

Huck's Black Voice

The author of Was Huck Black? tells how she came upon an insight, long recognized by African-American writers, that led to her pathbreaking book.

by Shelley Fisher Fishkin

October 1, 1994. The Mark Twain House's annual fall symposium had brought the pioneering comic Dick Gregory, cultural critic Michael Eric Dyson, columnist Clarence Page, novelist Gloria Naylor, journalist Andrea Ford, folklorist Roger Abrahams, myself, and others to Hartford, Connecticut, for a day of panel discussions followed by dinner and a tour of Twain's house. The symposium had originally been called "Nigger and the Power of Language." This title had quickly proved too combustible, and the initial epithet was dropped from all but the most preliminary advance notices about the event. But the word had hovered behind all the day's discussions—whether I was quoting Twain's 1869 antilynching editorial in the *Buffalo Express* entitled "Only a Nigger," or Dick Gregory, who had titled his autobiography *Nigger!*, was holding forth on Twain's genius as a satirist.

I had reread Gregory's autobiography on the plane to Hartford, and was struck anew by its brashness and bite, starting with the dedication on the book's first page:

Dear Momma—Wherever you are, if you ever hear the word "nigger" again, remember they are advertising my book.

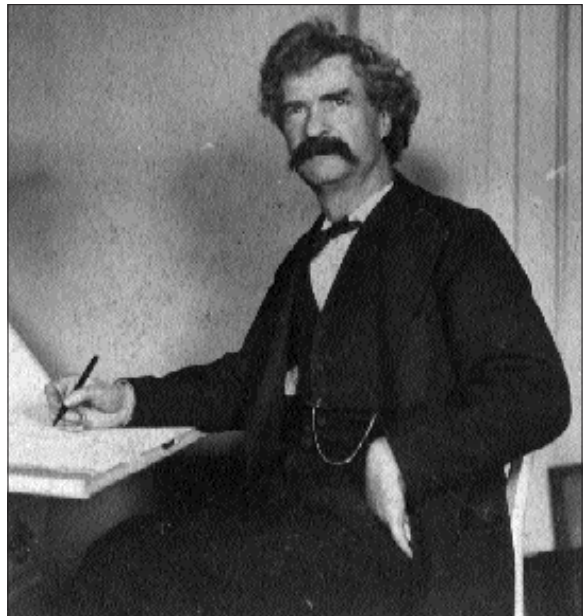
When I read Gregory's masterful jabs at Southern good ol' boys,

I recalled Twain's comment about no tyranny being so strong that it can withstand the weapon of ridicule:

"Last time I was down South I walked into this restaurant, and this white waitress came up to me and said: 'We don't serve colored people here.'"

"I said: 'That's all right, I don't eat colored people. Bring me a whole fried chicken.'"

"About that time these three cousins come in, you know the ones I mean, Klu, Kluck, and Klan, and they say: 'Boy, we're givin' you fair warnin'. Anything you do to that chicken, we're



Mark Twain in the 1880s, when he wrote Huckleberry Finn

gonna do to you.’ About then the waitress brought me my chicken. ‘Remember, boy, anything you do to that chicken, we’re gonna do to you.’ So I put down my knife and fork, and picked up that chicken, and *kissed* it.”

And I was moved by the way Gregory combined bold social critique and lyrical paean to

all those Negro mothers who gave their kids the strength to go on, to take that thimble to the well while the whites were taking buckets. Those of us who weren’t destroyed got stronger, got calluses on our souls. And now we’re ready to change a system, a system where a white man can destroy a black man with a single word. Nigger.

The book was first published in 1964, soon after the assassination of Medgar Evers and the Birmingham church bombing that killed four little girls, and shortly before the Watts riots, the murders of the three civil rights workers in Mississippi, and my first encounter with Pap Finn in high school. Gregory’s narrative of his experiences brought back to me the violent lunacies of that era more vividly than anything I have read since. As I reread the book, something else caught my eye that had somehow slipped my attention the first time around: Gregory hailed from Missouri, the same state as Mark Twain.

