

# Vulnerable White Men and Sexual Citizenship: Charles Ray Sculptures

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## Abstract:

This essay examines tensions in white men's public sexualities. Norms of sexual citizenship in the United States hide from public view vulnerable white men—naked and queer—especially in public art. In summer 2015, the Art Institute of Chicago showcased a major exhibit—Charles Ray Sculptures 1997–2014—that disrupted extant civil and legal models of citizenship that view white men as sexually unobjectified and impenetrable. The exhibit foreshadows queer nature—constructed and embodied—as a sexual citizenship model emphasizing diverse masculinities that crosscut ages, races, genders, and sexualities. Ray's work represents vulnerable naked and queer men as an integral part of American life from childhood to adulthood, including men in the classic American novel, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Ray presents vulnerable, embodied white men as both omnipresent and invisible. To disembody—disarticulate, erase, deny, shame into closets—the bodies of naked and queer men is to strip men of sexual citizenship. The disembodied sexual man compartmentalizes and severs his whole, despite representations that he is impenetrable, not vulnerable. Ray's exhibit—a queer nature, an indoor park—constructs part of what is missing in sexual citizenship.

**Key words:** Sexual citizenship, queer theory, Charles Ray, public art, male nude sculpture, *Huckleberry Finn*

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## Savunmasız Beyaz Erkekler ve Cinsel Vatandaşlık: Charles Ray Heykelleri

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### Özet:

Bu makale, beyaz erkeklerin kamusal cinselliklerindeki gerginlikleri incelemektedir. Amerika Birleşik Devletleri'ndeki cinsel vatandaşlık normları savunmasız beyaz erkekleri – çıplak ve kuir- özellikle kamusal sanatta saklı tutmaktadır. 2015 yazında, Chicago Sanat Enstitüsü beyaz erkekleri nesnelleştirilmemiş ve nüfuz edilemeyen olarak gören mevcut sivil ve yasal vatandaşlık modellerini bozan önemli bir sergiyi –Charles Ray Heykelleri 1997-2014- vitrine çıkardı. Sergi – inşa edilmiş ve somutlaştırılmış – kuir doğasını, yaşı, ırkları, toplumsal cinsiyetleri ve cinsellikleri çaprazlayan çeşitli erkeklikleri vurgulayan bir cinsel vatandaşlık modeli olarak öngörmektedir. Ray'in eserleri, klasik Amerikan romanı Huckleberry Finn'in Maceraları'ndaki erkekler de dahil olmak üzere, savunmasız çıplak ve kuir erkekleri çocukluktan yetişkinliğe Amerikan hayatının ayrılmaz bir parçası olarak temsil etmektedir. Ray, savunmasız ve somutlaştırılmış beyaz erkekleri hem her yerde var olan hem de görünmez olarak sunmaktadır. Çıplak ve kuir erkeklerin vücutlarını bedensellikten ayırmak, parçalamak, silmek, reddetmek veya gizli kalması için utandırmak erkekleri cinsel vatandaşlıklarından soymaktır. Bedensellikten ayrılmış cinsel erkek nüfuz edilemeyen ve savunmasız olmayan temsiline rağmen kendi bütünlüğünü bölümlere ayırır ve bütünlüğüne zarar verir. Ray'in sergisi – bir queer doğası, bir kapalı park- cinsel vatandaşlıkta eksik olan bir parçayı inşa etmektedir.

**Anahtar kelimeler:** Cinsel vatandaşlık, kuir teori, Charles Ray, kamusal sanat, çıplak erkek heykel, Huckleberry Finn

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Norms of sexual citizenship in the United States hide from public view vulnerable white men—naked and queer—especially in public art. In summer 2015, the Art Institute of Chicago showcased a major exhibit—Charles Ray Sculptures 1997–2014—that disrupted extant civil and legal models of citizenship that view white men as sexually unobjectified and impenetrable. The exhibit foreshadows queer nature—constructed and embodied—as a sexual citizenship model emphasizing diverse masculinities that crosscut ages, races, genders, and sexualities. Ray’s work represents vulnerable naked and queer men as an integral part of American life from childhood to adulthood, including men in the classic American novel, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*.

Ray disrupts public/private binaries in sexual citizenship by constructing inside a building a park filled with vulnerable white men—queer and naked subject-objects rarely seen in the art world and more rarely seen in public spaces. With curator James Rondeau, Ray constructed a queer nature inside the Modern Wing. The cleared-out second floor, flanked by windows overlooking Millennium Park in downtown Chicago, left a large open space for about two dozen of Ray’s sculptures, all life-size or better. Museum visitors milled about the sculptures in a park-like setting, mimicking citizens in Millennium Park milling about benches, trees, art installations, and children splashing in a fountain/wading pool. The exhibit was queer nature—an artificial or counterfeit nature that replicates and passes as something else conceived as authentic. Queer nature disrupts the binary of conceptualizing queer and nature as co-constitutive opposites, like “landscape architecture”—a human-constructed nature—disrupts thinking that nature includes only elements not made by humans (see Schmidt 2014, analyzing the queer nature of waste in John Ashbery’s poetry). Just as landscape architecture exposes the permeable boundaries between nature and culture, Ray exposes the permeable boundaries between public and private sexualities in his indoor park of sculptures.

