

Can Literature Come to the Rescue When History Is Under Siege? How One Novel Can Be a Trojan Horse to Engage Questions Some Politicians Don't Want Us to Ask

Shelley Fisher Fishkin

ABSTRACT

Under pressure from right-wing Republican politicians, more than half of US states have passed measures designed to discourage teachers from teaching their students about the role that racism has played in the United States' past and present. This article argues that teaching Mark Twain's 1885 novel *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* has the potential to let teachers to do an end run around that ban. It distills arguments I make in my 2025 book, *Jim: The Life and Afterlives of Huckleberry Finn's Comrade* (Yale UP). Recognized as a cornerstone of the United States' literary heritage, this celebrated canonical novel written by a very dead, very white male author is a book that can be a Trojan Horse enabling us to open our classrooms to issues these politicians do not want discussed. However, the novel has long been challenged by progressives who charge that it bolsters the racism that it supposedly attacks. This article argues that Jim, the main Black character in the book, has been sold down the river for nearly a century and a half - unjustly demeaned, denigrated, and dismissed as "minstrel show" stereotype. Paying him the attention that he deserves opens up new ways of understanding the history of race and racism in the United States and offers distinctive insights into the challenges of representing Black intelligence, emotion, and creativity in a world that denied their existence - a challenge shouldered not only by Twain himself but also by scores of writers, Black and white, who followed.

KEYWORDS

Racism, censorship, slavery, Mark Twain, *Huckleberry Finn*, Jim

Teaching the United States' past and present in all its complexity has never been an easy task – but the very project itself is increasingly under attack today in US K-12 classrooms and universities. Under pressure from right-wing Republican politicians, more than half of US states have passed measures designed to ban teachers from teaching their students about the role that racism has played in the United States' past and present, with advocates saying, in effect, “that education must emphasize only the positive aspects of American history” (Remnick; see also PEN America, “[Banned in the USA: The Growing Movement](#)” and “[Banned in America: State Laws](#)”). This article argues that teaching Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* can enable teachers to evade these gag orders, opening their classrooms to precisely the questions the bans are designed to banish. Teachers' fear of being prosecuted for teaching lessons that explicitly discuss racial oppression has resulted in fewer discussions of racism in the classroom and have even discouraged some aspiring teachers who care about teaching accurate versions of the United States' past to reconsider their decision to become teachers in the first place (Kelly et al.). An organization called Citizens for Renewing America run by Donald Trump's former budget director issued a “Toolkit” for “Combatting Critical Race Theory” (CRT) in the community arguing that CRT teaches “that individual racism, cultural racism, and institutional racism overlap to form a system of racism that is present through all of society.” It states that “Social Justice scholars think anti-racism” requires “people to constantly reflect upon the ways in which we are all complicit in racism” (Citizens Renewing America) and that this approach should be banned by law.

But teaching *Huckleberry Finn* can allow teachers to circumvent the right-wing ban on teaching the role of racism in the United States' past, a topic that they are often forbidden to address on its own. Recognized as a classic, a cornerstone of the United States' literary heritage, this celebrated canonical novel written by a very dead, very white male author is, in short, a book that can be a Trojan Horse enabling us to open our classrooms to issues these politicians do not want discussed. Teaching this iconic text responsibly *requires* that scholars and educators bring the history of US-American racism into our classrooms. Making sense of the novel *compels* us to understand Jim's condition as an enslaved person in antebellum Missouri; it demands that we examine the ways in which interlocking institutions in US society from the church to the law to the scientific establishment

conspired to reinforce the racism that underpinned that condition. Examining that de facto conspiracy shines a light on the broad contours of institutional racism that the right is determined to bury or deny. Twain's searing satire can bring the history of racism in the United States into the classroom in engaging and powerful ways.

But while conservatives want to ban from the United States' classrooms an accurate view of the chapters of the past that this novel engages, progressives have challenged the book's presence in the classroom for other reasons. They charge that it bolsters the racism that it supposedly attacks. Those who want the book banned view Jim, its central Black character, as a figure out of a minstrel show, an emblem of the author's alleged racism. To the contrary, however, this article argues that Jim is a compelling challenge to minstrel stereotypes and racism itself. Jim is a smart, self-aware, and enormously admirable man who is hemmed in on all sides by a morally bankrupt society determined to keep him enslaved. Huck does not see him that way, but Twain did. Indeed, the whole point of the novel was to challenge the legitimacy of a society that treated Jim the way it did. Although the novel is narrated by a boy who, like young Sam Clemens, did not question the justice of the world in which he lived, it was written not by Huck but by a Mark Twain who, by 1885, was ready to challenge norms he had accepted as a child (Fishkin, *Jim* 234–38).

Sadly, over the last 140 years, more often than not, critics viewed Jim instead as a character who embodied stereotypes drawn from minstrelsy, seeing him as a very limited comic foil to the white¹ child at the story's center. There have been some notable exceptions, most recently, my own book, *Jim: The Life and Afterlives of Huckleberry Finn's Comrade*, which builds on the work of earlier critics who did not mistake Huck's view of Jim for Twain's. These include [Sterling Brown](#), [Jocelyn Chadwick](#), [Ralph Ellison](#), [Robert Paul Lamb](#), [Hilton Obenzinger](#), [Stephen Railton](#), [Forrest Robinson](#), [Neil Schmitz](#), [David Lionel Smith](#), and [Ralph Wiley](#). But the majority of the authors of the 40,000 books and articles written about the novel do not give Jim his due. In short, Jim has been sold down the river for nearly a century and a half.

