

THE ANTICANONICAL LESSON OF
HUCKLEBERRY FINN

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INTRODUCTION

In recent articles in the *Harvard Law Review*¹ and the *Duke Law Journal*,² Professors Balkin, Levinson, and Primus offer insights into the idea of a canon of constitutional law.³ They suggest that certain overruled cases nevertheless continue to be a core part of the study of constitutional law because they provide reference points for legal jurists and society to understand outdated interpretations of the Constitution. Moreover, sometimes a dissenting opinion in an overruled case later becomes fundamental to a new majority opinion. For example, in *Brown v. Board of Education*⁴ the Court adopted Justice Harlan's dissenting opinion from *Plessy v. Ferguson*⁵ that the "separate but equal" doctrine was unconsti-

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¹ J.M. Balkin & Sanford Levinson, *The Canons of Constitutional Law*, 111 HARV. L. REV. 963 (1998).

² Richard Primus, *Canon, Anticanon, and Judicial Dissent*, 48 DUKE L.J. 243 (1998).

³ Balkin & Levinson, *supra* note 1, at 1016–18 (exploring possibilities for canon revision in constitutional law and suggesting that it include more than cases).

⁴ 347 U.S. 483 (1954).

⁵ 163 U.S. 537 (1896).

tutional. In this way, Primus describes the relationship between the cases as “yoked pairs.”⁶ The new opinion becomes part of the canon,⁷ and the overruled opinion is not forgotten but rather becomes part of what Primus calls the anticanon of constitutional law, which he describes as follows:

[T]he constitutional canon has a dual structure. Unlike a literary or a religious canon, the constitutional canon preserves examples of the worst errors in its field as well as the finest moments. This dual structure could be described, terminologically, in either of two ways. One is to refer to all of the component texts involved as “canonical” and to subdivide them into “approved canonical cases” and “disapproved canonical cases.” The other is to reserve the term “canon” to refer to the set of texts that are not only important but normatively approved, and to refer to the twin set, the set of texts that are important but normatively disapproved, as the “anti-canon.”⁸

Primus’s distinction between a canon and an anticanon of constitutional law is similar to the distinction in American literature between the canon and the noncanon.⁹ Recent discussions among literary scholars focus on revising the canon generally for the purpose of including previously noncanonical works of minority and women authors.¹⁰ Some scholars suggest that merely assimilating women and minority authors into the canon fails to challenge assumptions about what makes a work worthy of inclusion in the canon.¹¹ Professor Cutter addresses this problem by introducing the idea of an anticanon in American literature.¹² Specifically, she suggests that “marginalized” texts and canonical texts

⁶ Primus, *supra* note 2, at 249.

⁷ See Symposium, *Do We Have a Legal Canon?*, 43 J. LEGAL EDUC. 1 (1993), for an exploration of the notion of a canon in constitutional law.

⁸ Primus, *supra* note 2, at 245.

⁹ See generally JOHN GUILLORY, *CULTURAL CAPITAL: THE PROBLEM OF LITERARY CANON FORMATION* 6 (1993) (describing the “process of *selection*, by which certain works are designated canonical, others noncanonical”) [hereinafter *CULTURAL CAPITAL*].

¹⁰ See *Introduction: Reconstructing the Pedagogical Canon to THE CANON IN THE CLASSROOM: THE PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS OF CANON REVISION IN AMERICAN LITERATURE* xi (John Alberti ed., 1995) (describing “‘noncanonical’ texts” as those “left off of syllabi and missing from the bibliographies of mainstream scholarship, texts often written or created by women, people of color, working-class and poor people.”) [hereinafter *THE CANON IN THE CLASSROOM*]; Gregory S. Jay, *The End of “American” Literature: Toward a Multicultural Practice*, in *THE CANON IN THE CLASSROOM* 3.

¹¹ *CULTURAL CAPITAL*, *supra* note 9, at 7.

¹² Martha J. Cutter, *If It’s Monday This Must Be Melville: A “Canon, Anticanon” Approach to Redefining the American Literature Survey*, in *THE CANON IN THE CLASSROOM*, *supra* note 10, at 119, 122.

are dialectical pairs. The canon can be viewed “as a palimpsest which repeats and erases, confirms and reverses, its own historical situation allow[ing] us to get away from the paradigm of teaching either ‘classic’ or ‘marginal’ texts, toward an understanding that ‘classic’ texts and ‘marginal’ works are dependent on each other for meaning.”¹³

Viewing the relationship between certain literary works as dialectic is similar to Primus’s idea of viewing canonical cases and anticanonical cases as yoked pairs.

There is, however, a critical difference between how the canon-anti-canon distinction is used in literature and in how it is used constitutional law. While Professor Cutter’s paradigm functions to “critique hegemonic discourses of the time period”¹⁴ (as represented through canonical works) and present “alternative paradigms” (as represented through anticanonical works), it does not attempt to unequivocally reject the “normative approval” of the canonical work, as Primus’s approach to constitutional law does. She describes her goal as follows:

Using a “canon, anticanon” approach also allows me to emphasize the constructed nature of the canon itself. I do not present the canonical texts as repositories of value or meaning which have endured throughout time, but rather as something which someone has chosen to call canonical, at a particular historical moment. Similarly, the “anticanon” is not meant to be a pejorative term for texts which somehow did not “make it” to the big time . . . Rather, the “anticanon” represents texts which for various reasons were not considered “classic.” I also do not insist on rigid distinctions between these two groups of texts, although I generally describe texts which support dominant ideologies as the “canon,” and texts which undermine these ideologies as the “anticanon.”¹⁵

Although Professor Cutter’s approach to revising the canon is different from her colleagues’, all of their efforts at revision are largely limited to attaining a more inclusive reading list in classrooms, consistent with a limited understanding of multiculturalism.

I want to use the term anticanon of American literature as Primus uses it in constitutional law. Specifically, this article posits that some books included in the canon of American literature no longer belong there because they presently lack normative approval. Books in this category are different from noncanonized works that were never valued the

¹³ *Id.* at 121.

¹⁴ *Id.* at 122.

¹⁵ *Id.* at 124.

way canonized work were, even if perhaps they should have been under a revision of the canon. An anticanon of American literature that functions the way the anticanon of constitutional law would operate explicitly removes books from the canon.

It is time to consider removing from the canon and placing in an anticanon books that are inconsistent with multicultural education. I borrow Professor Sonia Nieto's definition of multicultural education "as embedded in a sociopolitical context and as antiracist and basic education for all students that permeates all areas of schooling, and that is characterized by a commitment to social justice and critical approaches to learning."¹⁶ Anticanonical books are worth studying because they contain reference points for understanding why society's values have changed, much as the value of studying *Plessy* and *Dred Scott* lies in understanding why they were overruled.

The book I focus on is Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*,¹⁷ which is part of the canon of American literature and viewed as the "quintessentially American book."¹⁸ My suggestion builds on another article I am writing in which I propose that making the book part of a mandatory public middle or high school curriculum causes emotional segregation of students based on race contrary to *Brown*.¹⁹ In that piece, I make clear that I do not think the book should be banned but only that it not be taught as an antiracist classic and involuntarily imposed on middle- and high-school students who lack the intellectual maturity to understand the racism in the novel. This article addresses more explicitly my thoughts on what society can and should do with the book.

