White Writers, Race Matters
FICTIONS OF RACIAL LIBERALISM FROM STOWE TO STOCKETT

Gregory S. Jay
{ CONTENTS }

Introduction: Toward a Literary History of Racial Liberalism 3

1. Sympathy in Action: Stowe, Twain, and the Origins of Liberal Race Fiction 42

2. How Does It Feel to Be a Trademark?: Fannie Hurst’s *Imitation of Life* 93

3. Jew Like Me: Empathy and Antisemitism in Laura Zametkin Hobson’s *Gentleman’s Agreement* 142

4. Desegregating Liberalism: Radical Identifications in Lillian Smith’s *Strange Fruit* and *Killers of the Dream* 185

5. Queer Children and Representative Men: Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird* 236


7. Afterword 327

Notes 331
Works Cited 339
Index 353
The “protest” novel, so far from being disturbing, is an accepted and comforting aspect of the American scene, ramifying that framework we believe to be so necessary. Whatever unsettling questions are raised are evanescent, titillating; remote, for this has nothing to do with us, it is safely ensconced in the social arena, where, indeed, it has nothing to do with anyone, so that finally we receive a very definite thrill of virtue from the fact that we are reading such a book at all. This report from the pit reassures us of its reality and its darkness and of our own salvation; and “As long as such books are being published,” an American liberal once said to me, “everything will be all right.”

—JAMES BALDWIN, “Everybody’s Protest Novel”

What explains the enduring popularity of white-authored protest fiction about racism in America? This book began with that seemingly simple question some years ago, following the spectacular success of Kathryn Stockett’s 2009 novel The Help and its Hollywood film adaptation. Many of the issues raised by Baldwin’s 1949 essay “Everybody’s Protest Novel,” with its derisive critique of Harriet Beecher Stowe’s Uncle Tom’s Cabin and Richard Wright’s Native Son, again surfaced in the debate among fans and critics of The Help. Stockett’s book appeared to revive an American genre—the white liberal race novel—landmarked near its origin by Stowe and continuing through a canon of bestselling books (often made into hit films): Mark Twain’s Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, Fannie Hurst’s Imitation of Life, Laura Zametkin Hobson’s Gentleman’s Agreement, Lillian Smith’s Strange Fruit and Killers of the Dream, and Harper Lee’s To Kill a Mockingbird. Many others could be added to the list, but these stand out both for their bestseller status and remarkable cultural
influence. Using a variety of literary devices, they struggled to criticize racism, call for social and political change, and promote liberal philosophies of freedom and equality. Empathy, sympathy, and an appeal to the emotions of readers are essential features of each, for liberal race fiction imagines that changing how we feel about racial injustice will motivate us to do something about it. They understood, however imperfectly, that impersonal systems of structural inequality never succeed without the help of personal feelings of fear, bias, prejudice, and hatred. That the efforts of these authors in creating such works were flawed is no surprise. The cultural effect achieved by art is complex and unpredictable, as are the people who make, receive, and interpret it. Rarely do books and genres act simply as the guilty agents of oppression or the heroic instruments of liberation. Detractors have done much damage to the reputations of liberal race novels by pointing out their ideological contradictions and aesthetic demerits. Yet readers continue to find them powerful, and teachers have regularly assigned the most famous two—*Huckleberry Finn* and *Mockingbird*—in many, many schools.

The widely held conviction that reading such books is still relevant, even urgent, testifies to the ongoing trouble racism presents to American society. The “Black Lives Matter” movement, protests against repeated police killings of African Americans, incidents of hate crimes against Muslims, and heated rhetoric about Mexican immigration have shown how far the nation still has to go in reconciling race and justice in the twenty-first century. Moreover, the video evidence of racial injustice that went viral across the Internet on many occasions again challenged the conscience and powers of empathy among the white audience. Did they simply feel “the thrill of virtue” in denouncing the wrongs displayed in these stories and images, or was a new civil rights movement gaining power from a reawakened interracial alliance? Or did the images fade into a kind of melodramatic commodification of racial violence shared more for its sensational effects than any impact on policy or personal behavior? The outbreak of often vicious and unashamed expressions of xenophobia and white racism during the 2016 elections seemed to document a collapse of cross-racial empathy and a hardening of hearts. It reminded us that the social construction of whiteness has always required a segregation of feelings and a defense against recognizing the suffering of others. Institutionalized racial practices of great cruelty—chattel slavery, the violent decimation of indigenous
populations, the exploitative use of Chinese labor in building the intercontinental railroads, the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II—could only proceed if the dominant racial group built up a wall of affective indifference or outright hostility to the bodies of racialized “others.” It is not “sentimental” in a bad sense to recognize the work of the emotions in the perpetuation of racism. The history of the genre of liberal race fiction teaches that each generation has had to confront these peculiar institutions and to feel out their own strategies for crossing the divides oppression erects. Studying these novels helps remind us that racism is an affective as well as a political issue, and that the work of combatting racism’s effects will be an emotional as well as an ideological and practical struggle.

While insightful and provocative, Baldwin’s criticism of the protest genre is not, I hope to show, an entirely fair one, so readers should not expect its mere reiteration in these pages (though I will discuss it again at length in chapter six). Baldwin’s essay went on to target black writers such as Wright, but his terms have become standard in treatments of white liberal race fiction, in part reflecting his influential criticism of white liberalism during the 1960s (Aanerud 1999). Baldwin spoke scathingly at times of the paternalism, condescension, and colonialist attitudes he discerned among white liberals professing their missionary zeal to help the “Negro.” Engaging Baldwin’s critique serves as an inevitable starting point in reevaluating the genre, especially because he also highlights sentimentalism as the enemy. Unmasking the bad effects of the sentimental has its place, but defenders of the mode have a case to make about its power to inspire usable affects that can help motivate cross-racial sympathies, transformations of consciousness, and movements for social justice. Still Baldwin’s work inspires an important question to pursue. Aanerud frames it this way: “Given white liberalism’s strong position both politically and in the public civic conscience, why and in what ways did white liberalism as an ‘antiracist’ social formation fall short?” (1999, 57). The following chapters examine this question by mapping how these novels speak specifically to the historical events and social conditions of their times. But my readings equally analyze the subjective dramas of racialization they depict in imagining the lives and fates of their characters, and how the reader is drawn into them. That all but one of the writers studied here at length are women, moreover, is no accident, for the cultural history of racial liberalism
demonstrates repeatedly that critiques of patriarchal oppression and protests against systems of racial injustice inspire and reinforce one another.

I have chosen, however, not to follow Baldwin into analyzing protest works by writers of color as well, though their voices will be heard at many points. Aside from the sheer impossibility of covering so much territory, I restrict the present study to white-authored texts of liberal race fiction because they form a self-conscious tradition whose audience is mainly, in Baldwin's phrasing elsewhere, those who decided “that they were white,” “those who call themselves white,” and those who “think they are white (Baldwin 1998a)”1 Liberal race fiction often contests specific turns in the social construction of whiteness, sometimes re-inscribing its biases, sometimes confronting its malice and delusions, or frequently doing both at the same time. Describing the tradition this way makes sense because the form and argument of these books derives so much from the cultural work they intend to do in educating the hearts, and propelling the actions, of those who think they are white—indeed, in making the social construction of that whiteness readable and thus more susceptible of reform. This tradition remains vital because every generation must relearn the lessons of antiracism and formulate effective cultural narratives for transmitting intellectual and affective tools useful in fighting injustice. Except for Hobson's Gentleman's Agreement, all the novels examined here focus on black-white race conflicts. Of course there are white-authored liberal race fictions devoted to other groups, and I hope the present study helps future critics examine them. But including that diversity here would have opened up an endless, unwieldy inquiry. Research revealed that the core texts I examine form a self-referential, coherent tradition with a unique history and substantial cultural impact that needs explanation.

Some readers may worry that the title White Writers, Race Matters traffics in a naming of racial identity that is obviously reductive and problematic. Is there really any such thing as “white” people? But we have for decades accepted the validity of scholarly studies that identify “black” and “African American” writers as such, despite the equally constructed character of these labels. The same can be said for other analogous literary categorizers of color, race, and ethnicity. The pervasive racialization of US society and culture has always included, indeed been founded on, the ascription of whiteness to various, and shifting, individuals and populations. As Toni Morrison argued
famously in *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, writers who were raised and racialized as “white” show the impact of that experience in the themes, forms, images, and narrative turns of their work. The results are not simple and predictable, and may often be contradictory and surprising. Gender and sexual orientation, for example, alter the ways of racialization profoundly, and will be considered as crucial in many episodes of this study. Women’s resistance to gender oppression and their exploration of counternormative sexualities often intersected with challenges to racialized structures of domination. There are many ways of living, working, and writing in relation to one’s racialization, then, and in the case of whiteness these have formed a literary history with its own fascinating and disturbing trends, patterns, and impacts.

The authors under study here were racialized as white in different periods, amid distinct cultural contexts, and with the variation that individual biographies exhibit. Historically, whiteness gave a legal status to Harriet Beecher Stowe in regard to enslavement (she was exempted), while for later authors their racialization as white accorded privileges granted by Jim Crow customs and US laws and policies that authorized racial discrimination throughout the private and state sectors. Fannie Hurst left behind her Midwest Jewish family for a New York career as a “New Woman” of the first decades of the twentieth century, enjoying the adopted privileges of whiteness while befriending Zora Neale Hurston and writing one of the more controversial novels of race liberalism in her time. In the case of Laura Zametkin Hobson, her birth to a Jewish family in the first year of the twentieth century propelled her into a contestation over whether Jews were white that informed her fiction and treatment of antisemitism. Her story is emblematic of how who counts, and how, as white changes with the tides of politics. So is the life of Lillian Smith, a white Southern woman who wrote some of the mid-century’s most stinging indictments of patriarchal white supremacy while keeping her own sexual orientation under wraps. The conflicts of whiteness were experienced and expressed in new ways by those, like Harper Lee and Kathryn Stockett, coming of age after World War II and the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s, times of crisis that both took down the pervasive social and legal signage of whiteness and yet saw the persistence of racialized inequality under new regimes of neoliberalism and “colorblind” ideology. Invoking the moniker of “white” in my title, therefore, is not done in the cause of stipulating a fixed
biological, cultural, social, or essentially coherent identity. Rather I intend to further historicize and critique the construction of this racializing category and the cultural work it has performed and generated.