Both of us were scheduled to appear on the morning panel. The van from the hotel dropped all of us at the Aetna Center, where the symposium was being held. We were instructed to make our way to the green room until it was time to go on stage. Dick Gregory had been a hero of mine for so long that I found myself star-struck at his side as we headed down the long corridor.

I nearly tripped when he told me he was aware of my work. (My book, *Was Huck*

Black? Mark Twain and African-American Voices, had come out the year before.)

“Hm-hm,” he said. “We always said Mark Twain got his stuff from things black folks told him. My *grandmother* said that. Now white folks with Ph.D.’s get government grants to discover that stuff.” He shook his head.

I started to explain that I had never received any government grants to discover anything, when I stopped myself: that wasn’t really the point. Gregory was right: blacks had known it all along. True, they hadn’t “proved” it. But they had known it and said it. Only nobody out there listened. Well, almost nobody.

Nine years earlier, in the spring of 1985, the Mark Twain Memorial in Hartford had invited me to be a guest at its annual meeting, an event that was being held jointly with the convention of the New England American Studies Association. The award-winning novelist David Bradley, author of *The Chaneyville Incident* (my candidate for the great American novel of our time), was scheduled to speak. He titled his talk, provocatively, “The First ‘Nigger’ Novel.”

Imposing and impressive—in fact, looking a bit like pictures I’d seen of Frederick Douglass—Bradley stared out into the crowd of mainly white American studies scholars and Hartford patrons of the arts and said, “You folks know a lot about Sam Clemens. Sam Clemens was white. But who here among you has ever seen Mark Twain? Mark Twain was black.” He then proceeded to make a case for *Huckleberry Finn* (1889) as a work that prefigured the fiction of African-American writers in the 20th century—including his own. The audience was (to put it mildly) in shock. Some were outraged. Some felt threatened. Others were simply confused.

I remember clearly my own response:

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he was right. His speech was a virtuoso performance rather than a scholarly disquisition. But his insights were right on target. It made perfect sense to view *Huckleberry Finn* as a key precursor to a great deal of fiction by black writers that came after it, just as he said; I was certain of it. I had no more proof at that point than he did—which, save for when he was speaking as a writer himself, was none at all. But could I prove it? Slave narratives had rarely employed dialect, seeking to demonstrate instead, through well-crafted, standard-English prose, the ex-slave's claim to a place at the table of humanity. And most of Twain's black contemporaries (with one or two exceptions) had steered clear of using the vernacular in their work as well, preferring the measured tones of the educated middle class. It was certainly plausible that Twain had been an important influence on writers such as Langston Hughes and Ralph Ellison. And hadn't Bradley acknowledged his own debt to Twain?

The seeds planted that night took six or seven years to germinate. During that time, as my antennae picked up everything that had bearing on the subject, I found a paper trail that supported Bradley's argument. Black writers who admired Twain included Charles Chesnutt, who kept a bust of Twain in his library, Ralph Ellison, who kept a photo of him over his desk, and Langston Hughes and Richard Wright, both of whom had paid eloquent homage to Twain in print. Through conversations and correspondence over the next few years, I found that Twain had been important to other contemporary black writers besides Bradley, including Toni Morrison, who returned to Twain when she was honing her craft as a writer. It was during an interview with Ralph Ellison in 1991 that my own variation on Bradley's theory began to take shape. Ellison spoke of Twain's special appreciation of the vernacular and of the irony at the core of a nation founded on ideals of freedom that tolerated slavery and racism in its midst. Mark Twain, Ellison said, "made it possible for many of us to find our

own voices." Why had Twain played this empowering role for black writers? I wondered aloud. Could some of the things Ellison learned from Twain be things Twain himself had learned from the rhetorical performances of African Americans? Yes, Ellison responded, "I think it comes full circle."

