? Let us approach the deleted raftsmen's passage with new eyes, keeping the focus on Huck rather than on what appears to be the primary purpose of this episode, allowing Twain to display his mastery of the modes of frontier oral culture (including boasting and insult contests, balladry, and ghost-tales) with which he first made a name for himself as an author.

Of all the tales that Huck overhears while hiding on the large raft, the most important for interpreting Huck's state of mind is the ghost story about how a murdered child named Charles William Allbright



haunts his father. A classic ghost story about guilt and the return of the repressed, the tale has several features of particular interest. The boy haunts his father by following his father's raft hidden in a barrel, drawing closer to the raft every night and crippling one raftsman after another, until one of their mates begins acting so strangely that they suspect him of causing them all to be haunted. The murderer is forced to confess when one of his mates courageously brings the barrel on board and a "stark naked baby" is revealed inside. After telling his tale, the father jumps overboard with the child in his arms, an act of contrition and suicide that is also described as the man's first act of tenderness toward the child: he "jumped overboard with it hugged up to his breast and shedding tears, and we never see him again in this life . . ." (272).

The ghost story becomes even more fascinating when placed in the context of Huck's own troubled relationship with parental figures, especially Pap. When Huck is violently pulled out from hiding and questioned by the raftsmen, the boy who staged his own murder to escape his father's beatings answers that his name is "Charles William Allbright, sir." Of those who know Huck, only Jim is aware he is still alive. Huck also has spent many nights in a "hogshead" barrel as his only home, as mentioned in *Tom Sawyer* and the first chapter of its sequel. After the men finish laughing at Huck's answer, they treat him noticeably better. But they are still dictatorial; they still force him to tell one story after another about who he is until Huck gets a version that *they* find plausible. ("Come, now, tell me a straight story, and nobody'll hurt you" [273].) They use the same threat of rawhide whippings Huck associates with Pap. Huck's identification with the murdered child makes psychological sense, and strategic sense as well, but what else can we make of this crossing of identities?

Shelley Fisher Fishkin has pointed out that there are many elements in Huck's writing that Twain strongly associated with black story-tellers whom he admired, and black American speech patterns in general. The majority of her examples, understandably, come from Huck's narration, not his rendering of his own conversation. But no moment in Huck's conversation in the novel sounds more like the black English that Twain knew than the reply Huck gives the raftsmen's hectoring advice: "Deed I will, boss. You try me" (274). "Boss" is used in such a way only rarely in *Huckleberry Finn*. Obviously the word signifies someone with power and authority; Pap uses it early in the novel several times when

his right to abuse Huck is questioned; as Huck renders Pap's thinking, "he said he was boss of his son" (21, chapter 5). Huck (before he meets Jim) also boasts that "I was boss of" Jackson's Island; and the King praises one of the Duke's scams as a "boss dodge" (152, chapter 25). But it is Jim's use of the word that most influences Huck's choice of it. Jim employs the word only twice, all in the same scene: when he is speaking defensively after Huck has lied to him about being lost in the fog. ("[L]ooky here, boss, dey's something wrong. . . . Is I *me*, or who is I? . . . En did't I . . . have a turrible time en mos' git drownded? Now ain' dat so, boss—ain't it so?" [78]). Jim says the word with an inflection that I hear in part as both pleading and commanding. But Jim surely also has an edge of scathing criticism in the word's tone; he is signifyin', marking the ways in which Huck is trying to reassert his superiority and his whiteness—for "boss" was very much expected to be used by blacks to show deference to whites.

In calling the raftsmen "boss," Huck may express deference, perhaps even abasement, guessing that these are his expected roles. We might claim, though, that Huck's performance cannot be interpreted so simply. The raftsmen may no longer be expecting a "straight" story from Huck at this point. Is Huck's response taken by the raftsmen to be heartfelt genuflection? Or is Huck understood to be engaging in a *parody* of sincerity, a performance he guesses the rogues will enjoy because they will recognize the familiar blackface mask of the "harmless," shuffling, incorrigible liar? Minstrel performance routines, as Eric Lott and others have emphasized, are similarly complex to interpret.

