Race and Reading: The Burden of *Huckleberry Finn*

For the great mass of admiring readers, because Huck and Jim are friends, and because Jim is finally emancipated, the novel's ambiguities are simply dissolved in an overflow of relief and warm fellow-feeling. ... *Huckleberry Finn* continues to be our favorite story about slavery and race because it gives us no more of this reality than we can bear. (Robinson 1986, 119)

Race and slavery, as almost all readers now acknowledge, are central to Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*, the great American novel. Twain's episodic, beautiful, ambivalent, cruel, and liberating tale of the Mississippi Valley in 1840 has become the universal story of bondage and freedom and the most widely taught novel in the United States. Yet if we read the novel carefully, against the context of the time Twain was writing in as well as in the context of our own time, we must recognize, with Forrest Robinson, that "it gives us no more of this reality than we can bear," that it enables its American readers to approach the most profoundly troubling issue in their history without risk of being overcome with the fear and guilt that attach to the subject. We return to the novel not because of what it resolves, but because it seduces us with a comedic image of resolution that we cannot quite accept, but that we permit, by a lie of silent assertion, to stand in place of much darker revelations. (Robinson 1986, 217)

Twain's ambiguity and ambivalence, as well as the complexity and heart-breaking tenacity of racism at the core of America make *Huckleberry Finn* the classroom text of choice for talking about race, as Jonathan Arac has discussed at length in *Huckleberry Finn As Idol and Target* (1997). Shelley Fisher Fishkin believes that "because racism remains endemic to our society, a book like *Huck Finn* can explode like a hand grenade in a literature classroom accustomed to the likes of *Macbeth* or *Great Expectations*" (1997, 123). Fishkin and "the great mass of admiring readers" expect this one novel to carry a burden too heavy for its pages, to embody the whole conflict over race in America. To some extent, *Huck Finn* pushes black voices from Frederick Douglass to Malcolm X and from Charles W. Chesnutt to Toni Morrison out of the classroom (as if there were only room for one black voice), though they, too, can explode. Focus on *Huck Finn* as the antislavery, antiracist novel also renders us blind to those aspects of America to which Twain himself was blind and tends to focus only through Twain's remarkable but limited gaze. The very universality that adds to the book's appeal also limits its use for understanding particular circumstances.

In this essay, I have tried to identify some of the unconscious racism—despite Twain's conscious and committed antiracism—that carries over into his writing. I have then compared Twain briefly to Albion Tourgeé, as another white writer who did address the specifics of race in America in the 1870s and 1880s. Finally I have looked briefly...
at why Twain fails to innoculate his readers against the insidious racism of such writers as Thomas Dixon, Jr.,
whose writings and the movie, *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), based on his novel *The Clansman* (1905), have set the
tone for Americans' understanding of the periods of Reconstruction and Redemption following the Civil War, the
immediate background for Twain's composition of *Huckleberry Finn*.

In 1958, Philip S. Foner published *Mark Twain: Social Critic*, in which he methodically comments on Twain's views
on race, his conversion from an unquestioning acceptance of slavery to a bitter repudiation of it, and his later
explicit condemnation of imperialism, which he accurately links to racism and the acceptance of slavery. As Foner
points out, Twain did present the stock characters and scenes of the South, yet he also included

wonderful scenes in which the evils of slavery are laid bare; quiet, tender scenes in which Negroes
voice their longings for freedom; and dramatic scenes picturing Negro heroism. (1958, 216)

Twain makes use of both southern and northern arguments against slavery, the southern that it degrades the slave
owners and the northern that slavery is cruel, indefensible, an abomination. Although Twain believed during the
Reconstruction years that the Civil War had successfully freed the slaves, he, unlike many of his northern
contemporaries, came to recognize that the war, the three postwar amendments to the Constitution, and the
various civil rights acts intended to enforce them had not really ended slavery or its attendant racism and that the
postwar United States offered little of respect or security, except by happy chance, to anyone of African descent.
Yet Twain's sight was not entirely clear as to how racism had been retained or how its defenders would continue to
argue its plausibility and justice. Foner writes of Twain's essay "Concerning the Jews"

that, despite his respect for and admiration of the Jews, Mark Twain had, unwittingly, written a piece
replete with untruths and half-truths--and some of the most typical anti-Semitic slanders. (1958, 229)

The same is in many ways true of Twain's writings on African Americans, though the issue is considerably more
complex, because Twain wrote with more detail and at much greater length about American blacks than about
Jews.

Although the first critics of *Huckleberry Finn* found it simply vulgar and unpleasant, before Twain's death it had
become an American classic, the book that created an American literature rather than a British literature written in
America. For most of the twentieth century it has served as the book that defines the American language, the
American place, and the spunkiness, independence, and resistance to authority of the American people. By the
1970s, reflecting the Civil Rights movement, the question of race became more central to critics. In 1971, Neil
Schmitz published an article on *Huckleberry Finn* and Reconstruction, while Forrest G. Robinson's 1986 volume *In
Bad Faith* explores the whole wall of deception about race in America that Twain both erects and attacks. In 1992,
James S. Leonard, Thomas A. Tenney, and Thadious M. Davis edited *Satire or Evasion: Black Perspectives on
Huckleberry Finn*, a splendidly useful volume of essays that develop a number of perspectives on race and the
novel. They start with "The Case Against Huck Finn," by John Wallace, the firmest opponent of using the novel in
junior-high and high-school classes, the person who has condemned it as "racist trash." Wallace writes:

My own research indicates that the assignment and reading aloud of *Huckleberry Finn* in our
classrooms is humiliating and insulting to black students. It contributes to their feelings of low self-
esteeem and to the white students' disrespect for black people. It constitutes mental cruelty,
harassment, and outright racial intimidation to force black students to sit in the classroom with their
white peers and read *Huckleberry Finn*.

Wallace continues, quoting Twain's most painful and ironic lines, in which Huck, who has been taken for Tom
Sawyer, explains to Aunt Sally that his boat was late because it "blowed out a cylinder-head."

"Good gracious! Anybody hurt?" "No'm. Killed a nigger." "Well, it's lucky; because sometimes people
There are indications that the racist views and attitudes implicit in the preceding quotation are as prevalent in America today as they were over one hundred years ago. *Huckleberry Finn* has not been successful in fighting race hate and prejudice, as its proponents maintain, but has helped to retain the status quo. (Wallace 1992, 17)

Although the exchange between Aunt Sally and Huck is an ironic one that distinguishes Twain's utter condemnation of slavery as a system that has warped a good person into accepting the complete dehumanization of a whole race of people, Wallace is also right. *Huck Finn* is not well-taught or well-cited in America. As James M. Cox, a distinguished Twain scholar of long standing writes,

> Yet for all the familiar defenses and for all my belief in freedom of the press and my love for the book, I know in my heart that, if I were teaching an American literature course in Bedford Stuyvesant or Watts or North Philadelphia, I might well find myself choosing *Tom Sawyer* or *A Connecticut Yankee* rather than *Huckleberry Finn* to represent Mark Twain. (1985, 389)

As I understand Cox's argument, his choice would be as much to avoid trouble as anything else, yet it also avoids embarrassing black students with the "nigger" word or reinforcing their suspicion that white education prefers black people who are passive victims to more purposive rebels like Frederick Douglass. I have made the same choices, perhaps for somewhat different reasons, in my own courses, where the majority of my students are from middle-class white families. My few students of colour do not need to be made to feel uncomfortable in the name of antiracism. Almost all my black friends have stories in which they or a family member was made to feel self-conscious, isolated, or ashamed by some classroom encounter with *Huckleberry Finn*. Worse, my majority white students, who as a group have very little experience of the subtleties of race in America, do not need their classroom discussion of race, already under the direction of a white teacher, framed by a white author. When I do teach the novel I spend weeks putting it in a context in which it does not disproportionately hurt those of my students who are battling every day against the affronts, intentional or entirely unconscious, of an overwhelmingly white university in an overwhelmingly white state, nor encourage a rather thoughtless self-congratulation by white students who believe they have been proven not racist. To do less, I believe, is a discourtesy, not an assumption that either my black students or my nonblack students will fail to understand Twain's irony.

