

Excerpt from *Jim: The Life and Afterlives of Huckleberry Finn's Comrade*

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“Afterlives: Jim on Stage and Screen” explores how thirteen Black actors interpreted Jim’s character on stage and screen between 1920 and 2012. They include the longest reigning world light heavyweight champion of all time, a bodybuilder who held the title of the “world’s most muscular man,” and an African geology student studying in Moscow. As they pushed rafts down the Dnieper River in Ukraine, the Danube River in Romania, and the Sacramento, Ohio, and Mississippi Rivers in the United States, these actors brought to the role their own experiences with racism and their own distinctive insights into who Jim was and why he did what he did. Their portrayals of Jim were also shaped by the scripts and directors as well as by geopolitics and national ideologies. How did these actors variously develop, demean, deepen, diminish, and distort Jim in these plays and films?

Did they present Jim as a smart and resourceful man with intelligence and agency, or was he cast as a stock figure from minstrelsy or the “plantation tradition” romanticizing the antebellum South? Was the racism of the world in which he lives presented or elided? As they inhabited and embodied Jim as a character, how did each of these actors contribute to Jim’s life as a national and global touchstone for American racism and the portrayal of Black men on stage and screen?

Jim on the Dnieper: Wayland Rudd (1936) and Feliks Imokuede (1973) Enact the Soviet Critique of American Racism

When Jim next appears on screen five years later, he is speaking Russian, and the Dnieper River in Ukraine serves as the Mississippi. The Dnieper would be the setting of two Soviet versions of *Huckleberry Finn*, one in 1936 and another in 1973. Both films use the novel as a vehicle to criticize America and to champion socialist ideals of interracial proletarian solidarity.

Twain's works were tremendously popular in Russia from the moment they appeared in translation. *Huckleberry Finn* first appeared in Russian in 1885, the same year it came out in the United States, and *Tom Sawyer* made its Russian debut in 1877, one year after its publication in the United States. Margarita Marinova notes that "the prerevolutionary fascination with Twain and the Russian admiration for his satirical talents (he was often compared to Gogol in the press), only intensified after the emergence of the Soviet State, as his critical stance towards the realities of American life, his antiracist position, and his disdain for organized religion made him extremely palatable to the new socialist government." "After the Soviets came to power in 1917," Marinova writes, Twain was "deemed to be ideologically relevant by the new political leadership. While his immense talents as a humorist were still acknowledged and enjoyed by reviewers and readers alike, now he was predominantly celebrated as a critic of American capitalism and the Western way of life in general."¹

Tom Sawyer dominated the market, but *Huck Finn* was quite popular as well. Both were widely used in English-language classes in schools and were often staged by children's theaters around the country. Marinova tells us that "the Soviet critical insistence upon the importance of Jim—not as an individual, but as a representative of a disenfranchised class—was so great that a 1926 edition of the novel came out under the title *Приключения Геккельберри Финна и беглого негра Джима* (*Adventures of Huckleberry Finn and the Runaway Negro Jim*)." According to Marinova, "Not only is [Jim] allowed to share the spotlight with Huck in the title, but he is also presented as fully capable of taking charge of his fate (as the title suggests, he has dared to escape from slavery and live a life of adventure alongside Huck Finn)." Indeed a prominent Soviet critic would assert that while Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn "are favorite heroes of Soviet boys," it is Jim who "holds their inalienable affection."²

The film produced in 1936 by the Kyiv branch of Ukrainfilm, the main studio in Soviet Ukraine, places Jim front and center, along with the theme of racism.³ Nebraska-born Wayland Rudd, who portrays Jim in this Soviet film, broke new ground as the first Black man to play Othello in the United States, and by the early 1930s his performances on and off Broadway were earning praise from theater critics in New York. Nonetheless, he knew that options for Black actors in the United States were severely limited, and when the opportunity arose for him to hone his acting skills in the Soviet Union, a country that condemned American racism and trumpeted its own egalitarianism, Rudd was intrigued.⁴

Between 1928 and 1937, the Soviet Union made the promotion of antiracism a priority policy, aware of the propaganda value at home to be gained by calling out racism in the United States. Extensive coverage in the Soviet press of the Scottsboro trial in Alabama in 1931, in which two white women falsely accused nine young Black men of rape, exposed Soviet citizens to the oppressions of the Jim Crow South. As Cassio de Oliveira reminds us, the trial put a host of "articles, photographs, and illustrations depicting American racism" before the Soviet public. Official Soviet policy during this period challenged ideas of white supremacy prevalent in the United States

and considered African Americans as potentially helpful in disputing America's claim to be "the world's beacon of democracy and freedom." In the spring of 1932, the Black press in New York and Chicago buzzed with reports about a new film to be called *Black and White* (*Chernyi i belyi*), that would counter racist stereotypes and present "Negroes on screen as humans, for the first time," in the words of the film's screenwriter.⁵

Rudd was a member of the delegation of twenty-two young African Americans heading to Moscow to make the film, led by Langston Hughes, who was to serve as script consultant. The film was to be produced by Mezhrabpom, the main production house for international films, and directed by Carl Junghans.⁶

As Arnold Rampersad writes in his biography of Langston Hughes, "As visiting Blacks, in fact, the twenty-two Americans were instant celebrities. Lines retreated impulsively before them, seats emptied as they approached.... Muscovites loved most foreigners, but the Scottsboro case gave American Blacks an instant prestige."⁷ Much to the actors' frustration, however, *Black and White* was never made. The government aborted the project when, in an unofficial protest, an American leading the construction of a major dam in Ukraine objected to the film, warning that making it might delay US diplomatic recognition of the Soviet Union. Disappointed and angry, most of the delegation went home. But Rudd decided to stay, fascinated by what he saw on the Soviet stage during the months he'd been waiting for *Black and White* to begin shooting.⁸ In 1936, after a brief sojourn back in the United States, Rudd found himself cast as Jim in a Soviet adaptation of *Huckleberry Finn*.⁹



Fig. 1 Wayland Rudd as Jim at his trial for having "murdered" Huck Finn in *Tom Coÿep*—romanized as *Tom Soier*—released by Ukrainfilm in 1936.