Jim has been hiding in plain sight. He is more complex and multilayered than meets the eye. Paying him the attention that he deserves opens up new ways of understanding the history of racism in the United States. And it offers distinctive insights into the challenges of representing Black intelligence, emotion, and creativity

¹ The practice of capitalizing "Black" but not "white" has become increasingly common in recent years. As Alexandria Neason observes, "to capitalize Black is to acknowledge that slavery 'deliberately stripped' people forcibly shipped overseas 'of all other ethnic/national ties.'" (Neason qtd. in [Wong](#)). The Associated Press justified its decision to leave "white" lowercase by noting that "[c]apitalizing the term white, as is done by white supremacists, risks subtly conveying legitimacy to such beliefs" ([Wong](#)).

in a world that denied their existence – a challenge shouldered not only by Twain himself but also by scores of writers, Black and white, who followed.

Unlike slaveholding on the large cotton, rice, sugar, and indigo plantations of the Deep South, slaveholding in Missouri was small-scale, with most households owning or renting a handful of slaves to raise wheat, corn, barley, rye, oats, flax, hemp, and fruit; tend hogs and cows; mind children; and do carpentry, cooking, cleaning, washing, gardening, and ironing (Burke 26; Dempsey 26–29; Epps 46–53). Jim’s principal duty is handling the cattle. As an enslaved man in antebellum Missouri, Jim has the same rights as the cattle under his care.

As Twain notes in his autobiography, in his youth “the local pulpit taught us that God approved of [slavery], that it was a holy thing” (Twain, *Autobiography*, vol. 1, 2010, 212). It was a world in which enslaved people were prohibited from learning to read or write and where their speech, mobility, social interactions, and deportment were constrained at every turn. It was a world in which both runaways (and anyone who helped them) were severely punished, and those who apprehended them could get rewards of thousands of dollars. Twain was born into this world in 1835. Fifty years later, he would become the first white male writer to portray a slave determined to be a father – and a surrogate father – even to a white child. Indeed, Jim is one of the first fully-drawn Black fathers in US-American fiction.

The precarity of Jim’s situation and his hesitation about speaking his mind, even to a child like Huck, becomes clearer to students when they are told that in this world a slave could receive up to thirty-nine lashes just for directing insulting language at a white person (Dempsey 12). When Huck callously toys with Jim’s very real grief and relief after the two are separated during the fog and then reunited, Jim’s decision to shame and rebuke Huck by calling him “trash” is all the more remarkable, given the penalties that existed for insulting a white person.

Slave traders were a familiar, intimidating presence in Twain’s hometown of Hannibal, Missouri, where every enslaved person lived with the awful knowledge that someone they loved could be taken from them suddenly, at any time. Twain vividly remembered “seeing a dozen Black men and women chained to one another, once, and lying in a group on the pavement, awaiting shipping to the Southern slave market. Those were the saddest faces I have ever seen” (“Jane Lampton Clemens” 49). Jim’s terror at the prospect of never seeing his children again and being unable to protect them becomes more believable when we are reminded that this was a world where parents could be sold away from their children on a whim. Narratives from enslaved people such as Mary Armstrong, Emma Knight, Charlie Richardson, and Bill Sims preserved in the Missouri State Museum (Armstrong; Knight; Richardson; Sims) make this clear as does the slave narrative of William Wells Brown (33–34).

Jim is determined to save himself and those he loves from the potential terrors that fate might hold for them. His principal goal in life – that which drives everything he does from the moment he realizes Miss Watson is planning to sell him – is to seek his own freedom and that of his family. Jim’s passionate pursuit of this goal comes from his awareness of the harm he and his family face by remaining enslaved. Given the intense shame Jim feels over having hit his daughter for not “minding” him before he realized she was deaf, the potential violence she might face while enslaved likely helped fuel his determination to secure her freedom, as well as that of her brother and mother.

Testimony gathered from Missouri slaves amply attests to what they had to endure. Mary Armstrong recalls, for example, that her owner “whipped my little sister what was only nine months old, ... jus’ cause she cry like all babies do, an’ it killed my sister;” Emma Knight’s father was “put on a block and sold ’cause de master wanted money to buy something for de house” (Knight). When Twain’s father won a verdict against a man named William Beebe who owed him money, he had the sheriff seize an enslaved nine-year-old girl and sell her at public auction to satisfy the judgment (Dempsey 83). Jim’s steely determination to buy or steal his wife and children out of slavery comes from living in this precarious world.

“In those old slave-holding days,” Twain recalled, “the whole community was agreed as to one thing – the awful sacredness of slave property” (*Autobiography*, vol. 1, 1924, 101). It is easier to understand how all of society’s institutions endorsed the legitimacy of slavery when we know that enslaved people accounted for a significant portion of the community’s wealth and were taxed just as other property was taxed, with the revenue thus raised helping to fund state and local governments. Indeed, in 1847, in the county that includes Hannibal, such assessments accounted for more than ten percent of state taxes that were collected (Dempsey 78).

It is important for us to understand what transpired in Missouri after the thirteenth Amendment to the US Constitution ended slavery following the Civil War in 1865 if we are to appreciate what happens in the last portion of the novel. The widely misunderstood period of Reconstruction was, in fact, a time when the formerly enslaved began to enjoy some political and civil rights. But the crucial presidential election of 1876 changed that. It was a tie between the Democrat Samuel Tilden and the Republican Rutherford Hayes. The Congressional commission authorized to hammer out a compromise that allowed Hayes to take office, basically giving the anti-civil rights Democrats everything they wanted – including in effect withdrawing all the federal troops that had been safeguarding the rights of Black people in the South. It ushered in a retreat from civil rights and a restoration of power to the former Confederate States. It was a period historians now recognize as a time in which conditions

akin to slavery were reestablished through sharecropping, lynchings, the convict lease system, and various violent forms of intimidation that effectively prevented Black people from exercising the rights they had been granted by law. As W. E. B. Du Bois would put it, “The Slave went free, stood a brief moment in the sun; then moved back again toward slavery” (30). This, of course, is exactly what happens to Jim in the novel. The last third of the novel is increasingly recognized as Twain’s satire on the breakdown of Reconstruction, a satire on how his country botched the enterprise of freeing the slaves.

