

# Introduction

## Performing Citizenship

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*I am convinced that those of us who are earnestly concerned about the problems of civil rights and integration must measure progress not in terms of how much progress we have made recently but how far we have yet to go before we achieve full first class citizenship for the Negro.*

■ Jackie Robinson, letter to Richard Nixon, 1958

*I have witnessed a profound shift in race relations in my lifetime. . . . But as much as I insist that things have gotten better, I am mindful of this truth as well: Better isn't good enough.*

■ Barack Obama, *The Audacity of Hope: Thoughts on Reclaiming the American Dream*, 2006

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A recent survey conducted by the Pew Research Center reports African Americans today believe that “blacks can no longer be thought of as a single race” and that class performance—how middle class or lower class you act—distinguishes one race of African Americans from an-

other.<sup>1</sup> The results of this study may appear at first to be unique, representing twenty-first-century racial attitudes. But they are in fact connected to an old racial longing, a longing, for instance, that the writer James Weldon Johnson puts in the mouth of the middle-class black doctor in *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912). In that make-believe memoir the nameless protagonist reports: “As I drove around with the doctor, he commented rather harshly on the [black lower] class which he saw. He remarked: ‘You see those lazy, loafing good-for-nothing darkies, they’re not worth digging graves for; yet they are the ones who create impressions of the race. . . . But they ought not to represent the race. We are the race, and the race ought to be judged by us, not by them.’”<sup>2</sup>

The racial perspective that Johnson incorporates into his fictional account, the wish for a special distinction to be made between middle- and lower-class blacks, is reflected in the behavioral instruction some parents gave their children in the early to mid-twentieth century. In 1926, while commenting on the family life of “the Negro middle class,” the literary artist Langston Hughes writes that “the mother often says ‘Don’t be like niggers’ when the children are bad.” This admonishment resembles the directive the journalist Clarence Page’s parents delivered as he grew up in the 1950s and ’60s. “Their early admonitions against ‘showing your color’ and the like,” he says, “were just another way to say, Don’t behave like *those* Negroes, those loud, lazy, godless, shiftless, do-rag-wearing good-for-nothings who hang out on the corner and get themselves into trouble.”<sup>3</sup>

Many in Page’s generation were apparently raised similarly. The intellectual Henry Louis Gates Jr. speaks of an instance when he and his father “drove past a packed inner-city basketball court” and his father remarked: “If our people studied calculus like we studied basketball . . . we’d be running MIT.” Although Gates doesn’t specify whether his father is speaking to him as an accomplished adult or an impressionable adolescent, the moral of the object lesson is clear. Gates’s father contrasts a disapproving representation of lower-class blacks with a vision of middle-class success. The cultural critic Shelby Steele also received object lessons from his father, lessons extolling middle-class virtues and financial success, Steele writes, “by means of negative images of lower class blacks.”<sup>4</sup>

Thus the Pew report does more than confirm that some middle-class “blacks see a growing values gap between [the] poor and middle class.” The findings also suggest that the historical longing of some middle-class African Americans to be racially distinguished from the lower class is no longer a yearning but is perceived as fact. Is it progressive, however, for Americans to view race this way—as an unstable marker of ethnic identity, as an alterable performance, influenced less by heritage or faulty concepts of biology or social construction and more by performances of socioeconomic status? Will multiplying racial distinctions on the basis of class alleviate or create social problems? And given that Americans so cherish their long-held myth of a classless society, and have come to treasure the notion of a colorblind one, just how did class become the basis for dividing one race into two?

While sociologists and social economists may have their own responses to these questions, my goal in this introduction, in addition to previewing this collection, is to analyze the performative quality of class and to discuss its increasingly significant effect on African American racial performances. To me, African American class performativity and the corresponding performances of race bear some relationship to African Americans’ status as U.S. citizens. More specifically, if African American identity has been informed by what Jackie Robinson calls the struggle for “full first class citizenship,” then changes in African Americans’ experience of citizenship have something, if not everything, to do with the reason that class is now believed by some to be the factor that determines race.

The goal of the greater volume is to present and interrogate African American middle-class performances in the post-civil rights era. This focus arises from what one sociologist calls the “declining significance of race” and the increasing significance of class in the African American experience.<sup>5</sup> This change is the product of desegregation, which ideally should benefit all African Americans. Yet the increased influence of class on African American identity has benefited the middle class, if not politically and socially, certainly economically, more than it has helped the poor and lower classes. Yet, according to various sociological studies, the middle class must still contend with social and political struggles, including racism.<sup>6</sup> What really, then, are the differences between the “two races” of blacks? And why is understanding those differences relevant to the Pew report?

I will respond to these questions, using citizenship as a trope to examine how racial identification has come to be linked to socioeconomic class performance. I begin with a discussion of E. Franklin Frazier's *Black Bourgeoisie* (1957), the fiftieth anniversary of which inspired this collection.

## I

E. Franklin Frazier's *Black Bourgeoisie: The Rise of a New Middle Class in the United States* (1957) is a short but complex sociological examination of the black middle class. His study is comprised of two parts, which I think of as sections on class performativity (part 1) and class performance (part 2). In the former, Frazier analyzes the ideologies that precede and produce the behaviors of the black middle class that he criticizes in the latter. In "Part 1: The World of Reality," he describes the persistent strategies deployed to subordinate blacks during times of racial and economic progress (e.g., emancipation, blacks elected to government during Reconstruction, and employment opportunities during the spread of industrialization).<sup>7</sup>

"Part 2: The World of Make-Believe" is best known because in it Frazier makes his most controversial assessment: "Having abandoned their social heritage and being rejected by the white world, the black bourgeoisie have an intense feeling of inferiority, constantly seek various forms of recognition and place great value upon status symbols in order to compensate for their inferiority complex" (111). This complex, he says, arises because the black middle class has "adopted the white man's values and patterns of behavior" (124) yet must "constantly [live] under the domination and contempt of the white man" (112).

As a result the black middle class manages its complex with "compensations," which are used to create a world of make-believe, or what performance studies scholars call "make belief"—"enacting the effects they want the receivers of their performances [and perhaps also themselves] to accept 'for real.'" Glamorous representations of fashionable blacks, expensive lifestyles, and appeals to southern white "ancestry, puritanical morals, and especially education" are used to "make belief" that the black middle class is not significantly impacted by racism.<sup>8</sup>

Frazier's assessments can be briefly summarized this way: the black bourgeoisie believe that their middle-class status compensates for the social inequality they experience, and, since they must live with racism, they focus their attention on what they can change (their class status) rather on what they cannot (their race), believing that economic equality with whites is attainable and will contribute to future social equality. Both perspectives are make belief, according to Frazier. "There are only eleven Negro banks," he writes, offering a strong example of the economic *inequality* between the races, "with total assets amounting to less than a single white bank in many small cities" (134). Frazier concludes his analysis by arguing that economic equality does not exist, that it will always be in limbo, unattainable, so long as there is any form of racial inequality, and further that the comparatively few blacks who have been able to attain upper-, upper-middle-class, or middle-class status exemplify neither the diminution nor transcendence of racism.

Frazier is even more controversial when he reports what is for me the central point of his text—that middle-class status for blacks in the United States tends to require a conservative rather than a radical racial perspective. He says that racial conservatism is expressed by an acquiescent, accommodationist, subordinate approach to race relations in exchange for increased economic security. Racial radicalism, Frazier says, is defined by the desire for simultaneous racial and economic equality, and racial radicals flat-out reject trade-offs that ask for acceptance or negotiation of racism in exchange for financial gain.<sup>9</sup>

These views are exemplified in two well-known perspectives on education offered by early twentieth-century leaders: Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. Du Bois. Washington says: "In all things that are purely social we can be as separate as the fingers, yet one as the hand in all things essential to mutual progress." "Separate as the fingers" refers to the segregation of the races, and "mutual progress" refers to economic advancement. For Washington the focus should be on gaining economic equality instead of fighting racial inequality. "If we make money the object of man-training," Du Bois responds, "we shall develop money-makers but not necessarily men." "Man-training" refers to developing the intellectual and emotional stamina needed to confront and challenge racial injustice. While opposing systemic

racism might in the short run reduce economic opportunities for African Americans, cause them personal discomfort (even death), and provoke white backlash, Du Bois believed it would produce true economic and social equality in the long run.<sup>10</sup>

Frazier illustrates the prominent white perspective on the issue, showing how even the most liberal philanthropic organizations supported blacks' economic success but not advancement of their social status as citizens. Frazier says the agencies expected beneficiaries to "conform to their racial policy," and were "hostile to any [black] who showed independence in his thinking in regard to racial and economic problems"; he noted that "a teacher could be placed upon a 'blacklist' by merely refusing to submit to insults by southern whites" (86).