Despite its title—*Tom Soier*—the film released by Ukrainfilm in 1936 is actually an amalgam of *Tom Sawyer* and *Huck Finn* in which Jim figures significantly.¹⁰ As Cassio de Oliveira writes, *Tom Soier*—a “potpourri of plot elements from Twain’s Mississippi novels, with a generous heaping of Soviet revolutionary spirit to go with it”—was intended mainly for the domestic market and especially for young audiences. The film was designed to exploit the immense popularity of Mark Twain’s novel “in order to propagate its antiracist message.”¹¹

The film establishes the trauma inflicted by slavery in its opening scene, which features a fugitive slave named George—played by the American actor Lloyd Patterson—being chased, captured, attacked by vicious dogs, and then, with bound hands, led abjectly behind the horse of a man who turns out to be the town’s pastor, and forced to drink water out of a trough alongside a horse.

Jim’s owner, Dr. Robinson, has told him that he is setting him free and put that intention in writing, making Jim supremely happy. But Pap Finn, who has long hated Dr. Robinson, kills him and frames Jim for the murder. Jim is jailed.

The “Star-Spangled Banner” plays at the start of the trial. Judge Thatcher, flanked by two large American flags, announces that the physical and moral crime of killing a white man demands the gallows.

Tom and Huck show up as witnesses in his defense, freeing him from the murder charge. But Dr. Robinson’s brother denies that his brother intended to set Jim free and plans to sell Jim himself, making him a slave again. When the boys help Jim escape and set out on a raft, a lynch mob chases them on horseback along the shore while Judge Thatcher, in a small sternwheeler, chases them on the water. The judge hits George, the former runaway who is now an enslaved member of the crew on his boat, for not stoking the boiler fast enough. When the judge boards the raft to recapture Jim, George hits the judge over the head, and Huck, Tom, and Jim tie him up, spread tar on his face (in effect putting him in blackface), place him in the wigwam, and put up a sign indicating that he has smallpox. The two boys and the two slaves commandeer the little sternwheeler (named “The Missouri River”) and sail off, heading for free territory. As de Oliveira notes, “In featuring so prominently the question of slavery—and, by extension, of racial inequality in America—*Tom Soier* follows a pervasive trend in Soviet culture of the time,” of consistently alluding to America’s racial travails.¹²

Wayland Rudd’s Jim is clearly a man who cares about his family, fervently dreams of freedom, and justly fears the brutal treatment runaway slaves can expect; but he also conforms to some familiar racial stereotypes as a fairly docile subject who expresses both sadness and joy by breaking into song. The closing image of the progressive white boys and the slaves thwarting the efforts of the evil judge to return Jim to slavery is emblematic of the Soviet ideal of an alliance between Black and white to challenge the corruption of the religious and civil powers-that-be.

In the decades that followed, Rudd would become the most visible Black actor in the USSR, cast almost exclusively as uneducated, oppressed Black American characters (although he would eventually achieve his dream of playing Othello in Russian).

Rudd had been attracted to the Soviet Union “by the Soviet state’s unapologetic attack on US white supremacy and its propaganda’s insistence—on a world scale—that Black lives matter,” as Meredith Roman writes.¹³ His role in later films was principally to win the audience’s sympathy and mobilize them against racism.

When Feliks Imokuede arrived in Moscow in the late 1960s to study petroleum engineering and geology at Patrice Lumumba University, he expected some of the challenges his fellow Nigerian students had encountered there in recent years. He was warned about the cold—his first week at Lumumba (named for the pro-Soviet first prime minister of the Congo, an African nationalist who was executed in 1961), he was taken to the GUM department store on Red Square, where a coat, boots, and warm clothing were purchased for him (the new clothing couldn’t fully counter the frigid temperatures). He knew that learning Russian would be hard. He wasn’t surprised by the lack of privacy in the overcrowded dorm rooms and the fact that one could bathe only on Wednesdays from five to eleven in the evening (the only time hot water was available); nor was he surprised by the dull and monotonous food and the general drabness of life all around him. He had been told not to be shocked by questions like “Do you have houses in Africa?” He had been warned that taxi drivers called Patrice Lumumba University “the zoo” and ordinary Soviet citizens were prone to call African students “monkeys.” Nigerian students who had arrived in Moscow shortly before him told him about the discrimination and racial abuse that he could expect even in the supposedly antiracist land of socialist brotherhood. The frequent racist attacks from Soviet youngsters on African students were well known, and he had been advised to carry a knife for protection. He had heard about the incident, a few years earlier, of the Nigerian student sleeping in his dorm room who was attacked with a chisel by a drunken Russian incensed by the success that he had been having with Russian girls. No, he was not surprised by how hard it was to learn Russian, how cold it was, how tasteless the food was, how uncomfortable the dorms were, how racist ordinary Russians could be, and how ignorant they were about Africa.¹⁴



Fig. 2. Feliks Imokuede with costar eleven-year-old Roman Sergeevitsch Madyanov in *Совсем пропащий*—romanized as *Sovsem propashchiy* (*Hopelessly Lost*, 1973).

