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Nostalgia for a Fictive Past: Nation and Identity in a Post-Trump, Post-Brexit World

Shelley Fisher Fishkin

In an America ruled by Donald Trump (no less in a United Kingdom preoccupied by Brexit), we are witnessing a rise in nostalgia for a time when the nation could glory in being self-sufficient and independent of the rest of the world; a rise in nostalgia for a time when the supremacy of white, Anglo-Saxon protestants was unchallenged and when the world they had created was thought to be the bastion of civilization – its best and only hope. This nostalgia for a past that never was requires a calculated forgetting, and the construction of false memories. Central to both the rhetoric and policy of some key political leaders in the US and the UK, it is both xenophobic and racist – part of a disturbing upsurge in jingoistic nativism and ethnocentrism on both sides of the Atlantic. It is also false. For centuries, both the US and the UK have been – and still are – deeply influenced by people beyond their borders and people of colour beyond their borders and within them. ‘Traditional’ American culture has always been multicultural. Our teaching must take into account our increasingly complex understanding of what our common culture is and how it evolved.

Keywords: Nostalgia, ethnocentrism, racism, multiculturalism, travel, America

In an America ruled by Donald Trump (no less in a United Kingdom preoccupied by Brexit), we are witnessing a rise in nostalgia for a time when the nation could glory in being self-sufficient and independent of the rest of the world; a rise in nostalgia for a time when the supremacy

white, Anglo-Saxon protestants was unchallenged and when the world they had created was thought to be the bastion of civilization – its best and only hope. This nostalgic vision, central to both the rhetoric and policy of some key political leaders in the UK and in the US – is both xenophobic and racist. It is part of a disturbing upsurge in jingoistic nativism and ethnocentrism on both sides of the Atlantic. It is also false.

Scholars in the academy on both sides of the Atlantic have long recognized what is wrong with this picture. They know that for centuries, many allegedly self-sufficient nations have been – and still are – in fact, deeply influenced by people beyond their borders and people of colour beyond their borders and within them. They have marshalled evidence of the distinctly uncivilized behaviour of so-called civilized nations vis-à-vis the allegedly benighted ‘uncivilized’ world those nations sought to bring into their orbit. They have documented efforts over centuries to challenge the legitimacy of the authority that white Anglo-Saxon protestants claimed for themselves, discrediting the idea of ‘white supremacy’ as anything other than a convenient fiction invoked to justify injustice and tyranny.

But we often have the sense today that what the academy has been uncovering for decades remains invisible to many political leaders who prefer to bury their heads in the sand, ostrich-like, rather than face these inconvenient truths head-on. Take the slogan of the Trump campaign for president in 2016 – “Make America Great Again.” It mourns the passing of a putative time when Americans were completely independent of the rest of the world, and when someone who knew little about the world beyond America’s shores could think of himself as an educated person. A time when English was the only language Americans needed to know. A time when white supremacy was widely accepted as an assumption based on scientific evidence that was a good organizing principle for society as a whole.

The nostalgia in which they prefer to indulge requires a calculated forgetting, and the construction of false memories. It is, in short, a nostalgia for a past that never was. But for those who prefer to embrace this false narrative of who we are and who we have been, culture itself poses a big problem. For American culture is increasingly coming to be understood as the product of a host of transnational nodes of connection stretching back to beyond the founding of the nation itself – nodes influenced by what writers read and by where they travelled. It is increasingly recognized as the complicated product of interpenetrating multilingual traditions, and as a culture shaped at its core by people of colour. Literature can be an antidote to this nostalgia for a fictive past. It

can talk back to these myths and be a crucial corrective. For teaching and reading literature requires us to engage a present – and a past – that are infinitely more interesting and more complex.

Let us start by looking at the nostalgia for a time when the nation could glory in being self-sufficient and independent of the rest of the world, a time when it could be proudly nationalist and isolationist. Where do we find such a time? Nowhere. Whether we pay attention to the books writers read for inspiration, or the sites outside the US to which they travelled, transnational nodes of connection have shaped American literature and culture from the start.

