



Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination

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The Pulitzer Prize-winning author of *Beloved* and *Jazz* now gives us a learned, stylish, and immensely persuasive work of literary criticism that promises to change the way we read American literature even as it opens a new chapter in the American dialogue on race.

Toni Morrison's brilliant discussions of the "Africanist" presence in the fiction of Poe, Melville, Cather, and Hemingway leads to a dramatic reappraisal of the essential characteristics of our literary tradition. She shows how much the themes of freedom and individualism, manhood and innocence, depended on the existence of a black population that was manifestly unfree--and that came to serve white authors as embodiments of their own fears and desires.

Written with the artistic vision that has earned Toni Morrison a pre-eminent place in modern letters, *Playing in the Dark* will be avidly read by Morrison admirers as well as by students, critics, and scholars of American literature.

Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination Details

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From Reader Review *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* for online ebook

David Withun says

Morrison's discussion of the role that a "signifying Africanist presence" has played in American literature is a genuinely brilliant and insightful opening for discussion of the ways in which the black/white racial binary has shaped American literature and culture. The black "other" has served as the counterpoint of "whiteness" via racial differance (to use Derrida's term indicating both the differing and deferring of signs) since the inception of the American literary tradition. An "Africanist" (in Morrison's terms) presence pervades American literature as a means by which whiteness, white characters, and white readers derive definition and meaning. Morrison's short book (I read the entire thing in a single sitting) is an outstanding opening to a discussion of the role(s) that this Africanist presence has played--as well as the inversion of this signifying in African-American literature (Du Bois's "Of the Coming of John" might serve as a fascinating example of a black author turning this motif in the opposite direction). For anyone seeking to understand American literature, this book is a must-read.

Paul says

This is a series of lectures by Toni Morrison focussing on literary criticism and American literature. Morrison discusses the "Africanist" presence in classic American literature. She analyses how the sense of whiteness, freedom, individualism and manhood depends on a black presence and population and also reacts to it; and projects fears and emotions onto it.

Morrison turns her eye onto Poe, Twain, Cather, Melville and Hemingway and does it very effectively. She looks at Jim in *Huckleberry Finn*, Wesley in *To Have and Have Not* and Nancy in Cather's *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, amongst others. The silent unnamed figures are also considered.

Her considerations are very telling and the analysis of *To Have and Have Not* sheds new light on what Hemingway was doing and how he perceived maleness and whiteness. Morrison has talked about the pervasive influence of race:

"The function, the very serious function of racism, is distraction. It keeps you from doing your work. It keeps you explaining, over and over again, your reason for being. Somebody says you have no language, so you spend twenty years proving that you do. Somebody says your head isn't shaped properly, so you have scientists working on the fact that it is. Somebody says you have no art, so you dredge that up. None of that is necessary. There is always one more thing."

The focus here of course is on the white literary imagination and how it manages, controls and silences anything that is other, but particularly African Americans. Morrison provides a way of critiquing the literary canon. The arguments are succinct and nuanced, but this is an easy read and quite focussed. The scope is narrow, but these are lectures and have that feel about them. Morrison's insights are original and interesting. This is worth reading for the analysis of Hemingway alone.

Karina says

A very interesting and much needed approach towards analyzing American Literature. Recommend!

Tanita says

A great insight into the African American culture, from the point of view of a brilliant, sarcastic, Nobel Prize winner, black writer and also a better understanding of the meaning of "blackness" and "whiteness" in America.

Zanna says

I do not seem to be in the right mind to review this now. Re-read required.

Jamie says

I should confess that Morrison will never get a flat-out criticism from this reviewer. I'm a bit of a fanatic, a would-be groupie. Read this one, my first experience with Morrison's non-fiction, for a paper I'm working on--incidentally, on "Beloved" (and tangentially, Faulkner's "Light in August"). Morrison's wry, crisp style is of course on form. The argument is, unsurprisingly, provocative and very astute. I'm particularly intrigued by her notion of the 'invisible presence' of Africanism throughout the history of American literature. As she remarks, even where this presence is (seemingly) not, it is. That she persuasively reminds us of the inextricable relation between constructions of American whiteness/maleness and the history of slavery in this country is to her great credit, to my mind.