How did those who inflicted this pain on their fellow human beings in the antebellum era and beyond justify their actions? One key factor is that the so-called scientific establishment of the day reiterated in treatises, articles, and books what it viewed as an established truth: that Black people were inferior to white people. Thomas Jefferson laid down the tracks for the racist ideology that would thrive for over two centuries and that is with us to this day when he wrote in *Notes on the State of Virginia* that Black people were unintelligent, uncreative, and insensible to pain. Although we know today that Jefferson was completely wrong on every front, throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, this ideology remained to a large extent the conventional wisdom in both the academy and in the society at large. It justified keeping African Americans disempowered and dependent on whites (see [American Antiquarian Society](#)). It allowed many white Americans to accept their own place in their world as right and natural, and to resist Black equality with vehemence, violence, and cruelty.

The powers that be today in Tennessee, Alabama, Florida, and dozens of other states do not want students to learn about the shameful history of slavery or how the nation eroded the rights that had been granted to the formerly enslaved after the end of Reconstruction. But Twain’s novel embodies and illuminates that history in fresh and powerful ways, perhaps as only a work of art can. Teaching this classic novel responsibly *demand*s that teachers bring this history into their classrooms. The right-wing forces that have banned the teaching of history that might make some students feel bad are not about to ban an iconic work of US-American fiction by a celebrated white male author. But while *Huckleberry Finn* may not be challenged from the right, it faces censorship from the left – from well-meaning individuals who identify as progressive who misread the novel as bolstering the racism that it attacks.

Since the late 1950s *Huckleberry Finn* has been frequently banished from US-American classrooms. Although its repeated use of an offensive racial slur often figures in these bans, the characterization of Jim is often just as central. Students at the University of Massachusetts in 1966 protested the presence of Jim in their

classrooms arguing that they found his character “embarrassing” (“‘Huckleberry’ ‘hit’”). In 1994, Texas State Senator Royce West, who had sponsored a bill in the legislature that would have prevented any state funds from being spent on *Huckleberry Finn*, told an interviewer that parents did not view Jim as a positive role model for their children (qtd. in Fishkin, *Lighting Out* 114–16). In 2003, the book was challenged near Seattle, Washington, because, as one student put it, Twain portrayed Jim in a manner that was “degrading and denigrating toward African Americans” (Mitchell). In 2019, two New Jersey General Assembly members initiated a resolution to prevent the book from being taught in the state, because it “can cause students to feel upset, marginalized, or humiliated” (Anandanayagam).

Jim’s presence in US classrooms has been challenged in Arizona, California, Connecticut, Florida, Illinois, Iowa, Kansas, Maryland, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, Mississippi, New Jersey, New York, Oklahoma, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Texas, Virginia, Washington, and elsewhere. The parents and others behind these challenges argue that the book promulgates racist stereotypes rather than undermining them. They charge that Jim is a character drawn from minstrelsy and claim that he is presented in a manner that demeans, diminishes, and denigrates him – that shows him as a proper object of ridicule. But Jim is not drawn from minstrelsy and Twain does not present him as an object of ridicule. Challenging this canard turns out to be more important today than ever before.

As Eric Lott has shown, blackface minstrel shows were a theatrical practice that embodied a contradictory blend of “love and theft” from Black culture by white working-class US-Americans. Born in the 1830s, these shows became the most popular entertainment form in the nineteenth-century United States. They were revues featuring short burlesque skits, sentimental songs, and raucous dancing. The actors were usually white men, their faces “blacked” with burnt cork portraying ludicrous Blacks who were bumptious and boastful, fatuous fools who deserved to be objects of derision, but who were also able to make fun of the upper classes in ways that working-class audiences found appealing. Although early minstrel shows sometimes featured subtle instances of antislavery sentiment, by the time Twain saw his first minstrel shows in Hannibal, St. Louis, New York, San Francisco, and elsewhere, they had come to be undergirded by the pretense “that slavery was amusing, right, and natural” (Lott 4). The Black characters who appeared in minstrel shows were variously stupid, proud, gullible, ignorant, confident, passive, lazy, and impervious to pain. After the Civil War, most minstrel shows featured a deep nostalgia for the bygone plantation era, celebrating it in story and song. Minstrel shows – along with ubiquitous post-Civil War fiction that treated the vanished antebellum world as akin to Eden – helped white Americans forget the brutality inflicted on slaves in that world and

helped them ignore the continuing injustices and indignities imposed on Black Americans in the present (Berret 37–38).

The argument that Jim's character is based on racial stereotypes can be summarized like this: Minstrel shows demeaned Black people. Twain had fond memories of the minstrel shows he saw in his youth (Berret 37–38). Therefore, he crafted Jim in the demeaning image of the stage Negro of the minstrel stage. Many critics since the 1950s have viewed Jim primarily through the lens of the minstrelsy, claiming to identify echoes of minstrel-show dialogues, minstrel-show humor, and minstrel-show language in episodes involving Jim in *Huckleberry Finn*.

