THE NIGGER HUCK: RACE, IDENTITY, AND THE TEACHING OF HUCKLEBERRY FINN

John Alberti

What Africanism became for, and how it functioned in, the literary imagination is of paramount interest because it may be possible to discover through a close look at literary “blackness,” the nature—even the cause—of literary “whiteness.” What is it for? What parts do the invention and development of whiteness play in the construction of what is loosely described as “American”?

Toni Morrison, Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination

Well, if ever I struck anything like it, I’m a nigger. It was enough to make a body ashamed of the human race.

Mark Twain, Adventures of Huckleberry Finn

Shelley Fisher Fishkin’s recent book, Was Huck Black?, explores the influence of African-American culture and language on the creation of Huckleberry Finn as both novel and character. In explaining her approach, she points out that until recently, “by limiting their field of inquiry to the periphery,” white scholars “have missed the ways in which African-American voices shaped Twain’s creative imagination at its core” (4). She links her study of Twain to the more general “need to revise our understanding of the nature of the mainstream American literary tradition” and credits Twain with helping to “open American literature to the multicultural polyphony that is its birthright and special strength” (4, 5). This effort to overcome the cultural separation and segregation in the study of American literature has many of its roots, as Fishkin points out, in the work of African-American scholars and critics, and constitutes one of the central aims of multiculturalism. Fishkin’s work is testament to the freshness of insight such an approach brings to the study and teaching of even the most heavily interpreted of texts.

If, however, as Fishkin argues (following Ralph Ellison and Toni Morrison), Huckleberry Finn can be used to demonstrate the interrelatedness of white and black American culture, the book is also profoundly about separation and the construc-

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tion of racial difference, issues evoked by the brutal epithet that haunts the pages of this supposedly All-American epic: “nigger.” Indeed, the emergence of the latest movements toward multiculturalism in general and the modern study of African-American culture in particular—the historical developments that make a book like Fishkin’s possible—parallels historically the controversy begun in the 1950s over Twain’s use of the term “nigger” in Huckleberry Finn. Rather than try to explain the term away or simply condemn the book, I want to look at the use of “nigger” in Huckleberry Finn as central to the operation of this text in American culture and the American classroom and to regard Huckleberry Finn as a kind of meditation on the word “nigger,” as an attempt by Twain to explore the construction and maintenance of racial identity. My goal, however, is not to come to a determination of some essential quality of the book or author (was Twain or is Huckleberry Finn “racist”?) but instead to see what this approach tells us about our own historical and pedagogical moment as part of the reception history of the book—its enshrinement as an American “classic” and its subsequent appearance as a standard required text in the classroom. In asking, for example, why Huck is unable to relinquish the word “nigger” in referring to Jim, in spite of the supposed growth of their friendship, I also want to ask how particular readers respond or have responded to that word. Most specifically, what do the excuses and explanations offered in justification of Twain’s use of the word “nigger,” the attempts to control the discussion of how race operates in the novel and in the classroom, tell us about the investment Huck and his white critics, teachers, and readers have in the book and in the word, and what implications does such an analysis have for discussions of race in the classroom?

Although dismissed by some as an example of a newly faddish “political correctness,” the controversy over the use of “nigger” in Huckleberry Finn goes back almost forty years and is in many ways a product of the efforts at school desegregation brought about by the civil rights movement and the Supreme Court ruling in Brown v. Board of Education. The changing demographic and political realities created by these historical developments brought a new group of readers and critics into formerly all-white educational institutions. For many black schoolchildren, particularly in integrated or semi-integrated classrooms, the insistent repetition of the term “nigger” in Huckleberry Finn caused pain, anger, and humiliation, and led organizations like the NAACP and other sympathetic parties to question the purpose of requiring children to read the work.

Responses from the academic establishment to such challenges ranged from the puffed to the dismissive. A classic move in defense of the book, then and now, has been to lump all nonacademic critics of the book together as extremists and “censors” (Robert Sattelmeyer, for example, refers ominously to “organized groups” [3] who have attacked the novel), thus equating the complaints about the book’s “coarseness” from the genteel bourgeois trustees of the Concord Public Li-
library in the 1880s with more recent objections based on race and civil rights. Clearly, though, such blanket dismissals obscure real and important differences in historical context and political reality. The book has been defended against charges of racism, for example, by the likes of George Will and Ronald Reagan, readers whose general advocacy of school texts that promote “patriotism” and “decency” might seem to have more in common with the moralistic concerns of the nineteenth-century Concord library committee than with modern civil libertarians (it is also hard to imagine any other situation in which conservative commentators would defend the inclusion in school curricula of a work that contained over two hundred instances of any other brutal obscenity, regardless of the overall artistic purpose of the work).

