

## “No-Body’s Watch”: Nineteenth-Century Capitalism, Temporality, and the Figure of the Loafer

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### Abstract

This article outlines the rather obscure ascent and fall of the loafer as a cultural figure. Beginning with the emergence of the term and its ambivalent semantics of idleness, I will sketch its subsequent racialization and regionalization, as it was appropriated by abolitionist writers who associated with whiteness, poverty, and southern masculinity. The significance of the term lies in the way it combines criticisms of capitalism and racism in a figure of idleness. A figure of idleness, both in its romanticized and disparaging connotations, the loafer alerts us to the fact that US nineteenth-century temporality is closely and inseparably entangled in the history of capitalism and slavery.

**Keywords:** Loafer, C19, Mark Twain, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Walt Whitman, poverty, masculinity, South, resentment, mob violence, Elias Canetti

- 1 In 1855, Walt Whitman opens his first edition of *Leaves of Grass* with the first lines of the now famous “Song of Myself,” in which he connects his celebration of a newly emergent sense of self and artistic American spirit with the somewhat surprising activity of “loafing”:

*I celebrate myself, And what I assume you shall assume, For every atom  
belonging to me as good belongs to you. I loafe and invite my soul, I lean  
and loafe at my ease ... observing a spear of summer grass[1]*

- 2 Nine years earlier the 1846 edition of *Webster’s Dictionary* had noted under “loafer” the uncertain etymology of “LOAF-ER, n. [G. laufer, a runner, from laufen, to run.]” It defined the term as “an idle man who seeks his living by sponging or expedients” (975)—which makes Whitman’s wording a surprising choice to celebrate a new American identity. So why this reference and what is a loafer (other than a slip-on shoe)? In the following, I will outline the rather obscure ascent and fall of the loafer as a cultural figure. Beginning with the emergence of the term and its ambivalent semantics of idleness, I will sketch its subsequent racialization and regionalization, as it was appropriated by abolitionist writers who associated with whiteness, poverty, and southern masculinity. The significance of the term lies in the

way it combines criticisms of capitalism and racism in a figure of idleness. The loafer can occupy a number of idle positions, ranging from utopian nonconformism and passive resistance to the dangerously resentful masculinity of “poor white trash”—a pejorative that came into common use in the 1830s in the South and spread across race and class boundaries in the 1850s (Wray 49). A figure of idleness, both in its romanticized and disparaging connotations, the loafer alerts us to the fact that US nineteenth-century temporality is closely and inseparably entangled in the history of capitalism and slavery.

- 3 Economic historian Richard White shows in *The Republic for Which It Stands: The United States During Reconstruction and the Gilded Age, 1865–1896* (2017) that the concept of unemployment as such did not arise until after the Civil War, “an artifact of the rise of industrial America where large gains in productivity often came at the expense of economic security” (268). It took the economic circumstances of the crisis of 1873 and the so-called ‘long depression,’ as well as the emerging systemic perspectives offered by sociology, demographics, and statistics, for the term to acquire its modern meaning, i.e. being without work and wages at no fault of one’s own. As White argues, unemployment as a problem surfaced when employment practices reduced workers to wage-labor while cutting off any opportunity for subsistence farming during lay-offs:

*Americans had previously attributed lack of work to individual causes—laziness or disability—but unemployment involved a structural shift. People looking for employment could not find it, and they lacked access to land or other resources to employ themselves. Unemployment became the engine driving a train of social problems: homelessness, malnutrition, crime, and illness. (White 269)*

- 4 I argue that the figure of the loafer in its ambiguity, its positive and negatively connoted uses, marks a time of transition towards the altered sense of industrialization and wage-labor. Time—or temporality—plays an important role in this transformation of work. As Rieke Jordan points out with reference to Gary Cross’ *Social History of Leisure* (1990) in the introduction of this issue, leisure emerges only as a counterpart to a temporality of labor quantified by the dictates of industrialization. For the free individual (as opposed to the chattel slave whose lack of self-ownership manifests itself in not owning one’s time or body), industrialization turns time into property, to me managed and hired out as labor. As the nineteenth century progresses towards temporalized modes of self-management, the figure of the loafer embodies the struggles of a society on the threshold of capitalist commodification.
- 5 As part of Rieke Jordan’s special issue on “Spending Time,” I propose reading the loafer as a “social figure” (Moser and Schlechtriemen) who marks the complex rise of capitalism in the nineteenth century. Richard Henry Dana mentions “the newly-invented Yankee word of loafer” (49) in *Two Years Before the Mast* in 1840. In 1835,

the Knickerbocker magazine had already printed an anonymous eulogy to a fictitious loafer “Benjamin Smith.” In 1855, Walt Whitman, who in his early writings had proposed a utopian republic of loafers (*Sun-Down Papers*, No. 9), prints *Leaves of Grass* with a photograph of himself as a self-stylized loafer on the frontispiece. These positive depictions, however, must be set in relation to Frederick Douglass’ 1852 novella *The Heroic Slave*, which represents loafers as shady characters in a Virginia tavern. Harriet Beecher Stowe uses the loafer as a marker of the degenerating forces with which the institution of slavery unravels the moral fabric of society. By the time Twain depicts small-town inhabitants as loafers in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884), they seem to have become synonymous with southern masculinity, “poor white trash,” and mob violence.

