The Best of Intentions: considerations for utilizing anti-racist principles when teaching *To Kill A Mockingbird* in a predominantly white, northern high school

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When I was a new teacher, I got a voice mail message from a parent that made me nervous. Mrs. Stafford, the mother of one of the few African-American students in my ninth- grade class, called because she noticed on my syllabus that we were about to start reading *To Kill A Mockingbird* and she said she'd like me to call her back because she had "some concerns" she wanted to discuss. "Here it comes," I thought, steeling myself for what could be the beginning of a drawn-out debate over book selection and racism in *To Kill A Mockingbird*. "I'm going to have to defend this book, and if I don't handle this right, I'm going to end up in front of the school board." With great trepidation, I returned Mrs. Stafford's call…

Harper Lee's classic Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, *To Kill A Mockingbird*, is one of the most widely read pieces of literature in American schools, and one of the most enthusiastically taught. The brilliance of the first person narrator, the vivid characterizations, clear symbolism and timeless themes make it an English teacher favorite. In fact, when I interviewed four other English teachers who, like myself, teach in northern, predominantly white high schools, each one reported that he or she looked forward to teaching *Mockingbird* each year and thought it was one of the books his or her students enjoyed and learned the most from. However, there have been cases where the book has been suc-

cessfully challenged by groups and individuals who object to the racist language in the text and feel that the book "undermin[es] race relations." The list of communities where *Mockingbird* has been challenged includes Eden Valley, Minnesota, Vernon-Verona-Sherill, New York, Warren, Indiana, Waukegan, Illinois, Kansas City, Missouri, and Park Hill (Missouri) Junior High School. In 1985, black parents in Casa Grande, Arizona, enlisted the help of the NAACP in their protest of the novel (American Booksellers Foundation for Free Expression). How can we reconcile the fact that the white school system—which prides itself on inclusion and being anti-racist—and its equally well-intentioned and liberal-minded teachers adore this book, knowing full well that some members of oppressed communities see it as offensive?

There seem to be two common responses to this paradox. We might either claim that *the book just is not racist*, or we might claim that *the way we teach it is not racist*.

Those of us in the first category point to the book's literary merit and its theme (that people need to be judged according to their individual actions rather than by their relatives or their skin color) to support our argument. Anyone who understands the book, we claim, can see that it isn't racist; in fact, it's anti-racist. "The book really isn't about race," one of the teachers I spoke to said. "It's about people and how we're all human." The problem with this stance is that it negates the perspective of people of color who find the book offensive. It's as if we are saying, "This book is not offensive because I say it isn't" or "If you are going to be offended by this, you don't understand the book" or, probably the most common defense, "Don't you understand history? That's the way it was back then." These attitudes, even if they are not said out loud, reveal the omnipresent power structures that exist in education. The teacher (or the curriculum committee, or whomever) is the authority and the student's (or parent's) belief system is wrong and needs to conform to that authority. When a parent or student honestly says, "that offends me," but we as the school or teacher only respond with, "Well, it shouldn't," we are claiming not just a different, but a *superior* world view. We tend to discount other people's

viewpoints because they aren't the same as our own. This is a natural human reaction, of course, but as white teachers (and therefore doubly categorized in the power structures of American society) we also have to recognize it as an arrogant one.

The teachers who fall into the second category are willing to recognize that there are parts of the book that might make some readers uncomfortable, but they claim that these parts shouldn't override the value of the rest of the book. Certainly, many of us feel awkward about handling the word "n[redacted]r" with our students and we can't deny, if we really think about it, that the black community in the book is poor and disenfranchised, and that the only character in it who is completely destroyed by his "Otherness" is the disabled black man, Tom Robinson. So, out of our discomfort, we tend to downplay the role of racial power structures in the book in favor of discussing "universal" themes of tolerance. The problem with this mindset, however, is that instead of moving race to the foreground and discussing it openly, it shies away from conflict and, in my opinion, means that we are not really teaching the entire book. Christine Sleeter advocates that all teachers should teach a multicultural education for all students. She defines multicultural education as one that "advocates transformation of the entire process of education with the goal of elimination of oppression of one group of people by another" (quoted in Corrick 3). For all of us who have ever admonished students for wanting "just the movie version" of classic pieces of literature, I believe we are only providing them with the "movie version" of *Mockingbird* when we fail to forefront racial inequities and the power structures that cause them.

