**AP LANGUAGE AND COMPOSITION SUMMER READING ASSIGNMENT   
2018-2019**

Welcome to AP Language and Composition! You should expect an extremely rigorous year with regular and complex reading and writing assignments. The course expectations of you are below and, as you can see, the demands are daunting. Our summer work takes on an added weight this year: you are not only preparing for the course, but also for the AP exam in May. Make sure to read the directions carefully and complete the assignment with your best effort. All work is due printed and ready for submission on our first class meeting. If questions arise, please feel free to contact me at [martex@hasdhawks.org](mailto:martex@hasdhawks.org). Have a wonderful summer!

AP Language Students:

* Compose in several forms about a variety of subjects;
* Write in a process through several stages or drafts, with revision aided by teacher and peers;
* Write informally to help students become aware of themselves as writers and the techniques employed by other writers;
* Write expository, analytical, and argumentative compositions based on readings representing a variety of prose styles and genres;
* Read nonfiction elected to give students opportunities to identify and explain an author’s use of rhetorical strategies and techniques;
* Analyze graphics and visual images both in relation to written texts and as alternative forms of text;
* Develop research skills and the ability to evaluate, use, and cite primary and secondary sources;
* Conduct research and writing argument papers in which students present an argument of their own that includes the analysis and synthesis of ideas from an array of sources;
* Cite sources using a recognized editorial style.

(Adapted from the College Board)

**THE SUMMER ASSIGNMENT**

I. Columnist Examination

Task 1: Identify and Annotate 5 Editorials

As a means of keeping up to date with public issues, you are required to follow a national columnist in a newspaper, read and annotate at least five articles by that columnist. Choose a columnist who discusses national issues such as finance, politics, or social issues; columnists who write about sports, fashion, or culture/movies (just to name a few) are not appropriate. Be selective. You must collect and print at least five current columns by the same author. You may use archived columns, but they cannot be more than a year old, and the topic must still be relevant today. Archives can be searched on some of the sites, but many publications require payment for articles older than one or two weeks; therefore, check your columnist’s web site regularly.

The close reading and annotation for AP Language is similar to close reading of literature, but you are now focused on examining and noting rhetorical strategies rather than literary devices. Some additional questions to consider as you read:

* How does the writer open the column?
* How does the writer close the column?
* How soon does the writer announce the thesis? Is the thesis explicit or implicit?
* How does the writer organize? What are the parts or sections of the column?
* How much is based on observation? Personal experience? Interviews? Fact?
* What rhetorical strategies are employed? To what effect?
* What sort of diction characterizes the columnist?
* What sort of syntax characterizes the columnist?
* What audience does the writer assume?
* What unstated assumptions (warrants – enthymemes) does the columnist make?
* What are the potential ramifications of the issues addressed in the column?

Task 2: Use the SOAPStone approach to the article.

Review the handout and directions on the strategy and then complete a chart for each of your 5 articles. Refer to actual evidence from the article to help build your answer for each row. For example, do not simply say that the word choice leads you to conclude that the tone is angry. Instead, you might say: The author’s use of frustrated diction like “every single time they fail,” “stupid meathead,” and “gosh darn it” create an angry tone toward the lack of progress. Set up each of your SOAPStone charts as set up on page 5 of this document. You will find a list of rhetorical devices with definitions and a list of words you might use to define the tone on pages 6 and 7 of this packet. Remember to create 5 separate charts, one for each of your articles. Be prepared to submit all five annotated articles and your SOAPStone analysis on our first class meeting.

**RESOURCES TO IDENTIFY A COLUMNIST**

[Creators Syndicate](http://www.creators.com/home.html) Here you will find columnists categorized according to their political predisposition. Look under "conservative opinion" or "liberal opinion." Remember: you will benefit more if you engage with a columnist you are inclined to challenge.

<https://www.creators.com/>

[Real Clear Politics](http://www.realclearpolitics.com/links.html) Links to columnists and all things political

<http://www.realclearpolitics.com/links.html>

[The Drudge Report](http://www.drudgereport.com/) Scroll down the home page for links to newspapers and columnists

http://www.drudgereport.com/

[Blue Eagle Commentary](http://blueagle.com/index.html) Links to over 700 columnists

<http://blueagle.com/index.html>

SPECIFIC COLUMISTS:

Michael Kinsley <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/opinions/>

Richard Cohen <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/opinions/>

Bob Herbert <http://www.nytimes.com/pages/opinion/index.html>

Thomas Sowell <http://www.townhall.com/columnists/thomassowell/archive.shtml>

George Will <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/opinions/>

John Tierney <http://www.nytimes.com/pages/opinion/index.html>

David Brooks <http://www.nytimes.com/pages/opinion/index.html>

Paul Krugman <http://www.nytimes.com/pages/opinion/index.html>

Thomas Friedman <http://www.nytimes.com/pages/opinion/index.html>

Peggy Noonan <http://www.opinionjournal.com/columnists/pnoonan/>

Maureen Dowd <http://www.nytimes.com/pages/opinion/index.html>

Charles Krauthammer <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/opinions/>

Mona Charen <http://www.townhall.com/columnists/monacharen/archive.shtml>

E.J. Dionne <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/opinions/>

II. The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn

*The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* has been at the core of a literary debate since its 1885 publication; we will join that conversation. The work is often considered Twain’s greatest masterpiece, attacking many of the traditions the South held dear at the time of publication. Huck is the protagonist through whose eyes the reader sees and judges the South, its faults and redeeming qualities. Many see the novel as a satire criticizing social values and norms of the time and place.

* Read carefully *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* by Mark Twain.
* Read and annotate the interview, articles and cartoons in this packet on pp. 9-22. You will find specific directions on annotation on p. 8.
* Write a synthesis essay that cites from at least four of the articles and one of the cartoons. See the directions below.
* Consider the following questions as you read and be prepared to discuss these and more in a Socratic Seminar during the first six-day cycle of the year.

1. What is your reaction to the characterization of Jim? Do you find yourself liking him? Admiring him? Laughing at him? Cite from the novel to support.
2. Both Huck and Tom agree to help Jim escape; however, their motives are different. Explain how citing evidence from the novel.
3. In Twain’s satirical essay, “The Damned Human Race” he says, “Of all the animals, man is the only one that is cruel. He is the only one that inflicts pain for the pleasure of doing it. It is a trait that is not known to the higher animals.” How is this contempt for certain aspects of human behavior evident in the novel? Cite the novel to support.
4. Does Huck come to condemn slavery as a whole or just to stand up for his friend? Note that Huck is a fourteen year old boy, a poor white one, who has no education to speak of and who has been told all his life by all those older and smarter and more moral than he is that slavery is right, even sanctioned by the Bible, and that the white race is superior. Is it realistic that he should suddenly become an abolitionist? That in a few months he should come to alter his views of race and slavery? Cite from the novel to support.

**The Synthesis Essay**

This question requires you to synthesize a variety of sources into a coherent, well-written essay of approximately 3-4 pages due on our first class meeting. When you synthesize sources, you refer to them to develop your position and cite them accurately. *Your argument should be central; the sources should support these argument. Avoid merely summarizing sources*.

**Introduction**

*The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* has been at the core of a literary debate since its 1885 publication. The work is often considered Twain’s greatest masterpiece, attacking many of the traditions the South held dear at the time of publication. Many see the novel as a satire criticizing social values and norms of the time and place, but others believe that the novel no longer should be taught to high school students in particular because the use of historically accurate but offensive terms worsens race relations.

**Prompt**

Read the sources, watch the interview and examine the cartoons in the summer reading packet carefully. **Then, in an essay that synthesizes at least four of the sources and one cartoon for support, take a position on the controversy surrounding assigning *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and the larger controversy of modern use of the n-word.**

**Helpful Hints:**

* This is a synthesis essay. Remember the word synthesis from English 10? It takes larger parts and combines them into a new coherent and connected product. Each paragraph should contain information from multiple sources.
* You must weave the transitions to smoothly connect your ideas and the various sources.
* Your thesis should be complex rather than black and white. No thesis should say, “Despite the controversy, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* should/not be taught in secondary schools.” Instead, you should recognize the complexities of the topic. You might instead assert, “Even though *All Quiet on the Western Front* is widely recognized as a classic text, it is instead a mischaracterization of the general German soldiers’ experience because the narrator and protagonist, Paul, is not typical.”
* Cite correctly and select meaningful contributions from the book and the sources.
* Cite by author and page number if available, but most often, you should signal the author. Morrison’s point contradicts; she asserts . . .” Note the power verb instead of “says.”

