



In the Margins of Huckleberry Finn

A conversation with Nancy Rawles
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by Birgit Spengler

NANCY RAWLES is the author of three award-winning novels, *Love Like Gumbo*, *Crawfish Dreams*, and *My Jim*. Chosen by the Seattle Public Library for its popular program Seattle Reads, *My Jim* tells the story of the wife and children of Mark Twain's famous slave character. In her New York Times review, Helen Schulman called it "as heart-wrenching a personal history as any recorded in American literature." Nancy's latest book, *Miz Sparks Is On Fire And This Ain't No Drill*, is a public school caper. She is currently at work on *Stolen Waters*, a novel about the founding of Los Angeles.

Thank you very much for agreeing to do this interview for the special issue on "Transfictions: Minor Characters" of *Altre Modernità/Other Modernities*.

B. Spengler: Rewritings have been popular with both audiences and writers ever since Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*, but especially so over the past decades. Your 2005 novel *My Jim* participates in this trend to explore well-known fictional texts from new angles and formerly marginalized perspectives. What constitutes the attraction of this particular type of fiction for you?

N. Rawles: Well, for me it was a very personal journey. I live in Seattle, where the African American population is relatively small. Some African American parents and



students had objected to the teaching of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, specifically in some of the predominantly white cities in the Seattle metropolitan area that have experienced a growth in the numbers of people of color present in the schools.

As a writer, I didn't pay much attention to these objections because I am accustomed to the long history of people in the United States objecting to books, especially in educational settings. As a teacher, I understand how difficult it can be to decide which books for a variety of reasons, and I am most appreciative of the ongoing efforts to introduce more books by writers of color into high school literature classes. However, since the purpose of literature and art is to raise questions, stir consciousness, awaken the mind, it's difficult for me to understand all these objections.

Once I stopped thinking like a writer and a teacher, I understood. I started thinking like a parent, meaning the parent of an African American girl who might be alone in a classroom of whites. Then, I had to ask myself, would I feel something similar to the parents that were objecting, knowing how casually and frequently Twain uses the word "nigger" or how the dialect in which he writes Jim is almost unintelligible or how the last pages of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* focus on the attempts of two poor white boys to re-enslave a black man when they know he has already been freed? That was a more uncomfortable perspective. So this is how my journey began.

B. Spengler: What are the particular attractions and challenges of rewriting Twain's classic?

N. Rawles: I actually don't think of *My Jim* as rewriting, since it doesn't follow the plot of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and since the plotline both precedes and follows Twain's story but doesn't intersect with it. As much as Twain's classic, the novel is inspired by Samuel Clemens' childhood in Hannibal, Missouri, and it dwells within the literature, research, personal narratives, and oral histories of slavery. There are so many other books and personal histories that inspired *My Jim*, books I was quite familiar with as well as new scholarship I was reading, that it's hard for me to think of this as a rewrite.

However, my book could not have existed without *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and that is why it is a child of Huck – quite a scary thought – and necessarily seen as an offspring of its celebrated parent. *My Jim* is child of an African American mother, and this child speaks a different language from her father. Actually, she doesn't talk to him very much, but she respects him and goes her own way.

Challenges included if and when and where and how to use the word "nigger," if and how to use humor in an essentially tragic story, and how to fashion a character out of whole cloth, since Twain only mentions Jim's wife in passing and doesn't give her a name. I knew I wanted to write about transcendent love, so I looked to Viktor Frankl's *Man's Search for Meaning* as my inspiration for that aspect.

B. Spengler: Critics and scholars are divided in their assessment of the practice of rewriting. Some years ago, German critic Wieland Freund called Michael



Cunningham's *The Hours* an act of "literary faredodging," other critics have spoken of "literary piggy-backing" or worse. What were the reactions to your novel by different types of audiences?

N. Rawles: I had a good reaction from critics. I only read one negative review, in which the writer seemed offended that I had dared to take on Twain, and that was in a student newspaper, maybe Harvard. Otherwise critics seemed to see precisely what I was doing and how very different a project *My Jim* was from *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. The most frequent words I heard from readers ran along these lines, "Until I read this book, I had never imagined what slavery *felt* like." I considered this the highest compliment, as this was a goal I had set for myself, which is a much more difficult undertaking than referencing *Huck Finn*.

I believe that Twain was commenting about the end of Reconstruction in *Huck Finn*, specifically about attempts to re-enslave people. I believe he saw American blacks and whites as being on a raft together, headed either toward freedom or away from it, on a journey that was inextricably linked. I know some critics might think this is hogwash, but if you read Twain deeply over his entire career as a writer and over his entire life as a person, it makes perfect sense. The argument over *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and the book itself would not have interested me if I hadn't believed it was written by a man who was deeply disturbed by the retrenchment that followed Reconstruction.

B. Spengler: Authors like Alice Randall (*The Wind Done Gone*, 2001) and J.D. California (*60 Years Later: Coming Through the Rye*, 2009), who took twentieth-century classics as the objects of their rewritings, were threatened with severe legal consequences because – as opposed to nineteenth-century works – *Gone with the Wind* and *The Catcher in the Rye* are still protected by copyright law. We are living in a time that scholars and copyright experts such as James Boyle and Lawrence Lessig describe in terms of a shrinking of the public domain and an "enclosing [of] the commons of the mind" (Boyle), or even in more drastic terms, as a transformation from a "free culture" into a "permission culture" (Lessig). Where do you position yourself in such debates about creativity and copyright issues, individual authorship and "closed" works of art, as opposed to the concept of the "open work" as Umberto Eco puts it? Does the "ownership" of culture impact your own creativity?