Ray's sculptures replicate common public parks: a boy plays with a car, a woman sleeps on a bench, an adolescent boy dressed as a Roman soldier performs in a play, a boy marvels at a frog he holds by its leg, a mime sleeps/performs on a cot, a man crouches to tie his shoelaces, a man hands his wife posies. There is a felled, decaying tree, Ray's version of a jungle gym (a tractor), and Mark Twain's characters, Huckleberry Finn and Jim.<sup>1</sup>

Ray's indoor park has a queer nature compared to traditional parks it replicates. Regardless of race and sex, people in Ray's park are monochromatic: polished versions of their silvery mediums (aluminum and stainless steel) or painted alabaster. Ray's park feels artificial and sterile, showing humans and nature without the spectrum of colors observed in outdoor parks. That Ray's park is inside the Institute emphasizes that seeing the queer park requires paying admission to a private museum, unlike Millennium Park, available to citizens at no cost. Only those who have the ability and desire to pay museum admission can see, and tacitly agree to see, Ray's naked men and boys; others are denied access.

This public/private distinction underscores legal and social norms that relegate men's sexualities to private spaces and prohibit public sexual expression. Sexual citizenship concerns the extent to which citizens receive liberties, equalities, autonomies, and dignities based on adherence to social and legal sexual norms (Eichner 2009). "Queer sexual citizenship" is seemingly paradoxical, since sexual citizenship is based on adherence to social norms and queerism is an ideological commitment to transgressing norms. Legally, queer sexualities are protected in private spaces. The U.S. Supreme Court in *Lawrence v. Texas* (2003) declared unconstitutional state proscriptions of consensual, adult sexual conduct in domestic spheres. The Court reasoned that states impermissible intrude on citizens' rights to privacy when they criminalize certain acts of sexual intimacy. Decriminalizing private intimate conduct was a leap forward in sexual citizenship jurisprudence, but it legitimated norms that expressions of sexuality are inherently private. Protecting private sexualities concomitantly constructs norms

that public sexualities are not protected. Queer sexual citizenship in public spaces remains controversial, and shifts in cultural norms do not always coincide with legal norms. For example, gender and sex hierarchies continue to exist despite laws prohibiting employment discrimination based on sex. The extant model of sexual citizenship is one that objectifies women's bodies and disembodies men. Concealing men's penises epitomizes this hegemonic norm and is reinforced by laws proscribing public indecency.

Shifts in public/private sexualities often occur through social movements supported by popular culture. This is where Charles Ray influences understandings of public sexuality. Ahead of social norms, he helps us envision possibilities for sexual citizenship in at least two ways. First, by making visible that which we do not often see (naked men and naked men interacting with one another), he reveals that most museum-goers are not offended seeing nude male bodies and to a lesser extent, queerness. Second, by making invisible what we take for granted in uncontroverted social life, he disrupts sexual citizenship assumptions.

### **Sexual Citizenship for Boys and Men**

Ray's men, ranging in age from five to sixty, shows the trajectory of sexual citizenship norms as men move from childhood into adolescence and into adulthood. The "accidental trilogy" is three sculptures of the same boy at three different ages. In *The New Beetle*, the boy is about five. Unaware of his nakedness, he attends to a toy car, a Volkswagen Beetle. In *Boy with Frog*, the boy is eight. Naked, he fixes his attention on a large frog he holds by one leg. In *School Play*, the adolescent boy performs as a Roman soldier; a t-shirt and toga conceal his body, and he holds a sword. The trilogy is accidental since Ray did not sculpt them to be seen together. *Boy with Frog* was a commissioned piece that stood alone outside the Punta della Dogana in Venice, Italy.

Ray hyper-details and hyper-texturizes certain parts of his sculptures; he deemphasizes other parts by smoothing them. In the

accidental trilogy, Ray sculpts in detail the stereotypically male objects the boy holds in every age—car, frog, and sword. In *Boy with Frog*, he smoothes the boy's nipples and penis compared to the hyper-textured frog skin, as if to parody the attention we give to other things when a penis is visible. We divert our eyes and look at frogs and cars, anything to avoid looking at the penis. He blurs that which society tells us we should not see and hyper-texturizes what society validates as appropriate objects of our attention. When a person develops a larger penis and testicles and body hair, diverting our attentions toward other objects is more difficult. When men's genitals cannot be ignored, we cover them, as in *School Play* where the adolescent is not only dressed, but anachronistically overdressed. He wears a t-shirt under his toga so not even his shoulders are bare and so there is no glimpse of armpit hair. The accidental trilogy reflects sexual citizenship norms where it is acceptable to be a young boy playing naked with a toy car or a pre-pubescent boy trampling naked in nature looking for frogs. Once boys enter adolescence, they are expected to perform masculinities that involve covering their bodies and carrying swords. Boys' bodies become less visible as they age.