The book is part of the canon because of Twain's ability to satirize and write in several different dialects.²⁰ *Huckleberry Finn* is also significantly praised because of its portrayal of competing ideologies about

¹⁶ SONIA NIETO, *THE LIGHT IN THEIR EYES: CREATING MULTICULTURAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES* xviii (1999) [hereinafter *THE LIGHT IN THEIR EYES*] (citing her earlier work, SONIA NIETO, *AFFIRMING DIVERSITY: THE SOCIOPOLITICAL CONTEXT OF MULTICULTURAL EDUCATION* (2nd ed. 1996)).

¹⁷ MARK TWAIN, *THE ADVENTURES OF HUCKLEBERRY FINN* (Emory Elliott ed., Oxford Univ. Press 1999) (1885) [hereinafter *HUCKLEBERRY FINN*].

¹⁸ See, e.g., JONATHAN ARAC, *HUCKLEBERRY FINN AS IDOL AND TARGET: THE FUNCTIONS OF CRITICISM IN OUR TIME* vii (1997) ("I am fed up with reading that *Huckleberry Finn* is the 'quintessentially American book'").

¹⁹ Sharon E. Rush, *Emotional Segregation in Public Schools: Lessons from Harlan and Huckleberry Finn*, 36 U. MICH. J.L. REFORM (forthcoming Spring 2003) [hereinafter *Emotional Segregation*].

²⁰ See ARAC, *supra* note 18, at 41; see also SHELLEY FISHER FISHKIN, *WAS HUCK BLACK? MARK TWAIN AND AFRICAN AMERICAN VOICES* *passim* (1993).

white supremacy and racial equality²¹ but with an understanding by most whites that it is antiracist.²²

Teaching the novel in public schools for the purpose of focusing on issues of slavery or race is as important to white society — I suggest more important — than teaching it for style. Indeed, understanding the satire and irony in the novel is beyond the maturing intellectual abilities of most middle- and high-school students.²³ Yet many white teachers adopt the novel as part of a multicultural lesson plan and use it to denounce slavery and perhaps talk about African-American history. For example, one unidentified school person believes it “‘ties in very well with the pre-Civil War history’ that most ninth graders study.”²⁴ Simultaneously, many black parents decry the novel’s inclusion in the curriculum because they conclude it is racist and are deeply troubled that their children are exposed to the harm and humiliation that come from reading the novel in a classroom. Professor Julius Lester stated that his “children’s education will be enhanced by *not* reading” the book.²⁵

Thus far, white society largely ignores black society’s resistance to the novel, and it continues to be viewed by white society as an “indispensable part of education.”²⁶ Many teachers and educators, however, are concerned about the controversy and are not sure what should be done to resolve it.²⁷ Teachers and educators somewhat sympathetic to blacks’ claims that the novel is harmful suggest that it be taught only to older students²⁸ or that it be taught using a teacher’s guide that presumably would avoid some of the hurt felt by black students.²⁹

²¹ Peaches Henry, *The Struggle for Tolerance: Race and Censorship in Huckleberry Finn*, in *SATIRE OR EVASION? BLACK PERSPECTIVES ON HUCKLEBERRY FINN* 25, 35 (James S. Leonard et al. eds., 1992) [hereinafter *SATIRE OR EVASION?*].

²² See *ARAC*, *supra* note 18, for an excellent survey of the literature in support of this and written by an author who disagrees with this view. Some blacks also think the novel is antiracist. See, e.g., David L. Smith, *Huck, Jim, and American Racial Discourse*, in *SATIRE OR EVASION?*, *supra* note 21, at 103, 104 (“*Huckleberry Finn* is without peer among major Euro-American novels for its explicitly antiracist stance.” (footnote omitted)).

²³ Henry, *supra* note 21, at 38–39.

²⁴ ELAINE MENSCH & HARRY MENSCH, *BLACK, WHITE, AND HUCKLEBERRY FINN: RE-IMAGINING THE AMERICAN DREAM* 107 (2000) (quoting an unidentified school official first quoted in NAT HENTOFF, *FREE SPEECH FOR ME — BUT NOT FOR THEE: HOW THE AMERICAN LEFT AND RIGHT RELENTLESSLY CENSOR EACH OTHER* 34 (1992)).

²⁵ Julius Lester, *Morality and Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, in *SATIRE OR EVASION?*, *supra* note 21, at 199, 200 (emphasis added).

²⁶ Charles H. Nichols, “A True Book — With Some Stretchers:” *Huck Finn Today*, in *SATIRE OR EVASION?*, *supra* note 21, at 208, 210.

²⁷ MENSCH & MENSCH, *supra* note 24, at 110.

²⁸ *ARAC*, *supra* note 18, at 81.

²⁹ MENSCH & MENSCH, *supra* note 24, at 11.

As the white adoptive mother of a black girl³⁰ who recently read the book in her sixth grade class, I am also concerned about including the novel in public school curricula because of the harm and humiliation black students experience reading the novel. Equally important, I am concerned that white teachers fail to grasp the full extent of the racist implications of the story. White teachers who use the book to illustrate Huck's courage at helping Jim escape slavery too readily categorize Huckleberry ("Huck") and Twain³¹ as antiracist, a label that then attaches to the entire book. Under this misguided view, *Huckleberry Finn* could be considered the harbinger of multicultural education in America.

In this article, I offer the primary reason I think the novel promotes the "race precept"³² — the belief in white superiority and black inferiority — and should not be included in a multicultural middle- or high-school mandatory³³ curriculum. I then try to show that a significant harm in teaching the novel stems from white teachers who *think* they do understand the racism in the novel but fail to do so.³⁴ Because most teachers do not question the view that the novel is antiracist, they are unable to present it in a way that promotes multicultural education *even though they think they are accomplishing this goal by studying the book*.

The value of *Huckleberry Finn*, then, is not that it is an antiracist novel worthy of canonization. Rather, the value of *Huckleberry Finn* lies in its anticanonical lesson: White society should no longer accept the normative value of the novel's message, a message that is far more complex and racist than whites understand. Indeed, Professor Rhett Jones, an African-American scholar, suggests that the novel be taught as a lesson about whites' cruelty toward blacks:

Huckleberry Finn must remain available to the reading public so that people can continue to read the novel, get angry, feel betrayed, and eventually find an answer. In so doing, they may find clues that will help explain why so many of Euro-America's most distinguished novelists have found it possible to accept or ignore racism, despite

³⁰ See SHARON E. RUSH, *LOVING ACROSS THE COLOR LINE* (2000) (describing how our relationship has taught me to understand racism more fully).

³¹ See MENSCH & MENSCH, *supra* note 24, at 17–18 (discussing the ambiguity over whether Huck speaks for Twain throughout the novel).

³² A. LEON HIGGINBOTHAM, JR., *SHADES OF FREEDOM: RACIAL POLITICS AND PRESUMPTIONS OF THE AMERICAN LEGAL PROCESS passim* (1996).

³³ I am not suggesting the novel be removed from libraries or banned. It should be available to students on a voluntary basis. Thus, I save First Amendment issues for another article.

³⁴ SATIRE OR EVASION, *supra* note 21, at 42 (noting the harm to both black and white students when the novel is taught by "incompetent, insensitive, or (sometimes unwittingly, sometimes purposefully) bigoted instructors").

their awareness of the ugly things it does not only to the souls of black folk but to those of whites as well.³⁵

Reading the novel to understand the limits of Twain's and white societies' goodwill toward blacks³⁶ may cause white society to stop praising the book as "quintessentially American." Like *Dred Scott* and *Plessy*, *Huckleberry Finn* is unlikely ever to be forgotten and will continue to be important because it exemplifies the historical and persistent limited understanding most whites have of racism. This more complex lesson, however, is better left to more intellectually mature audiences than emotionally vulnerable middle- and high-school students.