Take what we learn, for example, from a remarkable book published in 2016 titled *The Islamic Lineage of American Literary Culture: Muslim Sources from the Revolution to Reconstruction* by Jeffrey Einboden. “Arguing that Muslim sources exercised a formative impact on U.S. literary origins,” Einboden “traces a genealogy of Islamic influence that spans America’s critical century of self-definition [...] from the 1770s to the 1870s” (xi). He adds: “Focusing on celebrated writers from the Revolution to Reconstruction, I excavate Arabic and Persian precedents that shaped U.S. authorial lives and letters,” showing a previously overlooked “American literary engagement with Islamic texts and traditions” that stretches back to our founding era (xi). With Einboden as a guide, we come to recognize “early American authorship as a dynamic site of global exchange, rather than as an integral outcome of national exceptionalism” (xi). Furthermore, Muslim sources turn out to “permeate the personal lives and labors of iconic American writers” such as Washington Irving, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Lydia Maria Child, as well as less well-known ones (xii). Extending work by Wai Chee Dimock, Einboden’s chapter on Emerson focuses on Emerson’s daily reading and translation of Persian poetry. It “reveals Emerson, an icon of American exceptionalism,” as “America’s most prolific translator of Islamic verse, rendering more than two thousand lines of Persian poetry from German sources” (xiv). For Einboden, “excavating archival sources that exhibit U.S. authors’ adoption of Arabic and Persian idioms” allows us “to trace arcs in early America that anticipate our contemporary interests” in transnational American Studies (xv).

The impact of Asia on American literature and culture is equally revealing. It would be hard to find any moment in the history of the US when products, people, or ideas from Asia did not play a vital role (Fishkin, “Asian”). The American Renaissance? Thoreau and Emerson both were reading and learning from translations of Eastern texts (Hillemann). American impressionism? The most famous works by painter

Mary Cassatt are indebted to lessons she learned from traditions of Japanese printmaking (Ives). How about *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, the book which Hemingway claimed gave birth to all twentieth-century American literature? Twain undertook his first experiments with using satire to attack racism when, as a young journalist in the 1860s, his direct exposés of racism towards the Chinese in San Francisco were censored (Fishkin, "Mark Twain" 69-72).

For over a century, scholars have noted the influence of East Asian poetic traditions on twentieth-century modernist American poets such as Ezra Pound, who adopted and adapted themes and forms of East Asian poetry in order to develop his own distinctive innovations in poetry in English (Jang; Qian; Huff; Williams). Scholars have also written broadly on the influence of Buddhist philosophical traditions on T. S. Eliot's poetry (Bruno).

While the influence of Asia on American modernist poets is not a new topic, the influence of Asia on the dean of Chicano letters in the US is. Américo Paredes, a writer from the Texas-Mexico borderlands, was the author of brilliant and innovative works of folklore and fiction. As Ramón Saldívar demonstrates in his book *The Borderlands of Culture*, it was Paredes's experiences as a journalist in occupied Japan that seminally shaped his ideas about citizenship and belonging. Saldívar argues that Paredes's encounter with "the borderlands of the postwar intercultural contact zones" (361) he was documenting in Japan impacted his understanding of the borderlands in which he had grown up in key ways (Fishkin, "Asian" 19-20).

While Emerson, Pound, Eliot, and other writers may have encountered cultures outside the US through their reading, for Herman Melville and Mark Twain no less than for Américo Paredes, travel was a particularly fruitful source of exposure to the world beyond America's shores. Lawrence Buell explores what Melville learned from his travels in an essay titled "Ecoglobalist Affects: The Emergence of U.S. Environmental Imagination on a Planetary Scale." He calls Melville "the first canonical U.S. author to have sojourned in the developing world, and to perceive the effects of gunboat diplomacy there from the standpoint of its indigenous victims" (239). An essay by Rüdiger Kunow shows how Melville's travels developed his respect for the native cultures he encountered and his deepened critique of missionaries. In a similar vein, Tsuyoshi Ishihara demonstrates how Twain's travels prompted him to re-examine his views on non-Western others, transforming his sense of himself and of Western civilization in the process.

My own work has looked at how Mark Twain's travels throughout the British Empire clarified his understanding of his native land in crucial ways, igniting what would become a lifelong rejection of American exceptionalism (Fishkin, "Mark Twain's Historical View"). "Travel," Twain wrote, "is fatal to prejudice, bigotry and narrow-mindedness, and many of our people need it sorely on these accounts" (*Innocents Abroad* 650). He knew whereof he spoke. Twain, who spent a third of his life living outside the United States, was one of America's first truly cosmopolitan writers, as at home in the world as he was in his own country, and his travels had a huge impact on his work (Fishkin, "Originally"). His journeys through India, for example, helped spark some of his most trenchant observations about the Slave South in which he had grown up. It is in *Following the Equator*, the record of his round-the-world lecture tour that he published in 1897, that Twain first expatiates – in print – on what racism at home and abroad have in common. Twain's encounters with exploitative, abusive power abroad set off trains of recollections stretching back to the slave-holding society in which he had spent his youth.