Even if we can demonstrate that Wallace is wrong in his basic premise that *Huck Finn* is a racist novel, his argument, like Jim's about Solomon, has a wisdom to it that the conventional reading lacks. When Jim and Huck argue about the wisdom of Solomon, Jim condemns the king for casually suggesting that a baby be sliced in two. Huck complains that that is not the point. But both Jim and Huck live in a world in which children are chopped in two. Jim's children are figuratively chopped in two by the absence of their father, whose escape has been occasioned by Miss Watson's threat to sell him down the river--away from his children and to his death. Huck has escaped from his own father who threatened to chop him literally in two during one of his fits of delirium tremens. Casual talk--in an approved text like the Bible or a schoolbook--about chopping up babies or the lack of humanity of "niggers" is dangerous talk in a society that is still capable of saying with a straight face what Twain--or Solomon--is saying ironically, in search of the opposite meaning.

The last section of *Huckleberry Finn*, on the Phelps farm, is the section that most trivializes Jim, and, as many critics have pointed out, seems to undercut both his quest for freedom and Huck's--and the reader's--growing appreciation of his humanity. On the other hand, as Cox and Robinson and Fishkin and others point out, it is only the failure of Huck to live up to his decision to "Go to Hell" rather than see Jim returned to slavery that stands for the real failure of the Civil War to free the supposed freedmen and that alerts attentive readers to their own complicity in identifying with Tom Sawyer. As Bernard Bell writes, "Twain--nostalgically and metaphorically--sells Jim's soul down the river for laughs at the end of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*" (1992, 138). Charles H. Nilon
complicates this reading, however, writing,

the Phelps farm and the surrounding community are a microcosm of the way the South treated "the Negro problem." The last twelve chapters of *Huckleberry Finn* show figuratively, and pass judgment on, this process of 'freeing the free Negro' that Twain became increasingly aware of after 1880.(1992, 62)

Tom Sawyer had been a genuinely heroic and empathetic boy in his own novel, risking revenge at the hands of the murderous "Injun Joe" rather than letting Muff Potter be convicted (and hanged) for the murder Joe had committed, but in *Huck Finn* he has, perhaps symbolically, assumed the identity of his meeching brother, Sid, and his role in "freeing" Jim, who he knows has already been freed, is, at best, cruel and dangerous. As Nilon explains,

Tom's plan does more to harm Jim than simply make him uncomfortable; it prevents him from being a man; it stimulates fear in him just as many of the actions of white persons in the South during the post-Reconstruction period injured black people, emotionally and spiritually.(1992, 69)

And, as David Smith writes,

Furthermore, since Tom represents the hegemonic values of his society, Jim's "freedom" amounts to little more than an obligation to live by his wits and make the best of a bad situation, just as he has always done. ...Indeed, the novel suggests that real individual freedom, in this land of the free, cannot be found. "American civilization" enslaves and exploits rather than liberating. It is hardly an appealing message ... racial discourse flatly contradicts and ultimately renders hypocritical the egalitarian claims of liberal democracy.(1992, 116)

Twain himself loved the last twelve chapters of *Huckleberry Finn*. He would have elaborated them further if William Dean Howells, his best literary friend and trusted editor, had not convinced him to tone them down, he recited them gleefully on his lecture tours, and he continued their spirit in two published sequels, *Tom Sawyer Abroad* and *Tom Sawyer Detective* ([1894] 1982), as well as unpublished fragments. Despite, or perhaps because of, having grown up among black people who were enslaved, Twain never did see very far beyond the stereotypes of faithful and contented slaves, and despite his belated but wholehearted conversion to the party of the Union and antislavery, he was not particularly astute in identifying how the Sir Walter Scott romanticism he loathed, the northern technology that delighted him, and forms of racism, which he excoriated, were, like Tom Sawyer, "freeing the free Negro" into a more durable if less visible slavery.

In August of 1876, Twain wrote to Howells that he had started "another boys' book," "Huck Finn's Autobiography" and had written about 400 pages--"therefore it is very nearly half done" (Anderson, Gibson, and H. N. Smith 1968, 75). In the same letter, Twain told Howells that he was strongly supporting Rutherford B. Hayes, who had just accepted the Republican presidential nomination. Hayes, a Civil War general, was a cousin of Mrs Howells. What endeared him even more to Twain was his acceptance speech, in which, among other things, he had promised to enforce the recent amendments to the Constitution, abolishing slavery, granting equal rights, and guaranteeing the right to vote to all eligible men, regardless of race. Hayes and the Republicans conducted the election of 1876 on the principle of "waving the bloody shirt," sloganeering for the party that had saved the Union. Twain, a very reconstructed southerner, genuinely admired President Ulysses S. Grant, long after less idealistic supporters had grown disgusted at the corruption of his regime. (Twain had satirized the corruption in *The Gilded Age* [1873], but he held Grant personally as beyond reproach and would remain his friend and eventually his benefactor until the general's death.) Although by 1876 the civil rights amendments and the legislation enacted to enforce them had begun to fall by the wayside, abandoned by former radicals who found themselves more interested in exploring economic opportunity in the South than in protecting the rights of freedmen, the Republicans still presented themselves as the saviours of the Union, those who had "fought so that a mother might own her child." And so, in February 1877, when Hayes's long-disputed election finally appeared certain, Twain was happy to give a "shout" of
Twain began *Huckleberry Finn* in a great mood at the time when he believed that Reconstruction was moving successfully forward and that Hayes would continue the reforms in race relations promised by the three Civil War amendments. Twain worked on the novel in fits and starts, putting it aside several times to work on other things and even cannibalizing a chapter from the unfinished manuscript to publish in *Life on the Mississippi* (1883). By the time he got to the final section, beginning with Huck's arrival on the Phelps farm, it was 1883. Hayes had served his one term, pulling the last of the troops who had enforced Reconstruction out of the South, one of the compromises that had secured his election. James Garfield had been elected and assassinated, and Chester Arthur, whom Twain loathed, was in the White House. Despite his earlier optimism, Twain could see clearly that Reconstruction, and any hope of political equality for black Americans, was over. The southern Redeemers had effectively closed the polls to blacks and had established forms of debt peonage that offered African Americans few material advantages to chattel slavery. The Supreme Court had struck down the Ku Klux Klan Act, which had provided federal recourse for individuals attacked by the Klan, and in 1883 it invalidated the last of the remaining laws intended to enforce the civil war amendments, the 1875 Civil Rights Act, which had outlawed discrimination in public accommodations. The court agreed with the original opponents of the bill, who had argued that the Fourteenth Amendment only prohibited discrimination by the *state*, not by private individuals. Not until 1966 would the 1875 sort of protection against individuals and against conspiracies to destroy one's civil rights be recognized by the United States Supreme Court. What is saddest about the 1883 decision invalidating the Civil Rights Act is that almost no one cared. The liberal journal the *Nation* remarked "that the country's approval of the decision showed 'how completely the extravagant expectations as well as the fierce passions of the war have died out'" (quoted in Schwartz 1970, 779).