I. THE LITERARY IMAGINATION

Recently, I was invited to a local seventh-grade class to talk about my research on *Huckleberry Finn*. The teacher, a white woman, had learned from a colleague that I was writing a paper on the subject and thought I could contribute something to her classroom efforts. Her class had read *Huckleberry Finn*, and she wanted me to inspire them to read more Mark Twain, perhaps *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*. She said she was excited that so many of her students were engaged by Huck's adventures and sounded happy that she included *Huckleberry Finn* in her lesson plan.

I agreed with the teacher that the novel is overwhelmingly successful at tapping into the young reader's imagination. She thought we both saw the value of teaching *Huckleberry Finn* to middle-school students. I explained that I was unwilling to praise *Huckleberry Finn* in front of her class but would talk about why I thought it was racist. After a moment of silence, she said, "Oh well, then I guess it would be better if you didn't come, but tell me why you think that." Following is the essence of my reply.

Most objections to the book center around Twain's repeated use of the racial epithet, which appears 213 times in the book.³⁷ I explore in another essay³⁸ why this alone is problematic and want to focus on a different and more compelling reason the book should not be included in public school curricula. However, use of the racial epithet is also part of this more compelling objection.

³⁵ Rhett S. Jones, [*N*—] and *Knowledge: White Double-Consciousness in Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, in *SATIRE OR EVASION?*, *supra* note 21, at 173, 192–93 (entire racial epithet in the original).

³⁶ See Sharon E. Rush, *Sharing Space: Why Racial Goodwill Isn't Enough*, 32 *CONN. L. REV.* (2000) [hereinafter *Sharing Space*].

³⁷ *ARAC*, *supra* note 18, at 20.

³⁸ *Emotional Segregation*, *supra* note 19.

Imagine a classroom that is reading *Huckleberry Finn*. Who are the students? The teacher? What races are they, and why does it even matter? As noted by Andrew Hacker, “From nursery school through graduate school, most black students have most of their classes with white teachers.”³⁹ I want now to focus on the public school classroom where the teacher is white and the student body is either racially segregated or racially mixed to one degree or another. Moreover, I assume white teachers are people of goodwill, meaning they self-identify as antiracists and believe in racial equality. A white person of goodwill, by definition, would never intentionally inflict racial harm.

Moreover, *Huckleberry Finn* is overwhelmingly taught in public school:

Praised by our best known critics and writers, the novel is enshrined at the center of the American literature curriculum . . . [T]he work is second only to Shakespeare in the frequency with which it appears in the classroom, required in seventy percent of public high schools and seventy-six percent of parochial high schools. The most taught novel, the most taught long work, and the most taught piece of American literature, *Huckleberry Finn* is a staple from junior high (where eleven chapters are included in the Junior Great Books program) to graduate school.⁴⁰

I agreed with the middle-school teacher who had extended the classroom invitation that white students, especially boys, do identify with Huck. They are Twain’s audience. Without much stretch of the imagination, even white girls can step into the shoes of Huck Finn. And, although most white teachers are a bit old to identify with Huck, they probably do understand Huck’s character and most white students’ infatuation with him. Huck “has been aptly defined as ‘America’s child.’”⁴¹ Significantly, *Huckleberry Finn* is about race, primarily the white race and its attachment to slavery at one time in history. For Twain to draw white readers into the novel, then, is what he intended to do. Moreover, this probably is the reason white teachers and educators like the book so much; on some level, it is “fun” for (white) students to read.

While white students are off on imaginary adventures with Huck, however, where are the imaginations of black students and other students

³⁹ ANDREW HACKER, *TWO NATIONS: BLACK AND WHITE, SEPARATE, HOSTILE, UNEQUAL* 177 (Edward Chase ed., Charles Scribner’s Sons 1992) (1987).

⁴⁰ MENSCH & MENSCH, *supra* note 24, at 12 (quoting Allen Carey-Webb, *Racism and Huckleberry Finn: Censorship, Dialogue, and Change*, 82 *ENG. J.* 22, 23–24 (Nov. 1993)).

⁴¹ *Id.* at 13 (quoting Richard White as quoted in Ester B. Fein, *Book Notes: Heathcliff and Huck Going Way of Scarlett*, *N.Y. TIMES*, Feb. 5, 1992, at C15).

of color? I suspect that few white teachers ask themselves this question and this is where their understanding of multicultural education becomes limited and unproductive. Black students' imaginations have only three places to go.

A. IDENTIFY WITH HUCK

First, black students could try to identify with Huck. Perhaps this is what white teachers think happens in the classroom, assuming they do not give it much thought. Even if white teachers thought about it, they still might think black students should try to identify with Huck. After all, one purpose of multicultural education is to engage students in lessons that involve a variety of different viewpoints and histories. From this perspective, asking black students to identify with Huck's cultural background and history ostensibly is consistent with presenting a multicultural education.

This perspective is problematic for several reasons. For example, Ralph Ellison did identify with Huck, but only because he thought it was better than identifying with Jim because Twain portrayed Jim "inadequate[ly]."⁴² Moreover, multicultural education is intended to give students an appreciation of people different from them but not in ways that *romanticize* the oppression of one group of people by another. Yet this is the way the "history" of whites' oppression of blacks is presented by Twain in *Huckleberry Finn*. And, although some whites may want to romanticize slavery to give the impression that it was not "so bad," *Huckleberry Finn* is assigned to students primarily because this tone engages their imaginations. Leo Marx, writing in 1953, describes this dangerous quality of the novel:

It is true that the voyage down the river has many aspects of a boy's idyl. We owe much of its hold upon our imagination to the enchanting image of the raft's unhurried drift with the current. The leisure, the absence of constraint, the beauty of the river—all these things delight us . . . Then, of course, there is humor — laughter so spontaneous, so free of bitterness present almost everywhere in American humor that readers often forget how grim a spectacle of human existence Huck contemplates.⁴³

⁴² Bernard W. Bell, *Twain's "[N—]" Jim: The Tragic Face Behind the Minstrel Mask*, in *SATIRE OR EVASION?*, *supra* note 21, at 124, 131 (entire racial epithet in the original).

⁴³ Leo Marx, *Mr. Eliot, Mr. Trilling, and Huckleberry Finn*, in *HUCKLEBERRY FINN: TEXT, SOURCES, AND CRITICISM* 202, 203 (Kenneth S. Lynn ed., 1961) [hereinafter *TEXT, SOURCES, AND CRITICISM*].

The imagery of Huck and Jim floating down the Mississippi River with not a care in the world trivializes how difficult it was for slaves to escape into freedom. Twain also leaves young, impressionable minds with an all too simple lesson, that blacks merely had to get to a free state to be free people. How many white teachers also know and teach about the Fugitive Slave Clause in the U.S. Constitution, which reads:

No Person held to Service or Labour in one State, under the Laws thereof, escaping into another, shall, in Consequence of any Law or Regulation therein, be discharged from such Service or Labour, but shall be delivered up on Claim of the Party to whom such Service or Labour may be due.⁴⁴

Congress reinforced the importance of this clause in the Constitution by passing appropriate legislation to ensure the return of fugitive slaves. Known as the Fugitive Slave Act, the U.S. Supreme Court provided its imprimatur to the constitutional principle that slaves were the property of their owners and that states lacked authority to harbor runaway slaves as fugitives or offer them freedom.⁴⁵ The Court in *Dred Scott v. Sandford* reemphasized the status of slaves as property when it struck down the Missouri Compromise, which provided that Missouri could enter the Union as a slave state but the Northwest Territory was to remain free.⁴⁶ Finally, how many teachers discuss society's and even the law's indifference to distinguishing between free blacks and fugitive slaves — an indifference that often resulted in many legally free blacks illegally being returned to slavery?⁴⁷

One interesting and more truthful way to teach the effects of the fugitive slave laws on African Americans might be to tell middle- and high-school students about John Johnson, a young free African American who lived in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, in 1852. John mysteriously disappeared from his home, which he shared with his mother.⁴⁸ She eventually learned that her young son had been kidnapped by slave catchers and sold into slavery.⁴⁹ The only way she could rescue him was to pay \$100 to John's purported master, which the mother was unable to do even though she went from house to house begging for help.⁵⁰ Fortunately,

⁴⁴ U.S. CONST. art. IV, § 2, cl. 3.

