That slavery bequeathed to African Americans a twisted sense of self and identity is no longer in doubt; it was perhaps most famously, and empirically, demonstrated in the research that led to the 1956 U.S. Supreme Court decision in Brown versus Board of Education. The idea that slavery also bequeathed a peculiar legacy to whites as well, however, is a relatively new discovery. Over the past two decades, race theorists have introduced this notion to the social sciences, and Toni Morrison has popularized this idea in literature. As James Baldwin might say, Morrison has been able to find evidence of things not seen—tropes, assumptions, schemes and metaphors that underpin rationales of race, otherness, and white identity—in the cradle of American literature.

Baldwin died in 1987, one year before Morrison formally began her project with a series of speeches known as the Tanner Lectures. But he might very well have inspired the propositions on the birth of American literature that Morrison consolidated in her 1992 book, Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination. For at the heart of Morrison’s argument that American literature is animated by a dark, unknowable, “Africanist” presence is an assumption about how the white American imagination went about creating, recognizing, and reproducing itself in the form of literature and, ultimately, a national culture. It is a process that Baldwin first dramatized in his essays, and his determination to live by the ideas he discovered in those works might just have been the source of his downfall.

Baldwin has not been credited as a source for Morrison’s ideas. Yet the similarity between Morrison’s call to scholars to not just consider the effects of racism on its
victims, but also on its perpetrators (11) is remarkably similar to Baldwin’s writing on the symbiotic nature of black and white identity. Although the precise genealogy of their ideas may differ, both writers share a key method to illustrate the formation of white identity, which is not only the core of the white American imagination, but also the source of racism and racist practices. Consider, then, Morrison’s use of a history of European settlers in the New World, and the influences that led her to her insights.

Morrison, quoting Benjamin Bailyn, recalls the experience of William Dunbar, an accomplished and educated Scotsman who settled in the “Mississippi wilderness” (40) before the American Revolution. From the Caribbean he obtained enough slaves to transform the raw soil and trees on his land into a working plantation; Bailyn describes him as a “a more cultivated Colonel Sutpen” (40) who was nominated for a membership in the American Philosophical Society by Thomas Jefferson. Yet his intellectual pursuits, his physical wherewithal, or his financial acumen failed to mark him as a true example of a new, American breed of manhood; it was only his mastery over the lives of his slaves that won him the right to be considered a gentleman:

…But 4,000 miles from the sources of culture, alone on that far periphery of British civilization where physical survival was a struggle, where ruthless exploitation was a way of life, and where disorder, violence, and human degradation were commonplace, he had triumphed by successful adaptation…feeling within himself a sense of authority and autonomy he had not known before, a force that flowed from his absolute control over the lives of others, he emerged a distinctive new man… (Bailyn qtd. in Morrison 42).

Dunbar is perhaps Morrison’s most dramatic example of how the concept of white freedom—certainly a key facet in the formation of a national identity, and, by extension, imagination—is parasitic (57) by its very nature. It is only through the invention of what
Morrison calls American Africanism, which is, at base, a set of negative assumptions about the enslaved blacks in the midst of the United States’ revolutionary experiment, that white Americans were able to recognize the rights, liberties, and privileges that so dramatically set them apart from the rest of the world’s citizens. “Nothing highlighted freedom—if it did not in fact create it—like slavery” (38) Morrison writes. “Africanism is the vehicle by which the American self knows itself as not enslaved, but free; not repulsive, but desirable; not helpless, but licensed and powerful, not history-less, but historical; not damned, but innocent; not a blind accident of evolution, but a progressive fulfillment of destiny” (52).

Morrison goes on to explain how the presence of these slaves provided both the occasion and limitations of the American imagination. In Romancing the Shadow, an anthology inspired by Morrison’s naming of Edgar Allan Poe the first purveyor of American Africanism, scholars demonstrate how Poe’s conceits are manifestations of the enslaved population living alongside the free. These manifestations are not as gratuitous as the seemingly obvious racial reference in “The Murders in the Rue Morgue,” which finds the culprit for a sexually-charged, double murder in the form of an orangutan. Rather, they emerge as the charnel houses, the locked rooms, dismembered bodies and voices from beyond the grave, which are metaphors for white fears of miscegenation; and the circumscribed movements, punishments, and civilly dead existence forced upon black slaves. Morrison herself more thoroughly investigates the influence of American Africanism on Willa Cather, Saul Bellow, and Ernest Hemingway, “who wrote so compellingly what it was like to be a white male American” (90). One such portrait is drawn in contrast to a silent, nameless and featureless “nigger”—a character so silent and
ineffectual that Hemingway must torture his famously spare syntax to prevent this character from speaking (72).

