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Gender, Race, and the Silenced Asian Other in Olivia Vieweg's *Huck Finn: Die Graphic Novel*

Abstract: Olivia Vieweg's 2013 *Huck Finn: Die Graphic Novel* sets itself apart from other adaptations of Mark Twain's classic text by replacing the Black enslaved person Jim with Jin, a young Asian female sex worker. A reconceptualization involving a trafficked minoritized female character raises questions not only about authorial and narrative choices in rendering cultural Otherness and gendered oppression, but also about the efficacy of the graphic novel's social message, especially given the marginalized character's lack of authentic self-representation. With a focus on the prominence of Asian stereotypes that paradoxically render Jin more invisible, this study investigates the graphic novel's appraisal of racial and sexual patterns as concerns the historically present yet voiceless Asian woman in German culture.

Olivia Vieweg's *Huck Finn: Die Graphic Novel* (2013) reimagines Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884) through a striking narrative shift: it replaces Jim, the enslaved Black man, with Jin, a young Asian female sex worker. This adaptation raises critical questions about representation, marginalization, and the portrayal of cultural Otherness, particularly in the context of German society, where Asian women have been historically marginalized. While Twain's novel has long been typecast as a middle and high school schoolbook in the United States and other English-speaking countries, its layered appeal extends beyond young readers. Toni Morrison has described a text "that had given so much pleasure to young readers [yet] was also complicated territory for sophisticated scholars" (2). Vieweg's adaptation capitalizes on this stratification, blending a manga-influenced aesthetic with mature themes such as parental neglect, child abuse, and human trafficking. By doing so, her graphic novel challenges conventional perceptions of both Twain's work and commonly perceived boundaries of the graphic novel medium itself. *Huck Finn* thus invites critical engagement with issues of race, gender, and agency in contemporary comics storytelling.

In the decade since *Huck Finn*'s publication, monumental global cultural shifts, such as the #MeToo movement and anti-racist protests of 2020, have reinvigorated the discussion of social justice themes embedded in Twain's original novel. These powerful civic movements have inspired new topical retellings that seek to redress not only the unjust suppression of Jim's voice, but also the era-

https://doi.org/10.1515/9783112218631-008

sure, or at least the devaluing, of the female perspective (see Everett; Walker and Kwame Anderson; and Time). A social atmosphere of vigorous, culturally sensitive dialogues draws renewed critical attention to Vieweg's now more than ten-year-old adaptation, whose content not only revives the "decades-long debate about racial representation" central to Twain criticism (Valkeakari 29) but also substantiates Morrison's characterization of youthful amusement inhabiting complicated adult territory. On the surface, Vieweg's unruly teenage Huck shares the slangy linguistic features and a reckless sense of adventure with his 140-year-old predecessor. On an analytical level, the motivation for this reimagined Huck's rebellious actions and the arc of his development similarly beg to be dissected, as Twain scholars have done for decades. From scrutinizing the protagonist's moral character and his capacity for sympathy (Clarke 492), to recognizing Huck's fundamental innocence in a corrupt world (Ciocia 197), time-traversing trends in Twain scholarship converge in the plea to take "seriously the voice of a child, a teenager" (Levy 57). *Huck Finn* set in 2013 in Halle an der Saale, increases the magnitude of matters of morality, lost innocence, and the cherished youth voice with the creation of Jin. Its doubling to two children's voices, as well as the gender recasting of the original enslaved major character, would seem to certify *Huck Finn* as a rebellious and socially transformative text. A reconceptualization involving a trafficked minoritized female character, however, necessarily raises questions about authorial and narrative choices in rendering cultural Otherness and gendered oppression, especially given the marginalized character's lack of self-representation.

Vieweg's ostensibly daring narrative move problematically exhibits two devices that German translators of Twain's text have frequently deployed: difference and deficit. Although the more than 30 translations into German have consistently resisted branding Jim as cognitively and linguistically deficient, "this does not mean that those difference-generating strategies cannot carry stigma" (Berthele 608). In other words, adapters' and translators' efforts to deemphasize shortcomings amid original textual markers of difference and deficit do not render these adaptations and translations immune to critical appraisal. The current analysis approaches *Huck Finn* with these distinctions in mind, where "difference" refers to Asian cultural and female gender markers outside the mainstream identity that Huck's narrative prominence generates; and "deficit" indicates Jin's coping with trauma in the shadow of Huck's development or even completely out of sight. Regarding the two interlocking visual and textual levels aids in determining to what degree the Othered Jin approaches Huck's privilege of agency and movement. First, Jin's illustrated story of difference, notably not without visual reinforcement of Asian stereotypes, suggests her affixed positioning as an exoticized female character on the outside of white German dominant culture and in the

margins of a traditionally "fiercely masculine" story (Kidd 53). Second, *Huck Finn*'s narrative choices emphasize Jin's tangential relationship to the central plot that prioritizes Huck's privileged position and agency to be active, rebellious, and most importantly seen. With a focus on the visible prominence of Asian stereotypes that paradoxically render Jin more invisible, examining a select series of splash pages reveals ways that *Huck Finn* imparts patterns of racial and sexual subordination as concerns the historically present yet invisibilized Asian woman in German culture.