I give it three stars, though, perhaps because I feel like I've heard it before; I've heard it after; I've heard it done better, in many ways. This is good because it's Morrison, not because it is a book of race theory. Her readings of Cather, Melville, and Hemingway are spot-on; nonetheless (and perhaps this is by virtue of this being based on a series of lectures Morrison gave), it feels to some extent undercooked. I wanted her to go on and on, to delve further in, to provide more fodder for us to play with. It's an outline--a very beautiful and powerful outline, but nonetheless, it lacks the shading I was hoping to get. Worthwhile, of course, if you like Morrison or if you'd like to ease in to some critical race theory. It's a seductive and accessible text.

upon re-reading

I remain more or less in the same place with this book as with my first reading. As a literary critic (which she doesn't proclaim herself to be, though that's the apparent categorization of this book), Morrison does a number of surface readings that I wouldn't get away with in one of my graduate seminars. Her basic project is powerful; beautiful; necessary. But the execution lacks, and say what you will--she's writing as a writer and a reader, this is a series of lectures, &co&co--I think she takes a few too many liberties. Why use close readings if you aren't going to do them "right"? And as for the lecture argument--so was Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*, and I think that text simply holds up to textual analysis better than this one does.

I do appreciate it as part of larger critical race theory tradition, but I worry that this will be held up as the model, simply because Morrison wields a great deal of cultural capital. Unfortunately, I think her critiques of racialism in America are much more nuanced and deeply felt in her novels than in this book. Still worth a read--just don't go into it believing it to be the be-all-end-all of race theory.

Molly says

Indispensable. Morrison's case about the production of whiteness through various operations of othering and exploitation of blackness will remind readers of Said's case about the creation of 'European' in/through the production of otherness as Orientalism. The discussion of surrogacy -- the way (white, white-positioned) readers are stimulated and gratified with tales of suffering and violence and simultaneously protected from them by the author's deployment of black characters as surrogates (upon whom are inflicted the real agonies), while the sort of enriched experience and wisdom thus derived, as well as victimhood, are somehow transferred to the white characters -- is something that, once read, a reader sees manifest in imperial core narratives everywhere, in movies, tv, and especially pulp fiction. The loathsome tv show *The Wire* springs to mind, where the white cop hero McNulty is made deeper and more complex, and effectively transformed into a victim himself, by watching pityingly/understandingly/interestedly as the young black men (D'Angelo, Bodie) he tries to save are murdered. The show enlarges and dramatizes his heroic grief while it trivializes and exploits for thrills the actual killings of the show's black stars that are the substance of his 'character'; Morrison's monograph clarifies this for us, placing this so strange and yet so commonplace fictional operation in a long tradition and at the core of the production of white supremacy. All the pathos of those on screen murders, the danger and the suffering they depict, somehow accrues to the white hero who is safeguarded, by this perpetual reproduction of white supremacy that Morrison exposes in the most elite rank of American lit, the founts and keystones of white American culture. One finds the analogue in British fiction, often with other Others (the Irish scabs and English mill workers, for example, in Gaskell's *North and South*, whose suffering is expropriated by the genteel + bourgeois English heroine and hero, allow the reader to experience rich, deep, difficult emotions while the hero and heroine, with whom the readers are in solidarity, escape the worst.) I read this book years ago, when it was newly released, and I continue to see its insights validated and its method proven indispensable all the time, for the canon, for the pulp of the past, and unfortunately even more often for current culture products.

GloriaGloom says

Leggendo le prime pagine di questo straordinario libro mi è venuto in mente altro, sarà per la famosa teoria dei vasi comunicanti che la parola scritta sovente richiama (in realtà non credo, ma non vedevo l'ora di poter scrivere "vasi comunicanti" da qualche parte, è più comodo scriverlo qui che sulla facciata di un palazzo), mi è venuto da pensare alla comune rappresentazione iconografica dei musicisti jazz, la classica foto rigorosamente in bianco e nero che da più di mezzo secolo associamo automaticamente all'atto del suonare jazz. La musica jazz vive in un mondo codificato solo da due (non)colori. Anche oggi, nonostante digitale e photoshop, l'unica rappresentazione che in qualche modo autocertifichi autenticità a un jazzista è figlia di quel misto di romanticismo, limiti tecnologici e soprattutto contrasto tra lo spot bianco delle luci di un palco o di uno studio e la pelle (quasi sempre nera) di un musicista (col tempo quel bianco e nero basico della faccia di Billie Holiday che emerge dal nero dello sfondo - da un nero puro e fitto emerge un nero schiarito dalla luce - incontrerà tutte le varianti che le tecnologie e i supporti permetteranno: contrasto accentuato, sgranatura, movimento ecc..). Ho sempre trovato questa rappresentazione un involontario e leggero atto di razzismo. Un insieme di stereotipi condiviso da chi scatta la foto (generalmente un bianco) e chi la guarda (spesso anch'esso bianco). Tutto quel nero esalta una identità attraverso il suo contrario, il bianco (la luce bianca), apparentemente assente, e genera uno stereotipo culturale e razziale (solo ai musicisti classici, a quelli rock, alle popstar per ragazzine è permesso di vivere in un mondo a colori - e anche qui si potrebbero analizzare mille variazioni quando costoro vengono ritratti in bianco e nero, il bianco e nero dettagliato e senza grana del musicista classico o il bianco e nero sporco e di maniera degli scatti della prima scena punk:

"Jimi Hendrix was a nigger/Jesus Christ and Grandma, too/Jackson Pollock was a nigger/Nigger, nigger, nigger, nigger ecc...": il doppio salto mortale carpiato degli stereotipi culturali della signorina Patti Smith. Ma ci allontaneremmo troppo dalle tesi di Toni Morrison). Perché mi è venuto in mente tutto questo leggendo le prime righe di un saggio - una raccolta di tre lezioni universitarie in realtà - che tratta di altro, di letteratura e di razza (uso questo termine odioso perché la Morrison non ancorata ai legacci della lingua neutra e corretta di noi visi pallidi civilizzati, postilluministi e denazistificati lo utilizza a piene mani)? Perché il colore bianco, l'assenza, quello che non si vede ma illumina sono elementi importanti della sue dissertazioni, ma ci torneremo dopo, e soprattutto perché il libro inizia proprio con un concerto jazz. Nell'introduzione Toni Morrison ci racconta di un'altra scrittrice, Marie Cardinal, che assistendo a un concerto di Louis Armstrong viene colta da un forte attacco di panico che scoprirà essere il sintomo di una depressione che l'accompagnerà tutta la vita - una malattia bianca e borghese che viene disvelata casualmente dall'"altro" : un musicista nero (Morrison scriverebbe negro) e da dei ritmi sincopati. Da questo fragile appiglio si parte per una dotta, avvincente, rigorosa rilettura dei miti fondativi della letteratura americana alla luce dell'ingombrante assenza dell'elemento afroamericano. Non è una rilettura a tesi, ad armi spianate, un muro contro muro, ma un riordino degli elementi simbolici e reali della cultura americana alla luce di questa supposta assenza (un po' il contrario delle foto dei musicisti jazz: un enorme spot di luce nera a congelare il bianco della cultura americana). Attraverso il classico metodo dell'analisi testuale vengono rilette le opere di alcuni scrittori totem dei caratteri culturali nazionali (individualismo, virilità, sesso, democrazia ecc...) - Poe, Twain, Melville, Faulkner, James, Hemingway - non tanto per individuare gli scontati stereotipi (anche se con Hemingway, verso cui l'autrice sembra nutrire una profonda antipatia, si sfoga molto in questo senso) quanto per rimarcare come quell'assenza, quel contrasto taciuto sia l'elemento propulsore di quei miti fondativi. Un punto di vista in parte inedito illuminato dal pensiero rigoroso e mai banale, dalla cultura e dalla voce unica di una delle più grandi scrittrici americane (ma lei direbbe afroamericane). Imperdibile.

Guillermo Galvan says

The more I read, the more seldom my mind gets blown. Toni Morrison's *Playing the Dark* has changed my perspective on western literature the way Noam Chomsky opened my eyes to western power.

"My project is an effort to avert the critical gaze from the racial object to the racial subject; from the described and imagined to the describers and imaginers; from the serving to the served."

I thought this was going to be another book on racism and literature. Morrison treads away from that worn out subject and focuses on what role did the idealized black person play on the white imagination.

Morrison strongly and professionally argues her points. It's impossible to simply dismiss her as attacking white writers, without purposely disregarding some extremely relevant ideas (read some of the reviews on here and you'll see what I mean). This book touches on some sensitive issues and is intellectually dense, thus making it a tough and rewarding experience.

tortoise dreams says

A collection of three essays based on "The William E. Massey, Sr. Lectures in the History of American

Civilization" that Toni Morrison delivered in 1990.