The real problem that Frazier exposes, the economic myth he busts, is that class is not and could never be compensation for inequality. For as long as blacks have lived in the United States, they have lived in a racially hostile society. At the same time there has always been a group of blacks who manage to acquire wealth, increase their class status, and live within the confines of social inequality. What Frazier's black middle class understands and, according to him, unfortunately accepts, is that middle-class success for blacks in the United States means maintaining or, at least not directly challenging, a system of racial inequality.

While this rehearsal is important and should be kept in mind, this collection does not concentrate on Frazier's middle class. The more particular focus is on the middle class that lives within and benefits from the post-civil rights era of desegregation. This group is associated with, and many of its members arise from, that segment of blacks whom Frazier omits from study in *Black Bourgeoisie*. Writing about those who comprise the unobserved group, he says: "They do not have the same social background as the black bourgeoisie in my study who represent a fusion of the peasant and the gentleman" (6).

Frazier describes this other group as "the Negro middle classes" who participated "in sit-ins and in other protest movements against racial segregation" and whose "social background is essentially that of the Negro folk" (6). There is a significant difference, then, between Frazier's bourgeoisie and the middle class highlighted in this collection: the former base their ra-

cial performance on caste, a class status they believe they inherit largely from free middle-class or “mixed-blood” ancestors who had some privilege during antebellum slavery (“house servants”; free northern blacks; mulatto mistresses). This caste can be considered a historical middle class on traditional economic and social terms: as people of some financial means, they promoted and upheld Victorian manners and values during Reconstruction and beyond.

The “new” group’s racial performance is based on an acquired class status that links economic elevation to social justice. While the focus here is on this other group, exaggerating the distinctions between the two, without acknowledging their overlap, would be a mistake. As the historian John A. Bracey writes: “When the sit-in demonstrations started, it was the children of the same middle class that Frazier was attacking that led the demonstrations. . . . I was one of them.”<sup>11</sup>

The important point to be made, however, is that post–Jim Crow America witnesses more blacks from the lower classes, from Frazier’s “folk,” ascending to this new middle class largely by way of opportunities afforded by civil rights legislation.<sup>12</sup> And although some African Americans still boast of their connection to Frazier’s middle class, as Otis Graham does in his *Our Kind of People* (1999), comparatively few middle-class African Americans today place claims on that combination that produced the black bourgeoisie—social heritage, inheritances, and familial connections to white southern aristocracy. Yet even today’s middle class, with its activist roots, as Frazier points out, “has been influenced by the genteel tradition.” In other words, while the civil rights middle class may not have the caste of the bourgeoisie, the two share crucial commonalities in the performance of class. Thus the “new” group is sometimes pejoratively, sometimes encouragingly, called *boojie* (alternatively spelled *boujie*; pronounced boo’zhee).<sup>13</sup>

I have heard *boojie* used as a derogatory term in different ways to describe those who live outside their social or economic means in order to distance themselves from common blacks, for example, a single mother who lives in housing projects but refuses to speak to any of her neighbors; a single schoolteacher who buys a high-priced home in an exclusive neighborhood and wears mink; a custodian who vacations at the Hamptons or on Martha’s Vineyard; the secretary who carries only Gucci purses and belittles those who use “no name” bags.

In addition, *boojie* is also sometimes used to refer to a racial sellout, an opportunistic person who was once lower class but who now counteridentifies with the people of her class origins in exchange for personal gain. In this sense *boojie* applies to those of the post-civil rights generation who equate proper middle-class performance with middle-class whites, believing, as Steele does, that the black middle class “has always defined its class identity by means of positive images gleaned from middle- and upper-class white society and by means of negative images of lower class blacks.”<sup>14</sup>

On the other hand, as a positive term, *boojie* can be used to describe those from the middle class whom Frazier omits from his study, people from the “folk” background who elevate their class station, incorporate some mannerisms and values from middle- and upper-class white society into their black cultural patterns, and who sustain a positive perspective on and relationship with the black majority. What’s clear in the varying usages of *boojie* is the essence of performance. Note how this is illustrated by two authors in this book who also offer definitions of *boojie*.

In the final chapter the performance artist-scholar Bryant Keith Alexander says, “For me a boojie performativity references those perceived repetitive actions performed by black people, plotted within grids of power relationships and social norms that are presumably relegated exclusively to white people; hence, by virtue of their enactment and in the presumed absence of black folk, these performances are critiqued as rejecting or abandoning some organic construction of black character and black people.”

Alexander is here referring to *boojie* as a class epithet that is used to insult blacks with a folk background like, say, Shelby Steele, but who mimic white behaviors, insulate themselves in predominantly white environments, and nigger about the class performance of lower-class blacks. Of course, Alexander’s point is that the epithet can go too far, be unjustly applied to middle-class blacks, who, like himself, may have white lovers and regularly move through white circles but who have not deserted the folk and do not want to be white.

*Boojie* can also be used as a subversive sobriquet to label blacks who mimic the (white) bourgeoisie that Karl Marx critiques as a self-interested piranha class. Marx spoke against a bourgeoisie that controlled the means of industrial production and that relied on labor from the underclass it sys-



tematically exploited. Of course, blacks have never controlled production in the United States, so there is not a direct correlation between Marx's bourgeoisie and the black bourgeoisie. But the metaphor still obtains.

In black Marxist ideology production is not primarily industrial but is intellectual, emotional, and spiritual, as illustrated in relationships between, say, teachers and students, church leaders and congregants, intellectuals and the community. Thus the black bourgeoisie, who lack control of industrial production, should recognize the elements of their own oppressed state (benefited by class, oppressed by race) and use their primarily social and material production, however minimal, to help uplift the black lower class. Then both groups can challenge the dominant (white) bourgeoisie that oppress them both.

In this collection's opening essay, the literary and cultural critic Houston A. Baker Jr. vivifies this black Marxist ideology in his discussion of *boojie*:

The bourgeoisie is a moment of affiliation and transition; it is genuinely about resources, cooperative businesses, relevant group-oriented education for class advancement, and collective ownership. It creates and sustains public spheres that challenge old regimes of power and knowledge. It is a concerted enterprise at betterment, complete with operating manuals and clear marching orders. To be boojie, by contrast, is to ape the dominant bourgeoisie; boojie is black comprador performance for money and awards. Boojie is without commitment or black majority affiliation.

Obviously, *boojie* is a term that generates diverging interpretations. What is certain, however, is that the interpretations derive from the class performance of boojie blacks and their performative relationship to both the white and black bourgeoisie. The authors in this collection have not been asked to tease out these distinctions in terminology, although a few, like Alexander and Baker, do. Instead they attend to and discuss post-civil rights era (boojie) black middle-class performances from artistic, humanities-based perspectives.<sup>15</sup>

These perspectives follow the long tradition of artistic representations of the black middle class and are intended to complement studies that take a

historical or sociological approach, like Frazier's.<sup>16</sup> In fact, contained herein are essays (intellectual and academic) as well as creative works (fiction, poetry, and plays) that not only depict the progress made by post-civil rights-era blacks, like Barack Obama, the first black president of the United States, but that also illustrate how far this group still has to go.

Frazier's *Black Bourgeoisie* provides the foundation for this undertaking, but this book, unlike James E. Teele's edited collection, *E. Franklin Frazier and Black Bourgeoisie* (2002), is not about the man or his monograph. Instead another honor is paid—that of acknowledging Frazier's influence on and significance to the ideas presented herein.

## II

In the voice-over for director William Greaves's 1968 documentary *Still a Brother: Inside the Black Middle Class*, the late actor Ossie Davis asks: "Does income alone determine what is understood by the term *middle class*?" The film then cuts to the sociologist St. Clair Drake, who responds: "In the American sense class implies a style of life." To explain he shares an anecdote about two black men earning the same middle-income wage while working for the same company in the same position.