III. The Other Side of the River

Reviewer Robert Coles said of *The Other Side of the River,* “Yet again Alex Kotlowitz extends the boundaries of documentary exploration with brilliant success. He has given us an engaging, knowing, probing, thoroughly accessible moral narrative, a story of a river that is an ocean; a story of American apartness, by virtue of race and class; a story that ought help us understand one another better, no matter our background and place of residence.” Kotlowitz is an award winning author and journalist known for writing about complex social issues that have a regular impact on our daily lives.

Task: Read and note take.

Kotlowitz tells a true story of the tragic death of a teenager. As you read, consider whether Kotlowitz is an unbiased narrator or if you can detect his argument. Some teachers of AP Language start the course by announcing that everything is an argument. If so, what is Kotlowitz’s argument? Look closely at Coles’ review; is the book a documentary that means we should trust it to be factual or is it a moral, which would imply that Kotlowitz imbues the story with his own meaning, a lesson he sees inside the facts. Take some reader’s notes on these questions; I’d suggest you use post-it notes and you can pick them up from me when you sign out your books.

Let’s review the assignments due on paper on day 1:

1. Five current articles on American issues, annotations and a SOAPStone analysis for each, set up as shown on page 5. You may photocopy page 5 or copy and paste it from my teacher page into a document if you prefer to type.
2. Read *Huck Finn* and consider the 5 questions. Read and annotate the attached articles, watch the interview, and write the synthesis essay.
3. Read and note take *The Other Side of the River.*

Name

Teacher

Course

Date

**SOAPSTone Analysis**

**Article Title**

**Author**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| S | **What is the SUBJECT of the piece?**  What are the general topics, content, and/or ideas contained in the text. How do you know this from the text? Summarize the text. |  |
| O | **What is the OCCASION?**  What are the time and place? What prompted the author to write the piece? What event led to the development? How do you know this from the text? |  |
| A | **Who is the AUDIENCE?**  To whom is the piece directed? What assumptions can you make about the audience? Are there any words or phrases that are unusual or different? Why is the speaker using this type of language? How do you know this from the text? |  |
| P | **What is the PURPOSE?**  What is the reason for the text? Why was it written? What goal did the author have in mind? How is the author trying to get a reaction from the audience? How do you know this from the text? |  |
| S | **Who is the SPEAKER?**  Who is the voice that is speaking? What do we know about this person? What is his/her background? Is there a bias in what is written? How do you know this from the text? |  |
| T**one** | **What is the TONE of the piece?**  What is the attitude expressed by the speaker? How do you know this? Examine the words and imagery to show where in the text your answer is supported. |  |

**Terms for Rhetorical Analysis**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Juxtaposition | a poetic and rhetorical device in which normally unassociated ideas, words, or phrases are placed next to one another, creating an effect of surprise and wit  The apparition of these faces in the crowd; /Petals on a wet, black bough. |
| Parallel structure (parallelism) | refers to a grammatical or structural similarity between sentences or parts of a sentence; it involves an arrangement of words, phrases, sentences, and paragraphs so that elements of equal importance are equally developed and similarly phrased  He was walking, running and jumping for joy. |
| Repetition | a device in which words, sounds, and ideas are used more than once to enhance rhythm and create emphasis  “…government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth” |
| Rhetorical question | a question that expects no answer; it is used to draw attention to a point and is generally stronger than a direct statement  If Mr. Ferchoff is always fair, as you have said, why did he refuse to listen to Mrs. Baldwin’s arguments? |
| Rhetorical fragment | a sentence fragment used deliberately for a persuasive purpose or to create a desired effect  Something to consider. |
| Anaphora | the repetition of the same word or group of words at the beginning of successive clauses  “We shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing-grounds, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills.” |
| Asyndeton | a deliberate omission of conjunctions in a series of related clauses  “I came, I saw, I conquered.” |
| Polysyndeton | the deliberate use of many conjunctions for special emphasis to highlight quantity or mass of detail or to create a flowing, continuous sentence pattern  The meal was huge – my mother fixed okra and green beans and ham and apple pie and green pickled tomatoes and ambrosia salad and all manner of fine country food – but no matter how I tried, I could not consume it to her satisfaction. |
| Chiasmus | a sentence strategy in which the arrangement of ideas in the second clause is a reversal of the first  “Ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country” |
| Zeugma | the use of the verb that has two different meanings with objects that complement both meanings  He stole both her car and her heart that fateful night. |
| Synecdoche | A form of metonymy in which a part of an entity is used to refer to the whole.  Ex. “my wheels” instead of “my car.” |
| Metonymy | Greek meaning “changed label.” Figure of speech in which the name of one object is substituted for that of another closely associated with it.  Ex. "Good evening. Elvis Presley died today. He was 42. Apparently, it was a heart attack. He was found in his home in Memphis not breathing. His road manager tried to revive him -- he failed. **A hospital** tried to revive him -- it failed. His doctor pronounced him dead at three o'clock this afternoon. |
| Pun | A play on words that exploits the similarity in sound between two words with distinctly different meanings. |
| Oxymoron | Greek for “pointedly foolish.” Author groups two apparently contradictory terms to suggest a paradox.  Ex. “Blaring silence” or “Burning cold” |
| Paradox | Statement that appears self-contradictory or opposed to common sense but on closer inspection contains some degree of truth or validity. Enigma.  "The next time I have a daughter, I hope it's a boy." -- delivered by Paul Lynde (from the movie *Bye Bye Birdie* |
| Ambiguity | multiple meanings – intentional or not – of a work, phrase, sentence, or passagE |
| Antithesis | The rhetorical opposition or contrast of words, clauses, or sentences, as in the following: JFK: “Ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country.” |
| Digression | A temporary departure from one subject to another more or less distantly related topic before the discussion of the first subject is resumed |

**Words to Describe Tone**

1. accusatory-charging of wrong doing
2. apathetic-indifferent due to lack of energy or concern
3. awe-solemn wonder
4. bitter-exhibiting strong animosity as a result of pain or grief
5. cynical-questions the basic sincerity and goodness of people
6. condescension; condescending-a feeling of superiority
7. callous-unfeeling, insensitive to feelings of others
8. contemplative-studying, thinking, reflecting on an issue
9. critical-finding fault
10. choleric-hot-tempered, easily angered
11. contemptuous-showing or feeling that something is worthless or lacks respect
12. caustic-intense use of sarcasm; stinging, biting
13. conventional-lacking spontaneity, originality, and individuality
14. disdainful-scornful
15. didactic-author attempts to educate or instruct the reader
16. derisive-ridiculing, mocking
17. earnest-intense, a sincere state of mind
18. erudite-learned, polished, scholarly
19. fanciful-using the imagination
20. forthright-directly frank without hesitation
21. gloomy-darkness, sadness, rejection
22. haughty-proud and vain to the point of arrogance
23. indignant-marked by anger aroused by injustice
24. intimate-very familiar
25. judgmental-authoritative and often having critical opinions
26. jovial-happy
27. lyrical-expressing a poet’s inner feelings; emotional; full of images; song-like
28. matter-of-fact--accepting of conditions; not fanciful or emotional
29. mocking-treating with contempt or ridicule
30. morose-gloomy, sullen, surly, despondent
31. malicious-purposely hurtful
32. objective-an unbiased view-able to leave personal judgments aside
33. optimistic-hopeful, cheerful
34. obsequious-polite and obedient in order to gain something
35. patronizing-air of condescension
36. pessimistic-seeing the worst side of things; no hope
37. quizzical-odd, eccentric, amusing
38. ribald-offensive in speech or gesture
39. reverent-treating a subject with honor and respect
40. ridiculing-slightly contemptuous banter; making fun of
41. reflective-illustrating innermost thoughts and emotions
42. sarcastic-sneering, caustic
43. sardonic-scornfully and bitterly sarcastic
44. satiric-ridiculing to show weakness in order to make a point, teach
45. sincere-without deceit or pretense; genuine
46. solemn-deeply earnest, tending toward sad reflection
47. sanguineous -optimistic, cheerful
48. whimsical-odd, strange, fantastic; fun

**ARTICLES FOR ANNOTATION**

**Annotating Nonfiction Text**

**PRE- READING**

* Identify the context.
* Read the title, subheadings, and bolded words.
* What will this be about or prove?
* Look for a date. How recent is the information?
* Read any information about the author(s).
* Examine the illustrations/captions & layout.

