

Huck and Kim: Would Teachers Feel the Same if the Language Were Misogynist?

*The author reviews controversies surrounding the teaching of Huck Finn in the context of racial turmoil in the United States, then presents a revised text that substitutes a misogynist term, c***, for n*****, and makes the character Jim a female, Kim, asking readers to consider the need for empathy in reading.*

A discussion took place in 2015 on NCTE's Teaching and Learning Forum Connected Community that concerned teaching *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. It began with the question, "With college admins and professors being forced to step down at universities all over the country, over racially charged issues, is it time to prohibit Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*?" This question opened the door to a discussion that, for the most part, supported the teaching of the novel, with contributors defending it on its literary merits. In a sense, the justification of teaching *Huck Finn* as a masterpiece shuts the door on other possible ways of considering the novel's impact on modern-day readers.

In this article I ask White teachers to consider how the act of reading *Huck Finn* feels to Black students who have experienced the term n***** when spoken by White people as vile and vituperative over the course of their lives. In school, *Huck Finn* is often required reading in which offended students' affective response must be partitioned off so that they may appreciate its satirical critique of slave society. The enormity of the task of turning off an emotional faucet in this fashion, I believe, is underestimated by many of the novel's admirers who intentionally or not shut down an important discussion of how its language affects adolescent Black readers. I hope to complicate the assumption that the novel is a work of genius that stands above the need to accommodate the emotional response of a subgroup of readers.

The question about the potential prohibition of *Huck Finn* took place amid racial conflict

generated by shocking instances of African American men, women, youth, and children being arrested, beaten, and shot dead by police because they were perceived, often without cause, to be acting in threatening ways. Harvard, Princeton, Yale, the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, the University of Kansas, the University of Missouri, Ithaca College, Claremont McKenna College, and Oberlin College were the sites of student protests and social media storms over issues of race-based inequity, discrimination, harassment, and symbols.

Just after the Teaching and Learning Forum discussion died out, in December, Friends' Central School in Montgomery County, Pennsylvania, removed *Huck Finn* from the curriculum, replacing it with *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*. The decision was reached following discussions among stakeholders in light of the Quaker principle of achieving peace through collaborative resolution. The specter of prohibition had become a reality.

Huck Finn's Canonical Status

The status of *Huck Finn* as a lightning-rod in times of racial conflict is the latest instance in a long history of controversy about the book's language, in particular the use of n***** in Huck's narration. Upon publication it was boycotted and censored, not for its language but for portraying a friendship between a White boy and a Black man. By the 1990s it was the fifth most often challenged book in the United States, and in the 2000s ranked 14th.

Undoubtedly, Huck's use of this term would be fitting for a young boy of his time and place,

as would his engrained belief in the inferiority of slaves and other Black people. As a White boy coming of age in mid-1800s Missouri, a recently admitted US state embroiled in highly inflammatory disputes surrounding the Missouri Compromise that allowed for slavery, young Huck would surely have been immersed in racist assumptions that he would easily have appropriated and expressed in his narration.

That narrative authenticity helps to legitimize Huck's perspective to readers of later periods, including its defenders on the Teaching and Learning Forum, whose sincerity and intentions I do not doubt. Based on my high school teaching experience, I wrote (Smagorinsky, "Towards") about my own increasing ambivalence about teaching the novel to mixed-race high school classes outside Chicago, given the fatigue and angst that my African American students reported feeling over the ubiquity of *n****** in *Huck Finn*,

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in which it appears 212 times in the book's 320 pages. If not death by 1,000 cuts, it is, for many readers, death by 212.

I did not then, nor do I now, advocate for the suppression of the novel. Rather, I hope to persuade my fellow teachers, particularly the vast majority who are White, to wonder how it must feel to Black students to be battered repeatedly by what most African Americans consider to be the most hateful word in our language—one that most of these students have been called maliciously many times—under the auspices of reading great literature in school.

Huck Finn has served as the object of much significant writing about race in American letters. Toni Morrison, for example, makes a number of her points in *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* through references to *Huck Finn*. She argues that African American characters created by White authors tend to be used metaphorically to represent Blackness in relation to Whiteness. Black characters, like Jim, serve to fill the White imagination with an emblem of the wretched other, even

in narratives that, like *Huck Finn*, might be interpreted to have a noble purpose.