Before his trip to India, Twain had relegated to fiction the troublesome matter of coming to terms with the slave-holding world of his childhood. He had not explored this dimension of his world autobiographically before travelling to India. Then, one day in Bombay, a German's mistreatment of an Indian servant opened the floodgates, and memories of Twain's personal past came rushing in. The sight of a white man, a "burly German," giving a native servant "a brisk cuff on the jaw" without explaining what he had done wrong "flashed upon [him] the forgotten fact that this was the *usual* way of explaining one's desires to a slave" (*Following the Equator* 351). The scene brought back to him memories of his own father's mistreatment of "our harmless slave boy, Lewis, for trifling little blunders and awkwardnesses," and of a scene he witnessed when he was ten of "a man fling[ing] a lump of iron-ore at a slave-man in anger, for merely doing something awkwardly – as if that were a crime" (352). Twain marvels over

the space-annihilating power of thought. For just one second, all that goes to make the *me* in me was in a Missourian village, on the other side of the globe, vividly seeing again these forgotten pictures of fifty years ago, and wholly unconscious of all things but just those; and in the next second I was back in Bombay, and that kneeling native's smitten cheek was not done tingling yet! (352)

Elsewhere in *Following the Equator*, in a manner so disarmingly subtle that it strikes the reader as virtually unconscious, Twain manages to invert the savage vs. civilized hierarchy establishing an equality between the races. His critique culminates in that volume in a highly memorable quip. “There are many humorous things in the world,” he wrote, “among them the white man’s notion that he is less savage than the other savages” (213). Twain’s travels in India, Africa, Australia, and New Zealand led him to recognize with clarity and power the absurdity of the idea of white superiority – a recognition that would shape everything he wrote during the last decade and a half of his life.

Watching the supercilious German abuse a dark-skinned servant in imperial India brought it all home to Twain. It forced on Twain’s recollection the underlying brutality of the so-called mild domestic slavery of his childhood. It also prompted him to ponder the question of how those in power justified such unjust arrangements to themselves. In other words, Twain’s journeys allowed him to recognize the racism of his childhood as akin to the racist underpinnings of the imperialism he witnessed during his travels at the turn of the century as two sides of the same coin. Both were supported by one group’s assumption that it was more civilized, virtuous, or admirable than everyone outside the group. It mattered little whether those who thought themselves superior hailed from Hannibal or Heidelberg, from Washington, DC, or Waganui, New Zealand. Unfailingly they were white, and they were insufferable. Those whom they despised and oppressed were non-white.

A Mark Twain who had long admired the Anglo-Saxon race and Anglo-Saxon civilization as the defenders of democracy and freedom now challenged the arrogance of the imperialist adventures of that race and that civilization in genres ranging from short story to essay to polemic. Initially, Twain had believed in the value of extending the power and influence of the United States into the Pacific when he thought that meant extending democracy; that was, as Twain put it, the American model. But to his dismay beginning in 1898, he saw his countrymen following what he referred to as the European model in foreign affairs, seeking to dominate another culture out of greed, selfishness, and arrogance masquerading as benevolence and altruism. That behaviour cast the US as the same sort of villain as the European nations that were rapaciously carving up Asia and Africa in the name of extending to these benighted regions the so-called blessings of civilization – but in reality to suit their own ends. Twain joined forces with the Anti-Imperialist League, becoming the most prominent anti-imperialist in the nation, connecting American policy in the Philippines with the behaviour of

American missionaries in China, and the behaviour of England, Belgium, Russia, France, and Germany in Africa and Asia (Twain, *Following the Equator*; Zwick, *Mark Twain's Weapons*; Zwick, "Mark Twain"; Fishkin, "Mark Twain and the Jews").

Twain's travels gave him the perspective to become America's most cogent and acerbic critic of what he would call "the lie of silent assertion" – "the silent assertion that nothing is going on which fair and intelligent men are aware of and are engaged by their duty to try to stop" (Twain, "My First Lie" 171). The concept helped him recognize how racist usurpations and hypocrisy crossed boundaries and cultures. He became, in the process, perhaps the most globally admired American writer of all time.

If American culture has been deeply shaped by transnational nodes of connection, sparked by writers' reading and by their travels, it has also been shaped by interpenetrating multilingual traditions. A number of books published in the last two decades have drawn our attention to American literature written in languages other than English, and to the transnational movements of people and culture that gave rise to a rich body of material (see for instance Sollors; Shell and Sollors; Yin; Wirth-Nesher; Bachman; Kanellos). Work like this is rooted in the assumption that American scholars need to be more attentive to voices that were previously largely redlined from the cultural conversation in the United States.