On payday the first man stops at a bar to drink alcohol before heading home. When he reaches his house, his wife takes longer than expected to open the door. They fight publicly, and the neighbors observe the man beating his spouse. In contrast, the second man avoids the bar on his way home. His wife also takes some time to open the door. But their fight starts inside, and before he beats his wife, he pulls down the shades. Later they sit to plan their family finances. Drake explains the men's class difference: "They both might have the same amount of money, but the way in which they behave, the aspirations they have for themselves and their children differ. And therefore money alone, as we would see it, doesn't make one middle class."<sup>17</sup>

Later in the documentary Dr. Nathan Wright, an Episcopal minister who once organized the Newark Black Power Conference, expresses skepticism that any black person of any income level can accurately be described as middle class. In fact, he says, "there aren't any middle-class black people

but *middle-class-oriented* black people” (emphasis added), a sentiment also expressed by other interviewees. Drake and Wright differently complicate the notion of middle-class identity. For Drake, although income is important, performance, or, as he says, “style,” and the concealment of negative behavior, matter more in understanding the term *middle class*. For Wright race and racism impede the full development and acquisition of middle-class identity for blacks. These two perspectives, though dated, offer a context for why the term *middle class*, when used in association with African Americans in the twenty-first century, gestures toward performance and defies neat definition.

The term *middle class* is variously applied to blacks who stand anywhere between rich and almost poor. It’s a wide-ranging descriptor, since many who are wealthy, like President Obama and First Lady Michelle Robinson Obama, are often identified among the black (upper) middle class. On the other end, those with incomes closer to lower class but who exhibit the manners and ideologies associated with the middle class, are included, even if marginally, in the group.<sup>18</sup>

Instead of contesting and seeking to narrow this use of *middle class* for this book, I accept it. In fact, an expansive, if somewhat economically imprecise, understanding of *middle class* is appropriate in this context, particularly in light of E. Franklin Frazier’s own use of the term. In his 1949 textbook *The Negro in the United States*, he writes: “The middle class consists of professional and technical workers, clerical workers and sales people, skilled workers and craftsmen, and proprietors of small businesses, and public employees.”<sup>19</sup>

In *Black Bourgeoisie* he includes teachers, intellectuals, pastors, and even gamblers. Placing such a range of occupations and individuals under the rubric of middle class may make some sociologists and economists cringe, even though they too differ on who and what factors constitute the middle class and the importance of things like, say, marriage, occupation, neighborhood, and income in relation to socioeconomic status. Still, Frazier has not escaped criticism for his broad classification. Even his sympathetic biographer Anthony M. Platt, for instance, calls Frazier’s inclusive list “Frazier’s muddled middle class.”<sup>20</sup>

Yet Frazier was deliberate in his usage, noting in his textbook: “The term ‘middle class’ as used here refers to the class having an intermediate

status between the upper and lower classes in the Negro community. Only a relatively small upper layer of this class is ‘middle class’ in the general American meaning of the term. Moreover, ‘middle class’ as used here is essentially a social class though occupation and income play some part in its place in the class structure of the Negro community” (301). Thus Frazier’s middle class, and the term as deployed in this book, is not based on pure social-scientific data, nor does it describe a tightly identified economic or sociological category. Rather the term as used here refers mostly to its performative function.

Bracey explains that reading Frazier prompted him to enact a different performance of middle-class identity. He writes, “What I learned most from Frazier was not to be like the people in *Black Bourgeoisie*. If that’s what we were doing with our lives, we should stop and think about it. And there was an impulse that came out of *Black Bourgeoisie* that made a whole generation of young people in the black middle class say that whatever we want to be, we don’t want to be that.”<sup>21</sup> The performative essence of the term *middle class* as used by me and by Frazier, I think, is based on how middle-class blacks use any power and influence that their status affords them in relation to the black underclass majority. This includes both social and economic power, power that, say, business people, teachers, clergy, politicians, and police officers wield.

My use of the term *performance* refers specifically to black middle-class people’s everyday self-presentations and artistic representations of them. I connect my use of the term *performance*, as presentation and representation, to Richard Schechner’s explanation of what constitutes a performance. “One cannot determine what ‘is’ a performance,” Schechner says, “without referring to specific cultural circumstances.” For Schechner, a theater artist and director, “the roles of everyday life are performances,” just as plays, rituals, dances, paintings, and poetry are performances “because convention, context, usage, and tradition say so.”<sup>22</sup> Analyzing the roles that middle-class African Americans play in everyday American life reveals that many still desire what Jackie Robinson calls “full first class citizenship.” This citizenship status exceeds the legal definition of citizenship and is based on both economic and social equality. Therefore what I mean by the combined term

*black middle-class performances* is the desire for “full first class citizenship” as expressed in the roles middle-class blacks play in everyday life and how that desire and its attendant roles are represented in art.

A problem I observe, however, one of the several that motivate this collection, is that economic equality is often publicly discussed at the expense of social equality. That is to say, discussions of class that separate blacks into different economic categories today are considered more important than considerations of race and racism—which, the Pew report notwithstanding, still join all blacks together. It’s almost as if, as twin concerns, they cannot penetrate the same ear.<sup>23</sup> And even when they are presented together, audiences are bewildered. At least that’s the reaction that Nicholas Kristof observes whites had to Barack Obama’s national address titled “A More Perfect Union,” also dubbed the “race speech.”<sup>24</sup>

In his column for the *New York Times*, Kristof writes: “The Obama campaign has led many white Americans to listen in for the first time to some of the black conversation—and they are thunderstruck.”<sup>25</sup> Although Obama’s speech is a response to questions about his association with Jeremiah Wright, the Chicago minister whom some believe preaches antipatriotic, antiwhite sermons, Obama does not focus exclusively on race but also makes class central in his presentation. The economy, of course, was a primary topic of his campaign, and he says his constituency is the American middle class. Linking race to class is also appropriate in light of what he argues before and after the race speech—that attending to class difference will help secure a better economic future for the majority of Americans, not just the filthy rich. If the election results can be said to corroborate anything about this topic, it’s that most Americans are interested in and hear his views on class.

But when Obama articulates the relationship of race to class, people seem unable to reconcile one with the other, which perhaps explains why whites can hear the class and economic issues but are left confused by the racial ones. And although blacks do not appear to be dumbfounded by topics of race, some believe that a focus on class makes race irrelevant. These reactions, whether from naive whites or hopeful blacks, fail to account for a key point about race and middle-class status that Obama emphasizes in his

address: “That even for those blacks who did make it, questions of race and racism continue to define their worldview in fundamental ways.”

The disparities that produce a racialized worldview, he notes, “can be directly traced to inequalities passed on from an earlier generation that suffered under the brutal legacy of slavery and Jim Crow.” He believes this past is common knowledge: “We do not need to recite here the history of racial injustice in this country,” he says. But given the public’s “thunderstruck” response, a rehearsal of that history is important, particularly a rehearsal that shows how the social inequality that some middle-class blacks still protest always has been and already is about class.

Undeniably, race has always been connected to both the citizenship and socioeconomic status of blacks. The Supreme Court’s decision in *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896), which legalized segregation, illustrates just how connected they remain in our modern era. Justice John Harlan, offering the only dissent, wrote that segregation “interferes with the personal freedom of citizens.”<sup>26</sup> It was evident to him that the legislation violated the Fourteenth Amendment rights of African Americans: “No state shall make or enforce any law which shall abridge the privileges or immunities of citizens.”

