

Mulatta Mama Performing Passing and Mimicking Minstrelsy in Mark Twain's *Pudd'nhead Wilson*

Mark Twain's novel Pudd'nhead Wilson relates the freedom stories of three racially ambiguous people: the slave Roxy, her son Chambers, and the master's son Tom. The three find themselves searching for truth and freedom in complex webs of deceit. This paper considers how acts of racial passing and blackface minstrelsy facilitate entry into and enhance enjoyment of the benefits of white American citizenship and how motherhood creates the ability and opportunity to pursue that citizenship.

According to many scholars, white men dominate blackface minstrel performance. Yet Twain, knowledgeable of blackface customs, chooses to have the slave woman Roxy perform as a white male in blackface. Instead of the cross-dressed wench conceit being played by a white male performer, Twain inscribes white maleness (the pinnacle of U.S. freedom) in blackface on a female enslaved body that, while legally black, appears white and could easily pass into white society. This confusion of custom, race, and gender highlights blackface minstrelsy and racial passing as means for Roxy to appropriate the civil rights afforded to full U.S. citizens.

Roxy performs racial passing and blackface minstrelsy in her quest for freedom and a good American life for herself and her son, but Roxy does not seek freedom or manipulate race before she becomes a mother. Being a mother changes women's public as well as private lives. I argue that Roxy's desire and ability to employ race in order to garner freedom and access the benefits of American citizenship for herself and her son stem from being a mother.

Above all else, most mothers seek to protect their children. But as property, slave mothers lack the power and authority to provide basic necessities for themselves and their children, because they are not American citizens, but rather American chattel. Mothers, however, regardless of station or servitude, prove resourceful and find strength in motherhood because "motherhood provides

an introductory experience of having real power in the world” (Ellison, 2005: 106). And if motherhood is “powerful assertiveness training” that produces a willingness in mothers to “stand up against society and authority,” then motherhood must prepare and impel some slave women to fight the institution that hinders them (Ellison, 2005: 112, 113). Motherhood gives slave women the gumption to flout societal norms and seek freedom. In freedom lies the power and authority to protect self and children. The most effective way in the U.S. to obtain public political liberty is to be white and male. White supremacy and patriarchy define U.S. citizenship, so Roxy, a mulatta slave mother in Mark Twain’s novel *Pudd’nhead Wilson* (1959 [1894]), becomes a white man to find freedom. Roxy easily could pass as a white woman, and does to an extent, but to actualize her freedom, Roxy dons a blackface minstrel disguise. I argue that Roxy, although she employs racial passing to help affect freedom, uses blackface minstrelsy as a means of appropriating white maleness and its inherent liberties granted through patriarchy and white supremacy. I further argue that Roxy’s desire and ability to manipulate race in order to garner freedom and access the benefits of American citizenship for herself and her son stem from being a mother.

Mark Twain and motherhood

Mark Twain’s *Pudd’nhead Wilson*, although published in the 1890s takes place during the early 1850s in a small slaveholding Missouri town, slightly south of St. Louis. It relates the freedom stories of three racially ambiguous people: the slave Roxy, her son Chambers, and the master’s son Tom. Roxy, who is only one-sixteenth black, looks like a white woman. Her son Chambers, a mere one-thirty-second black, also appears white. Tom, as the master’s son, stands as the only “real” white person of the trio. Chambers and Tom share the same birthday, and Roxy, who rears them both, is the only person who can tell the two apart. Early in the novel, Roxy switches Chambers and Tom in the crib, thus bestowing freedom on her son. She never reveals their true identities. (From this point forward, I will follow Twain’s example and call the slave-born Chambers, Tom; and the freeborn Tom, Chambers.) When Tom’s father dies, he frees Roxy, who becomes a chambermaid on a steamer, and Tom and Chambers go to live with Tom’s uncle. Tom later sells Roxy back into slavery, and she escapes from an Arkansas plantation to find freedom.

Twain’s novel reveals he understands the potential power embedded in motherhood. Carolyn Porter (1990) describes *Pudd’nhead Wilson* as the “scene of conflict between a repressive paternal plot and a subversive maternal one” (125). Porter asserts that the “matrilineal rule of descent reinscribed on the mulatto mother that makes Roxana such a powerful weapon in Twain’s arsenal” pokes holes in white patriarchy (135). Children follow the slave status of their mothers, even if their fathers are white and free. Following matrilineal descent provides more slaves for slaveholders, but it also grants slave mothers the power to obliterate status inherited from fathers, even white ones (Porter, 1990: 131).