But he never dreamt that he would be cast in a major role in a film that would be nominated for best picture at the Cannes Film Festival in 1974.

Feliks Imokuede would play Jim in *Сове́м нронацу́й* (romanized as *Sovsem propashchiy*), translated as *Hopelessly Lost* in English and *The Lost Boy* in French.¹⁵ A joint effort by the celebrated Georgian director Georgiy Daneliya and acclaimed cinematographer Vadim Yusov, the film was produced in 1973 by Mosfilm, the Soviet Union's largest film studio, known for movies that would appeal to a broad public and could compete with foreign productions.¹⁶ It was applauded by Soviet audiences and critics alike.¹⁷ Imokuede may have been cast as Jim not because of his acting skills but because he physically conformed to many Soviet ideas of what a Black slave should look like. But the Nigerian-accented mix of Russian and English that he spoke was a problem. Daneliya decided that he had to be dubbed. So in the film, although Imokuede does not look Russian, he definitely sounds Russian, speaking the same standardized Russian as all the other characters.¹⁸

Soviet leaders at the time seized every chance they had to underline the hypocrisy of racism in the nation that claimed the mantle of leader of the “free world.”¹⁹ In the film, the king and the duke represent the rapacious materialism the Soviets associated with American capitalism, while Huck and Jim become “a metaphor for interracial working-class alliance fighting against capitalist bullies embodied by the pair of conmen onscreen.”²⁰ Daria Goncharova tells us that the film fit into a Soviet tradition of “reclaiming Twain as a socialist rather than as a national writer and Huck as an anti-imperialist rebel embodying Soviet values of comradeship and interracial solidarity.”²¹ Committed to ideals of “colorblind internationalism and proletarian solidarity,” Goncharova writes, the film “prioritizes scenes that draw attention to the social ills that, in the Soviet interpretation, constituted the foundation of a capitalist regime: racial exploitation and mindless pursuit of wealth.”²² Greed is a motivating factor for the film's villains: Miss Watson can't resist the eight hundred dollars she can get for Jim, and the king and the duke avidly count the gold they've taken in through their scams without distributing shares to Huck and Jim, who have been integral to their success. Implicitly, the money-hungry king and duke and Miss Watson are emblems of capitalism, while Huck and Jim are emblems of what “comradeship and interracial solidarity” can accomplish. (The film also includes some other social criticism implicit in the novel, such as the critique of mindless gun violence in the Grangerford-Shepherdson feud.) The film foregrounds the racial violence that lay just beneath the surface in the American South. This is conveyed not only by showing Jim's ankles bleeding from the shackles he is forced to wear when the king sells him but also by Huck's referencing lynchings as a reason why he and Jim should stick with the two conmen.

There are, as always, some major departures from the book—including the elimination of Tom Sawyer. Nonetheless, *Hopelessly Lost* is a film that lovingly honors Twain's original. The scenes—despite being truncated—remain remarkably faithful to Twain's text, often verbatim. In addition, Vadim Yusov's wonderfully luminous cine-

matography makes the Dnieper River shimmer in the moonlight and glisten in the sunlight in ways that evoke Huck's lyrical descriptions of the Mississippi. The replication of Twain's words combined with the incandescent shots of the river make *Hopelessly Lost* seem closer in spirit to the original than most other films based on the novel.

Although Black characters in Russian literature and art were portrayed stereotypically as servile, Imokuede's Jim is constantly showing agency, intelligence, and empathy in the face of the many obstacles thrown his way—a daunting task, given that he is in nearly every scene (with a few exceptions, such as scenes in pap's cabin or in the Wilks home or those involving Colonel Sherburn).

His acting is always adequate and sometimes pitch-perfect. He plays Jim with confidence and aplomb.

Imokuede portrays Jim as a father who cares deeply about both his own children and Huck. Jim's wife and daughter appear briefly near the start of the film and are invoked along the journey as the motive for his flight. In the hair ball scene, he reassures Huck and tells him not to worry in a fatherly way. Jim calls Huck "son" and always behaves in a paternal manner, treating and calming him when he is bitten by a poisonous snake, reprimanding him when he deserves it. One of Imokuede's most compelling scenes takes place when he wakes and finds that Huck is back after their separation in the fog. Imokuede's Jim is overwhelmed with emotion—his very real tears visible—but he is still the parent, demanding truth from the lying child.

Imokuede's Jim is resourceful, self-assured, and smart. He steals a canoe when he realizes he is likely to be sold. When Jim tells Huck why he ran off—explaining that Miss Watson couldn't resist the eight hundred dollars a slave trader offered her—he observes that a Black man can't last more than two years if he is sold South. The raft is Jim's idea, not Huck's. Jim has caught a raft and provisioned it with cooking utensils and other supplies.

The Frenchman debate is presented just as it is in the book. Huck's response to Jim's "winning" the argument is to spit and say, "Dammit."

But Jim's most significant demonstration of agency comes in the film's final scenes. Even though the king and the duke have sold Jim back into slavery and have been abusive to him, Jim makes a split-second decision when he sees the two men—tarred and feathered—swimming toward the raft as a mob chases them.

The camera closes in on Jim's eyes. Then, still shackled, with his ankles bleeding, Jim decides to save their lives by steering the raft toward them and letting them get on board once again. The moral turpitude of the king is underlined when, after Jim has saved his life, the disgusting-looking, tarred and feathered man has the gall to still demand that Jim address him with deference, insisting that he rise when talking to the "king of France"!