Critical attention to Othering is not new in the context of evaluating and examining *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* adaptations and translations, which by virtue of the source material also treat themes of marginalization and representation. The nearly 25 *Huck Finn* graphic novel versions,[1] published in a variety of Asian and European languages, appear, much unlike Vieweg's, more as illustrated versions than innovative adaptations because of their close adherence to Twain's original plot. Like Vieweg's, however, this international survey of *Huck Finn* graphic novels appears uniformly geared toward youth audiences, as evidenced by cover art, choice of publisher, and marketing techniques. Beyond these general and perhaps predictable observations, many of the illustrated versions of *Huck Finn* adaptations also elicit questions about graphic representations of race by authors of privilege. Comics scholars have suggested various approaches to reading stereotypical features and coloration that often engender one-dimensional characterizations. For example, Michael D. Harris's discussion of trends in Black American comics offers a useful framework for evaluating artists' traditionally stereotypical portrayals, which ultimately rely "on the visual in the sense that the visible body must be used by those in power to represent non-visual realities that differentiate insiders from outsiders" (Harris 2). Jim is an enslaved person in the late 1800s American Deep South; and a graphic depiction that physically distinguishes him from white characters reflects this disparity. Although this quality of mirroring reality is true, artistic decisions concerning this "visible body" can result in, as Qiana Whitted explains in her evaluation of Blackness in comics, an "excluded presence to be seen, not to see" (83). Additionally, and of particular relevance to *Huck Finn* adaptations, specific time periods also generate stereotyped images, as Jeet Heer contextualizes in his afterword to *Black Comics: Politics of Race and Representation*: "the affinity of comics for caricatures meant that the early comic strips took the existing racism of society and gave it vicious and viru-

1 These include manga versions such as Crystal S. Chan, Kuma Chan, and Jeannie Lee's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (2017), Spanish-language versions such as Thomas M. Rattliff, Penko Gelev, Maria Patricia Esguerra's *Las aventuras de Huckleberry Finn* (2016), as well as Hindi (Roland Mann and Naresh Kumar, 2010) and Tamil versions (Pai, 1988)

lent life" (Heer 253). Thus, adaptations that remain true to Twain's original story necessarily mirror his perception and rendering of societal realities of slavery and discrimination and, by association, link to decades-old criticism of Twain's flawed interpretation of racial conditions (Valkeakari 29–31). Vieweg's narrative transplantation to present-day Eastern Germany untethers her version from the original historical context and allows *Huck Finn* to construct its own systems and patterns for examination and reflection of Twain's themes. However, the textual and temporal distancing does not shield Vieweg's graphic novel from prevalent Twain criticisms of an attempted yet incomplete assessment of racism and participation in negative racial stereotyping.

Despite similarities to Twain's original and to other existing graphic adaptations, Vieweg's text departs from the original by presenting a pared-down version with far fewer characters and less developed ancillary plot lines than the original supplies. This narrative reduction allows the societal patterns that Vieweg's text highlights and references, and that Jin navigates, to emerge that much more clearly. The main players are Huck, Jin, Maik (Jin's trafficker), the widow who provides for Huck, Huck's father, and members of two families involved in a decades-old feud. More detailed plot elements accompany the closer analysis below, but, in general, the story follows a simple trajectory. Corresponding to Twain's characterization, Huck's burning sense of adventure drives him to leave the widow's home, to briefly take up residence with his abusive, alcoholic father, and then to devise and carry out a plan to fake his own death. With the fortuitous find of a raft, he sets out on his own until he is reunited on a stormy night with Jin, who has managed to escape her trafficker, Maik. After a head-on accident with a cruise ship completely decimates the raft, the two wash ashore and are taken in by one of the feuding families. After sexist and discriminatory treatment by the family's patriarch, Jin sets out on her own while Huck's morbid fascination with the psychopathic Benny compels him to stay behind. Benny's concerning criminal behavior eventually proves even too much for Huck's sensibilities and shortly thereafter, he and Jin are together again on the river. The story ends with Jin's ostensible liberation, which Huck, as the dominant yet decidedly still immature teen, insensitively encourages her to embrace: "Mann, du bist frei! Hallo? Freu dich mal!" (*Huck Finn* 137). On the latter part of her journey, she exhibited signs of independence and maturity; but this final impression of Jin's being "freed" by the consummate symbol of "boy culture" illustrates notions of racial and gender markers existing outside of the mainstream (difference). These designations ultimately lead her to experience personal growth and trauma recovery somewhere off the printed page (deficit).

In the entire field of *Huck Finn* adaptations, Vieweg is the first to my knowledge to install a female character into the classic role of Jim. In an interview, the

author explains her conceptualization and shares that it was immediately clear that she would develop "die Asiatin Jin" to replace the enslaved person Jim (MDR 2.32–2.44). The pithy comment about Jin's origin story evokes questions about representation, the influence of historically and culturally ensconced social systems, and even the author's social justice-oriented motivations. On the one hand, viewing the graphic novel through these critical lenses draws parallels to the branch of Twain criticism that views the Huck-Jim relationship as reflecting a "muddled terrain of good intentions, confusion, wavering, and inconsistency" influenced by the author's worldview (Valkeakari 29). On the other hand, attempting to diagnose implied ethical relationships of authors to their work often lacks pertinence or productiveness, as Leonard Rifas contends:

> To move past moralizing questions about a cartoonist's intentions or individual responsibility (which ordinarily remain both unanswerable and irrelevant to practical antiracist work), it helps to refocus on the larger patterns of cooperation that allow these picture-stories to come into existence and be circulated. (29)

General notions about contract theory, and contributions from two of its prominent contemporary voices, can assist in delineating some elements of "larger patterns of cooperation" identified by Rifas. Rudimentary aspects of Robert Mills's seminal work *The Racial Contract* (1997) offer a useful scaffold for understanding entrenched Eurocentric notions of race. Mills examines a firm and accepted system of white domination over non-white people, which results in "an exploitation contract that creates global European economic domination and national white racial privilege" (31). In *The Sexual Contract* (1988), which predated and inspired Mills's work, Carol Pateman historicizes a gendered facet of contract theory that has legitimized subordination of women, "For Hobbes, all women become servants as wives in the natural state and thus are excluded from the original pact that forms civil society" (50). Pertinent to Vieweg's adaptation centralizing a sex worker, marriage and prostitution are key institutions that underpin Pateman's understanding of the servitude and exclusion necessary for the sexual contract. In terms of Vieweg's "picture story," to recall Rifas's terminology above, the visual aspect under closer consideration is the system of splash panels, i.e., full-page panels that individually function as notable breaks in the otherwise linear and continuous narrative strands. Specifically, these panels call attention to the stark contrasts between the journey of maturation the privileged white male Huck undergoes and the exploited and invisible non-white female Jin.

