Introduction

“Coolies” and Comparative Racialization in the Global West

As the unexpected bestselling status of his autobiography and the controversy over the NewSouth edition of *Tom Sawyer* and *Huckleberry Finn* (in which pejorative terms for blacks and Native Americans have been replaced with “slave” and “Indian” throughout) attest, Mark Twain’s incisive literary treatments of U.S. history’s darker episodes continue to fascinate and provoke twenty-first century readers.¹ For a broad international² audience, Twain exemplifies how literary form and style can be mobilized against racist institutions; at the same time, his writings have provided key test cases for critical conversations about the possibilities and limitations of canonical engagements with blackness and empire.³ But whereas Toni Morrison’s reading of the “Africanist” presence at the center of *Huck Finn* has given rise to illuminating scholarship on blackness and its multiracial analogues in canonical American literature,⁴ historical dynamics of comparative racialization raise questions about how “Africanist” representations intersected with representations of Chinese immigrants in a period when the figure of the indentured “coolie” laborer blurred boundaries between traditional notions of freedom and servitude. *Sitting in Darkness* draws on recent scholarship on Asian immigration, U.S. imperialism, race theory, and legal history to situate Twain’s race fiction in a comparative perspective: in the intersectional contexts of Chinese Exclusion and Jim Crow, even historical novels about antebellum slavery registered fluctuating connections between immigration policy, imperialist ventures, and antiblack racism.

Although this book focuses on the explicit and implicit comparisons that Twain drew between different racial groups over the course of his career, his writings also provide occasions to think through
broader methodological issues, such as how literature can articulate tensions between different racial groups, how to critique processes of comparative racialization without reproducing their logic of analogy, and how readings that attend to shifting institutions of structural racism can complement accounts that focus on racial prejudice. The book’s title, which I take from Twain’s trenchant essay, “To the Person Sitting in Darkness” (1901), refers not only to the underrepresented status of the Chinese and their supposed lack of enlightenment but also to how Western imperialism marginalized and exploited numerous racialized and colonized populations. Twain’s ironic figure for a colonized subject bereft of Christianity and modernity recapitulates a range of captives from his earlier writings: Chinese immigrants sentenced to imprisonment by San Francisco’s police courts, Injun Joe locked away in a cave, the prolonged captivity of Jim in the last chapters of Huck Finn. If it invokes the possibility of analogizing colonized Chinese and Filipino subjects with figures of “darkness” frequently linked to African Americans, “To the Person Sitting in Darkness” also attends to the different ways in which Boers, Chinese Boxers, and Filipino revolutionaries were subjugated. In addition to arguing that treatments of race in Twain’s era should be read comparatively and demonstrating the importance of Chinese immigration and U.S. transpacific relations in his writings, Sitting in Darkness experiments with modes of reading that analyze how the shifting legal, material, and discursive grounds of racialization manifest in literary form. Rather than engaging in a traditional single-author study, this book uses Twain’s career as an occasion to rethink the intersections between topics often kept distinct in studies of the literature of the Gilded Age: imperialism, Chinese Exclusion, Jim Crow, the rise of corporations, and the development of the U.S. West.

This introductory chapter will set the stage for my study by describing and framing the archive of Twain’s career-long engagements with questions of migration, war, and colonialism raised by U.S. relations with China and the Philippines. These writings underscore the role of comparative racialization in the post-Reconstruction United States and throughout Twain’s writings by showing how Twain critiqued not just antiblack stereotypes but also laws, geographies, and economic relations that comparatively and differentially racialized African Americans, Asian Americans, Native Americans, Filipino nationalists, and
other groups. Understanding Twain’s fictional engagements with racism and colonialism requires an assessment of the discursive, legal, and extralegal means whereby racialized groups were compared, differentiated, and repressed in a period marked by massive demographic shifts and diverse forms of racial and imperial violence.

I. Mark Twain and Comparative Racialization

When Mark Twain headed west in 1861 after serving for two weeks in the Missouri state militia, he distanced himself from the battlefields of the Civil War but not from the political and cultural dynamics of slavery. “Lighting out” for Virginia City and San Francisco—where Twain’s professional writing career took off—was only a viable option because the Compromise of 1850 had organized territories acquired from Mexico in the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo around a series of agreements concerning the future expansion of slavery. Although California was admitted as a free state in 1850, proslavery Democrats had considerable influence in the state’s government, and early legislatures “denied blacks voting rights, prohibited African American court testimony, and banned black homesteading, jury service, and intermarriage with whites”; the state assembly even passed a bill that—had it not been blocked by state senator David Broderick—would have banned the immigration of free blacks into California. Setting the stage for virtually unprosecutable acts of racist violence by whites, the first session of the state legislature stipulated in 1850 that “no black or mulatto person, or Indian, shall be allowed to give evidence in favor of, or against a white man”; the California Supreme Court’s decision in People v. Hall (1854) extended this exclusion to Chinese witnesses. If the U.S. West taught Twain an appreciation of vernacular narrative, brash humor, and the social and economic dynamics of boom towns, it also exposed him to volatile scenarios of comparative racialization in which antiblack laws and customs were adapted and imposed upon a range of racial groups. Spending his formative years in the South and West, Twain witnessed a broad post–Civil War redefinition of white citizenship that encompassed western Indian wars and immigration restrictions as well as the effects of Emancipation. As historian Joshua Paddison explains, “Widening our conception of Reconstruction to include the West highlights
interconnections between African American, Native American, Asian American, and Mexican American history and demonstrates that the multiracial, multireligious encounters that made the West a zone of tumultuous cultural contact also indelibly shaped national politics.9