In analyzing this literary history and its cultural work, I will be illuminating twists and turns taken over more than one hundred fifty years, an extremely wide swath of time and more than one study can adequately cover. Such an overview, however, makes it possible to grasp the larger historical, literary, and thematic patterns shaping this tradition, which representative case studies can make evident. I have also, in the main, chosen to conduct rather long treatments of but a few influential books to produce richer contextualization and interpretation. The chapters thus include detailed research into biography and cultural history along with extended examples of close reading and critical theorizing. I hope the methods here can be used by others in analyzing the many books and authors I have not covered. Readers are cautioned from the beginning that I navigate, perhaps awkwardly at times, between two obvious poles of interpretation. On one hand, some of these books are celebrated worldwide as the great American novels of racial justice, tolerance, and the moral condemnation of bigotry and prejudice. On the other hand, they are dismissed as the barely disguised effusions of another kind of white supremacy, condescending and patronizing morality fictions that offer up Caucasian saviors and assuage the guilt of white readers by helping them to feel right while doing nothing to change the institutional and material conditions that underwrite oppression. Each of these interpretive stances has its merits, and each will be considered in the discussions to follow. But as accounts of these books and their cultural significance, such bald judgments remain misinformed and misleading, as I aim to show.

This book project began with a paper delivered in May 2012 at the annual conference of C19: The Society of Nineteenth-Century Americanists. The paper’s title was “Not Everybody’s Protest Novel: Popular Fictions of Anti-Racism from Stowe to Stockett.” Two years later, as I worked away, my librarian sent me notice of a new scholarly anthology titled From Uncle Tom’s Cabin to The Help: Critical Perspectives on White-Authored Narratives of Black Life (Garcia et al. 2014). There was no reason to think the editors or contributors knew about my paper, and of course I experienced every scholar’s worst nightmare: I had been scooped. Reading through its powerfully argued pages,
however, I found myself uncomfortable with the book’s reiterated accusations against white authors judged guilty of complicity with the very racism their books purported to oppose. In their introduction, “What’s at Stake When White Writes Black,” the editors observe: “Concerns about the abundant attention given to white-authored stories of black life in relation to the anemic attention paid to the words of blacks continue into the twenty-first century” (3). These worries center on “racial ventriloquism,” specifically white-authored books and film productions “that purport to offer insights into the realities of black life and history.” But such “texts, however well intentioned,” can display a contradiction between protests over inequality and “vested interests” in racialized structures of power, so that even “white authors who claim to be sympathetic if not empathetic to black concerns . . . participate in a long history of constructing ‘black-ness’ to serve hegemonic concerns” (4). As exercises in the dominant style of academic critique, the book’s essays “are less about author intention and more about narrative subtleties that unwittingly reinforce white ideological frames of knowing.” The editors’ summary is damning: Such works “excuse white viewers and readers from even remotely considering how they themselves might help reinforce the concept of race, produce racial inequities, or benefit from whiteness and ultimately excuse them from having to do anything to challenge racism” (8).

This criticism offers an important intervention and deserves careful study, especially as it comes from writers and scholars in the African American community who have, as the volume emphasizes, personal as well as intellectual stakes in this debate. The chapters that follow, however, often disagree with the bluntness of this interpretive conclusion. My research and close readings offer a different, though I hope complementary, account that grants more antiracist power to the cultural work of such fictions than currently popular political critiques of them allow. Crucially, I argue that we need reconsider these books and films with an eye to how they conceive, address, and move readers and viewers who think that they are white (to use Baldwin’s phrase). I find that, however haltingly and with the usual amount of human contradiction, they all struggle to find ways “to challenge racism,” and to urge their readers to do the same. Emphasizing the reiteration of stereotypes and the misrepresentation of black history in white-authored books certainly remains a key enterprise. Yet such a focus may lead to overlooking how these novels and films do expose
the invention of whiteness and call its supremacy into question in ways that have been salutary, both for readers and for US culture. Moreover, as a genre I find they endeavor to use many “narrative subtleties” to draw readers into acts of sympathy and empathy that unsettle white privileges and epistemologies, and to incite crossings between the segregated social and economic worlds dictated by racialization. Finally, the role that gender plays in their stories of racialization and its discontents provides them a counternormative, at times queer, perspective that has yet to be fully appreciated.

Ruth Felski has recently pointed out the limits to “critique,” the general term she uses to categorize the dominant methods of theory over the last four decades, with their emphasis on disenchantment, deconstruction, defamiliarization, and the exposure of a text’s (or author’s or another critic’s) shameless complicity with nefarious ideologies (Felski 2015). My chapters aim beyond those limits by engaging in other kinds of scholarly work as well, including biography, historical contextualization, and analyses of aesthetic form and the dynamics of reception. If these works were so obviously the antithesis of their purported intention, it would be difficult to explain the resistance they often met from apologists for racism or the enthusiasm they generated among progressives of many racial backgrounds. While no apologist for the flaws in these books or their ideological shortcomings, I intend to avoid producing a series of predictable, politically one-sided judgments condemning each of these works for complicity with racial oppression, a tempting stance that would have given me the high moral ground even more than does simply granting some credibility to the arguments informing racial liberalism and its literary uses. As Felski stresses, academic criticism may be at a hinge moment, caught between an orthodoxy of critique and the resurgence of other kinds of critical affect and method that depart from the “hermeneutics of suspicion”: “The idea of critique, we could say, contains the answer to its own question: as a highly normative concept, it knows itself to be exceptional, embattled, oppositional, and radical. Whatever is not critique, by contrast, must fall into the camp of the credulous, compliant, and co-opted” (50). For a white critic writing on race, of course, offering anything short of an unflinching indictment of white race liberalism risks inciting yet more accusations of bad faith, but that cannot be helped. The quandary is essential to the genre, and part of what makes its study today of theoretical as well as political and aesthetic interest.
The critique of the sentimental as a mode masking the will to power of dominant social groups is widely known, as is the counter-argument arising to defend its progressive effects. In closely reading these popular books, then, much attention will focus on the often-gendered dynamics of sympathy and empathy in relation to racial injustice, social change, and questions of literary form and right action. Distinguishing between sympathy and empathy is less a principle of the novel of racial liberalism than a problem it struggles both to conceive and work through, made more difficult by the long history and changing usages of the terms. For my purposes, it is helpful at the start to see sympathy as an affectively held attitude of benevolence toward another; it indicates an understanding that the other’s fate or misfortune is a cause of pain, loss, and/or injustice. Whether one judges the pain or suffering as deserved or unmerited, sympathy extends recognition and a degree of human solidarity, though the distance it maintains can lapse into condescension or a refusal of empathy. How so? Empathy requires, as Atticus Finch never tires of reminding us, “walking in someone else’s shoes,” feeling and seeing the world as does that other person (see chapter one for a fuller discussion). Crucially, this means adopting the epistemological stance that the other inhabits due to gender, race, ethnicity, nationality, religion, historical era, or other contingent variants of humanity.

Frequently the difficulty of “race relations” and similar identity conflicts stems from an inability to imagine the world from the other’s point of view—to know how it feels to “drive while being black,” or to walk down a dark street at night if you are female, or to approach the airport security line if you are a Muslim, or to hear anti-Semitic jokes when you are Jewish, or to listen to homophobic slurs in the locker room when you are gay. Empathy requires strenuously suspending one’s own history, beliefs, and feelings to imagine a situation as it might be lived by someone with a very different body or appearance or sociocultural experience, and thus to acknowledge the validity of the other’s perceptions. Whether such suspension is entirely possible will be a recurring question in analyzing these novels. Each deploys different versions of a literary racial liberalism that uses specific artistic strategies for eliciting morally challenging identifications of readers with their diverse protagonists. All the novels feature characters who experience epiphanies of racial enlightenment, or blind hypocrisy, and thus must decide whether to change their lives. Likewise, they put readers into the position of seeing, even
experiencing, such subjective reflection in action. This didactic narrative plotting explains the clumsy and embarrassing moments in which white racial consciousness trips over its own self-interest and delusions. Yet it also yields those times when empathy leads to a rebellious assertion of independence, as in Huck’s epiphanic declaration that he’d rather go to hell than turn the escaped slave Jim over to his owner.

The strategic use of empathy, both as a plot element for a novel’s characters and a literary experience drawing in the reader, derives from the inseparability of cognition, emotion, and action. In a recent essay collection on *Passionate Politics*, the editors emphasize the social construction of emotions (Goodwin et al. 2001, 13). Unlike virtually automatic feelings responding to perceptions of physical threat or carnal opportunity, emotions of anger, pride, outrage, shame, or guilt in political contexts require considerable social construction. Such construction includes the gathering of information, the response to felt attachments with allies or dislike of opponents, consideration of history, and the ranking of the relative importance of the problem. It also entails a judgment about what the effect of actions might be in certain situations: Will they bring about more justice or more punishment, create bonds of solidarity or rip a community apart, enhance one’s own condition or threaten one’s well-being and status? Emotions are fundamentally evaluative toward an object, person, situation, or program of action. When cultural works such as novels engage in the social construction of emotions as regards specific political questions of the day, they influence us through scenarios that prompt evaluative feelings of anger, surprise, shame, guilt, love, compassion, and so on without which action does not happen. Constructing scenes and plots about racial injustice toward such ends requires considerable effort. Success hinges on combining rational examination of facts with experiences of deeply felt responses to human predicaments and social values. The novelist can only awaken our outrage if the story represents injustice through an interweaving of plausible realistic detail, use of recognized symbols, staging of historically charged settings, and the artful eliciting of appropriate emotions. The reader’s identification with characters, including an understanding of their plight and their feeling about it, has always served that awakening purpose. The tradition of liberal race fiction is not unusual in addressing a reader’s knowledge, empathy and moral judgment through emotional plots and affective narrative
Introduction

forms; it only stands out because it targets experiences of oppression that many readers have been socially constructed to know little about, and to feel indifferent toward when confronted with them. Of course defensiveness in face of revealed injustice can prompt emotions that justify inaction.

African American authors have written extensively on race and slavery since the eighteenth century, protesting the oppressions consequent from them, and have been joined in this effort by writers of color stemming from other ancestries. The growing appreciation for that literary history and the critical perspective on the illusion of race it provides should not prevent us from turning fresh attention to the white-authored texts under study here. On the contrary, as Morrison (1993) shows in *Playing in the Dark*, the enduring hegemony of whiteness in the United States requires that we examine the cultural history of whiteness and the repeated attempts white people have made to speak out about its injustices, if only to understand better where they have fallen short as well as where they have made progress. Profound understanding of these issues has come from our reading and appreciation of African American, Latino/a, Asian American, and Native American literary deconstructions of race. But as Gunnar Myrdal argued in his 1944 classic, *An American Dilemma*, if those who believe they are white hold the dominant power in the United States, then efforts to undo racial injustice will have to focus much effort on explicating the consciousness and moral psychology of that group, for they are the ones with the power, the group that must be moved and persuaded to act against what may well seem its own common interests.