N. Rawles: I understand the necessity of creative artists benefitting from our work as it is bought and sold and sampled. But once a work is a universal classic, does it really need this kind of "protection"? Or to continue to make money for its "owner" in perpetuity? Can ideas be owned? Believe me, Margaret Mitchell and J.D. Salinger borrowed ideas from other people.

On the other hand, it was very important that the heirs of Zora Neale Hurston receive the money from her books after Alice Walker drew new attention to her works and they started selling again. And it's crucially important that all of the artists who



were never compensated for work that was stolen from them receive their due. This is restitution.

Cultural ideas, these are like scientific ideas, they need to be available for others to explore from different perspectives. However, there's a difference between using what the world has given and exploiting those gifts for personal financial gain. Seeds that have been cultivated in Mexico for centuries now "belong" to a family of U.S. farmers who patented them.

If I let the culture of ownership or, for that matter, the insistence that artworks are a commodity, stifle my creativity, I would never write a word.

B. Spengler: How does the CD you have produced contribute to your activity of reworking Twain's novel?

N. Rawles: I like working with other artists, collaborating, challenging, feeding off each other. *My Jim* could not have been written without the sorrow songs, the work songs, the blues stories that transcended the brutality of the black experience in America. I thought it would be interesting to invite other artists to speak to this history. Visual artists played a large role in the extension of the book, making historical links while creating work that was new.

B. Spengler: The tension between freedom and society is a theme that many scholars have perceived as being central to *Huckleberry Finn*. It is also a longstanding motif in constructions of U.S. national identity. Like *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, *My Jim* is deeply engaged in social criticism, but unlike Twain's pessimistic response to the mores of his time, community seems to play a much more positive role in your rewriting, although *My Jim*, too, ends with a character intending to "light out to the territory" so to speak. Can you comment on the role of community as a major theme of re-visioning Twain's novel as well as metaphorically, in terms of intertextual writing practices?

N. Rawles: Since *My Jim* is about people who belong to cultures grounded in African customs, values, and beliefs, it is natural that community would be central. When Sadie decides not to go with Jim in the end, it is because she chooses her new family over her old love. She defines belonging in a broader sense.

At the end of *My Jim*, the only reason the Jim character "lights out to the territories" is because Twain began writing a frankly horrible sequel to *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* called *Huck Finn and Tom Sawyer Among the Indians*. This unfinished sequel has been "finished" and is now on the market. If you read it as Twain wrote it, you will be quickly disavowed of any notions that Samuel Clemens was a crusader for racial justice. Jim appears as sidekick once more, and Tom and Huck haven't learned a thing from their other adventures.

In my opinion, unfinished, unedited works by famous writers should be allowed to die a peaceful death. After all, we draft and revise and rewrite for a reason. Here is an instance when the public domain offers us a look at something Twain may not have



wanted to show, at least not in the form he left it in. I've got work like that. Please burn it when I die.

B. Spengler: Writing from the interstices or margins, giving voice to the minor: Such gestures clearly have political implications. How do you envision the relations between art and politics? How political can art be without becoming subordinate to ideology? How engaged does art need to be in our times?

N. Rawles: I think art always speaks to the time and the culture in which it lives. It engages with the past and concerns itself with the world to come. Art and propaganda have been known to intersect, and art can be used in the service of any cause, as can science, medicine, law, and so forth and so on. Some of the best art is unabashedly political – think “Strange Fruit” as written by Abel Meeropol and sung by Billie Holiday, think “The Survivors” by Käthe Kollwitz, think the writings of Gabriel Garcia Marquez and the murals of Diego Rivera.

If I look at the works that are commonly taught as classics in American schools, which of them would not be considered political? *The Scarlet Letter*, *Things Fall Apart*, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *The Great Gatsby*, *The Woman Warrior*, *1984*, *The Crucible*, *Beloved*, *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*? Art can be as political as it wants to be and still be great art. Which is not to say that art and politics can't be a bad mix. But the same can be said for art and entertainment.

B. Spengler: Do you have a favorite rewriting?

N. Rawles: *Ahab's Wife* by Sena Jeter Naslund. “Captain Ahab was neither my first husband nor my last” is the first sentence. Right away, we realize we're a long way from “Call me Ishmael.”

B. Spengler: What are you currently working on?

N. Rawles: A contemporary narrative written as letters to a longtime friend. And, yes, it was partially inspired by Mariama Bâ's *So Long a Letter*, a book I greatly admire for being a thoroughly personal utterly political book of historic importance. The best kind.

Birgit Spengler teaches American Studies at the University of Bonn, Germany. Her publications include *Vision, Gender, and Power in Nineteenth-Century American Women's Writing, 1860-1900* (Winter, 2008) and *Literary Spinoffs: Rewriting the Classics – Re-Imagining the Community* (Campus, 2015). Her current research focuses on the



articulation of states of exception, bare life, and precarious being in contemporary literature and media as well as on time-space arrangements and conceptualizations of mobility in contemporary cultural forms.

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