One result of the entrance of African-American voices into the critical discussion of the book has been to point out the arrogance, ignorance, and naïveté of many otherwise subtle readers of Huckleberry Finn. Peaches Henry, for example, shows how the defenses of the book offered by Nat Hentoff, Justin Kaplan, and Leslie Fiedler in reaction to the controversy over the term “nigger” “illustrate the incapacity of non-blacks to comprehend the enormous emotional freight attached to the hate word ‘nigger’ for each black person” (30). Robert Nadeau’s condescending remark in his “The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn is a Moral Story” is typical: “But it might help to explain to those students [who object to the term] that in slave states the word was merely the ordinary colloquial term for a slave, and not necessarily abusive” (141). The larger implication of Nadeau’s remarks, that slavery itself was “not necessarily abusive,” raises new questions instead of defusing the controversy. It is also a pedagogical comment that seems strangely distant from the demographic realities of the contemporary American classroom.

Many other recent critics, both white and black, have also pointed to the level of white fantasy involved in discussions of the character of Jim and more specifically the relationship between Huck and Jim. Harold Beaver and Forrest Robinson, in particular, each point to the sentimental naïveté of white readers who simply take Jim’s declaration of affection for Huck at face value, thus ignoring the fact that throughout the book Jim is involved in his own plans for escape and that Huck always remains a threat to those plans. Beaver’s and Robinson’s more skeptical perspectives, for example, make us regard Jim’s statement in chapter 16 that he was secretly “a-listenin’ to all de talk” while Huck lied their way out of the unwanted attentions of two men in a skiff as a sign of Jim’s caution and suspicion as much as his attentiveness and gratitude toward Huck (128).

The increased albeit piecemeal integration of American education since the 1950s, however, has given many older Twain scholars pause. The prominent Twain scholar James Cox admits that he would now have second thoughts about teaching Huckleberry Finn: “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” (388). The assumption, though, is that this story would somehow be easier to teach in a racially homogeneous (that is, all white) class, or that it was easier to teach when such homogeneity could be counted on in the classroom. The controversy over the use of “nigger” in *Huckleberry Finn*, however, should make us question this assumption as well and ask why the word wasn’t a “problem” before. After all, racism may be a problem for African-Americans and other people of color, but it is a problem of white Americans, and classroom practice shows that the term “nigger,” along with Twain’s characterization of Jim, is just as problematic in a predominantly or all white classroom as it is in an integrated or predominantly black classroom, if not more so.

The question of Jim’s dialect provides an example of what I mean. There is a long critical history in response to Twain’s explanatory note at the front of the book concerning his attempts at recreating regional—and racial—dialects in *Huckleberry Finn*. The strongest such efforts (Fishkin; Smith; Woodard and MacCann) not only explore the various sources available to Twain but also directly confront the question of how Twain’s love of minstrel shows—what Twain called “the real nigger show—the genuine nigger show, the extravagant nigger show”—influenced his creation of the character of Jim (qtd. Bell 127). Critics have argued whether and to what extent Twain’s portrayal of Jim manages to transcend or ironically transform the minstrel aspects of Jim’s character, but pedagogical practice brings up a performative aspect of the question that complicates any discussion of Twain’s irony. Put simply, in teaching the novel every instructor must decide how to read aloud Jim’s character. Jim’s is the most heavily marked, most obviously “nonstandard” dialect in the book, and first-time readers will often express their difficulty in understanding him. In reading aloud, the instructor must decide how to perform this racially coded dialect. In effect, a white instructor reading out loud a white writer’s comic attempts at depicting what Twain calls “the Missouri Negro dialect” runs the risk of becoming a kind of minstrel performer him or herself, whatever the racial demographics of the classroom (although such demographics will surely affect how an individual instructor approaches this problem).

There are no easy or obvious answers to this pedagogical dilemma. One strategy, of course, is to make this problem a part of class discussion, and the more helpful defenses of *Huckleberry Finn* advocate seeing the novel as a teaching opportunity, as a chance for opening in the classroom a dialogue about racism. However, the multicultural classroom raises questions about what exactly we can learn about racism from *Huckleberry Finn*. Thomas Inge’s response is instructive both for its dismissive tone and for the assumptions embodied in it about who the novel is being taught to:

To the sensitive reader, such charges [of racism] are amazing, because the novel remains in American culture one of the works most challenging to racial bigotry, so-
cial and political hypocrisy, and moral compromise. There is an integrity at the heart of the novel that cannot help but touch the reader, and if any work of art has the power to exert a positive influence, then surely this one does. (ix–x)

Aside from the loaded term “sensitive reader,” this response makes us wonder just what this positive influence might be—and most important, who is supposed to be influenced. This only makes sense if we presuppose a white readership that needs lessons in the immorality (or even existence) of racial bigotry, or that needs to learn to see African-Americans as fully human. At the same time, Inge’s response might seem to suggest that readers who do raise questions about the impact of “nigger” in the classroom are guilty of being both insensitive and too sensitive.

