

HUCK, TWAIN, AND THE FREEDMAN'S SHACKLES:  
STRUGGLING WITH *HUCKLEBERRY FINN* TODAY

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This essay revisits the decades-long debate about racial representation in Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and suggests, looking beyond the rigid binary of either demanding a ban on the novel or belittling its racially offensive aspects, that in racial terms Twain's creation of the Huck-Jim relationship reflects what was in the author's own life and worldview a muddled terrain of good intentions, confusion, wavering, and inconsistency. While Twain may not have inscribed his incomplete struggle with the 'race question' in the novel deliberately, such an imprint was a *de facto* outcome of his writing process. A cusp text, *Huckleberry Finn* is, on the one hand, shackled and diminished by its view of African Americans as Others; on the other hand, the novel does contain an effort, albeit a flawed and unfinished one, to transcend the limitations of post-Reconstruction racism and racialism. This article examines these tension-ridden dynamics of racial representation in *Huckleberry Finn* by focusing on Twain's portrayal of Jim as a father figure for Huck (a relationship that temporarily transgresses the depicted era's prevalent racial hierarchies) and on the novel's noteworthy, though lamentably incomplete, deconstruction of meanings conventionally attached to whiteness and blackness in nineteenth-century America. This essay argues that *Huckleberry Finn*—a complex text of whose different layers and threads Twain was not necessarily in full control—both illustrates and mimics historical processes whereby shackles of racialized perception are at first partly opened and then, disappointingly, partly closed again.

Key words: Mark Twain, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, racial representation, Huck-Jim relationship, black manhood, Toni Morrison

"I'd like to pass it on to you, son. There", he said, handing it to me. "Funny thing to give somebody, but I think it's got a heap of signifying wrapped up in it and it might help you remember what we're really fighting against". ... I took it in my hand, a thick dark, oily piece of filed steel that had been twisted open and forced partly back into place....

(Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 1965 [1952]: 313)

The 1880s saw the collapse of civil rights for blacks as well as the publication of *Huckleberry Finn*. This collapse was an effort to bury the combustible issues Twain raised in his novel. The nation, as well as Tom Sawyer, was deferring Jim's freedom in agonizing

play. The cyclical attempts to remove the novel from classrooms extend Jim's captivity on into each generation of readers.

(Toni Morrison, "This Amazing, Troubling Book", 1999 [1996]: 389)

[S]ure enough, Tow Sawyer had gone and took all that trouble and bother to set a free nigger free!

(Mark Twain, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, 1999 [1884]: 292)

The above exchange between the narrator and a black political activist named Brother Tarp in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* offers a glimpse of a tragic memento, a reminder of Tarp's nineteen years in a chain gang: a leg iron. Despite *Invisible Man*'s primarily post-Great Migration time frame, Tarp's shackle—a link of steel "that had been twisted open and forced partly back into place" (Ellison 1965 [1952]: 313)—functions, among other things, as a metaphor for Emancipation and for the failure of Reconstruction, as well as for the psychological implications of the two. Mark Twain (whose prose Ellison greatly appreciated, recognizing its indebtedness to black Southern vernacular voices)<sup>1</sup> wrote *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* in the late 1870s and early 1880s, when, in Toni Morrison's words, "[t]he nation, as well as Tom Sawyer, was deferring Jim's freedom in agonizing play" (1999 [1996]: 389). This essay argues that *Huckleberry Finn* (1884) can at one level be read as a book about shackles of racial oppression that are, in the novel's course, "twisted open and forced partly back into place" at various levels of the plot and narration.<sup>2</sup>

To elaborate, during Huck's journey to the deep South, his African American fellow traveler is much of the time restrained both by the shackles of slavery and by what Fredrick Woodard and Donnaræ MacCann have, in the title of their 1992 article, aptly termed Jim's "minstrel shackles". Huck, in turn—despite his apparent freedom—is confined by various white conventions of antebellum life, especially by his society's axiomatic assumptions of white superiority and black inferiority. Most crucially, Twain's narrative is itself shackled and diminished by its view of African Americans as Others. However, being a transitional text written by a former, 'desouthernized' Southerner married to a liberal Northerner,<sup>3</sup> the novel also clearly contains an effort, albeit a flawed and unfinished one, to transcend the limitations of post-Reconstruction racism and racialism.

<sup>1</sup> See the discussion of Ellison in Fishkin 1996: 110–13. For a more comprehensive study of the influence of the black Southern language use on Twain's writing, see Fishkin 1993.

<sup>2</sup> The following *Huckleberry Finn* edition will be cited parenthetically throughout this essay: Mark Twain, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn: An Authoritative Text; Context and Sources; Criticism*. Ed. Thomas Cooley. 3rd [Norton] edition. New York and London: Norton, 1999 (1884).

<sup>3</sup> William Dean Howells famously called Twain "a desouthernized Southerner" in *My Mark Twain: Reminiscences and Criticisms*, ed. Marilyn A. Baldwin (Baton Rouge, Louisiana State UP, 1967): 30. Quoted in Bell 1992 (1985): 124, 138.