In Soviet culture, as Goncharova observes,

Jim's decision to extend his hand to his oppressors would indicate his moral superiority, and, with it, the superiority

of the oppressed races. Indeed, since the King and Duke have previously been established onscreen as metaphors for everything that is wrong with contemporary America, their pitiful state at the end of the film—tarred-and-feathered, kneeling by Huck and Jim’s feet—indicates the deficiencies of the American way of life. In contrast, Huck and Jim are shown to stand by each other as equals ... representing the Soviets’ anti-racist image.²³

The courage with which Jim stands up to the king when he is about to hit Huck for having tried to elude the two conmen is striking. Goncharova tells us that Imokuede openly confronts the king, saying, “‘Не троньте мальчишку’ [Don’t you touch the boy]. This defiance on the part of the slave causes the still panting King to stop dead in his tracks.” In outraged disbelief, the king spots an ax nearby, reaches for it, and lunges at Jim with a dire threat: “‘Убью! Раб!’ [I’ll kill you! Slave!]” But Huck quickly jumps in front of Jim screaming at the top of his lungs, “‘Не убивайте его! Это мой негр!’ [Don’t kill him! This is my Negro!]”

“Although Huck’s speech evokes the mentality of white masters,” Goncharova writes, by this point the viewer knows “that Huck’s appropriation of racist discourse is just a performance, a tactic, showcasing his code-switching skills.”²⁴

In the film’s final scene, Huck tells Jim that he will bend over backward to help him be a free man. Jim smiles broadly. Although Jim is not free yet at the end of the film, and although he and Huck may be floating down the river, “hopelessly lost” on a raft with two scoundrels, he knows he has a true friend and ally. Their bond is strong, and it gives Jim optimism and strength.

By making *Hopelessly Lost* the Soviet nominee for best picture at Cannes, jumping it ahead of a film that had been championed earlier, the Soviets wanted to demonstrate that they could make a film that was faithful to the spirit of this great American novel while also being an impressive achievement in Soviet filmmaking.

They also wanted to stake out their claim to Twain as a kindred spirit, someone who spoke to Soviet ideals of proletarian egalitarianism and racial harmony.

Foreign students were not allowed to stay in the country after their terms of study ended. But Imokuede was allowed to remain in Moscow for a year after graduation in order to make the film, returning home to Nigeria after it was completed.²⁵ The first Nigerian to be featured in a film nominated for best picture at Cannes, Imokuede must have been gratified when a street in Lagos was named in his honor.²⁶

Jim on the Danube: Serge Nubret (1968) and Jacky Ido (2012) Reflect Changing German Attitudes Toward Race

When German production companies set out to film *Huckleberry Finn*, first in 1968 and then again in 2012, the Danube served as the Mississippi, and the filming was done in Romania. But as far as Jim is concerned, the two productions could not have been

more different. In 1968, Serge Nubret's Jim was a stereotypical, attentive servant; in 2012, Jacky Ido's Jim was a fierce fighter who protected those he loved with combative physical strength. The distance between these two portrayals reflects, in part, changing German attitudes toward race. The film from 1968 was directed by a man whose career had thrived under the Nazis and who became adept, after the war, at remaking Nazi films with their political content removed. On this occasion he eliminated virtually all of the novel's antiracist critique.²⁷ Between 1968 and 2012, Germany witnessed from afar the rise of the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements, and the Black German community engaged in its own fight against racism, while German youth had become fascinated with Hip Hop and rap and the boldness and confidence they entailed.²⁸ In addition, the film from 2012 was made after Barack Obama was elected president.²⁹ Serge Nubret may have been directed to play Jim as an acquiescent house servant in 1968, but once he got on the river with Huck, it would have been hard for any director to hide his strength and power: At the time he was cast in the film, Nubret held the title of the "World's Most Muscular Man." Despite Nubret's memorable physical presence on the screen, it would be Jacky Ido, a French rapper-turned-actor, who in 2012 would finally give those who had longed for a truly assertive and aggressive Jim what they had been hoping for, when he played Jim in the only film version of the novel with a screenplay written by a writer of color.

Born in Anse-Bertrand, Guadeloupe, Serge Nubret had moved with his parents to Paris when he was twelve, returning to Guadeloupe in 1958 to avoid being drafted in the Algerian War, and it was there that he discovered bodybuilding, winning the title of Mr. Guadeloupe, and two years later, the title of the "World's Most Muscular Man." Nubret returned to Paris in the early 1960s and was cast in an Italian–West German spy film and two Italian sword-and-sandal films—adventure films set in classical antiquity that featured bodybuilders.³⁰

It is likely that it was his fourth film, released in 1964, that caught the eye of German director Wolfgang Liebeneiner. *Un gosse de la butte* (also known as *Rue des cascades*), directed by Maurice Delbez and based on the novel *Alain et le nègre* by Robert Sabatier, was a love story involving a middle-aged white woman and a handsome younger Black jazz musician. It was also a story about the relationship between the musician and the woman's ten-year-old son, Alain. This film, which views racism through the eyes of a child and focuses on a friendship between a Black man and a white boy, may well have served as Nubret's audition for the role of Jim.³¹

The four-part miniseries featuring Nubret that aired on German television on consecutive Sundays in early 1968—called *Tom Sawyers und Huckleberry Finns Abenteuer*—denuded the story of its social critique and ignored the issue of racism almost entirely.³²

It turns out that removing social and political content was a familiar project for Liebeneiner. Although he had been a successful director of melodramatic fare under the Nazis, after the war he remade a number of films of the Nazi era that depoliticized the originals.³³ He was on familiar ground, then, eliminating virtually all of Twain's

social criticism from the story. At the start of Episode 4, the episode in which Jim figures prominently, Jim is a coachman who works for Miss Watson and the Widow Douglas, driving Huck to school in a carriage, waiting on table at home, and acting as Huck's valet. We don't learn that he is a slave, in fact, until Huck meets him on Jackson's Island, when he admits that he has run off because Miss Watson planned to sell him. He tells Huck he wants to get to a free state, work, and buy his family, and the two set off down the Danube together. The series had a rather disconcerting habit of taking a memorable exchange between Jim and Huck in the novel—such as the conversation about where stars come from—and turning it into a highly improbable conversation between Huck and Pap.