Book Review: *Playing in the Dark*, subtitled "Whiteness and the Literary Imagination," finds Toni Morrison ably fulfilling her role as Ivy League academic. Here she promotes the need for a deeper and more nuanced critical analysis of the portrayal and use of black characters in American literature. Presenting her thesis as questions she asks, "How did the founding writers of young America engage, imagine, employ, and create an Africanist presence and persona? In what ways do these strategies explicate a vital part of American literature? How does excavating these pathways lead to fresh and more profound analyses of what they contain and how they contain it?" In *Playing in the Dark*, Morrison examines *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, Willa Cather's last novel, which I'd never heard of but apparently is universally panned. Morrison agrees. She then looks at *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* by Poe, which just seems like a very odd story. Morrison concludes with a lengthy discussion of Hemingway's minor novel (his only one set in the States) *To Have and Have Not* and his posthumous *The Garden of Eden*. The first seems to be Hemingway (or the Hemingway character) acting like an ass (or horribly worse), and the second is much enlightened by the description of his childhood-based fantasies in the recent biography by Mary Dearborn (*i.e.*, more fetish than race). *Playing in the Dark* presents a solid and necessary case for a deeper analysis of the portrayal of black characters in traditional American fiction, although I wished she'd used less obscure and unaccomplished examples. None of these are "a vital part of American literature." (There is a good though short discussion of *Huckleberry Finn*.) Fortunately, there has been a greater critical examination of black roles in traditional American literature, just as there has been in the portrayal of women (not enough, but more). In fact, I think Morrison's proposal should be extended to works without obvious or significant black characters, but in which black populations must exist just off-stage. The investigation of fiction that unaccountably fails to include notable black characters, the setting of which must have a strong if unacknowledged black presence would be a fertile field of study. My thought here is similar to Warren Roberts' 1979 study of the French Revolution in the novels of Jane Austen, even though that event is never mentioned in her work. My only criticism of *Playing in the Dark* (I'm not an academic nor even a literature student, so I'm on thin ice) is that, as with the Freudians and cigars, not every fictional description of dark and light, day and night, the shining and the void, means race. It's just me, but I must admit I'll always prefer her fiction. [3½★]

Ken Moten says

Jordan Elgrably: "Do you think that now blacks and whites can write about each other, honestly and convincingly?"

James Baldwin: "...I think of the impact of spokespersons like Toni Morrison and other younger writers. I believe what one has to do as a black American is to take white history, or history as written by whites, and claim it all—including Shakespeare." - James Baldwin, The Art of Fiction No. 78

This is a short but important book that looks at how White writers in the United States wrote about Black people from the 19th to middle of the 20th century. If any book deserves an updated edition to it, this is the book. Toni Morrison, coming off of one of the most triumphant stages in any literary career, takes a series of lectures and transcribes them to book form. She uses a select set of white writers and breaks down the different ways Whites have used Black people in their narratives and purposes this book as an introduction to further looking at literary criticism concerning the "Africanist presence."

Though the writers Poe, Melville, Faulkner, and Twain are discussed, the main authors being analyzed are Willa Cather and Ernest Hemingway. She looks at Cather's last novel as well as two Hemingway stories: *To Have and Have Not* and *The Garden of Eden*. *To Have and Have Not* was of particular interest to me because though I have never read it, I have seen the movie version with an adapted screenplay by William

Faulkner. I would like to a detailed comparison of those stories one day.

I picked this book up because of my interest in reading about race and literary criticism and suggest that if you have similar interest, to do the same.

Heid says

OK, what I don't like about Morrison's critical work is that it ignores the reality of First Peoples and our presence in literature.

Jason says

This was great. Clearly articulated, important work interested in a discourse Morrison observes is left out of contemporary American literary theory. I don't have much experience with American lit, but her clear analyses were such that I had no trouble applying her theories to some of the American texts (and even Canadian ones) that I have read that she didn't directly engage with. She takes major themes in American lit to task—"individualism, masculinity, social engagement versus historical isolation; acute and ambiguous more problematics; the thematics of innocence coupled with an obsession with figurations of death and hell"—as reactions to a force that reverberates throughout the national literature: "Africanism." Morrison defines this as a term "for the denotative and connotative blackness that African peoples have come to signify, as well as the entire range of views, assumptions, readings, and misreads that accompany Eurocentric learning about these people" that has become "both a way of talking about and a way of policing matters of class, sexual license, and repression, formations and exercises of power, and meditations on ethics and accountability." This was an eye-opening work for me as I attempt to educate myself on issues of race in life and in literature. Definitely one to reread.

