



NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE

Humanities

DIVISION OF RESEARCH PROGRAMS

Narrative Section of a Successful Application

The attached document contains the grant narrative and selected portions of a previously funded grant application. It is not intended to serve as a model, but to give you a sense of how a successful application may be crafted. Every successful application is different, and each applicant is urged to prepare a proposal that reflects its unique project and aspirations. Prospective applicants should consult the Research Programs application guidelines at <http://www.neh.gov/grants/research/fellowships> for instructions. Applicants are also strongly encouraged to consult with the NEH Division of Research Programs staff well before a grant deadline.

Note: The attachment only contains the grant narrative and selected portions, not the entire funded application. In addition, certain portions may have been redacted to protect the privacy interests of an individual and/or to protect confidential commercial and financial information and/or to protect copyrighted materials.

Project Title: From Emancipation to Exclusion: Contract, Citizens, and Coolies

Institution: University of Maryland

Project Director: Edlie Wong

Grant Program: Fellowships Program

Mark Twain's *Pudd'nhead Wilson* (1894) offers one of the most famous trial scenes in American literature. The novella's climatic criminal trial ends with a wry commentary on the legal construction of racial identity. The fingerprinting techniques of the titular "pudd'nhead" attorney reveal that the culprit, Tom Driscoll, who appeared "white," was, like the slave mother who switched him at birth, "by a fiction of law and custom, a negro." Twain's allegorical tale of American slavery and black-white race relations subtly encodes another, less visible racial drama enfolding the post-emancipation nation. Woven into this tragic comedy of racial misidentification is a subplot chronicling the misadventures of two Italian twins—loosely based on Chang and Eng Bunker—to secure American citizenship. Twain's well-known fascination (indeed, obsession) with the Bunkers—the original "Siamese Twins"—formed the basis of many of his popular literary meditations on American slavery. Published two years before the U.S. Supreme Court's affirmation of the "separate, but equal" doctrine in the landmark *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896), Twain's novella provocatively suggests that America's "Negro problem" might be conjoined with the "Chinese question" in similarly complex ways. Justice John Marshall Harlan's lone dissent in *Plessy* disputed the constitutionality of black-white segregation, yet only by way of comparison to the alien status of the "Chinese race." In Harlan's words, "There is a race so different from our own that we do not permit those belonging to it to become citizens of the United States. Persons belonging to it are, with few exceptions, absolutely excluded from our country." He emphasized the racial inconsistency of the disputed Louisiana statute, which permitted Chinese persons to travel in "white" public coaches, yet banned black citizens from the same privilege.

In thus disputing the logic of racial segregation, Harlan drew another line of demarcation between black and white citizens and Chinese aliens who were deemed politically inassimilable to the nation, but not (it would appear) to the legal category of "whiteness." Harlan further honed this idea of Asiatic difference in *United States v. Wong Kim Ark* (1898), a lesser-known case that challenged the construction of American-born Chinese as perpetual aliens ineligible to citizenship. Harlan concurred with the dissent rejecting the native-birth citizenship claims of children born of Chinese parents on American soil. Such conflicts over the legal construction of racial identity shaped the meaning of American citizenship and belonging. Black and Asian migrants, both voluntary and coerced, played a significant role in the making of modern America, yet their political claims upon the nation proved to be a far more divisive matter. Racial compartmentalization and the dominance of the black-white divide in public debates about race have overshadowed the complex inter-relations between early black and Asian American identity formations. To better understand the necessarily contingent contours of race relations, politics, and cultural production in post-emancipation America, my work investigates one specific if largely overlooked record of American racial formations in these early black and Asian challenges to the meaning of national citizenship and social incorporation.