* * *

But how to define “racial liberalism”? And what does it have to do with American literature and popular culture? In my account, literary racial liberalism can be distinguished by its reliance on plots of sympathy and empathy, and by corresponding designs on the reader’s sentiments and political actions. When I have mentioned the phrase in describing this book to friends and colleagues, it usually drew a blank face and a request for explanation. Other than a handful of recent theoreticians (some of whom are discussed later), few today use the term widely, though it has often been employed to label the kind of progressive approach to racism, segregation, and discrimination that flourished between the New Deal and the end of the 1960s. As my
argument unfolds, “racial liberalism” will sometimes appear to mean “liberal attitudes and policies toward race” and, oppositely, “racist attitudes and practices of liberals,” depending on the author or critic under discussion. Defining the term grows stubbornly difficult given the consensus that “race” is socially constructed, and thus not a stable concept to rely upon. Worse, “liberalism” is itself a concept with a 400-year history of contradictory principles and variations. In Race and the Making of American Liberalism (2005), Carol Horton writes: “Viewed across a broad historical expanse, both more racially equalitarian and hierarchical forms of liberalism have played significant roles in the nation’s political development. Consequently, it is impossible to issue a verdict regarding the fundamental nature of liberal politics with regard to issues of racial justice” (4). This ambivalence about the definition and effects of racial liberalism appears unhelpful at the outset, but its inevitability, or at least historical endurance, constitutes one of the problems that must be explored. After all, liberalism’s core political orientations—resistance to arbitrary power, tolerance, respect for others, belief in human progress, the recourse to benevolent uses of government power, and a dedication to liberty, equality, and democracy—would seem to make activist antiracism the natural and only position that liberalism can advocate. As the novels and films analyzed here show, however, racial liberalism has often foundered on its own contradictions and the limits of its approach. The structural pillars of oppression and the psychological barriers to undoing racial bigotry have both proved resilient. Racial liberalism may even be a horror story in which progressive whites turn out to be colonizers of the black body and vampires of the black experience, as Jordan Peele dramatized in his powerful 2017 film Get Out.

Traditionally understood in the American context, liberalism emphasizes the responsibility of society and the government to ameliorate injustices such as racism. It champions extensive involvement of the state and its instruments (especially the legal system and schools) to reform unfair or unjust conditions. To create a consensus for such action and to sustain it, liberalism relies on the cultural work of literature, popular arts, journalism, and other media to awaken the moral consciousness and intellectual understanding of individual citizens. The liberty of the free person includes the freedom to act benevolently toward others or in ways that damage or destroy the lives of others. Such work is necessary given liberalism’s evolving alliance with democratization, which extends the power of sociopolitical
Introduction
decision-making to various previously excluded groups (whether by race, ethnicity, sex, gender, religion, class, or other status). This didactic character shapes the genre of liberal race fiction, especially as authored by whites. Racial liberalism assumes that race is socially constructed rather than naturally or biologically determined; racial inequalities are understood to be the product of changeable social systems and in violation of universal notions of human rights. Racial liberals, however, may harbor various opinions about how the culture of different groups makes them in some way responsible for their plight, irrespective of structural oppression. Because individuals in a democracy are relatively free to help or harm each other, however, progress depends on the consciousness, affective disposition, and will-to-action of persons as much or more than on the laws and acts of the state. In practice, liberal freedom and its rights have been restricted by systemic biases of race, religion, nationality, gender, and class, such that the very construction of such “freedom” appears inextricable from oppression.

Conservatives question the capacity or efficacy of governmental solutions to differential social outcomes among races (in matters such as income, wealth, educational attainment, housing, et al.). After some minimal elimination of structural impediments to achievement, conservatives assign responsibility for upward or downward mobility to the individual, who may or may not squander the opportunity. Conservatives more readily accept the inequality of conditions as the natural human state of things. They expect individuals to struggle to overcome these conditions, even unjust or unfair ones, rather than rely on help from social forces or the state. Acts by the state or its agents to alter social conditions to improve the outcomes for specific groups are opposed by conservatives as (1) infringements on the freedom of other individuals or businesses and (2) as weakening the motivation of people in underperforming groups to better themselves through their own efforts. Significantly, the shift in responsibility from the state and its structures to the individual means that the burden of moral instruction is directed by conservatives at the racialized other, rather than at members of the dominant group, who are not seen as in need of ethical uplift and who should not be made to feel guilty.

Just as critics of liberalism point to the interdependency of freedom for some with the expropriation, enslavement, or exploitation of the “other,” critics of the economic order conclude from the same
evidence that the primary enemy is “racial capitalism.” First popularized by Cedric Robinson in his 2000 classic *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*, the theory of “racial capitalism” argues that the inequalities essential to the production of profit and surplus value under capitalism are always organized in large part through systems of racialization. Various modes of wealth accumulation (primitive, industrial, technological, etc.) depend on racialized strategies of accumulation through such practices as slavery, commons enclosure, expropriation of indigenous lands, discriminatory hiring and wage practices, residential segregation, disfranchisement, restricted access to education and health care, tax policy, “redlining” and mortgage financialization, mass incarceration, and the criminalization of immigrants. “Racial capitalism” names the structural agencies of injustice whose reform seems more important than appeals to the sentiments of the heart. Extending Robinson’s theory, Jodi Melamed (2015) points out “the need of racial capitalism to invalidate the terms of relationality—to separate forms of humanity so that they may be connected in terms that feed capital…. The division of humanity into ‘worthy’ and ‘unworthy’ forms is the trace of the violence that forces apart established social bonds and enforces new conditions for expropriative accumulation” of wealth (79–80). In other words, racialization segregates and divides people so that their social relationships are upended by their assignment to places in an economic system where they are often in conflict, or that require of them the exploitation of their neighbors or their own submission to dispossession. Here, however, we can glimpse an intersection of the theories of racial liberalism and racial capitalism. The very rending of the social fabric and the profitable divisions of people into segregated regions, engineered by racialization, motivate resistances that attempt to rebuild those bridges through the affective work done by sympathy and empathy. The literature of racial liberalism shows this dialectic between the depredations of racial capitalist practices and the resulting resistances that appear in the form of emotional identification across differences.

Given the wide range of beliefs and commitments encompassed within liberalism, most pointedly its emphasis on individualism and economic freedom, trouble over race shadows its practices from the outset. Insistence on racial difference, including the persistence of ideas of white supremacy, qualifies or negates liberalism’s program of equal rights and civil liberties, as does its reliance on racial capitalism.
Disagreements over the propriety and extent of governmental intervention in undoing racial inequality, especially at the economic level, means the camp of racial liberalism is constantly at odds with itself. Liberalism’s articulation of the psychological and affective dimensions of the social construction of race is one of its key features, yet this concern often sits uneasily with attempts to bring equal attention to socioeconomic conditions underlying the persistence of racism. The strong emphasis on individual moral responsibility—on developing or educating a sensibility keenly attuned by sympathy to the good of others—helps liberalism bridge the gap between a pursuit of individual happiness and an ethical commitment to the flourishing of society as a whole. Yet a focus on morality can distract the polity from the necessary structural, institutional, and policy changes that make the amelioration of injustice and the achievement of a common good more possible.

As one historian of liberalism reminds us, “In liberal practice, the modern state and the modern market grew up together in the nineteenth century as two counterpart powers” (Fawcett, 18). The liberal state tried to rein in the liberal market, and the liberal market exercised its power in resisting the regulations of the state. Chattel slavery in the United States offers a classic example of this dynamic tension. As a vital enterprise of modern racialized market capitalism, chattel slavery depended on the freedom of slave owners to buy and sell their “property” without the infringement of government, and on the right of individual states, correspondingly, to defend those freedoms against the central authority of the Federal power. Some arguments were also made that chattel slavery furthered the progress of enslaved Africans in providing them a modicum of education and Christian faith, and that the paternal care extended to the enslaved exhibited familial sentiments and sympathies in accord with the best Enlightenment philosophizing. In this account, slavery in the United States was an institution of peculiar racial liberalism.

Liberal opponents of chattel slavery saw the case otherwise. Once one set aside arguments, such as the speculations of Thomas Jefferson or the scientific racism of the era, that the Africans belonged to a naturally inferior and possibly separate race, then their claims to equal human and civil rights stood out as inescapable and exposed the exploitations of racial capitalism. Denying freedom and equality to the enslaved constituted a denial of humanity itself and a policy that promoted unspeakable cruelties. If, in contrast, one exercised one’s
sympathies and experienced empathetically the oppression and humiliation imposed on the enslaved through the arbitrary asymmetry of power, then one would grasp that commonality of the human condition that makes a claim for right action irresistible. After all, liberalism had emerged in the eighteenth century as a movement of propertied, bourgeois men in various European and North American metropoles reacting against such regimes of subjugation and in favor of political systems that empowered qualified individuals to negotiate their conflicting interests through consensual institutions and legal procedures. Insofar as the depredations of racialization continued to strip African Americans and other non-whites of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, political and social progress in the United States would need a corrective philosophy of empathic racial liberalism. Meanwhile a racial ideology of white supremacy emerged that developed its rationale through assertions about the cultural superiority or inferiority of the races. Stereotypes first clinging to biblical justification, then subsequently grounded in a spurious racial biology, returned as figurations supposedly justified by sociological or anthropological narratives. These updated accounts of white supremacy were defended as objective rather than indicative of prejudice on the part of the liberal white person who held such views of people of color.

The reformist racial liberalism that emerged in the modern period was decisively shaped by Jim Crow segregation, the New Negro movement, the Great Migration, the Depression, Franklin Roosevelt’s presidency, and the rise of a race-based fascism in Germany. Black organizing against racial violence and white supremacy in the first three decades of the twentieth century garnered many allies (particularly among Jewish immigrants and their children) and put increasing pressure on the Federal government to take action. The near-collapse of capitalism after 1929 opened an era when there was great public interest in programs for economic reform and social justice, even to the extent of fashioning preliminary alliances between the races. But African Americans and people of color did not benefit equally from most New Deal programs, and Southern Democrats continued to advocate immigration restrictions and to support Jim Crow, disfranchisement, and lynching through their powerful hold on Congress. Racial liberalism, however, benefited from the increased power of the central government to act in matters of social welfare and ameliorate the barbarities of racial capitalism. The Great Migration shook
the confidence of racism’s stewards in the South who saw their labor force escaping, opening the door to a brand of Southern liberalism that would be highly influential in the work of Lillian Smith and Harper Lee. According to historian Daniel Geary, a set of “common assumptions” underwriting racial liberalism took hold between 1930 and 1960: “that the main racial divide in the United States existed between whites and blacks, that the ultimate goal of racial policy was to integrate African Americans into American society,” that this integration and assimilation could be accomplished within the existing socioeconomic and political order, and that “social-scientific knowledge could enlighten the public and guide policy makers toward these ends” (Geary 2011, 54). This consensus liberalism notably took on an assimilationist cast, misleadingly borrowed from analogies with white ethnic immigration that did not fit the case of racialized populations of indigenous, Latino/a, Asian, or African descent (Omi and Winant 2015, 29–31). Moreover, the integrationist model overlooked the fact that racism would not end if people were simply assimilated into an economy of capitalism that depended on continued exploitative racialization both at home and abroad.