While recognizing and lamenting Twain's participation in negative racial stereotyping, this essay examines the tension-ridden dynamics of racial representation in *Huckleberry Finn* by focusing on the novel's portrayal of Jim as a father figure for Huck (a relationship that temporarily transgresses the depicted era's prevalent racial hierarchies) and on the book's noteworthy, though regrettably incomplete, deconstruction of meanings conventionally attached to whiteness and blackness in nineteenth-century America. Rather than aiming to contribute either to an uncritical whitewashing of Twain or to a further hypercanonization of *Huckleberry Finn*, this essay offers perspectives intended to make the intellectually and politically responsible teaching of this difficult book (of whose different layers and threads Twain was not, in my view, in full control) a little easier.

### 1. Introduction

Set in the Mississippi Valley "forty or fifty years ago", as the novel's subtitle declares, *Huckleberry Finn* responds to the failure of Reconstruction by retelling the story of slavery from the point of view of a young white runaway whose fate becomes intertwined with that of an adult black fugitive. A darker-toned sequel to the sunnier *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, *Huckleberry Finn* seems to have begun as another semi-autobiographical, fictionalized narrative about the joys of Southern boyhood and about the charm and spell of Twain's beloved Mississippi River. However, after the author allowed Huck and Jim's raft to pass the mouth of the Ohio River, and the two runaways started to drift where no fugitive slave should go, Twain's "original conception was beginning", as Jane Smiley observes, "to conflict with the implications of the actual story" (1995: 356). In the pages of his own writing, Twain's idealized Mississippi River began to monstrously transform itself into what it had, in reality, signified for participants in the domestic slave trade: a major route to the heartland of racial slavery in North America. At this point Twain, in fact, dropped the project and put the manuscript aside for three years; this writer's block seems to imply, as Smiley (1995: 356) suggests, that Twain did not know how to proceed after the raft had floated beyond the point of no return and entered what for Jim denoted the ultimate realm of terror.

Considering this tension-ridden genealogy, which indicates that *Huckleberry Finn* emerged out of a curious mixture of unrelated and partly conflicting motives, it is not surprising that Twain's narrative is at various levels "troubling", as Toni Morrison writes while commenting on "This Amazing, Troubling Book" in her 1996 introduction to the novel. Those initially 'troubling' qualities that are the easiest to deal with (and ultimately make up a crucial aspect of Twain's satirical style) derive from Huck's status as a young and somewhat unreliable narrator. A poorly educated adolescent, Huck knows little about the workings of society, and his perspectives on what he recounts are limited by his ignorance. The rather modest degree of his self-knowledge works towards the same effect: for all his bitter complaints about the widow Douglas's and Miss Watson's attempts to 'sivilize' him, Huck is much more heavily influenced by the norms of 'sivilized' society than he himself believes to be the case. Rather than going bravely against the grain, he condemns himself for his friendship with Jim and, in

general, for “his inability to conform fully to the norms of the widow Douglas and Tom Sawyer, the representatives of conventional antebellum life along the Mississippi” (Bell 1992 [1985]: 130). Of course, this combination of Huck’s immaturity and unreliability ultimately constitutes one of Twain’s most brilliant narrative inventions (modifying the example of Voltaire’s classic innocent *Candide*, another traveler): precisely because the narrator-protagonist is young and inexperienced, everything that he sees while floating down the river with Jim strikes him as new and presents an acute challenge to his worldview. In the final analysis, the voice of the adolescent boy whose views of society gradually change during his tragicomic (much more tragic than comic) Odyssean descent into the underworld functions as the primary medium for Twain’s ironic critique of the slaveholding South. All things taken into account, Huck’s narrative of his adventures serves Twain’s projects of unearthing the moral hypocrisy of ‘decent’, churchgoing, and slaveholding white Southerners and of addressing the perils of slavery.

This said, the *truly* ‘troubling’ aspects of this ‘amazing’ book arise from the fact that although Samuel Clemens as an adult distanced himself from the proslavery indoctrination to which he had been exposed as a young member of a slaveholding community, he could not, as critics have convincingly shown, shake off all aspects of the legacy of his Hannibal youth. It is no wonder, therefore, that especially from the early 1950s onwards many African American readers have felt that *Huckleberry Finn*, with its embarrassing minstrelization of Jim and its frequent use of the word *nigger*, was complicit in the post-Reconstruction policies that Morrison describes as “agonizing play” with black freedom (1999 [1996]: 389). The view that the novel is racially so offensive that it should be abolished from American high school and college curricula has been most famously articulated by the public school official John H. Wallace, according to whom *Huckleberry Finn* is “the most grotesque example of racist trash ever written” (1992: 16).<sup>4</sup>

However, legitimate as such critical comments may be, book burnings or any later variations on this medieval practice have never advanced democracy or innovative critical thinking anywhere—a fact reflected in many African American intellectuals’

