Introduction

Blues for Huckleberry

> Improvisation is the ultimate human (i.e., heroic) endowment . . . flexibility or the ability to swing (or to perform with grace under pressure) is the key to that unique competence which generates the self-reliance and thus the charisma of the hero.
>
> —Albert Murray, The Hero and the Blues

> Without the presence of blacks, [Huckleberry Finn] could not have been written. No Huck and Jim, no American novel as we know it. For not only is the black man a co-creator of the language that Mark Twain raised to the level of literary eloquence, but Jim's condition as American and Huck's commitment to freedom are at the moral center of the novel.
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> —Ralph Ellison, "What America Would Be Like Without Blacks," in The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison

> When Huck opens that window to take off from home, the reader has the same thrill of anticipation one feels after hearing the first few bars of a Miles Davis solo.
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> —Peter Watrous of the New York Times (personal conversation)

As an African-American who came of age in the 1960s, I first encountered Huckleberry Finn in a fancy children's edition with beautifully printed words and illustrations on thick pages, a volume bought as part of a mail-order series by my ambitious parents. While I do not remember ever opening that particular book—as a junior high schooler I was more drawn to readings about science or my baseball heroes—I do recall a sense of pride that I owned it: that a classic work was part of the furniture of my bedroom and of my life. Later I would discover Twain's ringing definition of a classic as "something everyone wants to have read but nobody wants to read."

Like many others of that generation—and then I suppose of every American generation that has followed—I was assigned the book as part of a college course. Actually I was taught the book twice, once in a course in modern fiction classics (along with Cervantes, Mann, Conrad, Wolfe, Faulkner), then in a course tracing great themes in American literature, including those of democracy and race. In both these classes, Mark Twain and his Huckleberry Finn appeared as heroic and timeless exemplars of modernism in terms of both literary form and progressive political thought. Here was an American novel told not from the standpoint or in the language of Europe but from the position of the poor but daring and brilliant river-rat Huck, whose tale was spun in lingo we could tell was plain Americanese—why, anybody could tell it, as the boy himself might say.

His was a story of eager flight from the rigidities of daily living, particularly from those institutions that as youngsters we love to hate: family, school, church, the hometown itself. That white Huckleberry's flight from commonplace America included a deep, true friendship with black Jim, who began the novel as a slave in Huck's adopted family, proved Huck's trust of his own lived experience and feelings: his integrity against a world of slavery and prejudice based on skin color. Huck's discovery that he was willing to take the risks involved in assisting Jim in his flight from slavery connected the youngster with the freedom struggle not only of blacks in America but of all Americans seeking to live up to the standards of our most sacred national documents. Here was democracy without the puffery, e pluribus unum at its most radical level of two friends from different racial (but very similar cultural) backgrounds loving one another. Here too was a personal declaration of independence in action, an American revolution (and some would say also a civil war) fought first within Huck's own heart and then along the Mississippi River, the great brown god that many have said stands almost as a third major character in this novel of hard-bought freedom and fraternity, of consciousness and conscientiousness.

I understood these themes as supporting the civil rights movement of that era, and, further, as significant correctives to sixties black nationalism, which too often left too little space, in my view, for black-white friendships and, alas, for humor, without which no revolution I was fighting for was worth the sacrifice. In those days,

Huckleberry Finn was also part of my arsenal of defenses against those who questioned my decision to major in literature during the black revolution; for me, it served to justify art itself not just as entertainment but as equipment for living and even as a form of political action. For here was a book whose message of freedom had been so forcefully articulated that it was still sounding clearly all these years later, all over the world. What was I doing in the 1960s, 1970s, and beyond that was as courageous and selfless (and yet as individually self-defining)—as profoundly revolutionary—as Huck's act of helping to rescue Jim?

And yet I do have to say that even in those student days of first discovering this novel, I was troubled by the figure of Jim, with whom, from the very beginning, I found it impossible to identify. Though as a college sophomore or junior I wrote an earnest essay in defense of Jim as a wise man whose "superstitions" could be read as connections to a proud "African" system of communal beliefs and earned adjustments to a turbulent and dangerous new world, it was definitely Huck whose point of view I adopted, while Jim remained a shadowy construction whose buffoonery and will to cooperate with white folks' foolishness embarrassed and infuriated me. Then too the novel's casual uses of the word "nigger" always made my stomach tighten. Years later, when I read about black students, parents, and teachers who objected to the novel's repeated use of this inflammatory word, I knew just what they meant. Lord knows, as a student I had sat in classes where "Nigger Jim" (that much-bandied title never once used by Twain but weirdly adopted by innumerable teachers and scholars, including some of the best and brightest, as we shall see) was discussed by my well-intentioned white classmates and professors whose love of the novel evidently was unimpeded by this brutal language. (Did some of them delight in the license to use this otherwise taboo term? What might that have meant?)

Using some of these ideas about democracy and race (including some of my doubts and questions), for fifteen years I taught Huckleberry Finn at Howard, at Wesleyan, and then at Barnard. And then somehow my battered paperback, my several lectures, and my fat folder of articles by some of the novel's great critics—Eliot, Hemingway, Ellison, Trilling, Robert Penn Warren, Henry Nash Smith—all were set aside. I suppose that one problem was simply that the book was taught too much—that

students came to me having worn out their own copies already. And too often they seemed to respond not to the book itself but to bits and pieces of the classic hymns of critical (and uncritical) praise, grist for the term-paper-writer and standardized-test-taker's mill. In recent years, when I wanted to teach Twain again, I turned to the novel Pudd'nhead Wilson, with its own tangled problems of racial and national masks and masquerades; to short fiction and essays (including perhaps his funniest piece of writing, "Fenimore Cooper's Literary Offenses"; see "For Further Reading"), and to The Mysterious Stranger, in which wry, darkly wise Satan drops in on a hamlet very much like the ones of Twain's best-known fictions, including Huckleberry Finn. One of Satan's messages is close to Huck's, too: that it is better to be dead than to endure the ordinary villager's humdrum (and very violent) life.