In popular culture and across the urban areas of the north, many whites after World War I became avid followers of African American arts, especially literature and music, which expressed both the anguish of an oppressed race and a spirit of resistance and survival. Those who thought they were white now thought they could also, from time to time, entertain being black. However idealistic, the Harlem Renaissance ambition of gaining racial recognition through cultural and intellectual achievement was effective in delegitimizing many of the cruder forms of white supremacist racism and helped to make whites more comfortable with living in a multiracial society. In the realm of literature, a host of brilliant black writers emerged in the years from 1900 to 1950, including W. E. B. Du Bois, James Weldon Johnson, Langston Hughes, Claude McKay, Nella Larsen, Alain Locke, Jessie Fauset, Wallace Thurman, and Zora Neale Hurston. These voices made it difficult for white writers to ignore race or to treat it only through the reiteration of stereotypical characters and plots (though Gone with the Wind [1936] proved once more the resilience of plantation mythology as an allegory of national resurrection out of the despair of the times). Black literature addressed a black audience and largely eschewed the mandate to serve as a pedagogy for
white uplift. But white writers responded by renovating the sympathetic tradition from the nineteenth century, which seemed called for given the revelations of ongoing oppression, cruelty, and violence documented in African American novels, poems, plays, stories, and songs and by organizations such as the NAACP. Such white writers increasingly tried their hand (not always successfully) at inhabiting and voicing African American characters to counteract rather than reinforce stereotypes, as is evident not only in Hurst’s and Smith’s novels but in texts by Carl Van Vechten, Du Bose Heyward, William Faulkner, Sinclair Lewis, and others. The revelation of the extent and horror of Nazi genocide against Jews, homosexuals, and other minorities likewise strengthened the case for new liberal sympathies and concomitant social and legal reforms, as seen in Hobson’s *Gentleman’s Agreement* and Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

The key text of racial liberalism at mid-century was Myrdal’s *An American Dilemma*, whose first volume was dedicated to *The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy*. “This fourteen-hundred page study,” observes Myrdal scholar Walter Jackson, “established a liberal orthodoxy on black-white relations and remained the most important study of the race issue until the middle of the 1960s” (Jackson 1994, xi). Researched by extensive travel, much of it in the South, in the late 1930s and completed in the early 1940s, *An American Dilemma*’s urgent analysis of the need to confront American racism and its effects was decisively influenced by Myrdal’s alarm at Nazi Germany’s racist onslaught in Europe and the global threat it posed to democracy.² In fact, much of his discussion of what he called the “American Creed” was first developed in 1940–41 for *Contact with America*, written with his wife Alva, which attempted both to explain the key ideological tenets of American democracy to a Swedish audience and to give them the inspiring principles needed to resist accommodation with the Nazis (see Jackson 1994, 147–158).³ *Contact with America* enabled Myrdal “to make explicit the connections between the fight against racism in America and the war against Nazism in Europe” (Jackson 1994, 157). After Pearl Harbor, Myrdal “would be free to frame his discussion of American race relations in terms of a global war for democracy” (163). The resurgence of moral argument in a sociological study intentionally broke with the reigning materialism of the social sciences in the 1930s; this turn by Myrdal reflects his shock at the results of his interviews with white Americans, as
Introduction

well as the context of the global campaign to motivate and inspire people to fight against fascism and its racist underpinnings.

An American Dilemma, then, aimed to shape a morality of racial liberalism into a patriotic US stance, upending the half-century of white nationalism that had reunited North and South through the rebirth of a nation imagining itself founded in racial hierarchy and secured by *Plessy v. Ferguson*. Here is Myrdal’s definition:

The “American Dilemma”…is the ever-raging conflict between, on the one hand, the valuations preserved on the general plane which we shall call the “American Creed,” where the American thinks, talks, and acts under the influence of high national and Christian precepts, and, on the other hand, the valuations on specific planes of individual and group living, where personal and local interests; economic, social, and sexual jealousies; considerations of community prestige and conformity; group prejudice against particular persons or types of people; and all sorts of miscellaneous wants, impulses, and habits dominate his outlook. (Myrdal 1996, lxxix)

In his introduction, Myrdal pointedly challenged the rhetoric about the “Negro Problem” in a section titled “A White Man’s Problem”: “Although the Negro problem is a moral issue both to Negroes and to whites in America, we shall in this book have to give primary attention to what goes on in the minds of white Americans” (lxxxiii). Myrdal’s study “combined appeals to morality with advocacy of ambitious programs of social engineering” (Jackson 1994, xii). In his analysis of the ideology and consequences of racial discrimination, Myrdal writes much about liberalism and its negotiation with the rise and institutionalization of white racism. His narrative traces how the liberalism of the Revolution, Constitution, and Declaration of Independence became increasingly out of step with the beliefs of many of the colonists and soon came under attack from pro-slavery thinkers and politicians.

The growing tension between the American Creed of liberty and equality and the practices of chattel slavery helped propel the nineteenth century turn in the West toward an ideology of biological racial hierarchy, one that grew ever more vicious in the first four decades of the twentieth century and culminated in American apartheid as well as the Holocaust. This move to biology neatly preserved the basic tenets of the creed by restricting it to those who wanted to
think they were “white” and retain the privileges that went with the name. It preserved slavery and the subsequent Jim Crow regime without, in theory, any contradiction. Myrdal’s racial liberalism engaged this tension and its sociopolitical factors, yet compromised at critical junctures with the arguments of those who contended that the extension of the American Creed to non-whites is at best to be taken slowly; at worst, this expansion of rights was seen as violating nature, the political order, and common sense. *An American Dilemma*’s endorsement of an assimilationist position calling on African Americans to abandon the “pathological” cultural behaviors supposedly spawned by their oppression and to join in with normative American life, however, unfortunately perpetuated the tradition of abjection and racial stereotyping that had long afflicted blacks in the United States.

The social construction of whiteness as a racial, cultural, and national identity plays a key role in the dilemma of racial liberalism, since efforts to extend human rights to people of color lead to disputes over the boundaries and requirements of white identity. The Civil War is both the supreme example of this conflict and the lasting lesson that imposes itself in the coming century; the violent white response to Reconstruction put a limit on the agenda of racial liberalism, since in practice every substantial move to enact that agenda ran into the opposition of entrenched white supremacists or just the ignorant and fearful—in the government, church, educational institutions, and the private sector. White reformers risked “disuniting” the nation that had in part been healed after the Civil War by the new ideology of white nationalism (see Blight, *Race and Reunion* 2001). The bonds of whiteness can be stretched only so far, as liberal “race traitors” faced real ostracism, social and economic punishment, and occasional violence. Lillian Smith and Harper Lee both felt such pressures, which even bear down upon, and help to define the heroism of, *Mockingbird*’s Atticus Finch. Power in America remains branded as white, so that racial liberals can lose power, as well as privilege, when advocating for reform. At mid-century racial liberalism’s ideology remains rooted in the principles of the Enlightenment and the documents of the founders, but it is also riven by strains caused by the imperatives of whiteness and capitalism that many racial liberals share to some degree, and which colors their writing, thought, and action. More radically, as Charles Mills argues, the original “social contract” of liberal society was also actually a “racial
contract” among whites and never designed to extend to other racialized groups (Mills 1997).

A form of that contract—an upper-class neighborhood’s informal agreement not to sell or rent to Jews—sits at the center of Gentleman’s Agreement. This protest novel about antisemitism in the United States rocketed to bestseller status in 1947 and became an Academy Award–winning film, its achievement testifying to how the contest of World War II against fascism could be fused with a domestic agenda opposing discrimination. Racial liberalism in those years, as An American Dilemma had shown, couched its critique of racism and antisemitism firmly within a pro-American rhetoric that emphasized the values of liberty, equality, and democracy as the foundations of reform. Racism and antisemitism were to be understood as aberrations from the American system, rather than as inherent characteristics (see Omi and Winant 2015, 32). In describing the film, Gregory Peck (who played Philip Green) said: “We had a very good story to tell, with a set of good characters, and at the same time were able to get in a few good licks against bigotry, prejudice and hatred, all the things we think of as being anti-American” (qtd. in Fishgall 2002, 125). Racial liberalism could be patriotic, an especially important point during and after World War II, and this pro-American stance would later inform the collaboration of some liberals with the anticommunist movement of the 1940s and 1950s.

Highlighting the didacticism of these novels illuminates how the cultural work of racial liberalism in the modern period, in literature and the movies, aims at mediating conflicts between sectors of the white-aspiring population and teaching them how to behave toward diverse others. Jodi Melamed argues that in the period after 1940, race novels stressed “the power of sympathy, liberal whites as heroic agents of reform, and the moral hazards of racial prejudice,” citing such works as Smith’s Strange Fruit, John Griffin’s Black Like Me, and Lee’s Mockingbird (Melamed 2011, 23). Hutner documents the focus on behavior and conduct in his section on “Race and the Middle-Class Novel” of the 1940s: “there was a series of novels about the relations between whites and blacks in the hope of inspiring racial tolerance among whites” (Hutner 2009, 244). Liberal writers and reformers evoke the principles of the American Creed in efforts to educate, persuade, or shame their fellow white citizens—as in Atticus Finch’s closing argument to the jury in Mockingbird in which he quotes Jefferson and the Declaration of Independence. Disparagers
of the genre should remember that its purpose adheres to the mission of persuasion, conversion, and moral uplift, rather than historical documentation or representation. These works must attain to a substantial level of popularity if they are going to fulfill that mission. Thus we would expect their rhetoric would be gauged to build on the audience’s beliefs (the American Creed) while showing how current sociopolitical, familial, legal, or sexual episodes lay bare failures to live up to those beliefs. Given that most American adults are already aware, at some level, of the disparity between American ideals and the practices of racist discrimination, moving them in the direction of reform requires, among other things, a profound affective experience in which sentimental and emotional feelings get attached to previously undervalued or invisible people, facts, and ideas. The rehabilitation of Harriet Beecher Stowe by feminist scholars in the late twentieth century made this case for what Jane Tompkins (1985) called “sentimental power,” though analyses by scholars of critical whiteness studies point out that this progressive strategy also had the effect of re-privileging the subjectivity of white people.

