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Why Jim Does Not Escape to Illinois in Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*

James Tackach

Among critical readers of Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Jim's decision not to escape from slavery by merely crossing the Mississippi River to the Illinois shore still provokes active discussion. The original Illinois constitution significantly restricted slavery and when Jim escapes from Miss Watson in the early chapters of Twain's novel and hides on Jackson's Island, he is only a short distance from Illinois and freedom.¹ So why does he not simply swim to freedom in Illinois, rather than plan with Huck a risky journey downriver on the Mississippi to Cairo, Illinois, and then up the Ohio River toward the free states of Indiana, Ohio, and Pennsylvania? Writing in 1942, Bernard DeVoto accused Twain of "a lordly disregard of the fact that Jim did not need to get to Cairo or the Ohio River, that he could have reached free soil by simply paddling to the Illinois shore from Jackson's Island."² A half-century later, Julius Lester, who finds fault with Twain's characterization of Jim, registered a complaint similar to DeVoto's criticism: "It defies logic that Jim did not know Illinois was a free state. . . . If Jim knew that the Ohio met the Mississippi at Cairo, how could he not have known of the closer proximity of freedom to the east in Illinois?"³

Several critics have tried to explain Jim's decision by noting that even if Jim had reached Illinois, he would not be a free man because he would still be subject to fugitive slave laws in force in that free state and to chase by bounty-hunting slave-catchers on the Illinois shore.⁴ Thomas Cooley, in a footnote in Chapter 8 of the third edition of the Norton *Critical Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, provides the most detailed explanation of Jim's reason for not heading to Illinois. Cooley reasonably suggests that Ohio might be Jim's and Huck's destination because of the success of the Underground Railroad there:

Huck earlier locates Jackson's Island only a quarter of a mile from the Illinois shore. What is to prevent Jim from crossing that short space to free soil? Illinois, and especially southern Illinois, where kidnapping and slave-catching were a thriving business, enforced the

Fugitive Slave Act of 1793; thus Jim, without freedom papers, would be subject to arrest and indentured labor until claimed by his "owner." By going downriver to Cairo and then northeast up the Ohio, Jim might also have been safer because Ohio had a far more extensive Underground Railroad than any other state.⁵

Nick Karanovich notes that at the time of the publication of *Huckleberry Finn* Twain had in his library a copy of William Still's *The Underground Railroad*, published in 1883. Karanovich records a handwritten comment about an escaped slave made by Twain in Still's book and concludes that Twain's inscription "shows that he was well aware that a fugitive slave did not become free on entering a free state, and of course Jim could not win freedom simply by crossing the river to Illinois."⁶

Indeed, as Cooley and Karanovich suggest, the Fugitive Slave Law of 1793 explicitly states that a "person held to labor" who escapes and flees to another state may be apprehended by the authorities in the state to which he or she has fled, brought into court, and, if satisfactory evidence were presented to the judge or magistrate, returned to his or her owner. The law also mandates that any person "who shall harbor or conceal" a runaway slave "after notice that he or she was a fugitive from labor" shall "forfeit and pay the sum of five hundred dollars."⁷ So if slave-catchers in Illinois apprehended Jim and Huck, Jim undoubtedly would have been returned to Miss Watson, and Huck might have been subject to arrest and fine for harboring and concealing a fugitive slave.

Cooley and Karanovich provide a reasonable answer to Lester's question about Jim's decision not to seek safety in Illinois: there was no certain safety for Jim in Illinois where slave-catchers could return him to Miss Watson, who, in turn, would surely sell her rebellious slave downriver and separate him from his family forever. Yet more can be said about Jim's decision to avoid Illinois. Thus far, no literary critic or historian of the antebellum era has examined Jim's decision in light of the racial climates of Ohio and Illinois during the 1840s, the setting of Twain's novel. An examination of the prevailing racial attitudes of these two states in the mid-nineteenth century provides more evidence that Jim's plan to steer clear of Illinois and head toward Ohio was quite sound. Perhaps Jim is smarter than critics like Lester contend.

Stephen B. Oates, the Civil War-era historian, describes Illinois as "racist to the core" during the time of Twain's novel.⁸ During the 1840s, Illinois did not recognize the citizenship of African Americans; they could not vote, run for public office, attend public schools, own property, file a lawsuit, testify against white people in court, or join the state militia. In 1848, the voters of Illinois considered new articles to amend their state constitution. One amendment on the ballot would have made it illegal for African Americans, slave or free, to settle permanently in Illinois. Seventy percent of the voters chose to approve the amendment, the vote being 50,261 for and 21,297 against.⁹ The most popular politician in Illinois from the mid-1830s through the 1850s was Stephen Douglas; he served in the state legislature, held a seat on the Illinois Supreme Court, represented the state in the House of Representatives, and won election to the United State Senate. Douglas clearly articulated his racial attitudes in his debates against Abraham Lincoln during their 1858 Senate campaign:

