

UNDER THE SPELL OF AMAZON: EXPLORING THE STRUCTURES OF RACE AND CLASS IN JOHN UPDIKE'S NOVEL *BRAZIL*

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ABSTRACT: *This paper is an attempt to examine how John Updike (1932-2009) a prominent American novelist, constructs in Brazil (1994) scenarios that reveal to his readers, moment by moment, the rich complexity of Brazilian race relations. I also seek to point out how Updike sets forth the complicated racial issues in modern-day Brazil through the hardships his two main characters, Tristão and Isabel, undergo. In a way, Updike seeks to identify parallel selves in individuals of other nations; individuals whom one would typically categorize as “Others”. The paper also discusses how Updike attempts to de-emphasize racial differences and suggests that humans are all connected to one another as mixed combinations of color. I argue that in a society where racial identities are not clearly definable and where miscegenation is commonplace, interracial unions are more easily accepted. Updike, however, sees that behind this admixture there is a bias linked to skin color and social class. Meanwhile, I argue that Updike’s text is stronger in his sense of place than his sense of people. In other words, though Updike poses the problems of race and identity, he falls short of that, because the main ideas of the novel—the questions of race and class—are never deeply explored or illuminated.*

KEYWORDS: *Updike, Brazil, Racism, Identity, Miscegenation, Classism, Corruption.*

INTRODUCTION

In many of his works, including *Brazil*, John Updike (1932-2009) gives the readers his analysis on human behavior. He often starts with realistic issues and adds a little imagination to create a novel that is rich in quality and relevant to the lifestyles and actions of man. A person’s color, gender, and social class all influence and assemble their personality and view on life. Updike expresses this concept in many of his works and sometimes utilizes moral dilemmas and discriminations to show the influences. *Brazil* begins in Brazil in the 1960s and follows the twenty-two-year relationship and adventures of the socially mismatched Tristão, a black street boy, and Isabel, a bored white beauty from a well-connected Brazilian family. The couple meets, falls in love, and then embarks on a series of new lives: first in middle-class São Paulo, then in a gold-mining camp, and, finally, deep in the wilderness. They experience dramatic interracial love relationships marked by the ways the lovers manage to exchange their colors and races, thus allowing for Tristão to be white and Isabel to be black. This change is not rationalized in terms of the fictional world the characters inhabit, which is in all other respects a closely observed representation of contemporary South America; it is exactly the kind of unexplained literary device that can be associated with “magical realism”¹.

DISCUSSION

The story line of *Brazil* allows Updike to engage questions of poverty, oppression, racism, classism and magic. In particular, the issues of social classes and racial ideologies are among the recurring ideas throughout the text. The novel begins with an attempt to portray the land of Brazil as a “racial democracy”. In Updike’s account, Brazil is a country which, if not exactly color-blind, is characterized by a marvelous blending of different races. This diversity of race and class offers a wealth of background color of Brazil. In other words, *Brazil* speaks about the novel’s much-discussed skin transformation, which Updike emphasizes is “not one of the central events in the book; it’s the central event.” The narrative, he explains, was meant to be a “global novel, a novel about race”, a novel about “the coming brown world” (Reilly, 221). Indeed, the narrator’s obsession with racial issues is present on almost every page of the novel. Each character is invariably described in terms of race and color, not only revealing a narrative awareness that is incompatible with true racial democracy, but also suggesting that perhaps there is a hidden, motivating force that makes writing this novel a necessary exercise for Updike.

This emphasis on skin color in Updike’s novel, which offended some critics, is profoundly important to Updike himself. In fact, racial issues had preoccupied Updike for two reasons; one of them personal and the second social or familial. On the personal level, Updike has once confessed his affliction with a skin disease, psoriasis, which he inherited from his mother. Afflicted with this chronic disease, Updike writes about the effects of mottling on his body as “naked, naked shame” (43). Updike’s memoirs, *Self-Consciousness*, implies a whole chapter, entitled “At War with My Skin”, in which he describes himself as a “prisoner and victim of [his] skin” (46). This disease even dictates upon Updike important life decisions, the most important of which was his marriage at an earlier age: “Why did I marry so young? Because, having once found a comely female who forgave me my skin, I dared not risk losing her and trying to find another. Why did I have children so young? Because I wanted to surround myself with people who did not have psoriasis” (48). Furthermore, the effect of this disease on Updike’s skin turned it, according to Jay Prosser, “analogous to being black” (87). Psoriasis, Updike admits, “keeps you thinking. Strategies of concealment ramify, and self-examination is endless. You are forced to the mirror, again and again; psoriasis compels narcissism” (45). Thus, Updike’s love-hate relationship with his own skin is literally reflected unto the magically changing skin of his characters in *Brazil*. But such magic has a price. As Updike says in “A Letter to My Grandsons”: “We carry our own hides to market” (211).

In “At War with my Skin”, once again, Updike tells of a life lived because of this disease, especially his struggle to acquire a tan, since the sun temporarily cures it. Once the sun has faded from the beaches of New England, he goes to the Caribbean. There, he has his first encounters with blacks: “I had never been among black people before. The “colored people” of Berks were ghettoized in south Reading...” (65). Updike is self-conscious about how his encounters with these blacks change him more profoundly: “It was my belief, as of 1950, that the United States’ black tenth had contributed much more than their proportionate share to what is distinctive and universally eloquent in American culture, and I believed that realizing full equality for blacks was our foremost domestic priority. Nevertheless, however liberal my views, I had no dealings with blacks either as equals or as servants and was shy and nervous with them” (65). Thus, the disease, which torments Updike throughout his life, seemingly changes his perceptions of skin: “The discovery of the dark races was to me a magnificent enlargement of all my world” (66). Updike

speaks to the same meaning in his interview with Margaria Fichtner just after *Brazil* is published. He proclaims that “there is powerful magic in the whole idea of how your skin is in some way your fate... So it [psoriasis] has probably made me more skin-aware than your average [American] citizen, and in some ways it was a modest rapture for me to write that section [in *Brazil*] where Isabel’s skin is dyed” (11).

