

An Afropessimist Interpretation of *Huckleberry Finn*

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* through the lens of Afropessimism, a critical theory which characterizes Blackness as being in a perpetual state of ontological death that is linked to slavery in America. The author argues that Twain's racist 'anti-racist' rhetoric is premised upon the third tier of terror of anti-Blackness, white counter-hegemonic thought, which manifests as a gross negrophilia of Black people, both in *Huckleberry Finn* and in Twain's personal life. Twain's forcing of a white narrative structure upon his Black characters in a novel with a clear white value structure precludes any possible investigation of anti-Blackness, only reproducing various forms of anti-Black racism. Ultimately, the paper contends that the survival and use of this white copy of the slave narrative to study racism in America is inherently problematic, and it demonstrates the limitations of the white mind in wholly and accurately articulating Black suffering.

Introduction

As a white representation of the freedman's slave narrative, Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is incapable of interrogating anti-Black racism in America. In *Slavery and Social Death*, Orlando Patterson first outlined the three elements of social death that define slaveness: gratuitous violence (without reason), natal alienation (eradication of language, lineage, culture), and general dishonor. The critical theory called Afropessimism, as developed by Frank B. Wilderson and others, applies these elements of social death to Black suffering and can be used to examine Twain's commodification of Blackness in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Mark Twain's attempt at anti-racism in *Huckleberry Finn*, composed of negrophilia coupled with the imposition of the white narrative structure onto his Black characters, precludes meaningful interrogation of the base structure of American civil society that is anti-Blackness.

Negrophilia and Contradictions in *Huckleberry Finn*

While anti-Black racism usually exhibits a phobic reaction to Blackness that manifests in violence, Afropessimism interrogates both phobic and philic instances of anti-Blackness. Pia Sen, from UT Austin, describes anti-Black philia as "a psychological reaction that is a result of living within the world that overloads the psyche with associations of Blackness." Sen explains that this association of Blackness in the white psyche "manifests in the form of exploitation," anti-Blackness which "dehumanizes the objects of fetish" (Sen). Dr. Frank B. Wilderson, Professor of African American Studies at UC Irvine, in *Afropessimism*, makes this distinction when describing "a three-tiered ensemble of terror" threatening Black thought. According to Wilderson, this 'ensemble of terror' is first composed of two phobic reactions to Blackness, being the threats of the traditional 'political society' (the police, the prison-industrial complex, the army) and civil society's 'hegemonic blocs' (the academy, the media). However, he states that anti-Black racism is a combination of both philic and phobic reactions,

and Wilderson describes how, “[T]here is also a third tier of terror with which Black thought must contend. And that is the terror of counter-hegemonic and revolutionary thought... The unrelenting terror elaborated whenever Black people’s so-called allies think out loud... This third tier terrorizes through an interdiction against Black performance, coupled with a demand for Black performance (*Afropessimism*)”.

This “third tier of terror” dominates rhetoric about Blackness in Twain’s *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. As Michelle Wright explains in *Physics of Blackness*, “the racism of Huckleberry Finn is denied because, it is argued, Twain intended it to be an anti-racist tale, so it must be one (or it ‘was’ for ‘its time’)” (Wright). This white ‘anti-racist’ intention by Twain exemplifies a philic reaction to Blackness, a part of this ‘third tier of terror,’ which attempts to engage in revolutionary thought and challenge civil society. As Marzia Milazzo, Associate Professor of English at the University of Johannesburg writes in *Colorblind Tools*, often “racism and white ‘antiracism’ are intertwined... even within seemingly counterhegemonic scholarship... [they] theorize whiteness and racism in ways that sustain the racist status quo even as they appear to unsettle it” (Milazzo). Twain’s authorship exemplifies this contradiction of intent within *Huck Finn*.