⁴⁵ *Prigg v. Pennsylvania*, 41 U.S. 539 (1842).

⁴⁶ See *Dred Scott v. Sandford*, 60 U.S. 393 (1856).

⁴⁷ James Oliver Horton & Lois E. Horton, *A Federal Assault: African Americans and the Impact of the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850*, 68 CHI.-KENT L. REV. 1179, 1189-90 ("Under the new law free people of color were more vulnerable to kidnapping by slave catchers than ever before . . .").

⁴⁸ *Id.* at 1189.

⁴⁹ *Id.*

⁵⁰ *Id.*

the commissioner assigned to her case was under increasing scrutiny and pressure by abolitionist groups and felt compelled to help the mother rescue John.⁵¹

An equally troubling lesson looms if students are expected to identify with Huck. Recall that the novel is praised because many critics and teachers think Huck takes a moral stand against slavery by helping Jim escape. Part of the novel's suspense involves Twain's ability to leave the reader wondering if Huck will turn in Jim during any given adventure. Huck's purported moral triumph occurs when he decides he would rather "go to hell" than turn Jim over to authorities.⁵²

Asking students of any color, including white students, to identify with Huck is completely at odds with a multicultural education because Huck's "moral" dilemma is artificially constructed. Some of the Founding Fathers knew slavery was wrong but justified it primarily for economic purposes.⁵³ One African-American scholar emphasizes that whites have always known that blacks are human but that whites would not admit this, either during Twain's time or even today, because identifying blacks as less than human is white society's justification for dominating them.⁵⁴ It is not healthy for students to question whether slavery just possibly could have been moral, but this is necessary if Huck's dilemma is to have any realistic pull on the reader. Presenting Huck's decision whether to help Jim escape or return him to slavery as a "close call" flies in the face of multicultural education's goal to present a more *complete and truthful* picture of history and to develop genuine understanding of differences.

Finally, multicultural education is premised on appreciating differences, which means, by definition, it does not teach students to devalue other students because of racial or other differences. Specifically, multicultural educators would not teach students that the race precept is valid or that it ever was valid. Students who identify with Huck (and teachers who expect this), however, subconsciously or consciously accept the validity of the race precept. Otherwise it would not be fun to read and teach the book. Quite the opposite, if readers do not think Huck is justified in dehumanizing blacks, or talking to Jim the way he does, or if they think Huck's dilemma is easy to resolve because slavery is immoral, then they will not identify with Huck and their teachers should not expect them to. The tone of the book then becomes one of whites' cruelty to-

⁵¹ *See id.*

⁵² *HUCKLEBERRY FINN*, *supra* note 17, at 193.

⁵³ *See generally* JOE R. FEAGIN, *RACIST AMERICA: ROOTS, CURRENT REALITIES, AND FUTURE REPARATIONS* 15, 41 (2001); *see also* VINCENT HARDING, *THERE IS A RIVER: THE BLACK STRUGGLE FOR FREEDOM IN AMERICA* 45-46 (1981) (calling Thomas Jefferson's claim that the institution of slavery was imposed on colonies disingenuous).

⁵⁴ Jones, *supra* note 35, at 180-81.

ward blacks, but this is not realistically presented in the novel because the race precept is never explicitly refuted. "In reality . . . it is impossible to satirize/subvert the myth of white supremacy while reiterating the myths of black gullibility, passivity, dependency, and so forth."⁵⁵ Thus, requiring non-white students to read a novel in which the fun comes from identifying with a main character who is white and who dehumanizes blacks, gives white students permission to accept the validity of the race precept and asks non-white students to accept it as well and pretend they are white if they also want to enjoy the book.

B. IDENTIFY WITH JIM

A second possibility for black readers is to identify with Jim as they read the novel. This is realistic because race is as important for blacks as it is for whites, and Jim is the only "developed" black character in the novel. Some critics suggest that Jim is the "hero" of the novel.⁵⁶ Admittedly, Jim is presented as kind, loving, lovable, trustworthy, honest, and as possessing many other admirable traits. Moreover, if white students were to identify with Jim, this ostensibly would be consistent with multicultural education's goal to teach students to appreciate differences.

In reality, teachers do not expect their white students to identify with Jim, and I doubt any white students do identify with Jim. Why would they? Huck is there for them. Besides, not even the black students identify with Jim, because he "is a character to laugh *at* and little more."⁵⁷ Imagine being a black student in a classroom that is reading a book in which blacks are referred to by the epithet over and over again. White teachers fail to grasp the reality that the racial epithet continues to be a derogatory and highly emotionally charged word. Consider Langston Hughes's evaluation of the use of the epithet:

The word [*n*——] to colored people of high and low degree is like a red rag to a bull. Used rightly or wrongly, ironically or seriously, of necessity for the sake of realism, or impishly for the sake of comedy, it doesn't matter. Negroes do not like it in any book or play whatsoever, be the book or play ever so sympathetic in its treatment of the basic problems of the race. Even though the book or play is written by a Negro, they still do not like it The word [*n*——], you see, sums up for

⁵⁵ MENSCH & MENSCH, *supra* note 24, at 97.

⁵⁶ See, e.g., JOCELYN CHADWICK-JOSHUA, *THE JIM DILEMMA: READING RACE IN HUCKLEBERRY FINN* 13 (1998), a discussion by Chadwick-Joshua, an African-American woman, on ways in which Jim's character can be seen as a positive statement about African Americans.

⁵⁷ Fredrick Woodard & Donnaræ MacCann, *Minstrel Shackles and Nineteenth-Century "Liberality" in Huckleberry Finn*, in *SATIRE OR EVASION?*, *supra* note 21, at 141, 148.

us who are colored all the bitter years of insult and struggle in America.⁵⁸

Realistically, only black students in a classroom can be called by the epithet so the emotional damage to their psyches as they “hear” Jim (and all blacks) being called the epithet is a unique harm. Whites and students of other colors can distance themselves from the derogatory term. The stories of Margo Allen and her son illustrate the enduring pain caused by the novel:

In 1957, Allen was the only black student in her ninth-grade class. As the class got into the novel, “the dialect alone made me feel uneasy.” She pretended not to be bothered by “that awful word”: “I hid, from my teacher and my classmates, the tension, discomfort and hurt I would feel every time I heard that word or watched the class laugh at Jim.” The hardest part was keeping her composure while others stared. “Somehow I thought that a blank face would protect me from not only the book’s offensiveness and open insults, but the silent indicting, accusing, and sometimes apologetic stares of my classmates.” A quarter of a century later, Allen’s son, the only African American in his ninth-grade English class, was asked by the teacher to read the part of Jim. “He has the perfect voice for it,” she said. Students laughed. “My son was humiliated, though he, too, tried to hide his feelings.” After class, some students were supportive, but others “took the opportunity to snicker [*n*——] under their breath to him.”⁵⁹

Black students should not be subjected to the humiliation and fear that attach to reading the novel in a classroom.