Theorizing the functionality and effect of splash pages or splash panels has a long history in comics studies. Scott McCloud, in his foundational *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* (1994), discusses ways that splashes either slow down or speed up a narrative, in either case signifying an important moment or narrative

shift (102). Charles Hatfield, in *Alternative Comics: An Emerging Literature* (2005), details the power of splash panels as "scene-setting images" that influence how the comic marks the synchronism of its storylines (54). Indeed, the notion of a narrative interruption suspending the rhythmic flow of images and even reducing the "forward momentum of the text" unites much of comics scholarship about splash pages (Postema 33). *Huck Finn*'s splash pages not only operate as significant moments for eliciting readers' emotional responses and interpretations, but also as "resets" or breaks that temporarily task readers with evaluating respective characters' evolution and progress toward maturity and personal growth. These splashes, which according to Duncan et al. "celebrate the prowess and graces of a character," will indicate stark disparities between the two characters in matters of aptitude and gracefulness (110). For Huck's character, the splashes indicate pauses in his developmental journey toward moral maturation, but not major setbacks. For Jin, on the other hand, the elements and composition of the splashes only serve to reinforce her ornamental and passive nature, as well as her inability to match Huck's repeatedly reinforced forward momentum and bold visibility.

In contemporary German culture, Asian women and girls experiencing the opposite of inclusion and visibility find voice in Hami Nguyen's 2023 appeal for an end to anti-Asian racism in Germany. In her *Das Ende der Unsichtbarkeit*, the author uses the terms "unsichtbar" and "ausgeklammert" to describe the lives of those in her community of Vietnamese immigrants in Germany (H. Nguyen 11). These are labels that relate to the aforementioned organizing principles of difference and deficit respectively; the close readings of the splash panel "resets" reaffirm these descriptors for Jin. In the following, I consider six splash pages that occur at pivotal points in the narrative and that, corresponding to elements of comics theory on splash pages, relay complete, self-contained stories. I then briefly contextualize the Asian stereotyping perpetuated in those panels from historical, German-language pop culture, and sociological perspectives. Additionally, I discuss the traditional significance and narrative function of stereotypes and stereotypical images in the field of comics studies, while also interrogating these explanations and considering ideological conflicts between agency and lack of agency that stereotyping in comics could evoke.

In Vieweg's graphic novel, Jin's exclusion and marginalization emerge as early as the first narrative sequence at a time when Huck is also shown struggling with feeling "ausgeklammert." The perceived equality, or even superior maturity of Jin vis-à-vis Huck given her life experiences as a sex worker, proves deceiving when the graphic novel presents two dissimilar stories of inequitable youthful development. *Huck Finn*'s establishing shots reveal a system in which white males, even if juvenile, dominate the scene in the small German city of Halle an der Saale. In Huck's case, however, the conduct of his friends and a veiled discussion

of larger social circumstances that determine family politics deliver the initial impression of his friend group's victimizing and excluding him. For example, Huck cannot be fully accepted into the boys' *Bande* because he lacks biological family members to use as collateral in the case of Huck's disloyalty to the gang (*Huck Finn* 10). Visual cues in a three-quarter page display the dichotomy of Huck's characterization and establish a baseline against which to measure Huck's personal development: excluded, yet also confident, and ultimately assertive.

Appearing in close-up as the main figure in the panel, Huck impresses the reader as a rebellious and undaunted young man. He rolls a cigarette, smokes, and leisurely relaxes next to a case of beer on a rooftop with his friends (*Huck Finn* 8). However, in the context of the requirement to kill family members, the boys' mention of Huck's father noticeably triggers Huck. Motion lines, part of a common comics syntax, suggest quivering, and exaggeratedly wide eyes indicate a deep sense of spiraling fear (*Huck Finn* 10). The boys' remarks about the widow with whom he lives sharpen the focus on this ambivalent nature of Huck's character early in the story. Despite his cocky response "Ach, bei der bleib' ich eh nicht mehr lange," the final panel of the prologue once again indicates this initial display of vulnerability as he processes the gang's family member requirement (*Huck Finn* 10). Although Huck faces hardships and experiences exclusion typical within a peer group, visual cues in the opening sequence nonetheless make it clear that this story is his to tell. Even if it could be argued that Jin's painful backstory renders her more mature than Huck, she often appears one-dimensional and ornamental in the absence of a continuous storyline or backstory, which would imbue her with the consistent and visible agency and confidence of her male counterpart. The last panel in the opening sequence emphasizes the complexities of Huck's character, presenting a zoomed-out view with Huck appearing much smaller against the backdrop, yet self-assured with his long stride away from the group and into his own adventure.

Before we move into the closer reading of Splash Page One, which I have named "The Morning After" for ease of identification, some narrative contextualization of this pivotal moment is necessary. Huck and Jin's initial interaction precedes the first selected splash page, which will establish the stereotypical representation of Jin as subordinate and lacking self-determination in an unjust social system. Before the first splash, or narrative reset, Jin tries to assert herself while Huck's behavior substantiates his (yet-to-be-developed) individual empowerment that he unwittingly, yet automatically, enjoys as a member of the dominant society. Confidence acquired from the opening scenes continues to embolden him as he wanders around the city, contemplating his next move. As Huck impudently urinates on a wall, Jin enters the scene and admonishes him: "das kannst du doch nicht einfach machen," to which he replies in a demeaning and sexist manner:

"Also von einer Schlampe lass ich mir nix sagen" (*Huck Finn* 16). This exchange not only typifies the initial dynamic of their relationship but also spotlights how inherited patterns of dominance filter down into individual relationships, even among teenagers. This lead-up narrative establishes a sharp contrast to the first splash page that will immediately dissolve any trace of assertiveness on Jin's part. Vieweg's clothing choices for Jin have arguably already begun to diminish any indication of self-determination: she is shown in a highly sexualized way wearing only a camisole and underpants. In addition to the wardrobe's visual shorthand that emphasizes her criminalized sexuality, the panel composition reinforces her lack of societal power.