The Tension of Race in America

At the root of our reluctance to teach *To Kill A Mockingbird* as a book about race is both our reluctance to see our society as one based on race and racial oppression (a particular characteristic for white teachers in predominantly white high schools) and our general discomfort with how to talk about racial issues "without offending anyone." Because of our discomfort with how to talk about race, we decide maybe it's best not to try.

In fact, two of the four teachers I spoke with gave examples of times they had made curricular decisions based on apprehension about causing racial tension in their classroom. One had been teaching in a small town with only one black family. Although she had always taught *To Kill A Mockingbird* before, based on her knowledge that the black student had a history of being picked on by other students and that his mother had taken a "very political stance" with the school on issues of race before, the teacher decided to substitute *Great Expectations* for *Mockingbird* the year the black student was in her class. The other teacher I spoke with had never had problems with *Mockingbird*, but she said that she had tried to teach *The Power of One* one time and it "nearly caused a riot" between some of her students. She hasn't taught it since. "I won't go through the aggravation again," she said. In the school district where I work, there was a particularly inflammatory set of public hearings about Gordon Parks' *The Learning Tree* during my first year. Although one of my colleagues defended the book eloquently and successfully, she has asked not to teach that class again. Not one of these teachers is any more or less 'racist' than either of the others. All of their stories, though, point to the fact that dealing with race in classrooms can be stressful, messy and disheartening work.

Teachers should not feel inadequate, or be made to feel inadequate, because they feel uncomfortable discussing race in their classrooms. It is not an individual flaw; it is a societal one. There is plenty of noise in the American meta-dialogue about race, but it is difficult to sort through which voices are productive and which ones are reductive. There are no clear rules about how to "best" talk about race in America. One need only to look at the public conversations generated by such diverse issues that have been in the headlines in recent years, such as the removal of the Confederate flag from the South Carolina state house, the elevated scrutiny of Chinese Americans in government offices, racial profiling by law enforcement, or even the question of Tiger Woods' ethnic identity, to see that talking about race in America is sometimes enlightening, sometimes divisive and sometimes both—or neither—according to whom is listening.

Teaching *To Kill A Mockingbird* with Anti-Racist Principles

After problemetizing the teaching of *To Kill A Mockingbird* as I have, I need to clarify that I believe it is a worthy book, and I intend to keep teaching it myself. I don't think the book should be removed from school curricula, but I do think that teachers—particularly teachers in predominantly white, northern, suburban schools—need to re-think some of our approaches to the book so that we consciously apply anti-racist principles in our classrooms. I submit that we need to: 1) begin looking at the text in terms of race. This means that we will need to examine whiteness as well as blackness and ask our students to try to define what it means to be white. We also need to 2) consciously avoid essentializing race ourselves, and point out where the novel might commit this fallacy. We need to 3) focus attention on the evidence of institutional racism, not just individual acts of racism in the book, and 4) challenge the notion that racism happened "back in the day" or "down South", but doesn't affect "us."

Some teachers tell me that they don't see the book as being particularly about race. These teachers emphasize Atticus' admonition to Scout that "you never really understand a person…until you climb into his skin and walk around in it" (34) and see the book as being about the universal human challenge to develop empathy for others.

I have a couple of problems with this approach to the book. First, it is part of the fallacy of the color-blind society. Race does matter, in the novel and in our society, and it is a common desire, particularly on the part of white people (which, unfortunately, most teachers still are) to deny the power of racial difference in our country. A person of color does not have the luxury of "ignoring" race. One of the reasons why racism continues in our country is because the privileged white person is allowed to (as Countee Cullen wrote) "live in a tent of sun and shadow/ all his little own." Racism will not stop if the only children who discuss it are children of color. Anti-racist ideologies should not be reserved only for multiethnic classrooms.