With an illustrative, if xenophobic, example, Harlan argues that it is contradictory to allow Chinese people who could not at the time qualify for U.S. citizenship to enjoy the very rights and protections of the law denied to black American citizens. “There is a race so different from our own that we do not permit those belonging to it to become citizens of the United States,” he writes. “But by the statute in question, a Chinaman can ride in the same passenger coach with white citizens of the United States, while citizens of the black race . . . are yet to be declared criminals” if they do so.<sup>27</sup>

Harlan’s argument about black people’s experience of citizenship is clear, but the relationship of Jim Crow–citizenship to class is not detailed. This is not because it was not addressed in the case. In fact, Homer Plessy’s attorney, Albion Tourgee, made an argument against segregation on the basis that it denied Plessy financial opportunities. Because Plessy was more white than black—seven-eighths white and one-eighth African (in the then-quantifying terms of race biology)—Tourgee argued: “How much would it be *worth* to a young man entering upon the practice of law to be regarded

as a *white* man rather than a colored one? Six-sevenths of the population are white. Nineteen-twentieths of the property of the country is owned by white people. . . . Under these conditions, is it possible to conclude that the *reputation of being white* is not property? Indeed, is it not the most valuable sort of property, being the master-key that unlocks the golden door of opportunity?" (emphasis in original).<sup>28</sup>

Toureee's argument appears at first to be a "defense of the nearly white man, not the black," but as the literary historian Brook Thomas points out, "if [the argument] had been successful, it would have played havoc with all laws designed to make [racial] distinctions" (30). The Court, however, ignored this class argument and reached a decision that made race the only issue. Thus one way to express the lasting effect of segregation on the combined experience of race, class, and citizenship is to say that separate but equal laws concretized the belief that in the United States your race determines your class. This is why, regardless of their actual economic level, middle-class African Americans could be treated as lower class.

The writer Charles Chesnutt explores the relationship of class to the Court's ruling in his novel *The Marrow of Tradition*, first published in 1901. When a train conductor asks Chesnutt's middle-class black protagonist, Dr. William Miller, to move to the second-class car, Miller says: "I have paid my fare on the sleeping-car, where the separate-car law does not apply." While he is riding through the North, Miller sits in the first-class car that his position afforded. While he is traveling through the South, his class is ignored. Miller moves to the "Colored Only" section and finds deplorable conditions and a white man smoking. He responds: "I have paid first-class fare, and I object to that man's smoking in here."<sup>29</sup> Miller believes an appeal to his class capital should at least entitle him to ride in a smoke-free car designated for blacks. But the white man and his smoke stay. And race, or rather race prejudice, forestalls class privilege.

In *Marrow* Chesnutt portrays the class problem inherent in racial segregation, a problem that can be described this way: the fantasy that blacks and whites should be separated because their races are incompatible and the falsehood that blacks are inferior because they are not white became class-based realities under law. Put another way, the law forced blacks to perform

their race as a lower-class identity in relation to whites. Under Jim Crow, whites, regardless of their actual status, received middle-class privileges, and middle-class blacks were uniformly denied them.

Desegregation may have eliminated separate but equal laws, but it has not eradicated the fantasy wherein race marks class. Thus many contemporary middle-class African Americans experience a psychological dilemma: their class status is linked to a white racial identity, and their racial identity is linked to a lower-class status. To reconcile this predicament many attempt unsuccessfully to identify with only one, the white racial world, or the other, the black class world, since to repeat the familiar expression, they are caught between two worlds. Or, like the elite black bourgeoisie, the Martha's Vineyard brand, where one anonymous resident called Michelle Obama "a ghetto-girl," they try to insulate themselves from both.<sup>30</sup> I firmly believe, and argue here, that this history prompts the people whom the Pew Research Center interviewed to mistakenly believe that desegregation undid the Jim Crow experience, where your race determined your class, and ushered in an era where your class status determines your race. On this basis some believe that if different groups of blacks perform class differently, "blacks can longer be thought of as a single race."<sup>31</sup>

To gloss the point, in "Race as Class" (2005), the sociologist Herbert J. Gans observes that even today, in the case of African Americans, "race is used both as a marker of class and . . . an enforcer of class position."<sup>32</sup> Yet there is a compromise. African Americans must prove their worth as beneficiaries of desegregation; either they must perform in socially acceptable ways, according to rules of decorum that are not defined by them or based on their cultural patterns, or they must remain segregated. Said differently, during Jim Crow middle-class African Americans were prevented from "acting white," from sitting where they could afford on the train; post-Jim Crow they are required to "act white," particularly in white-collar professions.

In this sense "acting white" simply means middle-class blacks must be cautious about talking too loudly and animatedly, wearing colorful clothes, letting their hair go natural, speaking black English, rolling their eyes, and a host of other benign behaviors that are deemed problematic only because they are associated with being black and thus lower class. If there really is



no such thing as acting a race, as many argue, why are so many of the traits and behaviors associated with black people perceived as so wrong?

Yet even when middle-class African Americans today present and sustain the “proper” racial performance, they still cannot yet be considered nonblack or be considered “new people,” as Chesnutt calls those in *House Behind the Cedars* (1900) who are middle class and more white than black. Therefore some have made their own categories: many middle-class African Americans who want to retain the category black for themselves characterize lower-class African Americans as not really black but niggers. Though they are not named as such in the findings, these are really the two class-based races discussed in the Pew report. But to view race this way is boorish, crude, and historically ignorant. This view shares a bed with America’s legacy of racism, which actually created the very circumstances that middle-class blacks wish to avoid by counteridentifying with lower-class blacks.<sup>33</sup>

Post-Jim Crow middle-class blacks counteridentify with the lower class for the same reason that blacks sometimes passed as dark-skinned noncitizens during segregation—in order to avoid racism and experience privileges denied them as citizens. The writer Zora Neale Hurston writes of passing as an “Asiatic person of royal blood” at the prompting of her employer, the novelist Fannie Hurst, in order to enter the apparently segregated Astor Hotel in New York. And although the educator Booker T. Washington does not write of passing himself, he does indicate that passing as an Indian or Moroccan would facilitate better experiences for dark-skinned African Americans. He writes about an instance when an Indian student was greeted in a “dining saloon,” where Washington was denied entry. “The man in charge politely informed me that the Indian could be served, but I could not. I never could understand how he knew just where to draw the colour line, since the Indian and I were of the same complexion.” Another example calls more attention to the importance of passing through performance, in this case using language to perform and downplay black racial identity. Washington reports that in one town “so much excitement and indignation were being expressed that it seemed likely for a time that there would be a lynching. The occasion of the trouble was a dark-skinned man had stopped at a local hotel. Investigation, however, developed the fact that this individual was a citizen

of Morocco, and that while travelling in this country he spoke the English language. As soon as it was learned he was not an American Negro, all the signs of indignation disappeared.” And “the man . . . found it prudent after that not to speak English.”<sup>54</sup>

The literary critic Joseph T. Skerrett Jr. argues that James Weldon Johnson writes so well about racial passing in *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* because Johnson was drawing from his own experience. Regarding Johnson, Skerrett reports: “On several occasions, recorded in *Along This Way* [Johnson’s real autobiography], his ability with idiomatic Spanish allowed him to ‘pass’ for some other kind of brown-skinned man than an American Negro. In these situations his goal was to avoid the potential unpleasantness inherent in ‘a suddenly presented situation that involved “race.”’ Johnson was personally familiar, then, both with the concept of impersonation and the experience of ‘passing’—if not for white, then at least for some other kind of non-Negro.”<sup>55</sup>

The point of these historical anecdotes is to show that the United States has always been hostile toward African American identity. And in order to benefit from the rights guaranteed them as citizens and to be treated fairly, some dark-skinned African Americans passed, ironically, as dark-skinned *non*citizens. The dark-skinned African Americans who passed as individuals of another dark-skinned race, of course, also had to disassociate themselves from other American blacks. Class passing or, rather, class performance in the twenty-first century has replaced the racial passing of the twentieth century. Both types of passing point to a societal problem, one that unjustly stigmatizes black identity. This stigma prompts blacks either to seek ways to avoid it by claiming another identity (passing) or try to disassociate from the stigma (creating a race within a race).

Given this overview of social history, it is really a wonder to me that so many misunderstand the quest to connect class equality to social equality. Too many mis-hear the articulation as just another appeal for racial justice. And that appeal is now eagerly dismissed by some blacks and many whites on the ground that blacks have achieved a good deal of social equality in the forty or so years since the end of the civil rights period.

Yet this very attitude illustrates the current relevance of Jackie Robinson’s assessment that we “must measure progress not in terms of how much

progress we have made recently but how far we have yet to go.” Measuring future travel hinges on understanding the (immediate) past, understanding how American racial history produces contemporary performances of class and how the very governing structure of our society at one end creates a legal frame that leads us to privilege race over class and at the other to judge a person’s class by his race.