Daniel Chaikin says

80. *Playing in the Dark : Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* by Toni Morrison

1992, 100 page hardcover
read Dec 9-12

These essays are work but also enlightening if you can manage to fight your way through them. Morrison is so angry and yet she never tells you, never expresses it in any overt way. But she lays it in raw when one compares the balanced tone and the emotion that almost logically is underneath. She writes objectively, "*Black slavery enriched the country's creative possibilities.*" - if you aren't cringing, read that again.

From there she just goes on to talk about it. I found myself so uncomfortable reading this, that it became a hard read. If I could have stayed on her tone, it would just been a somewhat interesting, boring and yet very informative read. Yet, that's not where she is going. She says it, and you think that's extreme and then eventually you come around to see how much racism plays such a fundamental unconscious and key a roll in American story telling, and how universal it is. It's like the message sinks in and a knife twists in your gut

Think again about Finn in *The Force Awakens*. Go see any American movie and look at the roll the black characters play - but these servile roles are child's play. In serious literature blacks play critical roles in

balancing main, non-black characters. They provide a critical sense of freedom and independence to those characters. Morrison brings up Henry James, Faulkner, Gertrude Stein, Flannery O'Connor (a bit more respectfully), Mark Twain's Jim, Nathaniel Hawthorne, William Styron, Saul Bellow, Carson McCullers, Edgar Allan Poe, Willa Cather's *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, Melville's Pip, and she hammers Hemingway. Melville was actually conscious about his racial play, using race in an exploratory and creative manner. Certainly he's comes across as more modern in his sensibilities in this aspect than all these other authors, and most literature coming out today.

Perhaps I should go back and tone this one down. This reviews seems a bit discouraging. But it is an uncomfortable read, with some uncomfortable revelations that you thought you already knew, but really you only knew a small piece of it.

“As a writer reading, I came to realize the obvious: the subject of the dream is the dreamer. The fabrication of an Africanist persona is reflexive; an extraordinary meditation on the self; a powerful exploration of the fears and desires that reside in the writerly conscious.”

Aubrey says

*[T]he habit of ignoring race is understood to be a graceful, even generous, liberal gesture. To notice is to recognize an already discredited difference. To enforce its invisibility through silence is to allow the black body a shadowless participation in the dominant cultural body. According to this logic, every well-bred instinct argues **against noticing** and forecloses adult discourse. It is just this concept of literary and scholarly moeurs (which functions smoothly in literary criticism, but neither makes nor receives credible claims in other disciplines) that has terminated the shelf life of some once extremely well-regarded American authors and blocked access to remarkable insights in their works.*

One's art of reading is not set in stone. It is a case in point I rely heavily upon. My guaranteed reviewing, the reiterating reviews I pile one on top of the other in the same work space, my keeping in play them all no matter how the years have shifted and cast a disparaging gaze on what I now know to be effort both half-hearted and pandering. Situation has much to do with it, for there is a broad span of difference between the past self which rejected out of fear of rejection and the current self which will take on any and all, confident in an inherent ability to thrive. In my reactions to works, I have been conniving, desperate for attention, petty, defensive, obstinate, and conscientiously inflammatory, and only I am the credible witness when it comes to determining which falls under which. Not being a saint, it is the best way of carving out an ethical space that I know, for internal shame is nothing compared to taking the next step in the journey towards critical, holistic, and fearless insight. Lack of fear, mind you, does not translate to lack of respect. I've more a revolutionary tendency in mind.