The coded "racial" language of the raftsmen's passage gets even stranger. Black and white references figure significantly in both the ghost story and its aftermath. The barrel that holds Charles William Allbright, it is emphasized, was "a black something" that kept following the raft, and its revenge on the raftsmen takes place during a thunderstorm in which the world seems to turn into black and white. Blue is also significant. The barrel has "blue lights winking around it"; when the raftsmen first discover Huck one of them threatens to "get out the paint-pot and paint him a sky blue all over from head to heel"; and a raftsmen's parting words to Huck are, "Blast it, boy, some raftsmen would rawhide you till you were black and blue" (270–73). Huck is never so painted in the novel, of course—but *Jim* is, in a later scene that invokes the face-painting and spectacle that were central elements

in minstrel shows. That episode is the one beginning chapter 24, in which the Duke proposes to paint Jim “a dead dull solid blue, like a man that’s downed nine days,” and advise him to “fetch a howl or two like a wild beast” to keep intruders away (143). Only Tom is able to top the King and the Duke in abusing Jim while claiming to do him favors. Such a “painting” of Jim is a form of dehumanization quite akin to slavery itself, including nineteenth-century theories justifying slavery that emphasized Negroes’ supposedly animal-like qualities, with some writers even arguing that they were a subhuman species.<sup>4</sup>

By adding so many markers not just of color but of the behavior Negroes were expected to endure, Twain’s novel makes it impossible to interpret the raftsmen’s threat to “paint” Huck simply as a random threat. It is a form of humiliation and dehumanization that carries deep overtones of being marked with the broad brush of the color-line. Huck is, literally, threatened with being made “black and blue,” with losing even his lowly status as a poor white boy. In response, Huck replies in kind, employing black English he has just heard from Jim and the mask of abasement daily demanded of Negroes. That the men enjoy his performance in no way erases the fact that their power over Huck precisely parallels the complex power dynamic between performers and audience in blackface’s racial masquerade.

One other black voice is twined into the raftsmen’s passage, this time not Jim’s but the voice of an actual person Twain knew well—Mary Ann Cord, his cook in Elmira, New York, and the storyteller whose account of some of her experiences in slavery and the war, Cord inspired Twain’s short story “A True Story, Repeated Word for Word as I Heard It” as told by an “Aunt Rachel,” published in *The Atlantic Monthly*, November 1874. This tale has received prominent attention recently from Shelley Fisher Fishkin (*Lighting Out* 85–90, 223–24), primarily as one of several publications in which Twain paid tribute to the verbal skills and historical memory of particular black story-tellers and acknowledged their influence on his own art. For Fishkin, “[s]tories like Mary Ann Cord’s were central to the genesis of *Huckleberry Finn*” (89). What has not been noticed, however, is how the climax of the raftsmen’s passage directly echoes language used by Mary Ann Cord.

Mary Ann Cord told Twain of being torn from her family on a slave auction block. She particularly emphasized the trauma of the loss of her youngest son:

dey begin to sell my chil'en an' take dem away, an' I begin to cry; an' de man say, "Shet up yo' dam blubberin'," an' hit me on de mouf wid his han'. An' when de las' one was gone but my little Henry, I grab' him clost up to my breas' so, an' I ris up an' says, 'You shan't take him away,' I says; 'I'll kill de man dat teches him!'" I says . . . (*Writings of Mark Twain, Definitive Edition*, Vol. VII, 242–43)

Henry is sold, but later escapes slavery, journeys North to freedom, and after the war is reunited with his mother. Twain said his published story is an exact "copy" of the tale Cord told him in the summer of 1874, two years before Twain began *Huckleberry Finn*; what he published in a national magazine was "not in my words but her own," testimony to "a shameful tale of wrong & hardship" and also "a curiously strong piece of literary work." (Fishkin, *Lighting Out* 85, 224).