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<sup>4</sup> Shelley Fisher Fishkin, who has called *Huckleberry Finn* “the greatest antiracist novel by an American” (1996: 23), represents the other end of the critical spectrum. While Fishkin’s superlative is, in my view, an overstatement, scholars such as she and Jocelyn Chadwick-Joshua (1998) have done important work in unearthing the antiracist side of Twain. Yet, it is impossible to dismiss lightly the reasoning of those who argue, as Fredrick Woodard and Donnarae MacCann do, that “[t]hrough Jim may reasonably be viewed as a model of goodness, generosity, and humility, he is characterized without an equally essential intelligence to buttress our claims for his humanity” (1992: 141). In presenting a counterargument, Chadwick-Joshua (1998: 43–59) examines Twain’s construction of logomachies (verbal battles) between Huck and Jim, claims that Jim wins each of these battles, and focuses on the rhetorical strategies by which Jim triumphs. However, James S. Leonard’s and Thomas A. Tenney’s summary of the more unfavorable criticism firmly maintains that “Twain’s ironic reversals do not overbalance the damage done by Jim’s minstrel-show speeches and reasoning” (1992: 4). An important addition to these discussions is offered by Eric J. Sundquist’s 1993 analysis of Twain and race, which focuses on the “carnavalesque drama of twinning and masquerade” constituting Twain’s 1894 novel, *Puddn’head Wilson* (1993: 225–270 [225]).

rather reserved responses to campaigns to outlaw Twain's novel. Toni Morrison, for example, has positioned herself among those who hold that *Huckleberry Finn* should remain in American high school and college curricula. At the same time, her autobiographical testimony emphasizes that the reading should be accompanied by politically responsible teaching:

In the early eighties I read *Huckleberry Finn* again, provoked, I believe, by demands to remove the novel from the libraries and required reading lists of public schools. These efforts were based, it seemed to me, on a narrow notion of how to handle the offense Mark Twain's use of the term *nigger* would occasion for black students and the corrosive effect it would have on white ones. It struck me as a purist yet elementary kind of censorship designed to appease adults rather than educate children. Amputate the problem, band-aid the solution. A serious comprehensive discussion of the term by an intelligent teacher certainly would have benefited my eighth-grade class and would have spared all of us (a few blacks, many whites—mostly second-generation immigrant children) some grief. (Morrison 1999 [1996]: 386)

One way to avoid the rigid binary of either demanding a ban on *Huckleberry Finn* or insensitively belittling what is racially offensive in the book is to return, in a revised fashion, to the idea that *Huckleberry Finn* could be read as a semi-autobiographical novel. Bernard W. Bell's simultaneously serious and tongue-in-cheek characterization of Twain provides an apt starting point:

Born and bred in the antebellum Southwest, a volunteer in the Confederate militia, and an advocate of the delightful accuracy of minstrelsy, Twain... struggles valiantly, *like Huck*, to reject the legacy of American racism and to accept his personal share of responsibility for the injustice of slavery, but never in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* does he fully and unequivocally accept the equality of blacks. (1992 [1985]: 124–25, italics added)

Endemic to this parallel between Twain and Huck are the origins of both the author and his fictional protagonist in a culture and society that took the Peculiar Institution for granted; their gradual realization that they must revisit their views of slavery and of African Americans (and, in the process, of themselves); their attempt at such reconsideration; their wavering, confusion, and inconsistency in this enterprise; and the eventual incompleteness of their respective projects of breaking away from the insidious influence of racism on their cultural perception and imagination. While Twain may not have inscribed his own journey—his incomplete struggle with the 'race question'—in the novel deliberately, such an imprint was a *de facto* outcome of his process.

This argument resonates with Toni Morrison's mention of *Huckleberry Finn* "deliberately cooperating in the controversy it has excited" (1999 [1996]: 386); for Morrison, "[t]he brilliance of *Huckleberry Finn* is that it *is* the argument [i.e., the controversy or debate] it raises" (1999 [1996]: 386, italics in original). Judging from Morrison's commentary, what is needed is serious and critical thinking as to how to teach, rather than ban, *Huckleberry Finn*. In this spirit, I will next scrutinize how Twain develops the Jim-Huck relationship in the course of his narrative. Aware that this task attracted a great deal of scholarly attention in the mid-twentieth century (including

Leslie Fiedler's in/famous 1948 suggestion of the Jim-Huck bond's latently homosexual qualities), I look at dimensions of the novel that were largely ignored at that time. Taking my cue, in part, from Morrison (1999 [1996]: 389–91), I focus on Twain's portrayal of Jim as a father figure for Huck—an aspect of Jim's characterization that transcends, albeit briefly, the racial hierarchies so forcibly inscribed in the novel's temporal and geographical setting.

