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Playing in the White



*Black Writers,
White Subjects*

STEPHANIE
LI



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For Dawana

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{ PREFACE }

I am often asked why I study African American literature. When I was an undergraduate reading and writing on Russian literature, no one wondered why I consumed with such passion the novels of Dostoevsky and the stories of Gogol. But African American literature typically begs the question or at least raises an eyebrow.

Embedded in the question of why I study African American literature is the more accurate question of why I study American literature. For me, these terms, while not precisely consonant, are so closely related as to be inextricable. The story of the United States is the story of African Americans. This does not exclude other kinds of Americans but instead emphasizes how this nation exists only through the history of antebellum slavery and black resistance as well as the abiding paradox of race.

To study African American literature is to understand the bold and violent trajectory of this nation. In a world of proliferating identities, not just those demarcating race but also class, gender, sexuality, and other myriad categories—American is the one label I always cling to. And thus I am always studying and writing about some part of myself, some part of where I came from. No doubt the authors discussed in this book were asked, and why do you write about white people? There is only one answer: to better understand this vexed, beautiful nation of ours.

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This book owes its existence to a small group of dedicated supporters. Four years ago, David Roediger encouraged me to continue my work on James Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room*, despite the poor reception it had received at various academic journals. I am grateful for his encouragement at a moment when I was tempted to abandon the project altogether.

There are few secrets to success in the academic world, but one is to meet someone like Gordon Hutner. Demanding yet encouraging, Gordon saw this manuscript through its tentative early stages, remaining ever committed to its eventual publication. He has since become both a mentor and a friend whose academic career is an inspiration. In the six years I have known him, my first impression still holds true: he is the scholar I'd like to be when I grow up.

I would also like to thank Brendan O'Neill at Oxford University Press for his patience and care in seeing this project to its conclusion. He brought this manuscript to a set of readers whose discerning and challenging comments guided me through my revisions. Their reviews pushed me to clarify, sharpen, and expand on many of the issues raised in this study. I am grateful for the ways they helped create a stronger, more lucid book.

Finally, I would like to thank those people whose love and support sustain me now and always. Dinah Holtzman remains my best reader, even as she is also the best excuse to stop writing and live in the world, not the page. Dawana Stephens, to whom this book is dedicated, may never read beyond this section, but as the person best able to tell my own story, she is proof that color lines are both essential and irrelevant. And as ever, I trace both my language and the questions that drive my work to my mother, Sara Antonia, and my father, Jonathan J. Li, who passed away while I was writing this book.

Stephanie Sheu Jing de la Garza Li

Playing in the White

Introduction

IMAGINING THE SOULS OF WHITE FOLK

Seventeen years after the publication of his most influential work, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), W. E. B. Du Bois wrote a remarkable corollary, “The Souls of White Folk” (1920).¹ This lesser known essay anticipates many of the key contributions associated with critical whiteness studies. Of his title’s subject, Du Bois writes:

I see in and through them. I view them from unusual points of vantage. Not as a foreigner do I come, for I am native, not foreign, bone of their thought and flesh of their language. Mine is not the knowledge of the traveler or the colonial composite of dear memories, words and wonder. Nor yet is my knowledge that which servants have of masters, or mass of class, or capitalist of artisan. Rather I see these souls undressed and from the back and side. I see the working of their entrails. I know their thoughts and they know that I know. This knowledge makes them now embarrassed, now furious. They deny my right to live and be and call me misbirth! My word is to them mere bitterness and my soul, pessimism. And yet as they preach and strut and shout and threaten, crouching as they clutch at rags of facts and fancies to hide their nakedness, they go twisting, flying by my tired eyes and I see them ever stripped,—ugly, human. (184)

Du Bois approaches his subject from a peculiar position that typifies twentieth-century black writings on white subjects. Though he is “native,” he is not a member of this group. Du Bois does not specify his precise relation to these souls, stating only that he is neither traveler nor servant. By defining this relationship as a series of negative characterizations, Du Bois troubles the connection between black and white. Skin color, the most obvious racial marker, is made irrelevant as Du Bois penetrates through “rags of facts and fancies” to perceive “the working of their entrails” beneath. However, by identifying himself as

“bone of their thoughts and flesh of their language,” Du Bois admits that he is embodied through their ideology. In his formulation, he too is a body; the crucial difference is that he does not attempt to “hide [his] nakedness.” For him, whiteness is not an aberration; instead it figures as a flimsy, tattered garment used to hide human commonality. By contrast, white souls name him “misbirth,” rejecting the flesh and bone that tie them together. Where they see a frightening other, he sees the thoughts and intestines that make them “ugly” but ever “human.”