The above account explains the perhaps obvious point that the texts of racial liberalism are predominantly created by and intended for white audiences (which is to say for people who have been racialized as “white” through various acts of social construction and personal identification). Most people of color do not need books and films to persuade them that slavery was wrong or that discrimination against people on the basis of race leads to terrible injustices, or that we need to institutionalize the counter-memory of incidents of racial injustice to balance dominant accounts of American history. When one turns to works by and for people of color, what we have are different genres: the slave narrative, the racial uplift story, the race pride text, the black nationalist manifesto, or the autobiography of the writer discovering the meaning of the racial experience and its consequences for identity and opportunity, women of color works on the difference gender makes, or their combination. These texts often struggle to meet the expectations of diverse racialized audiences, a difficult task given the quite different ideological interests of those audiences. They have often had to accommodate themselves to white norms if they wanted to have much chance of seeing the light of day. White control of virtually all the institutions of publication and film production, and of the system of reviews and criticism, forces the artist of color to negotiate constantly with the dominant
Introduction

culture industry. The white racial liberal, on the other hand, begins with the mission of addressing that dominant culture, using its terms, ideals, and tools, but does not necessarily have the equal burden of responding to the expectations of the nonwhite audience. When the two audiences cross, however, we witness clashes such as those over the assignment in schools of race liberal classics such as *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, where parents and students of color find offensive language and stereotypes while whites see uplifting lessons in moral development.

Critics of racial capitalism argue that the "bigotry, prejudice and hatred" Peck had targeted are essential and inextricable elements in the American system that produced wealth from slavery, the expropriation of indigenous people, and the exploitation of immigrant labor, not aberrations. Melamed’s chapter, “Killing Sympathies: Racial Liberalism and Race Novels,” elaborates this contention at length in discussing Myrdal’s work as promoting the “idea of racism as a problem of white attitude or prejudice,” and “sympathy” as the “crux of the antiracism” it advocated (61, 63). In her view racial liberalism “suppressed political and economic understandings of racialization that did not cohere with Cold War liberal nationalism” and imperialist claims for American exceptionalism (63). Melamed’s chapter, however, never conducts a close reading of any white-authored texts from the tradition, which are only mentioned in passing, while time is given to Baldwin’s critique of Wright and to a counterexample in the writing of African American novelist Chester Himes. Despite the validity of much of Melamed’s critique, we should not overlook the substantial attention of Myrdal’s chapters to the political economy of US racial discrimination. And as I hope to show, liberal race fictions do, in fact, combine sympathy with a “political and economic understanding” of racialization.

Mid-century racial liberalism found expression in a number of postwar documents and declarations affirming a universalist conception that repudiated ideologies of racial difference. These included the United Nations 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the 1950 UNESCO Statement on Race, and the consensus identifying “crimes against humanity” as an international legal term during the Nuremberg trials of former Nazi officials (King 2004, 2). The 1948 Declaration began by borrowing heavily from the US Declaration of Independence but included this statement in Article Two: “Everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in
this Declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status.” This universalism, however, tended toward envisioning a single model of human political society: “From this it tended to follow that social/cultural assimilation and legal-political integration of ethnic and racial minorities were of prime value; internationally it was assumed that non-Western nations would and should embrace the same sort of political, social, economic, and cultural institutions that had transformed life in the West, that is, capitalist modernization” (King 2004, 3). The next five decades were witness to numerous military adventures by the American government in behalf of “democracy” and “freedom” whose missions also included imposing a racializing capitalist modernization in such post-colonial countries as Vietnam, Nicaragua, Chile, Iran, and Iraq, with the goal of assimilating the economies of these nations to a global apparatus led by the United States. The results continue to be problematic, at best.

At home, schemes for the assimilation of racial minorities into the normative structure of socioeconomic and political life foundered on the economic and political prerogatives of white supremacy, which had long been a pillar of capital accumulation for the US economy. Many white people and white-dominant institutions (banks, the real estate industry, public education, corporations, manufacturers and small retail owners, etc.) resisted the program for racial desegregation and initiatives for battling inequality in the name of universal human rights. Supreme Court mandates such as Brown v. Board of Education and acts of Congress legislating equal rights in housing and voting precipitated open defiance by city councils, school boards, state legislatures, governors, and an array of public and private organizations intent on maintaining a profitable racial divide. Books such as Smith’s Killers of the Dream condemned this resistance and disputed the “go slow” policy of earlier reformist liberals while cheering on the civil disobedience strategy of the Civil Rights movement. Beyond being episodes from a regrettable past, the defeat of Atticus Finch and the killing of Tom Robinson in To Kill a Mockingbird, I will argue, can be read as the bleak assessment of what happens to racial liberalism when it tries to challenge the customs and institutions of white privilege as the 1960s approach.

The Great Migration of African Americans, which sent millions in flight from their oppression in the Jim Crow South from 1910 to 1970,
played a decisive role in changing the fate of racial liberalism in the North as well as the South. The migration spurred new alliances of white liberals with black workers and intellectuals. But it also became a cause for increasingly hostile white reaction in cities when the desegregation policies aimed at the South made claims on Boston, Detroit, New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, and other urban centers. Many cities experienced violent race conflicts in the streets along with the blunt application of mortgage redlining, labor union and job discrimination, and the myriad microaggressions accompanying the new social proximity of the races. As beautifully told in Isabel Wilkerson’s *The Warmth of Other Suns* (2010), many of the migrants found themselves, like the characters in Lorraine Hansberry’s *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959), locked into ghettos and watching as those who must believe they are white rebuilt their segregated enclaves of prosperity in the suburbs. Hansberry’s play anticipated the critiques of racial liberalism and racial capitalism in dramatizing how the “possessive investment in whiteness,” a phrase for the material and economic benefits bestowed by white supremacy, would determine white attitudes and prevent interracial sympathy. The popularity of racial liberalism in literature and other cultural arts during these decades attested both to the success of intellectuals, artists, and activists in mounting an ideological campaign for change, on one hand, and to the ongoing reaction against those changes among much of the populace, on the other hand, whose hearts (along with their wallets) had not been won over. The migration also fueled the eventual success of the NAACP’s legal attack on Jim Crow segregation in *Brown v. Board of Education*. “The ideals of racial liberalism helped fashion the legal strategy of the biracial elite,” argues Lani Guinier: “Racial liberalism emphasized the corrosive effect of individual prejudice and the importance of interracial contact in promoting tolerance” (Guinier 2004, 95). Though “separate but equal” institutions dominated the South, in the North migration meant a pressure for integration in business, schools, and public facilities as well as in social interactions.

However, influenced by Myrdal and various studies demonstrating the psychological harm of discrimination, the Supreme Court’s reasoning, according to Guinier, “suffered once it considered the caste system of Jim Crow narrowly, as a function of individual prejudice.” As a result, subsequent efforts at equality founndered on the test of proving intentional racial animus rather than racially biased
Articulating the legal-studies tenets of Critical Race Theory, Guinier concisely states its disagreement with racial liberalism: “Racism—meaning the maintenance of, and acquiescence in, racialized hierarchies governing resource distribution—has not functioned simply through evil or irrational prejudice; it has been an artifact of geographic, political, and economic interests” (98). The failure of Brown to end school segregation in America speaks to how the “divergence of interests” between groups grew after 1955 as whites acted to protect the many advantages racial hierarchy brought to them. Guinier’s allowance of that “simply,” however, also acknowledges the role still played by individual prejudice and the whole array of emotions weaponized by racism. A decade after Brown, Hollywood gives America Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner (1967), in which two white liberals (played by Katharine Hepburn and Spencer Tracy) react negatively to their daughter’s announcement of her engagement to a black doctor (Sidney Poitier). Even as massive resistance to desegregation in the South and exposure of increasing racial conflict in Northern cities dominates headlines, popular culture prescribes the generic medicine of reformed hearts and the ideal of color-blindness, palliatives that hardly seem powerful enough to match the murders, police dogs, fire houses, and angry white mobs featured on the nightly news.

Daniel Geary uses the debates surrounding Daniel Patrick Moynihan’s report, The Negro Family: The Case for National Action (1965), to demonstrate how the racial liberal consensus came apart. In the decades after Myrdal’s American Dilemma had directed attention to the “Negro problem” as a “moral” issue for whites, racial liberalism responded to critics and took a “socioeconomic turn,” arguing for “new government policies that would advance the cause of racial liberalism by adopting race-conscious measures to address socioeconomic inequalities” (Geary 2011, 59). At the 1965 Daedalus conference on new approaches to civil rights, Thomas Pettigrew stated that “one of the greatest fallacies we have had in the field of race relations for many, many decades has been to worry about attitudes rather than conditions” (qtd. in Geary 2011, 55). Yet support for such race-conscious social engineering was already a catalyst for white working-class resentment (no doubt incited by corporate and business leaders who had their own motivation for keeping people of color in their place and the appropriation dollars in their own racial communities and pocketbooks). The integrationist, assimilationist program
Introduction

also met resistance by Black Arts proponents who opposed using the model of ethnic assimilation as a route for African American progress, since such policies often represented black life as pathological, tending to criminality, and marked by habits of deviance whose “cultural” explanation seemed to be simply a continuation of scientific racism’s claims through a sociological discourse.

By the late 1960s, the New Left was articulating its critique of racial liberalism. “Racial inequality was not, in this view, an internal contradiction of liberalism that had to be rooted out so that American society could at last realize its true potential. Rather, it was a necessary by-product of a capitalist, imperialist monolith that could not be eradicated without destroying the system itself” (Horton 2005, 180). As Robinson would argue, racial oppression was essential for capital accumulation, realized through wage suppression, economic segregation, global imperialism, and cultural demonization. Racial capitalism enabled the extraction of profit for white businesses and corporations in myriad ways, from exploitation of the housing market to inflated retail prices in the ghettos to the artificial increase in the wealth value of suburban whites-only developments. Discrimination at once drastically reduced black competition for jobs held by whites and prevented them from gaining the educational advancements that might begin to tilt that competition evenly. A recurring accusation made against racial liberalism since the nineteenth century—that its primary focus on equal rights and civil status ignores the fundamental socioeconomic system of racialized capital accumulation and wealth diversion—characterizes the post-1960s work of Critical Race theorists. Once again liberal attempts to sympathize or empathize with minorities are disparaged, since they appear to direct energy toward private interpersonal relations instead of systemic or structural determinants. Such strategies also seem self-serving when offered as what Raymond Williams might describe as a “structure of feeling” by the very class that benefits from exploitative racialization of others (1961, 64–65). Still, one may ask whether substantial alterations in that system can be achieved with-out constantly addressing the social construction of white moral conscience and the energizing of people to attempt change motivated by, in part, such emotional and ethical experiences. Capitalism turns differences into “differentials,” relationships in which wealth and power flow from the oppressed to the dominant, with cultural alibis rationalizing the difference, political systems imposing it, and
affective behaviors managing it. A key to this differential is the abjection of the “other,” both in material and psychological terms (see Clover and Spahr, 2016, 299).