Myra Jehlen (1990) similarly argues that the congruency between Roxy's statuses as mother and black woman allow Twain to endow her with a degree of transcendence, that is the individual selfhood afforded to white males and their social ability to create themselves (114). For Jehlen, this transcendence most aggressively asserts itself when Roxy holds nature and race in "abeyance" and switches the babies (117). By switching the boys, she grants her son white male selfhood. Conceiving the idea of swapping the children requires a "strong" will and an "acute" and "calculating mind" (Porter, 1990: 125). Twain demonstrates through Roxy the power inherent in motherhood. Porter (1990) notes how he marks the "slave mother at once antebellum America's most tragic victim and potentially one of its most powerful subversive agents" (123).

Porter (1990) and Jehlen (1990) both acknowledge the power embedded in motherhood as experienced by the slave Roxy. To extend their arguments, I suggest motherhood itself as the wellspring of will, courage, intelligence, and creativity that Roxy possess and uses in garnering freedom for her son and herself. Motherhood enables Roxy to conceive of freedom and emboldens her to create and act out subversive race and gender roles, through racial passing and blackface minstrelsy, in her effort to fight patriarchy and white supremacy to enact that liberty.

Privilege, citizenship, and race

The social structures under question stem from the predominance of U.S. white supremacy, defined as the "radical inequality" between whites and nonwhites in every aspect of social life (Gordon, 2004: 174). White supremacy offers a standard of privileges that only certain humans can possess, simply by the accident of their birth (Gordon, 2004: 175-76). The problem of privilege is that it grants things like safety, food, and shelter—all things that should not be privileges but rather ought to stand as basic human rights. So white supremacy then, places humanity in the possession of whites alone (Gordon, 2004: 175, 178). Accordingly in the world of Twain's novel, Roxy does not enjoy the guarantee of these human rights. So in order to make a bid for these rights, these basic American freedoms, Twain has his Roxy employ, with varying degrees of success, racial passing and blackface minstrelsy. Because Roxy is fifteen-sixteenths white, she appears to be a white woman, but because she is only one-sixteenth black, Roxy is legally a slave. Roxy's legal status as white-skinned slave, with her potential for passing as free and passing freely into white society, challenges white supremacy and ideas of American citizenship.

Understanding *citizenship* as "taking responsibility for public life," slaves are not American citizens (Buker, 1999: 8). And before becoming a mother Roxy ostensibly does not attempt to control her public life. It is only after having her son that Roxy begins to think about participating in the public realm. Motherhood emboldens Roxy and equips her with "ways that help her cope more efficiently with the outside world" (Ellison, 2005: 76). One way that mothers protect their children is by tending, which at times means fading into the

scenery (Ellison, 2005: 94). Furthermore, slave mothers' need to protect their children often resulted in means of tending that became "exceedingly harsh or enterprising," which often created "emotional distance" between mothers and their children (Giddings, 1984: 44). For Roxy, tending to her son means helping him to disappear into the white American landscape. Her enterprising method, exchanging one baby for another, results in creating emotional distance between Tom and Roxy, but it also brings each of them closer to the ideals of liberty found in full American citizenship. Eloise A. Buker (1999) defines *citizenship* as the act of choosing how to perform subjectivity (157). So Roxy performs her first act as an American citizen when she decides to reinvent her son's subjectivity and switches Tom and Chambers. In so doing, Roxy opts to turn her biological son's public persona into that of a free white male with access to all of the benefits that American citizenship can offer. She introduces him to the life of privilege accessible through white supremacy. And in her burgeoning citizenship, Roxy yearns for the same privileges as her son.

Roxy as racial passer

Motherhood enables women to "become more flexible and resourceful, less fearful, and more 'dominant'—meaning focused and confident—in other realms of their lives" (Ellison, 2005: 108). In other words, motherhood helps women develop and implement strategies that yield positive outcomes in their lives. After her re-enslavement, Roxy escapes from an Arkansas plantation to the St. Louis waterfront. Before motherhood, Roxy does not attempt escape. Only after becoming a mother and experiencing its power and tenacity does Roxy dare to escape from slavery. Not only the act of escape, but also her means of escape, reflect Roxy's resourcefulness, fearlessness, and confidence.

