

Afterword: Writing Black Children, Writing Black Aliveness

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Given how frequently I reach for the *Norton Anthology of African American Literature* in my university teaching, it is shocking and a bit embarrassing to learn that it includes ‘not one author or illustrator who produced work exclusively for young readers’ as Donovan and Dubek, the editors of this special issue, discuss in their introduction. My scholarly interest in the representation of Black children in modern African American literature written for adults has drawn me into the adjacent worlds of children’s literature and the scholarship of age. In this Afterword, I attempt a response to Donovan and Dubek’s call to traverse the boundaries, the ‘apartheid,’ that keeps many scholars of African American literature oblivious to the rich conceptual and discursive terrain comprised by children’s and YA fiction by Black American writers. Specifically, I offer a brief intertextual reading of Mildred D. Taylor’s *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* (1976) and Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960). If, as Robin Bernstein argues, ‘It’s time to create language that values justice over innocence’ when considering how Black children are seen by adults, then Taylor’s text offers a brilliant blueprint for how we can begin to do this work as literary scholars too (2017).

In early 2022, in the lead up to the London stage premiere of *Mockingbird*, the production team asked me comment on *Mockingbird*’s enduring legacy and popularity. Although the key characters Scout and Atticus Finch were familiar to me, many details of the story and its construction presented themselves anew. For instance, I was surprised at how engaging I found Scout as a narrator, and I felt sure I would have loved her in my own childhood, proto-feminist that she is. Reading as an academic, however, other attributes came to the fore that I would surely not have been aware of as a child reader. Scout’s mix of self-belief and vulnerability, for example, called to mind Toni Cade Bambara’s portraits of young

Black girls in her collection of short stories, *Gorilla, My Love* (1972). More than anything, however, I was struck by Lee's nuanced representations of Whiteness. Notwithstanding Scout's narration, *Mockingbird* is a veritable festival of White maleness: Lee's varied depictions of White masculinity function as the through line of the plot and standpoint of the text. In this respect, and in reading recent scholarship on *Mockingbird*, I quickly grasped its profound popularity within the dominant Anglophone cultures of the US and the UK.¹ Finally, and most relevantly for this Afterword, I was gripped but not surprised by the thinness of *Mockingbird*'s portrayal of Black life. Not only is Black life peripheral to the plot and the world of Lee's small town Alabama, it is presented in the faintest of outlines, without any Black children to speak of. As Jennifer Murray (2010) points out, Black life is 'geographically distanced' as well as thematically marginal in the text (86). To write Black children is to write what Kevin Quashie calls 'black aliveness,' a means to evoke complex worlds of being. Evoking complex worlds of Black being is not Lee's project in *Mockingbird*. Rather, it is a text that centres both childhood and Whiteness, refuses to see Black children, and infantilizes Black adults. Yet, Lee's text is beloved: it won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction, the 1962 film won three Oscars, and it consistently reaches new generations because it is widely taught around the world. Most recently, the London stage version, like its Broadway predecessor that opened in 2018, is attracting sell-out audiences. The incredible popularity of the story—then and now—suggests a White investment in stories that marginalize Blacks yet present themselves as racially liberal if not overtly anti-racist. There is excellent scholarship on *To Kill a Mockingbird* that draws out its particular ideal of White American liberalism (Jay 2015), compounded by its structural weaknesses and narrative complexities (Chura 2000), and the ways in which its various internal contradictions have

¹ In addition to feminist readings, another avenue of contemporary *Mockingbird* research explores its queer epistemologies; see Jay (2015).

been misread (Murray 2010). Rather than displacing the text's enduring fan base however, this academic discourse exists in parallel with it.

Mockingbird's key plot points are Scout's adventures with her brother, Jem, and friend Dill, their fascination with their reclusive neighbour Boo Radley, and their father's involvement in a sensational trial in which a Black man, Tom Robinson, is falsely accused and then convicted of raping a White woman, Mayella Ewell. Scout's father, Atticus, serves as Tom Robinson's lawyer, making him abhorrent to many of the White citizens of the town and a hero to the town's Black citizens. Tom Robinson's characterization and the related oblique discussion of his children was of most interest to me. Twenty-five years old, married and a father of three, Mr. Robinson is a 'boy' to his White employer. Although fatherhood is a central theme in the text, Robinson's own children are illegible: they do not appear and they are not named. Rather, when Scout inquires about them and their mother the narrative assumes a detached anthropological tone to offer its most extensive though decidedly generic commentary on Black children: 'It was customary for field Negroes with tiny children to deposit them in whatever shade there was while their parents worked – usually the babies sat in the shade between two rows of cotton. Those unable to sit were strapped papoose-style on their mother's backs, or resided in extra cotton bags' (134). In this description of sharecropping, Black babies merge with their parents, 'strapped to their backs,' or with the commodities that their parents harvest, 'sat between two rows of cotton' or 'resided in extra cotton bags.' Black babies in this scene—a scene all the more significant for its matter of factness—are less human than thing. Bernstein (2011) links the cultural embeddedness of the idea of Black children as 'things' to the portrayal of Topsy and Eva in the nineteenth-century bestseller, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* by Harriet Beecher Stowe:

In many cases, angelic white children were contrasted with pickanninies so grotesque as to suggest that only white children *were* children. This is the flip side of the well-

known libel of the “childlike Negro”: the equally libellous, equally damaging, but heretofore underanalyzed exclusion of black youth from the category of childhood.