In discussing this tale, Fishkin stresses its general influence on *Huckleberry Finn*. That is, she sees it as one of the stimulants for Twain's own new perspective in that novel on the world of his Missouri childhood—a world where Jim's love of his family, the pain of slavery, and his determination to seek freedom now came to play a central role. Fishkin sees a more direct textual connection to another work, *A Connecticut Yankee*, chapter 21, which depicts a slave auction and slave mother losing her family and being beaten (*Lighting Out* 87–88). Fishkin is persuasive about these general and particular links between "A True Story" and the rest of Twain's oeuvre. But there is one scene in *Huckleberry Finn* that draws more closely than any other narrative of Twain's on Cord's, though it transposes its referents. It too features crying, a parent grabbing a child to the breast, the threat of beating, and the cry "I'll paint [vs. kill] the man that teches him!" This scene, of course, is the raftsmen's passage. Certainly there are differences between the two passages: it's a raft, not a slave auction; a "white" boy (actually two—Charles William and Huck), not a black child, etc. Perhaps most crucially, the tale features not a slave mother but two white father figures—the repentant murderer who grabs the ghost-child to his breast and the raftsmen named Davy who protects Huck. For Twain it is as if the power of Cord's story has returned, transposed, in a dream. The scene arguably has much more profound emotional resonance than his more

literal and self-conscious transcription of the auction scene in *A Connecticut Yankee*, which contains little of Mary Ann Cord's words or eloquence. Twain turned to the power of Cord's language when he needed to portray Huck at his most vulnerable. He also created his own version of the happy ending in Cord's story, by imagining two different male protector figures for Charles William and Huck.

In the deepest level of Twain's imagination, then, Huckleberry Finn in trouble in the raftsmen's passage has become part *black*—not just in appearance and speech, but because in imagining Huck's most desperate circumstances Twain drew upon narrative elements of a powerful slave narrative that he had heard only two years before. Furthermore, when the raftsmen's passage is re-integrated into its original place within Chapter 16, we can see that Chapter 16 represents the climax of the portrait Twain wrote in the summer of 1876 of the developing split in Huck's identity caused by his aligning himself with Jim's quest for freedom. Part of Huck convinces himself that he has become a traitor to the white race, while another part of Huck not only uses the first person plural to describe his union with Jim, but uses terms to describe himself that may not be definitely "black" but certainly make his racial status liminal and ambiguous. A number of commentators have valuably discussed certain generic parallels between *Huckleberry Finn* and slave narratives, but reading the "Raftsmen's Passage" as an involuntary racial masquerade brings a new dimension to our developing understanding of Twain's indebtedness to black narrative traditions.<sup>5</sup>

Reading the raftsmen's passage as a crisis of whiteness means that we cannot wholly subscribe to the most prevalent interpretation of Huck's development in the first 16 chapters of the novel, the one emphasized by Lionel Trilling, Henry Nash Smith, Emory Elliott, Ken Burns, and many others—who all (to varying degrees) stress Huck's magnificent moral development away from racism, with the raft as a privileged site for the recovery (or perhaps the improvised invention) of American innocence. I would argue instead that Twain's first draft of the novel dramatized not a narrative of progressive development but the story of Huck's gradual *disintegration* as a coherent self; chapters 14–16 in particular detail increasingly more violent struggles within Huck, with each moral "advance" toward treating Jim as an equal followed by an

equally violent regression. This pattern accelerates exponentially after Huck undergoes his experience on the raftsmen's raft. In a fit of shame, Huck plots to betray Jim, then turns upon himself when he can't go through with it. Huck had been self-critical before, but it is only after his encounter with the raftsmen that he castigates himself for not acting white enough.<sup>6</sup>

Twain's writing momentum in the summer of 1876 broke down, as we now know, in Chapter 18, in the middle of Huck's involuntary immersion in the Grangerford/Sheperdson feud across the Kentucky/Tennessee border. Underwritten by sentimental pieties, this slaughter is also Twain's brilliant allegory for the American Civil War itself—a war whose very name is an oxymoron combining violence and euphemism. Twain stopped writing at the line in Chapter 18 when Huck asks Buck to “tell me about it [the feud]” (99)—that is, just at the moment when his hero is about to hear the story of a civil war. Ironically, despite Huck's moral nausea at the violence of the feud, he continues to think of the Grangerford house as his “home” now that he believes the raft and Jim are lost (92; chapter 17). Furthermore, the fight into which he has stumbled is really no less violent than the one that Huck has been undergoing internally.