On the social and familial level, Updike is seemingly inspired by the example of his children, whose interracial marriages made him optimistic. In reality, Updike’s elder daughter, Elizabeth, had chosen a West African partner and had given birth to their two children, obviously of mixed race. Also, his son, David, chose an interracial marriage: his wife is Kenyan. Updike refers to this miscegenation, of which he is a strong supporter. In his interview with Christopher Hitchens, shortly after the publication of *Brazil*, Updike reflects: “Yes, in my youth in Berks County, Pennsylvania, a mixed-race couple would have been a rarity and, indeed, a scandal. And I would certainly have been surprised to think that two of my children would marry Africans. So my grandchildren are, in the truest sense, African-Americans. And my novel [*Brazil*] is a sort of hymn to miscegenation” (12). In this way, miscegenation, as Denise Ferreira Da Silva assumes, has become “central” in studies of race relations in Brazil, in which the United States is “forcefully an explicit or implicit basis of comparison” (205). As such, in his interview with Fichtner in 1994, Updike refers to this comparison between the two countries: “In some ways I treated Brazil as another kind of United States. It’s about the same size and has some of the same peculiarities... the same racial mix, the same coastal cities and then the immense hinterland” (11).

Moreover, Updike’s memoirs, *Self-Consciousness*, which he dedicated to his two mixed-race grandsons, John Anoff Cobblah and Michael Kwame Ntiri Cobblah, includes an entire chapter titled “A Letter to My Grandsons. The chapter begins with a claim about affiliation, similar to his opening sentence in *Brazil*:

We are all of mixed blood. Your mother, my older daughter, is fair, descended from the people of Northern Europe with its mist and fog and snow—she is English, with a dash of Russian and French, on her mother’s side, and German and Dutch on mine. Your father is black, the pure black of West Africa, his color sealed off by the Sahara from the north and by the breadth of a continent from the infusions of Arab and Hamitic genes that have rendered East Africans comparatively pale. Genealogists tell us that we are all cousins... Your two parents are about as black and white as two people can be, and that helps make them a beautiful couple. But they are beautiful too for sharing similar temperaments, both being good-natured and nurturing and artistic, and similar backgrounds, coming as both do from the international race of teachers and artists. (italics mine, 164-65)

As Updike reveals in this letter the origins of *Brazil*, he also goes on to imagine what the future of his *mulatto* grandchildren will be in the United States: “When Anoff was born... my instinctive thought was that he would do better if his parents settled in Ghana... I trusted an African country to treat a half-white person better than my own country would treat a half-black”ⁱⁱ. Updike also admits that across the politest of exchanges between blacks and whites a “shadow falls, an apprehensiveness and wary memory... As blacks, you will shoulder here a load of history and mythology that may hide you from yourselves and cut into your freedom to pursue happiness. You will each be in subtle (at best) ways the focus of distaste and hatred and fear that have nothing to do with anything but your skins”. In spite of this veil of prejudice which Updike foresees his grandsons will be subject to, he still hopes for change which interracial relations extend. He sees hope in “the Latinization of North America—the influx of Hispanics—[which] has softened the

color line...” In an emotional tone, Updike assures his grandsons that “America is slowly becoming yours...as much as it is anyone’s...” (195).

Clearly, Updike’s optimism for the racial future of his black grandsons is grounded in his memory of the *Civil Rights Movement* and its practical consequences with regard to affirmative action. He evaluates these actions as signifying an improvement in race relations, opening up unprecedented spaces and possibilities of social mobility for black Americans. In a way, *Brazil* is constructed as sharing the U.S. sense of a ‘democratic’ coexistence of people from different backgrounds. It replaces the conventional U.S. division of skin color into black and white with the view that both black and white are shades of the same brown. In his interview with James Woodall in 1994, Updike admits: “Of all the world’s melting pots...Brazil is the most melted. It’s the brownest. In the U.S., we had to fight a civil war to end slavery, and racial tensions have persisted. The Portuguese [in Brazil] had little dread of the African races, and the mestizo-mulatto society they made could be a model of how to behave” (5). Apart from this, Updike also believes that Brazil is another big country, like the U.S., “fat with minerals and forest”, and “another land of opportunity” (*More Matter*, 131). Thus, though Updike presents Brazil as a country of hidden turmoil, poverty, crime, drugs, promiscuity, and racial conflicts, yet he finds it to be beautiful due to its diverse background. The polemical subtext of the novel would appear to argue that racial admixture is the ultimate solution for the dilemmas of racially conflicted societies.

Throughout *Brazil*, Updike attempts to de-emphasize racial differences and suggest that humans are all connected to one another as mixed combinations of color. The novel argues that in a society where racial identities are not clearly definable and where miscegenation is commonplace, interracial unions are more easily accepted. His opening sentence of the novel demonstrates that varying colors are associated through a spectrum rather than divided by oppositions: “Black is a shade of brown. So is white, if you look” (3)ⁱⁱⁱ. People are not black or white in *Brazil*, but varying shades of pigmentation. This heightened narrative awareness requires us to take a closer look at the novel’s underlying concerns with race, most visibly demonstrated in the character descriptions. If we analyze the novel’s characters one by one, we see that all of them without exception are described as having traits that identify them as originating from more than one race. In other words, the novel tries to characterize Isabel, her parents, and Uncle Donaciano as having inherited from their Portuguese ancestors some ‘Negroid’ physical traits and some black blood. For example, Isabel’s mother, the descendent of a Portuguese family, is said to have Moorish blood, which would explain “that drop of darkness which makes a true Brazilian beauty” (77). Isabel’s father also comes from the Portuguese Leme family and has a “thin bluish skin” (75). The skin of Isabel’s uncle’s maid, Maria, is “a sullen snuff color” (13). As such, Ursula, Tristão’s mother, has a skin that is “a sludgy bistre quiet without Tristão’s shimmer of African blue” (34). Each of Tristão’s brothers seems to belong to a different race altogether and function as a representative of the Brazilian miscegenation that the narrator observes in all parts of the country. Euclides’s skin is “clay-colored”, a hint that his father “must have been part Indian”, whereas Tristão’s had boasted “pure African blood, as pure as blood can be in Brazil” (7).