There is a common fallacy that being white equates with being human. Leslie G. Roman argues that this can "imply that

whites are *colorless*, and hence without racial subjectivities, interest, and privileges." "Still worse," she writes, "it can convey the idea that whites are free of the responsibility to challenge racism" (71). One way to avoid this problem when teaching *To Kill A Mockingbird* is to consciously challenge students to define what it means to be white. We need to treat whiteness as merely one of many racial categories. White cannot be equated as being "regular," implying that only people who aren't white have "race." *To Kill A Mockingbird*, I think, gives us a perfect way to do this. We can start by having students define what it means to be "Finch," "Cunningham" and "Ewell" when we reach the end of chapter three. For example, students should be able to identify the attitudes toward appearance, education, the law and work for each of these families. As the novel progresses, and students see the black Robinson family as being quite similar in many ways to the Cunninghams, but considered socially below the Ewells, we need to start examining what it means to be white in Maycomb and what it means to be black in Maycomb. It would then seem to be a good time to think about what it means to be white in America in the 2000's and what it means to be black in America today. Special care should be taken to question the students if they "see" diversity within the white community, but only have one image of the black community in America today.

Also, I think pretending that race is a secondary issue in the novel shortchanges the text of *To Kill A Mockingbird*. Some might argue that the story of Tom Robinson and his trial doesn't start until Chapter 9, and the trial is over with eight chapters left to go in the book. However, I prefer to see the trial, not as one of many storylines in the novel, but as literally and figuratively the heart of the book. I think it is also easy to slip into treating Calpurnia, Zeebo, Helen Robinson, Reverend Sykes and the rest of the black community in Maycomb as secondary characters, as "lesser." But just because poor, working blacks were treated as "lesser" and "other" historically and in the fictional world of Maycomb does not mean that we as teachers are required to do the same when we teach the book. An anti-racist reading of the novel must include a conscious at-

tention to examining Maycomb's black community members.

One of the political criticisms I have about the novel (and I don't have a lot of them) is that Lee's portrayal of the black community is less varied and subtle than her portrayal of the white community. For the most part, the black characters in *Mockingbird* are noble, hard working and kind, and therefore of little threat to the segregated society of Maycomb or to the white suburban reader. However, there is an important exception that I think teachers would be remiss to gloss over. In Chapter Twelve, Scout and Jem go to church with Calpurnia and they run across Lula, the only black character with any "character flaws" whatsoever. We know Lula is "bad" because she behaves "rudely" by pointing at the children and professing a preference for racial segregation. We, like Scout, are surprised when Calpurnia herself uses the word "n[redacted]r" when she talks to Lula. We don't "like" Lula because she increases the scene's tension and she immediately expresses distrust of Scout and Jem, even though we know that she has never met them personally. Dramatically, she also serves as a foil for the goodness and gentility of the rest of the First Purchase A.M.E Church. When Zeebo denounces Lula, saying, "she's a troublemaker from way back, got fancy ideas an' haughty ways," we feel not only Scout and Jem's relief, but also their growing attachment to the 'good' parishioners who protect them from harm (122).

The traditional approach teachers take to Lula is perhaps most clearly illustrated by looking at a published curriculum unit for the novel. In the curriculum unit's study guide, the only question about Lula is, "How do you explain Lula's antagonism toward Jem and Scout?" (Morgan and Mote 11). I agree that we need to discuss why Lula reacts the way she does; however, I do not agree with the answer provided by the curriculum guide. The "correct" answer in the teacher's suggested response section is, "Lula represents the kind of Negro who 'knows her place' and keeps it. She probably resented the close relationship Calpurnia had with the Finch children" (4). This answer suggests that Lula feels Calpurnia is "showing off" the fact that she is close to white people. I believe we need to challenge students not only to empa-

thize with Scout and Jem, who are the victims of racial prejudice for the first time in their lives, but also to examine with some sensitivity why Lula sees them as a threat. Why is she willing to go against the grain of her community? I think if we put ourselves inside Lula's skin for a while, we might see that the complaints the church members have about her are similar to the accusations lobbed at Marcus Garvey, Malcolm X, and many other civil rights activists. What might a thoughtful rewriting of this scene from Lula's point of view include, if we looked at her, not as someone who thought Calpurnia was getting above herself, but as someone who felt Calpurnia was allowing herself to be exploited?