In the same exhibit, Ray offers a different view of public male sexuality for adult men. In two sculptures—*Young Man* and *Shoe Tie*—adult men are fully naked. Ray's subject-object in *Young Man* is one of his assistants: a man in his thirties holds a solemn expression as if he is aware of his own nakedness and aware that others (Ray) are seeing him and sexualizing him. Unlike the idealized image of a white man in Michelangelo's iconic, *David*, *Young Man* is an average white man: bulging sides, bearded, a medium-sized penis (circumcised), and thick pubic hair. Unlike the boys in the accidental trilogy, this man holds no toys or objects to distract our attention from his body. Ray hyper-details the young man's hair (head, facial, and pubic), inviting us to look intently at the man's body, including his genitals, in ways that do not feel perverse. In my experience, I was an average white man connecting with the likeness of another average white man. I wanted to touch him, but I was not allowed. The man does not touch himself. He stands upright with

his arms hanging freely at his sides. Ray constructs a sexualized naked man, without having him touch his own body, in contrast to the token woman in the exhibit (Aluminum Girl), whose hands rest on her thighs and who, by the way, has no pubic hair and visible, hyper-detailed labia minora and clitoris. Even if the man was not touching himself and if museum policies prevented me from touching him, my connection with Young Man was a moment I have experienced infrequently as a queer man—to be sexually aroused by and openly attentive to a naked man in the full light of day alongside women, men, children, and security guards. Looking at Young Man's full pubic bush, facial beard, and bulging mid-section, I overheard a woman say to another, "He looks like my husband." Young Man offers a different view of masculinity in sexual citizenship. Museum visitors were not only unalarmed by seeing a naked white man, but they seemed, as I did, to connect with his vulnerabilities and masculinities.

The second sculpture that disrupts normalized narratives that men should be clothed and desexualized in public spaces is Shoe Tie. Here, Ray's subject is his own body. In his early sixties, Ray crouches naked to tie his shoelaces. Neither the shoes nor the laces are there, so like Young Man, Ray includes nothing to divert our attention away from his naked body. Ray's inspiration for Shoe Tie comes from his routine mountain hikes before dawn, where mountain lions are common and where literature advises hikers not to bend over to tie shoes making themselves vulnerable to lion attacks (Catalogue 2014, 134). The crouched position is a vulnerable one not often seen in men's sexual citizenship, so I welcomed Ray depicting his vulnerabilities against lions, consciously transgressing common cautions. Ray exacerbates vulnerability by exposing his entire naked body in a bent-over, crouched position where arguably the armature of the sculpture is not the space between his fingers where one would expect to see shoelaces, but the space between his genitals and the earth: his scrotum, suspended from his groin, hovers over the ground. Both his genitals and the earth are nature even if we construct and conceptualize spaces and policies that view the two as separable. It is queer nature to acknowledge that socially

constructed sexualities and masculinities are as much part of nature as the non-human-made elements in the environment. Like the energy in the space between the eight-year-old boy's eyes and the frog's body, the armature of Shoe Tie is the mutable space between Ray's genitals and the mountain upon which he crouches—the spaces between men's natural bodies and natural otherness.

These sculptures are queer in part because the person experiencing them (me) is queer. Other perspectives, like the woman who said Young Man looked like her husband, are less queer in the sense of gay/straight binaries, but queer in the way one experiences sexuality in public spaces, regardless of gender. Each sculpture has certain queerness individually, but collectively displayed in an artificial park the monochromatic sculptures are decidedly queerer than contemporary sexual norms. One sculpture is obviously queer irrespective of the sexuality of the viewer. Huck and Jim is Ray's queerest piece and provides leverage for sexual citizenship analyses.

### **Huck and Jim: Homoeroticism and Patriarchy among Boys and Men**

One must read the wall placard to learn the subjects of the sculpture are Mark Twain's protagonists from *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Huck Finn is running away from an abusive father and an aunt hell-bent on reforming his vulgar ways. With his companion, Jim—a run-away slave owned by Huck's aunt—Huck flees his oppressors on a raft down the Mississippi River. Knowing the story taints how I view Ray's sculpture, but Ray's sculpture complicates Twain's story about American life, compelling me to read it differently. Of this sculpture, Ray asks whether the viewer can “negotiate the sexual politics” of a naked fourteen-year-old white boy and a naked twenty-eight-year-old black man (Catalogue 2014, 142). This negotiation depends in part on whether one is familiar with Twain's story.