When I wrote my latest book, *Writing America: Literary Landmarks from Walden Pond to Wounded Knee* (2015), I featured a number of American writers who wrote American literature in languages other than English, from the early twentieth century to the present. Only limits of space prevented me from going back even earlier. For example, thanks to the pioneering work of Arturo Schomburg and its recovery by Werner Sollors, we now know that the earliest known work of fiction by an African American was a story written in *French* by a New Orleans-born African-American poet, playwright, and fiction writer named Victor Séjour – a story titled "Le mulâtre," which was published in *Revue des Colonies* in March, 1937.

In *Writing America*, I devoted significant attention to Gloria Anzaldúa, whose work has become widely taught not only in the US, but in Europe as well, and who is increasingly recognized as one of the great American writers of the twentieth century (Fishkin, *Writing America* 304-28). Anzaldúa's master work, *Borderlands/La Frontera* (1987), demonstrated more vividly than any work before it the interpenetrating multilingual traditions of the Southwestern region of the United States.

As a child in Hidalgo County, Texas, Anzaldúa was beaten in the schoolyard for speaking Spanish. But by the time she pens *Borderlands/La Frontera*, she is a confident writer who translates only when and how she chooses to. “I grew up between two cultures,” she writes,

the Mexican (with a heavy Indian influence) and the Anglo (as a member of a colonized people in our own territory). I have been straddling that *tejas-Mexican* border, and others, all my life. It’s not a comfortable territory to live in, this place of contradictions. Hatred, anger and exploitation are the prominent features of this landscape. [...] The U.S.-Mexican border *es una herida abierta* where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds. And before a scab forms it hemorrhages again, the lifeblood of two worlds merging to form a third country – a border culture. (vii, 3)

While the border between the United States and Mexico may seem ‘natural’ from the standpoint of a culture that embraces the dominant version of US political and military history, from the perspective of the descendant of the ancient tribes that lived throughout the region, the border is a construct, dividing a people from itself. The story she tells about her cousin reminds us of the fear and danger that was a constant presence in the lives of her family members:

In the fields, *la migra*. My aunt saying, “No *corran*, don’t run. They’ll think you’re *del otro lao*.” In the confusion, Pedro ran, terrified of being caught. He couldn’t speak English, couldn’t tell them he was fifth generation American. *Sin papeles* – he did not carry his birth certificate to work in the fields. *La migra* took him away while we watched. *Se lo llevaron*. [...] I saw the terrible weight of shame hunch his shoulders. They deported him to Guadalajara by plane. The furthest he’d ever been to Mexico was Reynosa, a small border town opposite Hidalgo, Texas, not far from McAllen. Pedro walked all the way to the Valley. *Se lo llevaron sin un centavo al pobre. Se vino andando desde Guadalajara*. (26)

While Anzaldúa wants to communicate the difficulties of living on linguistic borderlands, she also wants to communicate the richness it entails. Sometimes she achieves this through highly evocative, clear, and readable passages – like the story of her cousin – that move back and forth between Spanish and English in a seamless flow, giving the reader a sense of what it feels like to live in two languages. The book is also filled with slyly evasive ‘non-translations’ – passages that might appear, on the surface, to be translations, but which turn out, on closer view, to be instead paraphrases that reduce the passages that precede them. The-

se passages underscore for the reader the poverty of one who does *not* have a mestiza consciousness of language.

Many of the ‘approximate’ translations occur when Anzaldúa is quoting colloquial speakers. She translates only the gist of what they say:

Through our mothers, the culture gave us mixed messages: *No voy a dejar que ningún pelado desgraciado maltrate a mis hijos*. And in the next breath it would say, *La mujer tiene que hacer lo que le diga el hombre*. Which was it to be – strong, or submissive, rebellious or conforming? (40)

This is no translation; it is a summation. The English-speaking reader is motivated to figure out what exactly Anzaldúa’s mother said. (What she said was, “I’m not going to let any miserable bum mistreat my kids.” And “The woman has to do whatever the man says.”) The English-only reader knows she is missing a lot by not understanding the Spanish. Anzaldúa will settle for nothing less than wrenching from her own experience as an outsider – as a Chicana, as a mestiza, and as a lesbian – the guideposts of a new way of being in the world. She makes a strong case for the idea that the sense of dislocation, ambiguity, uncertainty, and fear that living on cultural, social, linguistic, and sexual borders entails can be a positive force for the artist. For while living with constant fear of humiliation, deportation, and hundreds of unnamed terrors can paralyze, it can also produce a heightened sensitivity to one’s environment. The individual who learns to manage those tensions develops extraordinary capacities to forge new creative syntheses (Fishkin, *Feminist Engagements* 15-17, 23-30).¹