This possibility alone should be troubling to educators, because reading the book allows the race precept to play out in the classroom. But the harm is more pervasive. Specifically, teachers justify including the book in their curricula because they believe it depicts an interracial loving relationship. Some black scholars think Twain intended to present Huck and Jim’s relationship as an “authentic friendship,”⁶⁰ and

⁵⁸ Henry, *supra* note 22, at 30 (quoting LANGSTON HUGHES, *THE BIG SEA* 268–69 (1940) (entire racial epithet in the original)).

⁵⁹ MENSCH & MENSCH, *supra* note 24, at 110.

⁶⁰ Richard K. Barksdale, *History, Slavery, and Thematic Irony in Huckleberry Finn, in SATIRE OR EVASION?*, *supra* note 22, at 49, 54.

many literary critics suggest their relationship is even deeper, positing that Jim becomes Huck's true father.⁶¹

However, I suggest that Huck and Jim's relationship is not loving. Throughout the novel, Huck's emotional attachment to Jim can be characterized as cruel and indifferent. Huck's cruelty towards Jim shows in many ways, including Huck's constant dehumanizing of Jim. Huck's cruelty towards Jim intensifies at the end of the novel when Huck goes along with Tom Sawyer's suggestion that they put snakes and rats in the pen where they are hiding Jim to make the adventure of rescuing Jim more thrilling.⁶² With complete indifference to Jim's welfare as he sits in the rat- and snake-infested pen, Huck and Tom have a wonderful and relaxing day fishing on the Mississippi River.⁶³ Huck could not be cruel and indifferent to Jim if he loves him, especially if he loves him as a son would a father.

On the other hand, depicting a white person's "love" for a black person in a superficial or marginal way teaches children that love in an interracial relationship is defined by the white person and can include neglect and even humiliation of the black person. In fact, some critics suggest that Twain depicts Jim as an "overgrown child."⁶⁴ As professors Mensh and Mensh note, "No matter what virtues Jim may have, none can compensate for the fact that — in this iconic white-black relationship — the white boy appears more adult, that is, more intelligent, than the black man."⁶⁵ Why would black students want to identify with Jim as Huck's surrogate father? Why would teachers want them to think this is what love means? When Jim allows himself to be exploited by Huck the way he does, not only do students learn the wrong lesson about what it means for Huck to love Jim, but they also learn a terrible lesson about self-love.

Finally, I think it is inconsistent with multicultural education to put black students in a situation where their literary imaginations are asked to identify with Jim, a slave, the object of white society's evil cruelty. I think it is difficult for whites to understand the pain associated with racism. Recently, my daughter and I watched the first hour of *Roots*. I was deeply saddened to see the tears running down her cheeks as she saw the Hollywood version of slaves being beaten (the audience hears but never sees the actual whippings, only the scarred backs) and families being sold at the auction block. Mind you, this is a twelve-year-old who, like most children her age, has seen Hollywood violence depicted in

⁶¹ See, e.g., Lionel Trilling, *The Greatness of Huckleberry Finn*, in TEXT, SOURCES, AND CRITICISM, *supra* note 43, at 192, 193 ("For in Jim he [Huck] finds his true father."); Henry, *supra* note 21, at 36 ("Jim becomes a surrogate father to Huck.").

⁶² HUCKLEBERRY FINN, *supra* note 17, at 234–36.

⁶³ MENSCH & MENSCH, *supra* note 24, at 101.

⁶⁴ Woodard & MacCann, in SATIRE OR EVASION?, *supra* note 57, at 145.

⁶⁵ MENSCH & MENSCH, *supra* note 24, at 105.

ways we could never imagine. She knows Hollywood movies are make-believe and, to a certain extent, all of us have become somewhat immune to the violence we see in the movies. But watching just that one hour of *Roots* was not make-believe to my daughter. I watched her eyes stare at the screen in disbelief. Her naiveté surprised me, but I do not know why it should have, because she knows slaves were whipped and their families torn apart and sold into slavery. I held her close to me and she said, very softly, “I didn’t know it was that bad, mama. I didn’t know that’s what it meant to be a slave.” Realize, she had already read *Huckleberry Finn*.

On reflection, I wonder how our children are *supposed to know* about slavery? How do we teach those history lessons? When are students, particularly black students, mature enough to learn about them in *truthful* ways? One thing is for sure: the facile way the lessons are taught in *Huckleberry Finn* do an injustice to the lessons that need to be learned. Moreover, the way we teach black children about slavery must be different from the way we teach white children about it because the children are emotionally situated in dramatically different places. From a historical perspective, while Huck engages in all kinds of exciting adventures with his (white) readers, enslaved black boys his age were carrying food and messages to runaway slaves in the woods or trying to run away from their own brutal masters.⁶⁶ Black children were struggling for their freedom in ways far different from Huck’s “struggle” to stay uncivilized. From a current perspective, while whites enjoy remarkable privileges that attach to being white,⁶⁷ blacks struggle to refute the persistence of the race precept. Thank goodness my daughter was with me in the privacy of our home when we watched that one episode of *Roots*. We have not watched any more episodes of *Roots* because she has not asked to see more. I interpret this as a lesson for me that she is too emotionally vulnerable to learn about the horrors of slavery as a seventh-grade student. In this way, *Huckleberry Finn* leaves students with incomplete history lessons, which undoubtedly make the more complete and more accurate ones more shocking and even harder to understand.

Multicultural educators must be able to handle black children’s pain upon learning about slavery and simultaneously try to move white children toward a deeper understanding of what racism feels like. For all the current and persistent claims by blacks that *Huckleberry Finn* is hurtful, it continues to be taught as an antiracist classic, in effect “desensitizing”

⁶⁶ HARDING, *supra* note 52, at 164–65.

⁶⁷ See generally Cheryl Harris, *Whiteness as Property*, 106 HARV. L. REV. 1709 (1993); Stephanie M. Wildman & Adrienne D. Davis, *Language and Silence: Making Systems of Privilege Visible*, in CRITICAL RACE THEORY: THE CUTTING EDGE 573, 577 (Richard Delgado ed., 1995) [hereinafter CRITICAL RACE THEORY].

whites to racial pain.⁶⁸ Significantly, multicultural educators must inspire students of all races to understand that blacks did not passively submit to slavery as Jim does throughout the novel, continuing to travel down the Mississippi River deeper into slave territory without objection. Rather, *real* slaves actively resisted their bondage and constantly struggled for their freedom.⁶⁹ Using Huck and Jim as literary tools to learn these lessons is misguided.