In this way, racial identity ultimately disappears, for black is not fully black, nor is white entirely white. In a way, Updike seems to say that human beings are all hybrid. The race with sole color does not exist. There is neither absolute black skin, nor white skin. Both colors lack an intrinsic, original, and positive definition. They become the result of something more, the nuances of a third color — a neutral color that contains them both. We can find black blood in white people as well as white blood in blacks. Thus, pure races are replaced by multiracial compositions, and the nation becomes the ideal place for love between individuals of different races to fulfill its

potential. Accordingly, the white racists who discriminate against the blacks discriminate against themselves, and their emphasis on the white superiority is a praise for the blacks too. In addition to this diversity of race and culture in Brazil, we meet blacks and whites, rich and poor, Indians and Asians, Jews and Turks, the “wild” and the “civilized,” the meek and the strong.

Despite this multiculturalism in Brazil, the unfortunate reality, however, is that neither the beginning, middle, nor end of the novel is happy. Updike constructs scenarios that reveal to us, moment by moment, the rich complexity of Brazilian race relations. He sees that behind this admixture there is a bias linked to skin color and social class. Updike’s insightful view is in harmony with that of Darcy Ribeiro, a prominent Brazilian anthropologist and politician. Ribeiro argues that the “distinctive characteristic of Brazilian racism is that it is not based on the racial origin of people, but on the color of their skin” (156). This storyline allows Updike to engage questions of poverty, oppression, racism, classism and magic. He writes as an insider reveling in Third World detail. Besides, the nearly endless display of prejudice and discrimination throughout the novel includes racially-motivated verbal and physical harassment, and constant dislocations of the racial issue to the realm of social class.

Updike places his protagonists at diametrically opposite ends of the racial and social scale, thus multiplying the obstacles they encounter both as a black man and a white woman and as a white man and a black woman. In doing so, Updike seeks to identify parallel selves in individuals of other nations, individuals whom one would typically categorize as “Others”. The larger ambition of the novel, as mentioned earlier, is to be “global”, to try to describe the world as it “shuffles and melts...into multiracialism”, in which Brazil is “a perfect metaphor for this process” (Cited in Hitchens, 12). When Isabel’s uncle, Donaciano, tells his niece that his disapproval of Tristão is purely on account of economic, not racial, reasons, he points out: “I do not speak of color. I am color-blind. [Brazil] is not South Africa, thank God, or the United States. But a man cannot make himself out of thin air, he must have materials” (23).

As the earlier-mentioned statement draws the contrast to the “apartheid” notions in South Africa, it also weaves a comparison between the racial issues in both the United States and Brazil. *Brazil’s* setting has to be construed as a technical device created by Updike to add another perspective to and inform discussions about the complex racial situation in America, as well as in Brazil. Christopher Hitchens observes that the setting of the narrative is, in many ways, a “good metaphor for the United States”, being “vast and possesses great natural wealth” like Brazil. Hitchens also finds some affinities between the two countries: “With its gold rushes and its frontier wars, and the rivalry between its old east coast city settlements and burgeoning westward encroachment, it is not unlike the United States of a century or so ago. And though it is rich in mixed blood, it is also burdened with much surreptitious racism and a bad conscience about the treatment of its indigenous Indians” (12).

In exploring the question of race, *Brazil* also shows a great deal of irony. The two lovers, Tristão and Isabel, face the troubles of racism throughout their entire journey. In many ways, the attraction of these star-crossed lovers is based on opposites —on the clash between rich and poor, black and white. Their life stories are totally disparate, as are their social class, color, race, educational level, and societal relations. They have between them the most profound differences imaginable. In order to clear up the contrast between the couple, Updike holds a comparison between the cultural, social, and economic conditions of the two. While Tristão is born into poverty and bastardy and lives on a hillock in Rio de Janeiro continually washed away by sewage and tropical rainstorms, Isabel is an upper-class girl, who comes from one of the oldest and

proudest of Brazilian families. While Tristão's mother is a whore, Isabel's father is a powerful diplomat. When they first meet on the beach, while Isabel speaks about the school she attends and the luxurious and lightweight life she lives, Tristão and his brother "told almost nothing of their lives, of which they were ashamed: a mother who was not a mother, a home that was not a home. They had no lives, just a constant scurry and hustle, propelled by their empty stomachs..." (8). The two black brothers are too poor to further their study. They have just received the kind of education that enables them to read street signs and advertisements and no more.

Likewise, when Isabel goes to Tristão's shanty, she is struck by the dirt and bad conditions of his family. She, who had arrived in darkness, "was struck by the fluidity of this hazy space, in which she still did not know how many people, besides herself and Tristão and Tristão's mother, were present" (30). When she wakes up on the second day, she marvels at how many people she had slept soundly among: "These poor, like animals, had developed a tactful politics of space. The whole shack, now that she could gauge its dimensions, was no bigger than her uncle's master bathroom..." (37). In the shanty, Isabel recognizes that what Tristão's sister was cooking was only corn cakes which are mostly made of water and salt. Because of Isabel's presence on that day, the so-called cakes were too few to make everyone a share.