My Personal Journey as a White Educator

The discussion on the Teaching and Learning Forum on Teaching *Huck Finn* in "Times Like These" tilted strongly in favor of continuing to teach the novel as an American masterpiece. Although most participants were White, the few Black contributors also defended the novel, and their statements of validation were roundly applauded by the White discussants.¹ Even as some contributors suggested that other works available to teachers explored racism in more compelling ways—especially when the books were written by Black authors, both historic (e.g., Richard Wright) and contemporary (e.g., Ta-Nehisi Coates)—for the most part, the book was loyally defended. One poster wrote:

Huckleberry Finn is one of the finest American novels ever written. It's full of teaching moments, literary and historical. A key strategy is to relate the novel to its times, to the historical events, culture, and prejudices, including the language, of the 1830s when it was set and to the post-Civil War decades in which it was written, when Jim Crow started to set in. To not teach it is a loss of tremendous opportunities, to let students experience satire, figurative language, nineteenth-century prejudices. There are versions that help us understand what was going on in history at the time and why the novel uses the language it does: UC Berkeley's annotated print edition of *Huckleberry Finn* and Gleeditions annotated on-line version. Teaching the novel is tricky because of emotional sensitivities, but preparing students for the language, etc. makes a difference. And understanding the historical place of this novel helps us relate it to all that's going on today.

I used a similar rationale when teaching *Huck Finn* to eleventh graders in a mostly White school early in my high school career. In such settings, discussing racism in *Huck Finn* was less problematic. White people, in general, are able to distance themselves emotionally from the brutality of Huck's use of the term *n******. White teachers may then use their classroom authority to suggest to students they should recognize Twain's ironic narration to appreciate the masterful way in which Twain

critiqued racism and other human follies, and not take personal offense at the words in Huck's vocabulary that hammer home the satire. Meanwhile, many Black people have adopted the term *n****** for within-race use, allowing teachers to more easily justify their decision to teach literature that includes the word when written by Whites. Black people use it with one another, I have heard White teachers say; what right do they have to complain when Twain uses it to criticize racism?

My uneasiness with the novel began following a move to a school with greater racial diversity and more immediate contact with students who felt abused by reading about characters who looked like them being constantly referred to as *n******. These students included "good kids": athletes and student government leaders, students who had strong attendance and academic records, who nonetheless spoke wearily of being pulled over by police, being watched menacingly in stores, living under the assumption of having criminal intentions, and having racial insults shouted at them from passing cars. Given their obvious pain and their request not to read anything more involving the word *n******, I began questioning my teaching of the novel and the possibility that assigning it resulted in more harm to them than good.

Empathy in the Face of Microaggressions

I read the comments in the Teaching and Learning Forum with interest. I tried, like other contributors, to respect each speaker's points, but I kept coming back to the problem of empathy. I found the discussion to be concerned with the literary merit of the work and the social message available through a recognition of the ironic, satirical method through which Twain crafts Huck's narration. The discussion lacked attention to the concern I explore in this article: how Black students feel when they are assigned a novel that includes hundreds of instances of *n****** throughout its pages.

In many ways, the required reading of *Huck Finn* in schools could easily be considered a form of microaggression, a term coined by Chester Pierce to account for the seemingly innocuous expressions that unintentionally denigrate people from non-dominant social and cultural groups, and are experienced as routine acts of hostility toward their

existence. *Huck Finn* might be said to contribute to a hidden curriculum that not only privileges the work and outlook of White Americans; it further suggests that the lives of Black people are best related by sympathetic Whites as symbols for a White conception of a just society. I felt that the Teaching and Learning Forum discussion overlooked one of microaggression's principal traits: its often unintentional consequences. By assigning *Huck Finn* as a required text under the auspices of its stature as perhaps the most important American novel yet produced, are teachers denigrating students who have no recourse but to read it and bear it in spite of how they experience its language?

In posing this question, I hope to push the discussion in a different direction from that undertaken by many teachers of *Huck Finn* and other texts that employ similar language. In most rationales that I hear, the novel's literary merit is foregrounded, with students' affective responses subsumed beneath the need to engage dispassionately with the use of offensive terms. I hope to make the case for a competing emphasis, one that addresses the difficulties that many students have in detaching themselves emotionally from what they read; this value on promoting emotional engagement with reading, ironically, has long been valorized by student-centered teachers. Ultimately, my goal is to have teachers ask a different set of questions from those that customarily result in the justification for teaching *Huck Finn*.