But whatever else one might say about this sloppily constructed mash-up of Twain's Mississippi writings, Nubret's Jim is the best-dressed Jim ever to appear on screen. Also the least dressed. When we first see him, costume designer Jacqueline Guyot has dressed him in vermilion coachman's livery with velvet trim and a top hat. When he is giving Huck a thorough scrubbing, he is wearing a dramatically patterned gold satin vest. In the next scene—in which he is whisking dust off Huck's shoulders—he is wearing an elegant silver and gray vest with a cravat. However, from the moment he and Huck meet on Jackson's Island, Jim is bare-chested, wearing only a red scarf and khaki-colored pants—a state of undress that does full justice to his stunning physique, which dominates the screen during much of the final section of the series.

The inoffensive and pedestrian broadcast got good reviews from Germany's weekly television magazine and received the Perla Television Prize in Milan. Frustratingly mediocre as it was, it was so successful that it was rebroadcast on German TV “just a year later due to high demand, which was unusual at the time.”³⁴

Fast forward to German director Hermine Huntgeburth's very different adaptation, *Die Abenteuer des Huck Finn* (2012), with a screenplay by Sascha Arango.³⁵ When she wanted to find an actor who could portray Jim as powerful and assertive, she immediately thought of her favorite Masai warrior. Huntgeburth had cast Jacky Ido in a film she directed in 2005, *Die Weisse Massai* (*The White Masai*), in which a Swiss woman who goes to Kenya on vacation falls in love with a Masai warrior played by Ido.³⁶ Although the film in which Ido plays Jim was produced for a young audience, the brutality of slavery is front and center. The violence inflicted on slaves is presented in all its harshness. At one point Huck is shocked to see the stripes on Jim's back: “They did this to you?” he asks incredulously. And the anguish of family separations under slavery is also presented clearly. In an early scene set on the St. Petersburg docks, Ido's Jim, a house servant in the home of the Widow Douglas and Miss Watson who has come to the docks to hunt for Huck, watches some slave traders unloading a coffle of captives for auction.

He spots his wife with their child in her arms among those about to be auctioned off. He screams her name, and she screams “Jim!” as she tries to escape the men who restrain her. Ido pushes through the crowd, shouting at her in an African language. As the slave traders try to keep him from his family, he picks up a ten-foot

log from the dock in a rush of adrenalin and swings it at them, temporarily knocking them out. He fights ferociously but is outnumbered. The slave traders are outraged, but when Huck shows up and announces that Jim is his, they back off. Later in the film, even though his hands are chained, Jim will prevent Pap from recapturing Huck by throwing his full body weight against him, knocking him to the ground.

On those occasions when he is not aggressively trying to protect people he loves, Ido's Jim is surprisingly elegant: He eats his dinner in his room at a little table set with a crystal wine glass, a linen napkin, and a bottle of wine; indeed, he takes those items when he runs off and uses them when he's camped out on Jackson's Island. These accoutrements are a bit jarring, but perhaps their function was to show Jim as "civilized" to offset his violent outburst at the docks and prevent him from being associated with a different stereotype, that of the savage Black beast.

"Mark Twain is one of my heroes," Ido once told an interviewer. I love everything he did."³⁷ Ido, who was born in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, first made his mark as a rapper, slam poet, and musician in France, where he lives: Under the pseudonym John Pucc'Chocolat, he appeared on French slam poet Grand Corps Malade's best-selling album *Midi 20* (2006) and played a sold-out stadium tour throughout France. As an actor, before performing as Jim, he was best known for having played the projectionist Marcel in Quentin Tarantino's *Inglourious Basterds* and the heartthrob lead in *Die Weisse Massai*. He also played an uncredited role in Tarantino's *Django Unchained* the same year he appeared in this German adaptation of *Huckleberry Finn*.³⁸

Throughout the film, Ido's Jim is self-assured, confident, smart, and blunt: "I'm not being a slave any more. I'm an American like you," he asserts on Jackson's Island. When Huck and Jim are playing poker, Jim beats Huck's full house with his royal flush. It is Jim who plays a practical joke on Huck rather than the other way around: he pretends he doesn't know how to swim, lets Huck "teach" him, and then pretends to drown.

Jim is clear about his goals. When he tells Huck he plans to steal his children if the master won't sell them and Huck says that would be breaking the law, Jim responds, "White man's law."

After a deus ex machina ending that brings Twain himself into the story, a voice-over narrator tells us that Jim got to a free state, found work, and eventually bought his wife and son their freedom.

Reviewers singled out Ido's performance for praise. Reviewers also made clear that the central theme of the film was slavery, a challenging topic that the filmmakers were credited with having addressed with sensitivity, helping to teach children important values.³⁹ The irony that is so central to the original is completely missing here: Jim is a hero of Twain's novel in part because of, not despite, the fact that he is illiterate, constrained in word and action, and deeply aware of the precarity of his position. One can view Jacky Ido's confident, literate, and powerful Jim as perhaps the Jim that many critics of Twain's novel longed for and implicitly demanded.

