Introduction

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In the autumn of 1988, a few months after she had won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction for *Beloved* (1987), Toni Morrison spoke to a packed house at the University of Michigan.[1] Her talk, the tenth annual Tanner Lecture on Human Values, addressed the formidable influence of whiteness on American literature. As late afternoon turned to evening in Ann Arbor, Morrison turned attention to Herman Melville's sustained meditations on whiteness in *Moby-Dick* (1851). Considering the book in light of the racial politics of its historical moment – *Moby-Dick* came out one year after Congress passed the Fugitive Slave Law and one year before Harriet Beecher Stowe published *Uncle Tom's Cabin* – Morrison offered a tour-de-force reading of Ahab's hunt for the white whale as Melville's strategy for recognizing and reckoning with "the moment in America when whiteness became ideology."[2]

Accounting for the novel's obsessive attention to the whale and its whiteness makes it possible for a boatload of textual elements to "become luminous in a completely new way," in Morrison's evocative phrasing.[3] The white whale, which Captain Ahab devotes his life (and Melville devotes his novel) to chasing, has become a symbol of any all-consuming pursuit. Elaborations of this idea often foreground the whale – its colossal size, its power, its ability to elude its would-be destroyers – while losing sight of its whiteness. What happens, Morrison asks, when we treat the white whale as "if it is as much its adjective as it is its noun"?[4] What insights emerge from refusing to allow the whale's whiteness to be an "unmarked marker," as whiteness often is, and grappling with *white* as an insistent and recurrent modifying marker that accompanies the noun *whale* more than one hundred times in the text?[5]

A chapter called "The Whiteness of the Whale" becomes luminous when read as a rumination on racial ideology that sheds light on some of the otherwise enigmatic ideas *Moby-Dick* presents. Ishmael, the novel's narrator, identifies this chapter's subject matter as, in some sense, the book's

raison d'être: In launching this chapter, he insists that his paramount task is to account for why "it was the whiteness of the whale that above all things appalled me"; were he to fail to explain this, "all these chapters might be naught."[6] Across this section, Ishmael reflects on the ambiguity as well as the potency of whiteness, describing it as "ineffable" yet capable of "completely overpower[ing] all the rest" and as an "intensifying agent" marked by "indefiniteness."[7] These ideas, it seems to me, not only look backward at the history of American authors' explorations of whiteness but also look ahead to the future of whiteness studies scholarship.

This chapter of *Moby-Dick* glances back, by way of allusion, to the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (1845). Ishmael's observations near the start of this episode echo Douglass's reflections near the start of his narrative, where he movingly recounts the "ineffable sadness" that overtook him whenever he heard enslaved people singing as well as the momentous impact these strains had on him: "To those songs I trace my first glimmering conception of the dehumanizing character of slavery."[8] Building on historian Sterling Stuckey's work showing how profoundly the *Narrative* influenced *Moby-Dick* and following Morrison's lead in exploring the novel's ruminations on whiteness, I want to suggest that some of what Melville learned about whiteness from reading Douglass's *Narrative* makes its way into this chapter.[9] Douglass's text demonstrates enslavement's dehumanizing character by documenting both how enslaved people were "broken in body, soul, and spirit" and how possessing "the fatal poison of irresponsible power" corrupted enslavers.[10] Whiteness "overpowered all the rest," to return to Melville's novel, by subjugating all the rest of the people not construed as white as well as by facilitating the unequal distribution of power, opportunity, liberty, and resources.[11] When Ishmael (and through him Melville, perhaps) describes himself as "appalled" by whiteness, then, he reveals how it terrifies and discomfits him.[12] But might he also mean, with a nod to the word's earliest meanings, that he is made pale, or made (self-consciously) white?[13] Is he, in other words, racialized by these efforts to illume the workings of whiteness – operations that often proceed, as philosopher Shannon Sullivan has written, as though "unseen, invisible, even seemingly nonexistent"?[14]

By highlighting the "indefiniteness" of whiteness and the ways in which it can seem "ineffable" and "elusive," "The Whiteness of the Whale" anticipates some central concepts in scholarly work on whiteness since the 1990s.[15] George Lipsitz opens his landmark book *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness* (1998) by grappling with how the ineffability of whiteness – that is, its ability to seem unspeakable or indescribable – helps obscure its operations: "As the

unmarked category against which difference is constructed, whiteness never has to speak its name, never has to acknowledge its role as an organizing principle in social and cultural relations."[16] More recently, some scholars have suggested that "its ability to shift locations and its ability to change its nature" – its elusiveness – shores up the power and privilege of whiteness.[17] Across US history, conceptions of white identity have morphed to exclude some people (the one-drop rule, for instance, does this work) and include others – for example, immigrant populations that "became white" after coming to the United States; in *The History of White People* (2010), Nell Irvin Painter identifies four periods that witness this phenomenon, which she terms the "enlargement of American whiteness."[18] The result is an indefiniteness (to return to Melville's terminology) about the definition of white identity aptly captured by Richard Dyer's contention that whiteness is "a matter of ascription – white people are who white people say are white."[19]

