“Race and the Liberal Imagination: The Representation of African Americans in To Kill a Mockingbird.”

Sundiata K Cha-Jua
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in *To Kill a Mockingbird*

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Sundiata Keita Cha-Jua
Department of African American Studies
and the Department of History
University of Illinois
Urbana, Illinois 61801
217.333.7781
I. Introduction

Written during the summer of 1959 and published fifty years ago day, *To Kill a Mockingbird* is perhaps the most insightful and prescient work of fiction on race in America—Black and white--written by a white author at its time. It is part of what cultural critics describe as the racial liberalism of the 1950s. Though uneven in its depiction of African Americans and the Black community and perhaps not fully cognizant of the thread of resistance that though tattered runs throughout the African American sociohistorical experience, it nonetheless offers a humanistic portrayal of Black people.

In my remarks, I will locate the novel in relationship to the historical moment in which it was published, its sociohistorical setting, and its treatment of African American characters and the Black community.

II. Sociohistorical Context of the Publication, the 1950s

The 1950s is generally presented as a moment of “consensus,” as time of conservative hegemony. The economic, political, social, and cultural landscapes were indeed dominated by conservatism, but a revolt was roiling beneath the rightwing surface. For African Americans, the mid-1950s signaled the eventual dismantling of legal American Apartheid. It marked the beginnings of mass direct action and civil disobedience and heralded the coming of a more fundamental opposition to “America,” to racial oppression and capitalist exploitation of the African American people. The point is, that for Blacks the fifties represented a challenge to the conservative consensus, it represented the rejection of “the old way of doing things,” it represented an acceleration of struggles against apartheid and economic exploitation.

The 1950s saw the success of the Montgomery Bus Boycott, the formation of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, the emergence of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X and the Nation of Islam, and Robert F. Williams had already launched what he called armed self-reliance in Monroe North Carolina before the publication of *To Kill a Mockingbird*. The fifties had also witnessed Gwendolyn Brooks winning the Pulitzer Prize for *Annie Allen* and the publication of *Maud Martha*, Ralph Ellison being awarded the National Book Award for *The Invisible Man*, the publication of James Baldwin’s *Notes On a Native Son*, and the Broadway presentation of Lorraine Hansberry’s *A Raisin in the Sun*.

The 1950s was a moment in which Blacks were dispelling the myth of the “old negro” and t “uncle toms” were finding themselves challenged more frequently and in
unprecedented ways. Blacks were demonstrating that they were not “what they seemed” nor “what they did.”

*To Kill a Mockingbird*, like Norman Mailer’s “The White Negro” and other products of 1950s racial liberalism also offered reassessments of America’s race problem, albeit within the limits of the race relations paradigm.

The 1950s were a prelude, a moment that produced initials cracks in the edifice of American apartheid, fissures that the most radical currents of Black Power eruption of turbulent sixties would expand into a fundamental rupture.

III. Sociohistorical Context of the Books Setting, the 1930s

Though embodying the racial liberalism of the 1950s, *To Kill a Mockingbird* is set in the 1930s, during the Great Depression. In many ways, that moment is not central to the racial story, but it is absolutely critical to the story of class among whites. That the Ewells are receiving relief and are considered “white trash” is an important part of the storyline. Lee provides glimpses of labor strife, mentioning a strike in Birmingham, a southern city with a large African American population and one which was the site of biracial union activism during the thirties. Yet, she does not comment on the integrated nature of those strikes. The impact of the New Deal, the Popular Front, and the CIO’s industrial organizing on race relations remains unexplored. Nor does she account for the surge in Black activism during the 1930s. These events, as Scout says were “remote from the world of Jem and me” and apparently the literary-historical imagination of Harper Lee (p. 155).

The African American community like race relations appears timeless, unchanging.

IV. The Race Concept in *To Kill a Mockingbird*

One of the more interesting aspects of *To Kill a Mockingbird* is its treatment of the race concept. Lee’s interrogation of the race concept is fascinating, especially for a 1950s work. Throughout the novel, she contrasts Aunt Alexandra’s biological notion of race with a social constructionist perspective.

An example is the discussion between Scout, Jem, and Dill concerning Dolphus Raymond’s “mixed” children. After Jem expressed the *mistaken* notion that mixed children “don’t belong anywhere. Colored folks won’t have ‘em because they half white; white folks won’t have ‘em ‘cause they’re colored, so they’re just in between, don’t belong anywhere (215). The “separatism” inherent in this quote seems to gesture back to a biological conception of race.

However, this passage is immediately countered by a discussion that questions biological race. As the conversation proceeds, Jem identifies a passing (pardon the
pun) child as being one of “them.” Scout inquires as to how Jem can tell. Tellingly Jem replies, “you can't sometimes, not unless you know who they are.” To which Scout responds, “How do you know we ain’t Negroes?” After observing that Uncle Jack Finch claimed we really don't know, Jem returns to the one drop rule commenting “but around here once you have a drop of Negro blood, that makes you all black (216).

The reversion back to the one-drop rule appears to also return to a biological argument, but it is not. The statement carefully presents the one-drop rule as locational, as a regional phenomenon. This position may not be accurate historically but it allows the reader to question the “naturalness” of the one-drop rule. Hence, Lee presents it as social rather than a biological reality.

Another instance concerns very sharp observations about white privilege. During Robert Ewell's testimony, the narrator locates him by intertwining class and geography, and situating them in relationship to race. Ewell is described as residing near the African American community around the town dump in a rundown shack. Then in an insightful paragraph the narrator states, “All the little man on the witness stand had that made him any better than his nearest neighbors was, that if scrubbed with lyre soap in very hot water, his skin was white (229).”