- 6 Tracking the social figure across a range of literary texts, I will analyze the loafer as a product of volatile nineteenth-century economics and the linked instabilities of the labor market. As a literary character, the loafer becomes a symbolically charged figure of resistance to a capitalist temporality of optimized labor and self-management, but in abolitionists texts the loafer is depicted as a symptom of a characteristically southern societal pathology. Poor white men, complicit in and bound to a classist system of antebellum slave economy, are stunted economically and manifest their resentment through a kind of aggressive laziness. Tracking the shifting semantics of the term across a set of texts and exemplary uses, I will show that the loafer emerges simultaneously in two contexts, North and South, to describe two very different forms of idleness. My argument is that idleness is never just idleness, but that the figure of the loafer does specific cultural work and opens up different avenues of socioeconomic critique. Only by locating the loafer carefully in space and time can we hope to understand the changing significance of idleness in American culture, and its function in wider debates about American individualism and economic participation.

### **Birth of the Loafer and Capitalist Temporality**

- 7 From the beginning of the short and fragmentary genealogy I propose to trace, the loafer is both strangely pervasive and yet marginal to a world of business and bustle. If we attempt to pinpoint the ‘birth’ of the American loafer, his origins appear to lie in the 1830s. The term ‘loafer’ gained currency first as an urban phenomenon, when the panic and ensuing unemployment of 1837 forced men into idleness, making them visible elements of street life. Thus, the visual presence of the loafer evokes the volatile labor market of mid-nineteenth century bust-and-boom economy before the term transitions into other semantic fields.
- 8 Socially positioned as disadvantaged, the loafer can be understood as opting out, whether intentionally or not, from the proliferating logic of the market. The loafer’s demonstrative idleness throws into stark relief capitalist temporality: he resists a new economy of time, self-managed and measured in quantifiable units of labor, and,

above all, marked by a decided investment in the future. Michael Zakim and Gary J. Kornblith's introduction to *Capitalism Takes Command: The Social Transformation of Nineteenth Century America*, describes the nineteenth-century rise of capitalism as infused with an increased sense of urgency and efficiency. Its heightened emphasis on efficiency renders relationships of economic exchange the "dominant form of social intercourse as well as an equally dominant form of social thought" (1). The prevalent rhetoric of "progress" and "growth," the dynamics of credit and insurance, of hedging against risks, and betting on expectable profit, produces a sense of acceleration and volatility and a trajectory that is, above all, entirely focused on the future (2). Zakim and Kornblith characterize the "nervous logic of capitalism" via the example of financial exchange and its new financial instruments as part of a deep, cultural and social shift that reshapes the fabric of social temporality: "Credit allowed humanity to reshape time and space [...] in accordance to one's ambitions. The promise to pay (that is, to assume a debt) thus became the primary medium of exchange in the capitalist system" (3). The result is a double dissociation that separates the "currency of promises" (3–4) from the traded commodities and a credit-based system from personal and local relationships. As a result, social relationships appear increasingly transactional. The loafer as a social figure seems to highlight this nervous logic by creating a disturbance in the fabric of transaction. He refuses to engage in a pursuit of goals and self-management; he is both dubiously untrustworthy and unencumbered because he declines to participate in a system of debt and indeed refuses to accept responsibility for the future.

- 9 In his 1848 *Dictionary of Americanisms: A Glossary of Words and Phrases, Usually Regarded as Peculiar to the United States*, John Russell Bartlett reviews the first decade of use and devotes a longer entry to this "peculiarly American word"—the "loafer" (209–10). He reports on the emergence of this new concept that "has been gradually growing into extensive use during the last twenty years" and describes it as referring to "a vagabond; an idle loungeer." Bartlett describes the loafer as "equivalent to the lazzarone of Naples or the lepero of Mexico," thus invoking both low economic status and ethnic difference to describe urban vagrants. He goes on to point out that the term has since acquired a broader, less specific meaning of "idlers in general," illustrated by its use in upper and upper middle-class magazines. The *Philadelphia Gentleman's Vade Mecum* (later also called the *Sporting and Dramatic Companion*) refers to the new term "loafer" as "a good word, one much needed in the language, [which] will, in time, establish itself in the most refined dictionaries; [...] for it is the only word designating the most important species of the genus idler—the most important, because the most annoying branch of that family." Freed from more classist implications of the "ragged step-and-corner loungeer, who sleeps in the sun, and 'hooks' sugar on the wharf," the term has gained currency for phenomena of idleness across all classes and ranks in life, but appears to be a predominantly male affliction: "Like squinting, the king and the beggar may be equally afflicted with the imperfection. There be your well-dressed monied loafer, as well as your loafer who is nightly taken

by the watch.” The *Philadelphia Vade Mecum* complains about a visible spread of idleness that creates a disturbance to the business of the everyday:

*He is that kind of a man, who, having nothing to do, or being unwilling to do anything, cannot keep his tediousness to himself, and therefore bestows it all upon others, not when they are at leisure for conversational recreation, but when business presses, and they would look black upon the intrusion of a sweetheart or a three-day wife. He is the drag-chain upon industry, and yet so far different from the drag-chain, that he hitches to the wheel when the pull is up hill. (210)*

As a social figure who holds back industry as it labors uphill, the loafer demonstrates a counter-temporality indicative of the complex responses to the rise of capitalism in the nineteenth century. In his more romantic variants, he appears a self-sufficient stoic who rejects the temporal logic of future promises. Bartlett does not suggest a perception of the loafer as a figure of resistance, however; he sees him as a pathology.

- 10 The loafer prefers to be in the midst of excitement, the complaint continues, while remaining entirely passive, and thus becomes an obstruction to the path and activity of others:

*In the store, he sits upon the counter, swinging his useless legs, and gaping vacantly at the movements around him. In the office, he effectually checks necessary conversation among those who do not wish their business bruited to the world, turns over papers which he has no right to touch, and squints at contents which he has no right to know. In the counting-house, he perches on a stool, interrupts difficult calculations with chat as idle as himself, follows the bustling clerk to the storehouse, pouches the genuine Havana, quaffs nectar from proof-glasses, and makes himself free of the good things which belong to others. (210)*

This description, however humorous, casts the loafer as an obstruction to organized routines and the economy of the everyday. Bartlett’s loafer is a freeloader with little interest in useful employment; a vicarious creature, he seems content to function as onlooker who regards the industriousness of others as an amusing spectacle while enjoying the fruits of their labors.

- 11 To writers concerned with Northern cities, the loafer’s disregard for labor renders him a symptom of speculative capitalism in very different ways. Abolitionists such as Frederick Douglass, however, present the ‘something for nothing’ attitude as part of the pathology of the South. Southern economy fosters idleness because it trades in slave labor and uses the black body as collateral instead of engaging in an active social participation that requires industriousness and responsible self-management. Douglass, whose autobiographies attest to the African American experience of a

struggle towards self-ownership that includes control over one's body, labor, and time, emphasizes the importance of having the freedom to seize hold of an individual future. Consequently, he judges the loafer harshly as someone careless of the freedom and opportunity. Slave economy devalues individual labor and breeds an inertia specific to lower class white men who shun chances of self-improvement. To Douglass, the corrosive effects of slavery are rendered visible in the presence of loafers, whom he describes as idle "hangers on, [...] holders on to the slack, in everybody's mess, and in no-body's watch" (28). These white men in the South irresponsibly waste the privilege of an agency they are entitled to through the dubious virtue of the whiteness alone. Thus, while the loafer stands as a comment on the pathologies of capitalism in the nineteenth century, his significance is very different in the burgeoning industrial economy of the North and the slave economy of the South.

### ***Knickerbocker* 1835**

- 12 One of the earliest traceable mentions in print is a satirical eulogy in the *Knickerbocker* in 1835 devoted to "The Late Ben. Smith, Loafer," which embarks on a humorous ethnographic study of the loafer and promises insight into variants of human nature. The biographical reflection sketches the fictitious Benjamin Smith as an urban inhabitant, a metropolitan spirit, and a second-generation loafer (born of parents that are referred to as "loafer" and "loaferess," though the feminine version of the term would not prevail), who had avoided education as well as any institutional discipline. Devoid of any discernible employment or income, the tattered, gangly, unkempt city-dweller is a habitual pedestrian who defines all of urban geography solely through its uses to him as "loafing-ground" (63). Markedly, the article spends much effort on the description of Smith's ragged appearance, but it emphasizes his laudable straightforwardness and lack of pretense about his poverty. It characterizes Smith as a man who values liberty and prefers a life of his own choosing—an artist and trickster who sadly dies of asphyxia while pursuing the artistic project of trying to whistle the recent speech of a state senator. Thus, though bested by a politician's long-windedness and dying a fictional death for the cause of satire, the *Knickerbocker's* Ben Smith already carries some of the core features of later reappearances of the figure: he is white, male, slow-paced, and visually rugged—a leisurely pedestrian who embodies the street-level gaze of the city-dweller and the perspective of one unencumbered by social expectations and conformity.
- 13 Avoiding the ties of property and the temporal obligations of laboring for a livelihood, the loafer is established as a local phenomenon, a recognized character of the neighborhood, and thus also markedly distinct from later terms that came to signify phenomena of lazy mobility like the social figures of the 'tramp' and the 'hobo.' These figures have recently seen a renaissance in critical discussion by Tim Cresswell, Todd DePastino, and Frank Higbie, but they refer to both broader and more economically specific phenomena. The "tramp scare" of the 1870s demonstrated a rise

in public awareness that responded to the increased presence of itinerant workers.[2] While the tramp and the hobo will be mobile signifiers of the reconstruction period’s unemployment and long depression, the loafer marks an earlier struggle with social change in which the forces of quantification and self-optimization, speculative capitalism and the emerging temporality of industrialization spur resistance and systemic criticism.