As in his conception of double consciousness which presents black subjectivity as a function of the gaze, Du Bois characterizes whiteness as a failure of vision. Whites believe that clothes can transform the body they conceal and that blackness is a “misbirth” rather than a human difference. If, for Du Bois, “the Negro” is granted double consciousness or “this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others” (*Souls* 2), this incisive vision also allows him access to the souls of white folk and their performative charades. Du Bois’s contention that African Americans have special insight into whites is affirmed by a number of other key early twentieth century black writers. In *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912), a novel initially published anonymously, James Weldon Johnson’s narrator claims, “I believe it to be a fact that the colored people of this country know and understand the white people better than the white people know and understand them” (10). In a more playful but equally discerning essay, “Our White Folks” (1927), George Schuyler writes, “while the average Nordic knows nothing of how Negroes actually think, the Negroes know the Nordics intimately” (74). Schuyler begins his essay with the observation: “numerous and ponderous tomes have been written about Negroes by white folks” and then proceeds to catalog writings that include “alarmist gabble about the Black Menace or the tragedy of the dark brethren suffocating in the midst of white civilization.” Given that such “fervent scribbling . . . has been going on for a dozen decades or more” (71), it is no surprise that Schuyler is more concerned with rebutting and satirizing white stereotypes about blackness than elucidating the intimate knowledge he has gained of “the Nordics.”

The need to invalidate wide-ranging charges of black inferiority helps explain why there are few “numerous and ponderous tomes” written about white folks by African Americans. However, essays like that of Du Bois demonstrates the remarkably astute ways that blacks understood whiteness as a social construction and material

condition decades before the advent of critical whiteness studies. He describes whiteness as a seductive site of desire that promises “the ownership of the earth forever and ever” (185), an insight that long predates the pioneering work of scholars like Cheryl Harris and George Lipsitz. Moreover, just as *The Souls of Black Folk* inaugurated some of the central metaphors used to describe race and black subjectivity, “The Souls of White Folk” offers compelling symbols to conceptualize whiteness. The images of “souls undressed” and “rags of facts and fancies” are as insightful and provocative as his influential notion of the color line and the veil. The correlation of whiteness with inadequate clothing composed of “facts and fancies” reappears in novels by Richard Wright and James Baldwin that present white male bodies as a critical threshold of difference and desire. Such signifyin(g) relations suggest a neglected legacy in African American literature: explorations of whiteness that probe the material, psychological, and symbolic consequences of racial power.

Novels such as Zora Neale Hurston’s *Seraph on the Suwanee* (1948), Richard Wright’s *Savage Holiday* (1954), Ann Petry’s *Country Place* (1947), and to a lesser extent, James Baldwin’s *Giovanni’s Room* (1956) are rarely the focus of classroom discussion or even academic study because they are concerned with white protagonists. As Gene Andrew Jarrett has observed, anthologies, bookstores, libraries, and college syllabi contribute to a limiting overdetermination of what constitutes African American literature. He explains that these various social forces collectively

give the impression that African American literature must feature African American protagonists alongside certain historical themes, cultural geographies, political discourses, or subjectivities defined by race. And these texts are “authentic” when their authors are identifiable as African American, regardless of whether these authors desire to be characterized in this way. These protocols contribute to the idea that the canon, or the “best,” of African American literature only portrays the realities of black life, or practices what I call racial realism. (*African American Literature* 2)

Jarrett identifies racial realism as reflecting the “long history in which authors have sought to re-create a lived or living world according to prevailing ideologies of race or racial difference” (*Deans and Truants* 8). Beginning in the post-Reconstruction period and extending through the Black Arts Movement, racial realism has demanded socially and

politically minded texts that advance the interests and well-being of black people.