In his essay “Toni Morrison’s *Jazz* and the Racial Dreams of an American writer,’” Michael Nowlin traces Morrison’s debt to Ralph Ellison, even though Morrison believed that Ellison wrote “to” a white audience, not a black one. Both Ellison, and by extension, Morrison, would argue that African Americans “have the crucial symbolic function of ritualistically shoring up the equation between whiteness and American identity,” Nowlin writes. As proof, he cites Ellison’s “What America Would Be Like Without Blacks,” which states that black and white identity are “ironically identical” (Ellison qtd. in Nowlin). Ellison and Morrison’s views are a significant departure from W.E.B. DuBois’s construct of “double consciousness,” which holds African American identity to be a singular understanding, wrenched from the contradictions that are “blackness” and “American.” They also put the birth of white identity, as we now understand it, squarely in the hands of slavery, with its overwhelming ability to define all manner of relationships between black and white, especially in favor of the white race.

All of this is not to say that Morrison and Ellison deny the power or veracity of DuBois’s “double consciousness.” At its purest, black identity might very well be the organic product of the internal African American struggle to reconcile rival heritages as well as warring concepts of the self. But for white Americans, at bottom, black Americans have primarily existed for the use and comfort of white people. At first, that use and comfort was literal; later, they served as a reminder of what was, by comparison, normal, superior, and fully invested in the American way of life.
As an aspiring writer searching for mentors as well as his own identity, Ellison struggled with this history. In his acceptance speech for the 1953 National Book Award (for *Invisible Man*), he recalled not necessarily finding black authors to emulate or depictions of black life to refer to; instead, he relied on a kind of impact of absence, the reverberations the black presence had on American authors and their re-imaginings of the supposedly unique American project. He finally settled on nineteenth-century novelists:

Naturally I was attracted to these writers as a Negro. Whatever they thought of my people per se, in their imaginative economy the Negro symbolized both the man lowest down and the mysterious, underground aspect of human personality. In a sense the Negro was the gauge of the human condition as it waxed and waned in our democracy. (qtd in Banks)

Ellison’s proposition, that blacks left an indelible imprint on the American scale of assimilation, success, and familiarity, is more systematically extended by Morrison in *Playing in the Dark*, according to Russell Banks. Banks mentions Baldwin not so much as an inspiration for Morrison but as the first writer to acknowledge the role of violence in the African Diaspora, and by extension, America’s racially tinged history. “Baldwin’s underlying point is that from the start the central theme in the American drama has been race, and therefore, violence, and that it shapes every American’s life, the victimizer’s as much as the victim’s, the native’s as much as the newly arrived immigrant’s,” Banks writes.

Yet here Banks is inherently recognizing Morrison’s indebtedness to Baldwin, for here is the acknowledgement that both writers wish to spotlight not only racism’s victims, but also its merchants. It is this same drama that Morrison finds in the historian’s account
of William Dunbar’s life, and one that Baldwin also envisions—or, in Morrison’s words, one that he re-members—in his search for the beginnings of the black and white conflict.

While Morrison can rely on documented history, Baldwin illustrates the earliest encounters between black and white, and their attendant effects, purely from his imagination. This is the achievement of “A Stranger in the Village,” an essay that initially recounts Baldwin’s visit to a small, Swiss village. He arrives in this town that has never before had a black resident as the subject of polite curiosity for the village adults, and gentle teasing by the village’s naïve children. He answers their jokes and inquiries by “trying to be pleasant—it being a great part of the American Negro’s education (long before he goes to school) that he must make people like him” (Notes 137). Yet as he considers the villagers’ customs, such as sponsoring, or “buying” African natives so missionaries may convert them to Christianity; how the village’s older women ignore him as he walks by; and how he becomes a suspect in the theft of village firewood; he can no longer be so pleasant. “For this village brings home to me this fact,” he writes, introducing a second level to his inquiry,