To introduce the present edition, I returned to find The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn more deeply troubling than ever but nonetheless mightily alluring—in some ways more alluring now that its experiments and failures were so evident. In this fresh review of the novel, I have found it helpful to invoke certain of Edward Said's terms for contemporary reading: Read receptively, he advises, but also read resistantly.[1] This critical strategy of armed vision presumes that there are no perfect literary achievements, that one takes even the biblical gospel, "whenever it's poss'ble, with a grain of salt." Such an attitude of resistant receptivity is particularly apt for Huckleberry Finn precisely because it has been swallowed whole as a perfect book on the basis of which Mark Twain is "sole, incomparable, the Lincoln of our literature."[2] As Jonathan Arac has so eloquently argued,[3] it has been idolized and "hypercannonized"—included in every U.S. literary reading list and anthology as an unassailable monument by some who assume that those who raise questions about it either have not read the masterpiece, or cannot do so. One of the attractions of rereading this book is that with the work of Arac and others, we as readers are freer than ever not just to worship Twain's creation but to explore it anew—receiving and resisting as we go.

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[1] Edward Said used these terms in a lecture at Columbia University in April 2000.
[2] William Dean Howells, My Mark Twain, New York: Harper and Brothers, 1910, p. 101.
[3] Jonathan Arac, Huckleberry Finn as Idol and Target: The Functions of Criticism in Our Time, Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1997.

I will start, then, with what I found troubling in Huckleberry Finn, and afterward—at the risk of adding to the frenzy of hyperapproval—I will explain why I have decided to teach it again, not just as a problematic but teachable book but as one that still moves me greatly as a reader who loves words and sentences, characters and plotlines. And as a reader who loves the blues—but I'm getting ahead of my story. Trouble comes first: aspects of the novel to wonder about as we wander through the book, to resist.

The first problem is one I have mentioned already: the book's constant use of the word "nigger." Not as student now but as teacher, I find this offense to be glaring: What would I do about the use of the word in my classroom? What is there to tell eighth-grade readers and their parents and teachers—the first wave of those confronting the novel as a classroom exercise? I hate censorship, and would not remove the book from any library shelf or curriculum, even at the middle-school level; nor would I recommend deleting or translating the word in expurgated editions just for kids. To readers young and old, I would point out that "nigger" was used as part of casual everyday speech by whites and blacks in the South and also in the West and the East and the North. Sometimes it was willfully hurled as an assault weapon, sometimes as mere thoughtless prattle (and, of course, ignorant assaults at times can hurt as much as any others); sometimes it was tossed off by whites with well-intentioned affection-cum-condescension; sometimes by whites who lived at the borders of black communities and who felt their proximity granted them the insiders' privilege (always a precarious presumption) to use a term usually not tolerated from outsiders. For blacks, then and now, the word has been used within the group, just as anti-Semitic terms are used by Jews themselves, in part as a strategy to disarm the enemy. Within the black circle, "nigger" could invoke bravado and/or camaraderie and/or even flirtation: to be called a "pretty nigger" in the black Washington, D.C., of my youth could be the sweetest of compliments. (Though in the jujitsu world of black language that term could be reversed into one of disdain: "pretty nigger" as weak, absurd peacock.)

But my point is that in Twain's world of the 1870s and 1880s (when he was writing Huckleberry Finn), in the world of the novel itself—roughly the 1840s—and, crucial to note, in our own precarious world, the word "nigger" is and was, among these

other things, a word of deepest racial hatred, a willful assault. In class discussions of the novel and in writing about it, let the students use the term warily, in quotation marks, in recognition that somebody in the class could take it as a deeply hurtful act of indifference, ignorance, or outright viciousness; and that at the next turn of the screw a nasty racial term may be hurled back at the hurler! For my part, as I teach the book this year at Columbia University, I will be ready with materials on the word's history, in literary and cultural arenas beyond literature. Two important sources will be Jonathan Arac's book, along with Randall Kennedy's study Nigger: The Strange Career of a Troublesome Word[4]—in which, among other things, Kennedy lists dozens of court cases in which a black defendant in an assault or murder case has claimed as a defense that the white victim of an attack had started the fight by spitting out this one nasty word.

In defense of Twain's language, I would remind readers that we are getting Twain's creation of Huck's tale in Huck's voice, and that, as many have argued, we should read Huck's uses of "nigger" not only as evidence of authentic historical talk, however unpleasant, but as Twain's relentless, well-turned irony. (With "irony" referring to an aside that is understood by reader and writer, and perhaps at times by a particularly knowing character like Huck, but not by most of a work's characters.) One central irony here is that even a boy who strikes us as pure in heart and thoroughly genuine in his love for Jim uses the term in sentence after sentence—that's how deeply ingrained the language of American racism was (and, sadly, is). In one of the novel's most unforgettable scenes, Twain's irony is most effectively pointed. In chapter 32, Huck, masquerading as Tom Sawyer, pretends to have just arrived on a riverboat that was delayed by an explosion on board. Aunt Sally asks, "Anybody hurt?" "No'm," is Huck's quick reply. "Killed a nigger." "Well, it's lucky," said Aunt Sally, "because sometimes people do get hurt" (page 185). Even motherly Aunt Sally, who seems well-meaning enough, is at home not only with this term "nigger" but also with the news of the death of an African American, who in her language is neither a human being nor worth a sigh of remorse. Further, Huck's use of "nigger" in this instance adds detail to his cleverly turned lie, and asserts a sense of (white) community with Aunt Sally to hide his real intention of

[4] Randall Kennedy, Nigger: The Strange Career of a Troublesome Word, New York: Pantheon Books, 2002.

freeing Jim. As Huck suspected, Sally and family have bought Jim and kept him hidden as part of their own plan to sell him down the river. Behind what at first seems like her wonderful good manners lurks the monster of race hatred, unabashed.

Clearly, if in this scene we change the racial designation to "Negro" or "negro" (the more common nineteenth-century usage), we would lose the violence of the word "nigger"; but it is also true that with the emendation we would sacrifice the deepest, most slashing irony that Twain turns against the word and the world of prejudice underlying it.