On the other hand, Uncle Donaciano's apartment, where Isabel lives, was completely different. Inside the apartment, "there reigned a silence of expensive surfaces—vases and carpets and fringed pillows and the gilded leather backs of books" (12). Tristão was even shocked by what he saw. He had never been in such a space; he felt his breath and freedom of movement taken from him. His mouth has gone very dry as he looks around, thinking that he and his brother "could live for a month on one silver cigarette box, on two crystal candlesticks" (12). He marveled at the height of the bookshelves, which ascended to the height of a palm tree. Indoors, there was so much light to the extent that Tristão felt he was outdoors. Thus, compared to Isabel's extreme luxurious apartment, the blacks' habitation was no sign of life.

Through these kinds of descriptions and comparisons, which can be found throughout the novel, Updike gives us an aspect of the injustice and marginalization which the blacks suffered from at that time. The novel is set during the 1960s, a time when Brazil was still under the rule of military junta who "had sold Brazil's future to the international banks, and had spent the money on themselves" (239). It is a time when slavery no longer exists in Brazil, for it had been abolished a long time ago, yet the racial discrimination was still there. It is also a time during which the poor "remain poor", and "the rich rule with guns" (63). Updike writes:

My Brazil lies somewhere between the rather grisly headlines of today—which report massacres of street children and Amazonian Indians, and armies of corrupt and violent police doing battle with gangs of drug dealers established in the favelas like brutal barons from the Dark Ages: a society, in short, in meltdown, the institutions of order and decency collapsing under a sodden weight of poverty and cynicism...
(*More Matter*, 829)

Updike vividly evokes the hopelessness of Brazil's blacks under the military regime. He seems to say that the majority of blacks in Brazil are as poor as blacks anywhere else in the world. Privilege and power tend to be in the hands of the whites: "The truth is no help to men like us. People like us [i.e. blacks] are killed in Brazil for telling the truth" (89). Thus, the blacks, on the one hand, have nothing but to struggle for their lives against the savage privations of the country where the law is a flexible tool for the rich and whites only. On the other hand, to be of the

middle class in Brazil is to enjoy what would be “an aristocratic life-style” in which “servants are cheaper than appliances” (235).

Because of the wide gap between Tristão and Isabel, he was completely an “Other” in her world as well as in the world of the white community. However, Isabel, though knows that Tristão is another race and another class, ignores these facts. She knows that, as a white woman, she comes from the dominant culture, the culture responsible for Tristão’s persecution and suffering. Yet, she cannot bring herself to examine this identity. Instead, she feels guilty and ashamed. This becomes evidently clear after their first night together in his mother’s shanty. Isabel assumed that Tristão “seemed thinner, and older, like a piece of smoked meat, and the black of his skin duller”. It saddened her to see that his acquisition of her “had so soon proved a withering burden” (33). Consequently, she exudes this guilt as self-degradation and submissiveness.

Thus, Tristão only reaches expression in society when he changes his skin color with Isabel’s. As a black boy, he was oppressed and marginalized. Hence, he had been exposed to crime all his life which was “the life of a street dog” who would have been killed by the police or “another street dog” (237). But when he meets Isabel he was willing to throw away his past and concentrate on a future with her. He was eager to live like the whites. Unfortunately, it was not that yielding. Both his family and that of Isabel denounce the relation. Isabel’s father and uncle, on the one hand, did not approve of Tristão because of the color of his flesh. Her father looks at blacks as being beasts and on a much lower and almost not human level. Thus, when he is alerted of his daughter’s affair with Tristão he is strongly repellent. “Love is a dream,” he lectures her, “as all but the dreamers can see. It is the anesthetic Nature employs to extract babies from us... You will not throw away your life on a black slum boy... You will attend the university... Perhaps you will meet in one of your classes a charming general’s son” (73). When Isabel elopes with Tristão, her father further attempts to establish a blockade on the force that attracted the opposite skinned couple together by sending his henchmen to capture Isabel and guard Tristão. When Isabel is back again, her father warns that if she does not succumb to his commands, then “this Tristão, whom we can now identify and trace, may painlessly disappear. Not even his mother, I understand, will trouble the authorities” (74). Because of this white man’s inability to see beyond the flesh, into the spectrum that the whole human race possesses, a dilemma of morality resulted. In addition to her father, Isabel’s wealthy uncle declares the affair beyond the bounds, “even of our permissive age, in this all-too-progressive society” (21). “What bounds are there in Brazil?” Isabel naïvely demands of her uncle, but he is unimpressed and tells her, “[y]ou will no longer see this *moleque* [unreliable person]” (24). As is clear, Updike focuses on how family members and other peripheral characters react to this relationship just to reinforce social norms. There is a sort of competition of tradition and social justice that enters into this clash between Isabel and her family and their tradition.

On the other hand, Tristão’s mother, Ursula, rebuffs Isabel’s efforts to befriend her. Deep inside, Ursula believes it is impossible for a white woman and a black man to get together, to say nothing of their getting married. When Isabel tries to form an alliance with her and offers her a gift, Ursula even chooses to despise and neglect her as “the representative of the class of oppressors” (86). Ursula believes that their respective worlds—Isabel’s world of money and ease, her son’s world of poverty and despair—are incompatible. Like Tristão, Ursula is a model victim of racial discrimination and oppression in Brazil. As a black woman, she grew up under the oppression of white culture. Faced by poverty, oppression and discrimination, she comes to hate herself because of her black identity and black skin. As a prostitute, she never believes in true love, let alone the love between whites and blacks. When Isabel shows up before her for the first time, she dislikes

and rejects her. Thus, when she hears Isabel's affectionate declaration to her son, she could not understand and believe it. "The white girl somebody's... How come you steal her?" (31). Since any romantic relations between blacks and whites have been beyond her imagination, Ursula firmly believes that her son might have stolen this white girl.