**DURING READING**

**Mark in the text:**

* Identify the names of people, places and dates.
* Define unfamiliar words.
* Underline key ideas and other important information.

**Write in the margins:**

* Mark the **thesis** statement. (Be careful –It may not be the last sentence of the first paragraph.)
* For each chunk of text, write the “**bottom line**” or “jist” in the margin. This will help you see the big picture.
* Note anything that is unclear or confusing.
* Jot down potential holes/flaws in the logic or argument.
* Write questions that **challenge** the author’s position.
* Critically analyze **bias** and any research/support that is given (or the absence of it!).

**POST- READING**

* Reread annotations – draw conclusions.
* Reread thesis statement & closing arguments – formulate your own opinions.
* Identify bias – how does it impact your thinking?
* Evaluate research – is it credible? Or present?

First, watch “How the n-word became the ‘atomic bomb of racial slurs’” from PBS Newshour. This is an interview with Harvard University professor Randall Kennedy and offers a strong history of the n-word and discusses current uses of the word. The interview aired 25 Oct. 2016. As you watch, take notes; you may use the film as one of the sources in your synthesis essay.

<https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/n-word-became-atomic-bomb-racial-slurs>

**Coates, Ta-Nehisi. “In Defense of a Loaded Word.” *The New York Times*, 23 Nov. 2013.**

MY father’s name is William Paul Coates. I, like my six brothers and sisters, have always addressed him as Dad. Strangers often call him Mr. Coates. His friends call him Paul. If a stranger or one of my father’s friends called him Dad, my father might have a conversation. When I was a child, relatives of my paternal grandmother would call my father Billy. Were I to ever call my father Billy, we would probably have a different conversation.

I have never called my father Billy. I understand, like most people, that words take on meaning within a context. It might be true that you refer to your spouse as Baby. But were I to take this as license to do the same, you would most likely protest. Right names depend on right relationships, a fact so basic to human speech that without it, human language might well collapse. But as with so much of what we take as human, we seem to be in need of an African-American exception.

Three weeks ago the Miami Dolphins guard Richie Incognito, who is white, was reported to have addressed his fellow Dolphin as a “half-nigger.” About a week later, after being ejected from a game, the Los Angeles Clippers forward Matt Barnes, who is black, tweeted that he was “done standing up for these niggas” after being ejected for defending his teammate. This came after the Philadelphia Eagles wide receiver Riley Cooper, who is white, angrily called a black security guard a “nigger” in July.

What followed was a fairly regular ritual debate over who gets to say “nigger” and who does not. On his popular show “Pardon the Interruption,” Tony Kornheiser called on the commissioners of the National Football League, the National Basketball Association and Major League Baseball to ban their players from publicly using the word. The ESPN host Skip Bayless went further, calling “nigger” “the most despicable word in the English language — verbal evil” and wishing that it could “die the death it deserves.”

Mr. Bayless and Mr. Kornheiser are white, but many African-Americans have reached the same conclusion. On Thursday, the [Fritz Pollard Alliance Foundation](http://fritzpollard.org/), a group promoting diversity in coaching and in the front offices of the N.F.L., [called on](http://espn.go.com/nfl/story/_/id/10012596/fritz-pollard-alliance-asks-nfl-players-end-n-word-use) players to stop using “the worst and most derogatory word ever spoken in our country” in the locker rooms. In 2007 the N.A.A.C.P. organized a [“funeral”](http://www.naacp.org/press/entry/the--n--word-is-laid-to-rest-by-the-naacp) in Detroit for the word “nigger.” “Good riddance. Die, n-word,” said Kwame Kilpatrick, then the mayor. “We don’t want to see you around here no more.”

But “nigger” endures — in our most popular music, in our most provocative films and on the lips of more black people (like me) than would like to admit it. Black critics, not unjustly, note the specific trauma that accompanies the word. For some the mere mention of “nigger“ conjures up memories of lynchings and bombings. But there’s more here — a deep fear of what our use of the word “nigger” communicates to white people. “If you call yourself the n-word,” said the Rev. Al Sharpton, “you can’t get mad when someone treats you like that.”

This is the politics of respectability — an attempt to raise black people to a superhuman standard. In this case it means exempting black people from a basic rule of communication — that words take on meaning from context and relationship. But as in all cases of respectability politics, what we are really saying to black people is, “Be less human.” This is not a fight over civil rights; it’s an attempt to raise a double standard. It is no different from charging “ladies” with being ornamental and prim while allowing for the great wisdom of boys being boys. To prevent enabling oppression, we demand that black people be twice as good. To prevent verifying stereotypes, we pledge to never eat a slice a watermelon in front of white people.

But white racism needs no verification from black people. And a scientific poll of right-thinking humans will always conclude that watermelon is awesome. That is because its taste and texture appeal to certain attributes that humans tend to find pleasurable. Humans also tend to find community to be pleasurable, and within the boundaries of community relationships, words — often ironic and self-deprecating — are always spoken that take on other meanings when uttered by others.

Every weekday, get thought-provoking commentary from Op-Ed columnists, The Times editorial board and contributing writers from around the world.

Top of Form

A few summers ago one of my best friends invited me up to what he affectionately called his “white-trash cabin” in the Adirondacks. This was not how I described the outing to my family. Two of my Jewish acquaintances once joked that I’d “make a good Jew.” My retort was not, “Yeah, I certainly am good with money.” Gay men sometimes laughingly refer to one another as “faggots.” My wife and her friends sometimes, when having a good time, will refer to one another with the word “bitch.” I am certain that should I decide to join in, I would invite the same hard conversation that would greet me, should I ever call my father Billy.

A separate and unequal standard for black people is always wrong. And the desire to ban the word “nigger” is not anti-racism, it is finishing school. When Matt Barnes used the word “niggas” he was being inappropriate. When Richie Incognito and Riley Cooper used “nigger,” they were being violent and offensive. That we have trouble distinguishing the two evidences our discomfort with the great chasm between black and white America. If you could choose one word to represent the centuries of bondage, the decades of terrorism, the long days of mass rape, the totality of white violence that birthed the black race in America, it would be “nigger.”

But though we were born in violence, we did not die there. That such a seemingly hateful word should return as a marker of nationhood and community confounds our very notions of power. “Nigger” is different because it is attached to one of the most vibrant cultures in the Western world. And yet the culture is inextricably linked to the violence that birthed us. “Nigger” is the border, the signpost that reminds us that the old crimes don’t disappear. It tells white people that, for all their guns and all their gold, there will always be places they can never go.

Ta-Nehisi Coates is a senior editor at The Atlantic and the author of the memoir “The Beautiful Struggle: A Father, Two Sons, and an Unlikely Road to Manhood.”

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**Gleysteen, Mackenzie. “Society’s Use of the N-word Demonstrates Hypocrisy.” *Collegiate Times,* 16 Apr. 2018.**

Top of Form

Bottom of Form

“N-----” is a divisive word in society. Derived from the pre-Jim Crow period, white people branded Africans with the term and used it to abuse and belittle them for decades. The word represents generations of maltreatment of and disrespect toward African-Americans.