That summer of 1883 Twain picked up the manuscript that would be *Huckleberry Finn* and finally finished it in a way that satisfied and even delighted him. If he paid any attention to the court's decision, he did not mention it in the letters to Howells in which he discussed the manuscript. But Twain was someone who cared very deeply about the rights of the people who had been enslaved, and their complete abandonment by the North after all the blood and sorrow of the Civil War must have been a disappointment to him, though he did not necessarily register it consciously as such. Perhaps what makes Twain so great a writer is the very unconsciousness of his own motives. Although the vitriol of his anti-imperialist writings is entirely conscious, his writings about slavery are far more conflicted and inarticulate. He was, perhaps more than any other writer, aware of hidden motives and dream selves that completely contradicted the waking, conscious human being, and it is not surprising that his powers of allegory exceeded his conscious grasp. At any rate, whether or not Twain was conscious of the equivalence between the Supreme Court's 1883 ruling and Tom's treatment of Jim, the developments in Washington and in the South were the actual backdrop to Twain's comedy of "freeing the free Negro." As Fishkin says:

> 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? (1997, 200)

Unlike his later attacks on imperialism, such as "To the Person Sitting in Darkness" ([1901] 1946) and "The War Prayer" ([1873] 1946), in which Twain's political intentions were crystal clear and which were deliberately written as propaganda, in *Huckleberry Finn* he cast himself as a humorist and declared that "persons attempting to find a motive in this narrative will be prosecuted." Nor did he talk about intent in his letters to friends about the novel, though, as we have seen, he talked about political matters, such as Hayes's nomination, in the same letters. If we cannot talk about Twain's political intent, however, we can look at the parallels between the events of the novel and what must have been Twain's suspicion that the splendid promise of equality and justice he had hailed in Hayes's nomination and election had been completely overthrown by 1883.
*Huckleberry Finn* is a realistic, if symbolic, treatment of the abandonment and humiliation of the freed peoples at the hands of their northern "friends," who were suffering from "compassion fatigue" and, like Tom, wanted to get on with their own games. And while Twain may be for the "autonomy of the individual," he shows his belief that in the United States neither white nor black is able to oppose, internally and consistently, the "stupid conformity" (H. N. Smith 1958, xxix) of racism. *Huckleberry Finn* is "a landmark in American literature and a great world masterpiece" (Blair and Fischer 1985, xxii), but its greatness is as a tragedy. The American experiment of the City on a Hill, as David Smith has noted, is a failure. Both Huck and Jim collude in the humiliation of Jim through Tom's nasty little game. When Tom explains to Jim that they are not going to "hunt up a cold chisel to cut the chain off of his leg with," but are rather going to smuggle various implements into his cabin so that Jim can "keep a journal on the shirt with his blood" and do all the other romantic things Tom has learned about prisoners from *The Count of Monte Cristo* and other such sources, "Jim he couldn't see no sense in most of it, but he allowed we was white folks and knewed better than him, so he was satisfied and said he would do it all just as Tom said" (chapter 36).

"Training is everything," Twain wrote in *Connecticut Yankee* (1889); "training is all there is to a person. ... All that is original in us, and therefore fairly creditable or discreditable to us, can be covered up and hidden by the point of a cambric needle ..." (chapter 18). And America's training, black America's training as well as white's, is that slavishness, if not slavery, is inevitable for blacks, or so it seemed to Mark Twain. Slavishness is not necessarily a racial trait--"Chambers" in Twain's *Pudd'nhead Wilson* is a white man raised to the slavish shuffle of a bondsman--but it is indelible.

Fishkin has argued that Twain was not a racist because he supported one or more young black men through their studies—including studies at Yale Law School. Still, the letter from Twain that Fishkin published to demonstrate her point seems rather to show Twain's genuine guilt over slavery—and his belief that it had tainted all blacks with the slavishness that allows Jim to collaborate in his own degradation. Twain wrote,

I do not believe I would very cheerfully help a white student who would ask a benevolence of a stranger, but I do not feel so about the other color. We have ground the manhood out of them, & the shame is ours, not theirs, & we should pay for it. (Twain to Wayland, quoted in Fishkin 1997, 101)

There is much that is curious about this letter. Twain had, in fact, helped a white sculptor who had asked for his patronage--or at least had sent his very pretty wife to ask for Twain's patronage—and was very proud of himself, the sculptor, and the pretty wife (Anderson, Gibson, and H. N. Smith 1968, 164-69, 209). According to the story in the *New York Times* accompanying the newly published letter, the law student, Warner McGuinn, had not asked for help (*New York Times*, 14 March 1985). According to Fishkin, McGuinn, as president of the Kent Club at Yale had met Twain when the great author was the club's speaker, and Twain had written to the dean of the law school asking about McGuinn and whether he was deserving of financial help. (Fishkin 1997, 104). And it is hard to see how someone whose "manhood" had been "ground out of him" could have found the gumption to gain admission to Yale University Law School, let alone become a club president, but Twain apparently intended no irony and Fishkin does not comment on the strange inappropriateness of the phrase.

The issue of slavishness is complicated far beyond Twain's intention by the reception of his audiences to his portrayal of black characters. Many critics—and certainly many high-school students or general readers—discuss the novel as if *Huckleberry Finn* were an accurate portrayal of slavery and as if Jim were an accurate portrait of a "slave," fugitive slave, and free man. Twain himself made no such claims. Jim is a much more appealing and reliable character than Huck's Pap—as Foner says, "the real hero of the novel ... a noble human being. ..."

Although, as Foner says, "Twain does not portray Jim's devotion ... in the servile stereotyped manner typical of the plantation tradition novels" (1958, 205), he also does not portray him as staying true to his own goals and family, unlike the knight Miles Hendon, who becomes the defender of the little prince in *The Prince and the Pauper* ([1882] 1996), written in one of the intervals when *Huckleberry Finn* had been put aside. Twain is always at great pains to show Hendon's dignity and sense of self-worth, even when he is imprisoned or beaten in the prince's stead. Twain also restores him to his own true love, but the reader never does find out the fate of Jim's wife and children, his "po' little 'Lizbeth and po' little Johnny." There is no reason why Twain, that very reconstructed southerner, who
personally paid for the education of black law students and other ambitious and talented young black men, who genuinely hated slavery and wanted to atone for his part in it, who wrote, in *Huckleberry Finn*, a very effective satire against slavery, should not himself have been afflicted by the same malady he diagnosed in the society around him: training in the solidity of racism.

Twain's good manners and sensitivity kept him from discoursing on "the Negro"--as other white southerners were wont to do in the 1870s and 1880s. He wrote about individual people whom he knew in their relationship as servants to him or his family, or whom he remembered as having been enslaved on his uncle's farm in the Missouri of his childhood. Unlike his younger contemporary Charles W. Chesnutt, the first major African-American novelist, he never wrote about black professionals (except for a guide from South Carolina he had met during his *Innocents Abroad* [1869] travels), black law students, or national black leaders such as Frederick Douglass, whom he accounted a friend. What he did write about African Americans is stunning in its expression of his ignorance of the lives of black folk--in marked contrast to Fishkin's and his other late-twentieth-century defenders' implicit or explicit description of him as an expert on African-American life. That he had a good ear and that he borrowed the core of Huck's voice from black as well as white storytellers seems entirely likely, but it does not establish Twain's depiction of black life as particularly accurate or insightful. Jocelyn Chadwick-Joshua makes an elegant argument of Twain's love and respect for the black men who served him during his life. Her point is, I think, undeniable, but each picture is still that of a man in the honourable position of servant, one that Twain was never able to bring himself to depict for a white man (Chadwick-Joshua 1998, 18-23). "A True Story: Just As I Heard It" (1875) was the first piece Howells ever accepted from Twain and one of the key texts for Fishkin's argument in *Was Huck Black*? (Fishkin 1993, 30-31). It appeared in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1874, before he had begun *Huckleberry Finn*, and it tells the story of "Aunt Rachel," Mary Ann Cord, the cook for Twain's sister-in-law's family at Quarry Farm, in Elmira, New York, where the Clemens family often summered. It is the story of a woman whose husband and children were sold away from her and of her reunion, thirteen years later, with her youngest son, the only one she ever saw again. What frames the story is "Misto C--'s" laughing query about how Aunt Rachel has "lived sixty years and never had any trouble?" At which the woman stops laughing. "Misto C--, is you in 'arnest?"' And then she tells her story. Mr Clemens is astonished. He has never known. Nor have any of the other white family members, evidently, as the story is a complete surprise.