It might be a perfect point to discuss the fallacy of the idea of "reverse racism" (which many students conclude that Lula's actions are). Several educators use the definition of racism as "rac ism=prejudice+power." If we subscribe to this definition, Lula's actions, while originating from prejudice, do not wield power. We can't ignore the fact that Scout and Jem, despite being only children, have access to power that a black person would not have if the tables were reversed. There is no such thing as "reverse racism."

The more advanced student might also question the author's description of Lula as "bullet-headed with strange almond-shaped eyes, straight nose, and an Indian-bow mouth" (121). What, precisely, is the implication when Lula is described as having multiethnic physical characteristics and is also seen as a villain of sorts?

My point here is to encourage teachers to balance out what otherwise might be a shortcoming of the novel, and to propose that, even with a book we have read as many times as most of us have read *To Kill A Mockingbird*, there might still be some parts of it that we haven't fully explored before.

It is also important to highlight the examples of institutional racism in the book, rather than only seeing racism as a series of individual choices. If we do this well, we are helping students to build the analytical tools they will need to see how racism is institutionalized in our society today. One way to do this is to look at how the novel invites us to examine racism in the American justice system. Tom Robinson is found

guilty of a crime that he clearly did not commit because he was a black man who "made the mistake" of expressing pity for the white man who accused him of the crime. Jem's complete disillusionment stands in contrast to Atticus' more tempered reaction, which is, "I don't know [how the jury could do it], but they did it. They've done it before and they did it tonight and they'll do it again and when they do it—it seems that only children weep" (215). Furthermore, Tom is scheduled for execution, "unless the Governor commutes his sentence" (222). When Jem concludes that the problem is not in the laws, but in the jury system, Atticus points out that if eleven other boys like Jem had been on the jury, Tom would have been acquitted (223). Then he holds up the example of the Cunningham man who stalled the jury deliberations by arguing for Tom, as another illustration of how individual people can resist racism (225).

This is a very palatable way to teach about racism. But I think we should extend the lesson to an examination of who was not on the jury (women, blacks and townspeople) by questioning possible explanations for their exclusion, *other* than those Atticus provides. We should also speculate whether or not the governor would be likely to commute Tom's sentence. When Tom is killed trying to escape prison, we should invite students to see his choice as a reaction to the larger systems at play in his society, rather than an individual act of madness (238). As Barbara Dodds Stanford writes in *Teaching Black Literature*, "Atticus, in fact, compromised and survived in a destructive social system, and … for the blacks in the novel, Atticus' 'heroism' was a paternalistic insult. In a just system, Tom Robinson would never have needed defending—and Atticus would not have been a hero" (10). Furthermore, although in the past I have always been satisfied when students were able to explain how both Tom Robinson and Boo Radley serve as symbolic "mockingbirds," I will now be sure to help them understand the importance in the differences between their situations. Boo killed a human being and will not be expected to "pay the price" for it; but Tom did no crime, and was sentenced to death. Can we point to any explanation other than that Boo is white, Tom is

black and the justice system is racist? I think not. We must pay attention to the fact that Atticus, a representative of the judicial system, and Heck Tate, a representative of law enforcement, conspire and (we assume) successfully shield a white murderer from all consequences, but they are incapable of protecting an innocent black man from wrongful conviction and execution.

Another consideration for teachers when approaching this book is to avoid dealing with racism as if it were some kind of historical artifact, a problem that used to happen but doesn't anymore. The idea that racism and segregation *used* to be bad, or only *other* people (people of color or southerners) have problems with racism, is easy to slip into in the privileged white northern suburbs during a time of economic prosperity. The novel takes place in all of the "other" categories — a small town, racially segregated south of the Depression. If the *To Kill A Mockingbird* lesson plans available on the Internet are any indication, most teachers spend at least some time with their students providing historical context to the novel. Some plans call for showing parts of *Eyes on the Prize*. Others have students conduct mini-research activities about the 1930's or about black history. One site from Lewis and Clark University has an extensive "web quest" activity for students studying the south in the first half of the 20th century (Cline; Lauderman; Kraus). These activities are fine, especially as they serve as an interdisciplinary connection with history. However, I am more concerned about the fact that few of the prepared lesson plans and unit plans provide teachers with ideas and resources for how to connect the novel with the racism and segregation that exists in our country today. How should we go about examining with our students the racial injustices in our school systems and in our justice system today? When our President oversaw the greatest number of executions ever conducted in American history in one year (as governor of Texas), how should we help students to cast a critical eye on the percentages of people of color who are incarcerated and executed in this country? This is an area where curricular development and support materials are still needed.