In *Writing America*, I also included writers whose English intentionally mimics the cadences of Yiddish, and writers who wrote in Yiddish themselves. Yiddish, of course, is the language spoken by Eastern European Jews who sought refuge in the US from the anti-Semitic persecution they faced in Europe from the nineteenth through the twentieth century – a language cherished fondly as the cultural heritage of their descendants. Abraham Cahan (*Imported; Rise*), Anzia Yezierska, Henry Roth, and Irena Klepfisz are just a few of the writers who sprinkle Yiddish words and phrases throughout their poetry and prose, creating

¹ Other writers who meld Spanish and English in their work include Tomás Rivera, author of *Y No Se Lo Tragó la Tierra...*; and Rolando Hinojosa, author of *The Valley*, both of whom hail from the US-Mexico Borderlands (Fishkin, *Writing America* 304, 308, 313-14, 329-30). Also Junot Díaz, who blends the Spanish spoken in the Dominican Republic of his early childhood with the hip and breezy English of urban centres in New Jersey where he spent his adolescence (Carpio; Díaz).

work that is both evocative and distinctive. The work of several writers who wrote American literature in Yiddish is being recovered and reappraised. The poet Morris Rosenfeld, for example, who worked long hours in a sweatshop all day, wrote poetry at night about the sweatshop and the toll it took on family life. His most famous poem is the poignant “*Mayn Yingele*,” in which a father bemoans the fact that he sees his child at night only when he is asleep. He has to hear about how well the child played from his wife. Verses depict the father’s sadness at not being able to hear his child begin to talk, at not being able to look into his eyes when he is awake. It ends with a thought the father cannot bear: “One morning, when you wake, my child / you’ll find that I’m not there!” (“*Ven du vakst oyf amol, mayn kind, / Gefinst du mikh nit mer!*”) (Rosenfeld 135-36; Fishkin, *Writing America* 206-08).²

If American literature and culture is the product of nodes of transnational connection and multilingual traditions, it has also been shaped at its core by people of colour. If “all modern American literature comes from one book by Mark Twain called *Huckleberry Finn*,” as Ernest Hemingway declared (22), then all modern American literature comes, as well, from the African-American oral traditions that helped make that book what it is. In *Was Huck Black? Mark Twain and African-American Voices* (1993), I demonstrate, for example, that Twain drew on the speech of an engaging black child whom he had met to shape Huck’s voice and that the rhetorical style of a slave acquaintance from Twain’s childhood introduced him to the potential of satire as a tool of social criticism. I made the case that “the voice we have come to accept as the vernacular voice in American literature – the voice with which Twain captured our national imagination in *Huckleberry Finn*, and that empowered Hemingway, Faulkner, and countless other writers in the twentieth century” (4) – has its roots in the speech of specific African Americans Twain knew, and that Twain’s satire also has African-American roots. Mark Twain appreciated the creative vitality of African-American voices and exploited their potential in his art. In the process, he taught his countrymen new lessons about the lyrical and exuberant energy of vernacular speech, as well as about the potential of satire and irony in the service of truth. Both of these lessons would ultimately make the culture more responsive to the voices of African-American writers in the twen-

² In *Writing America*, I also discussed the Chinese poetry inscribed on the walls of the Angel Island immigration centre in the San Francisco bay. These poems, carved into the wall by would-be immigrants from China in the early twentieth century who were detained at Angel Island while awaiting permission to enter the United States, are now recognized as some of America’s earliest Asian-American literature (245-60).

tieth century. They would also change its definitions of what ‘art’ ought to look and sound like to be freshly, wholly ‘American’ (Fishkin, *Was* 5).

As I have claimed, “[s]omething new happened [in *Huckleberry Finn*] that had never happened in American literature before” (Fishkin, *Lighting* 112). It was a book that served as a declaration of independence from the genteel English novel tradition. I noted that “*Huckleberry Finn* allowed a different kind of writing to happen: a clean, crisp, no-nonsense, earthy vernacular kind of writing that jumped off the printed page with unprecedented immediacy and energy; it was a book that talked.” African-American voices played a key role in making it what it was (112).