The Right to Write about Other People's Experiences

I pause here to include a brief "subjectivity statement" in which I explain how I am positioned in relation to the topics of race and gender, perhaps the most sensitive cultural barriers that Americans have historically navigated. Establishing my position is especially important in what has been called the "right to write" about other people's experiences, such as Twain constructing Black characters to symbolize White racism. By this standard, I also have no right to write about the experiences of women. My purpose with this article is to write, indirectly, about both race and gender, by converting Twain's text about Black characters to a narrative about White women, primarily by replacing

n***** with a term that most women I know find equally denigrating, hateful, and derisive: an anatomical reference of extreme crudeness that tends to be used as an act of verbal violence by men against women. In doing so, I hope to approximate for women—that is, most secondary school English teachers—the experience that Black students have in reading a text that assaults their sensibilities page after page.

I consulted with a number of friends whose work is grounded in feminism and critical race theory to gauge the degree to which I have the right to write on these topics, even with many precautions taken to avoid colonizing the people whose rights I hope to champion. One asked, “Is it OK to use oppressive language directed at White women to make White women imagine empathizing with another oppressed group? How can White men begin to imagine what that feels like?” These are good points, well worth considering, even as I move forward with their consequences in mind.

Another respondent encouraged me, saying, “You are using [your White male] privilege to send what you feel is an important message, and no, you may not necessarily get it right, but damn, you’re trying. In fact, that might be the crux of this whole thing: Not empathy, but reflexivity.” Another asked, “If you’re a White man who’s troubling these issues, why do you get to use women to do so? You could argue that it’s because there is no derogatory term aimed at White cisgender men, and so no equivalent, but I’m not sure why the conversation needs to rest on examinations of two groups of which you have no part.”

I proceed in an attempt to raise awareness to a profession made up largely of White women that reading this oppressive term repeatedly from a canonical source might be emotionally troubling for many readers. I choose to at least try to start this conversation in hope that it helps others to take more empathic views of students whose sensibilities are crushed by the experience of reading books, like *Huck Finn*, that employ odious terms to achieve

presumably honorable ends. I recognize that in prying open this door, I may fail miserably.

The Basis for My Pedagogical Thinking

I am not a naturally empathic person. I am on the Asperger’s spectrum, which often produces an emotional disconnection from others. I’ve tried to learn ways of compensating for this absence in my makeup by being deliberate in seeing how the world looks and feels to other people. I do so by consciously shifting my perspective to see how others might view their surroundings and experience social interactions. In the heat of a disagreement, I can’t take the perspective of an antagonist, and I revert to Asperger’s-based responses that may be abrupt, unsympathetic, blunt, and at times hurtful. But given time to work reflectively, deliberately, and thoughtfully, I can detach myself from my immediate rush of response and think about how another person might experience situations.

I give this background to introduce a teaching practice I developed when writing about character education. I designed an activity that centers on inductively generating the capacity for sympathy, empathy, and compathy (Smagorinsky, *Teaching*), compathy being the rare ability to feel *with* someone. I created a role-playing scenario in which a school conflict, real or hypothetical, is dramatized by groups of students, each of which adopts the perspective of a different character or participant. Groups are responsible for occupying the position of their designated characters and doing their best to articulate their perspectives, feelings, motives, and other lenses through which they might experience the event. These different points of view are then shared with the class, discussed, potentially role-played, and possibly assembled into a Faulknerian account from multiple narrative perspectives to show the different ways in which people might view and experience a single contested event.

It is valuable to learn how to see the world from another’s vantage point, no matter how impossible that might actually be, and how especially precarious that effort might be when our own experiences are distant from those we are trying to understand. I have never experienced the world as a person whose skin color invites a wide range of negative assumptions, although I grew up in a Southern

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community in which my appearance, surname, and father's heritage elicited a lot of anti-Semitism from the boys in the neighborhood. Yet trying to take the perspective of my Black students by listening to their reasons for feeling beaten down by Huck's narration forced me to question my teaching of the novel in my high school classes. Perhaps that experience of listening to students' pain gives me, if not the right, at least the opportunity to ask readers to take an empathic stance while reading what follows.

A Very Offensive Pedagogical Exercise

The teaching profession as a whole is about 84 percent White, and 84 percent women. To help my colleagues position their reading to take into account the distress my students shared with me, I devised an exercise that might help my colleagues who teach this novel experience it in a way that approximates the way so many Black students do. I know of no word in the language that bears such hostility to men, or White people generally, as do the two words I emphasize in this article. There are simply no correlates for people like me for the terms available for speaking hatefully to and of women and African Americans.