Nat Hentoff’s defense of the novel provides another example of the often contradictory messages given in recommending the novel as morally instructive. In a Nightline debate over whether the book should be required classroom reading, Hentoff invokes the teaching defense: the novel explores questions of racial discrimination that should be at the heart of American education (“Huckleberry Finn: Literature or Racist Trash?”). When faced with the question of whether in fact most or many teachers are adequately prepared to lead such a discussion, Hentoff concedes the point, offering an anecdote about a teacher in Texas who tried to initiate such a discussion by asking the class “What is a nigger?” The class response was for all of the white students to turn their heads and silently look at the few black students. Hentoff admits that such an approach is disastrous and suggests that the teacher should have been summarily fired. This is a curious response indeed from a First Amendment advocate, and one not likely to persuade other teachers to follow his suggestion that they make race a focus of class discussion.

By framing his defense of Huckleberry Finn in didactic pedagogical terms, Inge also opens the question of whether Huckleberry Finn is in fact “one of the works most challenging to racial bigotry” in American literature. If such a challenge is what we want, any number of works might also fit the bill: The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Invisible Man, Beloved. Moreover, Huckleberry Finn is especially problematic in fulfilling this morally exemplary function because the title character and first-person narrator himself pointedly fails to transcend racism by the novel’s end.

The epigraph from Toni Morrison suggests a different approach to the text, one that views it not as an exemplary challenge to bigotry, however much it can be made to fit that purpose, but as a key text in the exploration of the attractions of bigotry and racism, an exploration tied to the reasons “nigger” remains so attractive to Huck in the text and has troubled so few white critics of the book. The hapless teacher in Hentoff’s anecdote was getting at an important question—or rather, if she made a mistake, it was in limiting the question, for the question “What is a ‘nigger’?” is inextricably bound up in the question “What is a white person?” and these questions perhaps make more sense as a translation of Huck’s conflict into the
contemporary American classroom than more abstract considerations of how the novel exposes a kind of ahistorical “social and political hypocrisy.”

Addressing these questions in the text means discussing the subject positions of readers—in particular, those of teachers and students in the classroom. One way to begin is by asking just what we mean when we identify ourselves or others according to racial codes, whether “white,” “black,” “yellow,” “brown,” or “red,” in the first place. One of the remarkable aspects of the construction of whiteness in the United States is the way it allows people to find some kind of kinship across barriers of time, language, religion, and social class solely on the basis of perceived racial unity. I teach at a predominantly white, working-class school, and I am always struck by the immediate identification many “white” students have with the “white” characters in texts which are otherwise difficult and historically distant, works such as Cabeza de Vaca’s Relations or the captivity narrative of Mary Rowlandson. This identification occurs even when the use of the social marker “white” may be anachronistic, even when students are separated from these characters by barriers of gender, ethnicity, and language, and even when they may be critical of the actions of these “white” characters.

This same identification holds true when my students read Huckleberry Finn. When considering the relation between Huck and Jim, most students will immediately align themselves on one side or the other of the color line, even when denouncing prejudice or bigotry. In fact, such an alignment is often a necessary precondition of making any such judgments. All this of course should not be surprising, but it is significant how little this aspect of the reception of the novel was discussed before various “resisting readers” (to borrow Judith Fetterley’s term) such as Ralph Ellison brought attention to it. If Huckleberry Finn is going to serve as a means of discussing race in the classroom, then we must start with the constructions of race we bring to the class: How do we define ourselves racially? If you define yourself as “white,” how do you know that’s what you are, and what do you mean by such a definition? What investment might Huck or his readers have in maintaining a color line in the novel, even while supposedly coming to recognize Jim’s “humanity”? For in spite of lessons Huck seems to learn in the novel and the actions he takes (“humbling” himself before Jim; swearing to help Jim at the cost of his own salvation), Huck never overcomes the use of the term “nigger.” Asking questions about why this is so, what benefits Huck derives from maintaining this racial distinction, ties in with a discussion of what that term would mean both to Twain’s 1880s audience and to readers today.

Neil Schmitz has pointed out that in spite of their partnership, Huck and Jim “have different ideas of where they want to go and what their flight means, points of view that come increasingly into conflict in the first part of the novel” (100), since in “a very real sense, Jim’s freedom means the termination of [Huck’s] own, the abandonment of the raft and the river for concrete realities in Illinois” (105).
While Huck’s goal may seem simply escapist, Jim’s escape is inherently political and social: he wishes to change the legal and cultural definition of his personhood and those of his wife and children. To do this in the narrow sense involves crossing into a “free” state, but as the imposition of Jim Crow during Reconstruction made clear, a larger sense of freedom would involve the reconstruction of social categories of race, status, and power, and such a definition of freedom would create a larger, more complex dilemma for Huck and, by extension, for any “white” readers identifying with Huck: the loss of their “white” identity. Simple friendship is one thing, but social and political solidarity with Jim would threaten Huck’s status as “white,” a position particularly vulnerable because of Huck’s own marginal class status. In helping Jim, Huck at the same time is trying to avoid becoming a “nigger” himself.