But we have to remember that Twain recognized that what minstrel shows presented had little to do with reality. As he wrote in 1873, three years before he began writing *Huck Finn*, “[t]he so-called ‘negro minstrels’ simply misrepresent the thing. I do not think they ever saw a plantation” (Twain, [Letter to Tom Hood](#)). He recognized that minstrels used “a very broad negro dialect.” Why would he use that exaggerated form of speech in a book in which he tells us that he crafted the “Missouri negro dialect’ (and other dialects) “pains-takingly and with the trustworthy guidance and support of personal familiarity with these several forms of speech” (Twain, *Adventures xxxiii*)? Although Twain had enjoyed minstrel shows, he viewed them as fundamentally *artificial* concoctions created as a stylized form of entertainment. The distance between Black life and representations of it on the minstrel stage has been the focus of many scholars in the late twentieth century who have argued that “blackface performance was a fantasy of northern white performers, largely from middle-class homes who knew little or nothing of black life” (Lhamon 6). If “the so-called ‘negro minstrels’ simply misrepresent” the world of antebellum slavery, as Twain said they did, Twain had no reason to base the book's central Black character on the foolish clowns of the minstrel stage. There was no need for him to draw on these artificial concoctions when he had a plethora of authentic real-life models on whom he could draw.

The myth that Black people were stupid was blasted out of the water for Twain by an erudite guide he met in Venice during his first European tour, who was far superior to all the other guides on the trip. Throughout the trip documented in *The Innocents Abroad*, Twain voiced a steady patter of complaints about the stupidity, arrogance, and irritating manner of all of the tour guides the group met but this one (8). The guides constantly repeated boring, pointless anecdotes and were always trying to get the tourists to buy things (Twain, *Innocents* 65–67, 118–23, 163–64, 183). But in Venice he met a guide who was the child of South Carolina slaves, who knew his art history cold, and was bursting with learned insights into Venice's paintings, architecture, and history. His enslaved parents had come to Venice when he was an infant.

Twain wrote that “[h]e is well educated. He reads, writes, and speaks English, Italian, Spanish, and French with perfect facility; he is a worshipper of art and thoroughly conversant with it; knows the history of Venice by heart and never tires of talking of her illustrious career. He dresses better than any of us, I think, and is daintily polite. Negroes are deemed as good as white people in Venice, and so this man feels no desire to go back to his native land. His judgment is correct” (Twain, *Innocents* 240-42). One would be hard pressed to find as admiring a description of any Black person by any white writer in 1869. The terse four words with which this passage concludes sum up the travesty of the ideology of white superiority. The Black guide in Venice is not “as good as” any of the white guides Twain has encountered on the trip: He is vastly superior to them. His very existence made the “stupidity” myth dissolve into thin air (Fishkin, *Jim* 40-42)

The myth of Black stupidity was also challenged for Twain by his friendship with a man possessing one of the greatest minds of the century: the eloquent Frederick Douglass, whom Twain met through his father-in-law, who had helped Douglass escape slavery. And it was challenged as well, by his friendship with George Griffin, a remarkably smart man who worked as a butler in Twain’s home in Hartford – but was also his sounding board, billiard companion, and literary advisor. In addition, there was Twain’s friendship with a man named John Lewis, a tenant farmer in upstate New York, where Twain and his family spent summers. Lewis’s quick thinking helped him save members of Twain’s family from certain death when he managed, against all odds, to stop a runaway horse about to crash the carriage in which they were riding (Fishkin, *Jim* 42-50).

In addition to stating that Black people lacked intelligence, Jefferson maintained that they lacked imagination and creativity. Twain’s rejection of this belief was undoubtedly fueled by his acquaintance with two enslaved men, Daniel Quarles, and a slave named Jerry. Quarles was a gifted, legendary storyteller whom Twain had the privilege of listening to every summer evening during his childhood stays at his uncle’s farm (Twain, *Autobiography*, vol. 1, 1924, 389; see also *Jim’s Journey*). Throughout his career as a writer, Twain aspired to have the same impact on his readers that Quarles’ storytelling had on him. The enslaved man named Jerry introduced Sam Clemens to the possibilities of satire as a tool for social criticism decades before he chose the pen name Mark Twain. Jerry preached wonderfully insightful and inventive sermons from his master’s woodpile for an audience of one: Sam Clemens himself. Fifty years later, Twain would write that listening to each satirical tour de force that Jerry came up with had convinced him that Jerry was the greatest man in the country (Fishkin, *Jim* 59-62).

Jefferson had also asserted that Black people did not feel emotions as white people did. But Twain had been exposed to enough Black suffering and grief to disabuse him of this idea as well. Mary Ann Cord, the cook at Quarry Farm, where Twain and his family spent summers after his marriage, told the moving story of being separated from her last child on the auction block and reunited with him after the war – a story so powerful it inspired Twain’s first contribution to the *Atlantic Monthly*, “A True Story, Repeated Word for Word as I heard It.” Twain was also familiar with the pain conveyed in the slave narratives that he read (Fishkin, *Jim* 50–56).

In short, at a time when the reigning racial ideology of the day maintained that Blacks were mentally inferior, Twain knew personally a number of very smart individuals whose very existence undermined that belief. At a time when a leading encyclopedia denied that Black people felt pain just as white people did, hearing Mary Ann Cord eloquently describe her grief at being separated from her children stood as a powerful antidote, as did examples from Twain’s reading and personal memory. And at a time when the culture largely dismissed Black creativity as inconsequential, Twain’s personal memories of Daniel Quarles, an unmatched storyteller, and of Jerry, an impressive satirist, acted as a counterweight (see also Fishkin, “African Americans”).