Whereas he is best known for a handful of novels about southern slavery and feudal England, Twain produced, throughout the arc of his career, a shadow archive of writings about China, Chinese immigrants, and transpacific imperialism. Twain's interest in the Chinese extends from his early writings about Chinese criminals and settlements in the U.S. West to his late polemics against the brutal indemnities imposed by the United States and its European allies in the wake of the Boxer uprising. Biographer Forrest Robinson attributes Twain's departure from San Francisco (and a crucial turning point in his career) to his published criticisms of racist policing: “His now seasoned nose for trouble led him into conflict with the San Francisco police, who took umbrage when he criticized them in print for corruption and mistreatment of the Chinese. Clemens beat a temporary retreat to the Sierra foothills, where, in the cabin of Jim Gillis on Jackass Hill in Tuolumne County, he first heard the story of the frog that would make him famous.”10 Shelley Fisher Fishkin also traces Twain's shift toward fiction as a mode of social critique to his writings about the Chinese in San Francisco: when the San Francisco Daily Morning Call refused to run an outraged article Twain had written about the persecution of a Chinese man, “Twain quickly learned that exposés of racism in San Francisco would not be printed in newspapers there. So he started writing a different kind of story, one with the same subject but an alternate strategy, and published it in a paper in the next state and in a national magazine.”11 Like Fishkin, Martin Zehr suggests that Twain's concern with the Chinese provoked an important transition in his writing style: “Twain's writing is influenced in a stylistic sense in conjunction with his experience of the Chinese. Almost from the beginning, Twain's writing about the Chinese is permeated with an intentional editorial flavor, not unlike [sic] any of his early western journalism, i.e., never strictly journalistic.”12 In California, Nevada, and Hawai'i, Twain witnessed and wrote about a new post–Civil War system of racial inequality based on the policing of movement, the segregation of public space, settler colonialism, overseas economic interests, and the production of uneven vulnerabilities
to premature death 13 years before he began publishing novels set in the antebellum South. Twain’s writings about the Chinese thus provide a basis for reading his entire corpus in the contexts of comparative racialization and comparative colonialism.

Twain’s most well known novels thematize the relationship between the industrial, post-Reconstruction era and race relations in the antebellum South. Even A Connecticut Yankee, which ostensibly takes place in medieval Europe, is structured around the contrast between its Yankee protagonist and an honor-based, feudal, and serf-holding society that would have resonated with contemporaneous representations of the South. Thus, Twain’s fiction insistently returned to the social, demographic, and cultural transformations wrought by Emancipation, industrial capitalism, and immigration on an unprecedented scale. Although his commentaries on Chinese populations in San Francisco and western mining towns may appear far removed from the settings and black-white motifs of novels like The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn and Pudd’nhead Wilson, they initiated a career-long engagement with Chinese immigrants and U.S. transpacific relations that influenced Twain’s depictions of African Americans and other racialized subjects.

While scholars have long noted Twain’s numerous writings about Chinese immigrants, Asian laborers in Hawai‘i, the Boxer Rebellion, and the U.S.-Philippine War, this archive has been marginalized within his body of work. Sitting in Darkness is the first extensive study of Twain’s representations of Asians. Although the Chinese writer Lao She noted the significance of “Mark Twain’s reprimand of the imperialist aggressive powers and sympathy for the anticolonialist Asian and African people” in his 1960 speech “Mark Twain: Exposer of the ‘Dollar Empire,’” U.S. critics have only recently begun to integrate Twain’s insights concerning Asiatic racialization with his writings about slavery and Reconstruction. 14 Margaret Duckett presents an overview of Twain’s treatments of Chinese immigrants in Mark Twain and Bret Harte (1964) but attributes Twain’s increasingly sympathetic attitudes toward the Chinese primarily to his wish to achieve something like “the current popularity of Bret Harte” by emulating Harte’s relatively complex representations of Chinese characters. 15 In “Mark Twain, ‘The Treaty with China,’ and the Chinese Connection,” Martin Zehr draws an implicit analogy between Twain’s Chinese and African American
characters. “In both instances,” he argues, “Twain’s transformation is a product of a developing empathy that is, in turn, a product of his often-demonstrated ability to successfully adopt the perspective of the other in his writings.” Shelley Fisher Fishkin draws this analogy more explicitly in her lucid discussion of Twain’s satirical sketches about anti-Chinese laws and customs, “What Have the Police Been Doing?” (1866) and “Disgraceful Persecution of a Boy” (1870): “When Twain took up the subject of racism in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, the time, the place, and the race would be different. But the central question would be the same: How can a society that debases human lives on a mass scale consider itself civilized?” While these arguments help us understand Twain’s stance toward public opinion and his sympathetic engagement with the humanity of Chinese immigrants, their reliance on empathy and analogy downplays the historical specificity of the “Chinese Question.” Why were Chinese characters and stereotypes so popular in the decades following the Civil War? What historical conditions support analogies between African American and Chinese subjects—and what conditions are obscured by such analogies?

In a critical assessment of “the Afro-Asian analogy,” Colleen Lye details “the limitations placed on Asian American politics when Asian racialization is attributed to a white supremacy that is by temporal and conceptual priority antiblack.” If framing Twain’s Chinese plots as analogues of his narratives about slavery highlights his critiques of racial prejudice and his capacity to empathize with racial “others,” it also risks falling into an ahistorical framework of formal equivalence in which “the Chinese [in the western states] were placed in the ‘mental compartment which in the East had been reserved for blacks.’” Twain’s texts about the Chinese were not just practice runs for his later anti-slavery novels or early exercises in interracial empathy: instead, they rehearsed and often satirized a range of discourses about the Chinese. Some of these discourses did take the form of analogy: for example, the California Supreme Court prohibited Chinese testimony in *People v. Hall* by reasoning that the state’s ban on “black” testimony was intended to refer to anyone who was not “white.” However, even analogically imposed laws could have divergent effects: the ban on testimony had a particularly devastating effect for the Chinese in California because they were already subject to a “foreign miners’ tax” that would make
them vulnerable to being robbed and displaced by white men against whom they could not testify. The most influential racial analogy of the time was the notion that Chinese migrant laborers were “coolies” serving under terms of indenture analogous to antebellum slavery. By using the term “coolie” to analogize Chinese workers with slaves, anti-Chinese agitators differentiated Chinese laborers from free black and white workers. Racial analogies could produce either convergent or divergent effects when they colluded with preexisting conditions. Twain’s narratives dramatize the historical conditions that ground specific instances of interracial comparison, as well as their convergent or divergent consequences. Rather than focus on the “nonwhite, African-like (or Africanist) presence” that Morrison taught us to interrogate, Sitting in Darkness focuses on Twain’s interventions in a system of differential racialization that functions at regional, national, and transnational scales. Drawing on the considerable scholarship exploring how U.S. literary whiteness is haunted by blackness, I consider how black and Asiatic figures inflect and haunt one another throughout Twain’s corpus.