The universalizing portraits of liberal heroes such as Hobson’s Philip Greene and Lee’s Atticus Finch intend to facilitate empathy and identification across differences. Yet they may also be whitewashing abstractions whose racial script resembles that of the early philosophers of liberal humanism. Just as Robinson argues that capitalism has always been racial, Charles Mills makes the analogous case about the liberal social contract theory that dominates Western political thought: “Racial liberalism, or white liberalism, is the actual liberalism that has been historically dominant since modernity: a liberal theory whose terms originally restricted full personhood to whites (or, more accurate, white men) and relegated nonwhites to an inferior category, so that its schedule of rights and prescriptions for justice were all color-coded” (Mills 2008, 1382). Critical Race theorists argue that the canonical accounts of social contract theory, which begin by imagining a “state of nature” inhabited by equal persons who then decide to form societies, are delusory and racist. Such hypothetical arguments begin by setting aside the very historical conditions of unjust power and inequality characteristic of the colonial imperial era, and thus have nothing to say, for example, about racism and slavery. The “persons” in these thought experiments are thus implicitly white, as were the beneficiaries of original liberal notions of who counts as a citizen. Thus we should not be surprised to find that foundational theorists of liberalism, such as Locke, Kant, and Jefferson were also proponents of doctrines of white supremacy. For Mills the “deracializing of racial liberalism should be a priority for us,” observing that the “struggles of people of color for racial equality” constitute just such a project (Mills 1997, 1383). “It would be a fundamental error, then . . . to see racism as anomalous, a mysterious deviation from European Enlightenment humanism. Rather, it needs to be realized that . . . European humanism usually meant that only Europeans were human” (26–27). The articulation of the difference of Christian from pagan, and then white from black or colored, did not arise after the originary conception of a universal human nature and universal human rights; rather these differences were foundational to the original formulation of the human in its Western dress: as rational, literate, male, and Christian. These differences were then made into differentials for the flow of surplus value from the oppressed to the oppressor.
Introduction

Liberal racial capitalism and industrialization required the redesign and extension of the inequalities and privilege systems of feudalism, but not in order to create a structure of universal human equality and rights. From the outset, the new system of liberalism only imagined a limited set of empowered, rights-bearing citizens—and people, at least in the United States, who increasingly believed that they had to be white. Without this original structure of racial inequality, racial capitalism would not be able to produce the level of enormous surplus value and profits available through the exploitation of slave labor, the genocide of the indigenous, and the imperial control of colonies and the colonized. And as Clover and Spahr argue, the exploitation of women through unpaid domestic labor became foundational to the rise of the male wage laborer and the profits made from his exploitation (2016). For Mills, “the bottom line is material advantage”: “Globally, the Racial Contract creates Europe as the continent that dominates the world; locally, within Europe and other continents, it designates Europeans as the privileged race” (Mills 1997, 33). As we will see in the case of Gentleman’s Agreement, however, antisemitism was also a racism that was contractually enforced by real estate covenants and a variety of explicit social, educational, and business agreements to exclude Jews. Their European origin did not immediately qualify them for the privileges of whiteness, just as many Europeans of non-Anglo Saxon ethnicity had to struggle for the moniker of white (see Jacobson 1998). Indeed, Robinson shows that racializing struggles among the populations of Europe preceded the era of colonial imperialism and shaped many of its practices.

Setting aside the false history of a color-blind social contract, which belongs to “ideal theory,” Mills focuses on the “domination contract” and the realm of the real, or non-ideal theory. In that realm, “Whites contract to regard one another as moral equals who are superior to nonwhites and who create, accordingly, governments, legal systems, and economic structures that privilege them at the expense of people of color” (2008, 1386). Mills’s language, however, tends to reify whiteness, which is historically a slippery category without natural ground (when, and how, did the Irish or Italians or Jews become white people?). It is not so much that the contract takes place between white people; “white” people come into being as an effect of such contracts and practices, and must defend them along with the identity and privileges these arrangements produce. Mills advocates
that philosophers as well as historians and artists do the cultural work of building a counter-memory, rejecting the “contract myth that the impartial state was consensually created by reciprocally respecting rights-bearing persons” (1388). Because “a racialized moral economy complements a racialized political economy,” films and novels that engage audiences in acts of counter-memory must do so not only by (1) offering representations of how the domination contract evolved and worked in particular historical episodes, but also by (2) unsettling their affective attachment to white privilege through subversive experiences of sympathy and empathy.

“The whole point of establishing a moral hierarchy and juridically partitioning the polity according to race,” writes Mills, “is to secure and legitimate the privileging of those individuals designated as white/persons and the exploitation of those individuals designated as nonwhite/subpersons” (1997, 32–33). In the United States, the Constitution ratified the racial contract by effectively restricting the franchise to white males; in many locales, citizenship rights also depended on property ownership. Various statutes and laws, such as the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 and the Dawes allotment act of 1887, enforced racial bias in immigration, naturalization, and the right to own property. Racially restrictive covenants and social contracts governed the private as well as public spheres, regulating water coolers and waiting rooms as well as admission to Harvard and access to voting and the jury system. Men categorized as white gained double advantage through restrictions and exclusions targeting women. Systems of differential preference help organize the competition and profit accumulation made possible by modern capitalism, efficiently distributing resources and rewards in ways that harness the disruptions of status, class, and privilege otherwise made chaotic by capitalism’s relentless disrespect for social bonds, customs, traditions, and historical attachments. The racial contract ensures the unequal accumulation of wealth and power falls to whites (no matter the instability of that category over time) and is justified as natural, indeed merited.

White abolitionists such as Harriet Beecher Stowe were among the first Americans to question the racial contract. In Twain’s novel Huck’s decision to break with the racial contract of the South by not turning Jim in to the authorities vexes his conscience. The plot of Hurst’s Imitation of Life draws attention to the contract’s business effects, as the lower-class Bea Pullman builds her empire of waffle houses out of the recipes given by her black maid Delilah, who (like
Introduction

Aunt Jemima) becomes a trademark for racial capitalism’s simultaneous disruption and re-inscription of hierarchies. Smith portrays the tragic consequences of the contract’s sexual dictates in *Strange Fruit* and dissects the obligations imposed by patriarchal white supremacy in *Killers of the Dream*. Class antagonisms between whites, which threaten to tear the fabric of white agreements about race, are blatantly on display in *Mockingbird* when Atticus faces down the poor farmers who come to lynch Tom and who eventually make up the legal jury that condemns him. In *The Help*, Skeeter absconds with a copy of Jim Crow laws and breaks the racial contract in betraying her society sisters and aligning herself with Aibileen, Minny, and eventually the whole black community.

Critical Race theorists such as Mills and Guinier offer a critique of liberalism’s racial contracts that overlaps in many aspects with the analysis of “racial neoliberalism” developed by David Theo Goldberg and other thinkers who caution against the idea that we have become a “color-blind” or “post-racial” society. Recent novels and films such as *The Help* are excellent places to do a reading of these problems at work (as one might presume given how their popularity is itself cited as evidence of our new racial enlightenment). When we are urged to “get beyond race,” argues Goldberg, because there is no such thing, or it is only a “social construction,” we inadvertently (or intentionally) promote the forgetting of the history of racial injustice and incapacitate ourselves when it comes to recognizing race’s harmful legacy and continuing effects. As abolition, the Civil Rights movement, and postcolonial liberation struggles dealt race a tremendous blow, “antiracism gave way to the dominant trend of antiracialism,” this last denoting any use of the concept of race in cultural, social, or political analysis. More insidiously, discrimination moves from the legal and public realm to the private sphere, which Goldberg dubs “born again racism” (2009, 23): “Racism is crucified in public only to be born again in private” (24). Neoliberalism opposes state intervention and state actions to address injustice, which in the case of race is unnecessary, anyway, for neoliberals, since race no longer exists. As Harvey notes, “the neoliberal state is necessarily hostile to all forms of social solidarity [such as organizing politically around categories such as race or gender] that put restraints on capital accumulation” (Harvey 2005, 75).

Classical liberalism was strongly committed to the use of the state in making progress toward balancing liberty and equality with social justice, a perspective foundational for the Federal war against slavery and
the Federal dismantling of Jim Crow. In contrast, “Neoliberalism is in the first instance a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade” (Harvey 2005, 2). “Freedom” and “liberty” become split off from social justice and reduced to the right to marketplace competition, with the effect of imagining all competitors as equally stationed and equipped before the starting gun fires. Thus neoliberalism, too, embraces the ideology of the racial contract in whitewashing the actual and historic inequality among racialized groups. The hostility toward government essential to neoliberalism is best understood as a reaction against the historic state attacks on racism and sex discrimination after the 1950s, and as fueled by parallel initiatives to ameliorate such biases in private economic practices and marketplaces. The post-1960s ideology of limited government and tax cuts aims directly at the Federal workforce which, not coincidentally, had become a major employer of African Americans, as it was a leader in rooting out job discrimination. The “increasing stress on individualized merit and ability in the name of racelessness” promoted the ideological forgetting of racism’s legacy of structural inequality while hijacking liberalism’s emphasis on liberty and the resistance to power (Goldberg 2009, 331). Campaigns against affirmative action in employment or educational opportunity, for example, are made in the name of racelessness, effectively licensing racial discrimination to continue in the private sphere of business and even in public college and university admissions. “Neoliberalism,” writes Goldberg, “accordingly can be read as a response to this concern about the impending impotence of whiteness” (336). The election of Barack Obama only accelerated both white fears of a black racial takeover and neoliberal insistence that race no longer mattered: “In diluting, if not erasing, race in all public affairs of the state, neoliberal proponents nevertheless seek to privatize racisms alongside most everything else” (339). The result of the 2016 Presidential election confirmed for many analysts the persisting power of a white backlash, now reinforced by class divisions that neoliberal economic policies exacerbated. For now, racial liberalism appears under siege from both left and right.

* * *

In the chapters to follow I seek to illuminate how the contradictions evident in the history of racial liberalism shape the form, plots,
characters, and receptions of key texts in American literary history. An archaeology of literary race liberalism in the United States must begin with its two nineteenth-century classics, Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852) and Twain’s *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1886). These novels owe much to a literary movement that was already a century old, so chapter one returns briefly to the origins of sentimental fiction’s emphasis on “sympathy” and its later development as “empathy.” These entangled terms will become central philosophical tenets and literary devices in the novels of racial protest from Stowe to Stockett. The moral sense philosophers of the eighteenth century, especially Adam Smith, exerted a profound influence on the emerging phenomenon of the didactic middle-class novel, an innovation deeply reliant on women readers and writers. Though left for dead by the writers and critics of male modernism, Stowe has been returned to us by feminist scholars and canon revisionists, such as Jane Tompkins, offering new appreciations of the “cultural work” done by sentimental literature’s efforts to intervene in political and public contestations (1985, xi–xix). Stowe’s passionate engagement in the cause of abolition and her placement of women, white and black, at the center of her plot against the peculiar institution now earn her more respect, even as we recognize her continued reliance on racialist thought popular in her time.

