The Realm of an Empire and the Reach of Empathy: Reconsideration of Humanism in Mark Twain's "The War-Prayer"

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In December 1925, *The Crisis*, the NAACP's official organ, carried a short article entitled "Philippine Mulattoes." The unsigned article quoted a cable sent by General Leonard Wood (1860-1927), the then governor of the Philippines, in which he had called for financial assistance from home:

> The American people have been so generous in their responses to the cries of children all over the world that I have no hesitation in appealing to them for children of their own blood who are in need of help. Especially do I have profound confidence, as the problem involves the honor of the American nation. (61)

By "the children of their own blood," Wood meant 18,000 hapless children, who had been born to GIs and Filipino women, and subsequently abandoned by their American fathers. Criticizing the hypocrisy involved in the appeal "to support these illegitimate victims of white men's lust" (61), the article nevertheless asked the readers for help:

> Send, in God's name, America, two million dollars . . . and send simultaneously two million protests to Washington to lambaste the heads of Congressmen who permit the holding of the Philippines as a house of prostitution for American white men under the glorious stars and stripes. (61)

In their indictment of the "American white men," African-Americans' segregated lives are here implicitly united with those of half-American, half-Filipino children. The article's scathing rhetoric, directed at the (white) government's imperial actions abroad as it is, reflects African-Americans' frustration at its racist policies at home.

The Philippine-American War, leading eventually to the birth of the Filipino mulattoes, drew as much attention from Mark Twain as from African-Americans. Just as the latter, seeing suffering images of themselves in the Filipinos, loudly voiced their rage at Washington and its injustice committed overseas, Twain took his political stand by writing "The War-Prayer" (1905), a satire harshly criticizing his country's imperialism.

Although Twain and African-Americans pursued a common political goal to end the

suffering in the Philippines, there was a significant difference between Twain's and African-Americans' feelings for the islanders, a difference ultimately deriving from the writer's guilt-ridden connection to his racial other.

Twain's verbal battle against American imperialism was closely tied to his personal history. Indeed, what may have had the strongest influence in determining his political stance was his racial identity. Therefore, if one seeks to examine and historicize Twain's conception of humanity and ironic race-consciousness evinced in many of his anti-imperialist tracts, it is vital to take into account the relationship, both real and imagined, that Twain, as a Southern (or South-Western) white man, had with African-Americans.

William Dean Howells once called Twain "the most desouthernized Southerner I ever knew," recalling that he "held himself responsible for the wrong which the white race had done the black race in slavery" (qtd. in Subryan 99, 101). Howells's description of his friend enables us to contextualize Twain's campaign against American imperialism—culminating in his assumption of the office as the vice-president of the Anti-Imperialist League in 1901—and to define his effort "as part of the reparation due from every white to every black man" (qtd. in Subryan 101). Given this remark, it is possible to think that Twain considered the defense of Filipinos as a way to somehow redeem himself from racial injustice at home, for which he felt responsible as a white man; it seems clear, at least, that he sympathized with Filipinos from the point of view of a man who had closely witnessed the systematic oppression brought upon another race all through his life.

There seems to be nothing really wrong with this identification, for Filipinos and African-Americans on a certain level were indeed united as the fellow victims of colonialism and racial violence. In fact, African-Americans' empathy for the Filipinos instanced an admirable solidarity, where the two joined hands in their common fight against oppression. However, this kind of identification, especially when made by a third party, can easily lead to the reduction of both cultural and social—but by no means essential—differences between the two groups, not to mention differences within each. What needs to be interrogated, then, is the disconcerting aspect of Twain's anti-imperial humanism: the ever-present danger of replacing one racial other with another, which confused the reparation for one with that for another.

To measure the limit of Twain's humanism and the potential value of his anti-imperialism, it is also important to recognize the power dynamics and emotional investment involved in the representation of and the identification with the Other. In her formulation of the difference between watching a violent scene as a spectator and as a witness, Saidiya V. Hartman talks about "the violence of identification" (20). Hartman convincingly argues

that unlike a witness of violence, who retains a certain distance between him/herself and what is seen, what the spectator of such a scene sees in the pain of the objectified other is simply a mirrored image of him/herself. This is because the spectator's identification with the victim of violence takes place as a process through which a suffering other becomes an object, which then is replaced by the spectator's own self. Consequently, the real sufferer either becomes invisible or recedes to the background, over which the spectator's pain comes to be projected.

The greatest challenge facing those who are seeking to reinvent humanism in our era—thus searching for ethical as well as political uses for Twain's critique of imperialism—is the difficult task of distinguishing a spectator-like, narcissistic identification from an empathetic witness who will create a genuine bond without taking a vicarious, obscene pleasure from the seen other. As we grow more and more concerned with how the discourse of humanity has been couched in—rather than degenerated into—a discourse of inhumanity, the significance of re-reading "The War-Prayer" today lies precisely in Twain's self-conscious critical assessment of his own humanism.

Through a satiric reinterpretation of jingoism in "The War-Prayer," Twain warns himself and others of the dangerous by-products of seemingly innocent wishes and desires. His caution against blind identification with one's nation reminds us of the need to know what our desires are from what those desires do—"When you have prayed for victory you have prayed for many unmentioned results which follow victory." This warning against unmentioned effects of one's speech and thought should receive special attention even when, or rather especially when, it comes to a desire for transnational or interracial humanistic identification. As it radically brings into question the apparently stable relationship of a subject's will, conscious/unconscious desires and the effects of his/her speech acts, "The War-Prayer" certainly helps us to reexamine our positionality and the enabling as well as disabling powers it implies, when thinking about the ways in which a sustainable bond with others may be created without subjecting them to the violence of identification which, as Twain has taught us, can be an unmentioned result of our seemingly altruistic desire.

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