I also wonder if Twain named Jim in reference to Jim Crow, although I have not found any suggestions of this.⁷⁰ Many scholars have written about Twain's depiction of Jim as a stereotypical minstrel.⁷¹ Perhaps the most poignant example of this is when the Duke dresses Jim as a lady, paints him blue and presents him to passers-by as a "Sick Arab — but harmless when not out of his head."⁷²

The origin of the term "Jim Crow" is thought to come from the minstrel tradition. A white man named Thomas "Daddy" Rice dressed in blackface and sang the following minstrel on New York's Bowery Theater in 1832:

Weel a-bout and turn a-bout
And do just so.
Every time I weel a-bout
I jump Jim Crow.⁷³

No one is quite sure who inspired Jim Crow. "Some historians believe he was a soldier spotted by Rice in Kentucky or Ohio. Others say that he was a slave from Cincinnati, Ohio, or Charleston, South Carolina. Some scholars believe the name came from 'old man Crow,' a legendary slaveholder, while others suggest that it sprang from the simile 'black as a crow.'"⁷⁴ Regardless of its origin, the term "Jim Crow" evolved into a description of the institutional segregation that reflected whites' views about blacks' "comic" way of life.⁷⁵

Professor Chadwick-Joshua notes that Jim must have been aware of Jim Crow.⁷⁶ The Rice song appeared during slavery before the time set-

⁶⁸ ARAC, *supra* note 18, at 112–14.

⁶⁹ Kevin Brown, *African-American Immersion Schools: Paradoxes of Race and Public Education*, in CRITICAL RACE THEORY, *supra* note 66, at 373, 381.

⁷⁰ CHADWICK-JOSHUA, *supra* note 55, at 14 (noting, however, that Jim must have been aware of Jim Crowism and suggesting Twain wrote Jim's character with this in mind to demonstrate how Jim had to cope with more subtle forms of racism).

⁷¹ See generally FISHKIN, *supra* note 20.

⁷² HUCKLEBERRY FINN, *supra* note 17, at 143.

⁷³ JUAN WILLIAMS, EYES ON THE PRIZE: AMERICA'S CIVIL RIGHTS YEARS, 1954–1965 12 (1987).

⁷⁴ *Id.*

⁷⁵ *Id.*

⁷⁶ See CHADWICK-JOSHUA, *supra* note 55, at 14.

ting of the novel and was fully developed by the time Twain wrote the novel and the Supreme Court upheld de jure segregation in *Plessy v. Ferguson*.⁷⁷ It is not unreasonable to think Twain could have named Jim with the institution of Jim Crow in mind. Consider the observation of critic Eric Sundquist:

What ranks as one of the most notorious debates in the history of American literary criticism — the success or failure of the last chapters of *Huckleberry Finn* — . . . can be properly adjudicated only by reference to the renewed crisis over sectionalism and black rights that accompanied Twain's periods of composition . . . “Now, old Jim, you're a free man *again*,” Says Huck, “and I bet you won't ever be a slave no more.” At last finishing a draft of his famous novel in 1883, when the Supreme Court decided the landmark *Civil Rights Cases*, which cut the heart out of “equal protection” and led directly to *Plessy*, Twain knew otherwise.⁷⁸

Private discrimination as well as government discrimination against blacks thrived under *Plessy*-sanctioned Jim Crowism.

Certainly, *Huckleberry Finn* does little to present slaves' perspectives on the institution of slavery. Jim's purpose in the novel is only to serve as an instrument for Huck's artificial moral development. The possibility that black students are supposed to identify with Jim when a class reads the novel virtually strips students of their humanity the way Huck and white society stripped Jim and all blacks of their humanity through the institution of slavery and Jim Crow. Again, multicultural education is about valuing differences in ways that affirm cultural values.

C. IDENTIFY WITH NO ONE

If black students are not identifying with Huck or Jim, where do their imaginations go while the white students presumably have fun reading the book? They go to the worst place any student's mind can go to — the place where a student feels confused, devalued, excluded, angry, resentful, and betrayed. This is what black parents and students insist happens when students are required to read the novel. How could any educator, especially a multicultural educator, not respect their views? How could white teachers miss or ignore some of the obvious lessons of *Huckleberry Finn*? I suggest white teachers miss or ignore the harmful lessons in the novel because they blindly accept it as “quintessentially

⁷⁷ *Plessy v. Ferguson*, 163 U.S. 537 (1896).

⁷⁸ MENSCH & MENSCH, *supra* note 24, at 95 (quoting ERIC J. SUNDQUIST, *TO WAKE THE NATIONS: RACE IN THE MAKING OF AMERICAN LITERATURE* 232 (1993)).

American,” meaning it is antiracist. If they could be disabused of this, undoubtedly they would reconsider the appropriateness of teaching the novel in middle and high school.

II. BEYOND THE LIMITS OF WHITES’ GOODWILL TOWARD BLACKS

The fact that *Huckleberry Finn* has been taught for decades as the “quintessential American novel” *even though* resistance to it by black society has persisted for decades reflects a power struggle between white culture and black culture, which, not surprisingly, black society continues to lose. Multicultural education, however, is not about winners and losers. It is not about silencing voices so only the “master’s voice” is heard.⁷⁹ Nor is it about establishing the supremacy of any culture and then showing how other cultures are different and implicitly inferior. But this often is the lesson students learn from studying *Huckleberry Finn*. It is offered as evidence of white society’s rejection of slavery and racism as portrayed through Huck’s decision to help Jim escape slavery. Simultaneously, the novel conveys overwhelming messages about white society’s persistent belief in the race precept. According to Gunnar Myrdal:

[W]hites were in inner conflict over their belief in a creed of equality and opportunity on the one hand, and their treatment of blacks on the other. It is singular that *An American Dilemma*, the most influential study dealing with black and white in America, and *Huckleberry Finn*, the most influential novel dealing with black and white in America, are at odds on this matter: while Myrdal visualized whites whose consciences bother them because of their treatment of blacks, Twain visualized a white whose conscience tells him it is sinful to rescue a black from slavery.⁸⁰

Today’s whites of goodwill are like Myrdal’s whites who do not want to mistreat blacks, but they also are like Huck because they keep professing a belief in equality but continue to drift down the River of Inequality.

This limited understanding of the novel is what makes teaching it inconsistent with multicultural educational values. Rather than thinking multiculturally by situating their minds and hearts in different cultural

⁷⁹ Berta Hernandez-Truyol & Sharon E. Rush, *Foreword to Culture, Nationhood, and the Human Rights Ideal*, 33 MICH. J.L. REFORM 23 (2000), reprinted in 5 MICH. J. RACE & L. 817, 827–28 (2000).

⁸⁰ MENSCH & MENSCH, *supra* note 24, at 68.

vantage points, white teachers unquestionably accept white society's evaluation of *Huckleberry Finn* as an antiracist classic and teach their students to accept this evaluation despite black society's opposition to it. White teachers are puzzled to understand, not why blacks think the novel is racist, but why blacks object to the teaching of an antiracist classic.

The anticanonical lesson lurking in *Huckleberry Finn* lies in this disjuncture: the novel can be a useful tool to help white educators understand the limits of their goodwill towards blacks. How can they recognize those limits in the context of the controversy about teaching *Huckleberry Finn*? I want to suggest three steps they can take that will help them break down barriers that prevent them from seeing the harm that comes from teaching the novel. These steps are interrelated and could be presented in any order.

A. CARE ABOUT ALL STUDENTS

Teachers and educators must care enough about their students to take time to understand and respect cultural differences. Parents want to send their children to classrooms in which teachers love the students. The more individual attention a child receives from a teacher the happier and more secure parents are that the teacher is a *good* teacher. Every parent wants this for his or her child, and every child deserves this from his or her teacher.

Multicultural educators understand the importance of loving each and every child in the classroom. Such teachers make the classroom safe for all students by affirming them. The affirmation includes appreciation of each child. Characteristics central to a child's identity include traits such as race, ethnicity, sex, language, and religion. Lessons that cause a child to question his or her value as an individual, even if the lessons are only through imaginary adventures like those of Huck's, are inconsistent with multicultural education.