By focusing on popular and legal responses to Asian immigrant laborers, Sitting in Darkness attempts to produce historically nuanced accounts showing how Twain’s writings function not only as anachronistic satires of antebellum slaveholding society but also as critical anatomies of his own era’s racial politics. For, as Lisa Lowe and Moon-Ho Jung have shown, Chinese immigrants represented an emergent form of racialized labor that unsettled existing notions of freedom and slavery. In a stunning reading of the 1807 British parliamentary debates concerning the introduction of coolies to the West Indies at the moment of emancipation, Lowe writes, “The Chinese coolie appears in colonial and parliamentary papers as a figure for this world division of labor, a new racial mode of managing and dividing laboring groups through the liberal promise of freedom that would commence with the end of slavery.” In his historical account of how the figure of the “coolie” intersected with discourses of slavery after Emancipation, Jung argues that “the construction of coolies formed a crucial ingredient in redefining blackness and whiteness—and Americanness—when equality under the law (Reconstruction) and wage labor (industrialization) seemed to erode their meanings.” Far from being direct analogues for antebellum
African slaves, representations of the Chinese had specifically modern associations: Lye observes that “the Asiatic figures of early-twentieth-century American literature (despot, coolie, mask) referred not to persons but to a host of modernity’s dehumanizing effects (laboring conditions, group entities, corporations).” Jung notes that the “coolie” was ambiguously “identified with the past (slavery) and increasingly with the future (industrial capitalism and free trade).” Lowe associates the “coolie” with “a modern racial governmentality in which a political hierarchy ranging from ‘free’ to ‘unfree’ was deployed in the management of the diverse labors of colonized peoples.” California in the postbellum decades was a vast experiment in the “modern racial governmentality” described by Lowe: a young settler-colonial state with an extractive economy whose laws attempted to racialize and control—through a carefully calibrated array of racial analogies and differentiations—a population that included displaced Native Americans, Mexican Californios who were naturalized by the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, legal and “illegal” Chinese migrants, black and white immigrants from the Eastern Seaboard, and immigrants from all over the world.

Moving beyond the model of racial analogy, recent monographs by Helen Jun and Julia Lee have examined the long history of intersections between African American and Asian American cultural production, mapping “the fertile but uneven terrain from which African American and Asian American interracial representations emerged.” Their analyses unearth striking patterns of interracial tension: for example, Jun argues that the nineteenth-century African American press deployed a discourse of “black Orientalism” that highlighted Chinese differences in order to argue for the relative assimilability of African Americans. While scholars have analyzed the significance of “AfroAsian encounters” amid the interracial tensions and varied race legislation of the late nineteenth century, we need a better understanding of how this dynamic field of cross-racial analogies and tensions played out in literary form. Perhaps because there were relatively few publishing outlets for Asian American, Mexican American, and Native American authors, literary scholars working on comparative racialization have tended to focus on treatments of interracial encounter by ethnic authors writing after 1900. But since much of the legal and discursive groundwork of comparative racialization was established during struggles over
Reconstruction, Chinese Exclusion, and overseas imperialism, literary treatments of race during the decades between the Civil War and the U.S.-Philippine War—even texts that appear to feature only one racialized group or character—were all forged in the context of comparative racial thinking.

If the ongoing yet shifting dynamics of comparative racialization provide a historical context for this book, they also inform its methodology. While literary scholars including Jun and Lee have produced insightful and groundbreaking research by comparing texts produced by authors associated with different racial groups, this book focuses on the mechanisms of comparative racialization—the legal, spatial, and discursive techniques that were historically brought to bear—either analogically or differentially—on different racial groups. Twain's formal engagements with these mechanisms of racialization become more evident when we attend not only to explicit cross-racial connections but to the broader contexts of comparative racialization as well. Assuming that racialization was always implicitly (if not explicitly) comparative, I attend not only to the Africanist or Asiatic presence in literary narratives but also to the ghostly African American presence haunting Twain's accounts of Chinese immigrants and Filipino freedom fighters and to the Asian presences that haunt his treatments of African Americans.

Twain's race narratives bring literary techniques to bear on racial discourses that insistently compared and contrasted African American and Chinese immigrant populations. Whereas critics have shown how the formal complexities of Twain's works—such as dialect, irony, caricature, historical anachronism, courtroom farce, and incongruous endings—critique racist attitudes toward specific groups (chiefly African Americans), I argue that Twain's writings track the racial logic of his era by dramatizing comparisons and contrasts between racialized groups. The formal peculiarities of Twain's narratives—from the abrupt deus ex machina ending of *Ah Sin* to the “evasion” of *Huckleberry Finn* to the massacre of *Connecticut Yankee* to the self-conscious splitting of *Pudd'nhead Wilson* and *Those Extraordinary Twins*—reflect multiple, intersecting histories of migration, U.S. imperialism, and racial formation. Even when focusing on only one racialized character—Ah Sin, Injun Joe, or Jim—Twain's texts implicitly draw on and respond
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To understand how Twain’s treatments of racialized characters interrogate and sometimes move beyond the logic of racial analogy, *Sitting in Darkness* situates his writings in specific contexts and public debates—such as laws regulating testimony, vagrancy codes, discussions of corporate personhood, and debates concerning overseas empire—each of which had particular resonances with both transpacific migrations in the U.S. West and the racial politics of the South.

II. “Coolies for California”: Race, Labor, and Empire

This study’s emphasis on comparative racialization complicates understandings of Twain as either a western writer or a southern writer by focusing on connections between his novels about southern slavery and his earlier formative writings about the U.S. West and the Pacific—a transnational region that encompassed frontier mining settlements, San Francisco’s police courts, Hawaiian sugar plantations, and eventually the sites of imperial battles and massacres in the Philippines. As Amy Kaplan and Stephen Sumida have pointed out, in many ways Twain’s early career progressed eastward, gaining significant momentum from his dispatches from Hawai‘i and his popular lectures on “Our Fellow Savages of The Sandwich Islands,” as well as western pieces such as “Jim Smiley and His Jumping Frog” (1865) and *Roughing It* (1872). Building on these accounts, I argue that Twain’s experiences in the U.S. West and the Pacific—a transnational region that encompassed Nevada’s mining settlements, San Francisco’s police courts, Hawaiian sugar plantations, and eventually the sites of imperial battles and massacres in the Philippines—played a formative role in his writing.