The disintegration of Huck's identity into warring factions in chapters 1–18 can be read in another way. Barbara Ladd has made the invaluable observation that late in Twain's career his narratives tended to break apart precisely at the moment when “‘white’ and ‘American’ or ‘nationalist’ voices” were displaced by “black and extra-national or pre-national ones.” Ladd's insight is worth quoting more fully:

Many readers have . . . observed both the displacements of geographical and temporal settings in Mark Twain's late works as well as the apparent loss of authorial control, the fragmentation of narrative, the fragmentation of character, and the disturbing recapitulations of character or plot or motif in different geographical and temporal contexts. I am thinking in particular of stories that begin, break off, begin again, to remain either unfinished or seemingly forced to premature or otherwise unsatisfactory conclusion (as the end of *Pudd'nhead Wilson*, for example); of characters or figures duplicated and reduplicated in ways that seem to defy reason. . . .

Although traditional literary criticism has taken these features of the late texts as little more than signs of the originating author's loss of creative power and discipline, there is more to it. What is so apparent when one looks at these texts from a New Historicist perspective is that the fragmentation of narrative seems to accompany the displacement of "white" and "American" and "nationalist" voices by black and extra-national or prenational ones. . . . Of all Twain's late works, *Pudd'nhead Wilson and Those Extraordinary Twins* might be the most complex—and most successful—example of the use of "black" and "foreign" voices (or voicings) to explore and explode the myth of the racially "pure" or determinate and culturally innocent American. . . . It is a complex example of the use of black and white, foreign and domestic, northern and southern social bodies to examine the myths of racial purity, national unity, and individual autonomy, upon which the ideal of authorship was constructed in Victorian America. . . . All this [in *Pudd'nhead Wilson*] . . . is hitched to a story of child switching and race mixing among the locals. (130)

The depiction of Huck in chapters 14–16 of *Huckleberry Finn*, particularly with the raftsmen's passage added, however, suggests that what Ladd calls Twain's explosion of conventions of character coherence, racial purity, and national unity began far earlier than *Pudd'nhead Wilson* or other late texts, though it is inescapable in those. It may be that on the raft Huck is growing so forcefully under Jim's tutelage that his "white" identity splits apart as if it were an outdated casque or shell. The raft is only rarely (and briefly) a sanctuary from conflict, a "raft of hope" in Ralph Ellison's words (483). For most of the time in the novel the raft is the primary *locus* of the civil war in Huck's soul, and the violence he encounters on other rafts or onshore seems only a shadow of the trouble in Huck's own heart. What Twain's magnificent opening portion of his novel makes indelible—especially if the raftsmen's passage is included—is that Huck's conflict over his bond with Jim is really a conflict over who he understands himself to be. And Huck's conflicts and his mask-wearing are also the nation's: they are continually denied and misunderstood yet are always there, shadowing the nation like that barrel in the ghost story.

## III

I turn now to a brief consideration of the post-Civil Rights era consensus about the notorious ending of *Huckleberry Finn*, in which Tom's torturous freeing of an already free man is often read as a satiric farce about race relations in the 1870s and early 1880s, when the limited reforms instituted by Reconstruction were systematically dismantled with the approval of many Northerners and Southerners.

I believe that it is a mistake to ask whether the Tom Sawyer-dominated episodes exploit racist stereotypes for humor or undercut them through irony and satire. Such a question implies we have an either/or choice in assessing the cultural work (or cultural damage) accomplished by Twain's novel. Rather, we should attend to the ways in which the last chapters of the novel enact doubleness and duplicity in ways that can never be reduced to a single way of interpreting their meaning. In their own demonic way, they complete the novel's cultural work of making Huck's identity-split representative of the nation's.

One key to the final chapters may be found in the meaning of Tom's phrase "letting on" to describe his plans for "helping" Jim. (Tom's term "evasion" (241; chapter 39) has been much discussed, but "letting on" has not, with the important exception of Forrest Robinson [174–78], who reads both these terms in the context of post-Civil War America). For Tom, "letting on" signifies not just to say one thing and mean another, but it also becomes a systematic way of lying shared by a group. Case-knives shall be called pick-axes, and torture benevolence. Listen to Tom: "Things being so uncertain, what I recommend is this: that we really dig right in, as quick as we can; and after that, we can let on, to ourselves, that we was at it thirty-seven years." And here is Huck's endorsement of Tom's plan: "Letting on don't cost nothing; letting on ain't no trouble; and if it's any object, I don't mind letting on we was at it a hundred and fifty year." Such a consensus to wink to each other while lying Huck calls being "full of principle" (220, 222, chapter 35).<sup>7</sup>