However, over time the word has [re-emerged](https://www.tolerance.org/magazine/fall-2011/straight-talk-about-the-nword) and is used with a different meaning by the descendants of the very people who had to endure the cruel term decades before. Depending on context, the N-word can be interpreted as either friendly or derogatory — friendly when used by the black community and derogatory when used by non-black people.

That double standard is an unfortunate example of hypocrisy in society. If a white person uses the N-word, they are immediately scorned for their behavior, it is deemed inappropriate and they are quickly labeled as a racist. While I agree that the word can be offensive and inappropriate to use, I find it important to consider the context in which the word is used.

The term is used in today’s slang, predominantly, by the black community and African-American [rappers](http://hiphophub.co.uk/portfolio/casual-racism-n-word-can-blame-music-desensitizing-us/). Initially, this was in an attempt to desensitize the derogatory interpretation behind the word. In doing so, the N-word has now become acceptable in culture to some in the African-American community. The normalization of the word in pop culture has led to some white people also saying the word, which has resulted in backlash from the African-American community with the view that white people should not say the word.

For instance, Ta-Nehisi Coates, who is a national correspondent for The Atlantic, specializes in cultural, social and political issues regarding African-Americans. Coates breaks down [his reasoning](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/ta-nehisi-coates-n-word_us_5a0a025ce4b0b17ffcdf9d67) for why white people shouldn’t say the N-word even if it is singing along with a rap song. He argues that white people can’t seem to accept this because of white privilege.

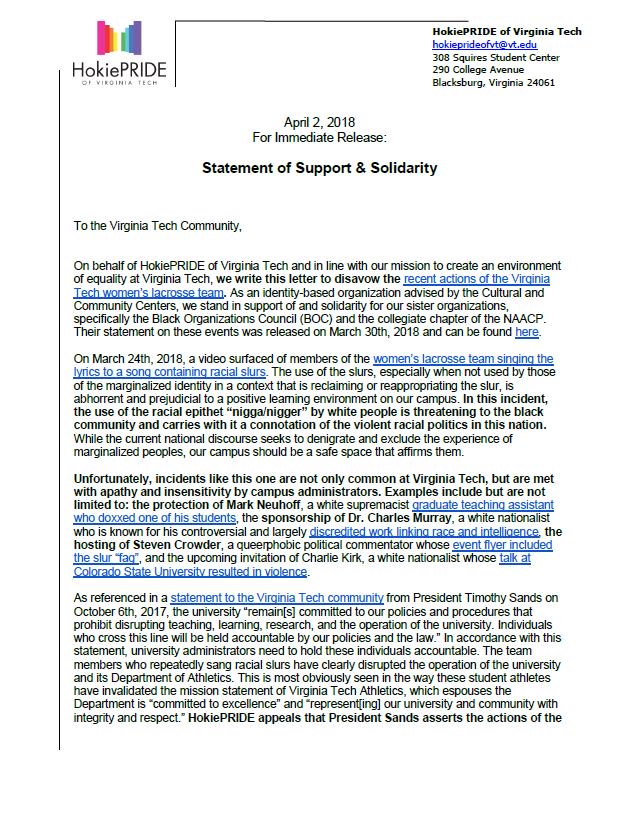
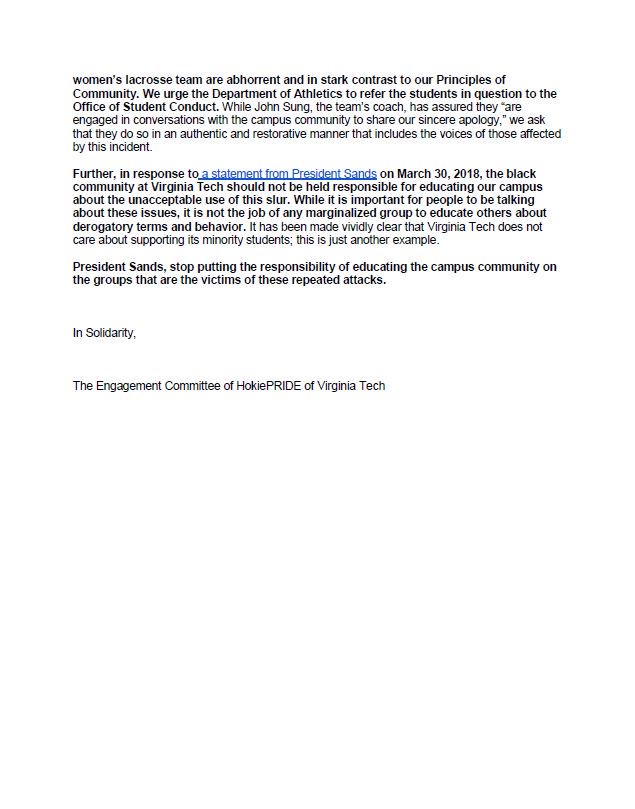
He asserts that white people have been raised in a society whose laws and culture communicates that “everything belongs to you.” With this reasoning comes the concept that some white people feel they are entitled to use the N-word even though it is inappropriate. Coates states, “For white people, I think the experience of being a hip-hop fan and not being able to use the word ‘n-----’ will be very insightful. This will give you just a little peek into the world of what it means to be black. Because to be black is to walk through the world and watch people doing things that you cannot do.”

Let me be clear. “N-----” is, undoubtedly, offensive. The word is a racist slur. Yet extraordinarily, it seems that the word has become the property of African-American rappers. The dilemma is when non-black or white people say the N-word. While I understand that African-Americans have been disadvantaged in some situations and circumstances of life that remain in some segments of modern society, I vehemently disagree with the notion of Coates’ argument that white people should not be allowed to say the N-word because it will give them a “peek into the world of what it means to be black.” To me this reasoning seems immature. This outlook reminds me of child play, saying, “See, now you know how it feels.” We don’t want anyone to feel this. We want to achieve a level playing field for all, rather than treating people differently for the pigmentation of their skin.

Clearly, those on the far-right and neo-Nazis who say “n-----” use it in a violent and derogatory manner that is unacceptable. However, I strongly disagree with the actions taken by Virginia Tech and student organizations in response to the video of the [Virginia Tech women’s lacrosse team](http://www.collegiatetimes.com/news/video-of-virginia-tech-lacrosse-team-singing-the-n-word/article_84edfd72-313e-11e8-9d9d-231e1f45d531.html) singing along to the song “Freaky Friday” by Lil Dicky featuring Chris Brown, which uses “n-----” in the lyrics. The song tells the story of a white man, Lil Dicky, who switches bodies with a mixed man, Chris Brown, and then asks if he can say the N-word now since he is black. The premise of the song is comical because Lil Dicky is now in the body of a black man, which apparently makes it acceptable to now say “n-----.”

It is also worth noting that in order for Lil Dicky to use “n-----” in the song, it was necessary for him to bring in a black person to be the one to sing the word. There are even comedic sketches that poke fun at society's disapproval of white people saying “n-----,” like [this one](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IcBCy5SYEps) — where a white person points to a black man to say the N-word for him, so as to stay socially acceptable.

Once the video of the Virginia Tech lacrosse team surfaced on social media, the team received immediate backlash. Head coach John Sung extended his [apology](https://twitter.com/HokiesLax/status/978324769278955522/photo/1?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw&ref_url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.newsweek.com%2Fvirginia-tech-womens-lacrosse-sing-nword-diversity-john-sung-coach-863811) for the team’s actions. Virginia Tech President Tim Sands then came out with a [statement](http://www.collegiatetimes.com/news/president-sands-releases-statement-about-virginia-tech-women-s-lacrosse/article_7f342a4a-354f-11e8-a416-3bfe34911829.html) to the community in response to the incident. [HokiePRIDE](http://www.hokiepride.org.vt.edu/" \l "myCarousel" \t "_blank) also came out with a statement in response to the incident as well as a response to Sands’ statement:

In response to Sands’ statement on the issue, HokiePRIDE stated, “President Sands, stop putting the responsibility of educating the campus community on the groups that are the victims of these repeated attacks.” I must say, I am in disagreement with HokiePRIDE’s perspective.