To the white Brazilian society, the blacks are nameless and worth nothing. The only thing they deserve is contempt. Speaking about her father's hostile stance towards the blacks, Isabel thinks of it as a kind of "distaste bred of his cultural conditioning" (108). Societal views and prejudices dictate that the black people are inferior. César, one of Isabel's father's henchmen, authenticates when he comes a second time to retrieve Isabel, saying, "Brazil is not yet altogether without standards, without traditions, without order" (141). It is this "order" that refuses to accept the black people, much less an interracial relationship. This discrimination leaves a deep wound within Tristão who tells Isabel, "[y]ou think because I am black and come from the *favela* I have no shame, no civilization.... You think I am shit, because of my color... You think I come from depths where order and honor never penetrate. But hopes of order and honor are everywhere... We all know what order and decency and honor are..." (50).

Ironically, this racial discrimination is not confined to the white supremacist. Rather, the so-called socialist reformers cannot even see behind the color of flesh. This is evidenced when Tristão goes to look for Isabel in Brasília. Sylvio, one of her socialist colleagues, sees Tristão near Isabel and promptly asks her, "[a]re you in trouble? Who is this riffraff?" (104). Here, rather than seeing Tristão as a person he should help, Sylvio instead both prejudges and condemns him as "trash". When the supposed reformers cannot see beyond their own prejudices, it is hard to expect Isabel's father to treat Tristão fairly. And he does not until the end of the novel when Tristão becomes white.

Unlike her father and uncle, Isabel highly appreciates the blacks and takes them as equals: "The blacks will never revolt, there [in the United States] or here [in Brazil]. They are too happy and good. They are too beautiful. Always it was so. The Indians died of slavery; the blacks rose above it, of their own great natures. Because they are superior, they let themselves be treated as inferior... They are able to live... *live*, and not merely survive" (100). Isabel assumes that the only difference between the blacks and whites is the skin color, which she innocently thinks is made by the sunshine: "[Tristão's] people come from across the great ocean, from another great island, greater than even Brazil, where the sun has made people black" (186). Unlike her father who considers the Indians "ignorant" and "disease-ridden" (223), Isabel believes that this is unfair because she lives among Indians for a while, and "they couldn't have been nicer" (224).

In retrospect, the discrimination and persecution Tristão faces in modern day Brazil is still the same that has existed throughout the centuries, the same that the indigenous 'Tupi' tribes themselves faced^{iv}. Fleeing west to escape Isabel's father, the couple experiences a movement back in time. When they first head toward the mining town, they note that "moving inland, they seemed to move backwards in time" (112). Again, when they were crossing the Mato Grosso, the couple "seemed under their loads to be moving backward in time, away from the furies that excessive population brought to their century, into a chaste space where pairs of willing human hands would still be valuable" (149). It is this backward movement that paves the way for Isabel's encounter with the now extinct "Tupi" tribe, and illustrates racial views of that time period.

Yet, Updike's treatment of these indigenous cultures is addressed through racial blurring in the novel. They appear, albeit briefly, throughout the novel. To many, the indigenous peoples play a

minimal role in a text often critiqued for its racial portrayals and its rewriting of the medieval Tristan and Iseult story. In fact, Updike's failure to name the tribe whom Isabel seeks out for their magic begins the novel's racial blurring. He does not identify the shaman's tribe. Instead, he simply gives small hints as to the tribe's identity. For example, Updike writes that the Indians were speaking a language the whites could understand "with difficulty" (180). This racial blurring in *Brazil* is, however, key to understanding the text, for it allows Updike to link the indigenous peoples with the central characters. Of course, many would wonder why race is blurred if Updike does want to make these links! One assumes that this racial blurring allows the author to illustrate the discrimination's timelessness—despite the centuries that have passed, discrimination is still based on skin color.

Given this discrimination, the indigenous peoples, as well as Isabel and Tristão, become lost. What they fail to realize is the importance of understanding their own ethnic identities. Despite having an extremely large family, Tristão is distanced from them all. He does not know who his father is, and, he and his brothers are forced to fend for themselves, working "as a team, stealing and robbing when their hunger became great" (4). Because of the poverty that surrounds Tristão, his family, and his community, there is no one who can provide any cultural immersion; everyone is too busy fending for themselves. Thus, Tristão is lost and becomes alone in the world. He feels no sense of place in the overcrowded shack he calls *home*, and can simply wonder at his position in the world as a black male. On the other hand, Isabel's refusal to address racial issues further complicates her sense of identity. She spirals into a circle of blame: both herself and Tristão. As she admits after her race-change, "[h]ad [Tristão] not been black, would she have been so casually and serenely unfaithful? True, she could justly blame his poverty and helplessness as leaving her no choice; but had she not taken a certain relish in her degradation, because the blame was his? She had used him to become shameless, denying him the luxury of shame" (205).

Thus, what we see is that Tristão and Isabel are cut off from their ethnic heritage, an act which has negative effects on their sense of self. Neither of them has any positive racial models in their lives. Unable to develop positive and stable ethnic identities, they become lost and confused. Instead of addressing the problem, the couple flees their homes. They believe the problem is solely from outside discrimination. Therefore, if they can simply start over, then everything will be fine. In fact, when the couple first stumbles into the mining town, talk of gold falsely invigorates them. The man who sells them his mining plot promises a "heaven-sent opportunity" (121), where Tristão will be a self-employed miner, and independent entrepreneur: "All the gold you find within your claim will be yours... I have seen a poor *camarada* [comrade], owning nothing more than the rags on his back, become overnight as rich as one of Dom Pedro Segundo's appointed lords" (119-120)^v.