From that moment on, I began to systematically track all black speakers in Mark Twain's work. I reread a posthumously published essay by Twain in which he referred to an "impudent and delightful and satirical young black man, a slave" named Jerry (whom he recalled from his Missouri childhood) as "the greatest orator in the United States." I also reread an obscure article Twain had written in the *New York Times* in 1874 about a 10-year-old black child named Jimmy who had impressed him as "the most artless, sociable, exhaustless talker" he had ever come across, someone to whom he had listened, "as one who receives a revelation." I found compelling evidence that black speakers had played a central role in the genesis not only of Twain's black characters but of his most famous white one: *Huckleberry Finn*.

If black oral traditions and vernacular speech had played such an important role in shaping Twain's art, why hadn't anyone noticed it before, given the thousands of books and articles on Twain that had appeared? Literary scholars had denied any African-American influence on mainstream American texts, much as linguists had denied any African-American influence on southern speech and American speech in general. All of them, I became increasingly convinced, were wrong.

Among the Mark Twain Papers at the University of California, Berkeley, I examined, among other things, the manuscript of that essay about the "satirical young black man" named Jerry, and found that Twain had first called him "the greatest *man* in the United States." Back in Austin, at the University of Texas, I mined published and unpublished fiction and nonfiction by Twain, folklore and linguistic studies, history,

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newspapers, letters, manuscripts, and journals. I didn't come up for air all spring.

As I knew from my first encounter with the book in high school, critics had long viewed *Huckleberry Finn* as a declaration of independence from the genteel English novel tradition. Something new happened here that had never happened in American literature before. *Huckleberry Finn* allowed a different kind of writing to happen: a clean, crisp, non-nonsense, earthy, vernacular kind of writing that jumped off the printed page with unprecedented immediacy and energy; it was a book that talked. I now realized that, despite the fact that they had been largely ignored by white critics for the last hundred years, African-American speakers, language, and rhetorical traditions had played a crucial role in making that novel what it was.

Ralph Ellison had Mark Twain's number. “The spoken idiom of American negroes . . . [was] absorbed by the creators of our great 19th-century literature even when the majority of blacks were still enslaved. Mark Twain celebrated it in the prose of *Huckleberry Finn*,” Ellison had written. But his comment drew little notice. “The black man,” Ellison had said, was the “co-creator of the language Mark Twain raised to the level of literary eloquence.” But literary historians ignored Ellison and continued to tell us that white writers came from white literary ancestors and black writers from black ones. I knew that story had to change if we wanted to do justice to the richness of our culture.

I hadn't dialed his number in years, but I knew I had to call Bradley and tell him. After all, wasn't it really his idea? I called him in February 1992. “This may sound crazy,” I remember saying, “but I think I've figured out—and can prove—that black speakers and oral traditions played an absolutely central role in the

genesis of *Huckleberry Finn*. Twain couldn't have *written* the book without them. And hey, if Hemingway is right about all modern American literature coming from *Huck Finn*, then all modern American literature comes from those black voices as well. And as Ralph Ellison said when I interviewed him last summer, it all comes full circle because *Huck Finn* helps spark so much work by black writers in the 20th century.”

I stopped to catch my breath. There was a pause on the other end of the line. Then a question.

“Shelley, tell me one thing. Do you have tenure?”