Twain was wise enough to realize that even though he had lived with slavery, he had likely missed a number of the details. One disadvantage of the great popularity of *Huckleberry Finn* is that readers rarely see any alternative versions of slavery in the 1830s and 1840s--or, if they do, the narratives are presented in tiny snippets from the hand of a number of survivors. It is instructive to compare Twain's portrayals with those of William Wells Brown, an abolitionist who had been enslaved in Missouri, escaped, was recaptured, and successfully re-escaped in 1834, the year before Twain's birth. William Wells Brown published his autobiography in 1847. The thirteen years between his escape and the publication of the book coincide with the setting of *Huckleberry Finn* as "40 or 50 years" before 1885.2

Twain wrote in his autobiography:

In my schoolboy days I had no aversion to slavery. I was not aware that there was anything wrong about it. No one arraigned it in my hearing; the local papers said nothing against it; the local pulpit taught us that God approved it ... ; if the slaves themselves had an aversion to slavery they were wise and said nothing. In Hannibal we seldom saw a slave misused; on the farm never.(Neider 1966, 7)

Brown's account is substantially different:

Though slavery is thought, by some, to be mild in Missouri, when compared with the cotton, sugar and rice growing States, yet no part of our slaveholding country, is more noted for the barbarity of its inhabitants, than St. Louis. ... During a residence of eight years in this city, numerous cases of extreme cruelty came under my own observation; to record them all, would occupy more space than
could possibly be allowed in this little volume. (Brown [1847] 1969, 185-86)

Twain's second set of remarks on the mildness of slavery in Hannibal come with an awareness of how partial was his memory:

I have no recollection of ever seeing a slave auction in that town; but I am suspicious that that is because the thing was a common and commonplace spectacle, not an uncommon and impressive one. I vividly remember seeing a dozen black men and women chained to one another, once, and lying in a group on the pavement awaiting shipment to the southern slave market. These were the saddest faces I have ever seen. Chained slaves could not have been a common sight or this picture would not have made so strong and lasting an impression upon me. (Neider 1966, 32-33)

Again Brown, also writing of the period during which Twain was a boy, offers a different take:

The boat took on board, at Hannibal, a drove of slaves, bound for the New Orleans market. They numbered from fifty to sixty, consisting of men and women from eighteen to forty years of age. A drove of slaves on a southern steamboat, bound for the cotton or sugar regions, is an occurrence so common, that no one, not even the passengers, appear to notice it, though they clank their chains at every step. (Brown [1847] 1969, 188)

My point is not that Twain misrepresented or attempted to whitewash slavery, and there is certainly no indication that the few years difference between Brown's and Twain's experiences changed the face of slavery in Missouri. But the white son of a slaveholder, unless in some way particularly challenged, will not--in a sense, cannot--see what a slave and the black son of a slave (though in Brown's case also the son of a slaveholder) will and must see.

Twain's own statements about what he knew of slavery are somewhat confused and self-contradictory, as Foner and others have pointed out. If nothing ever suggested to the young Sam Clemens that slavery might be wrong, how did his brother Orion come to oppose it? (Foner 1958, 193-95). As we might expect in the writing of someone who, as a young adult, successfully changed his mind completely about one of the formative institutions of his childhood, there are disturbing ambiguities in Twain's treatment of slavery and race in Huckleberry Finn--in fact it is the very power of ambiguity that makes the book so powerful and long lasting. Twain definitely opposes slavery. He sees it as cruel and unfair to the slaves and injurious to slave owners who, like Aunt Sally, have learned to harden their hearts to a whole class of people. Like Joel Chandler Harris, whose Uncle Remus tales he greatly admired, he created in Jim an intelligent, nurturing black man whose ingenuity and kindness contrast markedly to Pap's stupidity and cruelty. Jim is the first black character to take a major role in American literature and, as Fishkin (1993) has argued persuasively, Huck's voice gives Black English Vernacular prominence as the first truly American speech.

On the other hand, if we look at "what really happens" in the book, it tells us, as Twain did in his autobiography, that slavery actually was mild and even benevolent in Missouri and Arkansas. In "A True Story" and in The Tragedy of Pudd'nhead Wilson (1894), Twain shows people beaten, families broken up, and other violent underpinnings of slavery. In Huckleberry Finn, however, these abuses are only potential. Slavery is wrong, to be sure, but in theory, not in practice. According to the apologists for slavery, both before and after the Civil War, despite its potential for abuse and occasional rare actual abuses, slavery really was the best system to govern the relationships between blacks and whites, an argument that sometimes continued that slavery should never have been instituted and the blacks would have been better off left in Africa, but since they were here. ... The apologists maintained that slavery was seldom cruel and rarely broke up families, and that its supposed injustices were usually rectified in the end by the right-dealing of honourable slave owners. For the most part, concluded the apologists, slaves did not want to be free and were grateful to their masters for protecting them from the dog-eat-dog world of northern capitalism (see Genovese 1974, 54-65). This was a fairly desperate refusal to face the fact that slavery depended upon force and every kind of physical and emotional abuse to persist for as much as a day.
Twain conscientiously opposed all the proslavery arguments, yet *Huckleberry Finn* actually supports the argument of slavery's apologists. The "nigger" who is supposedly killed by the "blowed cylinder head" is a figment of Huck's imagination. As Huck tells Mary Jane Wilks, to her great relief, the family slaves will be returned to her and to each other because their sale was fraudulent. It was only the King and the Duke, not real slaveholders, who ever proposed that they be sold. Jim runs away and even talks about his liberty and about freeing his family, but only because Miss Watson has broken her own promise never to sell him down the river. Like a "good" slave owner, she frees him on her death bed, not because she believes slavery is wrong but because she believes lying is wrong. (Although Missouri, which had fewer than 10,000 free blacks on the eve of the Civil War had actually liberalized its manumission laws, most states had tightened the requirements, starting in the 1830s. Slaveholders were especially required to assume responsibility for their former property, and deathbed manumission was increasingly forbidden [Genovese 1974, 399-400, 746 n. 5]). As soon as Jim knows of Miss Watson's freeing him, he happily climbs back into what is in every way but legally slavery to "Mars Tom" and apparently forgets all about his plans to buy or steal his wife and children. None of the other black characters in the book seem to be at all desirous of freedom, though as Chadwick-Joshua points out, Jack and the other blacks hide Jim in the swamp while Huck is living with the Grangerfords (1988, 86-88). The mob threatens to lynch Jim but backs off when the doctor avows that he is a "good nigger" who has been properly and self-sacrificially loyal to Tom, just like any "darkie" in a romanticized story about "the Old South." Slavery in *Huckleberry Finn* menaces black characters and white (Mary Jane Wilks seems to be almost as upset about the sale of "her" slaves as are those who are separated and sold, though it never occurs to her to manumit them for their own protection), but when all is said and done, slavery turns out to be a self-regulating system, just like capitalism in Charles Dickens's "A Christmas Carol" (1843). The "good" slave owners win out and everyone apparently lives happily ever after. Twain was sincere in his condemnation of slavery, but he did not know how to show anything but the essentially sunny picture he wanted to remember from his childhood.