Anxiety over racial identity has always been a defining feature of the historical construction of racism in the British American colonies and later the United States. Such anxiety is in fact the strongest evidence that race is indeed a social construct, subject to historic variations and thus always inherently unstable. It is crucial to understand and take into account the material basis of both the initial construction of the racial ideology of the U.S. and its historical development and transformation, not only for interpreting *Huckleberry Finn* in the narrow sense but also for examining how various readers, both professional and amateur, have found and find themselves implicated in the novel’s concern with racial identity. Most crucially, we need to look at how the construction of race theory and the development of racism in the West was linked to efforts to justify slavery not only by creating a permanent servant class but also by creating an ideological barrier between work seen as “slave” labor and the work of indentured servants and other menial workers. Indeed, the first explicitly race-based slave laws in seventeenth-century Virginia were drafted in part to counteract confederacies, both political and sexual, among African and European indentured servants (Zinn 31; Morgan).

Thus, from the beginning, the construction of race has served to counteract tensions arising from class inequalities and to prevent class solidarity. “[R]acial privilege could and did serve as a compensation for class disadvantage” for workers classified as “white,” and the legal abolition of slavery could only intensify the need to mollify workers now finding themselves in potential competition with African-Americans (Fredrickson, *White Supremacy* 87). Fredrickson goes on to describe how the creation of “a powerful set of anti-Negro attitudes” in order to justify race slavery could, after the Civil War, still serve “the psychological needs of white groups in a competitive free-labor society” (*The Black Image* 41). Indeed, these needs have been among the most important factors contributing to the persistence of racism to this day, but they are more than psychological; they also carry with them a material dependence on the benefits of racial privilege, however marginal these benefits may be at times.
Thus, the identification along racial lines that students and teachers make with fictional characters and historical actions necessarily involves this question of racial privilege, even when such identification is used as a means of criticism. A student writing in response to *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* that she feels “ashamed for what we did to the slaves” condemns the actions of a group of people she nevertheless claims solidarity with, solely on racial grounds. The opposite reaction often encountered in class, the appeal to historical distance (“I don’t have any slaves, I’m not responsible for what happened back then, therefore racism isn’t my problem”) reveals in its defensiveness a desire, however unconscious, to maintain “white” status and its concomitant privilege while seeming to deny any such identification.

Keeping this inexorable cultural dynamic linking the construction of race and economic privilege in mind, let us consider the pedagogical implications of discussing the status of marginal “white” figures in *Huckleberry Finn* by looking at Pap Finn’s rant about what he sees as the erosion of racial privilege. Many critics have cited these passages as unequivocal denunciations of racism in *Huckleberry Finn*, since the overstated illogic of Pap’s argument clearly marks him as an object of Twain’s satire. It is significant, though, that Pap is not only condemning “that nigger” but also the white government that allows a black man to cross the boundary between free and slave:

> “Here’s a govment that calls itself a govment, and lets on to be a govment, and thinks it is a govment, and yet’s got to set stock-still for six whole months before it can take ahold of a prowling, thieving, infernal, white-shirted free nigger . . .” (34)

Pap’s racist harangue in fact develops out of his complaints against another “white-shirt,” Judge Thatcher, who is denying Pap his “property” in the person of Huck and thus his chance to be “one of the wealthiest men in this town, if I could git my rights” (33). Instead, the “law backs that old Judge Thatcher up and helps him to keep me out o’ my property” (33). Pap’s anger, then, has two targets, one based in class, the other in race.

Equally important to note in Pap’s speech is that the “nigger” in question is in fact described by Pap as “a mulatter, most as white as a white man” (33). Susan Gilman’s reading of *Pudd’nhead Wilson* focuses on how the figure of the mulatto in that work exposes anxieties over race and social control not only in Twain’s contemporary audience but also in Twain himself, and her analysis has clear implications for the reading and teaching of *Huckleberry Finn*:

> [Twain’s use of doubleness] raise[s] a fundamental question: whether one can tell people apart, differentiate among them. Without such differentiation, social order, predicated as it is on division—of class, race, gender—is threatened. Thus Mark Twain, champion of the subversive, also championed the law as one agent of control that resolves confusions about identity, restoring and enforcing the fundamental distinctions of society. (5)
The object of Pap’s scorn, then, creates anxiety in Pap through a variety of mixed signals: legally “black,” the man is an “old gray–headed nabob” with a “gold watch and chain, and a silver headed cane,” who is a “p’fessor in a college, and could talk all kinds of languages” (33–34). The professor, then, brings Pap’s class anger and the race hatred he uses as compensation for that anger into what is for Pap an intolerable conflict, a conflict he mitigates through alcoholism and child abuse.