The novels previously mentioned are uneasy additions to the African American literary canon because they explore the lives of white characters. Although often realist in their style and still fundamentally concerned with issues of race, they depart from the imperatives of racial realism by focusing on the struggles and concerns of white people. White life novels appear to reject what Henry Louis Gates, Jr., terms “the burden of representation” (*Thirteen Ways* xvii) long ascribed to black literature, eschewing not just the burden of portraying positive images of black life but the presumed responsibility to depict any black images at all. Moreover, published during a time when much of black literature was dominated by the imperatives of protest fiction, that is, work that explicitly dramatizes the hardships faced by African Americans, these postwar novels challenge what it means for literature to engage in racial politics. By undermining expectations of what constitutes the province of African American literature, they demand new ways of reading. We cannot draw simplistic correspondences between white and black subjectivity in these works or assume that they only offer racially transcendent conclusions. Rather, each text requires nuanced examination of how whiteness signifies as its own social construction and what such representations mean for conceptions of blackness. Whiteness repeatedly figures as a set of social expectations involving various forms of power that cannot be fulfilled. Such depictions are deeply connected to gender dynamics that highlight the notably tenuous claim of white masculinity to social and narrative authority. These novels demonstrate how white characters fail at whiteness and often use blackness or black characters as a repository of fear, anxiety, and transgressive desires. By assuming that whiteness is a manufactured, as opposed to a natural category, white life novelists expose the inner workings of racialized power.

Since their publication, these neglected postwar texts have been identified by a host of tentative labels. Decried as assimilationist by midcentury critics, they have since been described as transgressive, anomalous, and experimental by more recent scholars.² However, by their very urge to qualify the nature of certain black-authored texts, all of these labels reify the notion that African American literature must be focused on black characters. These terms open the field of inquiry only to reestablish the primacy of that which is authentically

black: books by and about black people. As I hope to demonstrate, *Seraph on the Suwanee* is no less black than *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), and in fact to appreciate Hurston's depiction of white southerners it is imperative to understand the all-black Eatonville depicted in her earlier novels. Together these novels establish a signifyin(g) chain of intertextual meaning that reflects on the multiple ways race operates in language, society, and literature. They constitute a coherent literary project that by exploring the lives of both white and black characters illuminates how racialized images and structures operate in America more broadly. For the purpose of clarification, I will refer to black-authored works about white characters as white life novels, but all of these texts belong equally to the province of African American literature. The white life depicted in *Giovanni's Room* or *Country Place* has crucial meaning to blackness not because the characters are performing in whiteface, but because constructions of whiteness impinge on all aspects of black life. These texts offer vital new avenues for understanding how black authors both respond to and resist the totalizing claims of whiteness.

The title of this book, *Playing in the White*, is a direct response to Toni Morrison's study of the Africanist presence in American literature, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (1993). In this influential critique Morrison, reading canonical American writers, is attentive to the way blackness functions as a necessary foil to a fabricated notion of whiteness. While I am indebted to Morrison's pioneering insights into how a racial other functions as a projection of various anxieties and fears, I do not contend that there is a comparable Caucasianist presence in black-authored texts about white subjects. Rather, the collection of texts I study raise critical questions about racial representations both black and white, and in particular they challenge the notion of a singular and "authentic" black voice. Are we to understand David, Baldwin's white protagonist in *Giovanni's Room*, as only performing in "racial drag" as Mae Henderson has claimed (299)? Are the main characters in *Seraph on the Suwanee* actually "white bodies" who speak with what "readers identify as black voices" as Claudia Tate contends (385)? What is the difference between a white and a black voice? Are white individuals who "speak black" somehow less white? *Playing in the White* seeks to respond to these wide-ranging questions, examining how racial representation functions in novels that undermine simplistic claims

regarding authenticity. The novels analyzed here demonstrate how the meanings accorded to blackness and whiteness reflect evolving anxieties about what constitutes racial identity, as well as the ways racial borders are policed by social institutions and modes of academic study. While the sheer volume of white life novels makes a comprehensive study of such texts beyond my scope, I aim to explore how neglected works by writers at the forefront of the African American literary canon represent whiteness, including the class and gender dynamics at work in this heterogeneous construction. Taken together, these texts create a web of intertextual meaning that examines the nature of American racial identities. Certain themes and images reoccur in white life novels with startling force. Rape in marriage, the false master narratives offered by newspapers, the collapsing of black and white speech, and the failure of white characters to live up to the expectations of whiteness are all prominent concerns. Such representations produce a signifyin(g) chain of meaning on important, previously ignored tropes.