While they come to the mining town giddy, in love, and full of hope, this soon changes when the couple experiences hardships that continue for years. Rather than the gold and riches they hope for, Tristão slaves fruitlessly in the mine and drinks too much. He is so obsessed with finding gold that he no longer has any desire for Isabel. She prostitutes herself for money because they both are starving and their clothes are falling apart. Even when they do find gold, it does not bring them the happiness which they had hoped. Instead, Isabel's father sends his goons, and again, they are forced to flee.

In fact, the reactions of Isabel and Tristão to the barriers of race, class and background could provide interesting insights into their personalities, but Updike minimally probes these issues, leaving us to wonder what motivates them to defy such rigid lines at what becomes a very steep

cost. The couple's refusal to address racial identity creates in them a destructive and deprecating co-dependence.

Yet, the couple's race-change reshapes how they view race and racial identity. When the Indian shaman asks Isabel if she is willing to sacrifice for Tristão and to change herself, she answers: "Yes, if he will still love me," to which the shaman responds with an assurance—and a warning: "When we disturb Nature with magic, nothing stays the same. Things shift" (186). Of course, the magic allows for a series of changes and reflections on the nature of the races which skitters dangerously close to, and sometimes crosses, the line of offensive generalizations. Each has become the cliché the other would imagine him or her to be. Updike writes at one point that when Ianopamoko, the Indian magician, resists Isabel's touch, she realizes that her "uncanny whiteness had been part of her charm... [She] felt insulted" (189). Despite the fact that the inner Isabel has not changed, she finally begins to realize just what an impact skin color has on society. In other words, Isabel's new race opens up the strength and power she had always hidden before, releasing the person she had been afraid to be. Likewise, Tristão's new white race has a similar effect. Whereas before, Tristão lacked direction, now "[h]e took charge, as never before. It was as if his brain, now that he had white skin, had become a box squared off with linear possibilities—a grid of choices, alternatives, projections" (201). He feels boldness and control that he never felt as a black man.

For both, the race-change allows them to tap into potentials and goads them into actions that, before, they would never have thought themselves capable of doing. They come to understand that if their relationship is to survive and thrive, they can no longer sublimate themselves or subjugate the other. This, however changes soon. Neither Tristão nor Isabel follows the path of racial harmony and equality that the 'Tupi' tribe showed them. Instead, as they begin exploring race, they also begin basing their ideas on societal preconceptions, along with their previous, racial identities. While Tristão feels a deeper love for Isabel, he also confuses it with love of his white self. Their new relation gave a last full scope to his instinctive chivalry. He, too, had felt something brutish in his former appeal to her. He had not been insensitive to the burden of her loss of social position placed on his shoulders: "Now it was he who *descended*, to accept a nigger wench as his mate..." (205). He relishes the dominant position his white race puts him in. He also lets his old racial views—the views of himself and the black race as inferior—paint his perceptions of Isabel. It is he who "descends" in their relationship; he who can easily abandon the black Isabel, just as he suspected that she, as a white, would do the same to him. Power and control do not make Tristão think how he can help his former race, but rather what he can get from them and what he can do to them. Furthermore, the idea that it is he who is elevating Isabel thrills him. Despite his own experiences as a black man, Tristão refuses to see Isabel as an equal. Thus, after the race-change, when he sees her submitting to the chieftain's brother's vileness for her life, he shows up as a tall bearded white man, like a warrior, and angrily admonishes her: "You *foul black* whore...When are *you people* going to learn some pride?" (italics mine, 196-197). It seems that Tristão uses these phrases, "you foul black" and "you people", just to distinguish and separate himself from the black community at large.

In a similar fashion, Isabel allows her blackness influence her view of Tristão. Though she was eager to merge herself into the black community, yet she believes he no longer loves her after she becomes black. She tells him, "[o]nce we are back in civilization, you will drop me. You will use me as your whore for a time but find another wife, a white wife" (207). Thus, she again bases love on skin color, finding herself unworthy of the white Tristão. To some extent, Isabel's insecurities arise when she realizes that part of her was drawn to Tristão simply because their

relation was 'forbidden'. She finally realizes that her many indiscretions were based on her view of Tristão's race. As a white woman with a black man, Isabel felt that she could do anything, and he would still stand by her. Now, with the opposite true, she worries just how long Tristão will stay with her. So, she begins to remind him of her favors upon him: "When I was your color, and you were mine, I took you, a mere street boy, a miserable *moleque*, to my uncle's apartment, where there were more expensive things than you had ever seen, your eyes were like saucers, and gave you my virgin's blood..." (198).

After finally returning from the jungle, both Tristão and Isabel come to realize that their relationship must be reformed. It can no longer be based on immature actions, such as intimacy and disobedience or on their racial preconceptions, but must be based on their true feelings for each other. Thus, they ultimately enter into a healthy relationship based on mutual love and appreciation. However, despite what the couple does learn about themselves and about race, they are unable to follow the journey through. Both Tristão and Isabel are incapable of fully exploring their ethnic identities. Isabel cannot comprehend what Tristão likes about his job. At one point, she cries: "I have made you into an artificial man! Your work now—honestly, isn't it meaningless and dreadful? Don't you hate me, honestly?" (237). She believes Tristão can only be happy in a position of power and wealth. She also believes that she has caused his misery through the magical race-change. Rather than seeing Tristão's happiness and the reasons for that happiness, Isabel instead sees him as being changed from a capable black man into a shell-like white man. She still does not understand, even when he responds, "[w]e are seeing the end of slaves and masters in Brazil, and I, who have little competence, can help here, having been both" (238). Tristão likes that he, as one of the privileged, can use both his past experiences, as well as his present position, to help those struggling in an oppressive system. Since he lacks "the upper-class Paulista accent that the workers and their leaders instinctively hated" and since he "had none of the [upper class's] prissy, languid arrogance" (233), the workers at the tissue factory trust him, coming to him with complaints and problems that he diligently tries to solve. The whole modern world seemed something of a puzzle to him, but he was patient and never succumbed.