### Walt Whitman 1840–41 & 1855

- 14 In 1855 Walt Whitman would famously appear as a loafer on the frontispiece of the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*.<sup>[3]</sup> He explicitly references loafing—“I lean and loafe at my ease ... observing a spear of summer grass,”—and reflects back on a much earlier text, part of the “Sun-Down Papers,” in which he had praised the loafer and satirically proposed a loafer republic. In 1840, as a young man of seventeen working as a school-teacher on rural Long Island, Whitman wrote an early series of editorials, published anonymously in local Long Island newspapers.<sup>[4]</sup> For these “Sun-Down Papers, From the Desk of a Schoolmaster,” scholars have little doubt regarding Whitman’s authorship, although many judge the early writings rather harshly as overly moralistic and sentimental: “Taken individually, the first four ‘Sun-Down Papers’ are as appealing as the wagging finger of a youthful prude” (Stacy 27). In these short editorials, Whitman sets out to criticize consumerism and argues that conspicuous consumption has led to an identity crisis of the working class. In “Sun-Down Papers no. 9” he praises the ideal of a “loafer republic” and pays an enthusiastic tribute to the “ancient and honorable fraternity” of loafers. Irreverent, egalitarian, and unaffected, the loafer does not waste energy on social status, appearances, or self-improvement, and should be read, according to Whitman, in line with prelapsarian Adam and the Greek philosopher Diogenes. Whitman proceeds to imagine a utopia of loafers, on a distant, sunny island that would involve an existence outside industrial temporality and its logic of self-exploitation, without “hurry, or bustle, or banging, or clanging. Your ears ache no more with the din of carts; the noisy politician offends you not; no wrangling, no quarrelling, [...]. Give us the facilities of loafing, and you are welcome to all the benefits of your tariff system, your manufacturing privileges, and your cotton trade” (no. 9).
- 15 His idealization is defiant, and he envisions himself as one of this non-conformist and anti-capitalist enclave. However peaceful the vision, it also threatens to overthrow those who fail to respect the legitimacy of the new republic: “People have talked of us sneeringly and frowningly. Cold eyes have been turned upon us. Overbearing men have spoken in derogatory terms about our rights and our dignity. You had better be careful, gentlemen. You had better look out how you irritate us” (no. 9). While that sounds radical, the following editorial (no. 9 *bis*), defuses this shadow of defiant loafer masculinity and returns to a vision that emphasizes the loafer as a counter-model to capitalist temporality. The loafer, in Whitman’s imagination, lives

very much in the present and realizes that people are but “the insect of an hour.” To cultivate a disposition for kindness may well be the only cure in a society that seems so wholly turned towards the pursuit of unobtainable futures, as there are “hundreds and thousands of men who go on from year to year with their pitiful schemes of business and profit,” and who define themselves through politics, fashion, or money and lose all they could be in the process (see also Stacy 38–39). Whitman’s depiction, however humorous the tone, thus extends the critical tradition of the loafer as he had been eulogized in the *Knickerbocker*. And yet it is safe to assume from his argument that his reading goes against the grain of a common usage of the term, and Richard Henry Dana, Jr.’s mention of loafers in *Two Years Before the Mast*, (“Chapter VII: Juan Fernandez – The Pacific”), in 1840, very much runs in the opposite direction.