Huckleberry Finn, much like Twain’s private life, “is full of contradictions” (Holmes). Explaining contradictions in the structure and purpose of the narrative, Dr. Avivia Neff writes in *Blood, Earth, Water* that “Twain’s *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1885)... posit[s] that slavery is a shameful aspect of American life, but relegate[s] enslaved Blacks to secondary roles in favor of white protagonists” (25). These contradictions are also embedded within interactions between white and Black characters. For example, in Chapter 42, after Jim risks his freedom to aid Tom, the doctor who treats Tom says of Jim that “he was risking his freedom to do it... I liked the [n-word] for that; I tell you, gentlemen, a [n-word] like that is worth a thousand dollars – and kind treatment, too” (288). In this instance, the white doctor simultaneously supports Jim’s position while equating Black worth with monetary worth, treating Blackness as inherently slaveness, even when acting in a noble way. These contradictions within the narrative are also found in racist statements made by white characters, even when holding the moral high ground. In Chapter 24, when upset at the King and Duke (scam acting as the dead Peter Wilks’ brothers), Huck states that “if ever I struck anything like it, I’m a [n-word]. It was enough to make a body ashamed of the human race” (165). In this instance, Huck equates Blackness as slaveness to foolery, that he would be good as Black, or good as a fool, to fall for their acts. The contradiction here lies in Huck defaulting to the use of a racial slur to articulate acting less-than, even in a moment of increased moral character. Especially racial contradictions are inherent in Mark Twain’s private life as well, which contains contradictions in affection for both minstrelsy and Black culture. In his autobiography, Twain even wrote that “the real Negro minstrel show, the show which had no equal... [was] a thoroughly delightful thing and a most laughter-making one and I am sorry it is gone” (23-24).

Wilderson states that this type of contradiction in affection is “[j]ust like [how] white boys in the ghetto are more into hard core rap. In psychoanalysis terms it is called ‘to volumize one’s existence’... jouissance that can only come from the cultural annunciation of someone that has nothing” (Wilderson and Hughes). From an *Afropessimist* lens of interpretation, this jouissance, or extreme enjoyment, from the obsessive fixation on consumption of Blackness by Twain, exemplifies the true ‘terror’ of the rhetoric in *Huckleberry Finn* (which Wilderson claims permeates the whole of civil society today): the philic obsession with minstrelsy and Black culture embedded in the ‘anti-racist’ intention of Twain.

Storytelling and the White Hyperreal

On a higher level of abstraction, the narrative of Blackness by a white mind further perpetuates anti-Black racism, contributing to the reproduction of the white hyperreal, the white simulation or replica of reality, and enforcing the use of white symbols and value structures (Gillespie). Additionally, the presence of redemptive theorization in the ‘anti-racist’ rhetoric of Twain in *Huck Finn* precludes any possible investigation of Blackness within Twain’s post-colonial lens of interpretation.

John Gillespie, PhD Candidate of Comparative Literature at UC Irvine, argues that the way that civil society deems value is determined by whiteness, and for Blackness to be coherent in this world it has to be seen as or articulated by whiteness. Gillespie's pessimist theorization, referred to as 'Black Baudrillard,' is based on articulating connections between the theories of semicapitalism from Jean Baudrillard and dominant perspectives from psychoanalysis and Afropessimism (Gillespie, *Black Baudrillard*). Baudrillard argued that everything has become co-optable within a semicapitalist economy, a hyperreal capitalist society, and the basic lens of interpretation of Afropessimism agrees that all aspects of Blackness get co-opted and commodified by white culture (Baudrillard; *Afropessimism*). Gillespie thus argues, "Black life is lived in a white hyper-reality... onto a map of anti-Black violence... subsumed in simulations by each and every (analytic) encounter with Whiteness and the World" (Gillespie, *Weaponized Death*).

Furthermore, Baudrillard and Gillespie emphasize the importance of semiotics, signs and symbols in language and literature, within either the semicapitalist economy or the anti-Black libidinal economy, respectively (*Black Baudrillard*). Wilderson defines the libidinal economy as "the whole structure of psychic and emotional life—that are unconscious and invisible but that have a visible effect on the world, including the money economy" (*An Introduction* 7). Gillespie argues that, due to unending social death, Blackness cannot access a grammar to articulate its suffering, that "Blackness can only articulate itself through the semiotics of Whiteness... There is no outside to whiteness, to white semiotics, to white constructs of value and reality, to white structuring of libidinal value" (*Weaponized Death* 7). According to Gillespie, central to the 'libidinal economy' is "the semiotics of the white hyper-reality," what he refers to as a "White Disneyland" (*Weaponized Death* 7). This white value structure is especially inherent in the rhetoric within *Huckleberry Finn*. An example of this is in Chapter 6, when Pap describes the free Black professor as "most white as a white man," indicating that higher education, professional clothes, and cleanliness physically and verbally are inherently white values (28). In Chapter 40, after Jim shows compassion to Tom Sawyer, Huck says of Jim, "I knowed he was white inside" (278). In this instance, Huck attempts to extend respect to Jim, but does so by equating his compassion and integrity with whiteness. Throughout the novel, there are comments from white characters that are either entirely premised upon racist ideals or made as a compliment towards Black characters through articulating their positive qualities as white. This is, in some cases, important in understanding the narrative arc of redemption for Huck Finn. However, this value structure is also in line with the ideals and statements of Twain, who frequently used racial slurs to degrade and viewed the minstrel act (which entirely articulates Blackness as a foolish form of whiteness) as an art (Holmes).