But while Twain had good reason to recognize these myths as myths, Huck, the narrator of his novel, does not. Huck largely buys into these myths and stereotypes of Black people, as Twain himself did when he was a child. But the adult Twain who wrote this book does not. A reviewer in the *San Francisco Chronicle* in 1885 shortly after the novel was published understood this, noting that “[r]unning all through the book is the sharpest satire on the ante-bellum estimate of the slave” (qtd. in Fischer 24). Alas, most – but not all – reviewers over the century after the novel came out and beyond have tended to confuse the perspective of the book’s narrator with that of its author and assumed that Twain, as well as Huck, believed that the stereotypes outlined here reflected reality. Most critics failed to appreciate that Twain was trying to undermine these racist assumptions rather than embrace them.

The individuals I have described demolished for Twain the myth that Black people had no ability to think rationally, imagine creatively, or feel pain and grief, and each contributed in distinctive ways to Twain’s characterization of Jim. In addition, three of them were fathers of daughters who mattered deeply to them; Twain himself was such a father when he was writing the novel. Twain’s personal knowledge of these smart, creative, and feeling individuals factored into his crafting Jim as a character who himself is highly intelligent and highly imaginative, and who feels pain and betrayal deeply.

Twain had no need to draw on a form of popular entertainment shot through with nostalgia for the slave South as a key source for a book that mounted a devastating critique of that world. The “racial counterfeit” that was the minstrel show (Lott 38) – with its premise of Black stupidity, its nostalgia for the world of slavery, and its speech as exaggerated and broad as its over-the-top costumes and makeup – was not the key source for Jim that many have claimed it was. Seeing Jim as the stereotypical flat, passive, fatuous “stage Negro” of the minstrel show requires that we overlook the many occasions when he demonstrates knowledge, skill, agency, empathy, intellect, and understanding – as well as the extent to which he can openly show these qualities to white people. Every scene in which Jim is charged with embodying stereotypes drawn from minstrelsy may alternatively be seen to highlight Jim’s perceptive strategies for self-preservation and self-empowerment (Fishkin, *Jim* 77–108), as even a handful of examples can demonstrate.

In the scene in which we meet Jim, in chapter two, for example, Huck and Tom decide to steal a couple of candles from the widow’s kitchen. They find Jim sitting outside under some trees near the kitchen door; they fail to answer when he asks who is there and are sure he has not spotted them. When he starts to snore, they assume he is asleep. They sneak by, steal the candles, and leave a nickel on the kitchen table for them. Then Tom decides to play a prank on Jim by hanging his hat from a tree limb. When the boys leave, Jim palms the nickel. Afterwards, Jim tells a wild, over-the-top story claiming that witches bewitched him, put him into a trance, and rode him all over the state. “And the next time Jim told it he said they rode him down to New Orleans, and after that, every time he told it he spread it out more and more, till by the end he said they rode him all over the world, and tired him most to death.” Jim hung the five-cent piece around his neck and claimed that it was “a charm the devil give to him with his own hands and told him he could cure anybody with it and fetch witches whenever he wanted to. . . .” Slaves would come from all over and give Jim gifts just to get a glimpse of that charm and hear him tell the story of how he got it (Twain, *Adventures* 3–8).

Chadwick Hansen wrote in 1963 that “[t]he Jim of this first episode is a recognizable type-character, the comic stage Negro. . . . We are free to laugh at him, that is, because his ignorance is so sub-human that he cannot feel mental pain” (46). Similarly, Fredrick Woodard and Donnarae MacCann wrote in 1985 that “[t]he swaggering buffoonery of the minstrel clown is represented early in the novel when Jim awakes and finds his hat in a tree (one of Tom’s tricks), and then concocts a tale about witches and the devil. . . . Jim and the other slaves have the superstition-steeped minds that give the whole scene a minstrel flavor” (145). But we get a different

reading of this scene from [Ralph Wiley](#), David Lionel Smith (“[Huck, Jim](#)”), [Robert Paul Lamb](#) – and [Percival Everett](#).

Wiley’s reading is a remarkable blend of criticism and creative writing: his 1997 screenplay *Spike Lee’s Huckleberry Finn* (Fishkin, “[In Praise](#)”). Wiley, a brilliant Black satirist and sportswriter who coauthored all of Spike Lee’s books with him, wrote this screenplay in the hope of persuading his friend Lee to produce it. Although Lee did consider the project seriously, the film was never made. However, Wiley allowed scenes from the screenplay to be published for classroom use, and they have been performed in US classrooms now for more than two decades (Fishkin, *Jim* 346). In Wiley’s screenplay, Huck tells the story, as he does in the book, and the voice-over narrator speaks Huck’s words – but the camera shows us the scene as Jim sees it. In this first scene with Jim, in Wiley’s screenplay (as in the novel) the boys fail to be quiet as they sneak up on Jim: “I fell over a root and made a noise,” Huck tells the viewers (Twain, *Adventures* 6). Wiley notes in the stage directions: “Only a fool would not have seen the boys. So Jim pretends to be one” (qtd. in Fishkin, *Jim* 347).

Most people who heard a noise in the dark that they could not identify would keep listening in silence until they heard it again. They would not announce, “Well, I know what I’s gwyne to do. I’s gwyne to set down heah...ahh!... and listen till I hears it agin” (Wiley qtd. in Fishkin *Jim* 347). The latter behavior – announcing that you are going to listen – is the kind of thing one would say to humor children who think they have managed to hide from you when you know perfectly well where they are. Wiley assumes that Jim is not actually asleep, that he is aware of what is going on around him. Why else would Twain have Huck tell us that “I fell over a root and made a noise” as they are sneaking up on Jim? Or why, the next moment, would he have Huck struggle with not being able to scratch an itch? (Twain, *Adventures* 6). The boys are making a racket, and Jim has heard them.

