Mark Twain, Race, and *Huckleberry Finn* *

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Ernest Hemingway wrote that "All modern American literature comes from one book by Mark Twain called *Huckleberry Finn*" (22). This book occupies a unique place not only in the Twain canon, but in the American literary canon, as well. Something new happened in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* that had never happened in American literature before. It was a book, as many critics have observed, that transformed American prose style, that served as a declaration of independence from the genteel English novel tradition. *Huckleberry Finn* allowed a different kind of writing to happen: a clean, crisp, no-

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* This essay summarizes arguments I made in *Was Huck Black? Mark Twain and African American Voices* (New York: Oxford UP, 1993) and elsewhere. For a more extensive discussion of issues raised here, see the aforementioned book and also the following books and articles (all by Shelley Fisher Fishkin): *Lighting Out for the Territory: Reflections on Mark Twain and American Culture* (New York: Oxford UP, 1997); *From Fact to Fiction: Journalism and Imaginative Writing in America* (New York: Oxford UP, 1988); "Mark Twain and Race" in *A Historical Guide to Mark Twain* (New York: Oxford UP, 2002); "Mark Twain and the Risks of Irony" in *Twain/Stowe Sourcebook*, ed., Elaine Cheesman and Earl French (Hartford: Mark Twain Memorial), 1988; "New Perspectives on 'Jim' in the 1990s." *The Mark Twain Review* [Korea] Winter 1999; "Mark Twain and American Culture: Which Twain Do We Embrace?" *The Mark Twain Review* [Korea] Vol.7, no.2 2005.
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nonsense, earthy vernacular kind of writing that jumped off the printed page with unprecedented immediacy and energy; it was a book that talked. It was also a book that engaged American history in fresh and powerful ways and continues to place issues of race and racism on the table in classrooms across America.

Critics tend to concur on the question of how *Huck Finn* transformed American literature. Twain's innovation of having a vernacular-speaking child tell his own story in his own words was the first stroke of brilliance; his awareness of the power of satire in the service of social criticism was the second. Huck's voice combined with Twain's satiric genius changed the shape of fiction in America. But where did *Huck Finn* come from? How did it engage American history in the 19th century and the legacies of that history today? These are some of the questions I'll address here.

Models critics cite when they probe the sources of *Huck Finn* include the picaresque novel, the Southwestern humorists, the Northeastern literary comedians, the newspapers Twain contributed to and read, and the tradition of the "boy book" in American popular culture. These sources may seem quite different. On one level, however, they are the same: they all give Twain's book a genealogy that is unequivocally white. My research suggests that we need to revise our understanding of the mainstream American literary tradition. For the voice we have come to accept as the vernacular voice in American literature--the voice with which Twain captured our national imagination in *Huckleberry Finn*, and that empowered Hemingway, Faulkner, and countless other writers in the twentieth-century--is in large measure a voice that is "black". In my book, *Was Huck Black?*

Mark Twain and African American Voices, I noted that compelling evidence indicates that the speech of a ten-year-old black child Twain met in l87l served as a key inspiration for the distinctive voice with which Twain would endow Huck. It is also likely that the storytelling of an ex-slave in l874 helped spark in Twain an appreciation of the possibilities of a vernacular narrator, and that it may have been yet another black speaker--a slave from Twain's Missouri childhood--who first awakened Twain to the power of satire as a tool of social criticism. Twain was surrounded, throughout his life, by many richly talented African-American speakers whose rhetorical gifts he admired candidly and profusely. But it was in *Huckleberry Finn,* more than in any other work, that Twain allowed African-American voices to play a major role in the creation of his art. This fact may go a long way towards clarifying what makes this novel so fresh and so distinctive. Mark Twain appreciated the creative vitality of African-American voices and exploited their potential in his art. In the process, he helped teach his countrymen new lessons about the lyrical and exuberant energy of vernacular speech, as well as about the potential of satire and irony in the service of truth. Both of these lessons would ultimately make the culture more responsive to the voices of African-American writers in the twentieth century. They would also change its definitions of what "art" ought to look and sound like to be freshly, wholly "American."