### Richard Henry Dana, Jr.: 1840

- 16 In his travelogue, Dana uses the term loafer for a stereotypical depiction of Chilean islanders that holds little significance for Dana’s text as a whole, but points towards an important differentiation in the semantics of the loafer: “The men appeared to be the laziest people upon the face of the earth; and indeed, as far as my observation goes, there are no people to whom the newly-invented Yankee word of ‘Loafer’ is more applicable than to the Spanish Americans.”[5] Through the ethnic ascription, the term thus acquires a quality of discriminatory othering, making idleness a matter of local character rather than of economic conditions. Despite an exoticizing mention of the men’s stylish air—even in rags, they maintain pride, politeness, and dignity—Dana ridicules the men’s poverty, watching them with “no little amusement” as they scramble to salvage their belongings: “The only interruption to the monotony of their day seemed to be when a gust of wind drew round between the mountains and blew off the boughs which they had placed for roofs to their houses, and gave them a few minutes’ occupation in running about after them” (Dana 49). The narrative of loafing thus allows Dana to ignore the socioeconomic conditions of the locale, and instead attribute the men’s apparent poverty to idleness, inertia, and a general “habitual occupation of doing nothing” (49). Dana’s account taps into a racialized economy that will strangely reverberate in the abolitionists’ writings about poor Southern whites.
- 17 Some nineteenth-century loafers were friendly, harmless, and somewhat hapless figures, but, once coded as Southern, foreign, or culturally other, they became charged with a sense of imminent violence. As my brief discussion of Douglass has already suggested, the loafer becomes a figure of idleness and resentment when connected to the American slave economy. Both in Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and Frederick Douglass’ novella *The Heroic Slave*, the loafer is the marginal figure who personifies the problems with the system as a whole.



## The Abolitionists: Harriet Beecher Stowe and Frederick Douglass (1851/52)

- 18 In a central chapter of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, a Kentucky tavern populated with day-drinking loafers casts a satirical ethnographic on a racist and classist microcosm.[6] Chapter XI, “In which Property gets into an improper state of mind,” begins with the arrival of a stranger in a Kentucky village, where “our traveler” observes the picturesque local color in the tavern’s bar-room. With “game-bags, hunting dogs, and little negroes, all rolled together in the corners” (Stowe *Uncle*, 93), the chapter opening paints a seemingly cozy, casually racist picture of “the jollities of a Kentucky tavern” (94). The scene’s rural antics grant the reader respite between a heart-wrenching chapter in which Tom is taken away in fetters (Chapter X) and the next, which depicts the horrors of slave-trading practices (Chapter XII).
- 19 The seeming casual atmosphere of the rural setting takes a dramatic turn as the reader realizes that the travelling ‘Spanish’ gentleman is George, Eliza’s husband. While the chapter may not draw much critical attention in the novel, its narrative dynamic is nonetheless characteristic of the novel’s agenda: It dramatically alters a reader’s perception through a recontextualization of social space, in this case using the loafer as an important figure in a racist geography. To a runaway slave who passes as white, the idly curious gaze of the locals turns into an immediate threat, and what may have appeared a harmless “set of loafers” to a white viewer now presents a deadly threat. Stowe’s text thus marks part of the semantic shift in the social figure of the loafer towards violence. The idleness of the Southern loafer is linked to a capitalist temporality of slavery in which the devaluation of labor breeds inertia and white resentment.
- 20 In a similar scene, Frederick Douglass situates part III of his 1852 novella *The Heroic Slave* in an old public tavern, “[j]ust upon the edge of the great road from Petersburg, Virginia, to Richmond” (27), filled with a mix of travelers, traders, and male, white, day-drinking loafers[7] Symbolically charged, the tavern’s location marks its significance as way-station in US slave-trading geography as situated *en route* to the sea-bound passage from Richmond to New Orleans and the Deep South. Douglass paints the social space of the tavern as a satirical allegory of Virginia society, which had been “quite notorious in its better days” but has “like everything else peculiar to Virginia,” now lost much its former glamor, “yet it keeps up some appearance of gaiety and high life” (27). Once frequented by “most of the leading gamblers, horse-racers, cock-fighters, and slave traders” (27), the tavern now provides a meeting point for an assortment of local loafers. Like Stowe, Douglass depicts the rural white variant of the loafer as a symptom of the downfall and moral decrepitude brought about by the state’s reliance on slave economy.