*Living in a nation of people who **decided** that their world view would combine agendas for individual freedom **and** mechanisms for devastating racial oppression presents a singular landscape for a writer.*

Marxist critique, LGBT critique, postcolonial critique. The only thing stopping one from engaging with the world of flesh and blood is their consignment of parts of it as a dream of a dreamer. Literature characterized as canonical texts of the United States coexisted far longer with the presence of slavery than without. Avoiding this majority is the lesser of the two evils only when one is a child, when ethics pale besides the intrigue of rockets and castles and everything not laid out as an explicit 'no' by the parent is imbibed as a conditional 'yes'. What concerns is not the dream, but those who still dream it. What concerns is not

ensorship or the ableism hooked into deriding of trigger warnings (go on and ignore the contentions of red means stop and green means go and see how far you get in your physical conception of free will) but the historical, sexual, psychological, social, and ideological reckonings that fueled these metaphors, these symbols, this creativity fueled by one of the most literal sorts of Other. One cannot take heritage piecemeal in the hierarchy that is academia and expect their analysis to bear fruit twenty, ten, a mere year after the publication springs and the beast turns over to a more comfortable side. If a text is to survive the onslaught of the millennia, it is to survive with *all* its faculties, for one can hardly learn how to avoid using flesh and blood as blank canvas if one avoids the canon of the methodology. Do you really think you remain without cannibal tendencies by your own will and effort?

A power, a sense of freedom, he had not known before. But what had he known before? Fine education, London sophistication, theological and scientific thought. None of these, one gathers, could provide him with the authority and autonomy that Mississippi planter life did. Also this sense is understood to be a force that flows, already present and ready to spill out of his "absolute control over the lives of others." This force is not a willed domination, a thought-out, calculated choice, but rather a kind of natural resource, a Niagara Falls waiting to drench Dunbar as soon as he is in position to assume absolute control.

Read ableist texts if you are physically whole or sane. Read homophobic texts if you are straight. Read anti-black texts if you're not black, for your gift is to not have a stake in the matter that has direct bearing on your right to self-care and avoidance of mutilation. All that matters is that you *pay attention*, and when you do, *say exactly what you attend to*. Look at the associations of an entire group of people with all the evils of the world. Break them down. Analyze the histories that enabled such fictional infliction of meaning, and look at the lines those famous writers drew for themselves out of wrestling with self-reflexive agony. Morality's no excuse when there's critical insight to be had, when the matter is not of guilt or mirrored bigotry but how far this text of humanity can go in succeeding generations, those that walk with books open and minds unafraid of seeing themselves in the void. I've said before that evaluating stereotypes is part and parcel of my toolkit, not a determination of dichotomy. That, of course, is with regards to the dream. There's nothing subjective about my extinction at the hands of the dreamer.

As for the culture, the imaginative and historical terrain upon which early American writers journeyed is in large measure shaped by the presence of the racial other. Statements to the contrary, insisting on the meaninglessness of race to the American identity, are themselves full of meaning. The world does not become raceless or will not become unracialized by assertion. The act of enforcing racelessness in literary discourse is itself a racial act. Pouring rhetorical acid on the fingers of a black hand may indeed destroy the prints, but not the hand. Besides, what happens in that violent, self-serving act of erasure to the hands, the fingers, the fingerprints of the one who does the pouring? Do they remain acid-free? The literature itself suggests otherwise.

leynes says

Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination is a 1992 work of literary criticism by Toni Morrison.

In 1990, Morrison delivered a series of three lectures at Harvard University; she then adapted the texts to a 91-page book consisting of three essays of metacritical explorations into the operations of whiteness and blackness in the literature of white writers in the United States. Toni Morrison takes the position that the

existing literary criticism in the United States has provided **incomplete readings** of its canonical literature by refusing to acknowledge and analyse the Africanist persona present in it.

Linda Krumholz described Morrison's project as "reread[ing] the American literary canon through an analysis of whiteness to propose the ways that black people were used to establish American identity."

Michael Eric Dyson observes that in addition to this exploration of the "white literary imagination...*Playing in the Dark* is also about **a black intellectual seizing the interpretive space within a racially ordered hierarchy of cultural criticism**. Blacks are usually represented through the lens of white perception rather than the other way around...With [*Playing in the Dark*], a substantial change is portended."

In 2016, Time magazine noted that *Playing in the Dark* was among Morrison's most-assigned texts on U.S. college campuses, together with several of her novels and her 1993 Nobel Prize lecture, making her one of the most-assigned of all female writers (which makes me very happy btw).

I have to admit that I did not fully understand the essay due to its academic nature and my lack of knowledge of Morrison's references. Since the target audience were students familiar with the topic and other professors, this is not surprising. However, I don't think that Morrison did a good job of providing useful and practical analytic tools for dissecting canonical literature. Her approach and her created categories were too abstract for that, nonetheless the food for thought she provided with this essay is invaluable.