How could a man who grew up in a slaveholding society and who was a racist himself until he was in his thirties write what is perhaps the greatest anti-racist novel by an American? And why is this great anti-racist novel—frequently challenged for being racist? If you can

understand these ironies –and their contexts—you will be well on your way towards understanding a great deal about both race relations in the United States, and about one of America's most profound and profoundly challenging American authors.

This is a book that is set in slavery, but that isn't written until more than a decade after slavery has ended, So there are two contexts to keep in mind—the world in which the author lived as a child, and the world in which he wrote as an adult. In his "schoolboy days," Twain recalled in his autobiography, he "had no aversion to slavery." He was "not aware that there was anything wrong about it." No one around him challenged the institution; local churches taught that "God approved it, that it was a holy thing." "In those old slave-holding days," he recalled, "the whole community was agreed as to one thing--the awful sacredness of slave property.... To help steal a horse or a cow was a low crime, but to help a hunted slave...or hesitate to promptly betray him to a slave-catcher when opportunity offered was a much baser crime, and carried with it a stain, a moral smirch which nothing could wipe away.... It seemed natural enough to me then."[1]1 For the most part, Clemens' family and other residents of the town accepted without question the legitimacy of slavery and the alleged natural inferiority of blacks that justified it. The church and the law were unanimous on the inherent justice of the status quo, which was strengthened by a range of arguments, made throughout the society, about the inherent inferiority of people of African descent.

During Twain's childhood, it was against Missouri law to read even the Declaration of Independence or the Bible to a slave. But state-

[1] http://www.boondocksnet.com/twaintexts/autobiography/mtauto13b.html

enforced illiteracy failed to extinguish a rich and creative oral tradition that Twain would later come to call consummate "literary" art. A young Sam Clemens who as yet knew nothing of his future calling listened to it every chance he got. He was tremendously struck by the storytelling talents of Uncle Dan'l, a slave at his uncle's farm in Florida, Missouri, whose tales he was privileged to listen to every night in the summer; in a letter Twain wrote about him in 1881, he recalled the "impressive pauses and eloquent silences" of Uncle Dan'l's "impressive delivery" (Paine, vol. I, *Mark Twain's Letters* 402-403). Twain would also recall the rhetorical performances of Jerry, "a gay and impudent and satirical and delightful young black man—a slave, who daily preached sermons from the top of his master's woodpile, with me for sole audience... To me he was a wonder. I believed he was the greatest man in the United States" (Paine, *Europe and Elsewhere* 399). All his life Twain would emulate the lessons in storytelling and satire he learned from Uncle Dan'l and Jerry during his Hannibal childhood, striving to reach an audience as effectively as these master-talents managed to reach him. Uncle Dan'l may have been the most accomplished storyteller Sam Clemens had ever encountered, and Jerry the most effective satirist; but the society in which they lived defined them as "inferior" because of the color of their skin. Twain would eventually understand and explode the irony and arrogance of that label.

One could see signs of things to come in his first book, *The Innocents Abroad* (1869), in which he had nasty things to say about every guide he met on the trip, save one: the child of South Carolina slaves, a black man in Venice who spoke several languages, knew his

art history cold, and made more sense than any other guide the group had encountered. One would be hard-pressed to find a more candidly admiring profile of an educated black man among Twain's peers in the 1860s.[2]

Contact with former abolitionists in the East after the Civil War and his marriage into Olivia Langdon's abolitionist family helped prompt Twain to continue to reexamine his views in the late 1860s. An editorial Twain wrote for the Buffalo *Express* condemning a lynching, "Only a Nigger" (1869), marked some of the changes in his sensitivity on this subject.[3] In this piece Twain delivered a scathing, unsubtle attack on the world view embodied in that offensive racial epithet, lacerating the Southern "gentlemen" who were unconcerned about a miscarriage of justice so long as "only a nigger" lost his life in the process. Elmira, his wife's hometown, was proud of its abolitionist heritage. It had been a key stop on the Underground Railroad, and Twain was fascinated by the stories of escape he heard from ex-slaves who had made it north. While his father had been sending abolitionists to the state penitentiary, his father-in-law, Jervis Langdon, had been funding their activities. In this environment, Twain continued to probe the "naturalness" of the racist views drummed into him during his youth, and found them wanting (Fishkin, *Lighting Out* 74-85).