The second problem I want to raise also involves race—the portrayal of Jim. Here a whole book-length essay could follow. But for this space my central complaint is that in this realistic novel, Jim is just not real enough, not true enough either to historical type or to human dimensions that transcend historical type. I'll start by observing that the greatest critic of his era on this question of African-American portraiture, Sterling A. Brown, disagrees with me on this point, and in fact has strongly commended Twain's portrait of Jim. Like Huck and Tom, writes Brown, Jim is "drawn from life. He is no longer the simple-minded, mysterious guide in the ways of dead cats, doodle-bugs and signs of The Adventures of Tom Sawyer. Running away from old Miss Watson who. . . 'pecks on' him all the time, treats him 'pooty rough' and wants a trader's eight hundred dollars for him, Jim joins Huck on the immortal journey down the Mississippi."[5] Brown finds Jim's humor rich, not the stuff of minstrel buffoonery alone: "His talk enlivens the voyage. He is at his comic best in detailing his experience with high finance—he once owned fourteen dollars. But the fun is brought up sharp by Jim's 'Yes—en I's rich now, come to look at it. I owns mysef, en I's wuth eight hund'd dollars. I wisht I had de money, I wouldn't want no mo'" (p. 41).

But as Brown observes, "he did want more. He wanted to get to a free state and work and save money so he could buy his wife, and they would both work to buy their children, or get an abolitionist to go steal them." In Brown's evaluation, "Jim is the best example in nineteenth century fiction of the average Negro slave (not the tragic mulatto or the noble savage), illiterate, superstitious, yet clinging to his hope for freedom, to his love for his own. And he is completely believable, whether arguing that Frenchmen should talk like people, or doing most of the work on the raft, or forgiving Huck whose

[5] Sterling Brown, The Negro in American Fiction, 1937, reprint: New York: Atheneum, 1969, pp. 67–68.

trick caused him to be bitten by a snake, or sympathizing with the poor little Dauphin, who, since America has no kings, 'cain't git no situation.'" Here is parental tenderness and shame as Jim "tells of his little daughter, whom he had struck, not knowing she disobeyed because she had become deaf from scarlet fever." Says Jim: "Oh, she was plumb deef en dumb, Huck, plum deef en dumb—en I'd been a-treatin' her so!"[6]

Likewise, in his first writings about Huckleberry Finn, the novelist Ralph Ellison strongly defends Twain's presentation of Jim (whom incredibly even he, Ellison, sometimes calls "Nigger Jim") as "not only a slave but a human being, a man who in some ways was to be envied." Echoing Brown, Ellison praises Jim's portraiture, particularly its inclusion of faults that humanize: "Twain, though guilty of the sentimentality common to humorists, does not idealize the slave. Jim is drawn in all his ignorance and superstition, with his good traits and his bad. He, like all men, is ambiguous, limited in circumstance but not in possibility." For Ellison, what's most significant is Jim's role as Twain's shining "symbol of humanity, and in freeing Jim, Huck makes a bid to free himself of the conventionalized evil taken for civilization by the town."[7]

Yet Ellison, writing in the 1950s, more than ten years after his first defense of Jim, also began to find fault with Jim's portrayal. On second thought, the figure was so close, he said, to the tradition of blackface minstrelsy—that form of American theater best known for its feature of white men wearing burned cork on their faces to imitate, typically in grotesque exaggerations, black American forms of song and dance—that black readers keep their distance from Huckleberry's black friend. Recalling his reading the book as a boy, Ellison says, "[I] could imagine myself as Huck Finn (I so nicknamed my brother), but not, though I racially identified with him, as Nigger Jim [sic; recall again that this was never Mark Twain's phrase], who struck me as a white man's inadequate portrait of a slave."[8] Elsewhere, Ellison said that Twain evidently did not calculate blacks among the readers of his novel: "It was a dialogue between . . . a white American novelist of good heart, of democratic vision, one dedicated to values . . . and white readers,

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[6] Brown, p. 68.
[7] Reprinted in The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison, edited by John F. Callahan, New York: Modern Library, 1995, p. 88.
[8] Ralph Ellison, "Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke," reprinted in The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison, p. 112.

primarily," he said. And Twain's failure as an artist, in this view, is that he relied too much on the barroom joke and minstrel show for images of blacks rather than seeking true images, not only from lived experience but from prior forms of literature, depicting blacks and other figures from beneath the social hierarchy. To this degree, Twain was "not quite as literary a man as he was required to be," wrote Ellison, "because he could have gone to Walter Scott, to the Russians, to any number of places, and found touchstones for filling out the complex humanity of that man who appeared in his book out of his own imagination, and who was known as Jim."[9]

In her eloquent commentary on Huckleberry Finn, the novelist Toni Morrison finds the solution to Huck's loneliness and despair to be not the godlike river—with its own terrible unpredictability—but the companionship of Jim. Floating on their raft, free from the troubles of the shore, Huck and Jim talk quietly, and their communion together is "so free of lies it produces an aura of restfulness and peace unavailable anywhere else in the novel."[10] But given the real distance between blacks and whites in America, Morrison says, so extreme today and infinitely more so a hundred-plus years ago, this wonderful friendship is doomed, and as savvy southerners, Jim and Huck know in advance that it is doomed. Morrison says that this inevitable split between the two friends, the novel's underlying tragedy, helps explain why Twain presented Jim in such exaggeratedly outsized stereotyped terms—lest Huck or the reader get too close to him. "Anticipating this loss may have led Twain to the over-the-top minstrelization of Jim,"

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[9] Conversations with Ralph Ellison, edited by Maryemma Graham and Amritjit Singh, Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1995, p. 172. Some of Ellison's mixture of feeling about Twain's creation is suggested in Ellison's novel Invisible Man, New York: Vintage Books, 1972, in which a white character named Emerson, son of a company tycoon, reveals to Invisible Man a letter that has kept him running in circles. "With us it's still Jim and Huck Finn," Emerson says to the young black man. "A number of my friends are jazz musicians, and I've been around," he goes on. "I'm Huckleberry, you see." Thus white Emerson's gesture of camaraderie, the moral action, must be discerned through a screen of well-meaning condescension in which Invisible Man is ironically saddled with the starkly limited role of Jim—a now-realistic, now-minstrel figure whom black readers barely recognize as one of their own. To compound the irony—and perhaps to underscore Ellison's sense of Twain's—Invisible Man sees a black couple in Harlem evicted onto the pavement along with their belongings, including "a pair of crudely carved and polished bones, 'knocking bones,' used to accompany music at country dances, used in black-faced minstrels; the flat ribs of a cow, a steer or sheep, flat bones that gave off a sound, when struck, like heavy castanets (had he been a minstrel?) or the wooden block of a set of drums" (p. 265). These evidences of a minstrel past, of connection to this tradition, may be distasteful, but they figure as part of black identity, too, as we recall that not only white men but black men blacked-up for minstrel shows. Distasteful as it may be, these evidences of minstrelsy are part of black American (and white American) identity.