I emphasize this point about class for a reason different from the one the cultural critic Walter Benn Michaels provides in his book *The Trouble with Diversity* (2006). According to Michaels, Americans enjoy believing “that the differences that divide us” are differences of race rather than differences of class, because recognizing racial difference “present[s] a solution: appreciating our diversity.” He says “appreciating our diversity” is fine: African Americans, Asians, queers, Latinos are all good people. But accepting this diversity does little to address America’s class trouble. He argues that Americans should recognize that the fundamental problems of the nation exist, not between races and genders but “between those of us who have money and those who don’t.”<sup>56</sup>

The problem with Michaels’s view, of course, is that he merely reverses the problem of privileging race over class by privileging class and ignoring the problems that race, gender, and sexual identity pose to those seeking to acquire or sustain a middle-class status. Unlike Michaels, I support analyses that place racial identity and class on the same plane, that link them. I believe that race determines and most certainly modifies the experience of class. Note the following example concerning Condoleezza Rice.

The now-famous tidbit is offered by Coit Blacker, a Stanford professor who identifies himself as one of the former secretary of state’s closest friends. He recalls going into a jewelry shop with Rice; Rice asks to see earrings. The clerk shows her costume jewelry. Rice asks to see something nicer, prompting the clerk to whisper some sass under her breath. “Let’s get one thing straight,” Coit recalls Rice as saying. “You are behind the counter because you have to work for minimum wage. I’m on this side asking to see the good jewelry because I make considerably more.” Rice gets what she wants: a manager quickly brings her the gems.<sup>57</sup>

Rice’s response is evidently an effort to get the benefits she deserves based on her upper-class status (“I make considerably more”). Her black

identity, however, complicates the case. After all, it's hard to accept that a clerk in a fine jewelry store is unaccustomed to properly dealing with upper-middle-class people. Thus the attention Rice calls to her class is also about her race. "I may be black," the subtext of her words suggest, "but I am also upper middle class."

Although Rice's experience ends differently than Dr. Miller's in Chesnut's *Marrow*, in terms of class performance the similarity matters. The difference, of course, is that in Jim Crow America Dr. Miller's class does not register. In post-civil rights America, Rice's class does. That's why she gets her jewels. Yet even with the outcome, race is a significant factor, since working-class clerks in fine jewelry stores do not customarily mistreat their clients on the basis of their upper-middle-class status. That would be not only absurd but bad for business. But clerks have been known to mistreat black people. It's not hard to believe, of course, that working-class clerks might mistreat white working-class people, might show them fake gems, not the good stuff, presuming what they can and cannot buy. That presumption would be an expression of classism, which is also wrong. But it is hard to accept that Rice was read as poor on a basis other than her race. The similarity, then, between Rice and Dr. Miller—what is, of course, the issue—is that they had to perform—verbally display and call attention to—their class in order to diminish their race.

How performing race differs for middle-class blacks than for, say, middle-class whites can be understood from what Schechner explains as the difference between performing that is "playing a role" in everyday life and someone "being herself." "To 'be myself' is to behave in a relaxed and unguarded manner. To 'perform myself' means to take on the appearance (clothes, demeanor, etc.), voice, and actions" of the role or persona. Both Rice and Chesnut's Dr. Miller exemplify the primary problem of racial performance for middle-class blacks: they must "perform themselves" (perform their class) in situations where they should be able to "be themselves." In other words, they must take on what I theorize in *Your Average Nigga* (2007) as the burden of racial performance, where middle-class black people are called upon in everyday social situations to be hyperconscious of their behaviors and speech and must guard how they are perceived, by constantly altering their social performance, in situations where they should be able to be "relaxed and unguarded."<sup>38</sup>

In view of the foregoing, it is clear why Jackie Robinson uses not one but two modifiers to emphasize that he wants all black people to experience citizenship just like any other person. Certainly, some might say, “But he and all blacks already have citizenship. If he asks for full citizenship, isn’t he asking for something that no one has, not even white people?” If the question refers to blacks as legal citizens, the answer is yes. Robinson, Chesnutt’s Dr. Miller, former secretary of state Rice, President Obama, and the middle-class blacks Obama says have “made it” are all citizens. The problem is lingering unevenness, disparity, inequality in the experience of their citizenship—particularly in the class experience, which is always inflected, and sometimes mitigated, by race. Thus Robinson’s “full first class citizenship” is a rhetorical hyperperformance that shines the spotlight on the regular citizenship that the law says African Americans have but that an analysis of their performance of everyday life reveals they still do not.

This point, in turn, further amplifies my earlier description of the term *performance* as presentation and representation. Representation is the depiction of actions, ideas, laws, and behaviors in order to draw attention to them for some kind of aesthetic and/or rhetorical consumption, like appreciation, analysis, or discussion. Such representations, as some of my examples show, take place in literature, like Chesnutt’s *Marrow of Tradition*; in film; in legal documents, like Justice Harlan’s dissent; on stage; in correspondences, like Robinson’s letter to Nixon; and so on. Presentation is both the unscripted and deliberate behavior of everyday life, like Rice’s encounter with the clerk and Obama’s act of delivering his “race speech.”

The contributors to this book use representation and presentation as they specifically perform what Schechner calls “explaining showing doing.” That is, they are engaged in “a reflexive effort to comprehend the world of performance,” or representation, “and the world as performance,” or the presentation of everyday life framed as performance. Although Schechner says “this comprehension is usually the work of critics and scholars,” which the writers here are, I think it is also the work of any person (readers of this book, for instance) who seeks to comprehend the interrelationship of their everyday performances and artistic representations.<sup>59</sup> On this specific basis the writers herein explore black middle-class performances.



The order of appearance for the contributions to this book makes no distinctions between the creative works and academic essays. The writings—a play, essays, poetry, and fiction—are arranged to illustrate what the performance scholar Dwight Conquergood describes as a “radical intervention”—“by embracing both written scholarship and creative work, papers and performances. . . . Performance studies brings this rare hybridity into the academy.”<sup>40</sup> The aim here, though, is to go a bit further than Conquergood’s charge and also present this hybridity to the public, addressing educated laypeople and public discourses, not only academic ones.

If, as Conquergood asserts, academic discussions can benefit from artistic performances that occur with greater reception and frequency in public, then the public should likewise be able to benefit from academic wisdom. The goal here is to represent a true exchange of values between the public and the academy, instead of reifying artificial boundaries that keep them apart. I believe Frazier himself would value this approach. In his essay “The Failure of the Negro Intellectual” (1962), he writes: “It may turn out in the distant future Negroes will disappear physically from American society. If this is our fate, let us disappear with dignity and let us leave a worthwhile memorial—in science, in art, in literature, in sculpture, in music—of our having been here.”<sup>41</sup> Artistic representation and academic analyses were important to Frazier, and that importance undergirds this collection.

The contributions are arranged into four sections, each of which is preceded by an artistic interpretation by Jean Berry, who is also our cover artist. Berry uses deceptively simple figures of unclothed, ambiguously gendered, faceless black bodies to depict each section’s main thrust: Performing Responsibility, Performing Womanhood, Performing Media, and Performing Sexuality. *Performing* is shorthand for presentation and representation, since the two terms are interconnected, one sliding into the other in practice. Their interconnectedness is better explained by the performance scholar Erin Striff, who writes that performing can be understood as “how we represent ourselves and repeat those representations within everyday life.”<sup>42</sup> The terms following *performing* in the section headings (i.e., *womanhood*, *sexual-*

ity, etc.) refer to topics found in Frazier's *Black Bourgeoisie* and remain important to understanding black middle-class performativity and performance. Let me therefore contextualize descriptions of the contributions with a brief summary of the contemporary discourse surrounding the topics.

### **Section 1: Performing Responsibility**

In *Black Bourgeoisie* Frazier is critical of black leaders for camouflaging their efforts to generally assimilate blacks under the rhetorical rubric of integration. He argues that by promoting assimilation, black leaders are supporting the annihilation of black culture, identity, and spirituality. Further, leadership is not only about occupying a political office, like the presidency. It is about one's responsibility to family, to community, to the race. One carries out this responsibility in various roles, as the one who has "made it" in an otherwise lower-class family, as a major figure in an academic field, as an administrator at a university, or as someone who runs a community institution designed to promote racial and economic success for blacks. The writings in this section feature leaders who fit in one or more of these categories, and they all interrogate the notion of responsibility.