It is interesting that it was two black speakers in the North—Mary Ann Cord in Elmira, and a young black servant in Paris, Illinois—who stimulated Twain to understand in fresh ways a fact that he later claimed to have understood during his childhood: the people who

[2] http://www.mtwain.com/Innocents_Abroad/24.html
[3] http://www.boondocksnet.com/twaintexts/onlynigger.html

were most talented at the art that Twain himself was now elevating into a calling had often, throughout his life, been black. In "A True Story" (1874), published in the *Atlantic Monthly,* an ex-slave, in her own powerful and eloquent language, told of being separated from her child on the auction block and of being reunited years later; the sketch won Twain critical acclaim for his dramatic evocation of "Aunt Rachel's" pain and joy (Fishkin, *Lighting Out* 84-92). A talkative and engaging black child he met in Illinois in 1871, whom he profiled three years later in a *New York Times* piece entitled "Sociable Jimmy" helped spark his awareness of the potential of a child-narrator, and contributed significantly to the voice with which Twain would endow Huck Finn (Fishkin, *Was Huck Black?* 13-48). At a time when African-American vernacular speech was widely ridiculed in the nation at large, Mark Twain recognized that African American vernacular speech and storytelling manifested a vitality and literary potential that was rich, powerful and largely untapped in print. He wrote no manifestoes on this topic however. What he did do was change the course of American literature by infusing it with lessons he had learned from African American speakers. This topic was at the center of my book *Was Huck Black? Mark Twain and African American Voices*. And at a time when African-Americans themselves were characterized as inferior specimens of humanity by pseudo-scientists, statesmen, and educators, Mark Twain recognized that such pronouncements were absurd. He wrote no manifestoes on this topic, either. But his awareness of black individuals of extraordinary courage and talent impelled him to challenge this characterization in fiction, nonfiction, quips, quotes, and unpublished meditations that he

wrote from the 1870s until his death.[4]

Adventures of Huckleberry Finn explored the subject of racism through satire and irony, a strategy that has often led readers to miss the point entirely or to take as Twain's message the opposite of what he intended to convey. While readers' misreading of his irony has helped prompt recent moves to ban his work as "racist," it is interesting that Twain originally developed this strategy when a direct expose of racism that he wrote was censored.

As a young reporter in San Francisco in the mid-1860s, Twain witnessed an incident he considered outrageous: several policemen stood idly by, apparently amused, as young white hooligans attacked a Chinese man who was going about his business. Twain's publishers refused to run the account he wrote of the incident, caring more about not offending the paper's subscribers (who shared the police's prejudices) than about the truth. Twain quickly learned that exposés of racism in San Francisco would not be printed in newspapers there. So he started writing a different kind of story, one with the same subject but an alternate strategy, and published it in a paper in the next state and in a national magazine. He had already published satires on travel letters, society balls, and corporate stock prospectuses. Now he turned his skill as an ironist on its thorniest target yet—racism.

These satires were told from the perspective of an invented character too innocent or bigoted to see anything wrong with the injustices he related. In "Disgraceful Persecution of a Boy", for example, Twain creates a narrator too bigoted to understand the

[4] In addition to the aforementioned works, see Fishkin, "False Starts, Fragments and Fumbles: Mark Twain's Unpublished Writing on Race." *Essays in Arts and Sciences*, Vol. XX, October, 1991, and Fishkin, "Race and Culture at the Century's End: A Social Context for Pudd'nhead Wilson," in *Essays in Arts and Sciences,* Vol. XIX, May 1990.