A twelve-month NEH Fellowship would help me complete my second book, which extends the questions my first book poses about racial formation, national identity, and the law within a more expansive critical framework of interdisciplinary comparative race studies. My first book, *Neither Fugitive Nor Free*, drew on a largely unexplored archive, the freedom suit, to offer a more historically embedded understanding of the concept of freedom. It critically recuperates the freedom suit—legal petitions for freedom initiated by slaves (and abolitionists on their behalf) whom traveling slaveholders brought into free jurisdictions (Great Britain, the U.S. North). Reconstructed from pamphlets, newspapers, slave narratives, novels, and casebooks, these legal stories comprise a relatively unknown genre of antislavery literature, charting the struggles of jurists, slaveholders, free blacks, slaves, and abolitionists as they negotiated the predicament of a territorially bounded freedom. My second book begins where the first book ends. It charts the complex intellectual legacies of slavery in the era of emancipation, when the ideals of contract freedom and voluntary exchange began to coalesce into a political world view. Emancipation ushered a new paradox into American life and thought: it nullified one kind of property relation—the commerce in chattel slaves—to validate the market as a mode of social

relations among citizens who voluntarily sold their labor as property. *From Emancipation to Exclusion* will examine how legislators, writers, labor organizers, and reformers drew on the anachronistic specter of slavery or unfree labor—in the figure of the Asiatic “coolie”—to contest and configure the legal disenfranchisement of free Chinese labor migrants.

The abolition of slavery in the British Caribbean facilitated the importation of Indian and Chinese indentured labor in what became popularly known as “coolieism.” In the 1850s, controversies over Chinese coolieism intensified in the U.S. as sectional tensions over the future of slavery threatened to erupt into Civil War. The specter of Chinese coolieism shaped antebellum debates over racial slavery, and became a potent symbol of the enduring legacy of African slavery in post-emancipation America. From popular media to political debates, coolieism came to mark all forms of trans-Pacific and trans-Atlantic Chinese labor migration. By placing Asian immigration within the analytical and historical framework of Atlantic slavery and emancipation, this book illuminates how the radical reconstruction of post-war citizenship, geopolitics, and national belonging led to the ratification of America’s first racially specific immigration law. Black and white writers (Frederick Douglass, Mark Twain, James Williams), illustrators (Thomas Nast of *Harper’s Weekly*), legislators (Senator James G. Blaine), labor organizers (Denis Kearny, Frank Roney), and Asian reformers (Wong Chin Foo) used the rhetorical figure of analogy—between Asiatic “coolie” and black slave—to sharpen both their attacks upon *and* advocacy for racial exclusion. While some black and Asian writers protested Chinese exclusion as an outgrowth of slavery’s racial proscriptions, pro-exclusion agitators retooled this racial analogy to defend exclusion as an anti-slavery, pro-immigrant measure in a post-emancipation U.S. committed to freedom, free labor, and free trade. Barring the entry of Chinese laborers and prohibiting their naturalization, the Chinese Exclusion Act (1882) marked the beginning of America’s modern immigration system.

Bringing the recent work of Moon-Ho Jung, Lisa Lowe, Mae Ngai, and Lisa Yun into critical conversation with the earlier U.S.-based labor history of Alexander Saxton and sociological analyses of Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *From Emancipation to Exclusion* adds to the burgeoning scholarship in comparative race studies. It also broadens our understanding of the centrality of racial slavery as historical experience, idea, and metaphor in American literary and cultural studies. Such an attention to the overlapping histories of black, white, and Asian racial formations in the U.S. thus reconfigures the dominant black-white binary of what W.E.B. DuBois famously designated as the problem of the American “color-line.” By bringing slavery studies to bear upon immigration studies, this book tracks the long history of what literary scholars such as Colleen Lye have begun to refer to as the “Afro-Asian analogy.” This specific racial configuration has influenced the epistemologies of comparative U.S. race and ethnicities studies since the 1960s. Immigration policies shape American understandings of national membership through specific forms of racial exclusion. Chinese exclusion—the exception that proved the rule—helped America redefine itself as a free nation in the wake of racial slavery. Shifting the prevailing axis of race and freedom from South-North to East-West, my book argues that early black and Asian racial formations were trans-regional and transnational processes that mutually constituted each other in complex relation to an emergent post-war American ideology of freedom. Thus the book’s comparative structure is both formal (in its exploration of literary and legal narratives) and geographical (in its efforts to bring Pacific Rim studies to bear upon Black Atlantic studies). Resisting the tendency to plot American history as the movement from slavery to freedom, the book recuperates those overlooked intellectual and cultural forces that propelled historical continuity and change across the divide of the Civil War and radical Reconstruction.