Whereas Melville anticipated whiteness studies, Morrison played a big role in inaugurating it. A few years after delivering the Tanner Lecture, Morrison published the book that kicked off whiteness studies as a distinct strand of scholarship within literary studies. In *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (1992), Morrison reframed American classics long understood as "raceless" or "universal" as, instead, narratives about whiteness defined by what was thought (by some segment of the population at some period of time, at least) to distinguish it from Blackness. The book was immediately influential and remains so; in fact, as readers will discover as they forge ahead in this volume, a half-dozen chapters engage with *Playing in the Dark*. Morrison was at the vanguard of a wave of work on whiteness that swept through English departments and other academic disciplines in the 1990s, with *Playing in the Dark* transforming literary studies around the same time that scholars in fields including history, law, sociology, film studies, and philosophy turned attention to whiteness.[20] The so-called culture wars of the nineties might help account for the flurry of interest in whiteness in that decade. Recently, whiteness has once again become a hot topic. References to whiteness in the *New York Times*, by way of example, exploded at the end of the 2010s, rising from 153 mentions in the first half of the decade (2010–2014) to 1,745 in the second half (2015–2019).[21] An upsurge in white supremacist violence and propaganda, battles over monuments honoring Confederates and enslavers, and other social and political issues that convulsed this period likely had a hand in kindling this interest in and attention to whiteness.

While the critical study of whiteness coalesced as an academic field in the late twentieth century, African American intellectuals were studying

and writing about whiteness long before then. Frederick Douglass, Harriet Jacobs, and other authors of slave narratives set forth extended analyses of whiteness in the middle of the nineteenth century as part of their efforts to advocate for abolishing enslavement. A half-century later, writers including Ida B. Wells-Barnett and W. E. B. Du Bois published works examining the connections among white supremacy, economic inequality, and social identity. Essays in this book draw on arguments set forth by Douglass, Jacobs, Du Bois, Richard Wright, James Baldwin, bell hooks, and other Black authors whose nonfictional writings investigate whiteness. But this volume also devotes significant attention to how fictional narratives engage with race, bringing to light how a broad spectrum of novels, movies, short stories, television shows, and other works address whiteness. By widening the frame to take in nonfiction and fiction within and outside of the African American tradition, this book includes representations of whiteness that span more than two centuries, starting with works from the early national period, including a short story by Charles Brockden Brown and a slave narrative by William Grimes, and ending at our doorstep with novels by Chinelo Okparanta and Julia Glass that were published in 2022.

In keeping with Stephanie Li's observation that "ultimately every novel is a racial novel; there is no writing 'beyond race,'" this volume explores how a wide variety of texts both explicitly and implicitly engage with whiteness.[22] It comes as small surprise that Thomas Dixon Jr. and Nella Larsen, two writers who address whiteness directly (albeit dramatically differently) in their best-known works, are each discussed in a few different essays collected here. In the same vein, novels about racial passing, civil rights memoirs, white life novels, and other works that home in on whiteness are examined at length in this book. But so too are temperance reform novels, naturalist novels, romance novels, and other texts that may not seem to center whiteness but that, as the scholars who take them up show, grapple with whiteness in noteworthy ways. With its capacious approach, *Whiteness and American Literature* reveals the role whiteness plays in a variety of periods, forms, and modes of US literature and culture.

Movies, songs, television shows, and literary works become luminous in the analyses that fill this book's three parts. Essays in "Whiteness and National Identity," the first of these three parts, explore the interplay among whiteness, history, and the arts. By focusing on the strange career of a ragtime song that was hugely popular with US troops around the time of the Spanish–American War, Harilaos Stecopoulos explores what he calls "the imperial sounds of whiteness." Mita Banerjee examines

startling parallels between how whiteness was being defined in the legal processes of naturalization during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and in the naturalist novels written in this era. Delving deep into eugenic family studies, Matt Wray shows how stigmatypes, or stigmatizing stereotypes, of rural poor white people not only figured in but also gained scientific authority from these studies, which claimed to show how "degeneracy" ran rife in particular families. Edward K. Chan contemplates white nationalism as part of an originary contradiction that structures life and literature in the United States, paying particular attention to how works of utopian literature variously assume, extol, and impugn white supremacy. Drawing examples from literary works, movies, and songs, Lee Bebout discusses the ways in which Mexico and Mexican-descent people have been depicted as an ethnic and racial Other in order to represent whiteness as Americanness. Justin Gomer scrutinizes the ties that bind whiteness, gender, and national identity in Hollywood blockbusters from *Birth of a Nation* (1915) to *Rocky* (1976). Marvin McAllister looks at how two recent television series use a performance strategy he terms *whiting up* to probe white privilege and Black agency.