significance of the events he describes. The narrator of the 1870 piece is ostensibly motivated to have his say by his outrage at the "disgraceful persecution" of an innocent boy in San Francisco. The narrator is incensed that the boy has been "thrown into the city prison" for an act which strikes the narrator not only as fitting and proper, but as fully sanctioned by the community: on his way to Sunday School, the boy stoned a Chinese man. "What had the child's education been? How should he suppose it was wrong to stone a Chinaman," he asks. In the heated editorial he writes in defense of the boy, the bigoted narrator reveals much more than he intends to about the moral norms of 1860s San Francisco. In an effort to prove that the boy was simply responding to signals that he had been given by his elders, the narrator drops that San Francisco is a place where mining taxes are imposed on the Chinese but not the Irish, where many tax gatherers collect the tax twice instead of once, where "when a white man robs a sluice-box…they make him leave the [mining] camp,; and when a Chinaman does that thing, they hang him." His education taught the boy that "a Chinaman had no rights that any man was bound to respect." Everything in the boy's environment "conspired to teach him that it was a high and holy thing to stone a Chinaman, and yet," the narrator complains," no he no sooner attempts to do his duty than he is punished for it."[5] In "Disgraceful Persecution of a Boy," the narrator, too bigoted to understand the import of what he relates, is convinced he is right. In *Huck Finn*, Huck, too innocent to understand the import of what he relates, is convinced he is wrong.

When Twain took up the subject of racism in *Adventures of*

[5] http://www.boondocksnet.com/twaintexts/disgracefulpersecution.html

Huckleberry Finn, the time, the place, and the race would be different. But the central question would be much the same: how can a society that debases human lives on a mass scale consider itself civilized? In *Huckleberry Finn,* as in earlier works, Twain used irony to shame his countrymen into recognizing the gap between their images of themselves and reality, as he portrays a racist society through the eyes of a boy too innocent to challenge that society's norms. Despite his love for Jim, Huck never achieves a larger awareness that the laws that define black people as less-than-human property are wrong. He still thinks he's wrong—and that he'll got to hell for helping Jim steal his own freedom. If Huck never reaches this awareness, the attentive reader, however, does. Twain himself had certainly reached this awareness by the time he wrote the novel. In 1885, for example, the year he published the book in this country, Twain provided a succinct comment on racism's shameful legacies when he wrote the dean of the Yale law school about why he wanted to pay for one of the first black students at Yale: "We have ground the manhood out of them," he wrote, referring to black people, "& the shame is ours, not theirs, & we should pay for it."[6]

The tendency on the part of some readers to conflate Huck's perspective with Twain's is aided and abetted by a peculiarly "double" aspect of Twain's vision. Samuel Clemens/Mark Twain wrote the book at age 55, but he presented it as if it were written by a child—a child who resembled in some ways, the child Clemens himself once was. Like Huck, Sam Clemens failed to condemn either Slavery or racism

[6] See Edwin McDowell. "From Twain, a Letter on Debt to Blacks." *New York Times*, 14 March 1985, 1, 16.

during his childhood. But by 1855, when *Huck Finn* was published, Samuel Clemens held views that were very different from those he ascribed to Huck, the "fictional" author of his novel. By the time he wrote *Huck Finn*, Sam Clemens had come to believe not only that Slavery was a horrendous wrong, but that white Americans owed black Americans some form of "reparations."

Efforts to ban Huckleberry Finn as racist have surfaced periodically since 1957, when the New York City Board of Education, citing some passages derogatory to African Americans, removed the book from approved textbook lists. Those who charge the book with being racist say that the term "nigger," used close to 200 times in the book, retains the power to hurt more strongly than ever and argue that the presence of demeaning minstrel stereotypes in Twain's characterization of Jim is painful in a society in which negative stereotypes of black people have not disappeared. Twain's defenders argue that Twain used the term "nigger" because it was integral to the project of presenting and indicting a racist society whose illegitimate racial hierarchy was embodied in the use of that word, because it was central to dramatizing the failure of everyone in that society (black *and* white) to challenge the legitimacy of the status quo and of the word that cemented and reinforced it. (This fact does not mitigate the challenge of addressing in the classroom the pain still associated with this term—it still has the power to hurt today; for that reason, teachers who want to teach this book need to open their literature classroom to the history of American race relations). And critics today are increasingly challenging earlier critics' willingness to link Jim to minstrel-show stereotypes in simple, uncomplicated ways. More and