…that there was a day, and not really a very distant day, when Americans were scarcely Americans at all but discontented Europeans, facing a great unconquered continent and strolling, say, into the marketplace and seeing black men for the first time. The shock this spectacle afforded is suggested, surely, by the promptness with which they decided that these blacks men were not really men but cattle. It is true that the necessity on the part of the settlers of the New World of reconciling their moral assumptions with the fact—and the necessity—of slavery enhanced immensely the charm of this idea… (Notes 143)

Baldwin’s statement makes the earliest forms of white identity not so much the products of slavery as the rationales for it. Yet white identity, which Baldwin says was
first based on the belief that white men were the creators of civilization, eventually comes to depend on slavery, and the system of Jim Crow laws and demeaning social conventions that replaced it: “Thus it was impossible for Americans to accept the black man as one of themselves, for to do so was to jeopardize their status as white men... I do not think, for example, that it is too much to suggest that the American vision of the world...owes a great deal to the battle waged by Americans to maintain between themselves and black men a human separation which could not be bridged” (Notes 146-148).

From this outpost in Europe, where black “possessions” in black colonies remained out of sight, and very possibly out of mind, Baldwin sees white identity in both its historical and contemporary contexts. Here, he obviously owes something to Ellison, for Baldwin finds white identity to be just as ironic as Ellison did. White identity functions to reassure whites of their superiority not by reminding them of their roots, but by deliberately ignoring their origins. For whites to acknowledge these origins—and subsequently admit their debt to blacks—would be to lose all sense of their white selves. As Baldwin continues in “Stranger in the Village:” “…in America, even as a slave (the black man) was an inescapable part of the general social fabric and no American could escape having an attitude toward him. Americans attempt until today to make an abstraction of the Negro, but the very nature of these abstractions reveals the tremendous effects the presence of the Negro has had on the American character” (Notes 145).

Nick Aaron Ford calls “A Stranger in the Village” “the most meaningful understanding of the black-white dilemma (to) appear in American literature” (89). Baldwin’s understanding of this conflict, particularly through the trope of identity, is
apparent in his other essays of the civil rights period. In a birthday letter to his nephew, published in 1962 in *The Fire Next Time*, Baldwin warns: “(White people) have had to believe for many years, and for innumerable reasons, that black men are inferior to white men…the black man has functioned in the white man’s world as a fixed star, as an immovable pillar: and as he moves out of his place, heaven and earth are shaken to their foundations”(19-20). Similarly, in “Down at the Cross/Letter From a Region in My Mind,” published in the same volume, Baldwin explains that black equality is just as shocking as black non-violence because the two virtues fundamentally contradict not only with the whites’ image of black people, but the white image of whites themselves: “white men do not want their lives, their self-image, or their property threatened” (*Fire* 83).

Baldwin’s contribution to the civil rights struggle is indeed one that deals with questions of identity. He is correct to name the source of the black-white predicament “status insecurity” among whites (Jones 109). Indeed, he might mean for his work not only to make whites own up to their inheritance from slavery, but also to remind blacks they need not labor under this particular legacy any longer. Perhaps then black identity might be something that DuBois had originally concocted, mindful of its difficult history but no longer beholden to the assumptions others place upon it. By “re-defining what has been called the Negro problem as white, (Baldwin) has forced the majority race in America to look at the damage it has done, and its own role in that destruction,” one sociologist writes. “At the same time, he has lifted the burden of humiliation from the shoulder of the Negro. This gives the Negro a greater sense of self-respect. It could free him, and the next generation of Negroes, from much of the psychological power wielded
by whites” (Jones 119).

Along with his fiction, Baldwin’s ultimate prescription for true self-discovery not only includes self-reflection, but “a committed, compassionate, and reciprocal understanding of the other” (Nelson 122). If such is the case, then there is always a possibility that whites may correct, or heal their own concepts of identity by seeing the black man as he truly is. He might have seen such an attempt in his white friend William Styron’s controversial novel, The Confessions of Nat Turner. Long before the backlash against the book, Baldwin predicted it would be “called an effrontery” (Sokolov 67), but he also described the work as “a very courageous book that attempts to fuse the two points of view, the master’s and the slave’s. In that sense the book is hopeful. It’s important for the black reader to see what Bill is trying to do and recognize its validity…He has begun the common history, ours’” (Sokolov 67).