[10] Morrison, Toni, "Re-Marking Twain," reprinted in Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, edited by Susan K. Harris, Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2000, p. 377.

writes Morrison. “Predictable and common as the gross stereotyping of blacks was in nineteenth-century literature, here, nevertheless, Jim’s portrait seems unaccountably excessive and glaring in its contradictions—like an ill-made clown suit that cannot hide the man within.”

So as Said-trained readers we receive Jim through this absurd stereotyped suit—receive his humanity, his fatherly sense of responsibility for Huck, his courage, family care, and industriousness, and wisdom—just as we find it. But it is also useful to resist the idea that Jim is thoroughly realistic, that black men of his time were typically this simplistic, docile, or full of minstrel-show-like patter. As we resist, we might fruitfully consider the historical backdrop of the minstrel stage, and the motives for white authors like Twain in creating such true-false black images at the moral center of their work.

Another problem, unrelated to realistic portraiture as such, also weighed down my rereading of Huckleberry Finn. I refer to the book’s final chapters, in which Tom Sawyer reappears and invents a score of schemes that delay and imperil the freeing of Jim. In the key instance of Huckleberry Finn’s “hypercanonization,” Hemingway wrote these famous sweeping words about the novel: “All modern American literature comes from one book by Mark Twain called Huckleberry Finn. . . . It’s the best book we’ve had. All American writing comes from that. There was nothing before. There has been nothing as good since.” Hemingway’s other key sentences, hidden in the ellipsis above, are usually not quoted: “If you read it you must stop where the Nigger Jim [there it is again: Hemingway’s phrase, not Twain’s] is stolen from the boys. That is the real end.”[11] While I strongly agree with those who upbraid Hemingway for recommending that the reader stop before Jim is free—and thus missing the moral center of the work—I agree with Hemingway that the novel gets infuriatingly dull once not Huck but Tom is steering the way toward freedom. And yet here too it is useful to consider the satirical commentary that might be said to go with Tom’s outrageous interferences. Could Tom’s delays and his self-serving play with Jim when he knew the man had been freed already comprise Twain’s stinging comment on the process of freeing blacks from slavery—a clumsy process that some would say is still haltingly in process? And might Tom’s absurd, by-the-book reliance on purported precedents comprise a telling commentary on the U.S.

[11] Green Hills of Africa, 1935, reprint: New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1953, p. 22.

legal system not only during slavery but in Twain's own time, when the gains of Reconstruction were undermined by compromises, and when the rights of black citizens were abridged, in the Supreme Court decision called Plessy v. Ferguson, such that constitutional sanction was given to virtually all forms of racial segregation.[12] The book slows down, then, to suggest the miserable slowness of the process of gaining black freedom in America—stuck in a mire of what might be termed Tom Sawyerism. We can't stop reading until the novel's end, but these last chapters are an agony!

What's left to recommend in this novel full of problems? Having resisted so much in the book, what do we gain when we read it with an attitude of receptivity? To offer an answer, I'm going to risk another piece of autobiographical reflection. For the past ten years, in my own scholarship and teaching, I have been exploring the impact of blues-idiom music on American life and literature. This new intellectual work grew out of my interest in black arts movement writers of the 1960s and 1970s, whose poetry and prose were often blues- and jazz-inflected, and in writers like Ralph Ellison, Jack Kerouac, and Langston Hughes, whose blues/jazz writing of the 1940s and 1950s (and in the case of Hughes, also of the 1920s and 1930s) had shown the way. Was it possible to think of Huckleberry Finn as a blues novel in the tradition of Ellison's Invisible Man? (Ellison always named Twain as a key influence, despite the problems he saw in the great novel.) Was it conceivable that a novel written more than a hundred years before Toni Morrison's Jazz was nonetheless also infused with the spirit of the musical form called the blues, and that this musical connection helped to define why, at least for me, Twain's book has continued to have such resonance so long after its creation?[13]

Sitting in my English Department office at Columbia University with blues-master Robert Johnson on the CD player, I continued rereading Huckleberry Finn, and the bluesiness of Huck's tale sounded through the book's pages. Listening to Johnson, and then to Bessie Smith and Louis Armstrong and Duke Ellington (yes, to the

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[12] Plessy v. Ferguson was decided in 1896, but the debates were alive as Twain was completing Huckleberry Finn.

[13] It is true that at the time of this novel's creation, the form of music called the blues was just in the process of being created. Twain could not have modeled his narrative after the form, but he used some of its ingredients and habits of mind in the making of his work. Houston A. Baker, in Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), might say that The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn is part of a blues-matrix—that is, it falls within the broad network of the blues form and feeling whether it literally antedates the musical form of the blues itself or not.

instrumental blues as well as to the lyrics of blues singers), I heard a story ringing true to the one in Huckleberry Finn: a journey toward freedom against insurmountable odds undertaken for the sake of yearning for an often impossible love, with the readiness to improvise as the sole means of supporting the hope of that love. After all, Huck's efforts to free Jim do comprise a profound expression of love—an assertion of the principle that for the American promise to be realized, everyone must learn not only to go it alone, to solo, but also to make music together with others, to swing. This, at this profoundest level, is what Huckleberry Finn learns to do. Huck knows how to solo; and like a true bluesman, he learns to swing.