On her part, Isabel takes pride in her status as a black, upper class wife simply because she is an anomaly. She fritters her life away, just as she had done as a privileged white woman. She does nothing useful; nothing to promote racial equality. All she does is socializing, shopping, and giving the household help orders. It is obvious that she has not fully explored her own racial identity either. She has no idea what it means to be black, and hence she never delves into herself or integrates her past and present races. She has always been in an elevated position, and no one has ever degraded her on account of her color. Even her father, the man who persecuted Tristão for his blackness, simply considers her dark color a "perfection": "I find Isabel as enchanting as I did when I first saw her, in her sainted mother's arms" (228). Isabel has never been forced to confront or comprehend her own identity. Therefore, this is a journey she quickly and easily abandons upon arriving home in Brasília.

Likewise, Tristão does not fully explore his ethnic identity. Rather than integrating his black and white identities, he instead relies too heavily on his black identity. This creates a tension inside him, for "he never really felt at home in São Paulo" (234). He continually compares São Paulo, his white home, with Rio de Janeiro, his black home, and finds São Paulo lacking. Metaphorically, São Paulo is, of course, the white Tristão. His inability to integrate his two racial identities is damaging. Indeed, after his change of race, he loses something that was essential to his being: his occult and mystical powers. He leaves his formerly enchanted world of dream and myth, of mediated ecstasy and occult dread, for the modern, more antiseptic world of critical rationality

and of management powers. This does, to be sure, enable him to become a wealthy bourgeois. But he is, at his core, partly disempowered by this change of race, though as a white man he enjoys the privileges and powers of being a member of the dominant racial, social, and economic group. Thus, he begins to yearn for his past.

Strikingly, the most tragic moment in the novel is also the most ironic. When he returns to the beach where he first meets Isabel, Tristão encounters black thieves reminiscent of his self-image. The now white and rich Tristão, accepted by society but still unhappy because he cannot fully penetrate the world of the Lemes, tries in vain to explain to these street boys that he is not a foreigner, as they imagine, but one of them; someone able to understand them. Rather than giving them what they want, he, instead, identifies with them, claiming that he is a “brother”: “I am one of you” (254). These final, and useless, words are emblematic of his final, failing effort to reestablish his origins. No matter how he explained to them, they did not believe that he was a “brother”. He is no longer one of them.

Indeed, the murder of the newly white Tristão by black street boys on the beach must be perceived as a crime motivated by racial hatred; in this case, of racism against whites. Being oppressed and dominated by the whites for a long history, the blacks had an abhorrence and profound hatred of the white community. They adopt violence and crime to express this feeling towards them. Thus, when they found Tristão, who just experienced skin transformation, they mistook him for a white man. As the boys stab him to death, the omniscient narrator interprets the thoughts behind their actions: “[They] slashed and stabbed at the crouching, toppling white man, as a lesson to all such white men who think they still can own the world” (255). Thus, Tristão’s failure to reconcile his racial identity leads to his death, as the black thieves only see a wealthy white man before them. This tragic end confirms Updike’s earlier admission that even the most democratic beach in the world is not exactly a paradise.

With Tristão’s death, Isabel is left to complete the journey that the Indian magic set in motion. It is also at this point that she finally comprehends what the ‘Tupi’ tribe meant when they told her that magic is personal and substitutive. Magic cannot bring Tristão back to her; it can only affect the “personal soul” (177). It is here that she finally comes to the end of her journey; she finally understands what magic is, who she is, and what race really means. The ‘Tupi’ shaman had told her that her blue eyes would not change until she truly becomes and understands her racial identity. With Tristão’s death, we see Isabel is completely transformed into the “dark-eyed widow...” (260). The eyes are the final component, indicating that full extent of and meaning behind the ‘Tupi’ magic has been realized. Thus, for the first time in her life, Isabel experiences true suffering and pain. She experiences this suffering alone, with no one to help or console her. Isabel comes into her racial identity, and hence she begins to feel the burden of being black.

As is clear, coming to terms with one’s ethnic identity is crucial for self-empowerment. When Isabel and Tristão ignore or abandon their racial identities, they end up adrift in the world, unsure of who they are and what they should be. Consequently, as with Tristão, he develops a negative self-image, basing his self-worth on how the dominant culture perceives his own. Or, as with Isabel, she assumes all the guilt from her race’s oppressive actions toward people of color. Therefore, what we see is that each character feels empty and de-valued, which leads to self-destructive tendencies. It is only when they embrace their ethnic identities that they are empowered. While Tristão embarks on this path, he is never quite able to come to terms with his ethnic identity. However, he does use his new white race to his advantage, working for the disenfranchised black population at his company. Yet it is his inability and lack of understanding

that does lead to his death. Similarly, Isabel finally comes into her ethnic identity, but it is belated. Had both Isabel and Tristão stopped and wrestled with racial issues immediately after their race-change, they would not have experienced such a harsh reality at the end.