In a September 26, 1866, travel dispatch published in the *Sacramento Daily Union*, Twain presents an uncharacteristically celebratory assessment of the extraordinary productivity of Hawai‘i’s sugar plantations. Writing just a year after the Civil War, as business leaders throughout the nation were concerned with how to source cheap labor and commodities in the wake of Emancipation, Twain advocates Chinese “Coolies” as a promising and inexhaustible source of plantation labor. After identifying Kanaka plantation workers with the past (“day by day the Kanaka race is passing away”), Twain turns to Chinese
contract laborers as the key not only to Hawai‘i’s productivity, but also to California’s future prominence in the global economy. In a section entitled “Coolies for California,” he predicts that

You will have Coolie labor in California some day. It is already forcing its superior claims upon the attention of your great mining, manufacturing and public improvement corporations. You will not always go on paying $80 and $100 a month for labor which you can hire for $5. The sooner California adopts Coolie labor the better it will be for her. It cheapens no labor of men’s hands save the hardest and most exhausting drudgery—drudgery which neither intelligence nor education are required to fit a man for—drudgery which all white men abhor and are glad to escape from.

Although he frequently represents other racial groups as premodern and indolent, Twain introduces the “Coolie” as the “secret” to modernizing the state of California: “Give this labor to California for a few years and she would have fifty mines opened where she has one now—a dozen factories in operation where there is one now—a thousand tons of farm produce raised where there are a hundred now—leagues of railroad where she has miles to-day, and a population commensurate with her high and advancing prosperity.” After noting how several western corporations have already profited from Chinese laborers (the Pacific Railroad Company, for example, “pronounce it the cheapest, the best, and most quiet, peaceable and faithful labor they have tried”), Twain turns to the topic of transpacific commerce and its promise of U.S. economic supremacy:

We have found the true Northwest Passage—we have found the true and only direct route to the bursting coffers of “Ormus and of Ind”—to the enchanted land whose mere drippings, in the ages that are gone, enriched and aggrandized ancient Venice, first, then Portugal, Holland, and in our own time, England—and each in succession they longed and sought for the fountain head of this vast Oriental wealth, and sought in vain. The path was hidden to them, but we have found it over the waves of the Pacific, and American enterprise will penetrate to the heart and center of its hoarded treasures, its imperial affluence. The gateway of
this path is the Golden Gate of San Francisco; its depot, its distributing house, is California—her customers are the nations of the earth; her transportation wagons will be the freight cars of the Pacific Railroad, and they will take up these Indian treasures at San Francisco and flash them across the continent and the vessels of the Pacific Mail Steamship Company will deliver them in Europe fifteen days sooner than Europe could convey them thither by any route of her own she could devise.36

Although the notion that the Chinese were “quiet” and “peaceable” laborers turned out to be misguided (in fact, Chinese workers protested inequitable laws and struck for better working conditions), Twain’s dispatch from Hawai’i about California’s Pacific future prophetically highlighted both the pivotal role of racialized labor in the state’s economy and California’s pivotal role in the nation’s economic and imperial expansion.

For Twain, access to the Pacific Ocean and to Chinese immigrants promised to make California the center of the future global economy. California, he writes, “is about to be appointed to preside over almost the exclusive trade of 450,000,000 people—the almost exclusive trade of the most opulent land on earth.”37 Historians have described California’s role in U.S. overseas expansion in similar terms: William Robbins writes, “From the beginning of the sea-otter trade along the northern Pacific coast at the close of the eighteenth century through the years of the California gold rush, the Pacific slope was tied to oceanic routes for travel, for trade, and to a significant degree—particularly in the case of San Francisco—for sources of investment capital. For more than two centuries, then, Pacific and Asian ties have been a geopolitical reality for the Far West. The transnational rail links that began to span North America during the last thirty years of the nineteenth century firmed and further integrated eastern ties to an area that could truly be seen as an increasingly international web of cultures, economies, and regions.”38 Gray Brechin notes that “the founding of California and its leading city were merely way stations on the course of empire in its eternal quest for metals and the energy necessary to acquire yet more of the same.”39 However, Twain’s uncharacteristic use of hyperbolic, romantic language—“the bursting coffers of ‘Ormus and Ind,’” “the land where the fabled Aladdin’s lamp lies buried”—also registers the fantastical
Chinese immigrants played a crucial role in the development of California and the U.S. West. In addition to the more than twelve thousand Chinese workers who took part in constructing the Central Pacific Railroad, Chinese labor contributed to mining, farming, infrastructure, laundries, restaurants, and domestic service throughout the western states. Alexander Saxton notes that, “while Chinese were only one-twelfth of the total population” of California in the 1870s and 1880s, “they comprised a much larger fraction [between one-fifth and one quarter] of the labor force.”41 Particularly after the completion of the railroads, however, white workers perceived Chinese immigrants as unfair labor competition, and the state and federal government imposed a series of restrictions on Chinese immigrants culminating in the 1882 Exclusion Act, which prohibited the immigration of working-class Chinese men.

In the western United States, Chinese immigrants mixed and at times clashed with diverse ethnic groups as state and federal laws produced distinct racial categories. European immigrants consolidated their claims to “whiteness” in opposition not only to African Americans (who were socially and economically subordinated by Jim Crow laws) but also to Chinese migrants, Native Americans, and Mexican Americans. Even when they are not set in the West, Twain’s writings frequently reflect his early exposure to laws that differentiated and disciplined California’s multiracial labor force by imposing racial restrictions on landowning, employment, testimony, taxation, suffrage, mobility, and public space. Because Twain wrote about a range of racial and ethnic groups, including Irish and Italian immigrants, the Jewish diaspora, Mexican Americans, and Native Americans, this book considers how his writings about the Chinese intersect with his descriptions of Irish immigrants, his ambivalent depiction of Injun Joe, his farce about the Italian Cappello twins, and his critiques of the United States’ treatment of Filipino colonial subjects.42 However, I focus on Chinese immigrants and African Americans because they are the subjects of Twain’s most complex writings on racism and comparative racialization and because his contemporaries persistently drew analogies and contrasts between the “Negro Problem” and the “Yellow Peril” during a period marked by the racial reshufflings of Reconstruction, post-Reconstruction, Chinese
immigration, industrialization, and empire building. As Jung notes, “Within the major social crises of the 1860s—battles over the legal, political, and social standing of slaves, masters, blacks, and whites in the United States—coolies represented a vexing anomaly whose contested status would reconstruct American identities after emancipation.”