While I neither believe nor support the notion that the black community should be solely responsible for spearheading the end of the word’s use, I do believe that the black community has a large role to play in the issue. The reason being that the black community contributes to the word still being used in popular culture. The use of “n-----” in rap songs perpetuates the enduring toxicity of the word.

The black community can have an even larger impact, especially in the Virginia Tech community, because our student population including undergraduates, graduates and professionals is [62.9 percent white](https://vt.edu/about/factbook/student-overview.html)students. While HokiePRIDE argues that it is inappropriate for the responsibility to be put on minority groups to educate people, I disagree. We need minorities and the majority to come together to help educate people and advocate for themselves.

This issue even extends to the classroom, where in some Virginia schools the books “[To Kill a Mockingbird” and “The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn](https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/dec/05/to-kill-a-mockingbird-removed-virginia-schools-racist-language-harper-lee)” have been eliminated from the curriculum because of their use of racial slurs. Frankly, this is absurd. The word is a part of our past and we cannot simply attempt to erase the negative aspects of history.

If the word is so offensive to the black community, then why does the black community still use it? Frowning on white people who enjoy listening and singing along to songs with the N-word insinuates that it is only OK for black people to say “n-----,” furthering the hypocrisy surrounding the issue.

It is vital that everyone, regardless of race, is respectful of history. Black people have endured incredible pain and suffering; however, I argue that if the black community really wants to see the change in others, then the black community needs to make a change too. Currently, a wedge is being driven between groups of people due to the ambiguity of semantics.

This is a sensitive and contentious issue between people. I encourage those who believe that it is not OK for non-black people to say the N-word but it is OK for black people to say the N-word to consider if you are virtue signaling for African-Americans. It is important to consider the context of the word’s use in these situations. One thing I think we can all agree on is that “n-----” is offensive language. In fact, you could probably make the argument that no one should be using the word. Regardless of your race, I argue that we should be better at policing ourselves with the term if we really want to change what so many complain about.

We should not be upset with white girls singing along with a rap song who had no intent of being derogatory or offensive. Instead, societal pressure should be placed on the rappers who continue to use the word. As long as the word is normalized in pop culture, there is no doubt in my mind that the word will continue to be used. Yes, be upset with the neo-Nazis who use the term in a violent manner. Be upset with the [politicians](https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/atlanta-n-word-confederate-history-month-griffin-georgia-rodney-mccord-a8290176.html) who use the word as a racial slur. But let’s not be upset with white girls on a lacrosse team who are simply singing along with the lyrics of a song.

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**Simeo Starkey, Brando. “If You Truly Knew what the N-word Meant to our Ancestors, You’d NEVER Use It.” *The Undefeated,*  18 May 2017.**

A few years ago, I read slave narratives to explore the lives of black agricultural workers after the end of the Civil War. The narratives came from the Federal Writers Project of the Works Progress Administration, a program that employed researchers from 1936 to 1938 to interview former enslaved people, producing more than 2,300 narratives that, thankfully, [reside online and are fully searchable](https://www.loc.gov/collections/slave-narratives-from-the-federal-writers-project-1936-to-1938/about-this-collection/).

Those whom the law defined as property recounted various unique human experiences — their daily horrors and monotonies, how they freed themselves or learned of their emancipation, the surge of exhilaration upon securing freedom, and how they endured life on the edges of a white supremacist society in the decades thereafter.

As I pored over the narratives, I was struck less by their experiences, as heartrending as they were, than by how their experiences sculpted their self-perceptions. The best explanation of what I gleaned, what social scientists called [internalized oppression](https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/unseen-and-unheard/201509/internalized-oppression-we-need-stop-hating-ourselves), describes the psychological trauma that ensues when a person from a stigmatized group believes those negative stigmas.

White folk indoctrinated them into accepting their supposed inferiority. These narratives illustrate the success of this campaign of mental terrorism, and no word conveyed the depth of this internalized oppression more than “nigger.” Now, whenever I hear the epithet, a visual and emotional representation of the heinous process by which a people — my people — were induced to think they were less than trespasses into my thoughts. After years of habitual use of “nigger,” I banished it from my speech to honor the humanity that many never saw in themselves.

The internalized oppression revealed itself in various ways. Sometimes the former enslaved people clearly, perhaps subconsciously, considered themselves subhuman, just like how their former owners regarded them. Jim Allen, for example, dubbed himself his master’s “pet nigger boy” and a “stray” and thought himself privileged because he could sleep on the floor beside his master’s bed. That he likened himself to a fortunate mangy mutt or frisky feline crushed me. The word laid bare a worldview that held black folk as a lower order of being, as when Irene Robertson claimed her former master Mr. Sanders was mean, in part, because “he beat his wife like he beat a nigger woman.”

“Nigger” also signaled antipathy toward fellow black folk. After the end of slavery, Mattie Mooreman went north to Wisconsin with a white family for whom she worked. Members of the family wanted her to go to the circus to watch a black boy’s performance. She told her interviewer, “Guess they thought it would be a treat to me to see another niggah. I told ’em, ‘Law, don’t you think I see lots, lots more than I wants, every day when I is at home?’ ” But read how she talks about the family’s baby, whom she constantly watched over, fearing, irrationally, someone would kidnap him: “No matter what time they come home they’d find me there. ‘Why don’t you go in your bedroom and lie down?’ they’d ask me. ‘No,’ I’d tell ’em, ‘somebody might come in, and they would have to get that baby over my dead body.” Her eyes fixated on the white baby, but she saw too many niggers.

A barrage of dispiriting uses of the word bloodied me as I combed through the narratives. “The Ku Klux kept the niggers scared.” “The Ku Klux did a whole lot to keep the niggers away from the polls. …” Slaves owned by “nice” masters are repeatedly called “free niggers.” “Niggers ain’t got no sense. Put ’em in authority and they gits so uppity.” “I’se just a poor old nigger waitin’ for Jesus to come and take me to heaven.” Slave traders are called “nigger traders.” Defiant enslaved people required the service of a “niggerbreaker.” “Nigger dogs” aided the recapture of those who escaped.

Perhaps more depressing, ironically, was that circumstances sometimes led them to opt against calling a black person a nigger. William Porter stated that “some of the Tennessee niggers was called free niggers. There was a colored man in Pulaski, Tennessee, who owned slaves.” A black man who kept others in bondage — he’s a “colored man,” yet those who were owned were “niggers.” I instantly thought of a moment from the *O.J.: Made in America* documentary when a white woman who saw black people talking to Simpson uttered, “Look at those niggers sitting with O.J.” Simpson delights in hearing this because she “knew I wasn’t black. She saw me as O.J.” Porter’s outlook matched that of both the racist white woman and the unspeakably racially deranged O.J.

Since reading those narratives, I’ve noticed this mindset when perusing the remarks of freed people in other contexts. For example, before the trial of Rufus Martin, [a black man who stood accused of the 1903 murder of Charles Swackhammer](https://supreme.justia.com/cases/federal/us/200/316/), a woman whom the *Fort Worth Star-Telegram* referred to as an “old negress who occupied a front seat in the court room” bellowed:

*It’s the white people that is to blame. They know that they got to make niggahs work or they ain’t no good and they know as long as they ‘low niggah men to loaf aroun’ low down saloons they ain’t goin’ to work. This man come from a good niggah fam’ly — one of the best I knows of, but the p’lice ‘lowed him to loaf aroun’ without workin’, and to drink and gamble, till he just got to be no good and thought he didn’t have to work. The p’lice ought to raid them low down niggah saloons every day and every night till they make every blessed one of the niggah toughs go to work or else send ’em all to the county road. Them saloons is what makes bad niggahs and the white folks is to blame for it, ’cause they let ’em run.*

That Martin sported a reddish mustache, light hair and skin so bright he could pass for white almost certainly colored her perception that Martin came from a “good niggah fam’ly.”

