



# **Playing in the White: Black Writers, White Subjects (Oxford Studies in American Literary History)**

*Stephanie Li*

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The postwar period witnessed an outpouring of white life novels--that is, texts by African American writers focused almost exclusively on white characters. Almost every major mid-twentieth century black writer, including Zora Neale Hurston, Richard Wright, Ann Petry and James Baldwin, published one of these anomalous texts. Controversial since their publication in the 1940s and 50s, these novels have since fallen into obscurity given the challenges they pose to traditional conceptions of the African American literary canon.

*Playing in the White: Black Writers, White Subjects* aims to bring these neglected novels back into conversations about the nature of African American literature and the unique expectations imposed upon black texts. In a series of nuanced readings, Li demonstrates how postwar black novelists were at the forefront of what is now commonly understood as whiteness studies. Novels like Hurston's *Seraph on the Suwanee* and Wright's *Savage Holiday*, once read as abdications of the political imperative of African American literature, are revisited with an awareness of how whiteness signifies in multivalent ways that critique America's abiding racial hierarchies. These novels explore how this particular racial construction is freighted with social power and narrative meaning. Whiteness repeatedly figures in these texts as a set of expectations that are nearly impossible to fulfill. By describing characters who continually fail at whiteness, white life novels ask readers to reassess what race means for all Americans.

Along with its close analysis of key white life novels, *Playing in the White: Black Writers, White Subjects* also provides important historical context to understand how these texts represented the hopes and anxieties of a newly integrated nation.

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