Further visual cues reaffirm Huck and Maik's guaranteed male access to agency. For example, as Huck reacts to Jin's admonishment, the reader sees his full face head on, while hers narrowly occupies the right side of the frame; and only the back of her head, her hair, and a camisole strap are visible as she attempts to assert herself (*Huck Finn* 16). A larger, overarching system of exploitation, one that objectifies and removes self-determination, becomes clear as Maik brutally interrupts any momentary trace of Jin's self-confidence and drags her away by her hair (*Huck Finn* 17). As opposed to *Huck Finn*'s dedication of narrative space to Huck's history of trauma, this is one of the few instances where the graphic novel explicitly portrays Jin's abuse. This deficit of expression reflects a condition that can apply across cultures, where "ethnic and racial others [live] in an economy of narrative scarcity" and where abundant and complex white representation abounds (V.T. Nguyen 203). A parallel scene to the one mentioned above in which Huck strides confidently away from his group of friends features Jin in about the same visual size as Huck in the frame (*Huck Finn* 17). However, her head pulled forward with her hair in Maik's grasp and her body bent at an unnatural angle indicate physical pain and societally enforced submission and visually proclaim the lack of decision-making power over her next destination.

In many ways, Huck's as-yet-ambiguous characterization is consistent with Twain's focus in the original on Huck's process of developing a sense of ethics in the role of "a fundamentally moral and innocent figure in a corrupt world" (Ciocia 197). Also similar to the original, Vieweg's graphic novel depicts Huck's process of moral maturation as complex, in contrast to his marginalized counterpart's one-dimensionality. Although Huck technically belongs to the white majority, he is still a teen who lacks life experience. A careful reading of one particular panel that precedes "The Morning After" conveys Huck's deficit of experience and his underdeveloped maturity at this point. Huck's face appears in full close-up, indicating prominence, but the trafficker's brutality has clearly had a visible negative effect on Huck, as seen by his fearful eyes and a black crest in the background behind him. Fittingly for this reading, McCloud identifies the comics narrative

feature of panel background as a "valuable tool for indicating invisible ideas [that affect] our reading of inner states" (132). As in the original, incident after incident tests Huck's moral character and calls into question expectations and limitations that affect the "inner state" of this adolescent rebel. Interpretations of Twain's original point to the implausibility of Huck's ignorance to the vileness of slavery, "it is hard to believe, given when and where [Twain's Huck] grew up, that he could be unaware that there is an alternative moral perspective, which has it that slavery is immoral" (Clarke 492). Likewise, it would seem just as inconceivable to conclude that Vieweg's Huck has no sense of the impropriety of Jin's exploitation. Any discussion of Huck's maturation in moral matters, whether he immediately succeeds in that moment or not, still strongly suggests that Huck has the luxury of agency, while Jin remains in a stereotypical and ornamental role, still lacking individual empowerment.

We will now turn to the close reading of Splash Page One "The Morning After" (Fig. 1), the "reset" aspect of which causes readers to temporarily retreat from the narrative action to inventory the characters' developmental trajectories and examine the implied social structures that furnish each character with disparate, inequitable experiences. As the encounter in this first splash evidences, Huck's complete freedom of movement and free will sharply contrast Jin's restrictions. Huck, having stayed up all night chasing adventure, encounters Jin returning in the early morning from a "customer's" house. The splash prominently features Jin in the foreground, once again showing the exaggeration and magnification of stereotypes that define her and do not allow for a differentiated reading or understanding of this marginalized person. Bruises frame her eyes, and she hugs her clothing to her chest. Paradoxically, despite the invisibility and hiddenness of her personal character development, implied stereotypes of Asian sex workers and exoticized women occupy a disproportionately prominent space on this single page. Jin's wardrobe and her blank gaze intensify the focus on her portrayal between "thingness and personhood," one derived from a "vast and tenacious history of Oriental female objectification, refracted through the lenses of commodity, sexual fetishism," as Anne Anlin Cheng chronicles in her study about ornamentalism and the "yellow woman" (419). Although Cheng writes generally about Asian femininity in Western contexts, a "vast and tenacious history" can also be regarded in the context of German history.

In this case, former East German economic reality blends with pop culture to establish assumptions of the "Asian woman" that in turn, consciously or subconsciously, influenced the creation of Jin's character. When Berna Gueneli maintains that cinematic and pop media portrayals of Japanese women have resulted in three versions of feminizations, "[a]estheticized artificialization/reification, eroticization, and infantilization," (326) she could just as well be referring to Jin's

Fig. 1: Jin returns home (*Huck Finn* 23).

characterization. In the panel, Jin's gaze is directed beyond the left side of the page. By contrast, the reader clearly sees Huck's wide eyes gazing at her. With actions again marked by ambiguity, graphic cues convey his consternation with a speech bubble, empty except for three dots, floating high in the air above his head. Jin's exposed body and bruised face disclose the trauma of invisibility for Asian women and the related limitations of "linguistic symbols and narrative structures" to describe suffering "rejected by history" that "cannot be seen, known, or explained" (Siyi 59). Consistent with the tradition of denying a non-white character narrative space, this will be the last readers see of Jin for a while.

Depictions of Huck's experience with and boldly depicted audacious renunciation of parental abuse lead up to the second splash page, which I have labeled "The Raft." Exerting his autonomy, Huck leaves the widow's home in search of his father. This carefree period of independence is short-lived, however, as his inebriated father grows violent. Bold and oversized sound words punctuate the brutal sequence and offer an additional sensory layer to represent the fear that Huck experiences, or, as Petersen labels it, "different degrees of sound presence" (587).