As Mia Bay demonstrates in *The White Image in the Black Mind: African-American Ideas about White People, 1830–1925* (2000), black writers and critics have been commenting on the nature of whiteness for centuries. However, the most sustained and complex figurations of whiteness by black literary authors have been largely ignored due to the instabilities they present to coherent and accepted definitions of blackness and black literature. In *African American Literature beyond Race: An Alternative Reader* (2006), one of two collections of black-authored texts that focus on nonblack subjects, Jarrett includes selections like Morrison's short story "Recitatif" and excerpts from Paul Laurence Dunbar's *The Uncalled* (1898), both of which have racially ambiguous protagonists. These additions, along with selections from narratives that focus exclusively on white characters, demonstrate for Jarrett "what it means for African American authors to write literature beyond race" (3). Borrowing a definition that originates with Claudia Tate, Jarrett promotes the term "anomalous texts" to refer to works that challenge normative racial constructs.³ While Tate's anomalous texts emphasize resistance to more generalized "race and gender paradigms," Jarrett's conception of such works do so especially as a means to depart from the confines that can adhere to black subjectivity.

Jarrett has made a major contribution to reconceptualizing the African American literary canon. However, my approach to black-authored

texts about white subjects is premised on a different approach to the relationship between race and identity. Jarrett's notion of "literature beyond race" mimics the attempt of Richard Wright to write in *Savage Holiday* a "non-racial" text (qtd. in Fabre, *Unfinished* 376). Just as Wright assumed that by focusing on a white protagonist, he could escape the complexities of racial identification, Jarrett assumes that texts about white characters move black authors outside the symbolics of race. However, the very notion of a "non-racial" novel or of "literature beyond race" assumes that American society can be realistically presented apart from its most divisive social category. I use quotation marks around these terms to highlight the artificiality embedded in the facile escape from race. Despite his best intentions, Wright could not simplistically transcend the strictures of race because ultimately every American novel is a racial novel; there is no writing "beyond race." As a reflection of human experience, a novel necessarily engages with the categories and institutions that define society. Because race is an inescapable part of American life, it is intrinsic to its literature. Although, as Shelley Fisher Fishkin notes, "white novelists are expected *not* to focus on issues of race and racism" (125), the absence of obvious racial tropes does not negate the presence of race in white-authored texts. To ignore, for example, the way the novels of Henry James or Jonathan Franzen are complex meditations on whiteness only reifies the conflation between whiteness and universality.

Just as scholars should examine, in response to Morrison's call, the way the Africanist presence operates in the entire historical span of American literature, they should also consider how whiteness has figured in canonical texts and read classics like *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881) as racial novels. This is not to suggest that whiteness is the only or even the primary concern of James's fiction; rather, considerations of race in such esteemed texts help us understand the ways race is intrinsic to the American experience. Jarrett is right to challenge the expectation that African American literature "feature African American protagonists," but his hope to present work that is not burdened with the representation of "subjectivities defined by race" is problematic. Here, like many black critics of the mid-twentieth century, Jarrett seems to conflate "race" with "blackness." As I argue in my analysis of *Savage Holiday*, Wright's "non-racial" novel presents a powerful study of whiteness as its own racial construction. To mistake that which is "non-racial" for whiteness fails to recognize how dominant,

seemingly unmarked subjectivities are complicit in racial and gendered hierarchies.

In ascribing an a priori value to race in American literature, I do not mean to dismiss or trivialize the aspirations of Wright and others to write non-racial novels. The desire to escape race is as old as racial categories themselves. However, race is such a deep-seated aspect of American life that it is impossible to shed its influence by will alone. Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham understands race as a “metalanguage” that “speaks about and lends meaning to a host of terms and expressions, to myriad aspects of life that would otherwise fall outside the referential domain of race.” She continues, “by continually expressing overt and covert analogic relationships, race impregnates the simplest meanings we take for granted” (255). Higginbotham conceives of race as part of our American language, an inescapable component that resides not in the intentions of a given speaker or writer but in the words themselves. Wright could not write a non-racial novel in part because his readers, both then and now, are incapable of reading a non-racial novel by a black man. This is not a fact to be lamented; instead we should broaden our conception of race to recognize that texts by white authors are also bound to racial protocols and the metalanguage of race. However, even as Wright could not escape race in his writings, it is important to emphasize that race should not be understood as a totalizing construct in his novels. *The Outsider* and *Savage Holiday* are not solely about racial identity and representation; as I explain in chapter 2, they also explore the nature of human freedom, individual rebellion, and the development of violent impulses. Understanding these novels through race does not reduce them to a tired set of interpretive principles but expands our understanding of how texts reflect the cultural dynamics of their time and reveal important developments in their authors’ conception of social relations.