Notes

The above excerpts were first published in [Shelley Fisher Fishkin](#), *Jim: The Life and Afterlives of Huckleberry Finn's Comrade*, published in April 2025 by Yale University Press in their "Black Lives" book series edited by David Blight, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and Jacqueline Goldsby. (c) 2025 Shelley Fisher Fishkin. The *Journal of Transnational American Studies* gratefully acknowledges Shelley Fisher Fishkin and Yale University Press for permission to reprint portions of Chapter 5, "Afterlives: Jim on Stage and Screen."

- ¹ Margarita Marinova, "Huck Finn's Adventures in the Land of the Soviet People," *Journal of Transnational American Studies* 12, no. 2 (2021): 119, 122, 124. Between 1918 and 1959, Marinova notes, nearly eleven million copies of Twain's works in twenty-five languages were published in the Soviet Union.
- ² Mark Twain, *Приключения Геккельберри Финна и беглого негра Джима* (*Prikljuchenija Gekkel'berri Finna i beglogo negra Dzhima*) [*Adventures of Huckleberry Finn and the Runaway Negro Jim*] (Molodaia gvardia, 1926); Marinova, "Huck Finn's Adventures," 120, 124; A. Sarukhanyan, "Mark Twain in Russia," 1959, Mark Twain Stormfield Project 1908–2012, twainproject.blogspot.com/2010/07/russian-versions-of-mark-twains-books.html
- ³ Interest in this film among Twain scholars has been ignited recently by the work of Cassio de Oliveira, who presented a paper on it at the Ninth International Conference on the State of Mark Twain Studies in 2022 and published his research in the *Journal of Transnational American Studies* in 2023: Cassio de Oliveira, "Mark Twain on the Soviet Silver Screen: Stalinist Laughter and Antiracism in *Tom Soier*," *Journal of Transnational American Studies* 14, no. 2 (2023): 29–49.
- ⁴ S. Ani Mukherji, "'Like Another Planet to the Darker Americans': Black Cultural Work in 1930s Moscow," in *Africa in Europe: Studies in Transnational Practice in the Long Twentieth Century*, edited by Eve Rosenhaft and Robbie Aitken (Liverpool University Press, 2013), 135; Yevgeniy Fiks, ed., *The Wayland Rudd Collection* (Ugly Duckling Presse, 2021); Jonah Goldman Kay, "Art Books: The Wayland Rudd Collection: Propaganda Posters, Works of Art, and Other Pieces of Print Culture Reveal a Complex and at Times Incongruous Approach to Race," *Brooklyn Rail*, March 2022, https://brooklynrail.org/2022/03/art_books/The-Wayland-Rudd-Collection. Christopher E. Silsby, "African American Performers in Stalin's Soviet Union: Between Political Promise and Racial Propaganda" (PhD diss., City University of New York, 2018). Ira Aldridge had played Othello in London in the nineteenth century, and Paul Robeson began playing the role there in March 1930, a month before Rudd played it in the United States.

- ⁵ Meredith L. Roman, *Opposing Jim Crow: African Americans and the Soviet Indictment of U.S. Racism, 1928–1937* (University of Nebraska Press, 2012), 11; de Oliveira, “Mark Twain on the Soviet Silver Screen,” 33. On March 9, 1932, New York’s *Amsterdam News* ran the headline “Soviet Seeks Negroes to Make Film of Conditions Here,” while on March 19 the *Chicago Defender* announced, “Russia to Produce Film of Race Life in America Soon,” cited in Mukherji, “Like Another Planet,” 121. See also Maxim Matusevich, “Blackness the Color of Red: Negotiating Race at the US Legation in Riga, Latvia, 1922–33,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 52 no. 4 (2017): 832–52; Allison Blakely, *Russia and the Negro: Blacks in Russian History and Thought* (Howard University Press, 1986), 102, 145–47; and Soviet screenwriter G. E. Grebner’s preface to *Chernyi i belyi*, quoted in Mukherji, “Like Another Planet,” 121.
- ⁶ Jack El-Hai, “Black and White and Red,” *American Heritage*, May–June 1991, www.americanheritage.com/black-and-white-and-red; Mukherji, “Like Another Planet,” 121; “Movie Players Leave for Moscow,” *Amsterdam News* (New York), July 15, 1932; “Russia to Produce Film of Race Life in America Soon,” *Chicago Defender*, March 19, 1932; “Stars Now on Way to Russia to Make Film,” *Chicago Defender*, June 11, 1932; “To Make Photoplay in Soviet Russia,” *Chicago Defender*, July 9, 1932; “Soviet Seeks Negroes to Make Film of Conditions Here,” *Amsterdam News* (New York), March 9, 1932; “21 Movie Players Leave for Moscow,” *Amsterdam News* (New York), July 15, 1932.
- ⁷ Arnold Rampersad, *The Life of Langston Hughes*, vol. 1 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 244–46.
- ⁸ El-Hai, “Black and White and Red”; Roman, *Opposing Jim Crow*, 137; Allison Blakely, “Foreword: Contested Blackness in Red Russia,” *Russian Review* 75, no. 3 (2016): 363–64; Mukherji, “Like Another Planet,” 138.
- ⁹ Silsby, *African American Performers*, 88, 101–2; Langston Hughes, “Mixes Russian and Jazz on Soviet Stage,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, February 25, 1933. Another veteran of the Black and White fiasco was also cast in the film: Lloyd Patterson, who would play a slave named George.
- ¹⁰ *Том Со́йер* (*Tom Soier*) [Tom Sawyer, Russian], film directed by Lazar Frenkel and Gleb Zatvornitsky; written by Nikolay Shestakov and Mark Twain; featuring Wayland Rudd, Lloyd Patterson, Konstantin Kulchitsky, Nikolai Katsovich, Pyotr Svechnikov, and Nikolai Uspensky; cinematographer, Yuri Vovchenko; released by Ukrainfilm (Soviet Union), December 31, 1936.
- ¹¹ De Oliveira, “Mark Twain on the Soviet Silver Screen,” 31.
- ¹² De Oliveira, “Mark Twain on the Soviet Silver Screen,” 31.