If Twain's condemnation of slavery ends up being surprisingly mild, his condemnation of racism is even more inconclusive and irrelevant to the conflicts of his time (and ours) than his condemnation of slavery, though it, too, is heartfelt and sincere. As Robinson has suggested, Mark Twain's bitter appraisal of "the damned human race," first clearly articulated by Colonel Sherburn in *Huckleberry Finn*, is incompatible with any real progress against social ills. "The contempt for the species which informs many of these texts absolutely undermines their ostensible reformist thrust" (Robinson 1986, 153). The spectacle of racial hatred that Twain shows in the last third of *Huckleberry Finn*, in which Huck and Jim acquiesce in Tom's cruel and dangerous "freeing of the free Negro" has the same effect that Robinson describes for "The United States of Lyncherdom" (1946): "the spectacle of racial hatred is transformed into a spectacular show in which the secular Jeremiah, the gamesman [in this case, Tom] earns the acclaim that he craves by serving as minister to his culture's illusions" (1986, 157). This certainly adds to the "hand grenade" effect that Fishkin describes, but once we have been blown away, we find that we have hardly been challenged "to alter the status quo" (Robinson 1986, 156). It is here that our insistence that *Huckleberry Finn* be the book to frame the discussion of race and slavery becomes perverse. All audiences are well served by hearing black voices on slavery. Black, Hispanic, American Indian, Asian, and other audiences of colour tend to recognize through experience what is misconceived in Twain. White audiences, especially in places like my own Nebraska, with its overwhelmingly white population, however, are likely to need more details to begin to understand the picture. One useful way to begin to apprehend Twain's limitations is to look at the basic history and to read other novels from the time.

Although the Civil War was precipitated and largely fought over the issue of slavery, neither the Republican Party nor its predecessor the Free Soil Party had abolition as a major object. Rather their goal was to stop the spread of slavery. Lincoln himself, though he personally loathed slavery and believed by the end of the war that some black soldiers should be enfranchised, maintained that gradual, compensated emancipation was the best way to end slavery (Lincoln to Hahn, "Message to Congress," in Williams 1943, 241-42, 160-61; see also Franklin 1961, 23-24). The Emancipation Proclamation initially freed no one, since it referred only to those people in Confederate-ruled territory. Enslaved people in Union territory were not actually freed by the war itself or by the peace, but by state action or the ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment in December 1865. What would have happened in the
South had Lincoln not been assassinated is unclear, but his assassination threw the nation into turmoil. Until 1867, there was no coherent plan for the reconstruction of the South but rather a conflict between Andrew Johnson and the radical Republicans in Congress over how the nation was to be reassembled, while Confederate state governments conducted something that at least resembled business as usual. Johnson favoured their general approach, with amnesty for prominent Confederate leaders. Northern armies of occupation were quickly withdrawn from most of the South. A Southern Homestead Act in 1866, to help freedmen establish their own farms, failed because the available land was scarcely tillable and the freedmen had no capital to support themselves nor to obtain the animals and tools necessary to build a farm from raw land (Franklin 1961).

The midterm elections of 1866 strengthened the Radicals in Congress, and by 1867 they were investigating Johnson, moving within one vote of impeaching and removing him from office in 1868. The Radicals began passing their own laws for more sweeping Reconstruction. Confederate states had to write new constitutions for readmission to the Union, and, under the provisions of the Fourteenth Amendment (July 1868), had to admit black men to suffrage or risk losing part of their representation. Johnson's impeachment and near removal and the election of Grant in 1868 enabled a period of black suffrage and the election of black representatives to Congress and the state legislatures. It is this short period of Reconstruction from about 1867 to 1870 that gave rise to the most determined activity of the Ku Klux Klan and to the myth, ably propagated by novelist Thomas Dixon as well as many southern historians, that the Klan was a justifiable reaction to the misrule by freedmen and their allies: the "Scalawags," southern whites, and "Carpetbaggers," northern whites, who had joined the Reconstruction governments. Actually, the "misrule" dated from the two years immediately following the war, when southern whites completely dictated state affairs, and not from the Reconstruction governments, which, not having any real economic backing (let alone widespread northern political or social backing) were weak and short lived (Franklin 1961; Carter 1985; Frederickson 1966; Foner 1988). In fact the Hayes election, for which Twain "whooped" in the naive belief that it would lead to the perpetuation of a reconstructed South, only resulted in the removal of the last weak props of support for a period that had ended some five or six—or even ten—years earlier in almost all of the South. When Hayes withdrew the last federal troops from the South, black editor T. Thomas Fortune wrote that the Republicans had "abandoned all effort to enforce the provisions of the war amendments. ... The black man, who was betrayed by his party and murdered by the opponents of his party, is absolved of all allegiance which gratitude may have dictated" (quoted in Franklin 1961, 222-23). The 1883 Supreme Court, in throwing out the last of the civil rights codes, merely ratified what had already happened.

Twain had not been directly involved with the Civil War or Reconstruction. After a short and dismal stint as a Confederate irregular, he had accompanied his staunchly antislavery, Unionist brother Orion to Nevada and had stayed in the West through 1866. Most of 1867 was occupied by developing his career on the lecture circuit and on the tour of Europe and the Near East that became The Innocents Abroad. He spent the winter of 1867-68 in Washington, as secretary to Nevada Senator William M. Stewart, a friend from Virginia City days (Kaplan 1974, 78). Although this was the period of the fierce struggle between the Radicals in Congress and President Johnson, Twain seems to have been more struck by political corruption than by the fight over the future of the South. Ironically, the corrupt Washington that he and his collaborator, Charles Dudley Warner, portrayed in The Gilded Age (1873) was very like the corruption that Hayes's opponent, Samuel Tilden, emphasized in the 1876 campaign. Twain's portraits of life in Missouri and Washington certainly show corruption, but not much of any sort of reconstruction, and the scheme of a freedman's university that his heroine, Laura, tries to have funded so she can sell off some of her family's worthless land is actually based on a Kansas scheme to bilk Indians (Kitzhaber 1954, 42-56; French 1965, 87-90; see also, Unrau and Miner 1985). Nowhere does Twain discuss the struggle for suffrage and for political and economic equality for blacks, North or South. The few black characters who appear in The Gilded Age do not seem in the least changed by the war and remain content in their loyal servant roles. Since Twain was not interested in writing about Reconstruction when the discussion was at its height or later as its promises were withdrawn, it is not surprising that he did not address the particular racisms of the time when he came to write Huckleberry Finn. While one may, from a strictly aesthetic point of view, appreciate Twain's choice of the universal rather than the particular, Twain's relative lack of interest in Reconstruction and the period of Redemption that followed it does mean that Huckleberry Finn is not a program for social justice, no matter how
much it may warm up the reader for accepting such a program.

I first read *Huckleberry Finn* as an adolescent about 1960, about the same time that I was being taught that the excesses of the Ku Klux Klan, regrettable as they were, had been made necessary by the greater excesses of Reconstruction, in which illiterate and boorish former slaves had been elevated to positions of dominance over their intelligent and cultured former masters. No one told me until I read John Hope Franklin's *Reconstruction* (1961) as an undergraduate that this interpretation of history had been concocted by Klansmen themselves and accepted as the truth in both North and South for nearly a century. I know that nothing in *Huckleberry Finn* led me to challenge this history, and my most vivid recollections of that first reading are what struck me as the hilarious antics of the King and the Duke. Academic historians following Franklin have continued to rebuke the myth that Reconstruction was a long and unfair degradation of the chivalry of the Old South, but I am not sure that myth has disappeared from the popular mind. And I do not think that it is challenged at all by readings of any of Twain's work. Twain in isolation lets the reader feel what a universal humanity might entail but gives us no hints for its particular application.