"Whiteness in the American Literary Imagination," the middle part of the book, features essays that analyze how literary movements, genres, and forms engage with whiteness. Surveying representations of whiteness in nineteenth-century speculative writing, Hannah Lauren Murray examines the anxieties that found vent in depictions of monstrous whiteness and fantastical renderings of racial transformation. John Ernest focuses on the white presence in slave narratives, illuminating the challenge Black Americans faced in speaking beyond and against not simply white people (including the enslavers they described and the amanuenses who sometimes recorded – and sometimes altered – their stories) but the white power structure that made recounting their own experiences of enslavement so arduous and so urgent. By analyzing novels of racial passing published in the early twentieth century, Masami Sugimori demonstrates how the "unmarked" status of whiteness both facilitated passing in the modern era and complicated writers' efforts to represent passing in their fictional works. Veronica T. Watson considers Black writers' essays, memoirs, and other nonfictional writings, bringing to light how these works expose not only the workings of whiteness but also the steep toll that white privilege and racism take on people of color and, in some cases, on white people themselves. Investigating what he identifies as the historical novel of whiteness, T. Austin Graham discusses a number of tales that interrogate – and, in many instances, denounce – the conceptions of white identity that

took root in post-Enlightenment America. Teresa A. Goddu looks at contemporary US climate fiction, documenting a pattern of representing the climate crisis as a whiteness crisis. Stephanie Li reads Chinelo Okparanta's *Harry Sylvester Bird* (2022) as a twenty-first-century white life novel, or a story about white characters written by a Black author, tracing continuities and divergences between Okparanta's novel and its postwar predecessors.

In the third and final part, "Approaches to Whiteness," essays define and employ interdisciplinary methods for studying US literature, media, and society. After delineating recent scholarly work at the crossroads of food, literature, and race, Catherine Keyser serves up readings of *The Great Gatsby* (1925) and *Lolita* (1955) that reveal how sugar, marshmallows, and other foodstuffs that appear in these novels help cook up illusory images of whiteness. Andrew Donnelly turns attention to queer studies, underscoring how gender and sexuality contribute to race-making through readings of novels by Thomas Dixon Jr., Nella Larsen, and Casey McQuiston. Eden Osucha traces the historical construction of whiteness in US law before delving into how Charles W. Chesnutt contended with the US Supreme Court's *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) decision, which upheld the constitutionality of segregation under the "separate but equal" fallacy, in his novel *The Marrow of Tradition* (1901). Exploring representations of working-class Americans in a variety of popular texts from the 1850s, Timothy Helwig chronicles how middle-class discourses of moral reform and individual responsibility were challenged by narratives that expressed artisan republican ideologies and depicted cross-racial sympathies among laboring people. Starting with Black feminists' critiques of white feminism, Taylor Nygaard and Jorie Lagerwey consider whiteness and feminism by using Hello Sunshine, a media company founded by actress Reese Witherspoon, as a case study illustrating some of contemporary popular feminism's race-related blind spots. With his chapter on disability studies, Stephen Knadler brings this book full circle, returning to *Playing in the Dark* to expose the ties that bind white supremacy and ableism.

Together, in their differences and their points of overlap, these essays affirm and analyze the momentous role whiteness has played in shaping American literature and culture from the early days of the nation to the present. Unsurprisingly, given that it's part of the Cambridge Themes in American Literature and Culture series, this book explores whiteness as a theme in – and influence on – the numerous works it addresses, although how these texts thematize whiteness varies widely. In some works, whiteness and the privileges it confers seem invisible to the storyworld's