- ¹³ Meredith Roman, “Anti-Racist Aspirations and Artifacts,” in Fiks, *Wayland Rudd Collection*, 154.
- ¹⁴ Constantin Katsakioris, “The Lumumba University in Moscow: Higher Education for a Soviet–Third World Alliance, 1960–91,” *Journal of Global History* 14, no. 2 (July 2019): 289; Beth Knobel, “Changing Lifestyles: Moscow’s Marxist School Strives to Reinvent Itself,” *Los Angeles Times*, February 16, 1993; Maxim Matusevich, “Probing the Limits of Internationalism: African Students Confront Soviet Ritual,” *Anthropology of East Europe Review* 27, no. 2 (2009): 24; Maxim Matusevich, ed., *Africa in Russia, Russia in Africa: Three Centuries of Encounters* (Africa World Press, 2007), 172; Maxim Matusevich, “Journeys of Hope: African Diaspora and the Soviet Society,” *African Diaspora* 1, no. 1–2 (2008): 67–74; Maxim M. Matusevich, “Soviet Anti-Racism and Its Discontents,” in *Alternative Globalizations: Eastern Europe and the Postcolonial World*, edited by James Mark, Artemy M. Kalinovsky, and Steffi Marung (Indiana University Press, 2020), 229–50; Everest Mulekezi, “I Was a Student at Moscow State,” *Reader’s Digest*, July 1961, 99–104; Olabisi Ajala, *An African Abroad* (Jarolds, 1963); Andrew Richard Amar, *An African in Moscow* (Ampersad, 1965); William Anti-Taylor, *Moscow Diary* (Robert Hale, 1967); Andrea Lee, *Russian Journal* (Random House, 1981); Maxim Matusevich, “Black in the U.S.S.R.,” *Transition*, no. 100 (2008): 56–75; Kimberly St. Julian-Varnon, “The Racist Treatment of Africans and African Americans in the Soviet Union,” *New Lines Magazine*, February 17, 2023, <https://newlinesmag.com/essays/the-racist-treatment-of-africans-and-african-americans-in-the-ussr/>; Julie Hessler, “Death of an African Student in Moscow: Race, Politics, and the Cold War,” *Cahier du Monde Russe* 47, no. 1–2 (2006): 33–63; Peter Shearman, *Rethinking Soviet Communism* (Palgrave, 2015), 132; Riikkaman Johanna Muhonen, “‘Good Friends’ for the Soviet Union: The People’s Friendship University in Soviet Educational Cooperation with the Developing World, 1960–1980” (PhD diss., Central European University, 2022), 23. Although the actor spells his name Felix Imoukhuede today, the film lists him as Feliks Imokuede.
- ¹⁵ *Совсем пропащуй* (*Sovsem propashchiy*) [*Hopelessly Lost*, Russian], film directed by Georgiy Daneliya; written by Georgiy Daneliya, Viktoriya Tokareva, and Mark Twain; featuring Feliks Imokuede, Roman Madyanov, Yevgeny Leonov, Vladimir Basov, Vladimir Ivashov, and Vakhtang Kikabidze; cinematographer, Vadim Yusov; produced by Mosfilm and released August 27, 1973.
- ¹⁶ Daria Goncharova, “‘Workers of the World Unite!’: Huck, Jim, and the Cold War’s Racial Tensions,” in *Post45 vs. the World: Literary Perspectives on the Global Contemporary*, edited by William G. Welty (Vernon Press, 2023), 55–76.
- ¹⁷ Alexander Federov, *Cinema in the Mirror of the Soviet and Russian Film Criticism*, 2nd ed. (ICO Information for All, 2019), 32.