Twain's antiracism was and remains effective in the uncontroversial showing that blacks are human, that black ties of love and family are as strong and genuine as white ones, and that slavery is a system based in violence and coercion that degrades and desensitizes slaveholders. But it is quite mute on how blacks and whites may live together after slavery--unless it is in the voluntary personal slavery that Jim seems to pledge to Tom. There is nothing in the portrayal of Jim that would make him out of place in the writings of such latter-day nostalgic celebrators of the antebellum South as Twain's friend Joel Chandler Harris or even such a vicious propagandist of the Klan and genteel racism as Thomas Dixon. In the context of the novel, Jim's quest for freedom is really only a kind of misunderstanding to be settled by the underlying trustworthiness of his former owner. By the end of the book, Jim wants to play with the white boys, not rescue his own children. There is nothing militant or revolutionary about him. He is a striking contrast to successful fugitives from Missouri slavery like William Wells Brown or contemporary black leaders like Frederick Douglass, or any of the millions of ordinary black men and women who had left those places where they had been enslaved and established new lives for themselves either back on their old plantations or elsewhere during the period from the end of slavery to the publication of *Huckleberry Finn*. These people did not play Jim's role. The black people Twain knew in the north after the Civil War, like Mary Ann Cord, did not give up their families to serve their white employers.

Twain identified the Sir Walter Scott-derived chivalry and romanticism of the south as the cause of the Civil War, a kind of social sickness that drowned out both chivalry's poetic death at the pen of Cervantes and the practical, progressive technology of his own Connecticut Yankee. Yet, even as Merlin, Twain's symbol of degenerate romanticism in *Connecticut Yankee*, actually comes out the winner in that novel, infiltrating the Yankee's headquarters and enchanting him back to the nineteenth century, where he wanders, isolated from his loved ones, until he dies of a broken heart, so southern romanticism of the Scott variety won the propaganda war that followed the Lost Cause. To understand this, we must view Twain's antiracism in *Huckleberry Finn* against both the racism and antiracism of other writers of his time and shortly after.

While Twain was a southerner who had gone North, Albion Tourgée was a northerner who had gone South after the war, settling in North Carolina to enjoy its mild climate and to take part in what he expected would be the economic elevation of the South following the northern model. He soon became caught up in politics, however, and although he doubted the wisdom of congressional Reconstruction, he attempted to implement it. When he left North Carolina in 1879 he felt, bitterly and accurately, that southern Unionists, poor whites, free blacks, and northern reformers had all been abandoned by the federal government and the northern public and sold out to the old economic and social elites of the South. His semi-autobiographical novel *A Fool's Errand* (1879) is a remarkable personal history of the time. Its bestseller status not only ended Tourgée's financial woes, but it indicated that there was a large northern public that was interested in the conditions in the South and sympathetic to the goals of people like Tourgée, who urged suffrage and education for blacks and saw the Klan as murderers. Tourgée's second Reconstruction novel, *Bricks Without Straw* (1880) replays the story in the form of a traditional
romance, with the significant addition of two major characters who are black. Unlike *Huckleberry Finn*, *A Fool's Errand* contains no brilliant narrative voice, no major black character, and no symbolic richness. It is more history than novel, and one edition even included a lengthy nonfiction history of the Invisible Empire (Frederickson 1961; see also Current 1988, 367-82; and Olson 1965, 223-41). It portrays white southerners, Unionists and Confederates, as virtually solid in their unquestioning assumption that blacks are foreordained to be the inferiors—and preferably the property—of whites. Human laws may change, but the laws of God regarding the proper relation of black and white were, for white southerners, immutable. Northern armies may by force decree that blacks will not be slaves, but they can do nothing about the southerners' underlying conviction that blacks should be slaves. Given such a creed subscribed to by his southerners, Tourgée can report the curiously impersonal acts of the Klan, in which Klansmen from out of town were called upon to assassinate the targets of their local brothers. Just as reading *Huckleberry Finn* against the narratives of William Wells Brown or Frederick Douglass renders Jim a very pale fugitive, reading *Huckleberry Finn* against *A Fool's Errand* or *Bricks Without Straw* makes the antiracism of Twain's novel pale against the exigencies of its time.

*A Fool's Errand* is, like *Huckleberry Finn*, episodic and virtually plotless. Comfort Servosse, the northerner, tries to understand the culture of the South, where he has come to make a home for himself and his family after the war. Toward the end of the novel, Tourgée attempts to conventionalize it by inventing a romance between Servosse's daughter, Lily, and a repentant young Klansman, but this never quite crystallizes. Like Twain, Tourgée uses irony—in fact his tone is not entirely unlike Twain's parts of *The Gilded Age*, a bemused wonderment at the self-righteous stupidity of Reconstruction-era Washington. The book was originally published anonymously as "*A Fool's Errand, by One of the Fools,*" and Tourgée often refers to his hero as The Fool. Tourgée does not display Twain's ambivalence, but he shows how ambivalent each communication between North and South was at this time, as white northerners and southerners misunderstood and misinterpreted each other's motives. Thus he includes a two-page schema broken down under the headings of "ANTE BELLUM: Northern Idea of Slavery, Southern Idea of Slavery. Northern Idea of the Southern Idea. Southern Idea of the Northern Idea. POST BELLUM: The Northern Idea of the Situation. The Southern Idea of the Situation. The Northern Idea of the Southern Idea. The Southern Idea of the Northern Idea" (1879, 138-39). As he succinctly develops his ideas, the reader can see exactly how people like the Grangerfords and Shepherdsons and Colonel Sherburn will turn from killing each other to terrorizing and killing the freedmen and their white supporters, exactly as they do in the two murders detailed and the many others merely mentioned in *A Fool's Errand*.

*Bricks Without Straw*, an ironic title that refers to the hopeless task of the freedmen and their white allies in creating a society of racial equality in the absence of any pressure from the victorious North, is a conventional novel
focussed on the love between a Yankee schoolmarm and a one-armed Confederate veteran. It flinches at murder, and the character of the crippled prophet who is lynched in A Fool's Errand resurfaces in Bricks Without Straw, where he is not only rescued from the Klan but sent North for a college education. Similarly, Nimbus, the political and economic leader of the black community, survives, and eventually the community is transported to freedom and prosperity in Kansas—not unlike Tourgée's own family, who left North Carolina for Denver (see Olson 1965, 223). This second novel is most useful for its portrayal of styles of black leadership—Nimbus's practical brilliance and his friend Eliah's intellectual and spiritual prowess. While the alert reader of Huckleberry Finn can see traces of both of these strains in Jim, it is gratifying to read Tourgée's clear, straightforward portrayal.

Twain's primary audience, like Tourgée's, was in the North, among the people Tourgée believed had deserted the freedmen, content in the belief that the Union was saved, the slaves were freed, and all was right with the world. What, beyond "compassion fatigue" and a desire to get on with the business of business had led the North to give up the fight for true freedom for the "free Negro," and how does Huckleberry Finn confirm or resist such a surrender? To answer such a question, one must look at the Klan's presentation of itself and at the arguments about the Klan, and about other violations of the civil rights of free peoples and their advocates, in Congress and in the Supreme Court. The Klan was founded in 1865, during the mild reign of presidential reconstruction, thus giving the lie to its apologists who claimed it had risen up in resistance to the "excesses" of radical Reconstruction. It and its emulators grew rapidly, and although the northern press at first condemned its bloody deeds, neither the federal government nor the court of public opinion ever effectively demanded that the Klan be abolished. Congressional anti-Klan laws were never actually enforced. Part of the Klan's public relations success results from its skilful play upon northern racism and the language of chivalry borrowed from Scott and other nineteenth-century favourites. According to the Klan's "Organization and Principles," adopted in 1868, it was "an institution of Chivalry, Humanity, Mercy, and Patriotism," whose goals were

> to protect the weak, the innocent, the defenseless, from the indignities, wrongs, and outrages of the lawless, the violent, and the brutal; ... To protect and defend the Constitution of the United States, and all laws passed in conformity thereto.(Commager 1968, 500)

Officers included Wizards, Dragons, Hydras, Titans, Furies, Goblins, and other scary sounding titles intended to frighten black people and appeal to adventuresome and thoughtless boy-men--like Tom Sawyer. Only down in the small print, so to say, of the "Principles" were matters like opposition to "negro equality" and support for "a white man's government."