## 2. The White Boy and the Black Man

Comparing *Huckleberry Finn* to Faulkner's *Intruder in the Dust*, Ralph Ellison wrote in 1958:

...Twain, standing closer [than Faulkner] to the Reconstruction and to the oral tradition, was not so free of the white dictum that Negro males must be treated either as boys or 'uncles'—never as men. Jim's friendship for Huck comes across as that of a boy for another boy rather than as the friendship of an adult for a junior. (Ellison 1995 [1958]: 105)

When *Huckleberry Finn* is studied as a whole, Ellison is undoubtedly correct. However, the novel also offers some glimpses of a Jim who, though compelled to squeeze himself in a humiliatingly diminishing mold while communicating with whites, is nevertheless powerfully aware of his manhood and adulthood. One such passage is the hairball scene in Chapter 4. David L. Smith, one of the few critics examining racial representation in *Huckleberry Finn* who address this scene, focuses on the pecuniary aspect of Huck and Jim's 'transaction': "[M]uch of the exchange between Huck and Jim is an exercise in wily and understated economic bartering. In essence, Jim wants to be paid for his services, while Huck wants free advice.... In this transaction, Jim serves his own interest while appearing to serve Huck's interest" (1992: 110).

At one level, this reading is accurate: Jim does test his luck, checking whether he could benefit from the fortune-telling financially. However, the scene cannot be completely reduced either to economic negotiation or to Jim's performance as a 'superstitious Negro'; rather, Twain also portrays Jim as an adult who pauses to listen to an adolescent in distress and takes his anxieties seriously. Twain's Jim clearly recognizes that the deeply troubled Huck's request for fortune-telling connotes much more than its face value indicates: in addition to pursuing information about his father's whereabouts and intentions, Huck desperately needs emotional support. Jim chooses to respond to this need and thus demonstrates genuine human kindness and unselfish generosity (while living and operating in a society that, ironically enough, questions his full humanity).

A slave, Jim can relate, at a most personal level, both to the agony generated by uncertainty about a family member's fate and to the fear of becoming a target of physical violence. Huck is, at this point, mainly preoccupied with the latter problem: he is already sure that Pap Finn—an abusive parent—is alive, and for the young boy this state of affairs translates, tragically, as extremely disconcerting news; he is, in fact, horrified. A little earlier, he saw familiar footprints in new snow, was struck by panic,

and ran to Judge Thatcher to transfer the ownership of his newly acquired assets (see the ending of *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*) to the Judge—attempting to rid himself of his money, so that he would not have to suffer at his father's hands for possessing what Pap Finn would try to seize by any means necessary. Huck comes to Jim after visiting Judge Thatcher: "... I went to him [Jim] that night and told him pap was here again, for I found his tracks in the snow. What I wanted to know, was, what he was going to do, and was he going to stay?" (29). Despite the fear and anguish saturating Huck's ostensibly matter-of-fact inquiry, Huck and Jim verbally adhere to 'business': they conduct their discussion in the language of fortune-telling and avoid any explicit display of emotions. In effect, however, the adult Jim here gently consoles the confused adolescent, communicating with Huck in a language that they both share and cherish, which happens to be the language of folk belief.

Because of the societal circumstances in which Huck and Jim find themselves, Jim has no authoritative voice (except for the clairvoyant's voice temporarily granted to him by the magic authority of the hairball), nor is he in a position to articulate the obvious: in consoling and advising Huck he actually substitutes for the young boy's father. This silence is one of Twain's many telling omissions that Toni Morrison perceptively terms "entrances, crevices, gaps, seductive invitations flashing the possibility of meaning" and "[u]narticulated eddies that encourage diving into the novel's undertow—the real place where writer captures reader" (1999 [1996]: 388). Despite the absence of an articulation of what in the context 'must' remain unsaid, the process that results in Jim becoming a father figure for Huck begins as early as this scene.

When Jim later, in Chapter 9, discovers that the dead man inside the house floating down the river is Pap Finn, he decides to temporarily withhold this information from Huck (61–62). This decision further develops what began in the hairball scene: without Huck having to consciously face or admit the process of substitution, Jim starts, after Pap Finn's death, to protect the fatherless boy as unselfishly as if Huck were his own son. Notably, Huck intuitively submits to Jim's newly established authority as an adult protector: curious and mischievous as he normally is, in Chapter 9 Huck obeys Jim without as much as a word of protest when Jim tells him not to look at the dead man's face (62). In this scene, it is clear who is a boy (Huck) and who is an adult (Jim), or who is the 'son' and who is his new surrogate 'father', although this clarity is not sustained in later chapters. Moreover, after this incident Huck begins to call the places he inhabits with Jim—here, Jackson's Island—"home" (62); the word is yet another signal of Jim and Huck's 'family formation'. The explicit linkage of this formation with Huck's fear of his abusive biological father in Chapter 4 and with the father's death in Chapter 9 suggests that Twain here indeed deliberately seeks to transcend the stereotypical image of the black male slave as an 'uncle' (although his portrayal of Jim is nevertheless heavily influenced by that stereotype).