Black folk rescued the word from the smoldering debris of a virulently racist land, reclaimed it and renovated the slur into a celebration of black comradery — defenders of contemporary usage of “nigger” repeat this. When this tale collides with reality, however, it shatters as a misreading of history — the current use of the word is owed less to white folk calling black folk “nigger” and more to black folk who thought they were niggers and said so. Black people have hurled the infamous word for nearly as long as white folk have. It exists within black speech now because it existed within black speech then. The uncomfortable truth must be confronted: Absent the internalized oppression of those who called white men and women their masters, “nigger” would probably not be a part of black folk’s lexicon. We black folk are reclaiming it not from bigoted white folk but from our ancestors, who, sadly, deemed their blackness a badge of inferiority.

I seek not to usher the word to the gallows. I harbor no aims to kill it. I can still bump a Young Thug track or chortle at a Dave Chappelle routine. “Nigger” does not bar my enjoyment of popular culture. My soul, though, winces whenever I hear it. The decision for black people to include it in their vocabulary, nonetheless, remains personal, and I reject the criticism of black folk who continue to wield it.

I write only to summon the words of former enslaved people from beyond the grave to express that “nigger” is haunted by the ghosts of hate and the more spiritually chilling ghosts of self-hate.

*Brando Simeo Starkey is an associate editor at The Undefeated and the author of In Defense of Uncle Tom: Why Blacks Must Police Racial Loyalty.*

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**Schultz, Marc. “Upcoming NewSouth ‘Huck Finn’ Eliminates the ‘N’ Word.” *Publishers Weekly* 258.1 (3 Jan.**

**2011).**

Mark Twain's Adventures of Huckleberry Finn is a classic by most any measure—T.S. Eliot called it a masterpiece, and Ernest Hemingway pronounced it the source of "all modern American literature." Yet, for decades, it has been disappearing from grade school curricula across the country, relegated to optional reading lists, or banned outright, appearing again and again on lists of the nation's most challenged books, and all for its repeated use of a single, singularly offensive word: "nigger."

Twain himself defined a "classic" as "a book which people praise and don't read." Rather than see Twain's most important work succumb to that fate, Twain scholar Alan Gribben and NewSouth Books plan to release a version of Huckleberry Finn, in a single volume with The Adventures of Tom Sawyer, that does away with the "n" word (as well as the "in" word, "Injun") by replacing it with the word "slave."

Article continues below.

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"This is not an effort to render Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn colorblind," said Gribben, speaking from his office at Auburn University at Montgomery, where he's spent most of the past 20 years heading the English department. "Race matters in these books. It's a matter of how you express that in the 21st century."

The idea of a more politically correct Finn came to the 69-year-old English professor over years of teaching and outreach, during which he habitually replaced the word with "slave" when reading aloud. Gribben grew up without ever hearing the "n" word ("My mother said it's only useful to identify [those who use it as] the wrong kind of people") and became increasingly aware of its jarring effect as he moved South and started a family. "My daughter went to a magnet school and one of her best friends was an African-American girl. She loathed the book, could barely read it."

Including the table of contents, the slur appears 219 times in Finn. What finally convinced Gribben to turn his back on grad school training and academic tradition, in which allegiance to the author's intent is sacrosanct, was his involvement with the National Endowment for the Arts' Big Read Alabama.

Tom Sawyer was selected for 2009's Big Read Alabama, and the NEA tapped NewSouth, in Montgomery, to produce an edition for the project. NewSouth contracted Gribben to write the introduction, which led him to reading and speaking engagements at libraries across the state. Each reading brought groups of 80 to 100 people "eager to read, eager to talk," but "a different kind of audience than a professor usually encounters; what we always called ‘the general reader.'

"After a number of talks, I was sought out by local teachers, and to a person they said we would love to teach this novel, and Huckleberry Finn, but we feel we can't do it anymore. In the new classroom, it's really not acceptable." Gribben became determined to offer an alternative for grade school classrooms and "general readers" that would allow them to appreciate and enjoy all the book has to offer. "For a single word to form a barrier, it seems such an unnecessary state of affairs," he said.

Gribben has no illusions about the new edition's potential for controversy. "I'm hoping that people will welcome this new option, but I suspect that textual purists will be horrified," he said. "Already, one professor told me that he is very disappointed that I was involved in this." Indeed, Twain scholar Thomas Wortham, at UCLA, compared Gribben to Thomas Bowdler (who published expurgated versions of Shakespeare for family reading), telling PW that "a book like Professor Gribben has imagined doesn't challenge children [and their teachers] to ask, ‘Why would a child like Huck use such reprehensible language?' "

Of course, others have been much more enthusiastic—including the cofounders of NewSouth, publisher Suzanne La Rosa and editor-in-chief Randall Williams. In addition to the mutual success of their Tom Sawyer collaboration, Gribben thought NewSouth's reputation for publishing challenging books on Southern culture made them the ideal—perhaps the only—house he could approach with his radical idea.

"What he suggested," said La Rosa, "was that there was a market for a book in which the n-word was switched out for something less hurtful, less controversial. We recognized that some people would say that this was censorship of a kind, but our feeling is that there are plenty of other books out there—all of them, in fact—that faithfully replicate the text, and that this was simply an option for those who were increasingly uncomfortable, as he put it, insisting students read a text which was so incredibly hurtful."

La Rosa and Williams committed to a short turnaround, looking to get the finished product on shelves by February. Mark Twain's Adventures of Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn: The NewSouth Edition will be a $24.95 hardcover, with a 7,500 first printing. In the meantime, Gribben has gone back to the original holographs to craft his edition, which is also unusual in combining the two "boy books," as he calls them, into a single volume. But the heart of the matter is opening up the novels to a much broader, younger, and less experienced reading audience: "Dr. Gribben recognizes that he's putting his reputation at stake as a Twain scholar," said La Rosa. "But he's so compassionate, and so believes in the value of teaching Twain, that he's committed to this major departure. I almost don't want to acknowledge this, but it feels like he's saving the books. His willingness to take this chance—I was very touched."

**Fisher Fishkin, Shelley. “The Words of Pap Finn’s Rants.” *New York Times*  6 Jan. 2011.**

[**Shelley Fisher Fishkin**](http://english.stanford.edu/bio.php?name_id=51), the Joseph S. Atha Professor of Humanities, Professor of English, and Director of American Studies at Stanford University is the editor, most recently, of "The Mark Twain Anthology: Great Writers on his Life and Works."

Racism is ugly. The history and legacies of American racism are our nation’s own peculiar brand of ugly -- and the n-word embodies it.

It is the persistence of racism in America that makes the n-word in Huck Finn a problem in the classroom.

To understand how racism works in America it is necessary to understand how this word has been used to inflict pain on black people, challenge their humanity, and undercut their achievements. Leading black writers in America from Frederick Douglass to Ralph Ellison have understood this: to criticize racism effectively you have to make your reader hear how racists sound in all their offensive ugliness. When Malcolm X famously asked, “What do you call a black man with a Ph.D.?” and answered “Nigger,” he was testifying to the destructive power of this word and the world view it embodied.

Malcolm X’s quip echoes a key passage in Huckleberry Finn, where Twain uses the n-word to the same end. I have in mind the moment when Pap Finn, drunk and covered with mud, delivers this rant:

There was a free nigger there from Ohio — a mulatter, most as white as a white man. He had the whitest shirt on you ever see, too….They said he was a p’fessor in a college, and could talk all kinds of languages, and knowed everything. And that ain’t the wust. They said he could VOTE when he was at home. Well, that let me out. Thinks I, what is the country a-coming to? It was ’lection day, and I was just about to go and vote myself if I warn’t too drunk to get there; but when they told me there was a State in this country where they’d let that nigger vote, I drawed out. I says I’ll never vote agin….And to see the cool way of that nigger — why, he wouldn’t a give me the road if I hadn’t shoved him out o’ the way. I says to the people, why ain’t this nigger put up at auction and sold? — that’s what I want to know. And what do you reckon they said? Why, they said he couldn’t be sold till he’d been in the State six months.

The n-word is key to this rant. It underlines the irony involved: a repulsive, illiterate, alcoholic child-abuser is incensed not only that a well-educated, well-dressed free black man could vote in another state, but that he couldn’t be sold into slavery until he’d been in Missouri for six months!