In the first piece, "Bourgeois Fugue: Notes on the Life of the Negro Intellectual," Houston A. Baker Jr. offers a personal and cultural analysis of the role of black intellectuals in the struggle of the black masses. He critiques the self-interest of some leaders, arguing that personal self-reflection can help bring about necessary systemic and ideological change. He offers his analysis through an honest reflection about his life and class status as well as his intellectual transformation.

Venise Berry's short fiction, "Pockets of Sanity," explores the main character's anguished perspective on the expanding gulf between the middle and lower classes. The female protagonist struggles to reconcile her middle-class status with her family's lower-class ways. She is presented with questions about what her personal role and responsibilities are in relation to those she loves as family but loathes as performers of class.

In his chapter "My Momma, Obama, and Me: Black Leadership/Black Legitimacy," Dwight McBride adds layers of complication to the traditional story of how an African American leader should perform. In an insightful ex-

amination driven by personal experience, he writes about the performance of black political leadership in relationship to intellectual and academic leadership. He folds in the question of “alternative” sexual and gender identities to open the closet door on what is still, unfortunately, a controversial question: Can gays, lesbians, the transgendered, and queer blacks or blacks with white partners be good, effective black leaders?

In “Selling Dr. King’s Dream: Blackness and Tourism in Atlanta,” Sara F. Mason critiques the heritage tourism of Atlanta’s tourist industry. She writes that as a tourist destination, Atlanta relies upon a dualistic construction of Atlanta as the place where history happened (the “Old South”) and a place beyond history (the “New South”) in order to promote a city of renewal, racial harmony, and progress. She argues that, in the process, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s dream of political and economic parity is rearticulated in terms of consumption rather than praxis and that King’s memorial is co-opted so that Atlanta can generate more economic capital, sometimes at the expense of social equality.

This section ends with the father of the black arts movement, the Poet Laureate of New Jersey, playwright, and activist Amiri Baraka. His poem “The Drug of White Supremacy” is controversial on the topics of race and class. His poem meditates on problematic middle-class ideologies that find their way into policies and behaviors that affect the black masses. He is not shy about calling out popular politicians, journalists, and activists who, although black themselves, engage performances that perhaps do more harm than good to the black majority. On this note of shared racial affiliation but displaying different class ideologies, he summarizes:

*Like my man, Mean William, used to say  
“Skin is Thin, But Class  
Will kick yo’ ass.”*

## **Section 2: Performing Womanhood**

Without a doubt, whatever strides African Americans have made in terms of class and citizenship have been largely the result of the efforts of black women and the roles they have played in social and economic struggles.



Black women have arguably done as much for the race as black men, if not more. To rephrase the historian Paula Giddings (à la Anna Julia Cooper), when or where black women enter, so enters the entire race.

Nazera Sadiq Wright's "Black Girls and Representative Citizenship" opens this section with a substantial historical interpretation of early twentieth-century conduct books written by middle-class blacks to train middle-class black girls to perform proper racial behavior. The aim of the proper behavior was to elevate the race. For Wright black girls became representative citizens of the black race. Wright's essay specifically examines the "language, iconography, and coded messages of decorum that surrounded the black girl figure as a citizenship model" in one popular instructional manual titled *Floyd's Flowers, or Duty and Beauty for Colored Children*. *Floyd's Flowers* is an important text to study, because as Wright points out, it was "part of a collection of prescriptive texts that instructed African Americans on how to act in a manner that would protect against Jim Crow laws and prevent violence by whites."

In "Black Bourgeois Women's Narratives in the Post-Reagan, 'Post-Civil Rights,' 'Postfeminist' Era," Claire Oberon Garcia examines how black women attempt to enter into a new post-civil rights era with hopes of social advancement. Garcia contrasts Ntozake Shange's novel and musical *Betsey Brown* with Andrea Lee's *Sarah Phillips* and argues that while both pay a kind of homage to historical constructions of class aspirations and social uplift, neither author accepts the limitations of those constructions.

Eileen Cherry-Chandler takes readers "down home" in her tale, "Rosalind." In this performance poem readers encounter the personal sexual struggle of a tough teenage girl, Rosalind, whose story is told by the girl she antagonizes. The two meet unexpectedly in a beauty salon, where the narrator reveals that Rosalind is 'hood, from the streets, where the narrator sometimes hangs out: "I was not raised for all the wild stuff that I do." The subtle and implicit notions of middle-class behaviors and ideologies as they conflict with working-class performances are uncovered in a story about sex, youth, and intraracial strife.

Following Cherry-Chandler is Lisa B. Thompson's play *Single Black Female*. Unlike Cherry-Chandler, who uses the black female grooming ritual of hair straightening to drive her coming-of-age narrative of class and gender,

Thompson reminds us that no matter the texture of the hair or the grooming technique—or the quality of the clothes, for that matter—black women continue to be the female doppelgangers of Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*. They struggle to be seen and heard among whites as well as other blacks. As Thompson writes in her remarks that precede the script, “throughout the [play] the duo humorously express the ambivalence, hope, and desires of many single middle-class African American women in the post-civil rights era.”

### Section 3: Performing Media

The essays here address a variety of media and media-related issues raised by Frazier. He exposes middle-class blacks who engage in conspicuous consumption, overspending in order to present a showy display of their means of life, and placing representations of their means in black magazines, like *Jet*, to convince themselves and the public of their status. He further examines the role of the black media, for example, newspapers, magazines, and journals, in creating make believe, a world that paints a false picture of insulation from white contempt.

The first two pieces in this section put two post-civil rights black musical traditions into conversation. Greg Tate’s essay, “Of Afropunks and Other Anarchic Signifiers of Contrary Negritude,” is a simultaneous call to self-reflection and a description of contemporary black musicians. Instead of focusing on a black musical past, he positions himself in the present by investigating “alternative music” by such groups as Living Colour. These musicians are meant to represent a creativity that inspires us to think outside the box, that eschews efforts to “authentically” represent white or black middle-class values.

Damion Waymer discusses the implications of the commodification of rap and hip-hop music in “Hip-hop and Capitalist Interests.” He identifies the negative ramifications of rap music and argues that the ghetto-fabulous features of the genre represent the very conspicuous consumption that Frazier critiques. What Waymer finds interesting is that middle-class blacks criticize the flaunting of ghetto-fabulous styles but do not follow the advice against conspicuous consumption themselves. He further cautions both un-

der- and middle-class blacks against falling prey to materialism, whatever its origin.

In “Middle-Class Ideology in African American Postwar Comic Strips,” Angela M. Nelson takes a historical approach to the discussion of two strips that appeared in two black newspapers. According to Nelson, black comic strips both reflect and reject efforts to create a world of make-believe. “What is important to know about them,” she writes, “is that comic strips are a direct reflection of the editors and staff of the newspapers in which they appeared.” Knowing this, she says, “helps us to understand the extent to which middle-class ideologies helped shape images and representations of African Americans.”

The next essay in this section, “*Put Some Skirts on the Cards! Black Women’s Visual Performances in the Art of Annie Lee*,” Deborah Elizabeth Whaley examines the art of Annie Lee, whom Whaley argues “envisages the variety of black female identities as articulated and practiced in everyday life.” Whaley ruminates on how Lee’s aesthetic approach is itself a visual performance of class, race, and gender identities, as well of sexual and national constructs. Overall, Whaley uses Lee’s art to draw critical attention to “the transformative power of oppositional art by and for African American women.”

Harilaos Stecopoulos’s essay, “Melodrama of the Movement: Lorraine Hansberry’s *A Raisin in the Sun*,” argues that Hansberry’s play is not, contrary to some popular reviews, an “endorsement of dominant [white] middle-class values.” Stecopoulos insists that the play instead contends with the traditional middle-class values that privilege racial and class assimilation over enlightenment.