The story with *Huckleberry Finn* offers a different pattern of recognition, since it only rises to masterpiece status after the 1950s. The years from 1960 to 2010 would not witness the publication of a white-authored novel on race claiming the popularity or status of those by Hurst, Hobson, Smith, or Lee in the century’s middle decades. Film would be the genre in which many works would once more mount “white savior” narratives where issues of racial oppression are ultimately made into stories of white moral consciousness-raising and empathy of an often self-congratulatory kind (*Mississippi Burning, Dances with Wolves, Snow Falling on Cedars, Amistad, Glory, The Blind Side*, etc.) (see Vera and Gordon, *Screen Saviors: Hollywood Fictions of Whiteness*, 2003). The literary world, meanwhile, witnessed the explosion of the second renaissance of African American literature, as dozens of black fiction writers, poets, dramatists, autobiographers, memoirists, and even a future president published bestselling and/or artistically celebrated texts on US racial history and contemporary dilemmas. With Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, Paule Marshall, August Wilson, David Bradley, Amiri Baraka, and so many others telling the story, perhaps it seemed to white writers that their place in the
tradition was now filled by people who had a better insight into the fiction of race. The rise of a correspondent multicultural literary renaissance featuring Asian American, Latino/a, Native American, and “mixed race” authors further complicated the question of who speaks for the story of America. Yet in this same era, critics and teachers (mostly white) continued the canonization of *Huckleberry Finn* begun in the 1940s and 1950s. It ascended to a height of literary eminence and curricular importance not occupied by any other work of American literature. It was *Huckleberry Finn* that became the white bestseller on race that, at least in schools, dominated the last decades of the twentieth century. By the early 2000s, however, the pressure of criticism and the protests of parents put Twain’s novel on the endangered species list when it came to required curricula; multiculturalism offered instead many options by writers of color that students might find more engaging or less offensive. Why teach *Huckleberry Finn* for a lesson on race and slavery when you can assign Frederick Douglass’s *Narrative* or Octavia Butler’s *Kindred*? My coverage of the rise and fall of *Huckleberry Finn* aims both to understand why the novel became an ur-text of liberal race fiction and how the debates about it shed light on the tradition’s virtues and flaws.

*Uncle Tom’s Cabin* exhibits almost no irony in its moral imperative, and little self-consciousness in its voice or formal construction. This bold sentimentalism and the uncritical embrace of Huck’s epiphany make these novels benchmarks by which to measure the modernist turns taken by race liberal novels in the twentieth century. Fannie Hurst’s *Imitation of Life* (1933) was another bestseller centered on women that languished in the dustbin of the modernist revolution in taste until new attention by feminist scholars rekindled interest, though Hurst’s story was kept alive due to its two famous film adaptations (1934, 1959). Hurst’s deployment of a “tragic mulatta” and an Aunt Jemima stereotype in her novel about white women’s career ambitions and gender constraints struck many as offensive, even unforgivable. Did she intend to perpetuate stereotypes that had undermined white sympathy for the plight of African Americans, or to question them? The latter seems plausible given her friendship with Zora Neale Hurston and Hurst’s career of astounding success producing popular fiction about injustices suffered by immigrants, Jews, and the women of urban America. Readers have largely missed Hurst’s attempt to use modernist irony and an unreliable point of
view in her narrative, with the unfortunate effect of convincing readers that the author shares the biases and confusions of the protagonist, Bea Pullman. Only when we read carefully the constructed distance between Bea's racial beliefs and those of the author can we begin to discern the actual import of the novel, though our difficulty in so doing may testify to Hurst's failure to execute her plan convincingly. Bea's sympathy for her African American domestic and business partner turns out to be less an object of Hurst's admiration than the focus of her satire, though her triumphant rise through racial capitalism still earns her much applause in the novel. The progressive liberal protest against Jim Crow segregation and the one-drop rule rests largely in the hands of the light-skinned Peola, who exits the novel and the nation after giving up on her American prospects.

Most of the books studied here focus on race primarily in regard to the conflict between whites and African Americans, yet the debates and cultural skirmishes over racial liberalism in the twentieth century obviously had a wider scope and context. “For 1940s’ novelists,” argues Tom Perrin, “the central problem facing US society is not material inequality but prejudice, such that a defining feature of what we now call the social problem novel is precisely its focus on prejudice, especially anti-Semitism and antiblack racism” (Perrin 2015, 39). That focus is at the center of Hobson's *Gentleman's Agreement* (1947). Like Hurst, Hobson was the child of Jewish immigrants, though the radical leftism of her family contrasts with the assimilationist, middle-class upbringing of Hurst. While the institutionalization of Jim Crow made the oppression of people of color into the preeminent example of racism for most Americans at this time, antisemitism was also legitimated through various restrictive covenants, quotas, and practices of exclusion when it came to jobs, education, housing, social clubs, and business. These discriminatory acts were justified by the “scientific racism” that put “Aryans” and “Nordics” at the top of an imaginary racial hierarchy that also placed people of African descent at the bottom (a development famously parodied by Fitzgerald in *The Great Gatsby*). German Nazism built on this history in mounting its global effort at racial genocide that cost the lives of millions, though the response in the United States was not, in retrospect, one that showed adequate comprehension of the threat or sympathy for its victims.

Hobson began publishing stories about antisemitism in the 1930s, but it was her blockbuster *Gentleman’s Agreement* that put the spotlight
on the hypocrisy of race liberals just as the Allies secured victory in World War II. The novel centers on a gentile’s passing as a Jew to write an exposé of antisemitism; along the way he learns the limits of liberal sympathies. The US claim to global power was undermined by racism at home, as Myrdal emphasized and Hobson also stressed by including a Jewish war veteran as a principal character. A prolific novelist, with fiction and autobiography appearing steadily until the 1980s, Hobson has been almost completely neglected except as the writer behind the Oscar-winning film version of 1948 starring Gregory Peck. Examining Hobson’s career reveals how the plot of the novel may be rewriting her own history, even as it concentrates on teaching readers its lesson about liberal hypocrisy, empathy across racialized religious lines, and the stubborn hold of racial capitalism.

The major mid-century voice of intellectually sophisticated and politically engaged literary writing on white supremacy was Southern liberal Lillian Smith, whose lesbian feminist or queer counternormative sexuality remained an open secret during most of her career. Her case seems to differ markedly from Hurst’s and Hobson’s, but all share intriguing common elements despite differences of region, religion, and ethnicity. Like her predecessors, Smith rose to fame writing popular fiction, most notably her very successful novel of tragic interracial romance in the South, *Strange Fruit* (1944). Smith made the critique of white supremacy and its roots in patriarchal forms of sexual culture the primary theme of her mature career and its masterpiece, *Killers of the Dream* (first published in 1949 and revised in 1961). This semi-autobiographical book uses a complex form of narrative address to solicit liberal empathy in facing issues of racial and gender oppression and exposing the social construction of whiteness. *Strange Fruit* forcefully indict racism and segregation, along with the sexual politics that underwrites them, but Smith’s concern with expanding the reader’s capacity for empathy by dividing our identification among multiple protagonists ultimately leaves the audience without the focused individual epiphany of a Huck Finn or *Mockingbird’s* Scout Finch. In contrast, *Killers of the Dream*, initially much less well-received than *Strange Fruit*, grew in popularity over the decades, especially after its revision and revival during the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s and its adoption as a key women’s studies text. *Killers* uses autobiography and scenes of instruction to put Smith’s own moral, sexual, and antiracist development forward as a primary narrative focus, thus providing her (white) reader with
a character more like Huck or Scout—someone with whom to identify and whose struggles with repression and oppression yield a fulfilling if difficult story of triumph.

Harper Lee makes the moral didacticism of liberal race empathy the very explicit theme of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, with Atticus Finch reiterating it repeatedly to his young daughter Scout. Many students, teachers, writers, and celebrities have testified to the transformation in their own racial consciousness resulting from immersion in Lee’s novel. This pedagogical narrative was, not surprisingly, eagerly taken up in schools during and after the Civil Rights era, when the reeducation of white people required new and entertaining instruments. *Mockingbird* becomes, along with *Huckleberry Finn*, the pervasive contemporary textbook of liberal race fiction after 1960, at least insofar as that genre is defined as works of fiction that address white readers in an effort to engage them in sympathetic experiences of the injustice, sufferings, and violations of racialized others.

Yet here, as in the cases of Hurst, Hobson, and Smith, close reading of the narrative structure and divided voice complicate our interpretation of the book’s meaning and possible cultural work. Only lately have readers begun to attend seriously to the oddities of the novel, especially its representation of counternormative sex/gender performances. Critics and the public have constantly referred to Scout as the novel’s narrator, as if the book were told by a six- to eight-year-old child, when in fact most of the narration is by her grown-up self, Jean Louise, as she recollects the events that happened in Maycomb three decades earlier. Much of the subversive social commentary comes from Jean Louise’s quite adult sardonic humor, few sentences of which could plausibly come from little Scout. There’s something queer about this double narration, in which one of the speakers stays closeted while projecting visibility onto her youthful tomboy self. What results is a story in which empathy proliferates in unconventional acts of queer identification that complicate the simpler, idealistic articulation of white American liberalism that Atticus Finch embodies. The publication in 2015 of *Go Tell a Watchman*, a manuscript about Jean Louise and Atticus that Lee composed and put away before writing *Mockingbird*, occasioned a national furor demonstrating just how central Lee’s original book remains to the American racial imaginary. In that earlier version, set in the 1950s, an adult Jean Louise struggles with the sexism of her time and the racism of, yes, Atticus himself. The shock and outrage heard in the
press and on the nightly news seemed predicated on the strange belief that Atticus Finch was a real person, about whom we had now learned a terrible secret. Or was it a revelation that might overturn our own self-congratulatory admiration for the tenets of race liberalism the patriarchal Atticus embodied?

The relative decline of white liberal race fiction suddenly experienced a surprising turnaround with Kathryn Stockett’s 2009 best-seller *The Help*, which was subjected to extremes of praise and blame, as was the widely acclaimed and denounced film version. Once more we have a sentimental education, this time of the twenty-something Eugenia “Skeeter” Phelan, raised in Jackson, Mississippi in the 1940s and 1950s and witness to the upheavals brought by the Civil Rights movement. Stockett, like Harper Lee, chooses not to set her race novel in the present day, but decades earlier. In terms of historical chronology, Stockett’s novel takes up right where Lee’s Jean Louise leaves off. While the recollected events of *Mockingbird* are from the early 1930s, its narrational present is 1958 to 1960 or so, the time of Jean Louise’s adult telling. *The Help* picks up the tale of race in America and the South in the years immediately following, mostly between 1962 and 1963. Instead of learning the lesson of empathy at her father’s knee, like Scout, Skeeter receives her education from the maids, whose narratives she sets down in what eventually becomes the book she sells to a New York publisher, enabling her to move there (as the young Harper Lee, without a book, had done in 1949). The novelist’s most controversial decision is to write the various chapters of Aibileen and Minny in the first person. Is this an instance of minstrelsy, of a white writer stealing black voices, so that Stockett becomes a sort of literary Bea Pullman (she who made her fortune from a black maid’s waffle recipe)? Are these maids the contemptible repetitions of the old “mammy” stereotypes? Or are they heroic African American workers in rebellion against white supremacy and the racial capitalist regime of humiliating domestic servitude it imposes?