A formative location in Twain’s development as a writer, California was the site of explosive struggles over racial inequality and immigration restrictions. On the one hand, southern Democrats imported discriminatory laws inspired by antebellum black codes into California, adapting them to apply to other racial groups. On the other hand, white workers agitated for laws applying specifically to the Chinese, framing them as unassimilable “perpetual foreigners” in contradistinction from African Americans. California was both a settler colony and a pivotal node in overseas empire: “As the wealth of nature poured forth, it turned California into a financial center of global significance and the western pole of the national economy: The West was both colony and empire in the nineteenth century, with its own imperial center in San Francisco and peripheries from the Black Hills to the Aleutians, from Zacatecas to Hawai‘i.” As a setting for comparative racialization and a key staging area for commercial and naval vessels setting out across the Pacific, California exposed Twain to social dynamics that would preoccupy him throughout the course of his career.

III. The Archive

While staying with his friend Steve Gillis’s family in San Francisco, Twain wrote a parody of Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Raven” titled “The Mysterious Chinaman” (1864–1865). “Once upon a morning dreary,” the poem’s speaker hears a knock at his door and assumes it is “Maim” (probably Mary Elizabeth Gillis, to whom the poem was inscribed). When he opens the door, however, the speaker discovers the domestic servant Ah Chung:

Then this leathery wretch beguiling my sad fancy into smiling,
By the grave and stern decorum of the countenance he bore—
“Though thy crest be shorn and shaven, thou,” I said, “art sure no
Raven,
Ghastly, grim, and long-tailed scullion, wand’ring from the kitchen floor—
Tell me what thy lordly will is, ere you leave my chamber door”—
Quoth Ah Chung, “No shabby ’door.” (hic!)  

Probably because of its racist caricature of both the Chinese servant and his faulty command of the English language, Twain’s critics and biographers have seldom commented on this poem. But if the poem disparages the Chinese worker by likening his pidgin speech to the nonsense of Poe’s raven and by likening his queue to a tail, “The Mysterious Chinaman” also allegorizes the repeated entanglements between the United States and Asia that would characterize both his era and his career as a writer. The poem’s compulsive return to Ah Chung and his refrain—modeled on the structure of “The Raven”—belyes the speaker’s dismissive claim that Chung’s answer “little meaning, little relevancy bore.” For beneath its humor and caricature, “The Mysterious Chinaman” is literally about an open door—a site of transracial encounter, foreign communication, and potential invasion. In this Gothic representation of a “Chinaman,” repetition evokes the troubling intimacy of racialized labor: western states were already becoming dependent on Chinese migrant workers, and Chinese domestic laborers were already in American homes. Even in the opening stanzas of Twain’s poem, when his speaker is innocently pondering “many a quaint and curious shirt that me and Steve has wore” and doing his “washing,” he is performing a task frequently associated with Chinese workers. Twain’s poem highlights the unsettled boundaries of race, labor, gender, and nation that would characterize his later engagements with U.S.-Asia relations.

The Chinese played an important role in Twain’s early newspaper writing. When his travel correspondence was serialized in the *Sacramento Daily Union* and the *Daily Alta California* in the 1860s, those newspapers were publishing numerous commentaries on the “Chinese Question.” Twain’s numerous articles about Chinese migrants in the *Virginia City Territorial Enterprise* and the *San Francisco Daily Morning Call* range from descriptions of Chinatown and Chinese buildings to descriptions of arrests and trials involving Chinese residents accused of various crimes. They include humorous representations that highlight the exotic language and appearance of Chinese residents, sensational
accounts that dwell on their supposed immorality and uncivilized habits, and more sympathetic responses to the persecution of unoffending Chinese men. While these ambivalent representations of the Chinese resonate with popular depictions of African Americans as primitive, undisciplined, criminal, or passive, Twain more directly invoked longstanding debates concerning African Americans in the eastern states in other articles with titles such as “Miscegenation” and “Chinese Slaves.” Twain’s early writings sometimes voiced unsympathetic and patronizing attitudes that were common in journalists’ accounts of Chinese immigrants, and these attitudes were reflected in his actions: he later reported that he and his friend Steve Gillis would amuse themselves by throwing beer bottles on the roofs of Chinese men’s “wooden shanties covered with beatenout cans.” An 1869 poem attributed to Twain caricatures the queues of two “distinguished Chinamen” who were reportedly returning to California: “they’ll waggle home, / And carry their tails behind them.”

Although Twain’s early newspaper articles were only sometimes sympathetic to the Chinese, he developed a more critical perspective as he acquired firsthand experience of how the police, courts, and newspaper editors colluded to repress the Chinese. By 1864, Twain was using the Chinese as a foil for satirizing ideas about Western cultural superiority: for example, he attributed the criminal activities of Chinese immigrants—such as the smuggling of prostitutes and an attempt to sabotage a railroad—to Christianity and other “civiliz[ing]” influences. Shortly after the Civil War, Twain’s “Personal Habits of the Siamese Twins” (1869) even used the Chinese conjoined twins, Chang and Eng Bunker, to allegorize the difficulties of national reconciliation—effectively treating Chinese characters as emblems for the U.S. body politic. Twain’s outrage over the San Francisco Call’s racist editing practices led to a turning point in his career. As he recounts in his autobiography, a story about a “Chinaman” led to Twain’s break from the “soulless drudgery” of journalism:

Finally there was an event. One Sunday afternoon I saw some hoodlums chasing and stoning a Chinaman who was heavily laden with the weekly wash of his Christian customers, and I noticed that a policeman was observing this performance with an amused interest—nothing more. He
did not interfere. I wrote up the incident with considerable warmth and holy indignation. Usually I didn’t want to read in the morning what I had written the night before; it had come from a torpid heart. But this item had come from a live one. There was fire in it and I believed it was literature—and so I sought for it in the paper next morning with eagerness. It wasn’t there. . . . The foreman said Mr. Barnes had found it in a galley proof and ordered its extinction. [Barnes] said that the Call . . . gathered its livelihood from the poor and must respect their prejudices or perish.55

As I noted above, Fishkin has suggested that this incident helped precipitate Twain’s shift from local journalism to satirical sketches and fiction with a wider circulation. Twain apparently held a grudge against the offending newspaper, which had suppressed the article because it “could not afford to alienate its Irish readers” for forty years (Twain either resigned or was fired as a result of the incident): “When news photos of the great San Francisco earthquake of 1906 arrived in the East, showing the Call’s building reduced to a skeletal frieze of ruins, Twain exulted, ‘How wonderful are the ways of Providence!’”56

As Hsin-Yun Ou has shown, two men who became Twain’s friends in the 1860s—Anson Burlingame and Reverend Joseph Hopkins Twichell—profoundly influenced his views about the Chinese. Burlingame, who invited Twain to visit him in Peking after the two met in Hawai‘i in 1866,57 worked to shore up China’s autonomy and equality in its diplomatic negotiations with the United States. Twichell, whose close friendship with Twain began in 1868, worked tirelessly to support the rights of Chinese laborers and students in the United States. In the years following his acquaintance with Burlingame and Twichell, Twain wrote a number of critical sketches and stories focusing on U.S. relations with China. “The Treaty with China: Its Provisions Explained” (1868), published in the New York Tribune, praises the Burlingame Treaty for placing diplomatic relations on an equal footing by guaranteeing equality and reciprocity in international relations, diminishing foreign traders’ extraterritorial privileges, relinquishing “practices of unnecessary dictation and intervention by one nation in the affairs or domestic administration of another,”58 and granting rights (such as rights to testify in court, to access public schools, and to apply for naturalization) to Chinese immigrants. No longer constrained by the anti-Chinese sentiment
of newspaper readers in California and Nevada, Twain expands upon a point he had made in passing in an 1866 article, “What Have the Police Been Doing?”

In San Francisco, a large part of the most interesting local news in the daily papers consists of gorgeous compliments to the “able and efficient” Officer This and That for arresting Ah Foo, or Ching Wang, or Song Hi for stealing a chicken; but when some white brute breaks an unoffending Chinaman’s head with a brick, the paper does not compliment any officer for arresting the assaulter, for the simple reason that the officer does not make the arrest; the shedding of Chinese blood only makes him laugh. . . . I have seen dogs almost tear helpless Chinamen to pieces in broad daylight in San Francisco, and I have seen hod-carriers who help to make Presidents stand around and enjoy the sport. I have seen troops of boys assault a Chinaman with stones when he was walking quietly along about his business, and send him bruised and bleeding home.

Twain leverages his regional experience as a former San Francisco resident to contextualize the treaty for his New York readers, emphasizing that political rights are essential to the safety and equal treatment of Chinese immigrants. Notably, “The Treaty with China” also departs from Twain’s earlier endorsement of “coolie” labor by recommending measures that would break up “the infamous Coolie trade” by supporting the already considerable “voluntary’ emigration of Chinamen to California.”

Among the miscellaneous and frequently humorous “Memoranda” that Twain contributed to the Galaxy Magazine (in which Walt Whitman had recently published his cosmopolitan essay on democracy and aesthetics, Democratic Vistas) were five installments about Chinese immigrants: “Disgraceful Persecution of a Boy” (May 1870), “John Chinaman in New York” (September 1870), and three installments of the unfinished story, “Goldsmith’s Friend Abroad Again” (October 1870, November 1870, and January 1871). In Chapter 1, I will consider how “Disgraceful Persecution” and “Goldsmith’s Friend” deploy literary techniques such as irony and first-person narrative to expose the contradictions of racist laws and customs. “John Chinaman” stands out not only as (at least ostensibly) an account of “Chinamen” on the
Eastern Seaboard but also as an incisive treatment of both ethnic stereotypes and comparative racialization. In the piece, a correspondent recounts an encounter with “a Chinaman sitting before [a tea store] acting in the capacity of a sign” and proceeds to meticulously describe the man’s clothing: “His quaint Chinese hat, with peaked roof and ball on top; and his long queue dangling down his back; his short silken blouse, curiously frogged and figured[;] his blue cotton, tight-legged pants tied close around the ankles, and his clumsy, blunt-toed shoes with thick cork soles.” However, when the liberally disposed narrator attempts to encourage the man and asks how he is being paid, the “Chinaman” responds in Irish brogue: “Divil a cint but four dollars a week and find meself; but it’s ais y, barrin’ the bloody furrin clothes that’s so expensive.” “John Chinaman” highlights the fictitious nature of ethnic stereotypes by exposing a “Chinaman” to be a “sign” produced by costume and by representing the Irish man through brogue (“brogue” is etymologically derived from a term for stout shoes, such as the man’s “blunt-toed shoes with thick cork soles”). But it also places the two stereotypes of Chinese costume and Irish brogue in uncomfortable proximity: how do we know that this is an Irish man wearing clothing that looks Chinese, rather than a Chinese man speaking in accents that appear Irish? In the context of Irish Americans’ animosity toward Chinese workers (whom they frequently perceived as unfair labor competition in this period), this short sketch emphasizes the socioeconomic vulnerabilities and cultural stereotypes that the two groups had in common. True Williams’s illustration of “John Chinaman in New York” (Figure I.1) for an early collection of Twain’s sketches highlights the dual and reversible qualities of ethnic “signs” by presenting the title of the piece in reverse, as if seen through a window from inside the tea shop. The hybrid image of an Irish man in Chinese costume emphasizes that ethnic figures such as the “Chinaman” are inherently relational, indexing analogies and tensions between a range of racial and ethnic groups.