Twain once wrote that “The difference between the almost right word & the right word is really a large matter -- it is the difference between the lightning bug and the lightning.” He chose his words with care. The “new edition" of Huck Finn is not new (John Wallace published an edition that substituted “slave” for the n-word over 25 years ago); and it is not Huck Finn.

It is the persistence of racism in America that makes the n-word in Huck Finn a problem in the classroom. We need to give teachers the tools they need to teach Twain’s book in the context of the history of racism in this country that is its central concern.

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**Matthews, David. “Dumbing Down and Numbing Down Jim.” *New York Times* 6 Jan. 2011.**

**David Matthews** is the author of “Ace of Spades,” a memoir, and "Kicking Ass and Saving Souls: a True Story of a Life Over the Line," a forthcoming biography.

The word is the word. In many ways, it's America. It's confounding, infuriating, degrading, and, sometimes, necessary. Even lyrical (in the right context, one need only listen to early Richard Pryor, or Biggie Smalls, or Dolemite).

Removing that single word from the text relieves the reader of doing any heavy lifting.

The word "nigger" should sting. It's part of the bloodied soil of America, yet another legacy of slavery still with us a hundred-plus years after the fact.

Huck Finn is an historical document. What a tragedy if a modern reader, deprived of the context the word provides, were to conclude that 'Slave Jim' was the equal of 'Nigger Jim.' A slave, without the proper historical guideposts, could conjure the lowly born, the unlucky member of the wrong caste, or maybe victim of some feudal system. There is no equivalency between slave and "nigger," which is an American invention. It's a word that denies humanity, and along with it justice and mercy.

Dumbing and numbing down 'Nigger Jim' to 'Slave Jim' etiolates the crushing, dehumanizing institutional forces against the character, and minimizes Huck's enlightenment. The reason Huck is such an enduring character is that he represents the best and worst of his time. He was able to skewer the inherent absurdity of slavery, while ostensibly being a member of the ruling society.

Removing that single word from the text, while sparing those too sensitive to get past it, relieves the reader of doing any heavy lifting. Great books -- or any work of art -- require that the reader meet the author half-way. Huck Finn is a serious literary work. It is not a children's adventure book, nor a Rockwellian portrait. As intended, it is a scathing indictment against slavery, hypocrisy, gender roles (sure, why not), and class.

It is the successor to the Odyssey, and the precursor to "Catcher in the Rye." I understood little of Huck Finn when I was in high school, a little more in college, and still more is revealed to me, when I pull it from the shelf every few years. I'll run out of capacity before Huck Finn runs out of lessons.

These books -- and others like them -- should not be retrofitted to make modern readers comfortable. Modern readers are already too comfortable. Lazy, even. If the word "nigger" keeps one from reading Huck Finn, then one lacks the critical skills to appreciate all the book has to offer.

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**Morrison, Toni. “My Problem with Huck.” *The Guardian* 10 Apr. 1997.**

Fear and alarm are what I remember most about my first encounter with Mark Twain’s *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn.* Palpable alarm. Unlike the treasure-island excursion of *Tom Sawyer,* at no point along Huck’s journey was a happy ending signaled or guaranteed. My second reading of it, under the supervision of an English teacher in junior high school, was no less uncomfortable, rather more. It provoked a feeling I can only describe now as a muffled rage, as though appreciation of the work required my complicity in and sanction of something shaming. Yet the satisfactions were great: riveting episodes of flight, of cunning; the convincing commentary on adult behavior, watchful and insouciant; the authority of a child’s voice in language cut for its renegade tongue and sharp intelligence. Liberating language - not baby talk for the young, nor the doggedly patronizing language of so many books on the “children’s shelf”.

Nevertheless, for the second time, curling through the pleasure, clouding the narrative reward, was my original alarm, coupled now with a profoundly distasteful complicity.

In the early eighties I read *Huckleberry Finn* again, provoked, I believe, by demands to remove the novel from the libraries and required reading lists of public schools. These efforts were based, it seemed to me, on a narrow notion of how to handle the offense Mark Twain’s use of the term “nigger” would occasion for black students and the corrosive effect it would have on white ones. It struck me as a purist yet elementary kind of censorship designed to appease adults rather than educate children. Amputate the problem, band aid the solution. A serious comprehensive discussion of the term by an intelligent teacher certainly would have benefited my eight-grade class and would have spared all of us ( a few blacks, many whites – mostly second-generation immigrant children) some grief. Name calling is a plague of childhood and a learned activity ripe for discussion

As soon as it surfaces. Embarrassing as it had been to hear the dread word spoken, and therefore sanctioned, in class, my experience of Jim’s epithet had little to do with my initial nervousness the book had caused. Reading “nigger” hundreds of times embarrassed, bored, annoyed – but did not faze me. In this latest reading I was curious about the source of my alarm – my sense that danger lingered after the story ended. I was powerfully attracted to the combination of delight and fearful agitation lying entwined like crossed fingers in the pages. And it was significant that this novel which had given so much pleasure to young readers was also complicated territory for sophisticated scholars.

My 1980s reading, therefore, was an effort to track the unease, nail it down.

Although its language- sardonic, photographic, persuasively aural- and the structural use of the river as control and chaos seems to me quite the major feats of *Huckleberry Finn,* much of the novel’s genius lies in its quiescence , the silence that pervade it and give it a porous quality that is by turns brooding and soothing. Some of the stillness, in the beautifully rendered eloquence of a child, is breathtaking. “The sky looks ever so deep when you lay down on your back in the moonshine” (59) [47]. Other moments, however, are frightening meditations on estrangement and death. Huck records a conversation he overhears among happy men he cannot see but whose voices travel from the landing over the water to him. Although he details what the men say, it is how distant Huck is from them, how separated he is from their laughing male camaraderie, that makes the scene memorable. References to death, looking at it or contemplating it, are numerous. “ . . . This drownded man was just his [Pap’s] size, . . . but they couldn’t make nothing out of the face . . . floating on his back in the water . . . took him and buried him on the bank . . . I know might well that a drownded man don’t float on his back, but on his face’ (30) [24].

If the emotional environment into which Twain places his protagonist is dangerous, the then the leading question the novel poses for me is, what does Huck need to live without terror, melancholy and suicidal thoughts? The answer of course, is Jim. When Huck is among society-whether respectable, or deviant, rich or poor- he is alert to and consumed by its deception, its illogic, its scariness. Yet he is depressed by himself and sees nature more often as fearful. But when he and Jim become the only “we”, the anxiety is outside, not within.”… we would watch the lonesomeness of the river … for about an hour… just solid lonesomeness” (158) [136]. The consolation, the healing properties Huck longs for, is made possible by Jim’s active, highly vocal affection. Talk so free of lies it produces an aura or restfulness and peace unavailable anywhere else in the novel.

Pleasant as this relationship is, suffused as it is by a lightness they both enjoy and a burden of responsibility both assume, it cannot continue. Knowing the relationship is discontinuous, doomed to separation, is (or used to be) typical of the experience of white/black childhood friendships (mine included), and the cry of inevitable rupture is all the more anguished by being mute. Every reader knows that Jim will be dismissed without explanation at some point. Anticipating this loss may have led Twain to the over-the-top minstrelization of Jim. Predictable and common as the gross stereotyping of blacks was in the nineteenth-century literature, here, Jim’s portrait seem unaccountably excessive and glaring in its contradictions- like an ill-made clown suit that cannot hide the man within. Twain’s black characters were most certainly based on real people. His nonfiction observations of and comments on “actual” blacks are full of references to their guilelessness, intelligence, creativity, wit, caring, etc. None is portrayed as relentlessly idiotic. Yet Jim is unlike, in many ways, the real people he must have been based on. There may be more than one reason for this extravagance. In addition to accommodating a racist readership, writing Jim so complete buffoon solves the problem of “missing” him that would have been unacceptable at the novel’s end, and helps to solve another problem: how effectively to bury the father figure underneath the minstrel paint. The foregone temporariness of the friendship urges degradation of Jim (to divert Huck’s and our inadvertent sorrow at the close), and the minstrelzing him necessitates and exposes an enforced silence on the subject of white fatherhood.