The noble-sounding goals of the Ku Klux Klan were belied in action, as testimony in a multiplicity of venues adequately established. When Congress debated the Ku Klux Klan Act in 1871, however, the debate was less on the gory testimony of Klan atrocities than on the constitutionality of the federal government's usurping state power over the criminal system to punish individuals for depriving other individuals of their civil rights. John Coburn, a Republican congressman from Indiana, concluded the general debate by pointing out that the Fourteenth Amendment prevented any state from depriving any person of life, liberty, or property without due process of law, but the

> positive denial of protection is no more flagrant or odious or dangerous than to allow certain persons to be outraged as to their property, safety, liberty, or life; ... How much worse is it for a State to enact that certain citizens shall not vote, than allow outlaws by violence, unpunished, to prevent them from voting?(quoted in Schwartz 1970, 619)

For the time being, the arguments of such Republicans carried the day in Congress, and the Ku Klux Klan Act of 1871 and the Civil Rights Act of 1875 were passed, though they were never really enforced in the South.

In 1873, the Supreme Court ruled in a labour dispute in Louisiana, the Slaughterhouse Cases, that the Fourteenth Amendment protected individuals only in their rights as citizens of the United States, not as citizens of individual
states, which had jurisdiction over criminal laws—such as beating people to intimidate them from voting. In 1874, the Court held similarly that federal laws could not enforce the Fifteenth Amendment's guarantee of suffrage to qualified black voters (Franklin 1961, 206, 207-208). The Civil Rights Act of 1875 was actually passed by a lame duck Congress, and the constitutional arguments against federal law guaranteeing public accommodation for particular individuals within the states were, if not more vehement than similar arguments in 1871, at least more widespread. Thus it is not surprising that in 1883 the Supreme Court specifically invalidated Coburn's reasoning that a state's refusal to act was itself action, and invalidated the 1875 Civil Rights Act. The Klan had accurately positioned itself to be seen as the defender of the Constitution, an extraordinary public relations coup for individuals who were not only domestic terrorists but also former secessionists from the Union—and its Constitution!

Mark Twain hated lynchings. In *Connecticut Yankee* and in the later piece "United States of Lyncherdom," he arraigned the cowardice and cruelty of lynch mobs. The cruelty of mob violence in general, whether it be stoning and burning witches or cruelties to any other unfortunate is a theme in much of his work from the *Yankee* on. In *Huckleberry Finn*, we see the attempted lynching of Colonel Sherburn, which the Colonel himself breaks up by his manly defiance. (Tourgée points out that apologists for the Klan argued that a *real* man would not let himself be hanged [1879, 234-35].) Huck mourns the cruelty of the mob that tars and feathers the King and Duke and rides them out of town on a rail, even though he knows they are complete scoundrels. The mob that gathers at the Phelps farm in response to Tom's bloodthirsty "nonnamous" warnings imagines itself not unlike the Klan in its desire to "protect the weak, the innocent, the defenseless" and support "a white man's government," but they do not do any long-lasting physical harm to Jim or the boys, and they seem more comical than threatening. If readers in 1885 made any connection between the book's proslavery mob and the Supreme Court's rejection of any federal redress against similar mobs after the abolition of slavery, it is difficult to see where such a connection might have led. Unlike Tourgée, Twain never showed the particular horrors of Klan violence nor negated Klan appeals to the Constitution. The universality of *Huckleberry Finn* and the novel's ability to support a number of various readings tend to weaken it as a key to understanding a particular history.

Twain's great antislavery novel offers the reader no clue of how to make sense of the racist assaults on black people and their supporters that were transpiring while the book was being written, but Thomas Dixon, writing a generation later, was more than happy to synthesize support for the mob with the rights of "good" former slaves like Jim. *The Leopard's Spots* (1902) is an outright defence of the Klan that transplants most of its violence and intimidation to organized "carpetbaggers," "scalawags," and "free Negroes." Nonetheless, Dixon is willing to "grant the Negro the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness if he can be happy without exercising kingship over the Anglo-Saxon race, or dragging us down to his level (Dixon 1902, 438), conditions that Tourgée had thoroughly explained and to which Jim might agree. After all, when Jim finally has his freedom, "'Tom give Jim forty dollars for being prisoner for us so patient, and doing it up so good, and Jim was pleased most to death. ...' Instead of thinking about freedom or his family or the cruelty of Tom's playing with him for so long, he is proud to be "rich" and ready to go off on "howling adventures" with the boys (chapter 43). "Kingship" is certainly not on his mind—nor even simple citizenship.

Dixon's propaganda in his two novels, *The Leopard's Spots* and *The Clansman*, the basis of the enormously popular movie *The Birth of a Nation*, is in many ways more effective than Twain's. Where Twain condemned romanticism of the *Ivanhoe* ilk, Dixon happily embraced it. While Twain proudly counted Harriet Beecher Stowe a neighbour and friend, Dixon wrote *The Leopard's Spots* as a sequel to *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, directed to showing the hypocrisy of the Yankees and the impossibility of the happy ending implied by the classic novel. Simon Legree, originally a New Englander, makes a small fortune as a "carpetbagger" and builds it to an enormous one operating northern sweatshops. Little Harry, Eliza's son, for whom she made her daring escape across the ice-choked Ohio River, is highly educated but unable to get the job to which his talents entitle him because of the extreme race prejudice of the northern whites who control his world. His Boston patron throws him out of his house for daring to ask for the patron's daughter's hand in marriage. The girl, Helen Lowell, explains to her father that she "never did like negroes anyway" and understands race relations in the South, where "negroes" know their place. "I've seen those beautiful Southern children kiss their old black 'Mammy.' It made me shudder, until I discovered they did it
just as I kiss Fido” (Dixon 1902, 314). Unpleasant as this passage is, it reminds us that there is something very
doglike in Twain's portrayal of Jim. To be sure, when Huck pretends that his having been lost in the fog was all a
dream, Jim resents having his love made fun of, but his devotion is plain in his original greeting: "It's too good for
true, honey, it's too good for true" (chapter 15). Similarly, when they are reunited after the wreck of the raft, "Jim
nearly cried, he was so glad" (chapter 18), even though he had known all along that Huck was safe. He waits
patiently in the swamp while Huck has his adventures with the Shepherdsons and the Grangerfords. Huck is also
glad to see Jim, but it is the man who is always demonstrative to the boy, not the other way around.

By the time Dixon published The Clansman, twenty years after the publication of Huckleberry Finn, the struggles of
the freed peoples had virtually disappeared from the consciousness of white Americans and had been replaced by
a sense that lasted at least until the 1960s that Reconstruction was a shameful episode in American history in
which ignorant and upstart black people, aided by the greediest dregs of white society, humiliated noble white
southerners, the true racial and social equals of the noble northern Union supporters and the true heirs of Abraham
Lincoln. The Clansman and, even more vividly, Birth of a Nation, had ratified this impression and implanted it firmly
in the consciousness of the dominant American psyche, where it had been growing, truth to tell, since at least
1865. And in this loving reunion of "the Anglo-Saxon race," where was Jim? Unfortunately, there is little in his
characterization that would lead the uninitiated reader to question the vile racism that Dixon propagates. Most of
Dixon's blacks are good enough as long as they are guided by their wise and magnanimous former owners. A few
are vile and rapacious. A few are loyal to their masters, faithful and loving, wise and courageous. Nelse, in
Leopard's Spots, is simply the stock faithful retainer, but Jake, in The Clansman, is fearless, quick thinking, and
able to use what Dixon paints as the false premise of equality to his own advantage—which means to the
advantage of his master and the Klan. When a northern soldier arrests Dr Cameron—whose son is the Ku Klux
Klan Grand Dragon—he parades his prisoner in front of Cameron's former slave quarters and tells the former
slaves that they are now "the equal of any white man." As the Captain and his prisoner pass Jake's cabin,

the doctor's faithful man stepped suddenly in front of him, looking at the Captain out of the corners of
his eyes, and asked: "Is I yo' equal?" "Yes." "Des lak any white man?" "Exactly." The negro's fist
suddenly shot into Gilbert's nose with the crack of a sledge-hammer, laying him stunned on the
pavement. "Den take dat f'um yo' equal, d--m you!" he cried, bending over his prostrate figure. "I'll
show you how to treat my ole marster, you low-down slue-footed devil!" (Dixon 1905, 233)

While Jim's loyalty is passive (and qualified by his quite justified fear that Huck might turn him in), Jake's is active,
and in striking a white man, he is more aggressive and militant than any of Twain's black characters.