Critics who want to defend Twain's ending as satire of Federal policy toward blacks after 1876 may point to many instances of Twain's contemporaries engaging in Tom Sawyer-like double-speak. Reversing the Civil Rights Acts of 1866 and 1875 that were high-water marks of Reconstruction, for instance, U. S. Supreme Court justices argued in 1883



that racial segregation was constitutional because such acts did not re-enslave. Writing for the majority, Justice Bradley began by limiting the relevance of the xiii<sup>th</sup> Amendment to the U.S. Constitution:

The xiii<sup>th</sup> Amendment relates only to slavery and involuntary servitude (which it abolishes), and, although, by its reflex action, it establishes universal freedom in the United States, . . . yet such legislative power extends only to the subject of slavery and its incidents, and the denial of equal accommodations in inns, public conveyances, and places of public amusement (which is forbidden by the sections in question), imposes no badge of slavery or involuntary servitude upon the party but at most, infringes rights which are protected from State aggression by the xiv<sup>th</sup> Amendment.

According to such reasoning, the xiii<sup>th</sup> Amendment effectively rendered itself moot once it abolished slavery; it cannot have any legal standing in the slave-free society that it brings into being. Such a narrow reading of the Amendment's meaning of course directly assaulted the Civil Rights Act of 1866, which, in the words of the legal scholar Charles Lofgren, "testified to the contemporary [Reconstruction-era] understanding that the Thirteenth Amendment empowered the national government to strike directly at discrimination based on race" (75). Bradley then used the allegedly limited scope of the xiii<sup>th</sup> to suggest that the xiv<sup>th</sup> Amendment is extremely narrow as well—making it apply to State laws only, not individual acts of discrimination that occur within the States. The convoluted syntax of the final part of the indented quotation above mirrors Bradley's convoluted logic; rights may simultaneously be infringed *and* protected because Bradley implies that individual acts and acts of a State legislature normally exist in entirely separate spheres.

Given such contortions, it is worth looking again at the actual wording of the xiv<sup>th</sup> Amendment to the Constitution, passed as part of the post-Civil War Reconstruction reforms. It prohibits "any law which shall abridge the privileges or immunities of citizens of the United States; nor shall any State deprive any person of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law; nor deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws." For Bradley, reading narrowly, this means that if States do not pass laws openly abridging a resident's

“privileges or immunities” (except for convicted criminals), then the xivth Amendment’s guarantees have not been violated.

Civil rights, such as are guaranteed by the Constitution against State aggression, cannot be impaired by the wrongful acts of individuals, unsupported by State authority in the shape of laws, customs, or judicial or executive proceedings. The wrongful act of an individual, unsupported by any such authority, is simply a private wrong, or a crime of that individual; an invasion of the rights of the injured party, it is true, whether they affect his person, his property, or his reputation; but if not sanctioned in some way by the State, or not done under State authority, his rights remain in full force, and may presumably be vindicated by resort to the laws of the State for redress.

Majority Opinion, Civil Rights Cases, 109 U.S. 3 [1883]

In short, Bradley’s majority opinion did more than just claim that Congressional civil rights laws prohibiting racial discrimination were unconstitutional. He argued that any claim of racial discrimination was merely a “private wrong” unless it could be proven that such acts were explicitly sanctioned by the State legislature. Further, his decision forbade state or national legislatures from passing laws protecting individual rights, or Congress from requiring prosecution and penalties for individual acts of discrimination in the States. The dissenting justice in the case, John M. Harlan, fully recognized what had been accomplished by the majority ruling: “we shall enter upon an era of constitutional law, when the rights of freedom and American citizenship cannot receive from the nation that efficient protection which heretofore was unhesitatingly accorded to slavery and the rights of the master” (quoted by Lofgren, who adds that the decision “stripped the national government of the authority to protect the central constitutional principle of equality of citizenship” [76]).