### 3. Twain's Deconstruction of an Idealized Whiteness

In addition to prefiguring the development of the Jim-Huck relationship as a father-son relation that temporarily transcends the era's racial hierarchies, the hairball scene in Chapter 4 also launches the novel's examination of the metaphorical meanings that

Twain's contemporaries habitually attributed to blackness and whiteness. At first sight, Jim's vision of black and white angels at the end of the hairball scene (30) may seem to uncritically enforce the Manichean identification of blackness with evil and whiteness with virtue; however, Twain begins to deconstruct this simplistic—and, in the context, racist—dualism immediately after introducing it. When Huck leaves Jim after the fortune-telling, he then, startlingly, encounters his father at the very opening of Chapter 5. The older man's deathly white pallor functions as a powerful image of the decaying white South: "There warn't no color in his [Pap Finn's] face, where his face showed; it was white; not like another man's white, but a white to make a body sick, a white to make a body's flesh crawl—a tree-toad white, a fish-belly white" (31). This image of decomposition, corrosion, and corruption is complemented by there being hardly any white character in the novel whom Twain unambiguously presents as morally good, with the possible exception of Judge Thatcher.<sup>5</sup>

Notably, in *Huckleberry Finn* a pivotal aspect of the moral imperfection of the whites of Missouri, a slave state within the Union, is their participation in the ideology and practice of slavery—a complicity that even the kindest of Twain's white characters share, whether or not they recognize their involvement. The widow Douglas is a case in point: though not a slaveholder herself, she benefits from the Peculiar Institution on a daily basis because she shares a household with her sister, Miss Watson, who owns a slave, Jim. Stacey Margolis has recently argued that "Twain's interest in exploring the ways in which a wide variety of unknowing people could be held responsible for Jim's fate and be made to compensate him for his injuries must be read as an attempt to imagine what it would mean to extend the logic of negligence to the national level" (2001: 331).<sup>6</sup>

Twain's deconstruction of any unproblematized identification of whiteness with goodness and social grace continues as Huck and Jim travel down south and are faced with white degeneration, immorality, and mob mentality practically every time they go on shore. In Chapter 16, Twain's portraits of poor whites along the Mississippi contain nothing that could be read as flattering; no role models for Huck can be found there. The novel's view of the white Southern aristocracy is equally disillusioned and pessimistic: although the feud episode of Chapters 17 and 18 may initially seem a hilarious parody of Romantic notions of honor, it ends on an extremely tragic note—the futile and largely self-imposed deaths of the Grangerfords (white upper-class Southerners isolated from the social realities surrounding them), who momentarily seemed to have the potential of becoming Huck's family. Furthermore, the episode where Colonel Sherburn executes a (white) drunken man in cold blood and is then faced by a lynch mob seeking revenge further calls attention to the antebellum South's ambience of white terror. Interestingly, repulsive and arrogant a character as he is, Sherburn's speech to the mob expresses chilling truths that Huck is also discovering

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<sup>5</sup> The other, temperance-minded judge is well-intentioned, but he is also dangerously naïve and gullible: epitomizing the failure of the novel's society to provide a safety net for a mistreated child, he leaves Huck at the mercy of a legal guardian who is an abusive alcoholic.

<sup>6</sup> Joining the critics who interpret *Huckleberry Finn* as being strongly antiracist, Margolis further suggests that "[i]n this commitment to examining unintentional harms, Twain... makes his strongest case against postbellum racism" (2001: 331).

about the life along the river: “The pitifulest thing out is a mob.... Now the thing for *you* to do, is to droop your tails and go home and crawl in a hole. If any real lynching’s going to be done, it will be done in the dark, southern fashion; and when they come, they’ll bring their masks, and fetch a *man* along.” (162, italics in original)

While Sherburn is primarily thinking of himself when he utters the word *man*, the remark can also be read as Twain’s reverent allusion to black male lynch victims (whose executors, ironically, thought of *themselves* as ‘manly’ and brave).

#### 4. Jim’s Plight

Among the most notorious white characters of *Huckleberry Finn* are the two con artists who call themselves the Duke and the Dauphin. By the time these “low-down humbugs and frauds” (142) enter the narrative, life on the shore and Huck and Jim’s life on the water have come to represent binary opposites. Huck and Jim have witnessed terrible tragedies and encountered lethal hazards on the shore, but their interracial existence on the raft—their oasis—has become something of a semi-democratic arrangement (still flawed, though, by Huck’s recognition of his racially based power to control Jim). However, when the Duke and the Dauphin arrive, they completely take over; even their fake names signify power. Huck and Jim, a young white boy and an adult black man, cannot defend their newly established way of life against the two white males’ *coup d’état*. The shore life, with its racial hierarchy, invades the raft, and Jim’s status as a slave is restored.