Although Twain had written about Virginia City’s Chinatown in ethnographic terms in 1864, he later updated his description of the settlement’s opium-smoking “vagabonds” and exotic foods in Roughing It, praising the Chinese as “quiet, peaceable, tractable, free from drunkenness, and . . . as industrious as the day is long.” While Roughing It’s assessment of the Chinese as a “tractable” and “industrious” race may
Figure 1.1: True Williams, “John Chinaman in New York,” in Mark Twain’s Sketches, New and Old (Hartford, Conn.: American Publishing Co., 1875), 231. Courtesy of the Mark Twain Project, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.
appear less hostile than Twain’s earlier accounts of their criminal activities, the equation of Chinese immigrants with industriousness also drew on popular stereotypes of the Chinese as a race of mindless laborers lacking in individuality: as Lye points out, “The coolie signifies . . . the prospect of [the body’s] mechanical abstraction” under modern monopoly capitalism.66 Twain’s enthusiasm about coolie labor in his correspondence from Hawai‘i and his later comments on Indian “coo-lie” laborers in Mauritius in *Following the Equator* (1897)67 reinforce this view of the Asiatic migrant as mechanized laborer.

However, Twain’s increased exposure to the Chinese in the U.S. West led to more nuanced treatments of Chinese racialization: with the exception of a passing reference in *Roughing It*,68 he would never again employ the term “coolie” to refer to involuntary Chinese laborers in the United States. Moreover, Twain was involved with numerous projects that critiqued or presented alternatives to figurations of the “coolie”: *Ah Sin* (1877)—which I discuss in Chapter 1—complicates the notion of Chinese docility by featuring a Chinese hero who strategically performs a tractable, inoffensive, and mindless persona in order to protect himself and his white friends. Twain’s writings about conjoined twins—which I examine in Chapter 3—explore the contradictions between liberal individualism and new collective bodies such as corporations and impersonal laborers that were increasingly associated with Gilded Age capitalism and Chinese immigration. Chapter 4 considers Twain’s relationships with two public figures—Yung Wing and Wong Chin Foo—who embodied a different form of Chinese modernity: not the “coolie” but the cosmopolitan intellectual working to strengthen China against foreign incursions. Twain’s suggestion, in “Concerning the Jews” (1898), that the history of anti-Semitism has “the business aspect of a Chinese cheap-labor crusade” not only indicates parallels between the treatment of these ethnic groups but also avows that the racialization of Chinese and Jewish diasporas was rooted in anxieties about economic competition and falling wages.69 “The Fable of the Yellow Terror” (1904–1905)70—a dystopian sketch about the threat of four hundred million Chinese subjects developing mastery of modern science and military technology—also invokes the industriousness of the Chinese, but only in the service of a broader critique of empire: in the fable, the Bees learned to use their stings and expand their sway from
the Butterflies, when the latter sent missionaries, traders, and soldiers into the Bees’ territory to force open their markets.

Twain’s later writings about Asia turn from Chinese immigrants to the United States and Europe’s imperialist interventions in China and the Philippines. After the United States decided to annex the Philippines and Guam in the wake of the War of 1898, Twain joined the New York Anti-Imperialist League and, according to Jim Zwick, became “the most prominent opponent of the Philippine-American War.” In “To the Person Sitting in Darkness” (1901), along with a number of shorter pieces collected by Zwick in *Mark Twain’s Weapons of Satire: Anti-imperialist Writings on the Philippine-American War*, Twain focuses on the ethical implications of annexing the Philippines and opening China to trade and missionaries against the will of their inhabitants, as well as the war atrocities committed to ensure control over these populations. However, Twain insistently situated U.S. practices of racial domination in the broader context of comparative imperialism, comparing slavery to India’s caste system, Jim Crow to Spanish colonial rule in the Philippines, the Boxer revolt to the Pawnee war. In “To My Missionary Critics” (1901)—a response to those who published shocked responses to his critique of Reverend William Scott Ament—Twain employs a series of anecdotes to draw analogies between the unfair and indiscriminate indemnities imposed on the Chinese for the Boxer uprising and the practices of Middle-Eastern despots and southern racists (530–531). In “The United States of Lyncherdom” (1901), he makes the modest proposal that we import missionaries in China back into the United States to proselytize against the lynching of black men: “The light from the [lynching] fires flushes into vague outline against the night the spires of five thousand churches. O kind missionary, O compassionate missionary, leave China! come home and convert these Christians!” Even in the sharp, satirical style of his later writings, Twain advocated for the international reciprocity and territorial sovereignty that had been at the heart of the Burlingame Treaty: “The Boxer is a patriot. He loves his country better than he does the countries of other people. I wish him success. The Boxer believes in driving us out of his country, I am a Boxer too, for I believe in driving him out of our country.” Beneath his caricature of nativist rhetoric, Twain uses chiasmus to emphasize an ethos of reciprocity between Americans and “Boxers,” whom he describes
as patriots struggling against foreign interventions and unequal treaties. Twain returns to the Boxer uprising in his unpublished piece, “The Chronicle of the Young Satan,” where Satan cheerfully describes how the Chinese revolt precipitated by Christian missionaries “will be Europe’s chance to rise and swallow China” and how, eventually, “the Turk and the Chinaman” will acquire Western guns “to kill missionaries and converts with.”

One of Twain’s many passing references to the Chinese describes an unexpected scene of reading in the gold-mining town of Bendigo in Australia:

I was taken to the hospital and allowed to see the convalescent Chinaman who had been attacked at midnight in his lonely hut eight weeks before by robbers, and stabbed forty-six times and scalped besides; . . . when I arrived this awful spectacle of piecings and patchings and bandagings was sitting up in his cot reading one of my books. (FE, 243)

Although this passage takes the form of a joke about an admirer who arranged for Twain to witness this unusual spectacle, it also gestures toward transpacific continuities between racial violence in Bendigo and the U.S. West—both settler colonies whose economies were grounded in resource extraction. It is unclear whether this passage’s humorous hyperbole is poking fun at the suffering of the “Chinaman” or the racial violence of those who attacked him; what is clear is that Twain’s host expects him to be pleased by a scenario that aligns his writings with the Chinese man’s convalescence. Despite its improbability, this scene of cross-cultural and cross-racial reading suggests that the critiques of racism, imperialism, and structural violence found in Twain’s books (and it is significant that he does not specify a title) concern the vulnerability of the Chinese diaspora as well as that of other groups. While Twain produced a rich and varied body of writings about the Chinese, I do not believe his engagements with Asia and Chinese immigrants are coextensive with these texts. Instead, the following chapters consider influences and resonances between Twain’s commentaries on the Chinese and texts—such as Tom Sawyer, Huckleberry Finn, A Connecticut Yankee, and Pudd’nhead Wilson—that do not mention China or the Chinese at all. Twain’s comparisons between different racial groups
and instances of colonialism—as well as the historical practices of comparative racialization that characterize his era—extend through all his writings.