Interestingly, Percival Everett reads this scene in a similar way in the opening paragraphs of his 2024 novel, *James*, although rather than humoring the children, he is simply behaving as they expect him to behave: “The moon was not quite full but bright, so I could see them as plain as day, though it was deep night.” James performs a stereotypical role because “it always pays to give white folks what they want” (Everett 9). But while Twain has Jim spin a brilliantly creative story about witches and the devil with creativity and confidence, Everett’s James here simply performs the stereotype – he pretends to actually *have* the “superstition-steeped mind” (Everett 10) that Woodard and MacCann accused Twain of giving Jim. Both Jim and James recognize that white people expect them to be superstitious. But Twain’s Jim turns that expectation to his advantage, even managing to get paid for his performance and “most ruined for a servant” (Twain, *Adventures* 6) in the process. He shows himself

to be just as smart as Everett's James even if he does not carry on imaginary conversations with Montaigne and Locke.

Jim's wild tale about being ridden by witches and having seen the devil allows him to sidestep potentially dangerous questions about how he got the nickel. David Lionel Smith observes, Jim has "cleverly exploited the conventions of 'Negro superstition' in order to turn a silly boy's prank to his own advantage. . . . By becoming, in effect, an author, Jim writes himself a new destiny. . . . [I]t is intelligence, not stupidity, that facilitates Jim's triumph" ("Huck, Jim" 109). Huck does not see Jim's creative achievement here for what it is - much as he has trouble seeing Jim for who he really is. A number of critics have the same problem.

Another example is the scene where Huck and Jim discuss King Solomon. Woodard and MacCann call this exchange "minstrel-like repartee" (145). However, Neil Schmitz observes that "Jim has instinctively recognized in Solomon the figure of the slave holder, the white Southerner, who regards the Negro as chattel," recalling "his own children - all the black families, dismembered on the block" (32). Frederick Douglass heard Twain give a reading of the "Sollermun" dialogue in the Congregational Church in Washington, DC, on November 24, 1885, and came backstage to say hello and chat afterwards (Cardwell 22; Lorch 475; Paine, vol. 2, 785). Would Douglass, who deplored minstrel shows and all they stood for, have embraced Twain's performance with the enthusiasm he did if the key number in it involving Jim had struck him as redolent of a minstrel show? Jim is unlettered and ignorant, but he is still smart, and his unexpected response to Huck's tale of Solomon's "wisdom" makes us like and respect him, not ridicule him.

The scene in chapter 15 where Huck and Jim become separated in the fog is another section of the book in which some scholars find echoes of minstrelsy. Jim falls asleep on the raft in despair when he believes Huck is dead. When Jim wakes after the fog and sees Huck next to him, he is overjoyed. But Huck plays a practical joke on Jim and insists that he must have been dreaming. After trying without success to get Huck to admit he is lying, Jim pretends to interpret the alleged dream, as Huck seems to want him to. But when Huck points to the trash that has washed up on the raft during what was clearly an actual storm, Jim waits five minutes and then rebukes him sternly, leading Huck to apologize. Like many critics, Betty Jones sees Jim in this scene as a "sadly comic victim" who is completely fooled by Huck's prank (155) while Woodard and MacCann see him here as the stereotypical "head-scratching darky" (145).

In Wiley's view, however, Jim is not actually fooled by Huck's prank. Wiley believes that Jim - frustrated by Huck's refusal to admit the truth - decides to give him what he is asking for: a clownish, over-the-top, stereotypical performance. In Wiley's

screenplay, the stage directions tell Jim to affect a stronger dialect at this point, as he pretends to be the easily manipulated dupe that Huck wants him to be. This idea is not Wiley's invention, it is Twain's. Twain has Jim call Huck "Boss," a name he has not used before but that would be at home in a minstrel show: "Well, looky here, Boss," Jim says. Jim addresses Huck with this deferential name *twice* in this scene but nowhere else in the book (Twain, *Adventures* 103).

In Wiley's view, Jim behaves in this scene as any parent would who wants to lead a child to admit they are lying: He carefully reconstructs what happened during the night, step by step, giving Huck the chance, many times, to confess his prank – without success. Jim is then silent for a full five minutes as he weighs how to teach this stubborn, insensitive child what was wrong with his behavior. The child needed to be taught a lesson, but he was a white child, after all, and it was not clear how Jim might go about doing that. In Wiley's screenplay, when Jim drops the deceit and points to the trash on the raft, he says,

You was los' en I didn' k'yer no mo' what become er me en d'raf'. En when I wake up en fine you back agin, all safe en soun'. . . en all you wuz thinkin' 'bout wuz how you could make a fool uv ole Jim wid a lie. (*points to detritus on the raft, speaks calmly, clearly*). . .
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 (qtd. in Fishkin, *Jim* 351, original emphasis).

The combination of Jim's affecting a heavier dialect to play the fool that Huck wants to make of him and the long pause he takes before he chastises Huck conveys how self-aware and perceptive Jim actually is during this scene. Wiley sees Jim as a father giving a rebellious adolescent the tutelage he desperately needs but has never had.

Other critics, as well, recognize the significance of Jim's response in this scene. Stephen Railton, for example, writes, "[d]ignity' is too abstract a word for Huck's vocabulary, but Jim's answer is as authentically noble as any speech in Shakespeare." "What Jim insists upon here," Railton continues, "what Huck is made to see as the darkness brightens, is simply [Jim's] manhood. Because he is black, no one else in the novel even suspects it exists" (398). Huck does learn the lesson.