I hold that a negro is not and never ought to be a citizen of the United States. . . . I hold that this government was made on the white basis, by white men, for the benefit of white men and their posterity forever, and should be administered by white men and none others. I do not believe that the Almighty made the negro capable of self-government. . . . Now, I say to you, my fellow-citizens, that in my opinion the signers of the Declaration had no reference to the negro whatever when they declared all men to be created equal. They desired to express by that phrase, white men, men of European birth and European descent, and had no reference either to the negro, the savage Indians, the Fejee, the Malay, or any other inferior and degraded race, when they spoke of the equality of men.¹⁰

It could be unfair to assume that one politician's racial attitudes reflect completely those of his or her constituents. But Douglas surely did not enjoy a quarter-century of political success by embracing ideas outside the political mainstream on an important issue like race. For comparison, consider the segregationist views of Alabama Governor George

Wallace during the 1960s. Is there any doubt that Wallace's position on race reflected those of Alabama's white electorate?

Douglas's opponent in those 1858 Senate debates held similar views on race. Lincoln joined the Republican Party upon its formation in 1854, but he did not readily embrace the agenda of the abolitionists and civil rights advocates in the radical wing of the new party. In an 1854 speech delivered in Peoria, Illinois, Lincoln considered and rejected the idea of allowing freed slaves to become citizens with the same rights as those held by white Americans:

Free them [slaves], and make them politically and socially, our equals? My own feelings will not admit of this; and if mine would, we well know that those of the great mass of white people will not. Whether this feeling accords with justice and sound judgment, is not the sole question, if indeed, it is any part of it. A universal feeling, whether well or ill-founded, can not be safely disregarded. We can not, then, make them our equals.¹¹

Lincoln reiterated his racial views in his 1858 debates with Douglas. In their first debate, Lincoln distanced himself from the radical Republicans with white supremacist rhetoric:

I have no purpose to introduce political and social equality between the white and the black races. There is a physical difference between the two, which in my judgment will probably forever forbid their living together upon the footing of perfect equality, and inasmuch as it becomes a necessity that there must be a difference, I, as well as Judge Douglas, am in favor of the race to which I belong, having the superior position. I have never said anything to the contrary, but I hold that notwithstanding all this, there is no reason in the world why the negro is not entitled to all the natural rights enumerated in the Declaration of Independence, the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. I hold that he is as much entitled to these as the white man.¹²

Garry Wills states that "Lincoln knew the racial geography of his own state well, and calibrated what he had to say about slavery according to his audience."¹³ The same holds for Lincoln's comments on race; his statements about race appealed to a largely racist electorate. During his Senate debates with Douglas, Lincoln consistently distanced himself from the civil rights advocates in his party to garner votes in a state that was indeed, as Oates suggests, racist to the core. Lincoln was surely aware that abolitionists and civil rights advocates rarely fared well with the Illinois electorate. When he ran for Congress in 1846, Lincoln gained a seat in the House of Representatives by receiving 6,340 votes to his major opponent's 4,829. An abolitionist candidate who ran in that election garnered only 249 votes.¹⁴

Indeed, many antebellum Illinoisans were proslavery, which led to hot debate over the issue during Illinois's quest for statehood in 1818. The initial Illinois constitution prohibited the importation of slaves into Illinois but allowed the existing slaves of Illinois to remain in bondage—the result of a compromise between antislavery and proslavery delegates forged at the 1818 state constitutional convention.¹⁵ In 1824, proslavery Illinoisans placed on the ballot a referendum for a constitutional convention that would consider the legalization of slavery in Illinois. Governor Edward Coles, a firm abolitionist, threw his weight against the convention call, and the measure was defeated, 6,640 votes to 4,972. In 1837, however, the Illinois legislature passed resolutions condemning abolitionism.¹⁶

Had Jim and Huck escaped to Illinois, they surely would have been on hostile ground. Free blacks who resided or worked in Illinois were required by law to carry a freedom certificate with them at all times; African Americans found without freedom papers were subject to arrest and fine or imprisonment. Given those circumstances and the racial attitudes of most Illinoisans, how long could Jim remain free in Illinois? An 1827 Illinois law mandated stiff fines for anyone abetting a runaway slave, so Huck, too, would be in legal trouble in Illinois. As written elsewhere, "The white citizens of Illinois [during the mid-nineteenth century] might have been generally opposed to slavery, but they certainly did not want free African Americans in their midst, exercising their civil rights and, more problematically, competing with whites for jobs and undercutting the wage scales."¹⁷ So Jim was wise to avoid Illinois in his pursuit of freedom.