How shall we define the blues as a musical form? Crystallizing in New Orleans and in other cities along the Mississippi River at just about the same time Twain's novel was being composed, the blues typically is a first-person musical narrative or meditation on a life of trial and trouble, delivered in a comic mode. Its stark descriptions of catastrophe are leavened by the music's design as a good-time dance music, rolling and tumbling with the sounds of flirtation and courtship, of the fine-framed "easy rider." Even when the music seems especially made for private reflection ("I'm settin' in the house, with everything on my mind"), its dreams of escape rarely offer mere sentimental flights but instead involve the agonies of confrontation and of real-world trips toward realms where freedom—that impossibly illusive but nonetheless inspiring dream ("how long, how long, has that evening train been gone?")—is pursued with a full heart and a cool head. Rather than softening or turning from life's pains, blues music probes the "jagged grain" of a troublesome existence. Typically concerned with a woman yearning for her man or a man yearning for his woman ("I'm in love with a woman but she's not in love with me"), the blues is a music of romantic longing and, in a larger frame, of desire for connectedness and completion, for spiritual as well as physical communication and love in a world of fracture and disarray. As an improvised form, the blues admits life's dire discouragements and limits to the point of death, but nonetheless celebrates human

continuity: mankind's good-humored resiliency and capacity, in spite of everything, to endure and even to prevail.[14]

In the first chapters of Huckleberry Finn, Jim sets the stage for the book's blueness by explaining to Huck that most of the mysterious natural signs of things to come point to bad luck and trouble—that, in other words, the two of them live in a world infested with the blues. Huck complains that "it looked to me like all the signs was about bad luck, and so I asked him if there warn't any good-luck signs. He says: 'Mighty few—an' dey ain' no use to a body. What you want to know when good luck's a-comin' for? want to keep it off?'" (p. 40) One good luck sign, Jim's hairy body and chest, which indicated he would be rich "bymeby," prompt another of Jim's bluesy reflections: "I's rich now, come to look at it. I owns mysef, en I's worth eight hund'd dollars. I wisht I had de money, I wouldn' want no mo'" (p. 41). And yet of course (as Sterling Brown observed) Jim does want more: He continues on the bad-luck-haunted road toward freedom for himself and for his family.

The more I read, the more I came to feel that this book is full of the blues. Huck Finn is a lonesome, unhappy boy whose reflections on his surroundings are often sublimely sad and lonely. Before taking off on the water with Jim, Huck feels trapped in the house with his night-thoughts of loneliness and death:

> [[EXT]]Then I set down in a chair by the window and tried to think of something cheerful, but it warn't no use. I felt so lonesome I most wished I was dead. The stars was shining, and the leaves rustled in the woods ever so mournful; and I heard an owl, away off, who-whooing about somebody that was dead, and a whippowill and a dog crying about somebody that was going to die; and the wind was trying to whisper something to me and I couldn't make out what it was, and so it made the cold shivers run over me. Then away out in the woods I heard that kind of a sound that a ghost makes when it wants to tell about something that's on its mind and can't make itself understood, and so can't rest easy in its grave and

[14] This definition owes a lot to Ralph Ellison's essay "Richard Wright's Blues," 1945, reprinted in Living with Music, edited by Robert G. O'Meally, New York: Modern Library, 2001, pp. 101–119; and to Albert Murray's Stomping the Blues, New York: McGraw-Hill, 1976.

> has to go about that way every night grieving. I got so down-hearted and scared, I did wish I had some company (p. 5).

Early one morning, before he meets up with Jim, Huck is alone on Jackson's Island, lounging on the grass. Again the scene is rather melancholy. The sad boy is killing time. "I could see the sun out at one or two holes, but mostly it was big trees all about, and gloomy in there amongst them" (p. 32). That night "it got sort of lonesome, and so I went and set on the bank and listened to the currents washing along, and counted the stars and drift-logs and rafts that come down, and then went to bed; there ain't no better way to put in time when you are lonesome; you can't stay so, you soon get over it" (p. 34).

Only with Jim on hand as Huck's friend and partner-in-escape does nature begin to shine. Shared with Jim, even a sudden summer storm on the river strikes the boy as marvelous:

> It would get so dark that it looked all blue-black outside, and lovely; and the rain would thrash along by so thick that the trees off a little ways looked dim and spider-webby; and here would come a blast of wind that would bend the trees down and turn up the pale underside of the leaves; and then a perfect ripper of a gust would follow along and set the branches to tossing their arms as if they was just wild; and next, when it was just about the bluest and blackest—*fst!* it was as bright as glory and you'd have a little glimpse of tree-tops a-plunging about, away off yonder in the storm, hundreds of yards further than you could see before; dark as sin again in a second, and now you'd hear the thunder let go with an awful crash and then go rumbling, grumbling, tumbling down the sky towards the under side of the world, like rolling empty barrels down stairs, where it's long stairs and they bounce a good deal, you know.
>
> "Jim, this is nice," I says. "I wouldn't want to be nowhere else but here. Pass me along another hunk of fish and some hot corn-bread" (p. 42).

Sometimes what Jim and Huck share on the raft is loneliness. Huck's poetic descriptions of their shared sense of the river's soft blue lonely quality stay in the reader's mind. "We

would watch the lonesomeness of the river, and kind of lazy along," he says, "and by-and-by lazy off to sleep. Wake up, by-and-by, and look to see what done it, and maybe see a steamboat, coughing along up stream." And soon "there wouldn't be nothing to hear nor nothing to see—just solid lonesomeness" (p. 100).

At the other end of the novel, in the bright, sunny back country where the Phelps family lives, Huck, alone again, is seized by desolation:

> It was all still and Sunday-like, and hot and sunshiny—the hands was gone to the fields; and there was them kind of faint dronings of bugs and flies in the air that makes it seem so lonesome and like everybody's dead and gone; and if a breeze fans along and quivers the leaves, it makes you feel mournful, because you feel like it's spirits whispering—spirits that's been dead ever so many years—and you always think they're talking about <u>you</u>. As a general thing it makes a body wish <u>he</u> was dead, too, and done with it all (p. 182).

Approaching the Phelps's home, Huck "heard the dim hum of a spinning-wheel wailing along up and sinking along down again; and then I knowed for certain I wished I was dead—for that <u>is</u> the lonesomest sound in the whole world" (p. 183). Considering ways to thwart the villainy of the king and the duke, Huck "slipped up to bed, feeling ruther blue" (p. 150).