If we fail to examine *both* the institutional racism in *To*

Kill A Mockingbird and the institutional racism that exists in our country and our communities today, are we any different from the ladies' Missionary Society in Chapter 24 whose "eyes always filled with tears when [they] considered the oppressed [Mrunas in Africa]," but who also condemn Helen Robinson and the black domestic workers for being "sulky" after Tom's trial? (233-4). Could Harper Lee be indicting anyone other than ourselves when she writes of Mrs. Gates, Scout's teacher who dramatically teaches a lesson on "DEMOCRACY" in opposition to Hitler in Germany, and states, "'Over here we don't believe in persecuting anybody. Persecution comes from people who are prejudiced. Pre-ju-dice" (248)? If during the teaching of this novel, we fail to discuss the evidence of institutional racism that exists in our society today, we are living proof of Lee's contempt for the hypocrisy of formal education and its inability to be relevant to the world in which the students live.

Recognizing Race within Our Own Classrooms

Not only do we as white teachers of white students often fail to recognize "whiteness" as a racial category, but we also often fail to acknowledge that we also teach students of color. In his study of school integration, R.C. Rist reported that white teachers tend to state that they don't notice their students' racial identities (Sleeter 161). As one teacher put it, "I really don't see this color until we start talking about it, you know. I see children as having differences, maybe they can't … do this or they can't do that, I don't see the color until we start talking multicultural. Then, oh yes, that's right, he's this and she's that" (quoted in Sleeter 161). Education professor Christine Sleeter problematizes these teachers' claims. She believes that, as teachers, our 'color-blindness' is in fact a coping mechanism. The fact that we claim not to notice what is physically obvious, she says, reveals our struggle to rectify the negative stereotypes we (as products of a racist society) have about people of color, with our desire to like and respect each of our students. She writes, "Therefore, in an effort not to be racist themselves and to treat all children equally, many white teachers try to suppress what

they understand about people of color, which leads them to try not to 'see' color [in their students]" (162). This is an uncomfortable idea to hear because most of us felt that, even if we weren't very skilled at incorporating race issues into our classrooms, at least we were doing the "right" thing by making sure we didn't think of or treat our students of color differently from our white students. Sleeter says that even by doing this, we reveal that we have internalized negative stereotypes of people of color and reveal ourselves as products of a racist society.

If we allow ourselves to see Sleeter's point, I think a good number of us would be tempted to give up on trying to change our classrooms at all. "No matter what I do," we argue, "it's going to be 'wrong' to someone, so why should I change what's been working for me?" I think there is a great need for the "experts" in multicultural education to address this. How are we as teachers supposed to respond to students of color in our classrooms? On one hand, we don't want to treat them differently from our white students, but on the other hand, we aren't supposed to treat them like they *are* white students, either.

Certainly, there isn't an easy solution to this conundrum. But, rather than just pointing out the problem, we need to propose some concrete schemes for teachers to use to try to solve it. I have one: I believe that at some point during the *To Kill A Mockingbird* unit, the teacher should find the time, either before or after class, and privately, to initiate a conversation with the student of color about the novel.

But I acknowledge that this might not be the easiest or the best thing to do. "I have one black student out of the eighty-nine freshmen in my classes this semester," reports one teacher I spoke with. "I don't know what he's getting out of [*To Kill A Mockingbird]*, but it doesn't seem to bother him. He never says anything." When asked if he would ever approach the student in an attempt to open the lines of communication, the teacher voiced the feelings of most of us when he asked, "How should I approach him? I don't want to single him out, as if to say, 'Hey, since you're the only black kid here, what do you think about the book?'"