The withholdings at critical moments, which I once took to be deliberate evasions, stumbles even, or a writer’s impatience with his or her material, I began to see as otherwise: as entrances, crevices, gaps, seductive invitations flashing the possibility of meaning. The 1880s saw the collapse of civil rights for blacks as well as the publication of *Huckleberry Finn*. This collapse was an effort to bury the combustible issues Twain raised in his novel. The nation as well as Tom Sawyer, was deferring Jim’s freedom in agonizing play. The cyclical attempts to remove the novel from classrooms extend Jim’s captivity on into each generation of readers.

Or consider Huck’s inability to articulate his true feelings for Jim to anybody other than the reader. Until the hell-or-heaven choice, Huck can speak of genuine affection and respect for Jim that blossom throughout the narrative only aslant, or comically to the reader- never directly to the character or to Jim himself. While Jim repeatedly iterates his love, the depth of Huck’s feelings for Jim is stressed, underscored and rendered impeachable by Twain’s calculated use of speechlessness. These silences do not appear to me of merely historical accuracy- a realistic portrait of how a white child *would* respond to a black slave; they seem to be expert technical solutions to the narrative’s complexities and, by the way, highly prophetic descriptions of contemporary negotiations between races…

It’s hard not to notice that except for Judge Thatcher all of the white men who might function as father figures for Huck are ridiculed for their hypocrisy, corruption, extreme ignorance and/or violence. Thus Huck’s “no comment” on Jim’s status as a father works either as a comfortable evasion for or as a critique of a white readership, as well as being one of the gags Twain shoves in Huck’s mouth to protect him from the line of thought neither he nor Twain can safely pursue. As an abused and homeless child running from a feral male parent, Huck cannot dwell on Jim’s confession and regret about parental negligence without precipitating a crisis from which neither her not the text could recover. Huck’s desire for a father who is adviser and trustworthy companion is universal, but he also needs something more: a father whom, unlike his own, he can control. No white man can serve all three functions. If the runaway Huck discovered on the island had been a white convict with protective paternal instincts, none of this would work, for there could be no guarantee of control and no games-playing nonsense concerning his release at the end. Only a black male slave can deliver all Huck’s desires. Because Jim can be controlled, it becomes possible for Huck to feel responsible for and to him- but without the onerous burden of lifelong debt that a real father would demand.

Concerning this matter of fatherhood, there are two other instances of silences- one is remarkable for its warmth, the other for its glacial coldness. In the first, Jim keeps silent for practically fourth-fifths of the book about having seen Pap’s corpse. There seems no reason for this withholding except his concern for Huck’s emotional well-being. Silence on this point persists and we learn its true motive in the penultimate paragraph of the book. And right there is the speech void- cold and shivery in its unsaying. Jim tells Huck that his money is safe because his father is dead.

“Doan’ you ‘member de house dat was float’n down de river, en dey wuz a man in dah kivered up, en I went in en unkivered him and didn’ let you come in?... dat wuz him” (365-66) [295]. Huck says and thinks about it. The following sentence, we are to believe, is Huck’s very next thought: “Tom’s most well now…”

As a reader I am relieved to know Pap is no longer a menace to his son’s well-being, but Huck does not share me relief. Again the father business is being erased. What after all could Huck say? That he is glad as I am? That would not do. Huck’s decency prevents him from taking pleasure in anybody’s death. That he is sorry? Wishes his father were alive? Hardly. The whole premise of escape while fearing and feigning death would collapse, and the contradiction would be unacceptable. Instead the crevice widens and beckons reflection on what this long withheld information means. Any comment at this juncture, positive or negative, would lay bare the white father/white son animosity and harm the prevailing through illicit black father/white father son bonding that has already taken place.

Such profoundly realized and significant moments, met with startling understatement or shocking absence of any comment at all, constitute the entrances I mentioned earlier – the invitation Twain offers that I could not refuse.

Earlier I posed a question, What does Huck need to live without despair and thoughts of suicide? My answer was, Jim. There is another question the novel poses for me: what would it take for Huck to live happily without Jim? That is the problem that gnarls the dissolution of their relationship. The freeing of Jim is withheld, fructified, top-heavy with pain, because without Jim there is no more book, no more story to tell.

There is a moment when it could have happened, when Jim, put ashore at Cairo, would have gone his way, leaving Huck to experience by himself the other adventures that follow. During the separation Huck notes the “dismal and lonesome” scene and searches for Jim until he is physically exhausted. Readers are as eager as he is to locate Jim, but when he does, receiving Jim’s wild joy, Huck does not express his own. A series of small accidents prevents Jim’s exit from the novel, and Huck is given the gift of an assertive as well as already loving black father. It is to the father, not the nigger, that he “humbles” himself.

So there will be no “adventures” without Jim. The risk is too great. To Huck and to the novel.

When Huck sees Mary Jane Wilks with “her face in her hands, crying”, he knows what is bothering her even before he asks her to tell him about it. “And it was the niggers – I just expected it.” I think it is important to note that he is responding to the separation of parents and children. When Mary Jane sobs, “Oh, dear, dear, to think they ain’t ever going to see each other anymore!” Huck reacts so strongly he blurts out a part of the truth just to console her. “But they will – and inside of two weeks – and I know it” (240) [198]. Her dismay over the most grotesque consequences of slavery catapults him into one of his most mature and difficult decisions – to abandon silence and chance the truth.

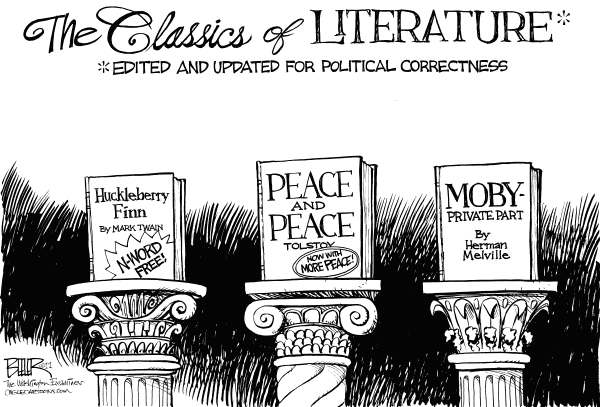
Huck cannot have an enduring relationship with Jim; he refuses one with Tom.

The source of my unease reading this amazing, troubling book now seems clear; an imperfect coming to terms with three matters Twain addresses—Huck Finn’s estrangement, soleness and morbidity as an outcast child; the disproportionate sadness at the center of Jim’s and his relationship; and the secrecy in which Huck’s engagement with (rather than escape from) a racist society is necessarily conducted. It is also clear that the rewards if my effort to come to terms have been abundant. My alarm, aroused by Twain’s precise rendering of childhood’s fear of death and abandonment, remains- as it should. It has been extremely worthwhile slogging through Jim’s shame and humiliation to recognize the sadness, the tragic implications at the center of his relationship with Huck. My fury at the maze of deceit, the risk of personal harm that a white child is forced to negotiate in a race-inflected society, is dissipated by the exquisite uses to which Twain puts that maze, that risk.

Yet the larger question, the danger that sifts from the novel’s last page, is whether Huck, minus Jim, will be able to stay those three monsters as he enters the “territory”. Will that undefined space, so falsely imagined as “open”, be free of social chaos, personal morbidity, and further moral complications embedded in adulthood and citizenship? Will it be free not only of nightmare fathers but of dream fathers too? Twain did not write Huck there. He imagined instead a reunion – Huck, Jim and Tom, soaring in a balloon over Egypt.

For a hundred years, the argument that this novel *is* has been identified, re-identified, examined, waged and advanced. What it cannot be is dismissed. It is classic literature, which is to say it heaves, manifests and lasts.

**Beeler, Nate. *Washington Examiner.* 7. Jan. 2011.**

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**Keefe, Mike. Cartoon. *Denver Post*. 8 Jan. 2011.**