- 21 Douglass describes the men as idle and irresponsible, “hangers on, [...] holders on to the slack, in everybody’s mess, and in no-body’s watch” (28). Parasitical in existence, they live off “the science of scraping acquaintance to perfection [...]. Money they seldom have; yet they always have capital most reliable” (28), namely the cultural capital of information and gossip. The loafers’ idle but observant nosiness had already marked them as potentially dangerous figures in Stowe’s Kentucky tavern, and even the novella’s white protagonists Listwell, a gentleman farmer converted to abolition who stops at the tavern, is intensely uncomfortable in their intrusive presence.
- 22 The narrative renders Listwell’s encounter with one of the loafers scenically, in formal dramatic dialogue, making the reader witness to the loafers’ competing strategies of wheedling information and drinks out of the visitor. The exchange foregrounds the connection between the loafer’s livelihood and the Virginia slave economy, which is brought into close proximity with gambling, betting, and speculation, having replaced “almost all other business in Virginia” (Douglass 30). As Jackson T. Lears has pointed out in *Something for Nothing: Luck in America* (2003), the significance of gambling is a common point of contention between Northern and Southern cultures throughout the nineteenth century (113–14). *The Heroic Slave* takes sides in the debate by exposing the idealization of leisure and betting as a product of the slave economy, which produces not just gentleman gamblers and speculators but also lower-class loafers and conmen. As the tavern scene suggests, living off the labor of others as a gentlemanly ideal promotes an ideology of “something for nothing,” which proves detrimental to southern society in general and “a disgrace and scandal to Old Virginia” (Douglass 45). While the loafers remain stock characters and not particularly sympathetic, Douglass’ criticism is systemic in focus and not limited to the loafer as such. The idler is symptomatic, and he throws into relief the novella’s contrasting construction of black masculinity. We see the runaway slave actively struggle and seize a mere sliver of opportunity at gaining freedom and self-ownership, while Southern white masculinity appears glazed by inertia, racist entitlement, and a muffled resentment over the fact that white male privilege has failed to convert into economic prosperity.
- 23 Following the timeline of the semantics of the loafer, we see that Stowe, in her later texts, discusses rural white poverty at length, and her work illustrates the racial construction of the white loafer as significant to her political agenda. Her stark depiction of white southern poverty illustrates the detrimental effect of a slave economy beyond its impact on the enslaved. In her second novel, *Dread—A Tale of the Dismal Swamp* (1856), her harsh critique turns more stereotypical when she describes the inhabitants of a stretch of swampland, on the border of Virginia and North Carolina, as essentially ignorant, degenerate, and immoral, supporting themselves through crime rather than legitimate labor (see Hurst). In her 1854 *Key to Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, Stowe had already included a chapter on “Poor White Trash” (part III, chapter X).[8]

24 “Poor White Trash” is neither southern ethnography nor the analysis of a sociological “type” but a systemic critique. It responds to proponents of slavery who sought to refute transatlantic abolitionists by claiming that industrialized working classes were off much worse than the enslaved in America. Stowe, in response, makes the argument that slavery was not just responsible for the misery and degradation of those enslaved but also drove Southern working-class white people into abject poverty. Next to an economically dominant plantation system, poor whites barely scraped by on subsistence farming, and since the economic factors were exacerbated by the lack of education and churches to stabilize local communities, poverty became transgenerational. Stowe laments not just the poverty that stems from an economic devaluation of labor in a slave economy, but the ideological devaluation that takes place when “useful labor” becomes associated with “degradation and slavery,” and when “the only standard of gentility is an ability to live without work” (Stowe *Key*, 184). Once social respectability and status depend primarily on slave-ownership rather than hard work and industriousness, it breeds neglect, drinking, loafing, and cruelty, while those who are more industrious migrate and settle in states that offer better conditions for making a living and education (371). Stowe’s explicit use of the term “loafing” (185), similar to its use in Douglass and later Twain, associates the figure with more than just a disregard for labor. This loafer hates labor as well as those who are forced to labor, and his violence can quickly transform from casual cruelty against animals and those perceived as of lower standing into the kind of collective violence that characterizes the lynch mob (see Stowe’s inclusion of newspaper clippings in “Poor White Trash”). Stowe cites a legal case she discusses earlier in *Key*, namely *Souther v. The Commonwealth*, decided by the Virginia Supreme Court in 1851, to illustrate the peculiar mixture of idleness and sadistic brutality:

*Singular as it may appear, though slavery is the cause of the misery and degradation of this class, yet they are the most vehement and ferocious advocates of slavery. The reason is this: They feel the scorn of the upper classes, and their only means of consolation is in having a class below them, whom they may scorn in turn. To set the negro at liberty would deprive them of this last comfort; and accordingly no class of men advocate slavery with such frantic and unreasoning violence, or hate abolitionists with such demoniac hatred. Let the reader conceive of a mob of men as brutal and callous as the two white witnesses of the Souther tragedy, led on by men like Souther himself, and he will have some idea of the materials which occur in the worst kind of Southern mobs. (Stowe Key, 185)[9]*

This is no ad hominem argument but an analysis of the mechanisms and ideology that prevents poor whites from locating responsibility for their misery in the capitalist slave economy. The loafer becomes once more an indicator for a society deformed by economic conditions, but this is an economy—the slave economy—that

disregards the worth of individual labor, favors idleness, and keeps poor white people from pursuing their political interest by channeling their resentment into racist violence.