Like most teachers, this man knew that turning a spot-

light onto students of color is not a good idea, especially if it is interpreted as a desire to have the student to "speak for his or her race" (since this assumes that racial identities are fixed categories with essential natures). Furthermore, as teachers of adolescents, we are extremely sensitive to the pressures on all of our students to "fit in." Just as Scout's empathy for 'outsiders' and victims of prejudice grows as Jem and Dill exclude her from games on the basis of her gender, we as teachers use our own experiences as 'outsiders' to empathize with our students' sensitivities. Because we didn't want to be singled out as teenagers, we know that any individual attention we give a student could be embarrassing to him or her, so we try to avoid it. However, again, we often slip into assuming that the white experience is the 'universal' experience when we fail to acknowledge that our students of color have an added experience that is not the same as our own. W.E.B. DuBois called this the "double consciousness" of the African-American. He argued, back in 1900, that to be black in America required not only an understanding of blackness, but also a keen understanding of whiteness. Maybe (and this is an intentional equivocation) black students in predominantly white high schools wouldn't find being 'singled out' (again, not in front of a group of classmates, but in private) such a shocking experience. Certainly there is no perfect guideline for the "best" way to handle *Mockingbird* with an isolated black student. However, it seems like erring on the side of at least acknowledging, personally and privately, that the student of color might have a unique perspective on this racially complex novel is better than pretending that we are completely 'colorblind.'

We need to consider that the adolescent student of color, particularly in a white high school, is much more keenly aware of his/her position as 'other' than we might be comfortable recognizing. This is not to say that all students of color will have the same reaction to the book. Where one student might not want to discuss race at all, another might be very articulate about his or her perspective. Where one student might have a very personal response, another might not if he or she feels very removed from the African-American characters in

the book. I once had a black student who told me (in another conversation, not in relation to *Mockingbird*) that she was often frustrated when she felt people expected her to "relate" to the African American history of slavery or segregation. Her family immigrated to the United States from Africa within the last two generations and she felt her connection to these events was tangential. Christine Sleeter's research also points out that many African American students have so internalized "the celebration of Europe and the silence about Africa that the school curriculum maintains, or …the media's depiction of Europe as industrialized and 'developed' and Africa as 'underdeveloped' and 'primitive' that they deny any connection with their African heritage" (166). But whether or not the student wants to engage in further conversation, I think the important thing is for us to ask. I feel we should proactively 1) offer the student of color the invitation to express his or her response to the novel and 2) allow the student to respond *on his or her own terms* if he or she accepts the invitation. Although it might feel awkward for both teacher and student to start this conversation, and although we may not see that our attempt has had any effect whatsoever, we cannot let this deter us from trying to reverse the teacher-student, white-black power structure in our classrooms. All revolutionary actions are awkward, and most of them also appear futile.

When I overcame my nervousness about returning Mrs. Stafford's phone call (and successfully resisted the urge to pretend I never got her message), I ended up engaging in a very helpful and frank discussion about race. To my relief, Mrs. Stafford told me that she was very familiar with *Mockingbird* and she thought its message about human dignity was a worthy one and a good topic for discussion in school. She was not interested in pulling her child from my class or in having him read an alternate text. However, she said she did have one request: could I refrain from saying "n[redacted]r" out loud in class? She said that when her older daughter had been in ninth grade and parts of the book were read aloud, she had felt very uncomfortable hearing that word spoken in that setting.

My assumptions and fears about this phone call, based

almost entirely upon my own racial prejudices, were unfounded. Of course, I readily agreed to the mother's request and thanked her for calling me and talking to me about it. I appreciated that she didn't expect me to know and to anticipate what it would be like to be an African-American student reading this book in school. I appreciated that she gave me a concrete and "do-able" action plan to help me on my path toward making my classroom a less hostile place for at least one student of color. I don't assume that all African-American parents or students have the same "position" on the use of the 'n-word,' and I am not sure that the "see but don't speak" idea is always the best way of handling racial pejoratives in school, but I certainly appreciate the help Mrs. Stafford gave me to walk around in her son's skin for a little while.

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