[Insert Figure 1 about here]

Figure 1: Huck and Jim (2014), Author Photo

When I first viewed the sculpture, I was unaware the two men were Twain's characters. I immediately saw homoeroticism: one man bends over, the other stands upright. At 150% scale, the upright man's penis is at eye level. His penis is not circumcised, unlike the other men and boys in Ray's exhibit. My eyes are drawn to the bending man's hand, the object of his own attention as he scoops something unseen. Suspended in motion, Ray captures the instant just before the bending man must shift his footing to maintain balance. The hand of the upright man hovers over his back ready to steady him. While the bending man focuses on his own hand, the upright man focuses on something distant: his eyes are hollow with an introspective gaze. Both figures are painted white, but features other than skin color indicate they have different races. The upright man has curly hair, a broader nose, and fuller lips. Perhaps he is biracial; his facial features resemble black men and white men alike. The other man has straighter, wavy hair, much like a white man. I observed a sensual, sexual relationship between them. The armature of this piece—the greatest curiosity and energy—is the space where a hand hovers over a back. Why are they not touching?

There are no objects in the sculpture to distract us from looking at the men's bodies. Ray hyper-details the hair on the young man's head and the pubic hair of the upright man: holes leading inward provide depth. Ray also sculpts great details in their hands and feet—highly visible palm creases, toenails, and thumb wrinkles. One might look past the sculpture to see Millennium Park through the window, but one cannot avoid looking at the men's bodies.

It is not obvious that the man bending over is a boy. His bent body largely conceals tell-tale signs of age—genitals, face, and torso. One cannot see readily that these body parts are not fully developed. One can, however, crouch and contort to see the concealed body parts enough to discern that the man is a young one. His pubic hair is hardly developed and the penis length is shorter than the penis of the upright man. There are two folds of skin bunched at the head of his penis, but none covering the head, which is not small. Nor are his testicles small. More visible from the back of the sculpture, his testicles and scrotum suspend freely from a

central apex near his anus. But these genital details do not foreclose manhood based on age. Many adult men have shorter penises and shave their pubic hair. He is probably a younger man because he is slim with taut, unwrinkled skin. His face is boyish, but one almost has to lie on the floor and look upwards to see it. The upright man is unquestionably adult. His body is maturely formed with visible pectoral muscles, a full pubic bush, a longer penis, fuller testicles, and a squared face. His body parts are proportional and have no fatty areas characteristic in boys' faces, arms, legs, and abdomens. The point is not to extol a quintessential man's body, but to say that one can reasonably know the upright man is adult and the other is a younger man.

If one is uncertain about the age of the bending man, one can be certain there is sensitivity between the naked men, a bond. The obvious bond is a sexual one: a man bends over to be penetrated by another standing man. The image of a penetrated male conjures heteronormativity and constructs sexual hierarchies out of gender hierarchies where one man replicates the passive role of woman (Kemp 2013). Norms of sexual citizenship conceptualize sexually passive men as vulnerable, unlike Kemp, who views penetrations of the body as powerful, as when sound penetrates the ear (2013). We wonder whether Ray's penetrated man is powerful or vulnerably in need of patriarchal protection. The upright man reaches to touch the other in a fatherly way, but it is not obvious he is the boy's father, since they are different races. (Apologies to my own family: I am a white man, guardian of my biracial nephew, whose race is both white and black. I also note that Ray's *Two Boys*, a bas relief in the exhibit, depicts two brothers who have different racial characteristics.) The relationship Ray creates is sensitively patriarchal, protectionist, and nurturing, but one wonders whether the two are father and son; overt homoeroticism and different races suggest otherwise.

Reading the wall placard and learning that the subjects were Huck and Jim both validated and complicated these observations. Huck is a fourteen-year-old white adolescent; Jim is a twenty-eight-year-old black man. They are not father and son. I was familiar with Twain's story, but I

did not recall the overt homoeroticism I saw in Ray's representation. Had I ever even read the story? I bought the novel.

The novel contains intimate conversations between Huck and Jim, both naked on the raft, such as the one Ray uses as inspiration for his sculpture:

Soon as it was night, out we shoved; when we got her out to about the middle, we let her alone, and let her float wherever the current wanted her to; then we lit the pipes, and dangled our legs in the water and talked about all kinds of things—we was always naked, day and night, whenever the mosquitoes would let us—the new clothes Buck's folks made for me was too good to be comfortable, and besides I didn't go much on clothes, nohow . . .

It's lovely to live on a raft. We had the sky, up there, all speckled with stars, and we used to lay on our backs and look up at them, and discuss about whether they was made, or only just happened. Jim he allowed they was made, but I allowed they happened; I judged it would have took too long to make so many. Jim said the moon could a laid them; well, that looked kind of reasonable, so I didn't say nothing against it, because I've seen a frog lay most as many, so of course it could be done (Twain 2012 (1884), 123-24, emphasis in original).