After a disturbing occurrence, conveyed by a visually striking panel in which his father hallucinates seeing snakes, Huck wields his self-determination and asserts: "Eins war klar, noch mal würde ich das nicht mitmachen" (*Huck Finn* 31). Although he has been victimized, Vieweg's version of Huck, much like Twain's source character, affords him the power and cunning intellect to devise and carry out a scheme to fake his own death.

As emphasis for the next step in his developmental transition, the next splash page features a broad horizon and a raft floating up to him as he stands on the riverbank (*Huck Finn* 37). Components of this image are consistent with Thierry Groensteen's description of splashes as "favoring wide open spaces and emphasizing decors and atmospheres" (45). The composition of "The Raft" also supports Duncan's observations that, while the splash depicts a "single instant of time," "the larger the panel, the longer the time span depicted in it" (68). This full-page composition invites the reader to see Huck "behind the scenes" of his protracted process of maturation, making significant, if scary, developmental progress. Jin's story and trauma, however, remain out of sight (*Huck Finn* 40–42). The splash features the limited tone coloration – muted browns, oranges, sienna, and sepia – that characterizes the entirety of *Huck Finn*. The splash also accentuates the prominent nature imagery that creates the foundation and acts as a recognizable *leitmotif* for most of the splash panels. Just as the one-page panels perform separate functions for Huck and Jin, the nature aspects serve a different function for each as well. Narrative and visual elements intimate Huck's agency while nature images for Jin underscore her portrayal as a passive ornament. In the splash, readers see Huck from the back, standing on the banks of the river. His eyes are not visible, but the composition nonetheless indicates a straight line from his gaze to the raft, one that highlights his socially affirmed power of boldly renouncing authority. Subsequent scenes where they appear together on the raft make Huck and Jin seem like equals in this developmental journey. Visual and narrative evidence from other moments in the text, however, continues to overwhelmingly support the idea that any attempted development or gesture toward autonomy is only read alongside Huck's actualized development and inside limited and firmly formed social structures, repeatedly negating any gains for Jin.

The analysis of a pair of splash pages, consisting of what I have named "The Fish," and "On the Raft," requires some context. Scenes leading up to these two splash pages underscore the above-mentioned repudiation of progress for Jin. Having returned from his fact-finding mission with Maik, Huck sails away with Jin on the raft, but visual details that emphasize her exclusion, her life in the shadows, and her blending into her environment, and thus into the natural background, prevail over any narrative indications of equal status or ability. As opposed to Huck's development, which should theoretically and ideally peak in

moral growth and heightened self-awareness, Jin's tendency, consistent with trends for Asian youth in Western countries, bends toward a self-awareness "of [her] marginalization and invisibility" and the necessity to develop skills for negotiating place (Mistry and Kiyama 584). Paradoxically, any active awareness is only of her exclusion as she continues to occupy an ornamental function and placement on the perimeter of the narrative action. When Huck takes initiative and an active role in spotting a rowboat containing two of Maik's cronies, Jin, still hidden, blends into the surrounding natural elements behind a tree. She is only able to act as a curious commentator on her counterpart's bold actions with the question: "was treibt er da?!" (*Huck Finn* 63). The page composition and her question inscribe Huck as the agent who has the power to act. Yet, at this point, the ambiguity and thus complexity of his character, manifests itself again.

As readers of Twain's original had over a century before, *Huck Finn*'s readers witness Huck working toward moral maturity. Vieweg's Huck, along with his source character, is involved in the debate about being "uncompromised in their critique of society [and] the extent to which they are ideologically implicated with the status quo" (Ciocia 205). Huck's internal dilemma is clearly expressed when he says: "Vielleicht sollte ich denen Jin einfach ausliefern . . . das könnte mir 'ne Menge Ärger ersparen. Und ich könnte meine eigene Flucht fortsetzen" (*Huck Finn* 59). His subsequent maneuvers verify his role as the active white savior who can display evolving intellectual and strategic skillfulness because he succeeds in sending Maik's men away. Jin, on the other hand, still behind the tree, now appears even smaller with the branches and leaves overwhelming the frame (*Huck Finn* 64). While this scene offers readers a look inside Huck's line of thinking, visual aspects make it clear that Jin's "thinking" is limited to taking on the role of background scenery for Huck's maturation process.

With this contextual information in mind, we can proceed to the analysis of "The Fish" and "On the Raft." Repeated insights into Huck's moral dilemma, and views of Jin as nothing more than a natural ornament, have preceded the splash page pair that once again resets, interrupts, and allows the reader to take inventory of the characters' contrasting developmental tracks. Despite his decision to do the right thing and his success in getting Maik's people to move on, Huck once again considers the morality of his actions and weighs potential gain against the amount of unnecessary trouble Jin has caused him: "Na ja, ich hab beschlosssen . . . dass ich mir keinen Kopf mehr machen werde, was das, Richtige' ist . . . Von nun an werde ich nur noch das tun, was gerade am bequemsten ist. So sieht's aus" (*Huck Finn* 65). "The Fish," another purely nature-oriented splash page, which is bright orange and features a fish catching a fly as its focal point, interrupts Huck's doubts about the right moral decision. Because it is a single panel, lacks transition to other panels, and interrupts a sequence, it can, as McCloud theorizes, "produce a sense of

timelessness" because the "panel offers no clues as to its duration" (102). "On the Raft" appears directly opposite the fish page and beckons the reader to take a textual inventory of Huck and Jin's personal development and respective prominence or invisibility as told through the plot lines outside of this panel (Fig. 2). This time, darker browns and black offset the pale orange and add depth of feeling to the scene, while also supplying a sort of foreboding foreshadowing (*Huck Finn* 67). In a recurring pattern, a birds-eye view of the two characters as small figures side by side on the raft delivers the deceptive message that the two teens have become equals. That might be a valid interpretation if we were to disregard the speech bubbles also present on the splash page. The pair reclines on the raft with identical body language and physical size, but their brief exchange about Jin's supreme trust in Huck underscores the dissimilar social statuses and degrees of autonomy (*Huck Finn* 67). Huck has the authority to promise action and Jin can merely trust in that authoritative promise.