The point of such an explication of Pap’s speeches is to demonstrate how this passage can be used to draw important connections between Pap’s marginal class status and his racism, as well as the contradictions inherent in his racial self-identification: his simultaneous condemnation and envy of class privilege in the person of Judge Thatcher and his subsequent identification on the basis of race with those he perceives as denying any such identification with him in return. Clearly, the complexity of the analysis necessary to elicit an understanding of Pap beyond simple repugnance should make us wary of the easy assumption that the simple assignment of *Huckleberry Finn* will automatically and inevitably challenge the attitudes of students—particularly white-identifying students—toward race.

In fact, even such a close reading presupposes a kind of distance from Pap, not only in historical terms but also in terms of personal implication in the logic of race, as if Pap’s concerns with status, both economic and social, are not also shared by the students in our classes, and by ourselves as teachers. As I implied above, many student readers of Pap react to him with disgust and show little desire to consider his case more deeply. We might want to read this condemnation of Pap as an indicator of how alien a figure he is to many students, but a closer analysis of that disgust allows us to see how in many ways the racial issues raised by Pap hit closer to home than they do in the supposedly more sympathetic figure of Huck. The reactions of some white-identifying students to Pap, for example, indicate a desire to see Pap as atypical, not a true representative of “white people,” while some students, particularly but not exclusively students identified as “nonwhite,” will recoil from Pap as precisely all too typical of “white” attitudes. Thus, our students’ dismissal of Pap as a racist, a point on which we may easily find unanimity, can in practice prevent a more consequential discussion of the construction of race, namely one that focuses on the connections between wishing to retain “white” status while dismissing Pap from the white race and Pap’s own confusion about whether to see Judge Thatcher as a class enemy or a racial compatriot.

Such an approach also helps us to understand why Huck has been and remains such a controversial role model. Before arguing about whether Huck’s behavior is exemplary or not, we need to understand how concerns over status and race not only propel the narrative of the text but also provide the context for student reader responses. If Huck is torn between conflicting loyalties in *Huckleberry Finn*, the conflict is not only between self and society, or, in Twain’s terms (as echoed in the title of Henry Nash Smith’s famous essay), between a “sound heart and a deformed
conscience.” Huck's two options—aiding Jim in his escape or turning Jim in—represent two different sources of personal empowerment. Helping Jim escape is not just an act of friendship; as Huck realizes, it is a profoundly political and revolutionary act, branding Huck as a “low down Ablitionist” (one of the few overtly political references in the work), and involving him not just in the eradication of race slavery, but in efforts at the social reconstruction of race (52). Turning Jim in will win him not only the approbation of the white community, but it will also secure his white status and clarify his own position as a non-slave.

Throughout the novel, Huck is nothing if not class-conscious. Mark Egan points out that “Huck's terminology . . . is worth noting as evidence of social attitudes. ‘People’ are reasonably affluent whites—Tom Sawyer's family, for example. ‘Folks,’ on the other hand, are destitute, like Pap Finn. Niggers, of course, are neither folks nor people” (112). I would modify the classification of “people” and “folks” with two even more class-laden terms that Huck uses repeatedly: “quality” and “trash.” Pap is an example of “trash” ludicrously hoping to become “quality,” and I would suggest that the condemnation of Pap among white readers stems as much from his “trash” status as his overt racism. In contrast, many (though not all) of my white-identifying students have to be coaxed to recognize the racism of the Phelpses, the more prosperous family farmers who nonetheless imprison Jim. Although Sarah Phelps's conversation with Huck about a fictitious steamboat accident is often correctly cited as part of the book's critique of racism (after being told by Huck that the boat “blowed out a cylinder-head” Mrs. Phelps asks “‘Good gracious! Anybody hurt? ‘No’m. Killed a nigger.’ ‘Well, it's lucky; because sometimes people do get hurt’ ” [279]), in classroom practice such an admission of callousness does not prevent many white-identifying students from still seeing Sarah Phelps as basically kind and decent. In other words, these students are more likely to make excuses for the petty-bourgeois Phelpses (“they didn't know any better”) than they are for the obviously “white trash” Pap. Similarly, many students overlook the repeated beatings Huck suffers at the hands of Sarah Phelps as simply “discipline,” supposedly unrelated to Pap's obvious abuse of him.

Jimmie also aware of the power of these white class differences, as is most famously seen in one of the text's overtly pedagogical moments, where Jim chastises Huck for playing a trick on him when they had become separated on the river and lost in the fog: “En all you wuz thinkin 'bout wuz how you could make a fool uv ole Jim wid a lie. Dat truck dah is trash; en trash is what people is dat puts dirt on de head er dey fren's en makes 'em ashamed” (95). The upshot of this lesson is that Huck decides to apologize, but only after thinking about it for fifteen minutes, and he describes the apology as “humbl[ing] myself to a nigger” (105).