But why should Jim and Huck head toward Ohio, where the Fugitive Slave Law of 1793 was equally in effect? Would they be safer in Ohio than in Illinois? Perhaps they would be. As Cooley suggests, the Underground Railroad was extensive in Ohio. The renowned Beecher family, who lived near Cincinnati, already an important Ohio River port in the 1840s, was active in the Underground Railroad. Slaves escaping across the Ohio from Kentucky often found helpers like the Beechers in and around Cincinnati. Two American fictional masterpieces set during the antebellum era feature Ohioans who actively assist runaway slaves. In *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Eliza Harris crosses the Ohio River and finds aid in Ohio, first from Senator and Mrs. Bird and then at a Quaker village. In Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, Sethe meets people willing to help her cross the Ohio River, and in Ohio she finds a community willing to harbor her after her escape.

Ohio was not a promised land for runaway slaves. During the antebellum era, free African Americans in Ohio could not vote, and they were subject to "black codes" that limited their freedom. But the racial landscape of Ohio was probably marginally better than the racial climate of Illinois in the mid-nineteenth century. By the 1840s, Salmon Chase had already established himself as a strong abolitionist voice in Ohio politics. In 1836, Chase personally defended the home of James Birney, an abolitionist newspaper editor, when an anti-abolitionist mob threatened it. He later defended Birney in court for harboring a runaway slave. Because of his ardent defense of escaped slaves, Chase became known as "the attorney general for runaway Negroes" during the 1840s.¹⁸ According to James L. Abrahamson, Chase was not a proponent for equal rights for African Americans, but he "worked to protect Ohio's black population from the worst forms of racial discrimination."¹⁹ While Illinois voters were electing and reelecting Douglas, Ohioans were sending Chase to higher office: the United States Senate in 1848 and the governorship of Ohio in 1855. The voters of Ohio were surely aware of his attitudes on race when they supported him on election day. Thus, it seems reasonable to assume that Ohioans might have been less hostile than Illinoisans to African Americans during the 1840s and 1850s.

Twain's novel suggests that African Americans in Ohio might enjoy some of the freedoms that African Americans in other states did not possess. In Chapter 6 of *Huckleberry Finn*, Pap Finn goes off on one of his drunken tirades about the government in the cabin in which he holds Huck captive:

Oh, yes, this is a wonderful govment. Why, looky here. There was a free nigger there [in Illinois], from Ohio; a mulatter, most as white as a white man. He had the whitest shirt on you ever see, too, and the shiniest hat; and he had a gold watch and chain, and a silver-headed cane-the awfulest old gray-headed nabob in the State. And what do you think? 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. . . . [W]hen 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 again. . . . 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 of 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, and he hadn't been there that long yet. There, now-that's a specimen. They call that a govment that can't sell a free nigger till he's been in the State six months. . . .²⁰

Clearly, the man to whom Pap refers enjoys a degree of freedom in Ohio. If he remains in Illinois for six months, however, he will be subject to arrest and enslavement, at least according to Pap. Cooley's footnote to Pap's oration identifies Dr. John C. Mitchell, an African American who taught at Wilberforce College in Ohio during the 1860s, as the possible basis for the man to whom Pap refers.²¹

Pap's drunken tirade about the free African American man from Ohio might have been a factor in Jim's and Huck's decision to avoid Illinois and travel toward Ohio. When Huck meets Jim on Jackson's Island in Chapter 8, however, Jim explains that his first impulse, when he escaped from Miss Watson, had been to seek safety and freedom in Illinois. When he escaped, Jim jumped into the Mississippi River, grabbed hold of a passing raft, and floated downriver on it. He assumed that with the fast current he would soon be twenty-five miles downriver from St. Petersburg. "I'd slip in, jis' b'fo' daylight, en swim asho' en take

to de woods on de Illinoi side," he tells Huck. Then Jim adds, "But I didn't have no luck" because he saw a man with a lantern on the Illinois side.²² Instead of risking a swim for the Illinois shore, Jim holed up on Jackson's Island. When Jim and Huck cast off on the raft from Jackson's Island in Chapter 12, their plan is to "break for the Illinois shore" if a boat comes near. They travel at night, and at dawn they "tied up to a tow-head in a big bend on the Illinois side."²³ They are aware that escaping to Illinois, a free state, would be more prudent than landing on the Missouri side of the river if trouble arose. But they undoubtedly realize that Illinois was hardly a safe haven for a runaway slave and his accomplice. If an escaped slave could easily find freedom in Illinois, slavery could not exist in Missouri. The Mississippi River was fordable in some places, especially during a late-summer draught; slaves, in large numbers, would have been leaving Missouri for Illinois if Illinois were freedom land.