As she flees from the plantation, Roxy does not attempt to disguise herself, a bold and counterintuitive tactic. In an area populated with people who could recognize her as her master's slave, she floats down the river without any means of concealing her identity. Roxy then sights the *Mogul*, the steamboat she worked on for a few years, and approaches it confidently. She does not fear capture and even relishes the recognition of her identity because she hopes to rekindle old acquaintances. After boarding the *Mogul*, Roxy considers herself amongst friends and experiences no dread of her master, recognition, or capture. Even as the *Mogul* steams past her former plantation, Roxy remains on deck viewing the onlookers with amusement. She watches them search for her while she enjoys safety on the riverboat. But perhaps she is not safe on the boat; perhaps her sense of security is false. As the search party examines the shore for Roxy, it surely sees the *Mogul* pass. Twain does not indicate how near to shore the steamer is; however, if Roxy could see the search party, the search party may have been able to see her. Yet she feels no anxiety about recognition, most likely because she more closely resembles a free white woman than a runaway slave. To casual observers, Roxy becomes just another American woman traveling on a steamboat.

Roxy easily could have passed as white. A hindrance to her passing would have been her attire, for before her escape attempt on the *Mogul*, Roxy's best dress is a "cheap curtain-calico thing" (Twain, 1959: 14). But Sally Jackson, the head chambermaid of the *Mogul*, gives Roxy "good clothes" to wear (110). Sally does not just offer Roxy clean clothes, or fresh clothes, or dry clothes. She furnishes Roxy with "good clothes," indicating that the articles themselves convey some level of social standing greater than, or at least different from, that of a slave.

But Roxy does not need to do anything to her physical appearance to be perceived as white. Roxy "was of majestic form and stature" with "imposing and statuesque" attitudes and "noble and stately" gestures (Twain, 1959: 8). "Her complexion was very fair . . . her face was full of character and expression, her eyes were brown and . . . she had a heavy suit of fine soft hair which was also brown" (8). Twain further describes Roxy's face as "shapely, intelligent, comely—even beautiful" (8). Roxy looks like a white woman and "to all intents and purposes Roxy was as white as anybody" (Twain 9). Roxy looks like a white woman and bears herself with a grace and dignity only ascribed to white people.

Roxy looks white and carries herself like a white person. Roxy is white in many ways except socially and legally. Although Twain never declares Roxy a white citizen, or even a black slave passing as a white woman, Roxy's acts of escape and tacit passing indeed make her a citizen. Citizenship entails shaping self-representation. Instead of cowering as a fearful slave (an expected depiction), Roxy boldly rides the steamer looking every bit the free white woman. And if citizens "can be thought of as hybrids who even embody polarities," Roxy's race manipulation brings her even more into the realm of citizenship (Baker, 1999: 166). Onboard ship, Roxy simultaneously stands as an enslaved black woman and a free white one. For Roxy, motherhood instills principles of power, privilege, and liberty that carry over from the domestic realm into the public sphere. Yet instead of utilizing her naturally white appearance and white-associated attributes to pass as white to gain freedom and access an American dream, Twain chooses to have Roxy pass as black upon her arrival in St. Louis. In order to avoid detection as a runaway slave, Roxy dresses as a black man and puts on blackface in lieu of walking unhindered to freedom as a white woman.

Roxy as blackface minstrel

Roxy has few acquaintances in St. Louis; and therefore, almost no one could identify her as a black person or a slave. Yet it is in this town of strangers, away from the Arkansas plantation, that Twain decides to conceal Roxy's white skin as well as her gender. Roxy spies her master at a market place in St. Louis. This naturally arouses alarm for Roxy and perhaps the situation warrants a disguise. But choosing to look like a man with a blackened face hardly seems the appropriate ruse for Roxy to employ. Although the sight of

a very dark black man would not have piqued her master's suspicions, it would most likely raise questions from others. Antebellum Missouri was not free, so Roxy, disguised as a black man walking the St. Louis streets, likely would have been stopped and required to produce free papers. This sort of apprehension would explode Roxy's counterfeit appearance. She would be unable to produce free papers because she did not own any, her blackened face would be recognized as false, and upon close inspection, Roxy's long brunette curls and feminine physique easily would reveal her as female. A blackface disguise potentially could be more hazardous for Roxy than relying on her naturally white features. If Roxy had worn her "good clothes," she could have roamed freely around St. Louis with little concern of being revealed as black or being discovered by her master.

Roxy's imposture as a black man seems to distort color and gender designations more so than a decision to remain a white woman would have, but it is not necessarily ineffective. Mary Wollstonecraft posited that in order for women to become citizens that they must become men (Crittenden, 2001: 47). In St. Louis, Roxy needs to continue her quest for freedom and full citizenship, and she needs to find her son. She calls on her inner fortitude, initiated by motherhood and her forays at liberty, to do whatever seems necessary to realize her goals. So Roxy becomes a man.