I have a hard time reviewing this book (since I did have comprehension issues), so I think I will just give you a little insight into what I took from it:

1 The construction of white identity

Toni Morrison claims that white American fiction has fabricated a black persona that is "reflexive," a means for whites to contemplate their own terror and desire without having to acknowledge these feelings as their own.

Oftentimes, black characters function as surrogates to the white man's identity, thus ensuring that the white author and his characters know that they themselves are not enslaved, but free; not repulsive, but desirable; not helpless, but powerful.

It plays very well into the thoughts of James Baldwin and Martin Luther King, that the white man's identity is constructed through his contrast to the black man; and thus the liberation of the black man evokes a bottomless and nameless terror, because it means a reconstruction of white identity and it forces the white man to face himself and what's left of him after he is stripped from his artificial superiority.

Black characters in classic American novels have been just as marginalized as their real-life counterparts. The black "shadow" has, paradoxically, allowed white culture to face its fear of freedom. Though colonist, immigrant and refugee embraced America for its promise of freedom, they were nevertheless terrified at the prospect of becoming failures and outcasts, engulfed by a boundless, untamable nature. **Africanism, the culture's construction of black slavery, stood, therefore, not only for the "not-free" but also for the "not-me."**

2 The Literary Imagination

Toni Morrison makes it very clear that literature is a byproduct of the author's mind. In order to write, you have to have the capability of imagining first. Another important factor that shouldn't be ignored is the author's cultural upbringing and social standing. Readers and writers both struggle to interpret and perform within a common language sharing imaginative worlds. Through the author's presence, his intentions and (color)blindness are inherently part of the imaginative activity. Toni Morrison asks herself the question what

happens then if most readers and writers (as it has been in American history) are white.

There seems to be a more or less tacit agreement among literary scholars that because American literature has been clearly the preserve of white male views, genius, and power, those views, genius, and power are **without** relationship to and **removed from** the overwhelming presence of black people in the United States. This is a false assumption. The 400-year-old Africanist presence in America has not only influenced the white's sense of 'Americanness' but also the literary canon.

For both, black and white American writers, in a wholly racialized society, there is no escape from racially inflected language. The ways in which artists – and the society that bred them – transferred internal conflicts to a black darkness, to conveniently bound and violently silenced black bodies, is a major theme of American literature. **Nothing highlighted freedom – if it did not in fact create it – like slavery.**

The world does not become raceless or will not become unracialized by assertion: the act of enforcing racelessness in literary discourse is itself a racial act. Pouring rhetorical acid on the fingers of a black hand may indeed destroy the prints, but not the hand. Besides, what happens in that violent, self-serving act of erasure to the hands, the fingers, the fingerprints of the one who does the pouring? Do they remain acid-free? The literature itself suggests otherwise.

3 Default-whiteness

"There is another person aboard, an alcoholic named Eddy. Eddy is white, and we know he is because nobody says so." This is still a problem in modern literature. Unless otherwise specified, all characters are read and seen as white. The visibility of minority characters is something that needs to be worked on, however, we should proceed with caution. The most common problem we see today is that minority characters become token characters – their skin color/ sexuality/ religion being their only defining feature.

Personally, I think that there are many great ways of including diversity in a more 'organic' way, e.g. through the language the characters are usual or the inclusion of certain cultural practices. Nonetheless, it's still something that can be easily fucked up, and be turned into insensitive bullshit.

In conclusion

Toni Morrison's approach is not only meant to teach a black author about white motivation. It should also teach whites about how they have constructed not only black but white identity, and how they have contemplated their own humanity by observing the dehumanization of others. While I wish that these essays would have been more comprehensible, I still highly appreciate the ideas that Morrison provided, and would recommend *Playing in the Dark* to anyone interested in the subject matter and anyone willing to put in the needed time and effort.

Christy Lenzi says

Thought provoking, eye-opening. The look at Africanist properties in Hemingway's work was the most interesting to me.

Christy says

If only all literary criticism and theory were as well-written, clear, and concise as Toni Morrison's *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*. Morrison's central argument in this book is a fairly simple

one, that "the contemplation of this black presence [in American history and literature:] is central to any understanding of our national literature and should not be permitted to hover at the margins of the literary imagination" (5). She dedicates herself in this book to exploring the ways in which blackness is used within traditional, canonical (in other words, white) American literature, the ways in which it is always present, even when it is not acknowledged.