In the half century that followed his earliest encounters with the Chinese in California and Hawai‘i, Twain’s perspectives on both race and writing shifted dramatically. After endorsing Chinese “coolies” as a source of cheap labor, Twain moved on to positive depictions of Chinese characters such as Ah Song Hi and Ah Sin, to critical treatments of issues—such as racialized vagrancy and “coolie” discourse—that affected Chinese migrant workers, to direct involvement with reformers’ efforts to modernize China, and finally to strident criticisms of colonialism and cultural imperialism in and beyond Asia. Throughout these shifts in attitude and genre, however, Twain remained focused on material inequalities, which he frequently highlighted through cross-racial analogies and distinctions.

The first half of this book considers how the legal and social contexts of comparative racialization inflect Twain’s narratives by juxtaposing his texts with landmark legal cases concerning testimony, vagrancy, and corporate personhood. Chapter 1, “A Witness More Powerful than Himself: Race, Testimony, and Twain’s Courtroom Farces,” examines a range of responses to the *People v. Hall* case, which extended (through the logic of racial analogy) a ban on African American and Native American testimony against whites to the Chinese. After surveying critical responses to the decision by Chinese immigrants and their supporters, I conduct a comparative reading of the motif of testimony—including blocked or circuitous testimony—in Twain’s writings about Chinese and African American court cases. Twain’s courtroom farces in “Goldsmith’s Friend,” *Ah Sin*, and *Pudd’nhead Wilson* dramatize the consequences of laws that deny the ethical and political responsibilities of witnessing to racialized populations. Chapter 2, “Vagrancy and Comparative Racialization in *Huckleberry Finn* and “Three Vagabonds of Trinidad,” situates *Huck Finn* among a range of texts in which Twain and Bret Harte critiqued the laws, institutions, and historical inequities that produced uneven, racially differentiated access to mobility and public space throughout the U.S. West and South. The disproportionate use of vagrancy laws to criminalize Native American, Mexican, black, and Chinese subjects—many of whom had already been forcibly
displaced by legal or extralegal means—grounds analogies between a range of texts and characters including the Chinese narrator of “Goldsmith’s Friend,” the “vagrant” Injun Joe, Pap Finn, Jim and Huck (who respectively experience their downriver voyage as paralyzing and liberatory), and the Chinese, Native American, and canine protagonists of Harte’s little-known rewriting of Huck Finn, “Three Vagabonds of Trinidad.” Chapter 3, “‘Coolies’ and Corporate Personhood in Those Extraordinary Twins,” situates Those Extraordinary Twins in two related contexts: the establishment of corporate personhood (along with Fourteenth Amendment protections for corporations) in Santa Clara County v. Southern Pacific Railroad (1886) and popular representations of Chinese railroad workers as swarming, monstrous “coolie” masses functioning as collective—rather than individuated—agents. These contexts reframe both Twins (in which the conjoined twins are put on trial as a “corporation” for kicking Tom) and Pudd’nhead Wilson by connecting their antebellum settings with the industrial-era labor struggles in which U.S. notions of whiteness and racial difference were forged.

This book’s later chapters develop comparative close readings across national boundaries in order to emphasize how Twain’s writings connect the struggles of different nations, races, and colonized populations. Chapter 4, “A Connecticut Yankee in the Court of Wu Chih Tien: Imperial Romance and Chinese Modernization,” reads A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court as both a satire of specific instances of Western imperialism (including in China) and a critical engagement with the emergent genre of historical romance. I juxtapose A Connecticut Yankee with two instances of Chinese modernization—Yung Wing’s Chinese Educational Mission and Wong Chin Foo’s novel Wu Chih Tien (which Twain read and praised). Yung’s attempt to educate Chinese boys in English and Western science is a suggestive precursor to Hank Morgan’s project of educating medieval boys into modern Republican subjects. Wong’s novel joins Twain in revising the conventions of historical romance, but Wong does so by presenting a democratic, modernizing, and masculine Chinese protagonist who allegorizes the anti-Manchu and anti-imperialist movement in China. Chapter 5, “Body Counts and Comparative Anti-imperialism,” considers the development of Twain’s anti-imperialist writings from his reflections on European colonialism in Following the Equator to his bitter criticisms of the
U.S.-Philippine War and the Western response to the Boxer uprising. Twain turns to abstract representational strategies—more appropriate to the genres of the nonfiction sketch, journalistic parody, fable, and collage than to novelistic fiction—that draw connections between different anti-imperial movements (Boer nationalists, Filipino revolutionaries, Chinese peasants, South Asian laborers, and blacks in the U.S. South) by highlighting how modern practices of state racism delineate, count, and manage racialized populations.

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By reading Twain’s writings in the context of legal battles over Chinese Exclusion, the displacement of Chinese settlers from the countryside to urban “Chinatowns,” and the writings of early Chinese migrants, Sitting in Darkness shows how his picaresque plots, historical novels, courtroom farces, journalistic parodies, and anti-imperialist sketches critically engaged particular modes of comparative racialization at the level of literary form. A comparative approach has the benefit of shifting the focus of conversation from Twain’s attitudes about racial stereotypes to how his works register and critique the structural inequalities that ground racial comparisons: who can testify in court, who can be employed by the state, who can vote or run for office, who can apply for citizenship, and who can move or stay still in public space. By examining how Twain deploys such issues of material inequality to ground and interrogate analogies between different racialized and colonized groups, I hope to extend our understanding of how his works mobilize literary form to expose and address not only racial prejudice but also structural modes of racism that function even in the absence of prejudicial intentions.