Topsy was written within Stowe’s argument that black children are innocent, but her reconstructed progeny defined back children out of innocence and therefore out of childhood itself. (16)

Mockingbird demonstrates Bernstein’s thesis exactly, whereby Scout’s innocence of the ways of the world is a driving force of the narrative alongside Tom Robinson’s abject dependency upon Atticus to navigate the racist justice system.

Published sixteen years after *Mockingbird*, *Roll of Thunder* is less well known but fortunately remains in print and available for successive generations of readers to encounter. Much connects these two texts in both form and theme. Both texts trace the contours of a local community across friendships, conflicts and crises. Both texts are set in small American southern towns during the 1930s. Both use retrospective narrators who reflect on happy girlhoods and the events that initiated the end of their own and their brothers’ innocence. Both narrators have a strong sense of self and revere their fathers who themselves earn sustained respect in their community. To varying degrees, both texts are attentive to White racism and anti-Black violence and each text, albeit in starkly different registers, make apparent (White) nostalgia for the era of chattel slavery. Yet *Roll of Thunder* offers a formidable contrast to *Mockingbird* by placing an African American family, the Logans, at its center and telling their story of connection to the land, to justice and to resistance. *Roll of Thunder* transpires across a particularly significant year for narrator Cassie and her family, a year in which adults as well as children demonstrate and enact modes of active living and learning, rather than just survival, in spite of White racism, aggression, and violence. Unlike the rest of their Black neighbours who are sharecroppers, the Logans own two hundred acres and farm their own land. Their economic independence, and Cassie’s mother’s job as a

teacher who promotes intellectual independence in her students, makes the Logans targets of White ire, not least of which is a desire to divest them of their farmland. Where *Mockingbird* embeds narratives of White humanity as complex and capable of redemption, *Roll of Thunder* centers the multiplicity and complexity of Black aliveness (Quashie 2021). *Roll of Thunder* achieves this, in part, through fulsome representations of Black childhood that include stages of innocence, acquired maturity, and radical agency. Black children in *Roll of Thunder* learn to assert their own power. We can read *Roll of Thunder* as a refusal of and a re-writing of the consistent attempts to deny Black maturity and Black childhood. Extending Quashie's tracing of Black aliveness through an aesthetic and affective examination of Black American verse, I see *Roll of Thunder* as a novel that represents and theorises Black aliveness in its particular blend of first-person narration, story-telling and setting. As Kelly McDowell emphasizes, in *Roll of Thunder*, 'enabling child agency becomes a necessary part of resistance' (McDowell 224).

Roll of Thunder offers a counternarrative to the liberal racial discourse through which U.S. culture (still) imagines the abolition of slavery and the Civil Rights era. Rather than parroting narratives about the brotherhood of man, *Roll of Thunder* is profoundly sceptical of the viability of interracial friendships due to the inequality embedded in concepts of racial difference and specifically in White power's unwavering commitment to itself.² In a pivotal scene, *Roll of Thunder* elaborates the hazards and limits of interracial friendship by showing them to be a function of the relentless drive of Whiteness and White power. Cassie's father directly and frankly advises Cassie's older brother, Stacey, to be wary of the friendship offered by a White schoolmate, Jeremy Simms. Although Jeremy's siblings and parents are

² Enlightenment ideologies of race, such those presented in Thomas Jefferson's 'Notes on the State of Virginia' (1787) or David Hume's 'Of National Characters' (1754) are but two examples of ideologies of the intrinsic superiority of Whiteness and how this ideology, fundamental to birth of the American nation and the transatlantic slave trade, effortlessly reproduces itself within politics, economics and culture.

actively dangerous and racist, Jeremy's character is developed and nuanced to the degree that the reader understands why Stacey would desire his friendship. However, Mr Logan presents this argument:

“Far as I’m concerned, friendship between black and white don’t mean that much ‘cause it usually ain’t on an equal basis. Right now you and Jeremy might get along fine, but in a few years he’ll think of himself as a man but you’ll probably still be a boy to him. And if he feels that way, he’ll turn on you in a minute...Maybe one day whites and blacks can be real friends, but right now the country ain’t built that way.”
(157-8)