#### **Section 4: Performing Sexuality**

The chapters in this last and arguably most important section take up class and sexuality. As the sociologist Patricia Hill Collins writes in *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism* (2005), “Failing to address questions of gender and sexuality will compromise antiracist African American politics in the post-civil rights era.” E. Franklin Frazier also attended, albeit somewhat problematically, to issues of gender in *Black Bour-*

*geoisie*. Frazier argues that because black men “are not allowed to play the ‘masculine role’ as defined by American culture,” they “resemble women who use their ‘personalities’ to compensate for their inferior status in relation to [white] men.”<sup>45</sup> He further reports that because many women may be married to men who neglect them for work, white women, and other activities, the women are sexually frustrated and engage in nonsexual behaviors to distract themselves from the “sexual orgasm” they desire. Certain ideas and images of the effeminized black middle-class male and the sexually truncated black female still abound in our public culture and media. And many issues surrounding sex and gender remain taboo in many African American communities and churches.

In this section’s opening essay, “The Black Church and the Blues Body,” Kelly Brown Douglas is concerned that “‘there’s something going all wrong’ in the black church.” The essence of the problem, she argues, can be found in the church’s “attitudes toward issues of sexuality.” Douglas examines these issues by focusing her discussion on what she calls “the blues bodies,” which are “nonbourgeois bodies.” Her interesting class-based analysis of blues music, the blues body, and lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender issues reveals just how central sex and sexuality are to the performance of class within the black church.

Candice M. Jenkins’s essay, “A Kind of End to Blackness: Reginald McKnight’s *He Sleeps* and the Body Politics of Race and Class,” focuses on Bertrand Milworth, the protagonist of McKnight’s novel. Bertrand Milworth is associated with academe. As an anthropologist, he goes to Dakar, Senegal, to conduct fieldwork and is haunted there by his sexuality: his relationship with white women and his never-satisfied desire to have sex with black women. Jenkins argues that because Bertrand’s self-reflective interrogation takes place in Africa, it “allows the novel to comment on, specifically, African American middle-class identity, and that identity’s relationship to larger narratives of the black body.”

Lisa B. Thompson posits in “Black Ladies and Black Magic Women” that the films she analyzes reject restrictive representations of black womanhood in order to “escape the clichéd depictions of sexually frustrated, but highly professional, black middle-class women.” Her discussion of female gender and sexual performances both illustrates the agency black women

have over their bodies and their struggles to maintain such control. Her analysis complicates pedestrian and stereotypical fantasies of black women as either oversexed or sexually bereft.

Bryant Keith Alexander offers a powerful and thoughtful closing to this entire project with his essay, “‘Boojie!’: A Question of Authenticity.” He addresses “issues of gender and sexuality, performances of professionalism, and racial authenticity.” He discusses his romantic partnership with a white male, how his role as a professor and dean in the “white ivory tower” affects others’ perceptions of his racial performance, and how the term *boojie* entraps as much as it empowers the possibilities for transgressive performances.

## IV

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*There exists today a monumental divide between black intellectuals and the black majority.*

- Houston A. Baker Jr., *Betrayal: How Black Intellectuals Have Abandoned the Ideals of the Civil Rights Era*

*Before the black creative intellectual can “heal” her people she must consider to what extent she must “heal” herself.*

- Hortense Spillers, “*The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual: A Post-Date*”
- 

Every book has a set of personal politics, even an edited collection. So I want to expose mine, indeed, where my politics and those of Bridget Tsemo intersect. In 1994 the historian Hortense Spillers poignantly critiqued black intellectuals for their failure to respectfully observe and take adequate note of the silver anniversary of Harold Cruse’s *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual* (1967). The anniversary of his still-influential analysis “passed without fanfare or remark,” Spillers says. “The occasion of the lapse,” she continues, resulted in no small part from black intellectuals’ continued confusion about their roles in relationship to the larger black community.<sup>44</sup>

Although Bridget and I were undergraduates at the time of Spillers’s

writing, and therefore not the direct subjects of her criticism, we nonetheless feel convicted by her description of “the black, upwardly mobile, well-educated subject [who] has not only fled the neighborhood (in some cases the old neighborhood isn’t even there anymore!) but, just as importantly, has been *dispersed* across the social terrain to unwonted sites of work and calling” (433).

We see ourselves in this description: two scholars from the urban landscape of Chicago (one from housing projects, the other from a working-class neighborhood but both from the now-gentrified, no-longer-ghettoes where we cannot afford to live) working to sustain our acquired middle-class status and landing our first university jobs in, of all places, Iowa. (I’m now at the University of Kentucky.) We do not want Spillers’s critique to apply to us. We are inspired by James Teele’s hope that his “volume [on Frazier] represents only the opening stage of a renewal of interest in E. Franklin Frazier’s rich and rewarding work.”<sup>45</sup> We did not want to be part of a group that allowed the golden anniversary of Frazier’s *Black Bourgeoisie* to pass without note, for we would be not only forgetful but neglectful.

Engaging the performance rituals of our culture, which call on us to become retrospective on special days and sensitively analytical during commemorative times, Bridget and I invited others to join us in self-reflective critique on our panel for the 2005 Modern Language Association Annual Convention in recognition of the original publication of *Black Bourgeoisie*, in France, in 1955. Encouraged by the good attendance and response, we brought the subject home to the University of Iowa in 2007, when we received a \$25,000 grant from the university’s Obermann Center for Advanced Studies in the Humanities. We codirected a well-attended symposium on the occasion of the anniversary of the American edition of Frazier’s book, published in 1957.

Still, conferences are intentionally ephemeral, occasions to generate thought that takes root elsewhere, in policy, in teaching, in interpersonal relations, in writing. This collection, then, is designed to substantially consider what it means for African American citizens to perform racialized class identities in the age of social progress. As I arranged the contributions, I recalled not only Spillers’s words but also those of W. E. B. Du Bois, specifically, his comments on the responsibility of middle-class blacks to the greater black majority.

In his “Talented Tenth Memorial Address,” written as an addendum forty-five years after the publication of his original “Talented Tenth” essay (1903), Du Bois calls successful blacks who emerged after Reconstruction “a group of self-indulgent, well-to-do men, whose basic interest in solving the Negro Problem was personal; personal freedom and unhampered enjoyment and use of the world, without any real care, or certainly no arousing care, as to what became of the mass of American Negroes, or of the mass of any people.”<sup>46</sup> Middle-class blacks misunderstood his original message to be about personal gain when, he says, he meant the focus to be on their relationship to the black masses. He explains, “For these men with their college training, there would be needed thorough understanding of the mass of Negroes and their problems. . . . Willingness to work and make personal sacrifice for solving these problems was of course, the first prerequisite and *Sine Qua Non*. I did not stress this, I assumed it” (161).

Du Bois’s advice unquestionably differs from the middle-class parental instruction that intellectuals like Page, Gates, and Steele received, instruction that negatively profiles, encourages identification against, and further stigmatizes the black lower classes. However, other middle-class black intellectuals of the same generation received different parental instruction, instruction that models Du Bois’s advice. In *Betrayal*, Baker writes: “My mother and father were among the select number of African Americans of their generation privileged to earn not only bachelor’s but also advanced graduate degrees.” Yet his father instructed Baker and his brother to “‘always speak to people.’” He told his boys, “Everyone deserves your respect.”<sup>47</sup>

His father’s lessons influenced Baker. He reminisces, “One day . . . I encountered a shabbily dressed black man, holes in his shoes, reeking of alcohol.” This man could certainly be one of the “negative images” of lower-class blacks that Page, Gates, and Steele report their parents warned them to avoid. But what did Baker do? He spoke to the man. To which the man replied: “‘Your father is one of the best people in this world. You spoke to me. You polite just like him. You got any spare change?’” Baker’s larger point is this: “To be known in the public world of the black majority as a ‘good man’—as my father was—can be a lifetime goal and calling” (8). Baker does not reference Du Bois’s counsel that the black middle class respect, sacrifice for, and work on behalf of the black lower classes, but the influence and relationship are clear.

Baker's example, as well as the admonishment from Spillers and Du Bois, prompt me to consider the plight of the underclasses of blacks and to make the discussion linking social equality to economic equality not just about receiving middle-class privileges (Condi's getting her earrings) but also about equal opportunities for the black poor to increase their class status in the land of opportunity. Indeed, our goal should be to help all blacks achieve not just economic success but full first-class citizenship. Therefore I acknowledge my own membership in the larger black community and welcome the responsibility that recognition brings. And while I argue that race is an entirely erroneous concept, something far worse than a social construction, I do not subscribe to the results of the Pew report, to the idea that there are now two races of American blacks. To me this is simply wrong-headed.