## Twain 1884

- 25 I will close my genealogy of the loafer with one of the “great American novels” of the nineteenth century, published in the reconstruction era but famously set in antebellum America. This novel once more illustrates the importance of the loafer as a polyvalent counterfigure of capitalism and its characteristic temporalities.
- 26 Mark Twain’s 1884 *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* demonstrates the semantic polyvalence of the term in all its complexity. The novel creates the character Huckleberry Finn as a picaresque anti-hero who accrues all the romantic potential of the loafer. He combines the nostalgia for a simpler life, close to nature with the fantasy of lost boyhood and a trickster’s ability to survive. His non-conformism will eventually drive Huck to “light out for the Territory” (*Huckleberry Finn* 366) as a last but closing frontier where he might resist the disciplinary economy of getting “sivilized,” (2) which regulates time and space all-too-closely. But far from a sentimental tale of idyllic youth and adventure, Twain’s novel uses the loafer figure to explore issues relating white masculinity, poverty, racism, and violence. Twain thus finalizes the semantic shift of the loafer towards a critique of “poor white trash” as a marker of the lasting repercussions of the degenerative forces of the Southern slave economy. He employs the loafer as part of a range of stock characters that populate his fictional geography to illustrate various facets of a south corrupted by racism, feudalism, and slavery. The deeper Huck and Jim travel into the South, the starker the portrayal of a morally deformed culture, riddled by casual cruelty, ignorance, and deceit. As Sacvan Bercovitch has pointed out, *Huckleberry Finn* is not just a picaresque journey down river, but also a novel in which a slave-hunt becomes “both metaphor and metonymy for the world it portrays” (11).
- 27 Throughout the novel, we encounter Huck as a free spirit, unfettered by consumer needs and property, who struggles over a conflict between his “sound heart” (Twain *Notebook*, 35) and a conscience socially deformed by a system of religious bigotry and hypocrisy. Huck has also been shaped by the abuse of an alcoholic father and by a boyhood friend who wants to mimic the heroics of historical novels. A social outsider, Huck lives in a barrel throughout most of *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, prefers to go barefoot, and has little use for the treasure he and Tom come across at the end of *Tom Sawyer*.<sup>[10]</sup> Huck’s character thus echoes some of the distinct elements of Whitman’s loafer as a figure who marks resistance to a profit-driven capitalist system of increasing self-optimization and the industrialized, scheduled temporality of labor. And yet, while the novel uses “to loaf” as a verb a few times for Huck (—and once for hogs, *Huckleberry Finn* 188), the noun does not surface except to describe a set of poor white men hanging around idly in a small southern town.

Notably, the term occurs but once in Twain’s 1876 *Tom Sawyer*, as a verb and with reference to the harmless town drunk Muff Potter in Huck’s hometown Hannibal, Missouri (Chapter XXIII). *Huckleberry Finn* does not employ the term until the second half of the novel, once Huck and Jim have passed from Missouri through Kentucky and Tennessee into Arkansas.

- 28 In Chapter 21, the reader has barely recovered from the violence of the Grangerford-episode and Huck’s narrow escape from the deadly escalation of a family feud, when Jim and Huck, now in the company of two confidence men, come into a small “one-horse town” in Arkansas. This is Twain’s most detailed sketch of small-town street life on the brink of the Deep South. The shabbiness of the houses and little gardens, the lack of up-keep or effort, stands out even to our narrator, who is himself not a stickler for cleanliness: “All the streets and lanes was just mud; they warn’t nothing else but mud” (*Huckleberry Finn* 187). In his usual, unjudgmental way Huck sees an upside to the state of the streets, because they are a pigs’ paradise, and he watches a sow suckle her piglets “and look as happy as if she was on salary.” And yet the idyllic scenario does not at all signal the happiness of a laidback coexistence, but is disturbed by a group of loafers whose description now appears deceptively humorous. Without provocation and for mere sport to interrupt their boredom, they randomly terrorize the animals and commit acts of violence, which always seems to fester under the surface.

*And pretty soon you’d hear a loafer sing out, “Hi! so boy! sick him, Tige!” and away the sow would go, squealing most horrible, with a dog or two swinging to each ear, and three or four dozen more a-coming; and then you would see all the loafers get up and watch the thing out of sight, and laugh at the fun and look grateful for the noise. Then they’d settle back again till there was a dogfight. There couldn’t anything wake them up all over, and make them happy all over, like a dogfight—unless it might be putting turpentine on a stray dog and setting fire to him, or tying a tin pan to his tail and see him run himself to death. (Huckleberry Finn 188)*

Historians have a number of explanations for why violence was omnipresent in the Old South. As Jeff Forret outlines in “Slave-Poor White Violence in the Antebellum Carolinas” (2004), constructions of southern white masculinity were dependent on a set of cultural values and beliefs that connected to a fragile concept of honor, which was highly stratified and classist, and could not be claimed actively but had to be bestowed by the community. The fiercely hierarchical construct, in which any act that jeopardized social standing required violent retaliation, also fostered acts of violence against those of lesser standing, or in weaker positions. Violence, thus, was a means of achieving and defending status (Forret 142). While Southern gentry, in Twain’s novel, is depicted as defending their status via dueling and a family feud, the loafers in the small Arkansas-town, who hold no property or slaves as chattel, are reduced to either fighting each other or tormenting stray dogs. Racist aggression is

also described as a way poor whites channel discontent and frustration against enslaved people who can be easily victimized. Such violence also reinforces the division between those impoverished and those exploited by a slave economy.[11]