Fig. 2: Huck and Jin on the raft to Hamburg (*Huck Finn* 67).

The visual shock of the next splash under consideration here, titled "The Crash," might call to mind Groensteen's discussion of disruptive "oversized panels," as he calls splash pages, which "break up the rhythm of the layout, creating a small visual surprise" (45). The "surprise" in this case is quite significant rather than "small," however, as a giant cruise ship approaches the tiny raft (*Huck Finn* 70). The graphic novel signifies the urgency of the situation with Vieweg's signature oversized and exaggerated sound words, which as Petersen suggests, "represent sensations at the speed they would be activated in the narrative" (578). Although readers know that Huck and Jin have jointly embarked on the journey and now experience this accident together, Jin is noticeably absent from the page. Instead, readers only see Huck's wide-eyed shocked reaction and a view from behind of his cowering body as the ship threatens his life. Only in the subsequent pages do readers see the pair's mutual reaction to the catastrophe. Jin's re-entry into the scene could suggest progress on her path to identity, which represents the universal "need to seek agency so they can work toward liberation," or "dismantling structures and doctrines which reinforce subordination" (Kim 115). As the two continue on the river with the goal of escaping the local reach of Maik and his cronies and arriving in Hamburg far away from Halle, Jin seems to make strides toward her liberation right alongside Huck. External factors, however, will work to preempt any immediate advancement on that journey, which propels the two of them, but especially Jin, back into established oppressive structures. The ensuing narrative storyline "between the splashes" shows Jin sinking further into those established structures because of overt sexism and stereotyping. The hope would be that the graphic narrative ultimately lifts Jin out of these structures, but that emancipation will elude her.

After Huck and Jin wash ashore, the Schäfers, one of the town's feuding families, rescue them. Huck takes the lead in fabricating the story that has brought them to Hamburg, while Jin fades into the background of skepticism and cautiousness. The prominent Asian stereotypes of sexualization and submissive femininity, as seen by her host's overtones of sexual assault, cause Jin's subsequent literal invisibility, or extended leave of absence from the text's main action. Any opportunity for the graphic novel to assess her gender-related trauma and to allow Jin to complete steps toward resolution disappear along with her. By contrast, readers continue to accompany Huck on his moral journey. For another lengthy section, where the story deepens Huck's characterization and moral development, Jin is essentially written out of the story, once again denied a narrative voice and thus representation in her own story.

The final splash page in the series is "Jin in the Water," which I argue carries the greatest potential for readers to construe and evaluate Jin's involvement, or lack thereof, in her own self-development and autonomy. Jin appears promi-

nently on the page, which suggests that she is still part of the story, but with prescribed limitations (*Huck Finn,* Fig. 3). She appears knee-deep in a body of water, supporting herself with a large stick, and gazing into the distance (*Huck Finn* 103). Before and after this splash interrupts the narrative flow, Huck has actively continued with his adventure. The page composition as well as Jin's placement and posing in it only reinforce her merely decorative function. Jin's rendering as a passive subject corresponds to Cheng's "ornamental personhood of Asiatic femininity" (428). The splash page's portrait-like character, however, evokes a further association with comics syntax. Postema has characterized splash panels, which she labels "single panel pages" as "individual works of art rather than parts of a sequence" (32). Similarly, Duncan also alludes to this role of splashes as pieces of art "[that] operate as pin-ups that show off the artist and talent" (110). Jin as the clear subject amidst nature images adorning this single panel of art relates on a thematic level to art exhibits such as those found in museums memorializing World War II-era comfort women,[2] another historical aspect of female Asian identity that supplements images and perceptions discussed elsewhere in this article. Displaying politically determined and gender-influenced trauma, the exhibits aim to highlight the women's long paths to identity formation (Siyi 56–57). Theoretically, *Huck Finn*'s purpose and impact could reflect that of the museums: that is, the establishment of "equality and human rights through the awareness of history and culture in pursuit of the concepts of justice and peace" (Siyi 58). Through its narrative and visual choices, *Huck Finn* does indeed raise awareness, and could draw attention to human rights, but it does not succeed at constructing even a scant impression of equality.

One conclusion that has emerged from the reading and interpretation of Jin's character thus far is that she stands out because of her perceived foreignness and stereotypical portrayal. Yet, in a contradictory way, she remains largely invisible to the reader for the same reasons. In her personal identity work, H. Nguyen reaches similar conclusions and indirectly comments on the paradoxical invisibility that results from the prominence of Othering and stereotyping. H. Nguyen's firsthand observations about racial power dynamics resemble those that restrain and restrict Jin. Like *Huck Finn*'s female character, German society defines the Asian woman externally, eliminates her from the conversation, and does not empower her. H. Nguyen reports feelings of being "von Außenstehenden und von Nicht-Betroffenen markiert und gelesen," and "nicht selbstverständlich mitgedacht oder mitgemeint," even in the context of the theoretically more inclusive

2 Examples of these museums include the *Women's Active Museum on War and Peace* in Tokyo, Japan, and *The War and Women's Human Rights Museum* in Seoul, Korea.

Fig. 3: Jin alone in the water (*Huck Finn* 103).

label *Person mit Migrationshintergrund* (H. Nguyen 19, 21). Although *Huck Finn* does highlight moments where Jin appears to have the upper hand, or at least a capable helping hand, her consistent exclusion from mainstream society and inclusion in nature scenes reminds readers that Jin's story remains frustratingly incomplete. Additionally, that she is not "mitgedacht" or "mitgemeint" becomes clear when Jin rejoins Huck only after he has experienced vital milestones of personal and moral maturation on his developmental journey. As seen throughout the narrative, Huck's adventure is made visible, which results in heightened intellectual curiosity, privilege to embark on an adventure, escape his traumatic environment, and experience moral development and maturation. Jin's traumatic experiences, on the other hand, remain largely invisible, as evidenced concretely by the number of pages where she is missing, and thus excluded, from the narrative. Consequently, readers do not see any degree of moral development or self-determination in Jin's character, contrary to what Huck enjoys, confirming that this remained his story all along. The graphic novel's final page bookends the prologue, as Huck calls his friend Tom to inform him that he is bringing a "Lady"

along to be a part of the *Bande*. Here, Huck again exhibits his confident long stride, head tipped back with orange smoke floating up from a cigarette, while Jin follows behind, eyes fixed on her presumed hero (*Huck Finn* 142).