Ray's representation of Huck and Jim is a moment when Huck is scooping frog eggs from the water; he originally conceived the sculpture as an outdoor fountain. Huck's embodied approach to understanding stars comes in his attempts to concretize what he can know with his own body—see, feel, scoop. Huck references a tangible framework for how the moon could have birthed the stars by connecting his natural body with other elements in nature.

Viewers familiar with Twain's story can similarly use the novel to concretize what we observe in Ray's sculpture, namely, the age and race

of the subjects; but knowing the story also complicates the experience because it does not align with the homoeroticism in Ray's sculpture. Jim's relationship to Huck in the novel is patriarchal: he takes longer shifts at night so Huck can rest, and he shields Huck from seeing his father's dead body. They are companions working, eating, and resting together on a raft down the tranquil and violent Mississippi River. Their relationship is, at once, patriarchal and homoerotic. One can imagine Huck and Jim being intimate with one another.

Suggesting homoeroticism between Jim (a man) and Huck (barely a man) broaches taboos surrounding children and sexual citizenship. Ray is important to sexual citizenship discourse because he forces us to consider how we negotiate the sexual politics between an adolescent white boy and an adult black man. When I discuss this sculpture with friends and colleagues, they raise concerns about power imbalances in sexual relationships among adults and children. They fixate on whether fourteen-year-old Huck can truly consent to sexual intimacy with twenty-eight-year-old Jim. The power imbalances associated with age become a litmus test for the legitimacy of sexual intimacy. Arguably, however, Huck has more power than Jim in this context. Despite Huck's resistance to his aunt's efforts to refine and educate him according to Christian values, he is more educated and socialized than his aunt's slave. Too, the white adolescent has a broader understanding of sexual citizenship norms. He is, after all, white and free. Jim is black and a slave. Age may be an indicator of sexual agency, but the cultural intersections surrounding race and education suggest the power imbalance does not tilt in Jim's favor. Huck is as likely as Jim to be aware of perceived social sexual transgressions related to age, race, and sex. Twain notes that Jim is married and has two children, which further complicates patriarchal and homoerotic narratives, but sexual citizenship norms are preoccupied with sexual power imbalances connected with age, not unlike power imbalances in Nabakov's *Lolita* (*Lolita* is twelve, Humbert around thirty-seven). Unlike *Lolita*, there are no explicit sexual relationships or desires described in *Huckleberry Finn*. The most explicit reference in the novel is the passage quoted above, which is not explicit; sexual references are

implied contextually in their nakedness, companionship, and conversational sensitivities. Yet, after seeing Ray's homoerotic representation of Huck and Jim, it is difficult to see Twain's characters as purely nonsexual.

Ray's sculpture challenges socially and legally constructed age lenses through which one sees young men (boys) as sexual citizens. By age fourteen, boys are aware of their sexual bodies—arousals from visual and physical stimuli, certain pleasures from stimulating the penis, bodily fluids that excrete in sleep. Sexual citizenship norms relegate these realities to private spaces, where young men exploring, for example, masturbation, do so only in bedrooms, bathrooms, or other private spaces. Despite these common experiences, young men learn that it is taboo to discuss their sexual bodies in public and more taboo to see or experience sexual bodies with others.

Consent is not the thrust of this essay; I do not argue that full sexual citizenship includes adults' unfettered sexual access to children. Instead, Ray's depiction of Huck and Jim compels reexamining age assumptions in sexuality when age is the language we use to describe white men's vulnerabilities. Fears of adult men sexually abusing vulnerable boys too often foreclose acknowledgements that boys have sexualities. Whether it is okay for a twenty-eight-year old man to have a sexual relationship with a fourteen-year-old man is different from asking whether the fourteen-year-old has sexuality or whether he is a sexual citizen. Huck is caught between boyhood and manhood, so are his genitals: more than a boy, not yet a fully formed man. This intermediate position disrupts the child/sex binary, even if we do not see the sexual boy in society with his naked body in the full light of day. Ray's sculpture acknowledges that sexual citizenship norms are constructed at early ages in ways that reinforce private sexualities and in ways that erase portions of men's sexualities. Society associates pathologies and maladies with childhood sexuality, such as the emerging porn "addiction" in a generation of young men who have ready access to sexual stimuli on the Internet that prevent them from having sexual relations with other people without pornography. Society views Internet

sexualities as problematic. This essay is not a treatise on the benefits of Internet pornography anymore than it is an essay that addresses the contours of consent, but these examples point to social constructions of sexualities in boys, which develop differently from what most people acknowledge as natural. But for Ray bringing childhood sexuality, with its taboos and constructions, into public discourse for critical analyses, boyhood sexuality remains missing in sexual citizenship discourse.