The question, then, for Huck as well as the student readers of the novel is one of identification, and this question—not only which characters we as readers find
ourselves identifying with in the novel but how indeed we identify ourselves and are identified socially—proves a more salient pedagogical question than whether we think the book is “racist” or not. As teachers, we might ask ourselves the related question of whether our pedagogical practices serve to reify or to unsettle hierarchical questions of race (or gender or class). One argument raised in relation to the satirical elements of Huckleberry Finn in the classroom is that students, particularly elementary and secondary school students but college students as well, are incapable of the ironic interpretation necessary to become the “sensitive reader” Inge refers to above. One response, of course, is to say that such training in responding to irony is the responsibility of the teacher, and that is certainly true as far as it goes. But the example of the very different reactions of white-identifying students to the racism of Mary Phelps and to that of Pap represents not so much an inability to recognize irony as an unwillingness to recognize irony, or to consider the implications of that irony: the question not just of why Huck doesn’t follow through on his apprehension of the fictitiousness of race, but of why he might not want to. To consider a reading of Huckleberry Finn that asks the reader to question his or her own investment in the construction of racial identity—and thus racial privilege—goes beyond the recognition of formal techniques of irony. It requires first of all the foregrounding of racial identity as a question, not in the clumsy sense of simply asking “What is a nigger?” but in the more fundamental sense of investigating how we come to have racial identities in the first place, and how those identities function as markers of class status.

The issue of Huck’s class mobility ties in directly as well with a similar issue in the lives of many student readers, particularly college students from “nontraditional” backgrounds, whether defined in terms of race, ethnicity, class, or gender, who view their own educations primarily in economic terms, as both a means to and promise of middle class (“quality”) life, a goal certainly ambivalent enough in itself but also increasingly problematic in practical terms, given the economic realities of the 1990s. Debates about affirmative action, for example, can be read as indicating among some white-identifying students distinctly Huck-like ambivalences about completely renouncing racial privilege in the name of equal opportunity or even class solidarity. Social class also provides us a more concrete way of understanding Huck’s comments about his inability to reform and conform to the expectations of Miss Watson and the Widow Douglas. Rather than referring to any internal moral capacity (or lack thereof), Huck’s “wickedness” can be seen as a code term for his class status, and Huck is torn, in classic American fashion, between an embedded but repressed understanding that such class divisions are an ineluctable consequence of birth in a hierarchical society and the ideology of unfettered class mobility that works as a solidifying force in the construction and maintenance of racial categories:
Well, I tried the best I could to kinder soften it up somehow for myself, by saying I was brung up wicked, and so I warn’t so much to blame; but something inside of me kept saying, “There was the Sunday school, you coulda gone to it; and if you’d a done it they’d a learnt you, there, that people that acts as I’d been acting about that nigger goes to everlasting fire.” (269)

Yet we have to wonder if Huck really can become “quality” anymore than Pap can, if his attempts to do so would amount to much more than the masquerade conducted by the equally low-born Duke and Dauphin, who in the end are unable to fool those “proper” members of the middle class, the doctor and the lawyer, during the Phelps deception.

Huck’s repeated internal meditations, then, on the usefulness of trying to imitate the “quality” can be read, as they often have been, as examples of either Huck’s pragmatism or his adherence to the pleasure principle, but we can also read them as class analyses prompted by his consideration of confederacy with Jim: “Well then, says I, what’s the use you learning to do right, when it’s troublesome to do right and ain’t no trouble to do wrong, and the wages is just the same?” (128; emphasis mine). When he first arrives on Jackson’s Island, Huck describes himself as becoming “boss,” a position formerly claimed by Pap. His confrontation with the runaway slave Jim thus forces Huck to choose between two ambitions: striving to become a “boss” in the “white” world, or allying with Jim and risking classification as a “nigger.”

Huck’s “insights” about Jim’s humanity (again, insights only to a white audience) thus provide as much racial anxiety as revelation. When Huck concludes, for example, on the basis of Jim’s crying over his children that “I do believe he cared just as much for his people as white folks does for their’n,” we can certainly recognize the irony here (particularly given how badly most white people treat their children in this novel) (201). More than simple irony or the exposure of hypocrisy, however, Huck’s comment can suggest a fundamental deconstruction of all categories of racial division. In Susan Gilman’s words, “Instead of a ‘true self’ and clear standards of verification, what Twain discovered in his own fiction was the constructed and artificial character of essential social measures of identity—measures that, as the history of race relations demonstrates, we nevertheless totally depend upon” (95).

Clearly, the argument over whether Huckleberry Finn is racist or not will not be solved through ever more subtle close reading. Toni Morrison suggests a different way of reading the text, one that moves the question of racism from something a person or book might “have” to a cultural practice that forms the context of every interpretive experience of Huckleberry Finn:

It is not what Jim seems that warrants inquiry, but what Mark Twain, Huck, and especially Tom need from him that should solicit our attention. In that sense the book may indeed be “great” because in its structure, in the hell it puts its readers through
The term “nigger” is the verbal expression of that parasitical freedom, as much today as in the 1880s (or 1840s), and therefore we can expand Morrison’s question about what Twain, Huck, and Tom need from Jim to include the reader in particular and the “white” critical tradition in general.