By the beginning of Chapter 15, however, Jim and Huck have formulated their plan to head for Cairo, land there, "sell the raft and get on a steamboat and go way up the Ohio [River] amongst the free States, and then be out of trouble."²⁴ Huck offers no explanation of how they settled on that plan, but it is certainly plausible that Pap's tirade about the free African American from Ohio might have had an impact on Huck's thinking and Jim's and Huck's planning. Since their vehicle for escape was a raft, Jim and Huck really have no choice but to head downriver. Taking the seemingly easier path to freedom-heading straight for the Illinois shore-might have been riskier than taking the seemingly more difficult journey downriver to Cairo and then heading up the Ohio River on a steamboat into the "free States" of Indiana, Ohio, or Pennsylvania. Pennsylvania, like Ohio, might also be a safer destination than Illinois. In 1837, Pennsylvania voters considered the same kind of constitutional amendment approved by Illinois voters in 1848-an article that would prohibit free African Americans from moving into the state. But Thaddeus Stevens, who was, by the 1830s, a strong abolitionist voice in Keystone State politics, helped send the amendment to defeat. The citizens of Pennsylvania might be less hostile than the citizens of Illinois to free African Americans.

Jim is not the fool that Lester assumes him to be. He is intent on becoming a free man and, with Huck's help, formulates a reasonable plan that is most likely to help him achieve his goal: avoid Illinois and

head to the "free States" along the Ohio River. That reasonable plan fails, however, when Jim and Huck miss the town of Cairo during a foggy night and head deeper into slave territory. They must then form another plan to free Jim from bondage.

Notes

- 1 Paul Finkelman investigates the issues of Illinois slavery, the immigration of free African Americans into the state, and their treatment in Illinois courts in "Slavery, the 'More Perfect Union,' and the Prairie State," *Illinois Historical Journal* 80, no. 4 (Winter 1987): 248-69.
- 2 Bernard DeVoto, *Mark Twain at Work* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1942), 54.
- 3 Julius Lester, "Morality and *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*," in James S. Leonard, Thomas A. Tenney, and Thadious M. Davis, eds., *Satire or Evasion: Black Perspectives on "Huckleberry Finn"*, (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1992), 202.
- 4 DeLancey Ferguson, "Clemens' . . . *Huckleberry Finn*," *Explicator* 4 (April 1946), Item 42; Charles H. Nilon, "The Ending of *Huckleberry Finn*: 'Freeing the Free Negro,'" in Leonard, Tenney, and Davis, *Satire or Evasion*, 66; Carmen Subryan, "Mark Twain and the Black Challenge," in Leonard, Tenney, and Davis, *Satire or Evasion*, 91; Harold Beaver, *Huckleberry Finn* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1987), 51.
- 5 Thomas Cooley, ed., *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, 3rd ed. (New York: W.W. Norton, 1999), 56.
- 6 Nick Karanovich, "Sixty Books from Mark Twain's Library," *Mark Twain Journal* 25, no. 2 (1987): 9-20.
- 7 Malcolm Lowance, ed., *Against Slavery: An Abolitionist Reader* (New York: Penguin, 2000), 323.
- 8 Stephen B. Oates, *Our Fiery Trial: Abraham Lincoln, John Brown, and the Civil War* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1979), 66.
- 9 Mark E. Neely Jr., *The Last Best Hope of Earth: Abraham Lincoln and the Promise of America* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1993), 42.
- 10 Roy P. Basler, ed., *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1953), 3:112-13.
- 11 *Ibid.*, 2:256.
- 12 *Ibid.*, 3:16.
- 13 Garry Wills, *Lincoln at Gettysburg: The Words That Remade America* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992), 92.

- 14 Herbert Mitgang, "Was Lincoln Just a Honki?" *New York Times Magazine*, 11 February 1968, 100.
- 15 The census of 1830 recorded 746 slaves living in Illinois. See David Zarefsky, *Lincoln, Douglas and Slavery: In the Crucible of Public Debate* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 27.
- 16 Robert P. Howard, *Illinois: A History of the Prairie State* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 1972), 103, 134-37, 184-90. For a detailed study of the slavery issue in Illinois, see N. Dwight Harris, *The History of Negro Servitude in Illinois and the Slavery Agitation in That State, 1719-1864* (1904; New York: Negro University Press, 1969).
- 17 James Tackach, *Lincoln's Moral Vision: The Second Inaugural Address* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2002), 36.
- 18 S. Bowman, ed., *The Cambridge Dictionary of American Biography* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 129.
- 19 James L. Abrahamson, *The Men of Secession and Civil War, 1859-1861* (Wilmington, Delaware: Scholarly Resources, 2000), 11.
- 20 Cooley, ed., *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, 39-40.
- 21 *Ibid.*, 39.
- 22 *Ibid.*, 56.
- 23 *Ibid.*, 74.
- 24 *Ibid.*, 91.