- 29 Twain's novel gives us two version of the loafer: Huck, who seems to point back to Whitman and the *Knickerbocker*, and the town loafers who resemble violent figures in Douglass and Stowe. The latter are characterized by a resentment notably missing in Hucks outlook. They feel they have been shortchanged, and the misgivings over the insult and the diffuse lack of something that they feel entitled to, turns them into potentially dangerous actors. The tavern and small-town scenes in Stowe, Douglass, and Twain are infused with latent danger that stems from the awareness that the smallest incident may transform the idyll into a bloodbath. What appears like a mix of curiosity and country boredom may prove explosive as loafers turn hostile towards a stray dog, a boy, or a stranger in a precarious position.
- 30 Sianne Ngai describes *ressentiment* as an "ugly feeling," but also a lesser feeling that ranks below the great topical passions of love or hate or anger (33). And yet *ressentiment* may turn from latent discontent and frustration, the nagging sensation of a "lesser" affect, into violence that gains momentum not through individual motivation but through collective dynamics. Jumping in scale from individual to collective sentiment, it can fuel a dynamics of group formation, turning the group of single loafers into a mob. In *Masse und Macht* (1960), Elias Canetti catalogues dynamics of group formation as emergent, unplanned phenomena and describes specifically the "Hetzmeute" (chapter 1.16, 31–33) to explain how mobs which form rapidly and seemingly spontaneously, expel and individuals in order to isolate them as targets; this is the mechanism that enables collective killing. That the death of a victim disperses the lynch mob as rapidly as it congealed, makes it an ideal mechanism of affect katharsis for totalitarian leaders, who might otherwise be threatened by a collective discontent (31–33).

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## Notes

[1] See Walt Whitman Archive as an excellent and well-curated digital resource and for first edition facsimile reproductions.

[2] The tramp and the hobo become social figures of mobility and homelessness, as itinerant workers moved between urban and rural regions, seeking a livelihood in seasonal labor, working in forests, on farms, in mines, and on infrastructure like canal and railway work, well before the mass displacement of farmers in the ecological disaster of the dustbowl and the ensuing “Okie” migrations of the depression era. Evolving along the lines of railway infrastructure, the hobo was originally an itinerant worker who developed into the political symbol of a wandering agitator. In the United States, the term tramp, with reference to transient workers, enters popular use in the 1870s, and is especially connected to the political struggle over the railway strikes of 1877.

[3] See the Library of Congress Rare Book & Special Collections Division for a *Leaves of Grass* first edition: The frontispiece shows a Samuel Hollyer engraving based on a Gabriel Harrison daguerreotype, dated Brooklyn 1855. The fifth edition (1872) used a W.J. Hennessey engraving of the elder Whitman, less dapper, more bearded and grizzled, but in a similar style.

[4] Two editorials are labeled “no. 9” in the “Sun-Down Papers.” The first appeared in the Long-Island Democrat as part of its November 1840 issue, the second in the 6 July 1841 issue (usually labelled no.9 bis). For an overview of the publication history, its reception, and full reprints see the well-curated digital resources of the Walt Whitman Archive.

[5] The annotated edition mentions previous uses of the term in the Knickerbocker and also cites the July 10th, 1830 issue of Mechanic’s Press which the author of this article could not track down.

[6] Serial publication in the National Era started in June 1851 and the tavern scene (Chapter XI) was published on August 14, 1851 (cf. <https://nationalera.wordpress.com/table-of-contents/>).

[7] While the copyright of *The Heroic Slave*’s first edition is for 1853, the novella is likely to have been published in December 1852, possibly to meet the giftbook market for Christmas (see the “Note on the Text” in the Yale Critical Edition).



[8] Archive.org makes various early editions of Beecher Stowe’s *Key* digitally accessible, for a more readable rendering see also the University of Virginia’s digital resources on *Uncle Tom’s Cabin & American Culture*.

[9] For the published legal documentation see <https://casetext.com/case/southern-v-commonwealth>

[10] The fact that Huck lives in a barrel seems an apparent allusion to the stoic Diogenes, who preached poverty and freedom from material possessions, and whom Whitman had also referenced as forefather of all loafers (*Sun-Down Papers*, No. 9).

[11] In 1906, John T. Campbell writes in *The Broad Axe*, a weekly African American magazine in Chicago: “In the United States the poor white were encourage to hate the Negroes because they could then be used to help hold the Negroes in slavery. The Negroes were taught to show contempt for the poor whites because this would increase the hatred between them and each side could be used by the master to control the other. The real interest of the poor whites and the Negroes were the same, that of resisting the oppression of the master class. But ignorance stood in the way. [...] The poor whites are almost as much injured by [the race hatred] as are the Negroes.” N.p.; facsimile print in [https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/data/batches/iune\\_charlie\\_ver01/data/sn84024055/00280761047/1906122901/0501.pdf](https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/data/batches/iune_charlie_ver01/data/sn84024055/00280761047/1906122901/0501.pdf).

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