Rather than trying to determine exactly what the book “is” (racist or non-racist, historically determined or historically transcendent), we would be better served by asking what different groups of people have wanted the book to be and why others want the book in the classroom. If traditionally—at least in terms of pedagogical practice—*Huckleberry Finn* has been seen as a book about “freedom,” the controversy over how both the portrayal of Jim and the repetition of the term “nigger” are received by different readers suggests that “freedom” is also a racially coded term, and that in crucial ways the conditions of Huck’s freedom are antithetical to those of Jim’s, particularly insofar as Huck’s desire for freedom includes a desire to retain white privilege: “Huck’s almost Hamlet-like interior monologues on the rights and wrongs of helping Jim escape are not proof of liberalism or compassion, but evidence of an inability to relinquish whiteness as a badge of superiority” (Lester 201).

That Huck’s monologues *have* often been interpreted as proofs of compassion or well-meaning also suggests that the white freedom desired by many of Huck’s white-identifying readers has been freedom from responsibility for or participation in the construction and maintenance of race and racial oppression in the United States: “one of the ways in which whites avoided confrontation with the humanity of black folk was to see themselves as kind to Afro-Americans, focusing on their own feeling of being good, decent people rather than on the feelings of the enslaved blacks” (Jones 179). Furthering this belief in white “kindness” in terms of the reception history of *Huckleberry Finn* has involved readings of the book that condemn slavery and racism while at the same time carefully maintaining the color line. It’s interesting to note that the phrase “nigger Jim,” an identifier that became commonplace in criticism of *Huckleberry Finn* (as in the famous Hemingway quote from *Green Hills of Africa*: “If you read it you must stop where the Nigger Jim is stolen from the boys” [22]), is itself an invention of the critical tradition; it appears nowhere in *Huckleberry Finn* (the closest is Huck’s reference to “Miss Watson’s nigger, Jim” [20]), indicating that for many white readers, as for Huck, it was important that Jim maintain a “nigger” status, thus establishing with certainty the “whiteness” of the reader, before “compassion” could safely be felt for Jim:

Although Huck may be “trash,” as Jim often calls him, Huck’s privilege is certainly there, thanks to the social structure. Huck himself fully understands the great degree of social distance that separates him from Jim and, accordingly, finds it quite easy to accept their distant intimacy. (Mason 37)
The fact, then, that *Huckleberry Finn* has been turned into a signifier of white liberal compassion has made any questioning of how race is handled in the text especially troubling for many white-identifying readers and teachers. Yet, as Toni Morrison suggests, the power of the text for a modern audience lies in the very impurity of its representation of racial oppression. The argument over the use of the term “nigger” in the novel may be the whole point: the emergence of criticism of that term over the last two generations should force readers of the book to think consciously about their own relationships to that term. This discussion is much advanced in the African-American community; for too long, however, white-identifying readers have failed to question their own investment in the term, a line of inquiry which leads to questions about the social uses and misuses of the construction of racial identities in general.

Pedagogical and critical strategies, therefore, that address race in *Huckleberry Finn* in particular and in American literature in general without addressing the construction of race serve to reify racial identity and thus reinforce the black/white split that functions as the crucial binary logic in the discourse of American racism, whatever specific condemnations of racism may be made along the way. This reinscription of the color line poses a particular dilemma for readers identifying themselves or finding themselves socially identified as neither white nor black, readers often referred to by the suggestive term “people of color.” Gilman’s discussion of Twain’s anxious fascination with how the figure of the mulatto potentially deconstructs the functional and binary logic of racism has important implications here, particularly when we remember that *Huckleberry Finn* appeared during the imposition of not only Jim Crow but also the Chinese Exclusion Act. A pedagogical reading strategy that implicitly insists that a Chicano or Chinese-American student, for example, choose sides in terms of black or white in responding to *Huckleberry Finn* reinforces without problematizing the perverse logic of American racial assimilation, whereby members of ethnic minorities can be shunted back and forth across the color line (think of Proposition 187 or the myth of the “model minority”) in order to accommodate various dominant group political desires.

Newcomers to the United States quickly discover that whatever the ethnic and class complexity of U.S. society, the bipolar racial logic of dark and light functions as a key component of identity formation, both between identified groups and within them. My classes in California, for example, contained many students who had lived in the United States for just a few years. Introducing *Huckleberry Finn* to these students turns the traditional humanist defenses of the text on their head: because any discussion of racism in the text, no matter how “critical,” must necessarily revolve around the freighted term at the heart of the controversy over the novel, the very assignment of *Huckleberry Finn* works as recognition and at some level institutional authorization of the language of American racism itself. Thus a pedagogical act meant to condemn racism can only do so by invoking the entire
discursive system of racism, a system that also carries the injunction to line up on one side or the other of the color line. This injunction carries this debate over *Huckleberry Finn* beyond a confrontation between “black” and “white” students considered as reified racial identities into an analysis of the bipolar color line as the crucial fault line running through the complex discursive network of racial construction in the U.S. Such a recognition of the embeddedness of the novel in the cultural logic of race and racism does not mean that *Huckleberry Finn* cannot or should not ever be taught in any U.S. class at any time, but that any teaching of it inevitably extends beyond the mythical level of the “text itself” to the level of discourse and ideology.