When analyzing *Huck Finn* and its specific commodification of Blackness, it is also important to look at those works that preceded it, the freedmen's slave narratives. As Katherine Schulten, New York Times Learning Network editor, writes, "a look at slave narratives and an examination of the legacy of slavery today is essential to teaching *Huck Finn* in a fuller context" (29). According to Dr. Jocelyn Chadwick, the increasingly popular slave narrative as told by freedmen such as Frederick Douglass or Henry "Box" Brown informed Mark Twain when writing *Huckleberry Finn*, which she describes as "the first fictional slave narrative" (*Response*).

When analyzing those original slave narratives under the framework of the Black Baudrillard, as Gillespie argued, the lack of a proper grammar to communicate Black suffering meant that the recollections of slavery and anti-Black violence by freedmen could only be constructed with the use of a white semiotics. As Gillespie argues, even in the real (or 'hyperreal') world, white semiotics are inescapable, and all interactions map Blackness onto a plane of anti-Black racism and violence (*Weaponized Death* 7). The construction of narrative from freedmen could thus only feed back into the white structure of libidinal value, as there is "no outside to whiteness." However, interpreting the narrative of *Huckleberry Finn* from the perspective of the Black Baudrillard reveals what is even worse than the co-option of the slave narrative through the use of white semiotics. While the slave narrative is a collection of real interactions between Blackness and whiteness that had already become subsumed into hyperreal simulations of Black death upon their original occurrence, *Huckleberry Finn* is a simulacrum, an image, of these slave narratives, formulated by a white mind, with a white

value structure, where all interactions and complexities are necessarily articulated through the semiotics of whiteness. All potential articulation of Black suffering is lost within this simulacrum (*Huck Finn*) of the simulation (the slave narrative) of the white hyperreal Disneyland (the status quo).

Moreover, there is one key difference between the Black slave narrative and its white simulacrum that further reinforces anti-Blackness. Wilderson outlines how the traditional white narrative utilizes ‘an arc of redemption,’ first assuming an instance of plenitude, then moving to a rupture, equilibrium moving to disequilibrium (*HST*). Contrarily, he writes that the slave narrative “‘moves’ from disequilibrium to a moment in the narrative of faux equilibrium, to disequilibrium restored and/or rearticulated” (Wilderson, *The End of Redemption*). As Wilderson states, “[t]he narrative arc of the slave who is *Black*... is not an arc at all, but a flat line” (*The End of Redemption*). In *Afro-Pessimism and the End of Redemption*, Wilderson argues that narrative emplotment relies on the possibilities of real or imagined redemption, which is inaccessible for Blackness. As defined by social death, he argues Blackness had “never a prior meta-moment of plenitude, never a moment of equilibrium, never a moment of social life” (*The End of Redemption*). The inaccessibility then of the existence of a plenitude for Blackness also means that redemption is impossible, and thus, according to Wilderson, “the belief that all sentient beings can be emplotted as narrative entities... is subtended by the idea that all beings can be redeemed... Black emplotment is a catastrophe for narrative at a meta-level... and, by extension, to redemption, writ large” (*The End of Redemption*).