more, we are suggesting that (1) Jim—not Huck—may well be the "hero" of the book; (2) Jim may don a minstrel mask strategically, when it seems to be in his self-interest to do so, and (3) critics' failure to recognize Jim's intelligence may reveal their own limitations rather than Twain's. These assumptions suggest that Twain was doing more than challenging the ideology of black inferiority that dominated his world: he was consciously inverting it, crafting a book in which the most admirable and, perhaps, the most intelligent character, was black.[7]

Ralph Ellison wrote in 1958 in "Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke,"

> Writing at a time when the blackfaced minstrel was still popular, and shortly after a war which left even the abolitionists weary of those problems associated with the Negro, Twain fitted Jim into the outlines of the minstrel tradition, and it is from behind this stereotype mask that we see Jim's dignity and human capacity—and Twain's complexity—emerge. (215-16)

Critics in the 1980s—with some notable exceptions—tended to focus on the first half of Ellison's statement (the links between Jim

[7] "New Perspectives on 'Jim' in the 1990s." *The Mark Twain Review* (Korea)Winter 1999; "Teaching Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*." In "*Huck Finn* in Context: A Teaching Guide" [Companion Guide to "Born to Trouble: *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*,"] (Boston: WGBH Educational Foundation,1999); "The Challenge of Teaching *Huckleberry Finn*." In *Making Mark Twain Work in the Classroom* ed. James Leonard (Durham: Duke UP), 1999.

and minstrelsy) while ignoring the second, forgetting that Ellison refers to minstrelsy as a "mask" and ignoring his comment that Jim's dignity and human capacity emerge "from behind" this mask. Today, however, critics are increasingly arguing that (as David Smith put it), "Twain adopts a strategy of subversion in his attack on race. That is, he focuses on a number of commonplaces associated with 'the Negro' and then systematically dramatizes their inadequacy" in ways that "undermine rather than revalidate the dominant racial discourse" (Leonard et al 103-20). We can look at a few of these scenes more specifically, if you like such as the scene in chapter 2, where boys hang Jim's hat on a tree. In other words, agency and intelligence rather than minstrel-stereotypes underlie Jim's verbal performances, and it may be that the complexity of Twain's satire combined with *readers'* prejudices—not Mark Twain's—prevent readers from recognizing this dynamic, from seeing that Jim shrewdly and consciously dons the minstrel mask as a strategic performance, playing a minstrel role when that is what a white person expects him to do. But it is a role, and that is key: he plays it out of self-interest. He is smart, sensitive, savvy, self-aware, politically astute, generous, and stunningly altruistic, a compelling and intelligent father, and a slave seeking his freedom in a racist world determined to keep him enslaved (Fishkin, "New" 3-10).

During the 80s and the early 90s many critics became convinced of the value of identifying and condemning the residues of minstrelsy in Jim as part of the admirable project of dismantling naturalized racist caricatures wherever one found them. But what had initially seemed like the progressive move turns out to be just the opposite: a part of

the process of (yet again) denying a black man his full humanity. It is one thing to credit Jim with intelligence, some might say—but do we have to give Twain credit for being that smart? A number of critics (myself included), would respond, "yes": Twain was smart enough to recognize intelligence and strength of character when he saw it, smart enough to understand the masks blacks had to wear to manipulate white people, and cagey enough to write a book that would take us over a hundred years to learn to read. Slavery was gone when Twain wrote this novel, but racism was alive and well. Twain's target, I suggest—is just that—the racism he saw around him.