A characteristic of Ray's work is missing elements. In *Horse and Rider*—the only sculpture in the exhibit located in an adjacent courtyard open to the public, outside the Institute's Modern Wing—Ray sculpts his aging self, clothed in denim and a long sleeve shirt, sitting on an aging horse. The bridle connecting Ray's hands to the horse's bit is missing. In *Shoe Tie*, the laces are not there, nor are Ray's shoes or his clothes. Missing in many of Ray's sculptures is clothes, but also pubic hair on an adult woman (*Aluminum Girl*) or foreskin on the penises of white men. The only nude black man, Jim, has intact foreskin, not uncommon for a black slave. The powerful missing element in *Huck and Jim* is not their clothes or Huck's foreskin, but the touch between Huck and Jim. The space Ray sculpts between Jim's hand and Huck's back is a moment when we see no physical contact, but know that queerness exists. From Ray's representation, touching would have seemed as natural as their feet standing on the raft or water splashing on their legs. It would not alarm Huck or change his expression if Jim's hand touched his back. Neither would Jim's stature or expression change. What may have changed is public reaction to seeing the two men touching. It is one thing to know men have sexual, intimate relationships in private; one can accept it by not thinking about it. It is more difficult, obviously, to escape thinking about man-man intimacy when it confronts us in visible publics. The first time I saw two men holding hands in public was jarring, even if my reaction was ultimately positive. When I first saw *Huck and Jim*, it was equally jarring because it was uncommon, not because it was offensive. Omitting touch, Ray causes us to reflect upon the implications of seeing and not seeing man-man intimacy. The homoerotic energy that runs through the hand-back space symbolizes homoeroticism in Twain's

novel and men's public sexualities—touches and experiences are omnipresent even if we never actually see them.

Not only are we forbidden from seeing Jim touch Huck, we are also forbidden from touching the art. Touching was forbidden at the Ray exhibit, even *Horse and Rider* in the outdoor plaza. In the time it took to eat an apple, the security guard stationed at *Horse and Rider* said twenty or thirty times to passersby, “No touching. No touching. No touching.” People wanted to connect with the horse, even if it was queer-natured—solid stainless steel, monochromatic—like the polished stainless steel naked man with bulging sides. Inside the exhibit, the “no-touch” norm is even more symbolic. The five-year-old boy (*The New Beetle*) is protected by an electronic sensor that sounds when someone gets too close. Notwithstanding safety precautions associated with not noticing a small child sitting on a floor, it sounded repeatedly, even for cautious visitors fully aware of the sculpture's presence. They wanted to be closer to the boy than the Institute allowed. Ironically, the Institute sponsored a companion lecture series with Ray's exhibit entitled, *Connecting with the Contemporary*. Connections with art, it appears, are like men's public sexual citizenship: they must occur in ways that do not involve touching. In the outdoor plaza, people touched (men and women, parents and children). I saw no men together, except fathers and sons. I spied one man, who was there alone. I took his picture. He left. This public space, accessible to anyone, was not nearly as queer as inside the Modern Wing. It was not queer, except for me and Ray on his horse. There was no visible queerness.

### **Politics and Perspectives in Queer Sexual Citizenship and Public Art**

Ray's queerness has a fuller political story that complicates this analysis of men's public/private sexualities. Two sculptures in the exhibit are scaled larger than life—*Boy with Frog* and *Huck and Jim*—because Ray conceptualized them for outdoor spaces and both were ultimately rejected. *Boy with Frog* stood for several years in front



of the Punta della Dogana in Venice. The sculpture replaced a lamppost popular in wedding and visitor photographs. Ray notes:

The artfulness of my work was to find just the right scale. He's a boy and holds his ground in front of a constellation of art and architecture. He stands amid a sea of tourists, Venetians, and the daily activity of one of the world's most famous cities. I wanted him to become a citizen, but politics removed him. . . . [A] populist politician—propelled by social media—has the old green lamppost back, and Boy with Frog is without a permanent home (Catalogue 2014, 124).

The politics of a lamppost denied Boy with Frog sexual citizenship, a place visible to publics.

Similarly, Huck and Jim has no permanent home in visible publics. The Whitney Museum in New York City commissioned Ray to design a sculpture for the outdoor plaza of its new space in lower Manhattan, but ultimately rejected it for reasons stemming from the museum's "growing concern that this particular image of a naked African-American man and a naked white teen-ager in close proximity, presented in a public space with no other art works to provide context, might offend non-museumgoing visitors—thousands of whom pass through the area every day" (Tompkins 2015). As Calvin Tompkins described in *The New Yorker*, "It was the recurrent public-art problem: once you go into a museum, you have agreed (tacitly, anyway) to put up with all sorts of visual affronts, but, if you're just walking by outside, you haven't." The result is denying queer Huck and queer Jim sexual citizenship. When Ray asks whether the viewer can negotiate the sexual politics, the Whitney's response was not affirmative.

