

Reading and Writing the Rhetoric of American Identity

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Black Like Huck

The idea was for Richard Ford and me to retrace the voyage of Huck and Jim down the Mississippi, traveling in an open boat on the big liquid serpent that has been such a magical, monstrous force in the biography of our nation. We were to begin near Hannibal, Mo., Mark Twain's hometown, and make our way down to Cairo, Ill., — Huck and Jim's destination. But we didn't get nearly that far. One November day was it.

The journey was meant as an opportunity to meditate on race relations since the publication of "Huckleberry Finn" in 1884. On the surface, the idea was contrived and might have been insulting, except that I welcomed the chance to see some more of America. It had also occurred to me that, given how much has shifted, we could not be sure that Huck today would be white and Jim black; that some boy with, say, Ennis Cosby's background might not be looking out for an older, less privileged white guy who was on the run, maybe had some serious trouble with the law.

The night I arrived in Missouri, our captain, Larry Orick, a sturdy man in his 50's with a gray mustache and a love of the blues, told me he was not much impressed by Mark Twain as a riverman and didn't consider him too knowledgeable about the ways of the Mississippi. Good: the whittling had already begun. I knew I would be doing some of my own before it was all over.

Hannibal, where we set out, is now a tourist town devoted to Mark Twain. The names and images of his characters are everywhere — on menus, statues, buildings and streets. With its packaged Americana ("America's Hometown") and its overwhelming whiteness, Hannibal is the kind of place for which I have both great affection and absolute disgust.

I say affection because the brutality in our history has always been redeemed by the peace-makers, the idealists and the martyrs who — through bravery or humor or both — inevi-

tably climb over the fences that intrude upon our shared human connections. I can't help loving all of that.

I say disgust because, at the same time, I have this melancholy resentment about how long it took the Negro to be recognized as one of the chief architects of Americana.

This ambivalence extends to my attitude about Twain. Slavery twisted up old Mr. Twain's world, which is why he wrote "Huckleberry Finn" 20 years after the end of the Civil War. He was still trying to resolve something. Twain knew that Negroes and whites would either achieve freedom together or share mutual diminishment. He knew that it was the duty of whites with moral courage to insure that bigots and opportunists not be allowed to sustain the immoralities of bias that petrify our nation. For Twain, Jim was at least as good as any of the white people in the novel.

Even so, Twain was never able to fully imagine sophisticated, educated Negroes of the sort represented by Frederick Douglass, men and women whose very existence remains one of the grand achievements of this nation. In this, Twain is like all those modern American writers for whom Negroes beyond the familiar stereotypes — be it the dependent Jim or the dangerous Tupac Shakur — are still too hot to handle. Such provincial writers might as well be in cahoots with Pa Finn, Huck's brutal father, who rages against a well-dressed mulatto from Ohio, a man with "a cool way" whom he heard was "a p'fessor in a college, and could talk all kinds of languages, and knowed everything."

Fortunately, in our time, the best of television has gone far beyond our fiction and our theater when it comes to providing a wide range of black people: homeboys and master surgeons, hoochies and sharp female lawyers, gangbangers and diplomats, illiterates and technocrats and every workaday type in between. There was no such range in Twain's time, when minstrelsy was king and the standard Negro never met a stolen chicken that he didn't like.

Now there is a new minstrelsy, but of a peculiarly customized sort. This steamed into my mind when we were getting ready to shove off. In the store at the dock, I bought a T-shirt. It had some licorice-black cartoon Negroes in pickaninny hairdos dancing and looking just like the characters in the illustration of "Jim's Coat of Arms" in the original edition of "Huckleberry Finn." The slogan on the front of the T-shirt read, "We Be Jammin'."

The young white woman who sold it to me said rather proudly that, "as a party animal," she had worn one all last summer. Everybody loved them, she said. Everybody. Could sell a ton of them. The image of a party full of white people wearing those T-shirts and dancing to rock and rap brought me to attention.

Negroes would have been outraged by such an image when I was coming up in the 50's but, of course, they hadn't yet embraced what I call "pickaninny chic." As things stand now,

no previously denigrating image of Afro-Americans is out of bounds. Every last one of them has been snatched up by Negro college professors, rappers and middle-class black kids trying to find something “authentic” — an antidote to being absorbed, a token of vitality.

This impulse is very different from the gutbucket consciousness of remaining in touch with the spit, grit and mother wit of the sidewalk. What we have here is a psychological crisis in the face of imminent or expanding personal privilege. The further that insecure Negroes get away from poverty and ignorance, the more they fear selling out and becoming “neo-whites.” So they wear dreadlocks or discuss rappers as though they have something profound to say or, most pathetic of all, feel it necessary to imitate a “street culture” they’ve seen on television.

With my symbol of contemporary minstrelsy bought and paid for, I was soon on the water with three white guys, not one of whom came from a similar place but each of whom was recognizable. Ford was the Southern writer; Orick, the riverman; and Mitch Epstein, the Jewish beanpole from New York, who took photographs and nearly set himself afire on the boat but later came through like a champ when trouble hit the fuel line and gas had to be hand pumped to keep us moving.

We laughed at the same things, were equally impressed by the goodness or the badness of our luck and felt, at least early in the day when the boat was running smoothly, the sense of connection to every person who had ever been out in the clear air and the wide-open light of the Mississippi.

Out here with these three men I was much freer than Jim or Huck had ever been. In my life and in the life of the nation, so much has fallen away. Forty years ago, when I was a teenager joining civil rights picket lines, the appearance of black and white people together was a social statement. When we went anywhere together in the black or white communities of Los Angeles, there were stares. Back then, Negroes were far more exotic and so had little investment in maintaining an exotic identity. Today there are black mayors, astronauts, models — and Oprah Winfrey.

So I felt none of the old feeling of making a statement by being on the same boat with those guys. It was not us against the world, looking out for a better day when a person would finally be a person. No, this was as natural as water running down a hill.

This camaraderie, this sense that we now consciously share a much broader vision of Americana, became ever clearer as we spoke of books, films, families, the landscape. When the boat’s fuel line went haywire, I thought of all the times Americans had been brought together by problems. I thought, too, of how much of our story plays itself out in the moments when will, muscle, spirit and experience are called on to take the place of machines that fall down on the job. An improvisational inclination underlies our national tale. Individually or collectively, we invent a way.

On our boat, we did. When there was trouble, we pumped and bailed and fiddled with the engine until, with the sky growing dark, we saw beyond us, glowing in gold lights, the bridge at Alton, Ill., the town where Miles Davis was born. We were safe. The boat ride was over.

In St. Louis the next evening, I went to a blues club with Larry Orick and found myself surrounded by white people who loved the blues, no matter who played them. The presence of the Negro was in the air, but now as part of a national esthetic that just about anybody felt free to adopt. While few Negroes now support the blues or grow up playing them, the blues are out there, waiting. They waited for Huck and Jim, just as they wait for all of us. That is one sound of America, one of the many we now share.