The Duke and the Dauphin decide that it will be ‘pretended’ that Jim is a runaway slave captured by the three white travelers, because this scheme will enable the group to travel by day. A former itinerant printer, the Duke even designs and prints a poster in support of their story: “[The poster] had a picture of a runaway nigger, with a bundle on a stick, over his shoulder, and ‘\$200 reward’ under it. The reading was all about Jim, and just described him to a dot” (149). As the Duke’s triumphant explanation indicates, the plan’s consequences for Jim are gloomy:

Whenever we see anybody coming, we can tie Jim hand and foot with a rope, and lay him in the wigwam and show this handbill and say we captured him up the river, and were too poor to travel on a steamboat, so we got this little raft on credit from our friends and are going down to get the reward. Handcuffs and chains would look still better on Jim, but it wouldn’t go well with the story of us being so poor. (149–50)

This passage explicitly evokes Jim’s factually shackled condition (“[h]andcuffs and chains”). From this point onwards, Jim’s adulthood mainly remains suppressed in the narrative. It does, however, surface occasionally—for example, at the end of Chapter 23, where Jim discusses his children with Huck. Jim’s guilt and sadness about his past misinterpretation of his little daughter’s deafness as disobedience reveals his profound appreciation of thoughtful, attentive, and sensitive parenting—a vision of adult conduct totally foreign to most of the novel’s white male characters. This scene also severely criticizes the family-breaking practices of slavery by disclosing how sorely Jim misses his family. What follows this revelation is, as Toni Morrison points out, one of

the loudest silences of the entire novel: “Huck has nothing to say. The chapter does not close; it simply stops” (1999 [1996]: 389). Despite what has in practice become a father-son relationship between Jim and Huck, the white boy (still shackled by his society’s racist concept of black people) is unable to envision Jim in the role of an adult with family responsibilities; the narrative connects this failure of Huck’s imagination to the ‘education’, however informal, that he has received in the South. At this point, moreover, Jim’s real family signifies a rival for his new, needy ‘son’ Huck. Morrison’s analysis of the complex and suppressed undercurrents of Huck’s need for Jim as a father figure is, in its grimness, insightful and accurate:

As an abused and homeless child running from a feral male parent, Huck cannot dwell on Jim’s confession and regret about parental negligence without precipitating a crisis from which neither he nor the text could recover. Huck’s desire for a father who is adviser and trustworthy companion is universal, but he also needs something more: a father whom, unlike his own, he can control. No white man can serve all three functions.... Only a black male slave can deliver all Huck desires. Because Jim can be controlled, it becomes possible for Huck to feel responsible for and to him—but without the onerous burden of lifelong debt that a real father figure would demand. For Huck, Jim is a father-for-free. This delicate, covert and fractious problematic is thus hidden and exposed by litotes and speechlessness, both of which are dramatic ways of begging attention. (Morrison 1999 [1996]: 389–90)

While psychological suppression, internalized racialism and racism, and mixed loyalties cause Huck’s vision of Jim’s adulthood to remain limited and blurred, the Duke and the Dauphin choose *complete* blindness to Jim’s human dignity. After victimizing him cruelly, the two con artists sell Jim into slavery for forty dollars—which, according to Shelley Fisher Fishkin (1996: 20), is the same sum for which Twain’s father, John Marshall Clemens, sold his slave Charley down the river upon finding himself in financial difficulty. Jim’s monetary value diminishes progressively during his journey; this devaluation aptly suggests a gradual lessening of his human worth in the eyes of the white beholders whom he encounters while traveling further south. His initial value, the price that was promised to Miss Watson for him, was eight hundred dollars. On Jackson’s Island, Jim’s understanding of his own ‘worth’ prompted the following, seemingly innocent comment from behind his minstrel mask—in effect, an ironic allusion to slavery’s reduction of black human worth to monetary value: “Yes—en I’s rich now, come to look at it. I owns myself, en I’s wuth eight hund’d dollars. I wisht I had de money, I wouldn’t want no mo” (58). When Jim becomes a fugitive, however, the advertised reward for capturing him is no longer eight but three hundred dollars (68). The Duke’s poster sets the price at two hundred, and the eventual selling price, forty dollars, is only five per cent of Jim’s original ‘worth’.

It is a realistic feature of Twain’s narrative—one closely tied to Jim’s plight—that although Huck rather quickly recognizes the Duke and the Dauphin for what they are, it is much more difficult for him to perceive flaws in Tom Sawyer’s leadership. Huck, a lonely boy without too many friends, shares a history of ‘adventures’ with Tom. Because of their class difference, he uncritically idealizes Tom for being a ‘decent’ bourgeois boy with a family and a good education. In Chapter 2, Huck even takes an oath of loyalty whereby he, in practice, ‘formally’ acknowledges Tom’s authority,

although the oath is, on the surface, about solidarity among all boys of ‘Tom Sawyer’s Gang’ (20–21). True, a dissonance—an indication of Huck’s nascent critique of Tom’s leadership—does make itself heard early in the novel: when Tom in Chapter 2 wants to have ‘fun’ at Jim’s expense by tying him to a tree while he sleeps, Huck persuades Tom to drop the idea. In Chapter 3, moreover, Huck begins to see through Tom’s pompous schemes, which are mainly gleaned from romance and adventure novels instead of resonating with real life (24–26). Drawing from the unreal and unseen, Tom’s leadership, in Huck’s disappointed words, “had all the marks of a Sunday school” (26).