One critic notes that “the vernacular language ... in *Huckleberry Finn* strikes the ear with the freshness of a real boy talking out loud” (Albert Stone qtd. in Fishkin, *Was* 13). I have argued that the voice of an *actual* “real boy talking out loud” helped Twain recognize the potential of such a voice to hold an audience’s attention and win its trust. On 29 November 1874, two years before he published *Tom Sawyer* and began *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Mark Twain published an article called “Sociable Jimmy” in the *New York Times*. “Sociable Jimmy” is the first piece Twain published that is dominated by the voice of a child; this fact alone would seem to mark it as deserving of scholars’ attention. I was therefore astonished to find, when I began looking into the matter, that it had been almost totally ignored. While Twain stopped at a hotel for the night during a lecture tour of the Midwest, he reports that a “bright, simple, guileless little darkey boy [...] ten years old – a wide-eyed, observant little chap” brought him his supper. The intensity of Twain’s response to the child is striking. He notes that he wrote down what the child said, and sent the record home because he

wished to preserve the memory of the most artless, sociable, and exhaustless talker I ever came across. He did not tell me a single remarkable thing, or one that was worth remembering; and yet he was himself so interested in his small marvels, and they flowed so naturally and comfortably from his lips, that his talk got the upper hand of my interest, too, and I listened as one who receives a revelation. I took down what he had to say, just as he said it – without altering a word or adding one. (Twain, “Sociable Jimmy” in Fishkin, *Was* 20)

Well, when I read that, I immediately thought of the “most artless, sociable and exhaustless talker” I had ever come across, and that, of course, was Huck Finn. Jimmy shares elements of grammar, syntax, and diction, cadences and rhythms of speech that critics have identified as

central to the voice we know as Huck's. Jimmy and Huck both use adjectives in place of adverbs. Jimmy says, "[h]e's powerful sickly." Huck says, "I was most powerful sick." Jimmy says, "[s]ome folks say dis town would be considerable bigger." Huck says, "I read considerable to Jim about kings, dukes and earls and such" and "[t]his shook me up considerable." Jimmy says, "she don't make no soun' scacely," while Huck says "there warn't no room in bed for him, skasely." Both boys use the word "disremember" for "forget" in contexts that are virtually identical in the two texts. Jimmy says, "he's got another name dat I somehow disremember," while Huck says, "I disremember her name." Huck and Jimmy are both unpretentious, uninhibited, easily impressed, and unusually loquacious. They free-associate with remarkable energy and verve. And they are supremely self-confident: neither doubts for a minute that Twain (in Jimmy's case) or the reader (in Huck's) is completely absorbed by everything he has to say. Jimmy may have triggered Twain's recollection of the voices of playmates from his childhood, reminding him of the ease with which he could speak in that voice himself. As he put it in a letter to his wife Livy written shortly after he met Jimmy: "I think I could swing my legs over the arms of a chair & that boy's spirit would descend upon me & enter into me" (qtd. in Fishkin, *Was* 11-50).

If Huck's speech was inspired, in large part, by a black child, does that mean that Huck used language that would have been considered "black" at the time? During the 1880s, the period when the American Folklore Society came into being and the *Journal of American Folklore* was born, dialect scholars began to pay serious attention to what they called "negro English," and began collecting expressions that were common among blacks, rather than whites, in the South. On this list, as it turns out, are many expressions characteristic of Huck's speech. They include "by and by" meaning "after a while"; "powerful" and "monstrous" meaning "very"; "lonesome" meaning "depressed"; "I lay" meaning "I wager"; "warn't no use" meaning "there is no use in"; "to study" meaning "to meditate"; "squash" meaning "to crush"; "if I'd a knowed" meaning "[i]f I had known," and "light out fer," meaning "to run for." These last two expressions, of course, appear in Huck's famous penultimate lines: "[I]f I'd a knowed what a trouble it was to make a book I wouldn't a tackled it and aint't agoing to no more. But I reckon I got to light out for the Territory ahead of the rest, because Aunt Sally she's going to adopt me and sivilize me and I can't stand it. I been there before" (Twain, *Adventures* 366; Fishkin, *Was* 11-50).

What happened between Twain's first encounter with Jimmy in 1871 and his decision to let a voice very much like Jimmy's be the narrator of a novel some four years later, when he began *Huck Finn*? For one thing Mary Ann Cord told her story. Mary Ann Cord was a former slave who worked as the cook at Quarry Farm, the home in Elmira, New York, belonging to Twain's sister-in-law, where the Clemens family spent summers during Twain's most productive and creative years. One evening, in the summer of 1874, Mary Ann Cord told Twain, his wife, and others assembled, the powerful and moving story of her being forcibly separated from her youngest child on the auction block, and eventually being miraculously reunited with him after the war. Twain wrote that he found the story she told "a shameful tale of wrong & hardship," but also "a curiously strong piece of literary work to come unpremeditated from lips untrained in literary art" – a comment that shows his awareness of the close relationship between speaking voices and literature. Throughout his career as a lecturer and as a writer, Twain aspired to have the effect upon listeners and readers that speakers like Mary Ann Cord had upon him (Fishkin, *Was* 8-9). For while Jimmy's vernacular speech had intrigued Twain, Mary Ann Cord showed Twain the possibilities of combining vernacular speech with accomplished narrative skill. Her story, which would become Twain's first contribution to the *Atlantic Monthly*, was another key step on the road to *Huck Finn*. Mary Ann Cord's storytelling underlined for Twain the fact that serious, compelling emotions could be communicated in the vernacular, and that the vernacular could be artfully structured into a compelling narrative (30-50).