While I applaud the Art Institute for giving Huck and Jim a temporary home inside its queer-nature park, I would be remiss not to draw parallels to sexual citizenship in the decision not to display the sculpture in outdoor spaces. I have already discussed the problems of scale in the space where Huck and Jim stood in the exhibit—flanked by

three walls (the fourth a bank of windows overlooking Millennium Park) with two doors, one a glass door, the other an opening into a corridor beneath the stairs. The Institute curated Huck and Jim inside a closet, apart from the main exhibit spaces with the other sculptures. More symbolically, Huck and Jim was too large for its closet. Containment policies aimed at keeping queerness out of public view are as awkwardly constructed as the Institute's glass closet. At least we saw and felt that Huck and Jim were too confined and would be better positioned as an outdoor fountain. Until then, only the few of us who visited the Institute were privileged to see naked men and queerness in public spaces. Even if his queers were closeted in a corner by the exit—at the end after visitors had already been desensitized to seeing nude males—at least the closet was glass and at least it was part of the mainstream of the exhibit's traffic channel.

Queer normalization undergirds nonplused reactions of friends and colleagues with whom I have shared my experience with the Ray exhibit. Queer theorists' argue that normalizing queers will be the death of queers and queer theory. If sexual transgression becomes normal, sexual transgression ceases to be queer, by definition. I prefer queer extinction through visibility and normalization over extinction through erasure and closets. In some regards it is unremarkable that the Institute displayed nude male sculptures. We have seen Ron Mueck's hyperrealistic naked men and Ray's own body in early performance art (e.g., *Shelf* (1981), *Road Warrior* (1983), *Gangrene* (1981–85)). Ray's exhibit, however, is not only about nude men as subjects (it is surely that); it is also about queerness coming out and claiming public spaces. It is about Ray bringing vulnerable naked men and queer men into political discourses in democratic life, the touchstone of citizenship.

In the exhibit's closing lecture, Annie Morse of the Art Institute said Huck and Jim was virtually uncontroversial based upon visitor feedback, suggesting that queerness may shifting toward the new normal. The most controversial was *Sleeping Woman*; the subject is a black woman Ray spotted on a walk through Los Angeles. She was

sleeping on a bench at a busy corner, and Ray decided she would make a good sculpture, noting, “I was taken by the enormous size of her ass” (Catalogue 2014, 132). After taking hundreds of photographic images of her, he realized once he was home that he missed critical images for a sculpture. Forty-five minutes later, he returned to the woman still sleeping and took more pictures, which he used to sculpt her three-dimensional likeness in solid stainless steel. She never knew. If Ray’s exhibit heightens the visibility of naked and queer men, there remains a relative invisibility of racial diversity in art and sexual citizenship. In one visit to the exhibit, I observed the races of other visitors in one moment in one section. Of twenty-five people, four were people of color, of whom two were security guards. The comparison is the myriad of racial diversity in the adjacent Millennium Park.

Images of women’s sexual citizenship are also incomplete. The Guerrilla Girls for three decades have noted hierarchies in art and society related to men. Their poster depicts a nude woman wearing a gorilla mask and asks, “Do women have to be naked to get into the Met Museum?” The accompanying 1989 statistic reads, “Less than 5% of the artists in the Modern Art sections are women, but 85% of the nudes are female.” These numbers are relatively unchanged: 3% and 83% in 2005; 4% and 76% in 2012. Sexual citizenship discourses are necessarily incomplete when they exclude diverse perspectives, but Ray’s work challenges norms where only women are objectified and sexualized. The Guerrilla Girls might not view Ray’s exhibit as progress, since the political thrust is to increase works by women, not necessarily the number of male nudes. Still, Ray’s work disrupts power imbalance in gender hierarchies that make hegemonic the invisibility of vulnerable masculinities. He provides an overlooked perspective, even if it is a white man’s perspective. Everything said here and everything we know about the black man, Jim, is through the perspective of white men—this essay’s author (a white man) analyzes the sculpture of a white man (Ray) whose work is based on the novel of a white man (Twain) about a white man (Huck) telling his story about a black man (Jim). White men’s perspectives are limited. Still, I am a queer man struggling (always, it

seems) to navigate the politics of public queerness, never knowing the extent to which queerness may manifest permissibly.

Because of Ray's exhibit, I can imagine queer possibilities, even if others—at least one other white man—cannot. I witnessed the Art Institute turning away a young white man because he could not pay admission. The Institute's companion lectures cost \$12.00 if you attend on Thursday evenings when the Institute is open to Chicago residents at no charge. If one attends a lecture at other times, one must purchase an entry ticket (\$25.00) in addition to the lecture fee. On a Tuesday, I complained at having to buy an admission ticket to hear a public lecture. The woman assigned to deal with grumbling museum visitors reminded me that the Art Institute is not a public museum. "This is not a public lecture," she said, "we are a private institution." In my grumbings at being directed to the membership counter, I regret not offering to sponsor the commiserating young man who was denied admission. He left. I regret that he, like other citizens, was unable to see more clearly what is missing in sexual citizenship. I grew up poor in a fundamentalist Christian, rural, southern state. I know what it is like not to see yourself in society, or the inside of an art museum for that matter. I regret that economics along with race and sex and gender and age limit our knowledge and experiences of sexual citizenship.