Twain denies all subversive intentions in the novel but such a limited reading denies the corrosive satire of white pretensions to racial superiority that is at the books' core. Indeed, while posing on the surface as an unthreatening boys' adventure story, *Huck Finn* is increasingly coming to be understood as a satire that voices encoded criticisms of American race relations in the Post-Reconstruction South. For example, let us look for a moment at the captivity of Jim in the last portion of the book. During the period in which Twain wrote the novel, 1876-1883, the gains that blacks had won during Reconstruction, the period immediately after the Civil War, were being quickly overturned. In 1877, the Federal troops that had been safeguarding the rights of blacks in the South were, in effect, withdrawn. The intimidation that white supremacists earlier had to carry out at night could now be accomplished in broad daylight; racists—organized and disorganized—pushed their ends through arson, murder, lynching and mass assault. The official government policy was to look the other way as African Americans' civil rights were flagrantly violated, and as thousands of

African Americans were effectively re-enslaved through such means as sharecropping, lynching, and the convict-lease system. As W.E.B. Du Bois put it in his book *Black Reconstruction*, "The slave went free; stood a brief moment in the sun; then moved back again toward slavery" (30; see also Foner). The final portion of *Huckleberry Finn* is increasingly coming to be understood as a satirical indictment of the virtual re-enslavement of free blacks in the South during the 1880s. The book presents itself as a simple boy's book as slyly as the traditional trickster tale presents itself as a simple animal story. Just beneath the surface however it dramatizes, as perhaps only a work of art can, both the dream and the denial of the dream, both the spectacular boldness of the promise of liberty and justice for all and the nation's failure to make that promise a reality. Scholars are increasingly coming to understand the last portion of the book as a satire on the way the U.S. botched the enterprise of freeing its slaves.

In the book's famous ending what do we find? Incarcerated in a tiny shack with a ludicrous assortment of snakes, rats and spiders put there by an authority figure who claims to have his best interests at heart, Jim is denied information that he needs and is forced to perform a series of pointless and exhausting tasks. After risking his life to get the freedom that unbeknownst to him is already his, after proving himself to be a paragon of moral virtue who towers over everyone around him, this legally-free black man is still denied respect—and is still in chains. All of this happens not at the hands of charlatans, the duke and the king, but at the initiative of a respectable Tom Sawyer and churchgoing citizens like the Phelpses and their neighbors. Is what America did to the ex-slaves any less insane than what Tom

Sawyer put Jim through in the novel? What is the history of post-Emancipation race relations in the United States if not a series of maneuvers as cruelly gratuitous as the indignities inflicted on Jim in the final section of *Huckleberry Finn*? Why was the Civil Rights movement necessary? Why were black Americans forced to go through so much pain and trouble just to secure rights that were supposedly theirs already? You think importing rats and snakes to Jim's shack are crazy? How about this: give blacks the vote, but make sure they can't use it; and when folks call your bluff—like civil rights workers James Chaney, Andrew Goodman and Michael Schwerner did—kill them. Mark Twain got it right—too right: he limned our society's failings with a risky, searing, irony that leaves the reader reeling. *Huckleberry Finn* may end in farce—but it is not Twain's farce: it is ours.

Writing at a time when pseudo-scientific justifications for racism abounded, Mark Twain created a work of art which subverted the reigning racial hierarchy and spoke across time to generations that would continue to struggle with the challenge of extricating their country from the destructive legacies of Slavery. It is a book about how people who think of themselves as fine, upstanding, citizens can be coolly complicit in supporting an evil and indefensible status quo. And it is a book that effectively uses dramatic irony to give the reader greater insight into the world its characters inhabit than the characters themselves have. No other novel by an American indicts racism as powerfully and as profoundly.

How do we explain Mark Twain's journey from knee-jerk racist to one of the greatest anti-racist writers America has produced? Twain

himself gives us the answer in a paper he gave in 1884: "What is the most rigorous law of our being? Growth. No smallest atom of our moral, mental or physical structure can stand still a year.... In other words, we change—and must change, constantly, and keep on changing as long as we live" (Twain "Consistency").