As this close reading of textual and visual attributes in *Huck Finn* has shown, Vieweg's reconceptualization of the enslaved Jim as Jin relies heavily on Asian female stereotyping and Othering. Thematizing discrimination typifies any iteration of Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, but the specific racially defined roles differ by geographic location, time period, and minority group referenced. Vieweg's *Huck Finn* presents Jin's current station as traditionally prescribed and subordinate. Grace Ji-Sun Kim elucidates in her study on the suffering of Asian immigrants in the United States, "an Asian woman who has been displaced to a Western cultural setting evokes desires for an exotic Otherness" (114). Jin's physical appearance corroborates this condition of Othered exoticism and could have cultural roots in the former East Germany's steady and consistent propagandization of officially warmly welcomed Vietnamese comrades. Descriptors from several official GDR government publications like "delicate," "petite," and "pretty" find visual expression in Jin (Mann 82–84). Other cultural phenomena speak to ongoing and firmly anchored biased attitudes against Asian women. The website thaifrau.de (still active in 2025) offers a portal for German men, "repulsed by women's lib" to "look beyond their borders" for "exotic" and "childlike" women with a "simple nature" and "naive femininity" (Berger 362). Referencing this information here is, of course, not intended to suggest a straight line between East German propaganda or Asian dating sites and the derivation of Jin's character. Instead, this contextualization suggests a prevalent commonness of these signifiers that allow them easy entry into the composite characterization of a young Asian female sex worker in modern-day Germany.

In addition to the aspects related to the former East Germany, a number of firmly rooted perceptions about female Asian identity in German pop culture originated years before economic demands brought tens of thousands of guestworkers to the GDR in the 1960s. Specifically, German cinematic impulses of the twentieth century have arguably contributed to the perpetuation and continuing tradition of Asian stereotypes in Germany that reach back centuries. Gueneli, in her study on the fetishization of Japanese femininities in Weimar-era film, investigates the origins dating back as early as the seventeenth century of the image of Japanese women as licensed sex workers, with broader circulation of "remarkably one-dimensional" images by the nineteenth century (Gueneli 327). In addition to the fact that Jin operates in the sex work milieu, the graphic novel's visual portrayal of her also displays this one dimensionality. Zach Ramon Fitzpatrick extends the timeline of stereotypically sexualized Asian women, and with it the intensified persistence of female Asian stereotypes, to the mid-twentieth century

with his analysis of the film *Bis zum Ende aller Tage* (1961). While this film, according to Fitzpatrick, is the first to focus on immigration and prejudice against Asian immigrants, it also relies on the "stereotypical cinematic blueprint to this day" of the "relationship between a white man and an Asian woman involved in sex work" (27). As the brief reference to contract theory above indicates, establishing a moral hierarchy requires a tacit agreement that one group exploits another group; and the exoticized Asian female has operated in various contexts as the permanently exploited.

The narrative vacuum where Jin's story resides for much of the text could also correspond to sociological aspects of German dominant culture and its historical treatment of non-dominant communities. Exploring this ostracism in the context of what he labels an ambivalent relationship between Germany and its immigrants, Dutch sociologist Ruud Koopmans provocatively asserts that "exclusion [by the dominant group] is tied to the concept of national identity" (643). He identifies uniquely German barriers for incorporating minority communities into the mainstream culture, maintaining that, unlike in other European countries that have adjusted legislation to keep pace with changing demographics, "Germany's ethno-cultural conception of citizenship and nationhood stands in the way of inclusion" (Koopman 627). When German citizenship is defined along ethnic lines, permanent labels and exclusionary language develop, resulting in a phenomenon for which sociologist Sandra Bucerius indicts mainstream culture, having "denied its immigrants an 'official sense of belonging'" (40). Not surprisingly and of interest to the current analysis of *Huck Finn* that trains the spotlight on two teenage voices, politics of exclusion take root early, as Moffitt et al. declare in their article about underrepresented minority youth in the secondary school system, "Who is marginalized and who is afforded opportunity is often delineated along lines of class and race" (832). Perhaps less straightforward than this finding, however, is the set of factors that contribute to a covert understanding of race in Germany. In other words, rhetoric and assigned labels have real world implications for members of marginalized groups: "the use of alternate terms to designate the perceived Other, including *Ausländer* (foreigner), immigrant or the more recently created *Menschen mit Migrationshintergrund* (people with migration background) have become racialized, meaning their primary referents are people of color" (Moffitt 832). Though *Huck Finn* does not explicitly use these terms or ethnic labels (other than some slurs by the villainous characters) to achieve the clear delineation between the two young characters, the visual choices – and even or especially excluded images – strongly suggest Jin's marginalization.