However, after some time passes without the boys seeing each other, Huck’s earlier idealization of Tom takes hold again. In Chapter 10, Huck unwittingly imitates Tom’s idea of having ‘fun’: wishing to confuse Jim by a prank, Huck puts a dead rattlesnake at the foot of Jim’s blanket. The consequences are much more drastic than Huck ever intended: the snake’s mate comes and bites Jim—that is, Huck’s childish and foolish behavior results in Jim being endangered and hurt. Despite Huck’s shock and regret, the pattern recurs in the narrative (most dramatically, in the chapters on Jim’s captivity on the Phelps farm towards the novel’s end). In Chapter 12, for example, Huck and Jim come across a wrecked steamship, and Huck—more interested in yet another adventure than in safety—decides to go onto the wreck to loot it. As Huck belittles Jim’s objections (which soon prove far-sighted and wise), he explicitly evokes Tom’s example and authority:

I can’t rest, Jim, till we give her [the wreck] a rummaging. Do you reckon Tom Sawyer would ever go by this thing? Not for a pie, he wouldn’t. He’d call it an adventure—that’s what he’d call it; and he’d land on that wreck if it was his last act. And wouldn’t he throw style into it?—wouldn’t he spread himself, nor nothing? Why, you’d think it was Christopher C’lumbus discovering Kingdom-Come. I wish Tom Sawyer *was* here. (77, italics in original)

It is worth noting that this scene invokes Columbus’s name, and one wonders whether it is a mere coincidence that the site of Jim’s final captivity after his escape from the Phelps plantation is called “Spanish island” (281). If Twain really inserted into his novel what would now be called postcolonial observations—that is, if he, in fact, intended to parallel the ‘Discovery’ and slavery as historical epochs that resulted in the evolution of racial hierarchies in the Americas—then it is significant that such trains of thought are embedded in the story of Tom Sawyer’s cruel, fantasy-fed, self-serving, and racist leadership.

When Tom Sawyer re-enters the novel for the last eleven chapters, Huck, disappointingly, yields to his authority. As Huck accepts Tom’s complicated schemes to ‘free’ Jim (which only serve Tom’s yearning for adventure), he prioritizes his friendship with Tom over his loyalty to Jim, and Jim loses the only white ally he has ever had in the deep South. Although Jim was there for Huck when the white boy needed support and protection, the shared journey does not last. Now that Jim would need Huck, he has to watch the boy start a new phase in his life with restored white loyalties. This loss of an ally at least in part motivates Jim’s excessive humility and servitude in the novel’s final chapters: Jim seems to conclude that putting his life in the hands of the two white boys, fully on their terms, is his only alternative to resigning himself to the life as a slave.

Because Jim finds himself in an unfamiliar and extremely hostile environment, he cannot escape without help; however, asking the slaves of the Phelps farm to assist him would mean putting *them* in danger. (Here, unlike in earlier episodes where local slaves helped him, the whites already know about Jim, so the Phelps slaves would be immediately suspected if he fled the farm. Ironically, Tom and Huck's games eventually result in the same outcome, albeit only briefly). Because Jim is a person of high moral standards, his options are extremely limited.

It is, admittedly, difficult to determine how emphatically Twain calls attention to Jim's recognition of Tom as a brutally selfish player who only seeks his own entertainment; towards the novel's end, Jim's mask of servitude becomes so firmly cemented on his face that it is almost impossible to see behind it and peer into the author's intentions. At the very least, Twain's Jim is powerfully aware of the ineffectiveness of Tom's plotting and deeply suffers from the consequences of Tom and Huck's cruel games as he waits, in his dreary cell, for the boys' next move that never seems to come. Nevertheless, after his eventual escape from the farm—during which Huck and Tom accompany him, and Tom is shot and wounded—Jim makes an unselfish moral decision: he chooses not to leave the injured adolescent behind. He sacrifices his own freedom to nurse Tom, or so he believes at the time. His generosity of spirit stands in striking contrast to the behavior of Tom, who, it eventually transpires, has known all along that Miss Watson's will has already set Jim free. This final revelation bestows a new, chilling significance on Tom's earlier remark: “[T]here's Jim chained by one leg, with a ten-foot chain, to the leg of his bed: why, *all you got to do is to lift up the bedstead and slip off the chain*” (246, italics added). In the novel's last eleven chapters, Tom's project of having ‘fun’ with Jim culminates in a cruel deferral of Jim's freedom in a play whose sole purpose is to make Tom feel adventurous, noble, and heroic—a sentiment as unreal as his imaginary heroism in Chapters 2 and 3. While the invented adventures of ‘Tom Sawyer's Gang’ hardly hurt any one back in St. Petersburg, Missouri, Tom and Huck's ‘play’ towards the novel's end on the Phelps farm in Arkansas has extremely serious—physically cumbersome and psychologically humiliating—consequences for Jim.