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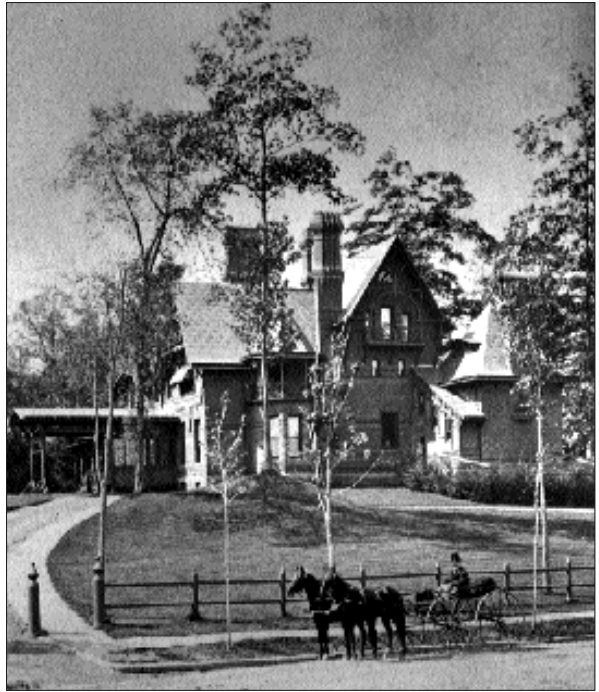
Ralph Ellison had been kind enough to read my manuscript through before I went public with my findings. When we spoke on the phone after he read it, he couldn't help chuckling with pleasure, delighted to have his intuitions validated after all these years. The actor Hal Holbrook, who has inhabited Mark Twain's voice for four decades, also read the manuscript. He told the *San Francisco Chronicle* that he had “sensed a black strain in Huck's voice but never knew for sure, adding ‘It's almost like the truth about something is so clear that you can look right through it.’”

Senior scholars who had devoted their lives to Twain's work were, for the most part, wonderfully open to my findings, and remarkably supportive. The occasional curmudgeon, of course, willfully ignored the fact that I was talking about the genesis of Huck's *voice* and not his skin color. And a scholar who should have known better argued something to this effect: how can Huck's voice be black if a sizable portion of it comes from white humorists? I had assumed that all of my readers would be able to recognize that my book's title, *Was Huck*

Black?, alluded to the famous “one-drop rule” that legally defined a person as black if he or she had only the most minute amount of “black blood.” In retrospect, I realize that was a mistake. The concept—crucial as it is to understanding the history of American race relations—had not made it into either E. D. Hirsh, Jr.’s, list of “What Every American Needs to Know” or the general “cultural literacy” of the country. I should have explained it: Huck’s voice did not have to be “*all-black*” in order to be considered “black” according to the traditional law of the land—it only had to be “*part-black*.” And the evidence that his voice had been shaped at least in part by African-American voices was strong—as even the most skeptical critic had to concede.

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Standing in the foyer of Mark Twain’s house in 1994, waiting for the rest of the group to join me to take the bus back to our hotel, I wondered how many of us had been drawn to visit this lavish, sophisticated mansion because the man who had lived there had painted a simple dawn on a silent river that was more real and memorable than any dawn we had ever witnessed. I thought about the demands Twain put on us, the contradictions he required us to acknowledge and address. The paterfamilias hosting elegant dinners in this house in Hartford also contained within himself the unruly child who hated to put on shoes. The man who felt such a deep sense of shame about the role white people played in oppressing blacks in America that he made that oppression central to his greatest works of fiction, explored the subject so artfully that he would be constantly misunderstood. Why was he so cagey? Why so reti-



Twain’s house in Hartford, Connecticut

cent to stake out these positions unequivocally? I thought of the many fragments Twain wrote but chose not to publish. So many—like “The United States of Lynchdom”—dealt with issues of race. Twain wrote his publisher that he would not have a friend left in the South if he went through with that book. (He seems to have been unaware of the fact that the black writer Ida B. Wells had written a very similar book several years before Twain conceived of his.) Was Twain guilty of trying to “have it all”—being true to his principles yet retaining that “option of deniability” that enabled him to banish controversy from his doorstep whenever he chose to do so? Did the local-boy-made-good who relished the chance to “go home again” to a hero’s welcome somehow make it too easy for his fellow Americans to avoid confronting the dark currents under the raft?

As I stepped out into the crisp night air of a New England autumn, I thought about how many Twains there seemed to be—and how the ones we choose to make our own reveal us to ourselves in fresh and surprising ways.