- ¹⁸ Goncharova, ““Workers of the World,”” 63–64; Theodore Shabad, ““Huck Finn’ Put on Film in Soviet,”” *New York Times*, November 29, 1972.
- ¹⁹ Thomas Borstelmann, *The Cold War and the Color Line: American Race Relations in the Global Arena* (Harvard University Press 2001), 106.
- ²⁰ Goncharova, ““Workers of the World,”” 56–57.
- ²¹ Goncharova, ““Workers of the World,”” 59.
- ²² Goncharova, ““Workers of the World,”” 62.
- ²³ Goncharova, ““Workers of the World,”” 73.
- ²⁴ Goncharova, ““Workers of the World,”” 69.
- ²⁵ On his return, Imokuede joined the Nigerian Agip Oil Company, where he worked for the rest of his career. He lives in Lagos today.
- ²⁶ Oseomoje Imoukhuede confirmed that the street in Lagos was indeed named for his cousin Felix Imoukhuede.
- ²⁷ The film was produced on the cusp of the social and cultural change that the student demonstrations of 1968 in Germany would help set in motion. At the time it was made, however, mainstream cultural productions could still count on being received by “a general German audience which basically did not question the validity of the historical representations of racial and class differences. It is only in the 1970s that a more general change of attitude sets in and enters cultural productions. It is the airing of the American TV series *Kunta Kinte* (the adaptation of Alex Haley’s *Roots*, 1976) in 12 episodes in 1978 which brings about a different perception of slavery and of African Americans.” Alfred Hornung, email to the author, February 4, 2024.
- ²⁸ Ingrid Gessner notes that “the works of Berlin filmmaker Branwen Okpako about the Afro-German detective Sam Meffire in the award-winning documentary *Dreckfresser* (2001) or in the feature film *Tal der Ahnungslosen* (2003) took up lived Black history in (East) Germany in the 2000s. They can be read both as cultural criticism and as poetic inscriptions that (might) have led to a new interpretation of Jim as we see it in Huntgeburth and Arango’s *Die Abenteuer des Huck Finn* (2012).” Gessner, email to the author, February 4, 2024.
- ²⁹ “Steve McQueen, the British director of *12 Years a Slave*, commented when his film was shown in 2013, that the slave trade is a cinematic subject whose time has come, and he called this ‘the Obama Effect.’” Andrew Anthony, “*12 Years a Slave* and the Roots of America’s Shameful Past,” *Observer*, January 5, 2014, quoted in Paul Giles, “Obama, Tarantino, and Transnational Trauma,” in *Obama and Transnational American Studies*, edited by Alfred Hornung (Universitätsverlag Winter, 2016), 257.

- ³⁰ Richard Dyer, “The White Man’s Muscles,” in *Race and the Subject of Masculinities*, edited by Harry Stecopoulos and Michael Uebel (Duke University Press, 1997), 286.
- ³¹ *Un gosse de la butte* [alternative title *Rue de cascades*, French], film directed by Maurice Delbez; written by Robert Sabatier, Maurice Delbez, and Jean Cosmos; featuring Serge Nubret, Madeleine Robinson, and René Lefèvre; cinematographer, Jean-Georges Fontenelle; produced by Edmond Lemoine; released by Les Films de Mai (France), December 2, 1964.
- ³² *Tom Sawyers und Huckleberry Finns Abenteuer* (Tom Sawyer’s and Huckleberry Finn’s Adventures), Episode 4 of four-part mini-series made for German television by French, German, and Romanian production companies (Franco London Films, Office de Radiodiffusion Télévision Français [ORTF], Deropa Films, Studioul Cinematografic Bucuresti); directed by Wolfgang Liebeneiner; screenplay by Walter Ulbrich; featuring Serge Nubret (Jim), Marc di Napoli (Huck), Roland Demongeot, Robert Hecker, Lina Carstens, and Marcel Peres; narrated by Ernst Fritz Fürbringer; produced by Stefan Barcava, Henry Deutschmeister, Ulrich Picard, and Walter Ulbrich; premiered on ZDF, January 12, 1968.
- ³³ John E. Davidson, “Working for the Man, Whoever That May Be: The Vocation of Wolfgang Liebeneiner,” in *Cultural History through a National Socialist Lens: Essays on the Cinema of the Third Reich*, edited by Robert Charles Reimer, (Camden House, 2000), 242.
- ³⁴ Ingrid Gessner observes that Liebeneiner’s series from 1968 “was produced and broadcast as what was called Weihnachts-Vierteiler (Christmas four-part series), which explains its enormous popularity.” At a time when there were only two channels—the networks ARD and ZDF—these four movie-length episodes that aired every Sunday during Advent (between December 1 and December 22) constituted “a real event back then” that “had the whole family sitting in front of the TV” (Gessner, email to the author, February 1, 2024). See also “Tom Sawyers und Huckleberry Finns Abenteuer,” TV Wunschliste, www.wunschliste.de/serie/tom-sawyers-und-huckleberry-finns-abenteuer.
- ³⁵ *Die Abenteuer des Huck Finn* (*The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*) [German], film directed by Hermine Huntgeburth; written by Sascha Arango and Mark Twain; featuring Jacky Ido, Leon Seidel, Louis Hofmann, and August Diehl; music by Niki Reiser; produced by Boris Schönfelder for Schönhauser Film Production; distributed by Majestic Filmverleih, released December 20, 2012. Ingrid Gessner notes that the screenwriter, Arango, “is himself a person of color. Arango is also known as Sascha Arango Bueno and as Arturo Arango. The son of a German mother and a Colombian father, Sascha Arango was born in December 1959 and grew up with his brother Tonio in Berlin-Wilmersdorf. Besides screenplays, he has also written several radio and theater plays and has been awarded the Adolf Grimme Prize [a prestigious award for

German television] several times” (Gessner email). “Sascha Arango,” www.filmportal.de/person/sascha-arango_533c763f73604bf7a99a7d787937b7a9

- ³⁶ *Die weisse Massai* (*The White Masai*) [German], film directed by Hermine Huntgeburth; written by Corinne Hofmann, Johannes W. Betz, and Nadia Fares; featuring Nina Hoss, Jacky Ido, and Katja Flint; cinematography by Martin Langer; produced by Günter Rohrbach; released September 15, 2005.
- ³⁷ Jacky Ido interviewed on *One on One with Steve Aduato*, November 7, 2014, www.youtube.com/watch?v=V8Z4GsAT3hQ
- ³⁸ “Jacky Ido,” TVSA: South Africa’s TV Website, www.tvsa.co.za/actors/viewactor.aspx?actorid=16877
- ³⁹ Sophie Charlotte Rieger, “Die Abenteuer des Huck Finn,” film review, *Filmstarts*, www.filmstarts.de/kritiken/196411/kritik.html