Through the course of the novel, Huck has much to feel blue about. His mother is dead, and his father is a drunken back-country vagabond who beats Huck, imprisons him, and tries to steal his money. The women who take him in, Widow Douglas and her sister Miss Watson ("a tolerable slim old maid, with goggles on") offer Huckleberry a genteel home whose rules of tidiness and decorum are so tight-fitting that he cannot wait to get out the window. Up the river, comfortably housed church-going families are pathologically locked into a pattern of killing one another, children included, for reasons some (all?) of them cannot remember. Ruthless "humbugs and frauds," in Huck's phrase, swarm the land: The king and the duke use what they know of human greed and sentimentality to separate the townsfolk from their money; they force Huck (until he tricks the tricksters) to participate in their elaborate ruses. Bullies and cowardly lynch

mobs produce another plague on communities along the river. And, poisoning everything, the region's economy depends on the enslavement of African Americans and on the vigilance of white people in owning them, and then in capturing and returning runaways, should they break free. Pap Finn so resents a well-dressed free black citizen and voter, with his "gold watch and chain, and a silver-headed cane," that he can't cannot see why "this nigger" is not "put up at auction and sold" (p. 24).

Not that Huckleberry is an abstract thinker—the poetry of his language is in its gritty specificity and its rhythm—or even advanced enough to oppose slavery as an institution. But he has learned that Jim is a man and a friend and a wise, guiding father-figure, one of Albert Murray's brown-skin shade-tree uncles,[15] and that he, Huck, will do what it takes to help Jim escape slavery. Though the scene in which Huck decides that he will go to hell, if that's what assisting Jim means, is more comic than tragic—for Huck already has made clear his preference for the exciting bad place over the dull good place trumpeted by Miss Watson[16]—Huck has decided to take whatever risks may be associated with helping Jim. In this sense Huck is a "blues-hero," an improviser in a world of trouble who optimistically faces a deadly project without a script. Remember that the blues is not just a confrontation with a world gone wrong; to that gone-wrongness, the blues answers that the instrumentalist-hero (and the community of blues people identifying with the artist's expression) have just enough resiliency and power to keep on keeping on, whatever the changes in fortune.

Getting Jim free is not a simple business. One might say that Huck and Jim's trip toward freedom is haunted by the blues. Along with the various efforts to recapture and sell Jim back down the river (including those of the duke and the king), consider chapter 15, in which Jim and Huck are separated by a swift current, and then seek each other through a thick wall of fog. As night falls, Huck paddles in a canoe after Jim and the raft, but the boy's hands tremble as he hears what seem to be Jim's answering whoops:

> I whooped and listened. Away down there, somewheres, I hears a small whoop, and up comes my spirits. I went tearing after it, listening sharp to hear it again.

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[15] Murray speaks of this type of American citizen in South to a Very Old Place, New York: McGraw-Hill, 1971.

[16] For this insight, I am indebted to Arac's Huckleberry Finn as Idol and Target, p. 34.

> The next time it come, I see I warn't heading for it but heading away to the right of it. And the next time, I was heading away to the left of it—and not gaining on it much, either, for I was flying around, this way and that and 'tother, but it was going straight ahead all the time (p. 69).

Confused by the swirling current and blinded by the fog, Huck hears calls in front of him and calls behind him, and finds himself in the territory of the blues. "I couldn't tell nothing about voices in a fog, for nothing don't look natural nor sound natural in a fog" (p. 69). Huck keeps still and quiet, listening and waiting. "If you think it ain't dismal and lonesome out in a fog that way, by yourself, in the night, you try it once—you'll see" (p. 70). The hard truth is that in the storm and fog they have passed Cairo, the port leading to the North. They have been pulled south again and will have many more difficult scenarios to endure—in the hands of the king and the duke and then with the Phelps family—before they can light out for freer spaces. These travelers, like the great singer/guitarist Robert Johnson, have "got to keep moverin', the blues fallin' down like rain, blues fallin' down like rain."

This impulse to move on, even without a satisfactory destination or solution in sight, echoes a trainload of rambling blues. In the first chapter, Miss Watson needles Huckleberry about the way he sits and stands. She warns him about hell, "and I said I wished I was there. . . . All I wanted was to go somewheres; all I wanted was a change." As for making it to heaven, Miss Watson's goal: "I couldn't see no advantage in going where she was going," Huck says, "so I made up my mind I wouldn't try for it. But I never said so, because it would only make trouble, and wouldn't do no good" (p. 4). Once he decides to run away both from the widow (and her sister) and from Pap Finn, his plan is sketchy, but it is enough to go on.

And in his bid to make his getaway, Huck is nothing if not a brilliant improviser, in the blues mode.[17] He invents a scenario that convinces the town that he has been killed. With things on the raft "getting slow and dull," Huck decides to go ashore and investigate

[17] As Constance Rourke notes in American Humor: A Study of the National Character (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1931), American storytellers, "streaming nonsense," were nothing if not superb improvisers. Huck, and, as Rourke observes, Twain himself, certainly were also part of this brashly inventive American vernacular tradition.

the talk among the villagers along the river. To hide himself, our restless improviser dresses as a girl and tells a woman whose house he visits that he is Sarah Williams from Hookerville, “all tired out” from walking all the way. Would he like something to eat? “No’m, I ain’t hungry,” declares Huck, cooking up a story. “I was so hungry I had to stop two mile below here at a farm; so I ain’t hungry no more. It’s what makes me so late. My mother’s down sick, and out of money and everything, and I come to tell my uncle Abner Moore” (p. 47-48).

As the woman’s belief in his act as a girl falters, Huck makes use of her suspicion that he actually is a boy-apprentice on the run from a cruel workplace master, which would explain the desperate disguise and secrecy. Warming up to this new role as runaway apprentice, Huck supplies impromptu details:

> Then I told her my father and mother was dead, and the law had bound me out to a mean old farmer in the country thirty mile back from the river, and he treated me so bad I couldn’t stand it no longer; he went away to be gone a couple of days, and so I took my chance and stole some of his daughter’s old clothes, and cleared out (p. 51).