From the 1883 “Civil Rights Cases” evisceration, it was not a large step, legally, to the 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision accepting “Jim Crow” state laws as constitutional. All that had to be done to achieve such a shift was to play further word-games narrowing even more the meaning of “State-sanctioned” infringement of private rights. Charles Lofgren again: “In the course of these [1883] comments, Bradley defined the scope of the rights that private action could not abridge as in-

cluding those pertaining to an individual's 'person, *his property, or his reputation.*' It was almost as if [Bradley] foresaw and wished to counter the due process argument that Homer Plessy's counsel later raised," which argued that Plessy's ability to pass for white was both a right and valuable property (73–74; Lofgren's italics). In Bradley's construction the burden of proof would be on the plaintiff to show not only that an act of discrimination was sanctioned by the State, but also that it seriously damaged one's property or reputation, not merely inconvenienced one from staying in an inn, riding in a certain car on a train, being educated at a school, etc. Laws mandating segregation in public facilities and conveyances could indeed be justified as an honest and practical solution to the race problem that *protected* the individual rights and reputations of blacks and white alike via "separate but equal" facilities. Jim Crow was validated by the Supreme Court in 1896, but the legal reasoning and evasions justifying it had begun to be defined—or perhaps we should say "let on"—over a decade earlier, while Twain was working on his ending to *Huckleberry Finn*.<sup>8</sup>

Parodic of Reconstruction and post-Reconstruction policies toward blacks *Huckleberry Finn* may be, but in Twain's working notes to the novel he unselfconsciously listed on the same page new ideas for using Jim *and* new ideas for asserting his copyright powers as author. Revealingly, Twain's assertion of those ownership rights merge quickly into what sounds exactly like Tom brainstorming new plots to "free" Jim, or the King and the Duke coming up with ways to exhibit Jim for money or—most grotesquely of all—to sell a new "medicine."

Publish this in England & Canada the day before the first number of it appears in ... Century or N.Y. Sun—that makes full copyright.

Turn Jim into an Injun.

Then exhib him for gorilla—then wild man &c., using him for 2 shows same day.

Nigger-skin (shamoi) for sale as a pat med [patent medicine]

Tell me some mo' histry, Huck. (Blair and Fischer *Huckleberry Finn*, 757; see 750 for ms. photograph)

Twain's plot in the second half of *Huckleberry Finn* indeed outdoes both the King and the Duke and Tom in the ingenious ways it markets comedy by silencing, stereotyping, painting, and threatening to dismember Jim. Twain's satire, if that is what it is, is thoroughly complicit with what it satirizes, not morally separate. In Huck's narrative there is no safe space or safe language indisputably transcendent and free from the lies we may tell ourselves about our own motives. The novel will certainly not disturb our complacency if we too easily come to consensus that the ending should be read as *either* safely controlled satire and critique *or* as complicit racist humor. Only when these possibilities are made to share the same space on the "raft" of meaning we construct may we truly experience how Huck's fall from whiteness and then his confused attempts to put on again—that is, let on—the mask of whiteness is a national story, not just the tale of an orphaned child. Such is the sobering truth that Huck's "mo' histry" tells us.

If critical narratives of Huck's eternal lighting out from the corrupting influences of civilization were prime movers in the canonization of this novel in the post-World War II era, perhaps for Twain's world-wide readers in the twenty-first century the mo' history of Huck's and Twain's ambivalent mimicry well captures the contradictions of whiteness as it is currently being investigated. Not coincidentally, during the same postwar period U.S. studies itself appears to be shifting from a dominant narrative centered in New England exceptionalism to ones that emphasize the paradoxes of the colonial and postcolonial condition, including the instabilities of whiteness as a cultural construction. Twain's novel could only with a good deal of ingenuity be made essential to narratives of the Puritan origins of the American self, but Huck's crisis of whiteness makes inescapable his relevance to colonial and postcolonial narratives of U.S. identity.<sup>9</sup>

#### IV

Huck really is Charles William Allbright after all—haunting *us*. The raft is a floating colonial contact zone. The only question is, how will we on our raft respond to him once we uncover him in "our" space? As we meditate on our predicament, we should recall two of the items that Huck finds in the floating cabin that, as he eventually learns from Jim, held the corpse of his father (chapter 9). One of the items is well-