characters, functioning, as Peggy McIntosh describes the operations of white privilege, as "an invisible package of unearned assets" whose tools and resources its possessor makes use of without recognizing that there are people around them who aren't similarly provisioned.[23] In these cases, the artists who produced these works or the scholars who analyze them here – or both – work to uncloak characters' unrecognized advantages. In other works, whiteness is hypervisible. For those racialized as white, it's marked at both poles of class identity: The acronym *WASP* (White Anglo-Saxon Protestant) as well as the derogatory term *white trash* incorporate the racial designation *white*. For this reason, whiteness is marked for some of the most well-known figures in US literature, including Daisy Buchanan, who waxes nostalgic for her "white girlhood" in *The Great Gatsby* and, at the other end of the class spectrum, Huckleberry Finn's father, Pap, whose pigmentation appalls: It's "a white to make a body sick, a white to make a body's flesh crawl."[24] Whiteness is also markedly important for countless individuals who are not classified as white despite their fair skin tones. These figures include the plaintiffs in the cases Mita Banerjee discusses in Chapter 2, who went to court seeking to be proclaimed white by law after authorities declared that they were racially ineligible to enjoy the rights and privileges of US citizenship, and the protagonists of the modern novels Masami Sugimori analyzes in Chapter 10, all of whom are Black characters who pass for white. But, really, this is only the beginning. Read on in this volume to learn much more about how writers and other artists have reckoned with whiteness and what those representations reveal about the roles that race plays in the social life and cultural imaginary of the United States.

Notes

1. For a first-hand account of this talk, see Margie Heinlen, "Morrison Speaks 'Unspeakable' in Lecture," *Michigan Daily*, October 10, 1988, https://digital.bentley.umich.edu/midaily/mdp.39015071754829/439.
2. Toni Morrison, "Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature," *Michigan Quarterly Review* 28, no. 1 (Winter 1989): 1–34; 15.
3. Ibid., 16.
4. Ibid., 15.
5. Ruth Frankenberg, "Introduction: Local Whitenesses, Localizing Whiteness," in *Displacing Whiteness: Essays in Social and Cultural Criticism*, ed. Ruth Frankenberg (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997), 1–33; 1.
6. Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick; or, The Whale* (1851; New York: Penguin, 1988), 204.

7. Ibid., 204, 212.
8. Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (Boston: Anti-Slavery Office, 1845), 14.
9. Sterling Stuckey, "Cheer and Gloom: Frederick Douglass and Herman Melville on Slave Music and Dance," chap. 4 in *African Culture and Melville's Art: The Creative Process in* Benito Cereno *and* Moby-Dick (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).
10. Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, 63, 32.
11. Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 204.
12. Ibid.
13. Most, but not all, readers take Ishmael to be white. Fred V. Bernard makes the case that Ishmael is a mixed-race man in "The Question of Race in *Moby-Dick*," *Massachusetts Review* 43, no. 3 (Autumn 2002): 384–404. Robert J. O'Hara shows that half of the men named Ishmael who lived in Massachusetts prior to the publication of *Moby-Dick* were Black (at a time when African Americans made up less than 2 percent of the state's population) in "Was Ishmael Black? Facts Behind Herman Melville's Fiction," *Journal of African American History* 102, no. 3 (Summer 2017): 380–386.
14. Shannon Sullivan, *Revealing Whiteness: The Unconscious Habits of Racial Privilege* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 1.
15. Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 212, 204, 205.
16. George Lipsitz, *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness: How White People Profit from Identity Politics*, rev. ed. (1998; Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2006), 1.
17. Hamilton Carroll, *Affirmative Reaction: New Formations of White Masculinity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 10.
18. In the 1990s and 2000s, Karen Brodkin, Noel Ignatiev, Matthew Frye Jacobson, and David Roediger published influential books chronicling how various immigrant groups came to be seen as white Americans. Nell Irvin Painter, *The History of White People* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2010), passim.
19. Richard Dyer, *White*, 20th anniversary ed. (1997; London: Routledge, 2017), 48.
20. Key early whiteness studies works in these fields include historian David R. Roediger's *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (London: Verso, 1991); legal scholar Cheryl I. Harris's "Whiteness as Property," *Harvard Law Review* 106, no. 8 (June 1993): 1707–1791; sociologist Ruth Frankenberg's *White Women, Race Matters: The Social Construction of Whiteness* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993); film studies scholar Dyer's *White*; and philosopher Charles W. Mills's *The Racial Contract* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997).
21. Lee Bebout, "Whiteness," in *Keywords for American Cultural Studies*, 3rd ed., ed. Bruce Burgett and Glenn Hendler (New York: New York University Press, 2020), 249–253; 251.
22. Stephanie Li, *Playing in the White: Black Writers, White Subjects* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 9.

23. Peggy McIntosh, "White Privilege and Male Privilege: A Personal Account of Coming to See Correspondences through Work in Women's Studies," in *Critical White Studies: Looking Behind the Mirror*, ed. Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1997), 291–299; 291.
24. Mark Twain, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884; New York: W. W. Norton, 1999), 31; F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* (1925; New York: Scribner, 1995), 24.

PART I

Whiteness and National Identity