While precluding her from assimilating into white society, Twain does, however, allow Roxy to pass as a man in blackface. On the surface, Roxy's blackface guise appears to be just that, a disguise, a convenient way to defy detection. But her blackface ploy is not convenient; it requires more effort to assemble and maintain than passing as white would have. And it draws more attention to Roxy than posing as a white woman would. In order to transform into a white woman, Roxy would only have to put on the "good clothes" that Sally Jackson had given her. The blackface costume, however, requires finding a black man to buy clothes from, garnering money to pay him one dollar for the attire, procuring cork or greasepaint with which to blacken her face, blackening her face (which no doubt entailed the aid of a mirror or other looking glass), and maintaining the black make-up in a heavy St. Louis rain.

Twain does not reveal the blackface figure as Roxy until after he introduces the "black face under an old slouch hat" that startles Tom (Twain, 1959: 105). The black face alone is sufficient to invoke clichéd characterizations of black men. Twain temporarily depicts Roxy in blackface, the "singing-dancing-comedy characterization portraying black males as childish, irresponsible, inefficient, lazy, ridiculous in speech, pleasure-seeking, and happy" (Davis, 1991: 51). At this point in the novel, Roxy becomes a disembodied black face devoid of any attributes outside of the hackneyed ones associated with blackface minstrelsy.

As the scene in Tom's St. Louis apartment unfolds, it becomes more ludicrous in its adherence to the conventions of blackface minstrelsy. And if produced on stage, it would have earned hearty laughter. A blackface man, in

an exaggerated low voice, commands a white society male, “Keep still—I’s yo’ mother!” (Twain, 1959: 105). This appears to be a childlike request given in ridiculous speech. The rest of Tom and Roxy’s encounter follows this pattern of comic dialogue. Tom then apologizes to this short blackface man and instead of receiving, “Sho ’nuff, Massa Tom,” he experiences a vernacular rebuke. The hilarity continues. With the lights dimmed low, this blackface impostor settles in to tell a story. He relates to Tom the incredulous tale that he is a white-skinned woman escaping from slavery who arrives at Tom’s doorstep because she is his mother. The scenario ends with the small-framed blackface man, perhaps tripping over his baggy costume, marching white Tom through a rainy St. Louis night at knife-point. Surely Twain wants his readers to find the comedy in this situation. It seems inconceivable that Tom, or anyone else, could take this little blackface upstart seriously.

Carolyn Porter (1990) asserts that Twain’s portrayal of Roxy reveals a world “where mothers are sexual, slaves are powerful, and women are temporarily out of (and thus in) control” (124). Women not under the control of men (i.e.: out of control) are in control of themselves. Being an out of control mother, a slave mother no less, instead of resigning Roxy to the powerless margins of society, allows her to shirk off social restraints and employ the boons of white supremacy to her benefit, which occurs as the blackface minstrel scene unfolds. In this scene, Twain inverts the blackface minstrel conceit of the cross-dressed wench. The cross-dressed wench typically remained silent, and “was established as a thoroughly contained and constrained African American woman” (Bean, 2001: 174). Ordinarily white men played blackface roles, but Twain shifts stereotypes of blackface minstrelsy by applying them to an ostensibly black woman. Instead of having a white man dress as a black man who portrays a silent and domesticated black woman, Twain has a white slave don blackface and dress as a black man who views himself, at least in part, as a white woman. Twain’s version of the wench conceit is anything but silent, contained, and constrained. Instead it explodes with comic dialogue and acerbic parody.

This blackface scene also recalls the lesser-known tradition of black female blackface minstrel performers. Black women, mostly very fair-skinned, in these performances subverted the “dominance of minstrelsy’s containment of the black female body as fixed, unmoving, and confined to the two categories of mulatta or mama,” or in Roxy’s case, “mulatta” and “mama” (Bean, 2001: 181). While Roxy is both “mulatta” and “mama,” her disguise reads as black and male. Roxy as the cross-dressed wench embodies numerous dualities: male/female, white womanhood/black womanhood, white manhood/black manhood, slave/free. It is at this point in the novel that Roxy most fully realizes citizenship and liberty. Roxy becomes a citizen through her pursuit of the public life (Buker, 1999: 198). She becomes the hybrid being embodying polarities (Buker, 1999: 166). And if liberty is the “continuous activity of differently . . . articulating . . . our associations with others and things about us,” then Roxy certainly finds freedom in creating this new publicly performed self (Flower, 2001: 67).