known; indeed it has become the most famous part of Huck's visual identity—the "boy's old speckled straw hat" that Huck appropriates as his own. This hat, which Huck doffs to us in the famous illustration by E. W. Kemble that ends the novel, is the easy symbol of Huck's eternal innocence and integrity—what Twain, in making suggestions to his publisher regarding the book's illustrations, defined as follows: "Huck Finn is an exceedingly good-hearted boy, & should carry a good & good-looking face" (Blair and Fischer, *Huckleberry Finn* xlvi). But Huck also "borrows" something else from the haunted house that must be seen as equally essential to his identity: "a couple of masks made out of black cloth" (47). 'Terpreting one last time, I'd say that these twinned masks well stand for Huck's doubleness, which is also Twain's and that of the postcolonial U.S. Their blackness reflects (via illegibility, or disguise) the unsolvable enigma of who Huck "really" is and who he might become in his eyes and in our own. We cannot read the raftsmen's passage properly, much less *Huckleberry Finn* itself, unless we learn that Huck always wears a mask, even when naked.<sup>10</sup>

The tension between Huck's folksy hat and black masks should become a part of our cultural memory, eternally shadowing us with our own duplicities, what we have repressed or denied or idealized. Twain's best novel is indeed a tragicomedy of the unspeakable that we must embrace. Muddy and roiling with the convoluted and constantly changing conflicts at the heart of our cultural landscape, and yet also somehow majestic, giving us a vista of our possibilities we can discover nowhere else, Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* is the Mississippi of our literature.

*Swarthmore College*

#### NOTES

1. For accounts of the complex textual history of the raftsmen's passage, see Beidler, Hirst, Doyno xvi and 377–78, and Arac 139–42. For the "mo' histry" quotation, see the Blair and Fischer edition of *Huckleberry Finn*, 757. Quotations from the novel will be from the Oxford University Press edition edited by Emory Elliott, but for convenience I will also cite by chapter number.

2. One anomaly in Morrison's *Playing in the Dark* that has not received enough commentary is Morrison's elision of Ralph Ellison's essays on American literature and American memory, which in myriad ways prefigure her key insights, including those on Twain. Why should Ellison's ancestral presence in Morrison's project be so occluded? Morrison's book has a relationship toward current "whiteness studies"

that is somewhat analogous to the relation between Said's *Orientalism* and post-colonial studies. Key anthologies of essays in whiteness studies include Roediger's *Black on White*; Hill's *Whiteness: A Critical Reader*; Kincheloe, et al., *White Reign: Deploying Whiteness in America*; and Najmi and Srikanth's *White Women in Racialized Spaces*. The intersection between U.S. whiteness studies and postcolonial studies is too vast to cite here, but see Pratt and Bhabha. Some of the most influential individual volumes that focus on the U.S.: *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1980s* by Omi and Winant; *White By Law* by Haney-Lopez; and books by Lott, Roediger, Dyer, Frankenburg, and Babb. A key early survey of whiteness studies was Fishkin's "Interrogating Whiteness"; for a more recent overview of intersections between postcolonial theory and whiteness studies, see Singh and Schmidt 35–38 and 55n36. An incisive critique of whiteness studies is Wiegman's. Of course, it is naïve to consider critical projects making whiteness visible an invention of the 1990s. Both the post-Reconstruction era and the post-1960s period featured major cultural studies published just when the meanings of "race" in the public sphere were in crisis. Contemporary cultural studies work on "whiteness" in the U.S. should therefore be read in the context of earlier writings by Albion Tourgée, Ida B. Wells-Barnett, José Martí, W. E. B. Du Bois, and many others.

"Whiteness Studies" has had some effect on Twain studies, perhaps most notably through Fishkin's work, but see also work by Lott and Jones. Jones understands Huck's contradictory ways of seeing Jim to be linked to a crisis in Huck's own identity, which Jones valuably calls "white double-consciousness"; I disagree with a number of other conclusions that Jones makes about the novel, however.

3. Twain made this famous comment many years after finishing *Huckleberry Finn*, in 1895, as notes for himself while introducing the novel's story to an Australian audience. The famous phrase is as follows: "a book of mine where a sound heart & a corrupt conscience come into collision & conscience suffers defeat." For the full notebook entry and commentary, see Blair and Fischer, *Huckleberry Finn* 806–07.

4. Regarding this "painting" of Jim, Lott comments: "Jim's appearance surely recalls the art of blackface at the same time that it explodes the very idea of racial performance. Twain no doubt means to lampoon the racial thinking behind forms such as blackface when he has the duke tell Jim [to perform like a wild beast]. . . . Savage injuns and A-rabs too are invoked here as figments of the white supremacist imagination" ("Mr. Clemens" 140).