What this young man missed by not seeing the exhibit or attending the lecture (titled "Art in Flux") is the queerness of Charles Ray. Contemporary art is in flux, departing from classical periods where paintings and sculptures are viewed best from one perspective. The classical Laocoön and His Sons in white marble is quintessential: viewers gain little from perspectives at the sides or rear of the three naked men intertwined with an accosting serpent; the "sweet spot" apparently is from the front, just right of center. Artists in the classical period manipulated and controlled viewers to see works through only one perspective, similar to sexual citizenship scholars such as Angela P. Harris (1990) who suggests the objective perspective of "We the people" forces us to presume there is only one correct, legal perspective. For Harris, these attitudes erase black women's perspectives. She favors the

phrase “multiple consciousness,” where legal and literary discourses are complex struggles and “unending dialogues” among voices and where multiple consciousness recognizes no essentialized self but “a welter of partial, sometimes contradictory, or even antithetical ‘selves’” (1990, 584). I understand contemporary art the way Harris understands sexual citizenship: individual and collective consciousnesses are not fixed but are “process[es] in which propositions are constantly put forth, challenged, and subverted”(584). Essentialism silences voices of black women and queer men. Conversely, diverse perspectives destabilize essentialist thinking that privileges whiteness and heteronormativity as universally “citizen.”

Contemporary art invites varying perspectives of distance and vantage-point. From the front, *School Play* (2014) shows an adolescent boy costumed as a Roman soldier in a make-shift toga holding a toy sword. Ray sculpted the boy with a sad facial expression. One can understand why a boy performing masculinity wearing a dress-like toga and carrying a sword might be less than enthusiastic, the rear perspective reveals other evidence of his sadness. The large indentation in his hair (“bed head”) indicates disinterest in preparing for a public performance. The tight toga knot at the boy’s left shoulder blade could have been tied only with two free hands. He, like other boys, was dressed by someone else and forced to perform his masculinity. Art in flux is an opening of perspectives, a departure from a fixed, often singular perspective of classical art. The young man whose museum admission I did not pay was denied these perspectives and his own, just like tourists and New Yorkers who are denied perspectives of Huck and Jim since the Whitney declined to accept Ray’s sculpture for its outdoor plaza.

Perspectives are constrained not only by what one sees and experiences, but also by what one does not see or experience. Being an active participant in constructing my experiences with Ray’s queer park is akin to queer theories emphasizing possibilities and fluidity in constructing sexual citizenship in contrast to classical views where “objective” perspectives disguised as science, medicine, religion, or philosophy manipulate participants by showing limited views.

Participants who look behind dominant norms to find different perspectives find none, because those who control the discourse—such as doctors who used science and medicine to pathologize homosexuality or art museums who use wealth to control who can and cannot be seen naked and sexualized. Contemporary art, like contemporary sexuality, provides space and opportunity for perspectives more complex than static, heteronormative, binaristic sexual expressions artists and experts of the past tell us are the only available (and valid) sexual expressions. All others are invisible, invalid, and erased. Sexual citizenship, like contemporary art, is in flux.

Queer theory tends to be constructivist, but avoids acknowledging that society constructs citizens' sexualities at early ages. I suspect this is out of fear that anti-queer citizens will use this knowledge to justify deconstructing sexualities in ex-gay therapies. This avoidance prevents us from understanding that sexual deconstruction is different from sexual construction. Michael O'Rourke, the Irish postman who works outside the academy, says the big secret about queer theory is that it does not like to talk about sex (2014). He is right. Queer theorists avoid talking about sex—its messiness, its embodiments, its constructions, its taboos. Society similarly avoids such conversations that disrupt traditional understandings of sexual power. Ultimately, this essay is about power: how we navigate, disrupt, and construct binaristic tensions in sexual citizenship—public/private, white/black, man/boy, clothed/naked, shamed/unabashed, rich/poor, queer/citizen.

Perspectives of sexual citizenship remain incomplete, but Ray exposes what is omnipresent and missing, namely vulnerable, embodied white men. To disembody—disarticulate, erase, deny, shame into closets—the bodies of naked and queer men is to strip men of sexual citizenship. The disembodied sexual man compartmentalizes and severs his whole, despite representations that he is impenetrable, not vulnerable. Ray's exhibit—a queer nature, an indoor park—constructs part of what is missing in sexual citizenship.

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<sup>1</sup> Images of all sculptures discussed in this essay are available at [www.charlesraysculpture.com](http://www.charlesraysculpture.com), except *Huck and Jim* (2014), which is shown in Figure