An NEH fellowship for twelve months starting in January 2010 would allow me to work in the archives of the University of California, Berkeley’s Bancroft Library and provide time to write the majority of the manuscript. The Bancroft Library houses both the Mark Twain Papers and the Chinese in California, 1850-1925 Collection, and preliminary research has revealed additional manuscript collections documenting early Chinese settlement in the American West (see select bibliography). Addressing an array of cultural materials, the book’s first chapter investigates the paradoxical relations between the

antislavery movement and the campaign against coolieism. The successful Anglo-American abolition of the African slave trade first necessitated and then increased the demand for Asian indentured labor. Mounting public pressure compelled Lincoln to sign “An Act to Prohibit the ‘Coolie Trade’ by American Citizens in American Vessels” just months before the Emancipation Proclamation. Focusing on the legal and literary discourses of coolie transport mutinies and labor strikes, this chapter charts this specific constellation of American racial formations at mid-century. Recorded pictorially in illustrated magazines such as *Harper’s Weekly*, the most stunning accounts of coolie transport mutinies adapted the imagery of earlier slave ship revolts aboard the *Amistad* (1839) and *Creole* (1841). The second and third chapters turn their attention to lesser-known literary figures in their critical recovery of such neglected African American and Asian American texts as James Williams’s *Life and Adventures* (1879) and the eclectic journalism of Wong Chin Foo within the shifting political contours of the 1880s and 1890s. Williams numbers among the few recovered black writers of the early American West. His popular autobiography, chronicling his experiences as a fugitive slave and gold miner knits together stories from the famed *Underground Rail Road* with incisive observations on Chinese labor migration and the expropriation of indigenous lands in the California. Writing from the vantage of Reconstruction’s failure, writers like Williams sought to understand the paradoxical structure of black political inclusion in the U.S. by way of analogy to Chinese exclusion. Prospecting also lured Mark Twain, as it had countless others, including Williams, westward where he witnessed firsthand the complex geopolitics of race and freedom that accompanied the incorporation of the American West. These western experiences found their way into some of Twain’s most popular works, including his extensive sketches of Pacific Coast Chinese settlements in his semi-autobiographical travelogue, *Roughing It* (1872). In the fourth chapter, I move to an exploration of the significance of Asian figures—specifically Chang and Eng Bunker—on Twain with particular attention to *Pudd’nhead Wilson*. The Bunkers’ real-life tale of naturalization, marriage to white sisters, establishment as North Carolina plantation slaveholders, and support of the Confederacy only heightened the racial and anatomical foreignness that Twain drew upon in his writings.

By the time that I begin my fellowship, I will have drafted the chapter investigating the writings of Wong and other early Chinese American reformers from New York City’s Chinatown. A largely unknown figure from early Asian American print history, Wong was an outspoken critic of Chinese Exclusion, best remembered as the founder of the first Chinese American newspaper in New York, the bilingual *Chinese American* (1883). The self-fashioned “Chinese journalist” became one of the most eloquent English language authors of the nineteenth century, publishing over a dozen articles in such leading magazines as the *Atlantic Monthly*, *Cosmopolitan*, *Harper’s Bazaar*, *Harper’s Monthly*, and *North American Review*. This summer and fall I will work at the New York Historical Society and the Chatham Square Branch Library, which houses the New York Public Library’s Chinese-American Heritage Reference Collection, researching the multifaceted controversies surrounding coolieism and the Chinese Exclusion Act. This work will prepare me to write about the early histories of U.S. labor immigration and to compare with accuracy the divergent, yet often overlapping accounts of black and Asian migrant experiences of the early West. The NEH Fellowship would provide essential time for me to draft these remaining chapters on Williams and Twain while in residence at the Bancroft Library. I am prepared for a period of research that promises to be both productive and significant, and a twelve-month NEH Fellowship would provide support essential to this project’s completion.

Manuscripts

Kathryn Conlon Childress correspondences at the Bancroft Library, Berkeley, California.

Frank Roney papers at the Bancroft Library, Berkeley, California.

Louisiana Erwin Strentzel papers at the Bancroft Library, Berkeley, California.

David L. Gardiner letters at the Bancroft Library, Berkeley, California.

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