Tom, however, does not understand this difference, or if he does, he believes that Jim's suffering, like Jim himself, can easily be assigned a monetary value and handled by the rules of capitalism. In ‘Chapter the Last’, Tom gives Jim “forty dollars for being prisoner for us [Tom and Huck] so patient” (294)—the same sum for which the Duke and the Dauphin sold Jim into slavery. Seemingly happy about the money, Jim triumphantly refers back to the discussion that Huck and he had on Jackson's Island about his ‘worth’ (294–95). However, in another of the novel's silences Jim never mentions that he only receives forty dollars instead of, for example, the ‘original’ eight hundred. None of the white characters admits that the monetary compensation for Jim's postponed freedom is shamefully low; nor does anyone seem to recognize the absurdity of the compensation taking the form of a voluntary and ‘noble’ act on Tom's part; nor does anyone pursue a moral analysis of what has just taken place. Twain's irony operates on the unsaid.

One of E. W. Kemble's illustrations aptly enhances this ironic effect: in the picture titled ‘Tom's Liberality’ (295)—which echoes Huck's words, “Tom's most well, now, and got his bullet around his neck on a watchguard for a watch, and is always seeing

what time it is" (295)—the healed Tom affectionately holds the bullet that pierced his leg while he was 'freeing' Jim. Tom, with his ostensibly modest poise, is here presented both verbally and pictorially as the very emblem of hypocrisy. Twain's and Kemble's approach contains a germ of later cultural historians' critical observation that in the United States, as in England, the memory of the slave trade and slavery was soon largely transformed into a memory of white abolitionist heroism; there was little room for the ex-slave in that celebratory discourse (see e.g. Wood 2000: 1–13).

## 5. Conclusion

In sum, during the journey that he makes with Jim, Huck's views change from what they were at the novel's beginning, but the process remains incomplete, as Huck's eventual relapse into Tom's sphere of influence powerfully demonstrates. Joel Roache, in discussing Huck's retrospective narrative voice, captures this dilemma well:

The first person narrator recounts events that have somehow changed him. Huck therefore plays two roles: the protagonist in the process of change, and the narrator who has already experienced that change. It is this second character, the character who supposedly has overcome his racism, who says that Jim's love for his family "don't seem natural"; it is this character who says that no one was hurt in the steamboat accident, that it just "Killed a nigger"; it is this character who avers, "you can't learn a nigger to argue"; and it is this character who, having been convinced of Jim's humanity, can express that conviction only by announcing that he "knowed he was white inside". (Roache 1998)

At one level, Twain's choice of Huck's disappointing discourse and register probably reflects the author's realism: the change in the young protagonist's worldview is a slow process because it is not supported by white adults around him. However, this aspect of the novel also seems to reflect Twain's own ambivalences. As Elizabeth Ammons and Susan Belasco point out in their discussion of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, it is possible to be antislavery and, in terms of intentions, antiracist, and yet end up reproducing racial stereotypes (2000: 2). Besides Stowe's novel, *Huckleberry Finn* is, in many ways, another case in point, not only because of Twain's text itself but also because of his authorization of Kemble's illustrations. Although such images as 'Tom's Liberality' support an antislavery/antiracist point of view, Kemble's visualization of Jim certainly leaves much to be desired. Earl F. Briden has rightly stressed that, by accepting Kemble's work, "Twain was in effect authorizing a pictorial narrative which runs counter to major implications of his verbal text" because Kemble's illustrations "rewrite the Huck-Jim relationship by reducing Jim, whom Huck gradually recognizes as an individualized human being, to a simple comic type" (Briden 1999 [1988]: 311). Kemble's illustrations indeed render Jim's minstrel shackles very visible throughout the novel.

Why, then, after all the reservations summed up above, teach *Huckleberry Finn* at all? Perhaps one valid reason to maintain this 'amazing' and 'troubling' book in American high school and college curricula is precisely the fact that, with all its wavering and ambivalence, *Huckleberry Finn* both mimics and sheds light on historical

processes whereby shackles of racialized perception are at first opened and then, very disappointingly, partly closed again; in teaching, this observation is worth articulating, and it acutely points to the question of how such shackles could be fully abandoned. Another good reason to teach *Huckleberry Finn* in twenty-first-century college classes on American literature, in particular, is the novel's status as an important antecedent to such African American novels as Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952) and Charles Johnson's *Middle Passage* (1990). In these narratives, the Hucks (to give a nod to Shelley Fisher Fishkin's famous 1993 title) are indeed black; Ellison and Johnson play deliberate intertextual games with Twain's classic, but they also introduce a revised racial politics in the process. Like *Huckleberry Finn*, both *Invisible Man* and *Middle Passage* focus on an unreliable first-person narrator-protagonist who survives an ordeal largely caused by racial hierarchies and racialized perception, who undergoes a moral transformation and growth, and who writes down his story. At the same time, however, these African American novels take both literary techniques and moral/racial reflection in radically new directions.<sup>7</sup>

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