Though the woman is too sharp to fall for his act as a girl, Huck does gain enough of her confidence to obtain the information he has come for—that a posse has a bead on Jim, and that the two of them had better move on quicker than planned. And note the themes of Huck’s invented tales: hunger, sickness, death, abandonment, separation, escape. These are the subjects of the blues; and just as Huckleberry’s larger story, within the fully orchestrated blues sonata that is the novel, is at bottom about freedom, resiliency, and heroic action, so are these, at bottom, the subjects of the blues: the improviser’s capacity, in spite of all disconnection, to connect and to make a break for freedom.

To get help for a gang whose boat Huck has stolen (and because of which theft he feels guilty), the boy stops a man passing on a ferry and pretends to weep before serving up another bluesy tale of woe. “Pap and mam, and sis and Miss Hooker” are all in a peck of trouble, Huck declares, because while making a night visit to Booth’s Island, Miss Hooker and her black servant-woman took a ferry but lost their oar, so the ferry turned

down the river and ran into an old wrecked boat, the Walter Scott. With the servant and the horses lost, Miss Hooker climbed aboard the wreck. “Well,” says Huck, unwinding the yarn, “about an hour after dark, we come along down in our trading-scow, and it was so dark we didn’t notice the wreck till we was right on it; and so we saddle-baggsed”—that is, they were slowed to a complete halt. “Well, we hollered and took on, but it’s so wide there, we couldn’t make nobody hear. So pap said somebody got to get ashore and get help somehow” (p. 63). To seal the deal that the man on the ferry will go to offer help (the stranded gangsters), Huck plays on the ferryman’s greed by claiming, as if incidentally, that Miss Hooker’s uncle is the fabulously wealthy Jim Hornback. Again, underneath Huck’s comedy of manipulation is an orphan’s tragic tale of a family mired and separated by forces beyond their control, a blues in the night on the river. And again there is the larger drama of the quest for freedom and democracy (our nation’s word for love) through quick and artful improvisation.

Like a blues musician, Huck creates in the moment. With fertile imagination, he solos. He fills the vivid breaks in the action with invented phrases, gestures, and disguises, songs of self and community in love and trouble, characters trying to piece things back together, trying to get home, and then again, perhaps better still, to get away, to break free. Sometimes, as a soloist, Huck overblows. For instance, in the scene where Huck pretends that Jim did not actually experience but only dreamed up the storm that left them separated, Huck’s invention is merely self-serving, the smarty stuff of Tom Sawyerism. When Jim sees the trick, his heartfelt words, containing a stinging rebuke, achieve a kind of blues cadence:

> When I got all wore out wid work, en wid de callin’ for you, en went to sleep, my heart wuz mos’ broke bekase you wuz los’, en I didn’ k’yer no mo’ what become er me en de raf’. En when I wake up en fine you back agin’, all safe en soun’, de tears come en I could a got down on my knees en kiss’ yo’ foot I’s so thankful. 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 (p. 73).

At its best, Huck's language is the language of the blues: vigorous, ironical, understated, grainy with detail, swingingly playful. Like the blues-singer, Huck has little patience for sentimental language or the headlong, tearful action that goes with it. This novel's ongoing parody of airy poems about dead relatives, etc., parallels the blues' disdain for the easy tear, sentimentalism's shallow parade of false feelings. Huck's impatience with Tom Sawyer's egocentric reliance on bookish precedents—even when he can't say what some of the highfalutin' words he uses actually mean—is also true to the blues, which favors not only the improviser over the set text but also language that is clear and unabashed. "While you're steppin' out someone else is steppin' in," says a blues by Denise LaSalle—never mind all the Tom Sawyerist indirection and pretense. When real trouble haunts the book—the death of Huck's new friend Buck, for example—Huck does not gush; instead, the situation itself is so eloquent that he can barely speak, there is nothing to say. In the spare diction of the blues, worlds of meaning erupt. These are the strange silences that Toni Morrison notices elsewhere in Huck: He loves Jim too much to make a speech about it. Like a true bluesman, Huck's art is magnificently understated and full of stark but meaningful moments when there is nothing for words to say. His answer to Jim's rebuke about Huck's tricking of Jim after the storm had separated them is not direct; we only know that he was ashamed and that he crept back to apologize.

It is Ellison who directly connects Huck's resolution, the line in the novel's famous last sentence—"to light out for the Territory"—with the blues of Bessie Smith, who, in the "Workhouse Blues" also declares that she's "goin' to the Nation, goin' to the Territor'." In his collection of essays called Going to the Territory,[18] Ellison says that in her song, Smith's will to take off for the "Territory" beyond U.S. borders parallels the journeys of slaves and ex-slaves, and their children, toward the broader freedom and multiplied sense of possibility associated not only with the North but with the Western frontier and, more generally, with the uncharted frontiers of the future. Jim, of course, "lights out," too. Indeed, Mark Twain's master-stroke is connecting Jim's quest for freedom from slavery with the nation's effort to grow up, morally, as Huck is able to do as he lights out for a territory we hope will be more humane and freer for all.

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[18] Ralph Ellison, Going to the Territory, New York: Random House, 1986.

Making this case about this novel as a sort of "Blues for Huckleberry" or "Huck and Jim's Lonesome Raft Blues" does not depend on our straining to show that Huck is black. And yet it is intriguing to remember that, culturally speaking, all the boys and girls of that period (and of our own period) from all the towns like Huck's home in Grant's Landing, Missouri, whatever their specific racial bloodlines, known and unknown, were both black and white—as well as Native American.

Here Bernard De Voto's reflections on Mark Twain's own boyhood can help us understand Huck's "blackness." De Voto observes that in the world of Mark Twain's boyhood,

> [[EXT]]black and white children grew up together. . . .They investigated all things together, exploring life. They hunted, swam, and fought together. . . . So the days of Sam Clemens were spent among the blacks. Negro girls watched over his infancy. Negro boys shared his childhood. Negroes were a fountain of wisdom and terror and adventure. There was Sandy and the other slave boys who played bear with him. These and others preserved him sometimes from drowning. There was the bedridden old woman who had known Moses and had lost her health in the exodus from Egypt. There was Uncle Dan'l who told the stories that Harris was to put in the mouth of Uncle Remus, and, while the fire died, revealed the awful world of ghosts. There were the Negroes with whom he roamed the woods, hunting coons and pigeons. There were the roustabouts of the steamboats, the field hands shouting calls over their hoes, and all the leisurely domestic servants of the town. . . . Olivia Langdon, whom he married, was to give him a principle for dealing justly with the human race. He ought, she said, to consider every man black until he was proved white.[19]

De Voto also tells of Mark Twain/Sam Clemens's love of Negro spirituals. As an adult in Hartford, Connecticut, he would sometimes stand under the moonlit night, singing "Nobody Knows the Trouble I See" and delivering the song's final "Glory,

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[19] Bernard De Voto, Mark Twain's America, 1932; reprinted in Mark Twain's America, and Mark Twain at Work, Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1967, pp. 65–66.