There is also a problem when it comes to cultural and literary sources that are supposedly the roots of scenes involving Jim. The plays of William Shakespeare, for example (a writer with whom Twain was obsessed all his life and especially during the period he wrote *Huckleberry Finn*) turn out to be a likely source for portions of the book involving Jim that critics claim to be derived from minstrelsy (Fishkin, *Jim* 108–09). African spiritual traditions are the most likely source for other scenes allegedly shaped by minstrelsy (Fishkin, *Jim* 84–85). And *The Big Bonanza*, a book that Twain's friend William Wright (who wrote under the pen name Dan DeQuille) composed in part in Twain's home shortly before Twain wrote the novel is also the

probable source for two other scenes often attributed to minstrelsy (Fishkin, *Jim* 109–11). Meanwhile, a section involving the white king and duke, as it turns out, probably does have roots in minstrelsy (Fishkin, *Jim* 76). While minstrelsy was one likely source that shaped aspects of the book, it was not the key source for scenes involving Jim.

Similarly, minstrelsy was not a key source of Jim's language. As I demonstrate, Twain went to great pains to distinguish Jim's "Missouri Negro dialect" from what we might call "minstrelse" – the kind of, in Twain's words, "very broad negro dialect" (*Autobiography*, vol. 2, 294) found in minstrel shows (Fishkin, *Jim* 111–26). Twain listened attentively to Black speakers and carefully tried to capture key characteristics of their speech on the page. In an 1874 letter to William Dean Howells, for example, he had written, "I amend this dialect stuff by talking & talking & *talking* it till it sounds right" (Twain, [Letter to William Dean Howells](#)). Reading Black dialect makes many readers uncomfortable, bringing with it, as it does, all the racist baggage of minstrelsy and caricature. But Twain did not see it that way: He saw it as part of his effort to convey the reality of a particular Black man's world with accuracy and nuance. While most of Twain's white contemporaries who wrote Black dialect did so for comic purposes, Twain did not. Mary Ann Cord (as well as other Black speakers he knew) had taught him that Black dialect was as capable as any other dialect of anything that so-called "standard English" could do (Fishkin, *Jim* 52–56).

For example, in order to demonstrate the capaciousness of African American Vernacular English (AAVE) to convey important information, in 1882 Twain wrote his publisher, James R. Osgood, a letter detailing kinds of editorial judgments he was willing to accept in a manuscript he was about to send. "The letter would be unremarkable were it not for the fact that Twain decided to write it entirely in what Osgood would have recognized as Black dialect" (Fishkin, *Jim* 112–13). Furthermore, Twain emphasizes the care with which he crafted Jim's speech in the "explanatory" that opens the book: "In this book a number of dialects are used, to wit: the Missouri negro dialect; the extremest form of the backwoods Southwestern dialect; the ordinary 'Pike County' dialect; and four modified varieties of this last. The shadings have not been done in a haphazard fashion, or by guesswork; but pains-takingly, and with the trustworthy guidance and support of personal familiarity with these several forms of speech" (Twain, *Adventures xxxiii*).

Twain crafted Jim's speech with great care. In his notes for the novel, Twain had told himself, "Let Jim say putty for 'pretty' and nuvver for 'never'" (Twain manuscript qtd. in Doyno 122). But, as Victor Doyno observes, when Twain was revising the emotionally powerful scene in which Jim expresses his guilt over having hit his deaf daughter for not doing as she was told before he knew she was deaf, Twain first followed the rule he had come up with for Jim's speech, writing "de chile nuvver

move!," but then crossed out "nuvver" and substituted "never" – a "highly unusual modification of dialect form to standard language" (122). Jim says "never" instead of "nuvver" a second time in this passage (122). After Jim describes yelling "pow! Jus as loud as I could yell," Twain has Jim say, "'*She never move!* O, Huck, I bust out a-cryin', en grab her up en my arms en say, 'Oh, de po' little thing! de Lord God Amighty fogive po' ole Jim, kaze he never gwyne to fogive hisseff as long as he live! O, she was plumb deaf en dumb, Huck, plumb deaf en dumb – en I'd ben a-treat'n her so!'" (Twain, *Adventures* 202). In the left margin, near "She never move!," Twain had written, uncharacteristically, a note to the copy editor in pencil: "'This expression shall not be changed'" (qtd. in Doyno 122). Twain always has Jim say "never." In minstrel shows the word "river" appears as "ribber," and the word "give" appears as "gib." But Jim never says "ribber" or "gib" but always "river" and "give" (Fishkin, *Jim* 116–18). There are dozens of other examples of the pains Twain took to differentiate Jim's speech from "minstrelese" (Fishkin, *Jim* 116–21).

Several scholars have studied in depth the Black English Twain writes in this novel. For example, after a systematic study of Jim's use of thirty-one specific features of African American Vernacular English, Lisa Cohen Minnick concluded that "Twain incorporated features that have been identified with African American speakers in the scholarship, and he did so in a way that reveals his understanding of . . . the phonology and grammar associated with black speech." In Minnick's view, "the evidence that Twain actually uses the depiction of Jim's speech to disparage him is simply not found in the text of the novel" (66–67, 73). After undertaking a similar study, Anne Lea Ryan concluded that "Twain portrayed Jim's dialect realistically and respectfully and did not intend to create racial controversy through the use of his dialect" (16). But both Twain and Jim seem to have fallen victim to a phenomenon Holger Kersten has observed, writing about nineteenth-century US-American literature: "Critics assume that the selection of dialect as a literary medium implies derogatory if not racist intentions" (95). While that assumption may be correct in some cases, it is not relevant here. Whether we focus on the lexicon, grammar, or orthography of Jim's speech, Twain wanted to make sure that Jim most definitely did not sound like someone in a minstrel show. His many corrections in the manuscript – even his marginal instructions to the copy editor – all bear this out.