It was another black speaker – a brilliant satirical slave named Jerry who Twain thought of as "the greatest man in the country" – who introduced Twain to satire as a tool of social criticism. The book that changed all of American literature that followed is now recognized as a sly satirical critique of the nation's retreat from black rights in the years that followed the end of the Civil War. The captivity of Jim in the final portion of the novel takes on new meaning when we understand it in the context of the time in which Twain wrote, a time when the nation was re-enslaving its black citizens by law and by force (51-76).

Ralph Ellison observed that "[t]he spoken idiom of Negro Americans" was "absorbed by the creators of our great nineteenth-century literature even when the majority of blacks were still enslaved. Mark Twain celebrated it in the prose of *Huckleberry Finn*" (qtd. in Fishkin, *Was* 128-29). But the role of "the spoken idiom of Negro Americans" in shaping the language of Americans was doggedly denied by scholars

throughout the twentieth century. As late as the 1960s, folklorists and ethnographers still resisted the idea that the terms “OK,” “wow,” “uh-huh,” and “unh-unh” were African-American contributions to the American language – which they are (Holloway, “What” 59). A paradigm shift began to happen in the 1990s, one which I charted in publications including an article titled “The Multiculturalism of ‘Traditional’ Culture” and another called “Interrogating ‘Whiteness,’ Complicating ‘Blackness’: Remapping American Culture.” I noted over a hundred books and articles published by scholars in literary criticism, history, cultural studies, anthropology, popular culture, communication studies, music history, art history, humour studies, linguistics, and folklore that all lent support to this pithy comment by Robert Farris Thompson: “To be white in America is to be very black. If you don’t know how black you are, you don’t know how American you are” (n.p.; see also Fishkin, “Interrogating ‘Whiteness’” 429). Traditional American culture turns out to be less ‘white’ than was previously thought.

Just as such ‘minority’ traditions are key to understanding Mark Twain, so are African traditions essential to understanding the work of Herman Melville – as historian Sterling Stuckey and literary critics Eric Sundquist and Viola Sachs have shown. They have demonstrated Melville’s deep interest in African customs, myths, languages, and traditions and have pointed out the African influence on works such as *Moby Dick* and the short story “Benito Cereno.” Sachs has uncovered numerous references to the Yoruba god Legba in *Moby Dick*, while Stuckey and Sundquist have examined the use of Ashanti drumming and treatment of the dead in “Benito Cereno,” suggesting that the treatment of the corpse of the rich slaveholder Aranda in “Benito Cereno” was not a racist allusion to African savagery, as critics have argued, but rather evidence of Melville’s insight into Ashanti rituals and the shrewd political use his characters made of those traditions.

In popular culture, as well, familiar artefacts generally accepted as ‘white’ are now recognized as having more complicated roots. Howard L. Sacks and Judith Rose Sacks have argued cogently in their book, *Way Up North in Dixie: A Black Family’s Claim to the Confederate Anthem*, that “Dixie,” the song that became the anthem of the Confederacy, was written by a black family in nineteenth-century Ohio, and not, as had been thought, by the white minstrel performer who appropriated the song and presented it as his own. Historians Christopher P. Lehman (63-72) and David Roediger (48) reveal the African and African-American roots of that staple of American popular culture, Bugs Bunny. Roediger notes that the verb “bug,” meaning to annoy or vex someone, has its roots

partly in Wolof, the West-African language spoken by the largest group of Africans to arrive in this country in the seventeenth century (48). Moreover, he writes, “the fantastic idea that a vulnerable and weak rabbit could be tough and tricky enough to menace those who menace him enters American culture” largely through tales that were told among various ethnic groups from West Africa and further developed by American slaves (48). Mel Watkins tracks comedian Lenny Bruce’s hip, irreverent satire to the wit of black musicians and entertainers with whom he associated (485). Joseph E. Holloway has traced to African languages the roots of many familiar American words and expressions. These include – in addition to “OK, wow, uh-huh and unh-unh” – “banana,” “yam,” “banjo,” “bad-mouth,” “bodacious,” “bogus,” “bronco,” “coffee,” “cola,” “guff,” “guy,” “gumbo,” “diddle,” “dirt,” “honkie,” “hoodoo,” “jamboree,” “jazz,” “Jiffy,” “Jive,” “kooky,” “phony,” “rap,” “tote,” “yam,” “you all,” and “zombie” (Holloway, “Africanisms” 82-110). And John Edward Philips provides an illuminating overview of multidisciplinary research on African influences on ‘white’ American culture in his essay “The African Heritage of White America.” And although there is not space here to examine the ways in which British culture has also been shaped at its core by people of colour, this is a topic that scholars have been increasingly exploring in recent years in work that resonates with research American scholars have done (see for instance Julia Sun-Joo Lee; Fisch).