Whether Vieweg as a German reader of Twain's original explored similar aspects of her own culture, such as gendered and ethnic Othering as well as racial exploitation, and correspondingly reshaped the original's thematic and historical

frameworks (Berthele 589), is unclear and even "unanswerable" and "irrelevant" (Rifas 29). What becomes clear upon closer examination, however, is that *Huck Finn*'s overall conceptualization of the "die Asiatin Jin" reinforces aspects of social and historical discriminatory practices. This perpetuation compels the reader to draw connections to specific origins and forms of cultural Otherness as regards Asian identity in Germany. Introducing or imagining an alternative dynamic, such as centralizing Jin and her liberation story, or at least presenting her narrative parallel to Huck's, remains absent. Rather than Jin's moments of presence in the text, her extended omission and resulting invisibility provide the strongest evidence for the claims of her consistent marginalization and ultimate lack of autonomy. Jonathan Bignell, in a discussion of media semiotics, explains this interaction between visible and invisible significance, "Every sign present has meaning by virtue of the other signs which have been excluded and are not present in the text" (14). Applying this to *Huck Finn,* the selected splash pages gain in significance at the expense of excluded images: Jin's story is lost to the main narrative that privileges Huck's. With attention to comics mechanics, Duncan et al. elucidate both the process and the result of both the image selection and exclusion process. One method is paradigmatic choice, which refers to the author's curation of illustrations "that could have made sense or communicated nearly the same meaning at the same point in the panel" (Duncan et al. 62–63). Even if an alternative conceptualization of the text were to retain the reductive visual devices that indicate "exploited Asian woman," other authorial choices, such as granting the two characters equal "screen time" and emphasizing Jin's hard-won independence by highlighting her singular voice at the end, could have invited readers to extract meaning contained in the necessarily two-dimensional and caricatured drawings.

Considering the role that clichéd depictions and generalizations have traditionally played in comics production offers an entry point for determining the balance between stereotype as an "essential tool in the language of graphic storytelling," and the expectation of the artist to "recognize its impact on social judgment," to cite Will Eisner's 2013 addendum to his oft-quoted assertions about stereotypes in comics (Eisner 2013, 3–4). Years before offering this more balanced and nuanced view, Eisner had characterized stereotypes and oversimplification as an "accursed necessity of comics storytelling," inherent in the form itself, which necessitated "the simplification of images into repeatable symbols" or stereotypes (Eisner 1996, 17). Indeed, past adaptations of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* bear out the stubborn persistence of Eisner's "accursed necessity." If comics readers are looking for racial stereotypes in Huck Finn adaptations, whether in *Illustrated Classics* of decades past, or updated manga versions from well into the 2000s, they can certainly find them. And it could surely be argued in those cases as well

as that of *Huck Finn,* that those oversimplified images efficiently communicate shorthand messages that otherwise require disproportionately lengthy visual and verbal exposition.

Rifas, for his part, does not renounce the use of "repeatable symbols" or stereotypes. Instead, he proposes accounting for and indexing their use, for example with qualifiers such as "satiric, ironic, parodic, or even idiotic" (Rifas 35). By doing so, he contends, the critical reader can dissolve the focus on "suspect imagery" and instead listen "for the 'conversations' that a comic participates in" (Rifas 35). Vieweg has, at the very least, with her arguably "satiric" and even "parodic" display of racial stereotypes, joined in the concurrent conversations of traditional criticism of Mark Twain's work. At the same time, she has updated critical discussions of racial and sexual politics that the original evokes. In his critical confrontation with Eisner's views on stereotypes, Andrew J. Kunka discusses the difficulties of "disentangling" problematic images and assessing the "limitations of imagination and empathy for both readers and a [comics] creator" (74). Part of this work of unraveling involves viewing caricature alongside character, that is to say the way a character is drawn over how it is written (Kunka 68). The question becomes one of formula: does character or caricature carry the heavier weight? As regards *Huck Finn,* racist stereotypes (caricature) play a superior role in illuminating Jin's struggle with and possible power to overcome racism and discrimination (character).

Yet, this alignment with elements of original Twain criticism – particularly Twain's attention to his audience and their expectations in matters of caricature and character – complicates the question further. Narrative and graphic magnification of Asian stereotypes as a method for raising awareness or generating sympathy with a minoritized group might seem an effective method. Dramatists like Mihyang Amy Ginther, however, in her directives for actors with racialized identities, confounds that logical jump. She views the cultivated exoticism, for example as displayed in *Huck Finn*, as a misplaced tool to generate sympathy. Instead, she advocates for a "dramaturgy of deprivation" that exists in opposition to one of empathy for marginalized characters and that can counterproductively leave "white audiences feeling passively satisfied" (Ginther 1). This indicator of white contentment recalls Sidonie Smith's address to the "privileged, safe subject" whose "reading rehearses a form of rescue of the other through the invitation to empathetic identification and outrage" (64). Likewise, Ginther advocates for withholding a gratifying happy ending, and for resisting the temptation to fill in "gaps and provide closure where there is none" (2). Historical and sociological evidence, as well as contemporary testimonials about Asian identity, support the idea that closure has not been achieved for members of those communities because they do not own their stories. This raises a further related question about why *Huck*

Finn would attempt to deliver this closure. Whether as a result of societal truths and structures, author's intention, or publisher's expectations and limitations, the graphic novel displays an approved and comfortable version of a story that presumably would like to draw attention to the important social issue of human trafficking through a highly developed character, but whose unexamined use of caricature obstructs that aim.

When Toni Morrison characterizes Twain's original as "sardonic, photographic" and "persuasively aural," she could just as easily be talking about a graphic novel adaptation; and she could be speaking the comics language of the gutter in her assertion that the "major feats lie in the silences" (Morrison 154). In Jin's case, her sexualization and exoticization, which force her out to the margins, lie between the disruptive splashes. With an eye on the critical aptitude for influencing rebel teenage narratives and their modernized adaptations, Ciocia advocates for capitalizing "on the subversive potential of disaffected teenage narrators, where compelling vernacular voices, and their distinctive positions as outsiders are powerful tools for social critique" (196). But, as we have seen, one teenage narrator stands much further outside than the other. In addition to the white-crowd-pleasing happy ending, *Huck Finn*'s visual and narrative cultivation of firmly rooted patterns of Asian identity, societally normalized oppression, fetishization, exoticism, and invisibility have ultimately, and seemingly contradictorily, resulted in a perpetuation of ensconced structures that limit a deeper understanding of marginalized communities. Any critical discussion of these social conditions cannot succeed because Jin, the character whose experiences should ideally shed light on the social ill of sex trafficking, was not able to find her voice.

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