In turning to *The Help* in the final chapter, I explore how its depiction of the privatization of racism may be symptomatic of our times, even as the book’s overt plot concerns the public and legal struggle against Jim Crow segregation in the early 1960s. Both the public and private institutionalizations of racism are on display and subjected to liberal critique in the book. They are put into dialogue with one another through the voices of the maids themselves. Feeding off the
long history of racial liberalism’s literature of empathy and the sentiment, Stockett takes us into the private, domestic realms where oppression does its work and racial capitalism extracts its profits. Significantly, the novel thematizes the abjection of blackness in its plot about a private group’s effort to ensure that every white employer of black domestics installs a separate toilet for its maids. Instead of Atticus in the courtroom, here our white savior figure is the somewhat queer Skeeter of the toilet wars (and one can’t help connecting this plot to the recent transgender bathroom battles). Even “when invoked to mark the human, race almost invariably operates as threat, as pernicious, as disruptive,” a violation of borders, limits, and even bodily coherence, Goldberg observes (2009, 355). The “abjecting” of racial others by the dominant culture—often through symbolic and rhetorical processes—marks them as the antithesis of the truly human, as waste and excrement. Resistance appears most aptly, then, in a certain ironical pie Minny serves up to her oppressor, its most elemental ingredient being Minny’s own feces.

Sorting out the claims and counterclaims made about The Help requires examining how the work of empathy plays out in the text’s literary forms and devices, most prominently the first-person narratives of the maids who teach us about what’s happening in Jackson. The resistance of Aibileen and Minny to their gendered racialization, moreover, comes to us through the gender nonconforming Skeeter, continuing the tradition of white women questioning patriarchal norms as a consequence of their alliances with antiracist struggles. The book’s cultural work also hinges on its treatment of the Civil Rights movement in Mississippi during those years, whose traces need to be underscored in explicating the narratives of Skeeter and the maids. In highlighting the novel’s theme of the necessity for “change,” personal and political, this last chapter brings us back to the difficult balance between changing the system and changing the heart that has been the primary tension in the history of liberal race fiction.
Introduction

1. Baldwin, “On Being ‘White’…and Other Lies” (1984, 179, 180). Ta-Nehisi Coates (2015) plays variations on Baldwin’s language in Between the World and Me, writing, for example, of “Americans who think they are white” (6) and “people who must believe they are white” (108).

2. Jackson’s 1994 book argues that Myrdal’s alarm at the submissive reaction of Sweden’s populace to the Nazi threat led him to idealize the American Creed as a model for the kind of ideology a democratic nation needs to resist racism.

3. Kontakt med Amerika was published in Swedish and has not been translated. I rely on Jackson’s account.

4. This section of the book on “The Negro Community” was actually written by Myrdal’s assistant, Arnold Rose, though it went into print largely unmodified after Myrdal’s review. For a study of Myrdal’s influence, see Southern 1987.

5. I have opted for this spelling of “antisemitism” to align with Hobson’s language in the novel, but retained “anti-Semitism” when that form is used by other scholars and historians.

6. In describing these now largely neglected books, Hutner argues for their significance to a more inclusive American literary history and to contextualizing such novels as Strange Fruit, Gentleman’s Agreement, Sinclair Lewis’s Kingsblood Royal, and William Faulkner’s Intruder in the Dust, that retain some prominence. He also lists two dozen or so 1940s novels by African Americans that “seem never to have been reviewed in a mainstream venue” (Hutner 2009, 227).

7. Mills observes the almost complete absence of race as a topic in the discipline of philosophy, which he sees reinforced by theories of the abstract social contract. Symptomatically, one could note that in 1984 Michael Sandel edited the distinguished collection Liberalism and Its Critics without including any entries on race (or gender) or any by philosophers of color (the only woman represented is Hannah Arendt). In The Future of Liberalism, Alan Wolfe dedicates only four pages to the topic of race, almost exclusively concerned with affirmative action. The index to Edmund Fawcett’s Liberalism: The Life of an Idea, has no entry for “race” and only a few scattered, single page mentions of “racism.”

8. One might nominate William Styron’s The Confessions of Nat Turner, which won the Pulitzer Prize in 1967, but its influence waned quickly in the wake of African American criticism.

9. Perrin’s Aesthetics of Middlebrow Fiction considers the novels of Hobson, Lillian Smith, and Harper Lee together “to think about the social problem genre” as designedly self-conscious, “a meta-literary discussion about the relationship between realist fiction and social injustice” (Perrin 2015, 42). He notes that they “all make much of realism’s sentimental power to generate empathy between readers and oppressed characters” and “gamble” that such identifications will do the work of political action (43–44).
Chapter 1

1. The critical and scholarly literature on Stowe and *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* is too extensive for me to do it justice or cite all the books and articles I have found valuable. Highly insightful overviews include Eric Sundquist’s “Introduction” to *New Essays on Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, Richard Yarborough’s “Strategies of Black Characterization in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and the Early Afro-American Novel,” Thomas Gossett’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin and American Culture*, and David Reynolds’s *Mightier Than the Sword: Uncle Tom’s Cabin and the Battle for America*. See also Joan Hedrick’s rigorously researched biography, *Harriet Beecher Stowe: A Life*.

2. Some scholars, however, continue to reference Baldwin’s censure approvingly. See Samuels 13.

3. Compare Saidiya Hartman’s 1997 analysis of racial spectacles of suffering in *Scenes of Subjection*.

4. Ellis (1988) argues that “There is a distinctive generic difference between the practical moralising of the conduct book and the novel’s affecting and entertaining narrative,” so that “the novel is in competition with conduct books” (35).

5. See Hedrick’s illuminating account of Stowe’s debt to “parlor literature” of the era (1994, 76–88).

6. Robert Levine quite brilliantly responds to these criticisms by returning to reviews and articles on Stowe published in *Frederick Douglass’ Paper*, and to Douglass’ novella *The Heroic Slave*. Levine’s research shows that Douglass’ support for Stowe rested on their common belief in “Enlightenment universalist values, transracial claims of sympathy, and an optimistic faith in black elevation” (1992, 87).

7. Furnas (1956) put together his trade press book in part inspired by Gunnar Myrdal’s study of the “Negro Problem” in America, which Furnas believes Stowe’s book exacerbated with its inaccuracies: “we still see Negroes and their plight all too consistently through Mrs. Stowe’s always flawed and long obsolete spectacles” (10). Her books are “racist propaganda,” he judges, though in many pages trying to provide a more accurate view of race and slavery in America Furnas wanders far from Stowe, and offers his own ill-considered perceptions and stereotypes, as in the forgiving treatment he gives to the question of sexual oppression in the slave system: “Once his stint was finished and his belly full of grits and fatback, the slave vegetated lumpily at the cabin door. It follows—and the evidence agrees—that his principal recreation was sexual intercourse” (134).

8. Praise by many famous contemporary white writers was also widespread. For a summary of the critical reception of the novel, see Donovan 1991 (27–35) and Reynolds 2011 (173–178).

9. Yael Ben-Zvi’s comparative analysis finds that “While the pre-abolitionist *Primary Geography* doubts the viability of successful national expansion, the abolitionist *First Geography* represents slavery explicitly as a hindrance to national growth and obliterates African Americans’ civic aspirations by tacitly positioning them as antithetical to national development” (Ben-Zvi 2012, 10–11). Stowe’s belief in the determinism of racial geography, in this account, helps explain how her opposition to slavery (as an impediment to the whiteness of Manifest Destiny) conforms with her support of colonization (which would remove Africans from the American soil where they cannot flourish).

10. Marianne Noble (2000) cautions that what she calls the “masochistic pleasures of sentimental literature” accompanied and even propelled its anti-slavery cultural work, since readers “frequently associated sentimental pain with pleasures of a private erotic or ecstatic character rather than with the disinterested altruistic desires to serve the public good” (127).
11. See Arac (1997) and Thomas (2007, 125–76). For an introduction to the debate over race and the teaching of the novel, see the 2000 PBS documentary Born to Trouble: Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, which also works well to bring students into the discussion. Other excellent anthologies include Graff and Phelan (1995); Chadwick-Joshua (1998); and Leonard et al. (1992).

12. See Marx (1953).

13. For an excellent discussion by one white teacher of this history and the problems of using the novel in the classroom, see Carey-Webb (1993).

14. The PBS site states “This activity was created by YMI (Youth Media International),” apparently the earlier name for Young Minds Inspired, whose Editor in Chief, Dominic Kinsley, produced the PBS web site for Burns’ documentary The West. The YMI link on the Burns Twain page is dead.

15. See Gilman (1993), Fishkin (2005), and Foner (1958). Oddly, Fishkin’s essay never references Gilman’s article, which covered many of the same issues and texts. While Fishkin finds positive representations of Jews in Innocents Abroad, Gilman documents the text’s conformity with the rhetoric of the “diseased Jew” and characterizes the 1899 essay as belonging to a later “liberal” Twain. For an account of the issue of Jews and antisemitism throughout Twain’s career, see Vogel, and particularly his chapter on Twain’s essay.

Chapter 2

1. Kroeger’s biography of Hurst identifies Father Murphy as a “Josephite professor at Xavier University” in New Orleans (Kroeger 1999, 204). Their website states: “The St. Joseph Society of the Sacred Heart (the Josephites) is a congregation of priests and brothers whose exclusive mission is to serve the African-American community. Founded after the Civil War to minister to newly freed slaves, the organization has served the African American community since 1871” (www.josephites.org). Murphy published an autobiography, Yankee Priest, in 1952. The quote is from a letter in the Hurst archives (qtd. in Kroeger 1999, 204).


3. Published in Locke’s epochal The New Negro, a shorter version had appeared in March that year in the issue of Survey Graphic that formed the base of the eventual anthology.

4. Ads for the film version continued the tradition. An Atlanta Journal advertisement even proclaimed “see Claudette Colbert make Aunt Jemima Pancakes in her new feature picture ‘Imitation of Life.’” The ad’s headline was “We’re in town, honey,” as if the French-born Colbert had incorporated the black woman whose trademark face is displayed prominently on a box (which actually doesn’t appear in the film) beneath the white star’s own countenance. In contrast, the ad in the black-owned Atlanta Daily World featured a drawing that could be Peola or Bea, under the headline “She Disowned Her Mother and Denied Her Own Race,” with the names of Beavers and Washington prominently displayed and relegating Colbert to a spot at the bottom (Bernstein and White 2007, 160, 165).

5. New York Times, 5 February 1933. The review notes the role of Delilah only briefly and never mentions Peola or the book’s subplot about passing. Other mainstream reviews, mostly positive, are summarized by Kroeger (1999, 198).