When I asked my daughter's teacher if he would assign any other book that dehumanized another racial, religious, or ethnic group the way *Huckleberry Finn* does blacks, he responded, "I might if it were a classic." Not only did I doubt his answer, perhaps unfairly, but I also wondered if any such book exists. Even the *Random House Webster's College Dictionary* defines the epithet as the "most offensive word in English."⁸¹ Professor Randall Kennedy describes it as:

the epithet that generates epithets. That is why Arabs are called "sand [n——]" and Indians "timber [n——]"; why Irish have been called the "[n——] of Europe"

⁸¹ See Randall Kennedy, *The David C. Baum Lecture: "[N——]!" as a Problem in the Law*, 2001 U. ILL. L. REV. 935 (entire racial epithet in the original).

and Palestinians the “[n——] of the middle east”; why a black bowling ball has been called “a [n——] egg,” a game of craps “[n——] golf,” a watermelon “[n——] ham,” heavy books “[n——] stompers,” a roll of one dollar bills a “[n——] roll,” and gossip “[n——] news.”⁸²

Is there any other classic that is as popular as and assigned as much as *Huckleberry Finn* that does to any other group what *Huckleberry Finn* does to blacks? I have asked many, many people this question over the last year, and no one has come up with a book yet. This alone is quite telling of white society’s attitude that it is appropriate to canonize and teach a book that is unique in its ability to dehumanize only a select group of students — black students.

I also want to suggest that a *good* teacher is not doing white students a favor by teaching *Huckleberry Finn* as a valued classic. Why? Because it reinforces white students’ expectations of maintaining their privileged status in society. In other words, a decision by a white teacher of goodwill to present the novel as an antiracist classic unwittingly reinforces the validity of the race precept. Because white teachers of goodwill do not fully understand the harm and humiliation their black students feel when they are forced to read the book, neither do they understand the privilege white students enjoy because they do not have to feel the racial pain. Yet on some level of consciousness white teachers are aware of the black students’ pain because students and parents tell teachers it is painful to read the book. A failure to take seriously the voices of blacks conveys a message to them that their opinions are irrelevant. It also teaches white students (and black students) that it is acceptable to inflict racial pain on blacks, which is another way the race precept functions in the classroom.

Correspondingly, when blacks say racial inequality exists in other contexts, white society will be less sensitive to their claims. White students will have learned that it is justifiable to ignore or object to blacks’ request for equality. This not only promotes persistent racial inequality, but it also teaches students that this is how race relations are defined — by the race precept. Educators Mensh and Mensh aptly described this phenomenon:

At the same time that the schools’ resistance to such criticism has been painful to black students, it has had a desensitizing effect on white ones. The “aura of controversy” around *Huck Finn* has had “a long-lasting negative effect on some white students’ literary sensitivity

⁸² *Id.* at 935–36.

and even on their ordinary humanity . . . It seems that by the time students get to college they have become so habituated to hearing a book like *Huckleberry Finn* defended from even suspicion of censorship, that their literary, critical and even ethical faculties go into abeyance whenever it is discussed.”⁸³

Society’s inability to communicate effectively across color lines on the affirmative action debate is an example of this paradigm; thus far, blacks and other people of color have been successfully “trumped” about the importance of maintaining affirmative action. Perhaps we should not be surprised. After all, if black students can suffer through *Huckleberry Finn*, just because it is adventurous, or just because white society calls it a classic, then will there ever be a situation in which racial inequality and its concomitant pain are unjustifiable? Teaching *Huckleberry Finn* sets a terribly low standard of what multicultural education and healthy race relations mean. Assuming that students were studying Twain’s writing style in addition to the substance of the novel, a decision to impose the novel on students remains difficult to justify under a multicultural curriculum.

Black parents who confront teachers and ask them not to read *Huckleberry Finn* are not asking for special favors. Rather, they are protecting their children from harm just as any loving parents would do if their children were emotionally assaulted in a classroom. For example, the Supreme Court recently addressed the issue of whether reading grades aloud in a classroom violates a student’s right of privacy.⁸⁴ Parents brought the suit on behalf of their son, a special education student, who was understandably embarrassed to have his grades read aloud because they were usually lower than his classmates.⁸⁵ Although the Court ruled against the parents, the fact that the issue was worthy of scrutiny by the Supreme Court illustrates its importance. Society should take such claims seriously and should not tolerate serious infliction of pain on any student regardless of how the Court holds. Moreover, the degree of harm for a student who is forced to read his grades out loud, although equally unnecessary, is far less severe than the harm that accrues from teaching *Huckleberry Finn*.

Moreover, whether or not a teacher violates a students’ rights when the teacher asks students to read grades out loud is akin to asking

⁸³ MENSCH & MENSCH, *supra* note 24, at 114 (quoting Kay Puttock, *Historicism, Huckleberry Finn, and Howard Beach*, in 17 TEACHING ENGLISH IN THE TWO-YEAR COLLEGE 167 (1990)).

⁸⁴ *Owasso Indep. Sch. Dist. v. Falvo*, 534 U.S. 426 (2002).

⁸⁵ Marcia Coyle, “*Spiritual*” *Journey from Oklahoma to the High Court*, NAT’L L.J. (Dec. 3, 2001).

whether teachers or students have a constitutional right to teach and read *Huckleberry Finn*; both questions are rather beside the point. Good teachers simply do not make curriculum choices that hurt their students. Black parents and students are entitled to have good teachers in their classrooms. At a minimum, teachers must be able to think multiculturally to be considered good in today's diverse society.

B. LEARN TO BE LESS DEFENSIVE

It is hard for a white person of goodwill to be called a racist. I know because I have been called racist in front of a large audience and was mortified. I tell this story in a law journal article,⁸⁶ and when my white colleagues read about it, they ask what I could have done to be called a racist. Their faces convey bewilderment and even suggest that I probably overstated the situation in my article. They cannot imagine, and neither could I at the time, that anyone would call me racist.

It is hurtful for a white person to be called racist because it is not consistent with our identities as people who support racial equality and would never be intentionally racist. Given this, why is it difficult to understand the pain blacks feel when they are confronted with the racial epithet? Labeling conduct as racist is benign, especially compared to labeling a black person by the racial epithet. Yet because whites of goodwill are so sure of our antiracism, we have made it virtually impossible for blacks or other people of color to use the word in our presence, especially to describe our behavior. In their struggle for racial equality, blacks are not allowed to call whites' conduct racist and, if they do, we either get angry or walk away. In our anger, we actively dispute accusations, and in our withdrawal, we suggest blacks are so obviously wrong that talking is not worth the effort. There is no middle ground for a white person of goodwill on this issue.

Think about this in the context of teaching *Huckleberry Finn*. Blacks claim the novel is racist and to prove them wrong, while white society goes to great lengths to defend it. Some of the defenses include that it is part of the canon,⁸⁷ that Huck was black,⁸⁸ the epithet describes the reality of the novel's time,⁸⁹ that Jim became Huck's true father,⁹⁰ and that Huck took a moral stand against slavery.⁹¹ The list of ways in which the novel is antiracist goes on and on.⁹²

⁸⁶ *Sharing Space*, *supra* note 36, at 11–12.

⁸⁷ ARAC, *supra* note 18.

⁸⁸ FISHKIN, *supra* note 20.

⁸⁹ Smith, *supra* note 22, at 108.

⁹⁰ *Supra* note 61 and accompanying text.

⁹¹ *Supra* note 52 and accompanying text.

⁹² *Emotional Segregation*, *supra* note 19.