How then best to use *Huckleberry Finn* as a teaching opportunity to open a discussion about racial identity and racial oppression that doesn’t merely reinforce racial identity? A number of recent articles have offered detailed lesson plans and strategies for approaching *Huckleberry Finn* in the classroom (Lew; Carey-Webb; Hengstebek). All stress the need to place the novel into a social context by providing students with readings in both history and sociology, and all would clearly make for interesting, socially responsible learning experiences (the recent critical edition of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* by Gerald Graff and James Phelan that includes essays and documents related to the controversy over race is pedagogically promising in this regard). Yet the enormous amount of what we might, from a New Critical perspective, call source and background material needed to introduce the text successfully into the classroom begs the question of just why it is so important to get *this* text into the classroom. Instead, by implication these articles demonstrate the ideological and pedagogical problems raised by a “masterpieces” approach to literature instruction—that is, designating certain texts as classics and therefore required reading, and then dealing with the question of how to make the texts work in the class. But the controversy over the representation of race in *Huckleberry Finn* goes to the heart of the reception history which created its classic status, at least in pedagogical terms, on the basis of the book’s positive “moral” influence.

This reception history, then, provides the vital context we need to bring into the classroom, but again not as separate from or supplementary to the analysis of how the novel implicates its readers in terms of the construction of racial identity, or perhaps only supplementary in the Derridean sense of the term, in that, as we have seen, the establishment of *Huckleberry Finn* as a cultural/pedagogical icon has itself been a part of the process of maintaining the color line in the twentieth century.

These pedagogical questions have relevance beyond the particular example of *Huckleberry Finn* to the case of any overdetermined canonical text, especially those with their own notorious histories, histories that point to a similar implication in the construction and reification of oppressive structures of differentiation. Feminist criticism has challenged the patriarchal structuring of the dominant canon as a
whole in this regard, but the critical/pedagogical point applies as well to supposedly isolated individual cases, such as the anti-Semitism informing *The Merchant of Venice, The Sun Also Rises*, or *The Waste Land*. Teachers introducing these texts into their classes face the same basic question of pedagogical orientation raised by the example of *Huckleberry Finn*: do I regard these texts as isolated and discrete textual entities somehow infected by a strain of bigotry that can be eradicated through liberal faith and ever more ingenious (and ahistorical) close reading? Or do I consider my teaching of these texts (whether as personal choice or as part of a set curriculum) as a cultural activity implicated in and a further extension of the construction and maintenance of a larger hegemonic discourse of power and identity, processes that include not only the discrete production of a text containing the particular views of a specific author but also the canonization and institutionalization of that text along with a set of interpretive practices to insure the maintenance of that canonical status? As we have seen in the case of *Huckleberry Finn*, these practices work both to reinscribe the canonical literary status of the text in question and to confirm the dominant social status of the subject-positions inhabited by those who regulate that interpretive practice, even when the results of such practice claim to offer a critique of the oppressive ideologies represented in the text in question.

This second alternative suggests that in the classroom we approach the controversial status of Twain’s text by asking ourselves two questions: how do we define racial identity, and why is this text considered required reading? One of the points of this essay is to argue that these in fact become one question, and that any institutionally sanctioned discussion of the text, whether on a television show, at an academic conference, or in the classroom, is an intrinsic part of that process.

In the end, the controversy over *Huckleberry Finn* or any other “problematic” text is not finally an interpretive argument, but a debate over what the ends of education should be. It is ironic to say the least that after praising *Huckleberry Finn* as masterpiece on the basis of its treatment of race, many advocates of the book want to dismiss out of hand any attempt to pursue further the questions about racial identity raised by the reading of the book in a diverse classroom. The efforts to defend the book as providing a pedagogical opportunity to talk about race and racism in the final analysis seem more interested in monitoring and limiting that discussion to a distinctly middle-class point of view, a view that both secures the racial identity of the reader and affirms that reader’s innate innocence and goodness rather than exploring how the constitution of that racial identity implicates any reader in the dynamics of race and class privilege. As Terry Eagleton argues, however,

> What it means to be a ‘better person,’ then, must be concrete and practical—that is to say, concerned with people's political situations as a whole—rather than narrowly abstract, concerned only with the immediate interpersonal relations which can be extracted from the concrete whole. (208)
Yet pedagogical practice makes such “concrete and practical” considerations unavoidable; like it or not, it is impossible to read *Huckleberry Finn* in a contemporary American classroom without talking about the term “nigger”; to explain the term away in the name of preserving the text as an indictment of racism is not a defense of the text but an avoidance of it.

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