She names the set of relations and representations that she studies here American Africanism and describes it as "an investigation into the ways in which a nonwhite, Africanlike (or Africanist) presence or persona was constructed in the United States, and the imaginative uses this fabricated presence served" (6).

In the first essay in this book, "Black Matters," she focuses on exploring the reasons behind the omission of American Africanism in literary discourse and, in doing so, presents arguments for the necessity of repairing this omission. One such argument is that "the pattern of thinking about racialism in terms of its consequences on the victim--of always defining it asymmetrically [sic:] from the perspective of its impact on the object of racist policy and attitudes"--does not address the complete range of problems that accompany racism (or racialism). In addition to studying the impact of racism on the victims, we must also study "the impact of racism on those who perpetuate it" (11). Looking at the place of blackness in white literature will help with this project.

She also addresses the idea that art is human, universal, and, ideally, apolitical, contending that "criticism that needs to insist that literature is not only 'universal' but also 'race-free' risks lobotomizing that literature, and diminishes both the art and the artist" (12). Race (like gender, sexuality, religion, etc.) will always be a part of a living literature. Sometimes it will be at the heart of a work of literature and sometimes it won't, but as long as we humans think in terms of racial categories, it will be present in some way. So to pretend that it is not present, that it does not color our representations and modes of storytelling, is to rob literature of some of its meaning.

In the second essay of the book, "Romancing the Shadow," Morrison discusses Edgar Allan Poe's *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* in order to examine the use of whiteness in conjunction with blackness (as occurs, for instance, at the end of Poe's novel, as well as in Melville, Faulkner, and Hemingway, all acknowledged giants of American literature). She writes, "These images of impenetrable whiteness need contextualizing to explain their extraordinary power, pattern, and consistency. Because they appear almost always in conjunction with representations of black or Africanist people who are dead, impotent, or under complete control, these images of blinding whiteness seem to function as both antidote for and meditation on the shadow that is companion to this whiteness--a dark and abiding presence that moves the hearts and texts of American literature with fear and longing" (33). If the American dream is to be free and the immigrant's dream of American is to have a clean slate on which to begin again, Morrison argues that the black bodies of slaves provided a counterpoint to these dreams, something against which to more clearly define those dreams. It is something that cannot be explicitly acknowledged, but it is something that permeates American literature and ideology. She writes, "It was this Africanism, deployed as rawness and savagery, that provided the staging ground and arena for the elaboration of the quintessential American identity" (44). She concludes this essay by writing, "If we follow through on the self-reflexive nature of these encounters with Africanism, it falls clear: images of blackness can be evil and protective, rebellious and forgiving, fearful and desirable--all of the self-contradictory features of the self. Whiteness, alone, is mute, meaningless, unfathomable, pointless, frozen, veiled, curtained, dreaded, senseless, implacable. Or so our writers seem to say" (59).

In the third and final essay, "Disturbing Nurses and the Kindness of Sharks," Morrison attempts "to observe and trace the transformation of American Africanism from its simplistic, though menacing, purposes of establishing hierarchic difference [as described in "Romancing the Shadow":] to its surrogate properties as self-reflexive meditations on the loss of difference, to its lush and fully blossomed existence in the rhetoric of dread and desire" (63-4). She also re-states her purpose in writing this book: "Studies in American Africanism, in my view, should be investigations of the ways in which a nonwhite, Africanist presence and

personae have been constructed--invented--in the United States, and of the literary uses this fabricated presence has served. . . . My project is an effort to avert the critical gaze from the racial object to the racial subject; from the described and imagined to the describers and imaginers; from the serving to the served" (90).

Since the publication of this book in 1992, the field of literary studies has actually opened up in this direction. Critical studies of whiteness and its construction have flourished, which prevents the racial subject, the describers and imaginers, from remaining invisible and unmarked and which also thereby makes it possible to imagine and create a world (both fictional and real) in which people of color are not limited to being the Other and are not the only people imagined to be affected by racism.

Amanda says

This was a lot more academic than I was hoping it to be. I don't think I fully comprehended all Morrison explained, but I understood the main takeaways and bracketed several passages. Overall, this publication is a call for more literary research and criticism like that which is found in this text. I really loved her in depth analysis of works by Cather and Hemingway and wish there had been more analyses like this. I hope to get more out of *Playing in the Dark* upon rereading.

Molly Labenski says

I gave up on highlighting because everything Toni Morrison says is important.