Blackface minstrelsy, as a performance of “inauthenticity,” creates a hyper-whiteness. This hyper-whiteness emerges from the performers’ ability temporarily to “embody” cultural norms associated with blackness. This hyper-whiteness also relies on “denying blacks the same options for self-transformation” (Browder, 2000: 49, 50). Only whites can put on and take off racial stigma at will, so blackface minstrelsy simultaneously allows white men to explore a different race and yet remain completely white while doing so. If blackface minstrelsy is a way for white men to attain hyper-whiteness, it becomes a means for white men to participate fully in the human privileges afforded by white supremacy as it gives them access to all of the benefits of American citizenship. But if white males’ acting in blackface productions reveals their desire to try on blackness and their success in procuring the benefits of American white supremacy, then Roxy’s blackface portrayal indicates the same desires and successes. In order to find her son, Roxy necessarily becomes a white male who can enact blackness within the social safety of a blackface minstrel performance. This performance generates admission to the human rights and freedoms endowed by white supremacy, which allow Roxy to search for and confront her son. To fulfill her role as a mother, Roxy, a slave woman, must transform into a free white man.

Conclusion

Katherine Ellison (2005) argues that motherhood makes women reexamine their priorities and redirect their energies (114). Defining “‘smart’ as a mindset that helps [mothers] and [their] children survive,” highlights that motherhood also increases women’s intelligence (Ellison, 2005 150). Motherhood introduces power into women lives, and Ellison further argues that once accustomed to the domestic power of motherhood, women extend this power into the public realm and become more inclined to buck repressive social systems (106, 112, 113). Motherhood motivates much of *Pudd’nhead Wilson*, and these byproducts of motherhood impel Roxy to action.

Although readers meet Roxy after she gives birth, we can reasonably imagine that Roxy, a socially powerless slave before motherhood, discovers the generative power of carrying a baby to term, unleashes previously untapped reserved power during childbirth, and experiences the domestic power of creating and ordering a world for her son. Becoming a mother forces Roxy to examine her slave status and the slave status inherited by her son. Her priorities shift from pleasing her master to freeing her son, because she sees freedom as his only means of survival. In other words, motherhood gives Roxy a type of power and intelligence previously unknown. With this increased power and resourcefulness, Roxy devises a plan to free her son. By conceiving and executing the plan to switch babies, Roxy challenges the restrictive social strictures of white supremacy. Roxy turns her black slave son into a free white male citizen. Providing freedom for her son eventually induces Roxy to fight for her own freedom, which, in turn, introduces her into the public realm and yields more

power to rail against social fetters. She later, albeit temporarily, endows herself with free citizen status as she performs a blackface minstrel act. These race changes question societal norms, but in the motherhood paradigm they also prove smart, because they advance survival.

The troubles and anxieties in Twain's *Pudd'nhead Wilson* stem from notions and misconceptions of racial identity. In order to appreciate how race impacts privilege and freedom, it becomes necessary to understand white supremacy, racial passing, and blackface minstrelsy. Theories of white supremacy establish the US as a country that only allows full humanity, freedom, and citizenship to its white inhabitants. Racial passing, then, becomes a way for non-whites to use deception in order to enter into this system and to achieve and maintain the rights denied them by white supremacy. And blackface minstrelsy locates the height of American privilege in the ability to accommodate blackness temporarily. Blackface minstrelsy places white males at the site of racial crossover. This theory denies white women opportunities temporarily to put on blackness, and this male-domination further removes black women from participating in mainstream American cultures. In other words, blackface minstrelsy allows access to US privilege to white men alone.

Twain, although ultimately upholding American social norms, uses and upends both passing and blackface minstrelsy to allow Roxy to attain some benefits of white American citizenship. Through Roxy, Twain challenges prevailing notions of blackface minstrelsy and gender, and by exploding those notions gains her access, rather than denial, to the privileges of antebellum American citizenship. Accessing privilege depends on finessing identity. And violation of custom yields acceptance rather than denial to society. So deception and duality, then, become essential to enjoying entitlements of U.S. citizenship in Twain's novel. Twain evokes the "experience of freedom through images of divided selves," with Roxy standing as an example (Horn, 1996: 2). In the novel, Roxy exists as mulatta and mama, female and male, black and white, slave and free. Her travels between these dualities introduce her to American citizenship and the liberties inherent in citizenship. And motherhood compels Roxy to explore avenues that lead to freedom. *Pudd'nhead Wilson* is a novel concerned with social customs. And in it, Mark Twain questions white supremacy, racial passing, and blackface minstrelsy through the lens of Roxy, a seemingly "contained and constrained" mulatta slave mother.

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