5. For connections between Twain and ex-slave narratives, see Beaver; MacKethan; Rampersad; Fishkin, *Lighting Out*; and Wieck 20–39. In general, these approaches focus on Jim more than Huck and ignore the "Raftmen's Passage"; indeed, the one serious disagreement I have with MacKethan's excellent essay is that she suggests excising the Raftmen's Passage brought the novel more into alignment with ex-slave narrative conventions. No ex-slave narrative provides such detail about how an accomplice aided the escape as Twain's novel does, and the above approaches, in their understandable focus on Jim's story, slight the implications ex-slave narratives could have for narrating *white* identity—an issue that I am arguing *Huckleberry Finn* foregrounds.

6. Huck's language about proper behavior in chapter 16 never calls it "white" directly; he uses terms such as "conscience" and "show" that emphasize both appearances and how proper behavior is culturally constructed: a white "body that don't get started right when he's little, ain't got no show" (85). Ironically, the only direct reference to Huck's whiteness in the chapter is Jim's, who praises Huck as a "de on'y white genlman dat ever kep' his promise"—a phrase that the scene as a whole shows Huck links to being a despised white "Ab'litionist" (82–83).

7. There is another, possibly different, employment of "letting on" in *Huckleberry Finn*. After Jim breaks his teeth on brass candlestick pieces smuggled into his food, Huck comments: "Jim he never let on but what it was only just a piece of rock or something like that that's always getting into bread, you know . . ." (224, ch. 36). This could be Huck revealing he knows Jim too is playing Tom's game, pretending brass is stone. But Huck's double negative could also mean that he believes Jim ignorant. The latter reading would certainly fit with many instances where Huck suggests a trick works best when the victim is fooled, not in on the joke. As Huck comments, "when Jim bit into it it most mashed all his teeth out, and there warn't ever anything could a worked better" (224). In such a reading, interestingly enough, "never let on but what it was" means something like "never understood; he thought it was. . . ." If so, though, Huck's use of "letting on" here to signify ignorance, not knowing deception, ironically rebounds against its user. In the "Evasion" chapters Huck normally implies that the line between "letting on" and self-deception is clear, but this instance suggests it is more unstable than Huck admits.

8. A more thorough discussion of the implications of the *Slaughterhouse* and "Civil Rights" cases, *Williams v. Mississippi*, and *Plessy v. Ferguson* and other legal decisions for the literary historian is Sundquist's, in *To Wake the Nations* 234–70 and 338–43. Sundquist focuses primarily on the relevance of these rulings for reading Twain's *Pudd'nhead Wilson*.

9. Regarding the guilt and ambivalence beneath Huck's masks of mimicry, two of many earlier critics who make a congruent point to mine are Holland and Robinson. Consider Robinson: "while Huck is aware enough of his bad faith to be ashamed of its effects, he is too much a product of the dominant culture to face it for long, and thus, perhaps, to deal with it. Instead, he flees from himself, seeking oblivion in the solitude of 'the Territory ahead,' just as he sought it before in the concealment of the snake-skins, and again, later, in his rebirth as Tom Sawyer" (207). It is perhaps also necessary to note here that in contemporary postcolonial theory "postcolonial" refers not to a temporal but to a metaphysical state. That is, not solely to the period after a colony is granted independence but also to any moment that calls into question the master narratives seeking to regulate the interactions of a "superior" civilization and race with an "inferior" one.

10. Compare another of Twain's working notes for the novel: "Wouldn't give a cent for an adventure that ain't done in disguise" (C-12, Blair and Fischer, 748 and 756). Interestingly, Twain also later joked that "Huck is two persons in one," though he meant it differently than I do here. (Twain wanted to publish a statement that Huck was an accurate portrait of the boyhood identities of two pompous newspaper editors who criticized his novel; see the Bradley et al edition of *Huckle-*

berry Finn, 285–86.) For a fine discussion of pairings and doublings in *Huckleberry Finn* read as an encoding of “twain,” see Wieck 102–07. See also Wieck 82–92 for a superb short essay on various meanings that accrue around the objects Huck and Jim find in the floating house, including those black masks.

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