I didn't read *Huckleberry Finn* until junior year in high school, when it was assigned in my English class. It was l966. I was living in a small town in Connecticut. I expected a sequel to *Tom Sawyer*, a children's book I'd read when I was eleven. So when the teacher, after handing out the books, announced the assigned paper topic, my jaw dropped: "write a paper on how Mark Twain used irony to attack racism in *Huckleberry Finn*." The year before, the bodies of three young men who had gone to Mississippi to help register blacks to vote—James Chaney, Michael Schwerner and Andrew Goodman—had been found in a shallow grave; some two dozen white segregationists were eventually accused by the F.B.I. of being involved in the murders. America's inner cities were simmering with long-pent-up rage that had started exploding the previous summer; riots in Watts had left 34 people dead. None of this made any sense to me. I was confused, angry, certain that there was something missing from the stories I read each day: the why. Then I met Pap Finn. And the Phelpses.

Pap Finn, Huck tells us, "had been drunk over in town" and "was just all mud." He erupts into a drunken tirade about "a free nigger...from Ohio; a mulatter, most as white as a white man," wearing "the whitest shirt on you ever see, too, and the shiniest hat" ("there ain't a man in town that's got as fine clothes as what he had...."):

> [T]hey said he was a p'fessor in a college, and could talk all kinds of languages, and knowed everything. And that ain't the wust. They said he could vote, when he was at home. Well, that let me out. Thinks I, what is the country a-coming to? It was 'lection day, and I was just about to go and vote, myself, if I warn't too drunk to get there, but when they told me there was a State in this country where they'd let that nigger vote, I drawed out. I say I'll never vote again. Them's the very words I said....
>
> And to see the cool way of that nigger--why, he wouldn't a give me the road if I hadn't shoved him out of the way. (*Adventures* 49-50)

Later on in the novel, when the runaway slave Jim gives up his freedom to nurse a wounded Tom Sawyer, a white doctor testifies to the stunning altruism of his actions. The Phelpses and their neighbors —all fine, upstanding, well-meaning churchgoing folk

> agreed that Jim had acted very well, and was deserving to have some notice took of it, and reward. So every one of them promised, right out and hearty, that they wouldn't curse him no more. Then they come out and locked him up. I hoped they was going to say he could have one or two of the chains took off, because they was rotten heavy, or could have meat and greens with his bread and water, but they didn't think of it.... (*Adventures* 358)

Why did the behavior of the Phelpses and their neighbors tell me more about why Watts burned than anything I had read in the daily paper? And why did a drunk Pap Finn railing against a black college professor from Ohio whose vote was as good as his own tell me more about white anxiety over black political power than anything I heard on the evening news?

Mark Twain got it right—too right: he limned our society's failings with a risky, searing, ironic humor that leaves the reader reeling. How could anything BUT irony address the way American ideals foundered on the fault line of race? Twain knew that racism in the world of his childhood and in the world of his adulthood required a conspiracy of silence and denial to thrive. He took on the challenge of letting us see, through his ironic genius, that it was not the hateful villains in this world, but the good people like Aunt Sally and Uncle Silas—who kept the system afloat by buying into what Twain later called "the silent assertion that nothing is going on which fair and intelligent men and are aware of and are engaged by their duty to try to stop" (Twain, "My First Lie"). The same silent assertion would tolerate and condone the striking down of the Civil Rights Acts in the 1880s, the upsurge in lynching and Jim Crow laws in the 1890s, and the residue of insult and deprivation that exploded in the 1960s and whose repercussions are still with us today.

Twain understood that depicting racists with chilling perfect pitch could expose the viciousness of their world view like nothing else could. It was an insight that was shared by Malcolm X: Some eighty years after Mark Twain penned Pap Finn's rantings about the black professor, Malcolm X would famously quip, "What do you call a

black man with a Ph.D.? 'Nigger'" (*Malcom X* 284).