Hallelujah," "with a great shout." "Away back in the beginning—to my mind," said Twain, the singing of blacks "made all other vocal music cheap . . . and it moves me more than any other music can."[20]

While as far as we can tell, Twain never heard blues music as such, he heard the various American musics, including the Negro spirituals, that blended to become the blues. And there is a "nobody knows the trouble I see" as well as a "glory Hallelujah" shout in the blues. Both extremes of feeling find their way into this novel, Huckleberry Finn.

If Huckleberry Finn may be read as a blues narrative, with blues characters and plotlines, the book's mode of composition by improvisation also is strongly suggestive of the blues. Manuscript evidence and letters from and to Twain indicate that he first conceived of Huckleberry Finn as an extension of The Adventures of Tom Sawyer, in which Huck had first made an appearance as Tom's friend, dirt-poor but smart and natively good at heart. Twain decided that the new book would not bring Tom into adulthood, as Twain's friend William Dean Howells had recommended, but instead would tell the story of this other boy, Huck, who had so much appeal that he had nearly taken over Tom's own Adventures.

The decision to shape this new novel as a first-person narrative, a chronicle told in an everyday voice by a boy trying to cope with the trouble he sees, was brilliant and bluesy. It is also important that Twain did not first conceive the book as a weapon against slavery, or as even about slavery in any central way. In fact, Jim did not figure as a major character in the book's early drafts; nor at first was there any indication that Twain intended to have Jim run away from slavery. Evidently Twain's plan was to write a series of episodes satirizing American foibles and hypocrisies, particularly when it came to religious practices, as his model book The Adventures of Gil Blas (1749), by Alain René Le Sage had done. According to scholar Victor Doyno, "Twain initially considered having Huck escape from his father's cabin to set off tramping across Illinois. Then the novel would have been a 'road' book, like Gil Blas's, instead of a 'river' book. But when he [Twain] remembered the June rise in the river level, with logs and rafts coming from upriver, he soon had Huck spot a free-floating canoe, and that gave him the mechanism

[20] De Voto, p. 39.

for Huck to travel down the river Twain knew so well."[21] Twain brings Huck to Jackson's Island, according to Doyno, without knowing what would happen next. Further, Twain "may have been a bit puzzled by the Robinson Crusoe–like moment when Huck first discovers the campfire on Jackson's Island because he did not yet know in his imagination who else was there. When he finally realized, after much sequential revision, that the person by the campfire was Jim, he was so excited—and, I think, happy—that he wrote 'I bet I was glad to see him!' in running script, lifting his pen off the page between words only four times (his habit when writing very rapidly) instead of the normal seven times. Placing Jim by the campfire was a crucial discovery/creation on the part of Twain's imagination, because it gave Huck a companion who would give the book surprising new possibilities." Composing the book over a ten-year period, with one episode suggesting another, and with Jim's leap for freedom challenging Huck to be more than an adventurous picaro or vehicle for incidental satire—he had to face the implications of loving Jim and identifying with his goal—gradually Mark Twain shaped the novel into The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn as we have it today. Huck became a moral hero hotly engaged in a battle between what Twain called "a sound heart and a deformed conscience."

There is a sense in which all novels, and perhaps all works of art, are improvised. Still, Huckleberry Finn strikes me as a special case because when it began one of the two main characters hardly existed, and the most significant part of the plotline was not yet imagined at all by the writer. Starting and stopping, improvising over ten years, Twain found out what the book was about. In the process he seems to have discovered that improvising on the blues is the American mode. In The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, Huck not only makes up stories to dupe the dupes and undo the tricksters he meets along the river, he develops a style of resiliency and optimism, a readiness in the face of distress and even disaster that spells his survival as well as his moral development. He learns what the great improvisers in music learn: that improvisation at its best is not a trick but a style and process; it is a philosophical and aesthetic attitude with which to face the future ready to swing with others. Improvisation is swinging freely, with discipline

[21] Victor A. Doyno, "The Composition of Adventures of Huckleberry Finn," reprinted in Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, edited by Susan K. Harris, Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2000, p. 12.

and with love. In the end, that capacity for free but disciplined loving swing with others—at the heart of the blues—is what Huckleberry Finn is all about.

And in this new millennium, how wonderful for me, brown-skinned reader and inheritor of the legacy of the blues (as well as of the traditions of the American novel), to discover that my love for this music and, alas, yes, my love for this book—wrong notes and all—are linked, tied as tight as the strings of old Robert Johnson's blues guitar.

Robert G. O'Meally is Zora Neale Hurston Professor of Literature at Columbia University, where he has served on the faculty for thirteen years; since 1999 he has been the Director of Columbia's Center for Jazz Studies. He is the author of The Craft of Ralph Ellison (1980) and Lady Day: The Many Faces of Billie Holiday (1991), and the principle writer of Seeing Jazz (1997), the catalog for the Smithsonian Institution's exhibit on jazz painting and literature. He edited the collection of essays Living with Music: Ralph Ellison's Jazz Writings (2001) and The Jazz Cadence of American Culture (1998), which was awarded an 1999 ASCAP–Deems Taylor award, and coedited History and Memory in African-American Culture (1994) and The Norton Anthology of African American Literature (1996). O'Meally wrote the script for the documentary film Lady Day and for the documentary accompanying the Smithsonian exhibit Duke Ellington: Beyond Category (1995), and he was nominated for a Grammy for his work as coproducer of the five-CD boxed set The Jazz Singers (1998). He lives in New York with his wife, Jacqui Malone, and their sons, Douglass and Gabriel.