Not only does Dixon give his readers a noble and manly black man who is attached to the Klan's purposes and
leaders, but he also lays claim to the North's heroes. Abraham Lincoln is "The Friend of the South" whose
assassination "loosed the beak and talon of the Vulture" (Dixon 1905, "To the Reader") of congressional
Reconstruction on the defeated Confederacy. Grant, Twain's fellow Missourian and personal hero, is portrayed in
Leopard's Spots as giving his horse to a one-legged Confederate veteran so that the old soldier may get safely
home. Unlike the North Carolinians Tourgée had known during the actual years of Reconstruction, Dixon's
idealized Klansmen are perfectly willing that chattel slavery be banished and even blame its institution on the greed
of northern merchants who had sought to protect their own profits by enshrining slavery in the Constitution. Dixon's
novels flesh out all of what was supposed to be the "decency" and "chivalry" and protection of the weak that the
Klan had promised in its principles. The murders and beatings are displaced onto the responsibility of the "Union
Leagues," while the Klan fights their excesses. The Clansman is, according to Dixon, a story of how "the young
South, led by the reincarnated souls of the Clansmen of Old Scotland, ... saved the life of a people" (Dixon 1905,
"To the Reader").

The Clansman is a book that set out to make race hatred popular. While Twain and Tourgée focus on the humanity
and capability of their African-American characters, Dixon is willing to grant a measure of this but then uses the
image that, from Othello to Willie Horton and beyond, has always triumphed--that of the bestial black man violating
the pure and innocent white woman. (Twain had himself even created a Willie Horton image, though it is "Injun Joe" and not a black man who threatens to violate a white woman, the Widow Douglas.) In its incarnation as Birth of a Nation, Dixon's story was as successful in making racism fashionable as Uncle Tom's Cabin had been in making slavery unfashionable. The movie's enormous popularity ensured that many of the audience members who thrilled to it had read Huckleberry Finn as well. And there was no reason that audiences should have perceived the messages of the two books as mutually exclusive, even though Twain had nothing but contempt for the Klan.

Hal Holbrook, who has been portraying Mark Twain since before I was born, says, quite honestly, "The book is about the evils of slavery. It's not a racist book. If anything, it's an anti-racist book." He says that is why his Twain performance is "as relevant today as it was at the height of the civil rights movement in the 1960s" (Holbrook 1998, 5H). Huckleberry Finn in the original, in various expurgated versions (including one edited by John Wallace), and in the dramatizations by Hal Holbrook and hundreds of other less skilled presenters lets white America off the hook. The reader/auditor gets the joke. We know that Aunt Sally and Huck have been corrupted by their underlying racism. But because we as readers see what escapes them, our tendency is to think that we, white or even brown or black, have made progress against racism—though some of us may feel a little green around the gills.

Then there is the matter of Pap, the most arrant racist of the book. Brutal, dishonest, alcoholic, Pap is the one who expresses the coarsest racism of his day in the coarsest racist terms. Even though Pap's beliefs and expressions of them were unexceptional in the 1840s and even the 1860s, readers by the 1880s were unlikely to identify with such a reprehensible character (even if they shared the bulk of his views), any more than today's reader identifies with those of his ideological descendants who blow up daycare centres in federal office buildings in the heart of the country. Racism is not gone—it just presents itself with better clothes and straighter teeth and a more sophisticated public-relations man. Americans have never found it easy to see through racists like the superficially attractive young "heroes" of The Clansmen or The Leopard's Spots, and it is dangerous to think that we know something because we see through Twain's characters. We sell out Hal Holbrook's performances because they are funny and well done. Because Holbrook believes passionately, with Twain, that violence and racism are wrong, we think that we are learning to become less racist. On the contrary—we are learning to be content with the "white noise" of racism that still pervades the United States. We are learning not to look at the particulars of our own time.

Huckleberry Finn, the great American novel, is a tragedy that recapitulates the victorious North's sell-out of African Americans after the Civil War. Mark Twain, a reconstructed southerner who genuinely hated slavery and racism and was far more true to civil rights causes than were all but a few of the many who had hurrahed for the Union and voted a solid Republican ticket, never completely overcome his own training in racism, though in the discomfort generations of readers have felt with the Phelps farm section of Huckleberry Finn, he wrote out a disillusionment he could feel but not consciously articulate. Despite his own best efforts, he ended up perpetuating the image of the slavish African-American male whose manhood has been ground out of him. Despite and because of growing up in a slaveholding society, Twain never got beneath the defensive layer of "puttin' on ole massa" of his dark-skinned playmates.

Huckleberry Finn, as its admirers have always known, is a book that talks about universals of the "sound heart" and the "deformed conscience." Complicated by what Robinson defines as "bad faith," the silent lie always echoed from the heart of Twain's "damned human race," it is a brilliant allegory of racism in America and what that means for all of us who are, willingly or unwillingly, complicit in it. On the other hand, because it is universal, it necessarily scants the particular. For contemporary Americans reading the Iliad or Macbeth, with very little knowledge or need for knowledge about the Greeks and Trojans or the internal politics of ancient Scotland or even Tudor England, it is easy to concentrate on universal themes. Even though Charles Dickens's Great Expectations, as Edward Said has pointed out (1993, xiv-xv), moves beyond Britain to the questions of freedom and equality involved in the shipping of convicts to live out their lives in Australia, that drama does not affect Americans in the way that race does. Contemporary Americans, or those who would understand America, can only willfully escape the political aspects of Huckleberry Finn. Issues of race and racism are as real and as lethal and as divisive as they ever were in Twain's lifetime. As readers and teachers, we often act as if Huckleberry Finn could carry the primary, or even the
whole, burden of focussing our discussion and our understanding of race in America. For example, Fishkin asks,

Why did the behavior of these people [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 had seen on the evening news?(1997, 5-6)

Yet the assumptions behind her rhetorical questions are not entirely valid.

There are things about Watts that Twain cannot tell us. And there are things about slavery and Reconstruction that Twain cannot tell us--not because he is white nor because he uses the "nigger" word, and not because he writes in bad faith. Tourgée, Twain's contemporary, another white man whose characters say "nigger," can tell us some of those things. More important, works like A Fools' Errand show us why one can be equally stirred by Huckleberry Finn and Birth of a Nation--simply because A Fool's Errand tells us explicitly why we cannot trust Birth of a Nation or, by implication, the rhetoric of today's Thomas Dixons, who play on our fears and seem to embody our hopes. We are real and we live in a time and a place shaped by a particular history and particular stories. One story, no matter how great, cannot meet all our needs.

Notes

1. Because there are so many editions of Huckleberry Finn and Connecticut Yankee, I have noted quotations by chapter number rather than page number.

2. I have compared these same two sets of passages in my earlier article, "Huck, Jessica and the Rest of Us," Nebraska Humanist 4 (Fall 1994): 7-10.

3. Albion Tourgée, in a list of laws that had particularly underlined the line between white and black in the antebellum South, pointed out that in North Carolina and some other slave states, "emancipation was not allowed except by decree of a court of record after tedious formality and the assumption of onerous responsibilities on the part of the master; and it was absolutely forbidden to be done by testament" (1880, 154-55).

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