The assumption that minstrel shows were the most significant influence shaping Twain's creation of the main Black character in the novel is both facile and misleading. Sterling Brown understood this in 1937, calling Jim "the best example in nineteenth century fiction of the average Negro slave. . . . And he is completely believable" (*The Negro* 68). This comment is all the more significant given that Brown was widely known to be "bluntly honest and unhesitant to confront racists insult for insult," as

David Smith reminds us (“Black Critics” 119). Some thirty years later, Brown’s words would be echoed by Langston Hughes, Milton Meltzer, and Charles Eric Lincoln, who called Jim “one of the best portraits in American fiction of an unlettered slave clinging to the hope of freedom” (Hughes et al. 235). Critics’ obsession with viewing Jim through the lens of the minstrel show reveals their own limitations rather than Twain’s. I, too, initially misunderstood and misread Jim, making comments published in the 1990s about his having a “diminished voice.” In 1993, I referred to his voice as “cramped within boundaries as confining as his prison-shack . . . It is not a voice with which any student, black or white, whose self-esteem is intact, would choose to identify for very long” (Fishkin, *Was Huck Black?* 107). I reject that view completely now and say so clearly in my new book (Fishkin, *Jim* 124). I also disagree with the idea that students would not want to identify with Jim, as chapter seven of my book, devoted to Jim in the high school classroom, makes clear (Fishkin, *Jim* 9-10, 311-37; see also [Nogowski](#)).

I argue that Twain saw Jim as intelligent, responsible, quick thinking, and mature – as someone as smart and resourceful as, say, George Griffin or John Lewis. Twain also saw Jim as a parent who cared about his children as much as Mary Ann Cord cared about hers and was as pained as she was when she was forced to be separated from them. And Twain saw Jim as a creative storyteller as talented as Daniel Quarles or Jerry. Twain crafted Jim as a smart and resourceful figure, as a man with intelligence and agency, as a creative storyteller, and as a caring father weighed down with guilt about his own children who deals with that guilt by protecting two children who are not his own. But many readers have trouble seeing past the racist stereotypes ubiquitous in Twain’s world and still present in our own (Fishkin, *Jim* 66-67; see also [Nogowski](#)). Teachers should not teach this novel if they are unprepared to grapple with the history it engages and the irony through which it does so – with Twain’s decision to satirize racism by telling the story through the eyes of a child too innocent to call out the flaws of the racist society in which he lives.

However, teachers who do feel equipped to do this should not be stymied in this effort by challenges from the right *or* from the left (Fishkin, *Jim* 341-56). I include in my book an appendix of “Notes for Teachers” designed to simplify the challenges of teaching the novel (Fishkin, *Jim* 341-56). *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* offers a critical lens on the United States’ complex history, challenging readers to confront uncomfortable truths about racism and societal norms; it has the capacity to engage them in profound discussions of race, morality, and empathy. At a time when teaching the accurate history of US-American racism is under attack and when a book that can illuminate that history and do much, much more is often banned, the issues addressed in this article are more important than ever.

Keeping this extraordinary novel in our classrooms can help students appreciate how racism distorts our understanding of the past, of the present, and of each other. This novel can illuminate in fresh and powerful ways the brutal nature of the racist roadblocks (subtle and unsubtle, intentional and unintentional, small and large) that prevent so many from living their best lives.

Huckleberry Finn evokes – perhaps as only a work of art can – both the boldness of founding a nation on the ideals laid out in the Declaration of Independence and the brazen hypocrisy that allowed those ideals to be violated so fully from the start. It is perhaps unsurprising that the persistence of racism in our world has fostered a myopia that has prevented so many from recognizing Jim’s full humanity until now. Jim’s astute ability to weigh the complexities of any situation is, indeed, remarkable – as is his compassion, his sense of justice, his creativity, his generosity, strength, and integrity – and his refusal to let a world that denies that he is even human constrain his ability to love. Twain’s daring experiment of presenting Jim through the eyes of a child with such a limited understanding of what he is seeing assumes that we, as readers, will understand things that Huck never did. Even at the time he wrote this novel, Twain trusted his readers to see through the whitewashed history of the United States’ racist past that was being presented as truth and that has continued to be foisted upon each new generation ever since. He trusted them to read the story he placed before them and to recognize the phenomenon that he would later call the “lie of silent assertion” – “the silent assertion that there wasn’t anything going on in which humane and intelligent people were interested . . . and are engaged by their duty to try to stop” (Twain, “My First Lie” 440, 441). Do we have the courage to honor that trust, to be the readers he hoped we could be? The jury is still out.

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About the Author

Shelley Fisher Fishkin is the Joseph S. Atha Professor of Humanities, professor of English, and professor (by courtesy) of African and African American Studies at Stanford University. She is the author, editor or co-editor of fifty books, including *Jim: The Life and Afterlives of Huckleberry Finn's Comrade*; *Writing America: Literary Landmarks from Walden Pond to Wounded Knee*; *Lighting Out for the Territory: Reflections on Mark Twain and American Culture*; *Feminist Engagements: Forays into American Literature and Culture*; *Was Huck Black? Mark Twain and African American Voices*; and *From Fact to Fiction: Journalism and Imaginative Writing in America*. She is editor of the twenty-nine-volume *Oxford Mark Twain* and *The Mark Twain Anthology: Great Writers on his Life and Work*. She was awarded the Bode-Pearson Lifetime Achievement Award by the American Studies Association and the John Tuckey Lifetime Achievement Award from the Center for Mark Twain Studies. In 2019 American Studies Association established the "Shelley Fisher Fishkin Prize for International scholarship in Transnational American Studies" in her honor.

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