‘Traditional’ American culture has always been multicultural. Our teaching must take into account our increasingly complex understanding of what our common culture is and how it evolved. Doing so will “force us to examine how an unequal distribution not of talent but of power permitted a blatantly false monocultural myth to mask and distort the multicultural reality” (Fishkin, “Reclaiming” 86). This new vision of our culture will be more accurate than any that we have had before – and more stimulating. It will also provide a healthier base on which to build for the future. Forging this vision may not be easy, but it is a challenge we must embrace.

Contemporary cultural productions, no less than key works of the last two centuries, require that we engage these issues, as a brief closing discussion of one recent American novel will make clear. Transnational nodes of connection, multilingual traditions, and the centrality of people of colour all come together in the celebrated 2017 novel *Pachinko*, by Min Jin Lee, a National Book Award finalist, and a book recognized with many other awards. Lee is an American born in Korea who has lived in both America and Japan and is married to a Japanese American.

With its evocation of the language of characters speaking Korean, Japanese, and English as well as combinations of all three, her book is the complicated product of interpenetrating multilingual traditions. These transnational nodes shape the book at its core. And given that the book is profoundly influenced by Lee's awareness of the history of the Civil Rights movement in America, as well as of the history of Asians in America, it is a novel shaped at its core by people of colour. *Pachinko* is a book that defies borders. It is a book about Koreans in Japan that only an American could have written. *Pachinko* is the product of Lee's empathetic, border-crossing generosity of spirit. It is a book that makes me proud to call Min Jin Lee a friend and a fellow American – as well as a marvellous writer.

Coda

Many Americans are taken aback by the ignorance, self-importance, braggadocio, self-satisfied provincialism, and knee-jerk nationalism on display by the current occupant of the White House. But it is important to remind ourselves that these attitudes and behaviour are nothing new. Consider Mark Twain's 1869 book, *The Innocents Abroad*, a satirical record of the first sizeable cohort of middle-class, middle-American tourists' visit to Europe. "The people of those foreign countries are very, very ignorant," Twain wrote. "In Paris they just simply opened their eyes and stared when we spoke to them in French! We never did succeed in making those idiots understand their own language" (645). He notes that throughout the trip,

[w]e always took care to make it understood that we were Americans – Americans! When we found that a good many foreigners had hardly ever heard of America, and that a good many more knew it only as a barbarous province away off somewhere, that had lately been at war with somebody, we pitied the ignorance of the Old World, but abated no jot of our importance. (645)

Or a half century later, consider the prologue that opens *Main Street* (1920) by Sinclair Lewis:

Main Street is the climax of civilization. That this Ford car might stand in front of the Bon Ton Store, Hannibal invaded Rome and Erasmus wrote in Oxford cloisters. What Ole Jenson the grocer says to Ezra Stowbody the banker is the new law for London, Prague, and the unprofitable isles of the sea; whatsoever Ezra does not know and sanction, that thing is heresy, worthless for knowing and wicked to consider. Our railway station is the final aspiration of architecture. ([i])

George Babbitt, in Lewis's novel *Babbitt* (1922), is proud of living in Zenith, a fictional Midwestern city that is truly "great" (a ubiquitous word in speeches and tweets by the leader of the free world today). He brags that the city has "an unparalleled number of miles of paved streets, bathrooms, vacuum cleaners, and all the other signs of civilization" – clear signs of its "all-round unlimited greatness" (187). The ignorance and self-importance of the self-satisfied provincialism, knee-jerk nationalism, and braggadocio emanating from the Oval Office today may infuriate us, but before we despair, let us remember that the US is also a nation that has produced gifted writers able to unmask these

traits, often with wit, with humour, and with a faith that recognizing these alarming flaws is a first step towards becoming the kind of society that rejects them (Fishkin, “America’s”). Recognizing the boldness and brilliance of these writers’ critiques of our society – and embracing a vision of our world that welcomes these critiques and learns from them – is the task of literary scholars today.

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