Before reading on, please beware this trigger warning: What follows is highly offensive. It involves the only word in the language I can think of that rivals *n****** in hostility. Like *n******, it's not a word I say aloud, or even in my head if I can avoid it, because it is despicable, hostile, and abusive. I can only use this word in print, like *n******, elliptically.

This exercise is not a perfect match for substitution into Twain's text. It simplifies the complexities we understand about the multiple identities we inhabit and their innumerable intersections in schools and in the world. Just as women's experiences are not interchangeable with those of African Americans, neither is the substitution of *c***** for *n****** an exact swap. *C***** was not yet in use in Twain's era as an expletive of its contemporary magnitude (Warwick). But for the purpose of attempting to help readers experience how it feels to read it repeatedly, no matter how well-intentioned the usage is in producing societal critique, it's the most comparable word I can find in our language. For this exercise, I took a paragraph from *Huck Finn*

and changed the character of Jim to a woman, Kim. Instead of being referred to routinely as a *n******, Kim is matter-of-factly called a *c***** 212 times in this narrative related by a male character. White women of Huck's day had few rights and were, in effect, their husbands' and fathers' property, so this substitution of Kim for Jim, while not a direct exchange, is not too far-fetched.


Most of what follows is taken verbatim from Twain's original, with substitutions indicated by brackets to replace *hanging*, the action proposed in Huck's story, with *beating*, the likely punishment for recalcitrant women. The narrator remains a young White boy from 1840s rural Missouri named Huck Finn. The subject for Twain's Huck is runaway slaves; let's assume instead that Kim has tried to escape her abusive, alcoholic husband, a man similar to Huck's Pap. Huck relates the following after Kim is caught following her flight:

I followed the men to see what they was going to do with Kim; and the old doctor and Uncle Silas followed after Tom into the house. The men was very huffy, and some of them wanted to [beat] Kim for an example to all the other *c***** around there, so they wouldn't be trying to run away like Kim done, and making such a raft of trouble, and keeping a whole family scared most to death for days and nights. But the others said, don't do it, it wouldn't answer at all; she ain't our *c*****, and her [husband] would turn up and make us pay for her, sure. So that cooled them down a little, because the people that's always the most anxious for to [beat] a *c***** that hain't done just right is always the very ones that ain't the most anxious to pay for her when they've got their satisfaction out of her.

Take this paragraph and multiply it by about 70, and if you are a person who is deeply offended by this term, you'll get a small taste of how it must feel for a lot of Black students to be required to read *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Perhaps the brevity of this example cannot possibly replicate the experience of being bludgeoned for more than 300 pages of scurrilous language, and being required to do so as part of a captive student population required to read an American classic that is above criticism. Perhaps my effort falls well short of its goals. I then must ask for you to use your imagination to project the rest of the experience and regard it with empathy.

Would you want to be required to read such a book, and be told to put aside your emotions and recognize the genius behind the satire? Would you want such an experience for your daughter, or your son for that matter?

If you're at all troubled by the answers, and if you're a member of the teaching field's predominantly White population, then I ask that you put yourself in the shoes of Black students for whom *Huck Finn* is required reading. What must they feel as the cumulative impact of hearing the Black characters referred to as *n****r* more than 200 times? Perhaps more importantly, how must they feel when told that reading great literature requires them to get over their emotions and become cold literary technicians of the sort presumed in the Common Core State Standards' emphasis on reading within the four corners of the page while sublimating emotional responses in service of textual analysis? By opening the door to this question, I hope to promote

a discussion that has been shut down many times, yet cries for new consideration. 

Note

1. I inferred participants' races from the photos accompanying their posts.

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Peter Smagorinsky (smago@uga.edu) is Distinguished Research Professor of English Education at The University of Georgia. In 2016, Palgrave Macmillan published his book, *Creativity and Community among Autism-Spectrum Youth: Creating Positive Social Updrafts through Play and Performance*.

READWRITETHINK CONNECTION

Lisa Storm Fink, RWT

For more than a year, conversations on social media have drawn new attention to the lack of diversity in children's and young adult literature. Statistics can help us see the problem, but they don't capture its effects on readers' lives and dreams. Even if they are few in number, diverse books do exist. Tune in to this ReadWriteThink.org podcast episode to hear about recently published YA titles that celebrate diversity in a range of genres. There's something for every reader here: comic book superheroes, civil rights history, love stories, humorous essays, poetry, artwork, and stories of suspense. <http://bit.ly/1NFOD9G>