Thus, the dynamic in Isabel's and Tristão's relationship is defined in terms of color and race. Also, the effect of the racial transformation on the couple is perhaps the most crucial point in the novel. This skin change, Updike once states, was "an ambitious step", without which *Brazil* "wouldn't be the same book" (Charlie Reilly, 242). At the same time, this race-change is also what allows critics to attack Updike and condemn his stereotypical depictions. Indeed, Updike ventures into a new set of stereotypes that proliferate without sensitivity or insight. His startling twist and his extended narration on the nature of Isabel's and Tristão's new relationship with each other and with society may shock some readers, anger others. Updike, not content to skim along the surface of black and white love, brings out the deepest taboos between the races: master and slave relationships, differences in genitalia, and social standing.

At one point, Updike's statements may not really convey the racist message they might appear to convey. What he is really after are the thought processes that lead to the tyrannical racial prejudices which enslave all humans. At another point, Updike's ethnic insights with such statements seem dismayingly platitudinous and clichéd. However, what cannot be overlooked is the fact that such generalizations, whatever Updike's intentions in writing them, are what led to the cries that the novel was racist and repellent. Updike, however, succeeds in producing a sociological novel based on discrepancies between the rich and the poor, the black and the white. In addition to the sociological portrayal, he also contributes as a reporter and an anthropologist. In a way, Updike's claim in *Brazil* is universal and his text is international in a variety of aspects, notably in its narrative motif of love overcoming all obstacles and in its moral and philosophical message of the need to transcend borders. Yet Updike's attempt to present Brazil as "a racial democracy" and another "melting pot" is less than ideal. In other words, *Brazil's* hope of racial harmony, even of miscegenation, seems a vain fancy. The couple exchanges their racial affiliation, but they cannot eliminate the racial differences which make them attractive for each other but also separate them. Despite much energetic coupling —and several children —Isabel never conceives by Tristão's seed. Thus, the result of the racial mix in Brazilian society in general is shown to be less than perfect. All of the old prejudices and stereotypes are left in place at the story's bitter, and beautifully orchestrated, conclusion. Tristão winds up murdered because he winds up white. He forgot for a moment that he is not a black boy, and it cost him his life. Here, Updike also succeeds in bringing to the reader's attention the power of color in the Brazilian society of that time, and the terrible damage it did to so many people's lives.

CONCLUSION

Updike's *Brazil* is an attempt to account for the structure of race and class relations that has pervaded Brazil during the 1960s and the 1970s. It is also an impressive guidebook of a complex nation fused by its myriad races and forged by a violent history. Updike succeeds in pointing out the complicated racial issues in modern Brazil through the hardships underwent by his two main characters, Isabel and Tristão. He uses simple teenagers that are on the verge of adulthood that can explain the whole of society. The couple is collective characters, symbols, representing the whole of Brazil in all its hues and social conditions. It is through the emphasis on these two individual characters that readers come to focus on cultural racism and prejudice and, rather indirectly, on the narrative of Brazilian nationhood. Yet the moral dilemmas related to color and social classes are left unsolved in *Brazil*. Though Updike poses the problems of race and identity,

but he falls short of that, because the ideas of the novel—the questions of race and class—are never deeply explored or illuminated. When Updike’s protagonists switch races under the spell of the Indian shaman’s magic and Tristão becomes white and Isabel turns black, we learn precious little about the class and racial conflicts of Brazilian society or any society for that matter. The racial stereotypes are merely reversed, not illuminated: We are no closer to understanding the dynamics of race than before. Hence, the novel’s hope of racial harmony, even of miscegenation, seems a vain fancy.

NOTES

ⁱ Broadly speaking, “magical realism” is a literary genre, where there is a seamless blending of magical occurrences within a realistic setting. It differs from pure fantasy primarily because it is set in a normal, modern world with authentic descriptions of humans and society. The magical element, then, is an extraordinary occurrence or event that is outside the boundary of natural or scientific laws—something for which there is not rational explanation, as it is the case with Isabel’s and Tristão’s exchange of skin colors in *Brazil*.

ⁱⁱ The term “Mulatto” is used to refer to persons born of one white parent and one black parent or to persons born of a mulatto parent or parents. In English, the term is today generally confined to historical contexts.

ⁱⁱⁱ John Updike. *Brazil*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf. 1994. All subsequent quotations are from this edition.

^{iv} The “Tupi” were one of the main ethnic groups of Brazilian indigenous people. Darcy Ribeiro, a prominent Brazilian anthropologist, believes that the ‘Tupi’ tribes first settled in the Amazon rainforest, but started to spread southward and gradually occupied the Atlantic coast. Ribeiro refutes the myths launched against the ‘Tupi’ tribes that they imposed themselves on others, creating chieftainships and forcing the people living there to serve them. Rather, he thinks that what changed the course of the ‘Tupi’ people’s lives is the advent of a new protagonist into their world, namely the Portuguese explorers. The newcomers, Ribeiro validates, were “super-aggressive and capable of acting destructively in many different ways, mainly through the deadly infection that decimated the preexisting population to the point of extinction” (9-10). Ribeiro goes on to document that when the Portuguese first arrived to Brazil in 1500, the number of the ‘Tupi’ population was estimated at one million people, nearly equal to the population of Portugal at that time. From the 16th century onward, the ‘Tupi’, like other natives from the region, were divided into tribes, assimilated, enslaved, or simply exterminated by Portuguese settlers, nearly leading to their complete annihilation, with the exception of a few of isolated communities. Ribeiro adds that when the ‘Tupi’ tribes were fighting against the Portuguese or against each other, they, if victorious, used to take prisoners for cannibalistic rites and go on their way. If defeated, they try to escape with the aim of regrouping their forces for new attacks” (13). Yet when they were decimated and therefore incapable of attack or defense, the survivors fled beyond the frontiers of civilizations. The remnants of these tribes are today confined to Indian reservations or acculturated to some degree into the dominant society

^v Dom Pedro Segundo (1831–1889), also Dom Pedro II, was the second and last ruler of the Brazilian empire, reigning for over 58 years.

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