Strikingly, the Ewell's poverty and decadence is presented as a family trait not a product of class relations. The narrator comments the Ewell's lived “as guests of the county in prosperity as well as in the depths of the depression (227). The Ewell's family relations, child rearing practices, and the state of their property are placed in counter distinction to that of the Black community. Whereas the Ewell's had a “dirty yard” which “looked like the playground of an insane child.” In contrast, the cabins in which blacks dwelled “looked neat and snug” (P.228-29). Because the homes and the area in which “the Negroes” lived were well-tended, the filthy decrepit nature of Ewell's property cannot be ascribed to poverty. Moreover, since when scrubbed with a powerful cleaner their whiteness becomes apparent, race cannot “account” for their lack of cleanliness, the Ewell's poverty and grimy appearance is presented as a consequence of personal behavior, rather than social condition.

V. The Representation of African American Characters and the Black Community

In the main, To Kill a Mockingbird depicts a humanistic portrait of its African American characters and the Black community. Calpurnia, Tom and Helen Robinson, and Rev. Skyes are portrayed as highly moral, sweet caring people. They represent the type of “respectable Negro” characters that Sydney Poiter would make a career of playing. Calpurnia is an exceptional “Negro” who unlike “most colored nurses” doesn't “indulge” the children. (p. 183)
Despite Atticus’s liberalism, and his full trust of Calpurnia, she is spoken to, albeit very politely, and sensitively, but she never converses with Atticus and certainly not with Aunt Alexandra. She seems to only have conversations with the children.

To her credit, Lee does not present a homogenous Black community, at least ideologically. When Calpurnia takes Jem and Scout to the Purchase African Methodist Episcopal Church (A.M.E.), Lula bluntly confronts her, arguing, “You ain’t got no business bringin’ white children here—they got their own church, we got our’n. It is our church ain’t it, Miss Cal?” (158). Lula speaks for the proto nationalist ideological undercurrent churning beneath the integrationist mainstream. In the real world, Lula and the submerged nationalist tendency were ever an increasing presence in the sociopolitical landscape of the 1950s. Nevertheless, Lula’s perspective is dismissed quickly and she is portrayed as “contentious,” “a troublemaker,” with “fancy ideas and haughty ways” (159). Thus, Lee marginalizes Lula and with her the nationalist perspective. Though she presents the nationalist voice as a whisper, it is significant that she includes it. Perhaps she sensed that what was a whisper in the late 1950s would speak in thunder tones a decade later.

Another perceptive point is that Scout often presents cultural differences without representing them as deformations from white ways of knowing and doing. Her commentary on Rev. Sykes sermon and her and observations about practices at Purchase A.M.E., are powerful examples that challenge the “consensus” on middle class whiteness. She notes the ways in which it differs and is similar to her pastors without creating a racial hierarchy.

Scout initially observes, “How’re we gonna sing it if there ain’t any hymn-books” by the end of the song, she notes her amazement at the majesty and power of the African American call and response tradition of singing (p. 161). She comments on other differences but locates them in a context where they appear as different, not inferior practices.

Now, the Black community is portrayed as passive, as a community that lacks a sense of efficacy. Despite Lula’s nationalist inclinations, there are no militants in the Black community of Maycomb, Alabama. Yet, Lee captures some positive aspects of African American social life. She highlights the ways in which the community draws on its communal values to support each other in times of crisis. For instance, when Rev. Sykes closes the doors of the church until he gets enough contributions to support Helen and the children while Tom is incarcerated (162-63).

In another pivotal passage, during the trial the narrator referring to Tom observes that Mayella “kissed him not like an old uncle” and that is the point, Tom was not an “old uncle Tom,” or at least would be transformed from one by his conviction and incarceration.
For me, Tom’s attempted escape represents the fundamental transformation in African American consciousness. It signals a repudiation of the state, a rejection of the state’s legitimacy. Tom’s break from the “respectable Negro” he is described as on page 257 and transformation into someone capable of defying the authorities offers a glimpse of the future. Tom’s attempted escape portends Blacks’ rejection of the U.S.’s racial formation and represents what Huey P. Newton would describe in the midst of the African American uprising as “revolutionary suicide.” That is, Tom comprehended that for Black folks, America was more nightmare than dream, and pursued a new vision, one acknowledged the contradiction between Blacks and “America” and challenged the U.S. state.

There is another knowing passage where Scout acknowledges never contemplating that Cal might have a life outside service to her family but then smartly recognizes that Cal is bilingual and bicultural (167). This is was a very perception recognition in the 1950s, one that few whites acknowledge even today.

VI. Conclusion: Foreseeing

The conversation between Atticus and Jem on page 295 and 296 is especially intriguing. Here Atticus recognizes that change is coming, that change is coming among whites, among Blacks, and between them. He tells Jem that had he and 11 boys like him composed the jury than Tom would be a free man. Later in that conversation, he shares his apprehension about the future. He says, “Don’t fool yourselves—it’s all adding up and one of these days we’re going to pay the bill for it. I hope it’s not in you children’s time (296).

I suspect that Lee could feel the change sweeping across a new generation. This change would lead white youth to confront white privilege and a host of other social ills. It was also a change that would not only activate a new generation of Black youth, but it would push them to be more assertive and to demand fundamental social change. *To Kill a Mockingbird*, pointed toward a future that poised a generation to mobilize against the reality of “America” by rewriting its promise.