In the context of Baldwin’s previous remarks, it is clear that in praising Nat Turner, Baldwin is doing much more than returning a favor to a colleague who had earlier supported him. One of Baldwin’s most salient demands in his early essays is that whites must see blacks as human beings, if only to rescue their own humanity. Embedded in this demand is the belief that whites must have the ability to do so, to exercise their imaginations—and, by extension, reform their identities—to recognize their brothers in black skin. Baldwin’s concept of black and white identity is one that called on all Americans to renounce this particular legacy from slavery; in Styron’s efforts he might have seen the first attempt at this.

Baldwin also was correct in prophesizing a negative response to Nat Turner, which was deemed a highly dishonorable project by black critics. The result was the 1968
publication of *William Styron’s Nat Turner: Ten Black Writers Respond*, a critical overview that cited the book’s historical inaccuracies and chastised its stereotypical depiction of Turner as an over-sexed black man lusting for a white woman. “Black writers had effectively drawn a line in the sand and white writers would think twice before stepping over it,” writes Robert Fikes Jr. Baldwin’s defense of the book might have also marked a dividing point in his own career, for after this point, critical reception of his ideas cooled and often his work was derided as repetitious, out-of-date, or didactic. By 1970, some critics were calling him an “anachronism” (Watkins 234) and by 1973, Henry Louis Gates Jr., the dean of black literary criticism, had proclaimed Baldwin “passé” (Shin 251).

There are as many explanations for Baldwin’s decline, both artistically and in the public eye, as there are critics. Some have cited his supposed turn to militancy, while others claim that he never recovered from the criticism of black militants (Scott 102). Others blame it on the public’s reception to his homosexuality, or Baldwin’s own unsuccessful attempts to meld his politics with his artistic work. But there is another explanation, evident in the arc of his life: Baldwin practiced too much of what he preached; he lived by what he wrote, beyond the point of endorsing a white writer’s discredited imaginings of black life. For Baldwin continues to argue in his later years, through his reviews and essays, that the symbiotic relationship between blacks and whites animates American history and culture.

For example, in a 1976 review of Alex Haley’s landmark novel *Roots*, Baldwin begins, “Whites need the moral authority of their former slaves, who are the only people in the world who know anything about them and who may be, indeed, the only people in
the world who really care anything about them” (How One Black Man... BR1). Such is Baldwin’s explanation for how blacks won the right to vote in the United States; not out of some enlightened position on the part of whites, or even through political pressure on the part of blacks; but out of the white, and American, need to maintain its view of white American exceptionalism. Yet black identity also is not without its antecedents. In “If Black English Isn’t A Language, Then Tell Me What Is,” Baldwin postulates blacks owe a piece of their identity at its most visible—“this passion, this skill...this incredible music” (“If Black English…” E19) that is their language—to the presence of whites in their midst.

Language, contestably, reveals the speaker. Language, also far more dubiously, is meant to define the other...There was a moment, in time, and in this place, when my brother or my father or my father or my sister had to convey for me, for example, the danger in which I from the white man standing just behind me, and to convey this with a speed, and in a language, that the white man could not possibly understand, and that, indeed, he cannot understand, until today...This understanding would reveal to him too much about himself, and smash the mirror before which he has frozen for so long. (“If Black English…” E19)

For Baldwin, the struggle over identity cuts both ways; each race has had an undeniable, if sometimes unfortunate, influence on the other. Or, as Baldwin originally puts it: “...it is one of the ironies of black-white relations that, by means of what the white man imagines the black man to be, the black man is enabled to know who the white man is”(Notes 142). For whites, especially during the civil rights era, this statement had to have been frightening and sobering, as it struck down a seemingly impenetrable wall between the two races. For blacks, immersed in the difficult fight for economic and social rights that followed the civil rights era, Baldwin’s reminder that their seemingly liberated selves still owed something to the white world must have been confusing, if not
infuriating. Nevertheless, Baldwin refused to forget this particular legacy of slavery. Perhaps it is a measure of this particular legacy that Baldwin’s ideas went unnoticed until we were unable, thanks to Morrison, to ignore them any longer.

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