This presumed impossibility of redemption was obvious in the early lived experiences of authors such as Frederick Douglass, as “[b]eing born into the system of chattel slavery, there was no reason to ever believe that... life might present a narrative arc rather than a flat line” (Klarman 77). As Brian Klarman writes in *Would Frederick Douglass be an Afropessimist?*, “[f]or Afropessimists, the changes that Douglass experiences are only ‘faux’ resolution, as they only resolve instances of ‘racism’—which is to say the contingent acts of racial injustice—rather than addressing the immovable base-structure which is anti-Blackness” (79). In contrast to this Afropessimist perspective on the lives of freedmen, in *Huckleberry Finn*, Mark Twain attempts to interrogate racism in a way that he believed could inspire change and does so by forcing a white narrative structure upon his Black characters. While this narrative structure for development is mostly used to emphasize Huck’s growth, Jim is also forced into this ‘arc of redemption.’ Near the end, he realizes an idea of freedom, and he describes how, “I’s rich now, come to look at it. I owns myself, en I’s wuth eight hund’d dollars” (98). Chadwick writes that by the end of *Huck Finn*, Jim “accepts no limitations,” being resilient against the new Jim Crow society and functioning as a Sophoclean hero, where his “suffering and the glory are fused in an indissoluble unity... achiev[ing] a strange success” (*The Jim Dilemma* 14; Knox, qtd. in 13). This Sophoclean arc of redemption with Jim’s resilience and ultimate redefinition of wealth “functions as the novel’s central focus, since he realizes that he is indeed worth something” (*The Jim Dilemma* 11). In the end, Jim realizes a point of equilibrium of worth from a disequilibrium of bondage, which shows how Twain emplots his Black characters onto a traditional narrative structure.

This redemptive emplotment strategy not only fails when interrogating racism, it also reentrenches the status quo of anti-Blackness when posed as an ‘anti-racist’ commentary on society. Twain frequently utilizes racialized archetypes until just before the conclusion of the novel, where Jim keeps shifting his language and manner to a more docile subserviency, such as with an increase in the use of terms such as ‘Mars’ and ‘sah’ towards Tom in Chapter 38. Initial critics of the novel outline how this frequent portrayal of Jim as a minstrel caused the acceptance of racialized archetypes, eventually “seized by pro-slavery advocates and performed by white minstrel actors” (Neff 32). However, as Chadwick explains, Twain attempts to show how Jim can use this shifting language as a survival strategy while also being an empowered Sophoclean hero. Unfortunately, from an Afropessimist perspective, any redemption or restoration of equilibrium for Black people, including Jim’s Sophoclean arc, is, at best, misguided, falling within the third tier of terror that Wilderson described of negrophilic anti-hegemonic thought. In *Huckleberry Finn*, Twain’s narrative strategies thus fail to adequately

interrogate the immovable institution of anti-Black racism which operates as the white domination of language, culture, Black life, and Black death in America.

Proponents of the book as a successful ‘anti-racist’ tale, like Jocelyn Chadwick, argue that the strength of *Huckleberry Finn* lies in its success in teaching the nuances of slavery and racism in the classroom at a time when Black voices were silenced and novels from Black authors “were shrouded in obscurity” (*The Jim Dilemma* 66). Chadwick emphasizes that “[i]n opposition to the neglect of these [slave narrative] works, Twain’s novel, with its intimate portrayal of [B]lacks, has survived... [and] stood as a successful surrogate for the others for a century” (66). However, this ‘survival’ of the white simulacrum of the slave narrative should not be viewed as a success in telling the story of Blackness and racism in America. In fact, its survival *alone* only signifies that America has *not* made progress to escape the inescapable bounds of whiteness within literature and the classroom, illustrating that Blackness is only seen and heard by civil society when articulated through whiteness. The main issue, then, when discussing how to properly educate and interrogate racism, is marketing this white narrative as one that “transcends race” or “exceeds the range and focus of the slave narrative,” as these assumptions are likely responsible for the preference of the white narrative over time (*The Jim Dilemma* 61; 16).

Conclusion

In conclusion, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* serves as a white narrative that is premised upon the third tier of terror of anti-Blackness, white counter-hegemonic thought, coupled with the forcing of a white narrative structure upon Jim. Even the ending, which should serve as just a grim reminder of the failures of reform and the constant persistence of the base structure of anti-Blackness, functions instead as the conclusion to a tripartite Sophoclean redemption of Jim. Thus, the traditional white value and narrative structure employed in *Huckleberry Finn*, accompanied by the gross negrophilia of the author, restrains Twain’s racist ‘anti-racist’ storytelling from ever meaningfully interrogating anti-Black racism in America. Ultimately, Twain’s repackaging of the slave narrative into a ‘Great American Novel’ was inherently flawed at its inception, as this novel demonstrates how the white mind cannot properly articulate Black suffering completely or accurately, however much the white liberal may try.

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