While not denying the possibility of interracial friendship, Mr Logan presents a pragmatic view based on history. That Jeremy might turn on Stacey ‘in a minute’ is a factor to consider in their one-to-one relationship and also alludes to the collapse of post-Civil War Reconstruction reforms that another character, Mr Morrison, recounts when discussing the obliteration of his family by ‘Night riders’ one Christmas: ‘Reconstruction was just about over then, and them Northern soldiers was tired of being in the South and they didn’t hardly care about no black folks in no shantytown. And them Southern whites, they was tired of the Northern soldiers and free Negroes, and they was trying to turn things back ‘round to how they used to be’ (147-48). As this passage shows, *Roll of Thunder* excels in its own consideration of history—it reiterates how important it is for Black people (young and old) to have a sense of history, and in its plot line, the novel delivers an often obscured history to its readers. By focusing on a year in the life of the Logans, it also offers a counter history to (White) America’s self-narrative of progress. The ‘right now’ of Mr Logan’s advice to Stacey invites, I believe, a broad consideration of historical time, up to and including the 1970s context of writing and publication: the post-Civil War and Reconstruction era, the Great Depression, and the modern Civil Rights movement. A critical interrogation of these

periods of history, *Roll of Thunder* suggests, can be achieved by decentering White masculinity as the narrative spine for understanding Americanness, and replacing it with empowered, differentiated Black points of view. As Quashie writes, ‘We can’t will the violent reality away, nor can we not incorporate its impact. We have to live in the world and also live in the world of imagine’ (146-7). Key scenes in *Roll of Thunder* do just that.

As a final example, I turn to a scene that, like *Mockingbird*’s aside about Black babies, is powerful not just because of what is represented but because the scene is subordinate to the main narrative action. Mr Granger, one of the most powerful and wealthiest of White plantation owners in the community, insults Cassie’s Uncle Hammer, who lives and works in the North and makes a point of dressing well and driving a nice car. Granger remarks, “You right citified, ain’t you? Course you always did think you was too good to work in the field like other folks.” Uncle Hammer’s retort is emblematic of how Taylor’s characters know and assert their worth as humans: “Naw, that ain’t it...I just ain’t never figured fifty cents a day was worth a child’s time, let alone a man’s wages” (166). Uncle Hammer’s deft linguistic sparring reveals a self-awareness that formal education, local and national politics and everyday encounters are designed to erode and undermine. Furthermore, in his response Uncle Hammer pointedly asserts and distinguishes between childhood and adulthood, even though Granger does not. Uncle Hammer differentiates the work that adults and children might do in order to earn a wage. He implies that he is paid according to the worth of his skills, and that such skills are commensurate with his status as an adult. Slavery, as Hortense Spillers (2000) delineates so eloquently, seeks to ‘forcefully homogenize’ Blackness when it comes to age and labour. Indeed, Cassie’s narrative voice explains how that ideology persists in the share-cropping, *de facto* plantocracy of their Mississippi town: ‘Everyone knew that fifty cents was the top price paid to any day labourer, man, woman, or child, hired to work in the Granger fields’ (167). Uncle Hammer’s words cut

across that collective knowledge—‘everyone knew’—of the status quo designed to diminish and restrict his, and any indeed Black person’s, aspirations. His words and powerful sense of self have a counteracting power that neutralize Granger’s attempt to delimit and belittle his existence. As Hyun-Joo Yoo, asserts, ‘In *Roll of Thunder*, the black people are portrayed not as totally knowable and controllable, but as the subversive disrupters who can destabilize the hierarchal binaries needed to maintain white power and authority’ (339). Moreover, Uncle Hammer’s disruptive claim on space and being is posed to the children in the text and to the readers of the text as a viable stance to take. As witness to this exchange, Cassie builds and fortifies her knowledge, her epistemological and ontological frameworks of self, and her repertoire of how to be alive. Uncle Hammer’s clarity about his identity and self-worth is replicated across the characterisations of Black adults in this text.³ Knowing and asserting one’s self-worth is repeatedly taught to the children, and is the key pedagogical imperative conveyed to Cassie and her brothers.

Reading *Roll of Thunder* was a joy and a revelation. When I teach it next year, I will take the opportunity to contextualise it within other significant contemporaneous literary and cultural considerations of American history that assert the central humanity of Black children, Black families and Black generations. Possibilities that immediately come to mind are the broadcast sensation that was Alex Haley’s *Roots* (1977), novels such as Gayl Jones’ *Corregidora* (1975), Toni Morrison’s *Song of Solomon* (1977), and Albert Murray’s *Train Whistle Guitar* (1974). To these I would add Louise Meriwether’s *Daddy Was a Number Runner* (1970), Rosa Guy’s *The Friends* (1973), and Walter Dean Myers’ *Fast Sam, Cool Clyde and Stuff* (1974). For, like *Roll of Thunder*, collectively these African American texts for adults and for children boldly ‘make the world anew’ as Langston Hughes writes in his