Mark Twain taught me things I needed to know. He helped me understand the raw racism that lay behind what I saw on the evening news. He enabled me to see that the most well-meaning people can be hurtful and myopic. He helped me grasp the supreme irony of a country founded in freedom that continued to deny freedom to so many of its citizens. Every time I hear of another effort to kick *Huck Finn* out of school somewhere, I recall what Mark Twain taught this high school junior, and I find myself jumping into the fray. I remember the black high school student who called CNN during the phone-in portion of a l985 debate between Dr. John Wallace, a black educator who was spearheading efforts to ban the book, and myself. She accused Dr. Wallace of insulting her and of insulting all black high school students by suggesting they weren't smart enough to understand Mark Twain's irony. And I recall the black cameraman on the "CBS Morning News" who came up to me after he finished shooting another debate between Dr. Wallace and myself. He said he had never read the book by Mark Twain that we had been arguing about—but now he really wanted to. One thing that puzzled him, though, was why a white woman was defending it and a black man was attacking it—because as far as he could see from what we'd been saying, the book made whites—not blacks—look pretty bad.

My investigations of the role black voices and traditions played in shaping Mark Twain's art helped make me aware of the role black voices and traditions had played in shaping all of American culture. They underlined for me the importance of changing the stories we tell about who we are to reflect the realities of what we've been. Ever since our

first encounter in high school, Mark Twain has helped me understand the potential of American literature and American history to illuminate each other. Rarely have I found a contradiction or complexity we grapple with as a nation that Mark Twain had not puzzled over as well. He insisted on taking America seriously. And he insisted on not taking America seriously ("I think that there is but a single specialty with us, only one thing that can be called by the wide name 'American,'" he once wrote. "That is the national devotion to ice-water.").

Mark Twain understood the nostalgia for a "simpler" past that increased as that past receded. And he saw through that nostalgia to a past that was just as conflicted and complex as the present. He held out to us an invitation to enter that past and learn from it. Twain threw back at us our promise and our failures, our dreams and our denial of those dreams, our greed, our goodness, our ambition, and our laziness—all rattling around together in that vast echo chamber of our talk—that sharp, spunky American talk that Mark Twain figured out how to write down without robbing it of its energy and immediacy. Talk shaped by voices that the official arbiters of "culture" deemed of no importance—voices of children, voices of slaves, voices of servants, voices of ordinary people. Mark Twain listened. And he made us listen. To the stories he told us—and the truths they conveyed. He still has a lot to say that we need to hear.

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Abstract

Mark Twain, Race, and *Huckleberry Finn*

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Adventures of Huckleberry Finn explored the subject of racism through satire and irony. Twain originally developed this strategy when a direct expose of racism that he wrote was censored. The tendency on the part of some readers to conflate Huck's perspective with Twain's is aided and abetted by a peculiarly "double" aspect of Twain's vision. Samuel Clemens/Mark Twain wrote the book at age 55, but he presented it as if it were written by a child—a child who resembled in some ways, the child Clemens himself once was. By the time he wrote *Huck Finn*, Sam Clemens had come to believe not only that Slavery was a horrendous wrong, but that white Americans owed black Americans some form of "reparations." More and more, critics are suggesting that (1) Jim—not Huck—may well be the "hero" of the book; (2) Jim may don a minstrel mask strategically, when it seems to be in his self-interest to do so, and (3) critics' failure to recognize Jim's intelligence may reveal their own limitations rather than Twain's. These assumptions suggest that Twain was doing more than challenging the ideology of black inferiority that dominated his world: he was consciously inverting it, crafting a book in which the most admirable and, perhaps, the most intelligent character, was black. Twain denies all subversive intentions in the novel but such a limited reading denies the corrosive satire of white pretensions to racial

superiority that is at the books's core. The final portion of *Huckleberry Finn* is increasingly coming to be understood as a satirical indictment of the virtual re-enslavement of free blacks in the South during the 1880s. Writing at a time when pseudo-scientific justifications for racism abounded, Mark Twain created a work of art which subverted the reigning racial hierarchy and spoke across time to generations that would continue to struggle with the challenge of extricating their country from the destructive legacies of Slavery. It is a book about how people who think of themselves as fine, upstanding, citizens can be coolly complicit in supporting an evil and indefensible status quo.

Key Words: Mark Twain, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, racism, satire, irony.