My critical approach to black-authored texts about white subjects resonates more closely with the impetus behind David Roediger’s collection, *Black on White: Black Writers on What it Means to be White* (1998). Among this group of essays, short fiction, and excerpted historical studies, Roediger finds evidence that “African Americans have been among the nation’s keenest students of white consciousness and white behavior” (4). Rather than assuming that understudied works by James Weldon Johnson, Anna Julia Cooper, Ralph Ellison, and many others are indicative of some universalizing impulse, Roediger

directs readers to consider how whiteness as a social category is constituted in these texts. In this study, I respond to Roediger's consideration of the complex and multiple figurations of whiteness. I understand white life novels not to be explorations of racelessness or hasty escapes from the challenges of black subjectivity. Instead, these texts offer crucial insight into how blackness and whiteness operate as social constructions that both limit and liberate the imaginative possibilities of African American writers.

In addition to close readings of these texts, my analysis includes discussion of their critical reception. When discussing black-authored texts about white subjects, critics and scholars tend toward a kind of excuse-making analysis: Baldwin wrote *Giovanni's Room* in order to mask his homosexuality; Hurston penned *Seraph on the Suwanee* because she was in desperate need of money; *Savage Holiday* exposes the dangers of living abroad for too long, away from the rich inspiration of African American life. Because these texts threaten any stable notion of black authenticity, critics have largely concluded that they must be treated as anomalies. They are quaint curiosities that are by necessity failures because they undermine the black writer's implicit responsibility to black representation.

For example, since the 1990s, *Giovanni's Room* has enjoyed a resurgence of scholarly attention that understands Baldwin's "black characters in whiteface" as a means to address the taboo issue of homosexuality (Holland, "(Pro)Creating" 268). Although it is laudable to emphasize the place of *Giovanni's Room* in African American letters, this new critical consensus is premised on disturbing notions concerning the relationship between author and text. Presumably, to be a part of the African American literary canon, it is necessary for a black writer to explore the lives of black characters. Hence even as recent critics celebrate Baldwin's homosexuality, he remains safely black only because the characters in *Giovanni's Room* are effectively black. This approach has produced strained readings of the novel that fundamentally limit the creative vision of black writers. By contrast, in approaching *Giovanni's Room* as an overt exploration of whiteness, I track how its relationship to the African American literary canon reflects shifting concerns about what constitutes blackness.

The few studies that touch on white life novels treat whiteness in polarizing terms, either as a simplistic manifestation of evil or as a racially transcendent point of sympathy.⁴ In "Representing Whiteness

in the Black Imagination” (1992), bell hooks emphasizes “that representation of whiteness that is not formed in reaction to stereotypes but emerges as a response to the traumatic pain and anguish that remain a consequence of white racist domination” (170). The emphasis hooks places on terror, her own and that of other black writers, reduces whiteness to a static site of trauma that reifies binaries of black and white, good and evil. Similarly, Jane Davis in *The White Image in the Black Mind* (2000) identifies black productions of whiteness solely as a mass of negative qualities.⁵ Both hooks and Davis neglect how whiteness operates in the black literary imagination in more nuanced ways that challenge conventional approaches to discursive power and racial identity. At the opposite end of hooks’s and Davis’s work is John Charles’s recent *Abandoning the Black Hero: Sympathy and Privacy in the Postwar African American White-Life Novel* (2013). Emphasizing how sympathy operates in these novels, Charles claims: “it is this positive affective relation that poses the greatest interpretative obstacle for a reconsideration of these works” (6). While Charles is attuned to nuances in white representations that hooks and Davis ignore, his focus on sympathy ignores the critique of whiteness embedded in these texts. As an interpersonal exchange, sympathy too often neglects the larger social and material dynamics at play in racial constructions.

In my analysis, the white characters of Hurston, Wright, Baldwin, and other key twentieth-century African American writers are neither terrorizing and duplicitous nor misunderstood objects of sympathy.⁶ Instead, they demonstrate how whiteness can be both exploitative and confining. Nell Irvin Painter reminds us that whiteness is a malleable category, which, especially in the United States, has shifted in response to specific historical developments and changes in the country’s immigrant population.⁷ However, this is not to suggest that whiteness is without meaning; rather, like its necessary counterpart, blackness, it is an unstable site of power, invention, and fear. According to Painter, whiteness emerged as a salient concept of social definition and discourse in the United States from two primary sources: antebellum slavery, which equated freedom with whiteness, and concepts of beauty originating in the eighteenth century that applied the term “Caucasian” to white slave women.⁸ Painter observes that the origins of whiteness are fundamentally contradictory. Whiteness is associated both with freedom and with bondage. Moreover, the kind of beauty historically embodied in whiteness represents its own form of