³ Sargent (2018) contrasts William Melvin Kelley’s 1962 novel *A Different Drummer* with *Mockingbird* to highlight a similar rejection of the necessity of ‘black sacrifice’ and ‘white heroism’ that I see evident in *Roll of Thunder* (38).

poem 'To You'. They also push back against what Habiba Ibrahim identifies as 'the historical process of alienating black subjects from their own age' noting that this 'continues to be felt throughout the twentieth century and into the present' (4). Cassie begins to practice a way of living that she learns explicitly from her father. Woven throughout the text, this *modus operandi* is enacted by different characters, including Cassie's brother, Stacey, her mother, and her Uncle. In her father's words, it is both an empirical philosophy, drawing on his own experience, and theoretical proposition as it suggests the power that Cassie has to shape her place in the world:

"There are things you can't back down on, things you gotta take a stand on. But it's up to you to decide what them things are. You have to demand respect in this world, ain't nobody just gonna hand it to you. How you carry yourself, what you stand for—that's how you gain respect. But, little one, ain't nobody's respect worth more than your own. You understand that?" (176)

Mockingbird, unsurprisingly, reserves the full embodiment of a similar philosophy for its adult white male saviour character, Atticus Finch and, to a lesser extent, Boo Radley, who saves Jem (Scout's older brother) in the final scene of the novel.

In *Black Aliveness or a Poetics of Being* (2021), Quashie responds to Lucille Clifton's 1991 poem 'reply' in a way that connects to the essential differences I have briefly sketched between *Roll of Thunder* and *Mockingbird*. Taylor's novel presents and contests the violent erasure and marginalization of Black life, for children and adults, whilst Lee's novel uses similar circumstances of Black erasure and marginalization to bolster White identities. Quashie's reading of Clifton's poem models an inclusive practice for the self-recognition of Blackness that resonates with Mr Logan's philosophy for living in a racist world. What Quashie calls 'antiblackness' Mr Logan encapsulates in 'things you gotta take a stand on,'

but both agree that the phenomenon, whatever it is called, is deeply rooted. Thus, Quashie's interpretative framework for 'reply' is both relevant to and potentially generative of further engagement with *Roll of Thunder*, and by contrast, *Mockingbird*:

We are supposed to not-see ourselves or to see ourselves through not-seeing; we are, indeed, supposed to fear—and hate—our black selves. But Clifton's poem invites us into a practice of encountering black being as it is, in its beingness, in its terribleness and wonder and particularity... A racist happening prefaces the poem, and racist happenings surely linger in every indicative verb in the verse. But in a black world, the racist thing is not the beginning or the end of being, and what matters is not only what is done to the subject but also how the subject is. Antiracism is part of blackness but not all of how or what blackness is. Antiracism is total in the world, but it is not total in the black world. (5)

In *Roll of Thunder*, the many 'racist things' that occur do not become the totality of Blackness and this fundamental difference with *Mockingbird* is anchored in the relative visibility of Black children within each text. Whilst Quashie sees 'a world of heterogeneity' in Clifton's poem, I see how a similar world is evoked from multiple perspectives in *Roll of Thunder*. From the opening images of 'rusty Mississippi dust' with which each of the Logan children has a different relationship, to the forest sanctuary where important conversations take place and emotions are shared, to learning about the political and economic imperative that the Logans do all that they can to keep hold of their 200 acres of farm land, Cassie and her siblings are presented in their heterogeneity, their innocence and their evolving maturity.

Similarly, in her 2021 book, *Black Age: Oceanic Lifespans and the Time of Black Life*, Ibrahim offers theoretical frameworks that are applicable to an expanded study of *Roll of Thunder*. She considers the impact of the transatlantic slave trade as well as liberal

humanist discourses that link humanity and Whiteness and how these have shaped Black literary representations of age – adulthood as well as youth. Ibrahim writes, ‘Black age is the prism through which the abuses of liberal humanist dispossession, as well as black cultural, political, and historical reclamation are visible’ (3) and we could find no better set of examples of this linked phenomena than in *Mockingbird* and *Roll of Thunder*. The mutually constitutive idea of Black adulthood and Black childhood examined from multiple angles in *Roll of Thunder* is extraneous to *Mockingbird*. If the work of figuring Black children critically begins with seeing Black children, then *Mockingbird* remains a very useful text for its example of conceptual blindness. In *Roll of Thunder*, multi-faceted acts of resistance are co-articulated through the presentation of fully embodied Black adulthood and Black childhood whereby robust claims on the distinction of age are made. Such difference signifies beyond just resistance to antiblackness but rather extends to the entitlement of ‘black aliveness’, an embeddedness within and a symbiotic relation to the landscape, and an investment in the very schema of age, whereby Black pasts, presents and futures are not just possible but are known.

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