My point here is not to establish that the book is racist, which I think I did in the first part of this essay. Rather, it is to illustrate how defensive whites become when blacks use the word *racism*. On reflection, however, white people of goodwill have no reason to be defensive about being called racist. Becoming defensive and being angry or withdrawing are choices we make because we control how we will understand the word. It seems white society has chosen to understand the word as an insult *intended* to inflict pain and, admittedly, sometimes it is meant to be hurtful, but often it is not. Moreover, just as whites want blacks to assume whites are acting in good faith on race issues and do not mean to act in racist ways, blacks also want whites to assume that blacks are acting in good faith when they invoke the words *racist* or *racism* to describe what they think and feel. Although racist behavior is wrong, having that pointed out to us does not have to be taken as a condemnation of our goodwill. To act in a racist way may come from an unawareness about the complexities of racism, and that usually is the point blacks are trying to convey.

Oftentimes the words *racism* or *racist* are the best and the only ways to accurately describe a problem. They convey an important message, especially to white people of goodwill. When a white person of goodwill is called racist because of something he or she did or said, the person could interpret it to mean that he or she is promoting racial inequality in some way he or she is not aware of. By definition, a white person of goodwill does not want to and does not consciously promote racial inequality. To be called racist could be interpreted by the person as an invitation to understand how and in what ways he or she contributes to the inequality.

Return to the novel. When blacks say the novel is racist, whites can choose to continue to try to prove them wrong, or whites can accept black society's view and explore how and why the book is racist and why teaching it as an antiracist classic promotes the race precept. Learning about racism is much easier if one is not defensive about it. In this way, the interpretations of the novel presented above are important and worthy of serious reflection.

C. LEARN TO THINK MULTICULTURALLY

Teaching multicultural lessons is far more complex than including lessons about slavery and African American history in the curriculum. A successful multicultural education depends on teachers' ability and willingness to *think* multiculturally. What does this mean? Multicultural educators think critically; this is part of what it means to be an educator who promotes multiculturalism. Accordingly, a multicultural educator would question what is really going on in the debate between blacks and

whites about teaching the novel. They would question *why* black parents do not want the book included in curricula. What objectionable messages are conveyed to students by the novel? If black parents relate to teachers and educators that the novel is hurtful to their children, why is that not reason to exclude it from the curriculum? Why is white society so attached to *Huckleberry Finn*?

Asking and grappling with difficult questions are essential steps for any teacher who identifies herself as a multicultural educator. This kind of inquiry causes a multicultural teacher to engage in research beyond the teacher's realm. Inevitably, a multicultural teacher literally and intellectually crosses over color lines, religious lines, or whatever lines exist as barriers between the teacher and student. Multicultural teachers must expand their understandings of the world and make room for different viewpoints that others, including the students, might have. Teachers are learners too.⁹³

On reflection, placing the novel in its historical context, it took very little for a white person to be considered non-prejudiced or antiracist in the days prior to the Civil War or even in the late 19th Century when the novel first appeared. The Supreme Court justices in *Plessy* may have considered themselves people of goodwill even though they openly supported the race precept. According to *Plessy*, as long as the races stayed segregated, they theoretically could be considered legally equal.

Plessy, and the thinking that supported it, however, have been relegated to the anticanon of constitutional law. Antiracists of today understand that separate cannot be equal, and they also consciously reject the validity of the race precept. Moreover, we also have available a new vocabulary or way of talking about racism so that the concept of unconscious racism is meaningful.⁹⁴ Once a teacher "sees"⁹⁵ the racism in *Huckleberry Finn*, he or she cannot claim that the novel is antiracist in the way we more fully understand that concept today. Once it is pointed out that a student's literary imagination is taken to racist places by reading the book, the teacher's unconscious, blind, or uncritical acceptance of the novel as antiracist is revealed.

Thinking critically also causes the multicultural educator to question the novel's inclusion in the canon. Who said it should be part of the canon? "[I]n the nineteen-twenties critical authority for the valuation and interpretation of literature was consolidated on college campuses in the hands of a small demographically homogeneous group of professors

⁹³ THE LIGHT IN THEIR EYES, *supra* note 16, at 144.

⁹⁴ Charles Lawrence, *The Id, the Ego, and Equal Protection: Reckoning with Unconscious Racism*, 39 STAN. L. REV. 317, 321-22 (1987).

⁹⁵ Barbara J. Flagg, "Was Blind but Now I See": *White Race Consciousness and the Requirement of Discriminatory Intent*, 91 MICH. L. REV. 953, 957 (1993).

— mainly male, upper-class, from northern European Protestant backgrounds.”⁹⁶ Without much imagination, one can understand that the evaluators of the novel have primarily been whites whose understandings of racism were probably limited just as Twain’s was, albeit in different ways and for different reasons. Let me be clear about my point. I am not saying all whites think alike. Rather, I am saying that the critics’ limited understanding of racism should be taken into account in evaluating their praise of the novel. Recall this forms the basis for an argument that the canon should be revised to include more authors of color.⁹⁷

In a white society that constitutionalized Jim Crow laws, it should not be surprising that *Huckleberry Finn* was considered antiracist by many critics. To be antislavery generally meant one was antiracist. But just as slavery and Jim Crow laws are no longer constitutional, white society also must rethink why Twain’s limited understanding of racism, called “non-prejudiced” in his days, nevertheless has translated into a modern conception of anti-racism. Using the novel to explore why the white mind has not made this literary leap away from Twain makes the novel suitable for an anticanon of American literature. This lesson is critical if whites are to move beyond their goodwill toward blacks.

CONCLUSION

Multicultural curricula are premised on teaching students about cultural differences in ways that affirm those differences. It takes a special teacher to achieve this goal. Specifically, a multicultural teacher thinks in an inclusive way that enables him or her to feel the value of the cultural differences and convey this feeling of appreciation to all students in the classroom. Books and lessons that are chosen by the teacher should achieve this goal.

Huckleberry Finn is not such a book because it presents slavery and racism in a way that romanticizes a horrible time in American history. Reading about Huck’s adventures is fun for white students and bearable for black students only if they buy into the validity of the race precept. The novel discounts the dramatic importance of white racism in American history, which allows white students to distance themselves from the related racial inequality that exists today. Significantly, it also asks black students to empathize with Huck and forgive Twain and white society for dehumanizing them by asking them to identify with Huck and come along for fun adventures. Even if teachers say that white society no longer believes in the race precept, their actions — teaching the book,

⁹⁶ *Introduction* to THE CANON IN THE CLASSROOM, *supra* note 10, at xiii.

⁹⁷ *Supra* notes 10–16 and accompanying text.

especially without understanding the racism in it — speak louder than their words.

Does this mean the novel has no value? I suggest that it be put into an anticanon of American literature for mature audiences. It can be used to help whites move beyond their goodwill support of racial equality by exploring why and how white society bought into and desperately holds onto the “greatness” of *Huckleberry Finn*. It would be ironic and dramatic proof of white society’s lack of commitment to racial equality if literary critics are right to describe the novel as “quintessentially American” today. One scholar noted that, “[u]ltimately, the status of *Huckleberry Finn* as a ‘classic’ may tell more about the nation than many Americans want to know.”⁹⁸ Whites do not need, and should not try, to protect *Huckleberry Finn* from its place alongside *Plessy* and *Dred Scott*. Anticanonizing it is antiracism in action.

⁹⁸ Kenny J. Williams, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn; or, Mark Twain’s Racial Ambiguity*, in *SATIRE OR EVASION?*, *supra* note 21, at 228, 237.