I am all too aware that some might believe that not having one black community is a good thing, that the notion of community produces an overconcern with race and race politics that keeps blacks in retrograde mode, stuck in a pre-civil rights-era concept of blackness when we are now free to be individuals. "People." "A part of the American community." "Not just black people." But I want to posit that so long as whiteness is a privileged position in America, deliberations about its relation to blackness and class must exist.<sup>48</sup> Without them, as Frazier points out, not only the black middle class but all black people will risk "becoming NOBODY."<sup>49</sup>

I am also aware that some believe that trying to prove your blackness, the burden of racial authenticity, is killing too many. So many brothas are found dead in the streets and sistas lie out in the 'hood precisely because performing a certain kind of black authenticity has wreaked havoc on their lives. Resisting certain "white" cultural ways has led some to dismiss education and to perform brands of blackness that have detrimental consequences. But this spectacle is not simply an upshot or proof of black pathology; it is part of the relationship that blackness bears to the larger American drama, the American dream, which for many blacks is still a nightmare.

Yes, I too am dismayed when pretty girls get ugly much too quickly, when youthful vigor is wasted on prowess in the streets. But the United States has rested its very identity, its local—and now, especially, its global—persona on preventing these eventualities in nations around the world. So



why are African Americans dying much faster than whites? Granted, members of the black middle class are dying a little slower than the underclass but only a little.<sup>50</sup> In other words, although some stave off the eventuality of black death—because they are more middle class, because they have access to better health care and the information that health care provides—the sad truth is that the maelstrom of the United States still produces effects that shorten the lives of all black men and women, and even when they live a long time their quality of life is overwhelmed by injuries to the spirit.

So while the effects of race, or rather the devastation that racism produces, are compounded in the direction of the underclasses, the devastation operates in all directions—even toward the middle classes. I see one function of this book, an important one, as understanding the role that black middle-class performances have in relation to black working- and underclass performances and how all these performances contribute to both the wonderful promise and lingering peril of black people's experience of citizenship in the United States of America.

## NOTES

1. See "Blacks See Growing Values Gap between Poor and Middle Class: Optimism about Black Progress Declines," report, Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, November 13, 2007, Washington, D.C. As noted on the center's website: "This report on racial attitudes was conducted by the Pew Research Center, a nonpartisan 'fact tank' that provides information on the issues, attitudes and trends shaping America and the world" (<http://pewresearch.org/pubs/634/black-public-opinion>).
2. James Weldon Johnson, *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (New York: Dover, 1995), 73.
3. Langston Hughes, "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain," *Nation*, 1926, available online at [www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/g\\_l/hughes/mountain.htm](http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/g_l/hughes/mountain.htm); Clarence Page, *Showing My Color: Impolite Essays on Race and Identity* (New York: HarperCollins, 1996), 59.
4. Henry Louis Gates Jr., "Breaking the Silence," *New York Times*, August 1, 2004, A11; Shelby Steele, *The Content of Our Character: A New Vision of Race in America* (New York: HarperCollins, 1990), 97. In *Colored People: A Memoir* (New York: Vin-

tage, 1995), Gates presents a more nuanced perspective of his parents and his upbringing that is more sympathetic to the black lower classes. However, the example here, taken from his opinion piece in the *New York Times*, illustrates the complex perspective that blacks held about class and the appropriate racial performance of their children, particularly their public performance around whites, which, I argue, is a direct response to black people's historically oppressed position in America.

5. See William Julius Wilson's *The Declining Significance of Race: Blacks and Changing American Institutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980).
6. See, for instance, Joe R. Feagin and Melvin P. Sikes's *Living with Racism: The Black Middle-Class Experience* (Boston: Beacon, 1994); Lois Benjamin's *The Black Elite: Still Facing the Color Line in the Twenty-first Century* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2005); and Karyn R. Lacy's *Blue-Chip Black: Race, Class, and Status in the New Black Middle Class* (2007) (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).
7. E. Franklin Frazier, *Black Bourgeoisie: The Rise of a New Middle Class in the United States* (New York: Collier, 1962).
8. Richard Schechner, *Introduction to Performance Studies* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 35; Frazier, *Black Bourgeoisie*, 126. According to Schechner, make-believe recognizes a distinction between reality and fantasy, whereas make belief uses everyday performance to "create the very social realities [performers] enact" (35).
9. See Frazier, *Black Bourgeoisie* (chaps. 3 and 4, esp. 65–76 and 84–97).
10. *Ibid.*, 61, 62.
11. John H. Bracey, "Frazier's Black Bourgeoisie: Talented Tenth or a Parasitic Class?" in James E. Teele, ed., *E. Franklin Frazier and Black Bourgeoisie* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2002), 88.
12. The sociologist Benjamin P. Bowser makes a similar observation in *The Black Middle Class: Social Mobility and Vulnerability* (Boulder, Colo.: Lynne Rienner, 2007). He writes: "There are very few African Americans today in professions, management, or any other white-collar work who have not directly benefited from affirmative action. . . . In this sense, the contemporary black middle class can be called the 'affirmative action' middle class" (101).
13. See Lawrence Otis Graham, *Our Kind of People: Inside America's Black Upper Class* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1999), 14. See Geneva Smitherman, *Black Talk: Words and Phrases from the Hood to the Amen Corner* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1994), for a critical definition of the term boogie in the context of African American rhetoric.
14. Smitherman, *Black Talk*; Shelby Steele, *The Content of Our Character: A New Vision of*

*Race in America* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1992), 99.

15. Representing and analyzing the performance of “middle-class” and “aristocratic” identities among blacks is in line with a tradition that has considered the subject within arts, literature, and culture since the beginning of slavery in the Americas (e.g., Aphra Behn’s *Oroonoko; or, a Royal Slave*, 1688). After Reconstruction and especially since the turn of the twentieth century, there has been a concentrated increase in artistic critiques and assessments of middle-class performance in African American culture and literature Charles Chesnutt’s *House Behind the Cedars* (1900) and *The Marrow of Tradition* (1901); Anna Julia Cooper’s *A Voice of the South* (1892); Frances Harper’s *Iola Leroy* (1892); Pauline Hopkins’s *Contending Forces* (1900) and her magazine novels (1901–3); W. E. B Du Bois’s *The Quest of the Silver Fleece* (1911); Johnson’s *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*; and Hughes’s “Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain.”

In his influential study of the period, *Black American Writing from the Nadir* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1989), Dickinson Bruce Jr. writes: “It would also be difficult to understand much about black writing from 1877 to 1915 without some sense of the characteristics of its creators. . . . They may be described without oversimplification as members of the black middle class that was taking shape and growing in size in the Post-Reconstruction era. . . . Such a collective portrait helps indicate a common body of experience upon which they drew and helps illuminate their work (4–6).

There are also recent notable and influential explorations of the subject in literary and cultural studies, such as Michele Wallace’s *Invisibility Blues: From Pop to Theory* (New York: Verso, 1990); Valerie Smith’s *Not Just Race, Not Just Gender: Black Feminist Readings* (New York: Routledge, 1998); and Candice Jenkins’s *Private Lives, Proper Relations: Regulating Black Intimacy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007). There are, of course, so many more that to cite only three may appear a disservice. These three texts, however, specifically address representations in film, art, and literature, the focus of this collection, and thus come readily to mind as examples.

16. Some notable and influential examples of texts from the sociological and social historical perspectives are Mary Pattillo-McCoy’s *Black Picket Fences: Privilege and Peril among the Black Middle Class* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000) and *Black on the Block: Politics of Race and Class in the City* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007); Karyn Lacy’s *Blue-Chip Black: Race, Class, and Status in the New*

- Black Middle Class* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007); Martin Summers's *Manliness and Its Discontents: The Black Middle Class and the Transformation of Masculinity, 1900–1930* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003); and Bart Landry's *The New Black Middle Class* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988).
17. William Greaves, *Still a Brother: Inside the Black Middle Class*, a ninety-minute television documentary made in collaboration with William Branch for National Educational Television, first aired on NET on April 29, 1968.
  18. For more on the varied inclusions within the middle class, see *Class Matters* by Bill Keller and a team of *New York Times* reporters (New York: Times Books, 2005), and bell hooks's *Class Matters: Where We Stand* (New York: Routledge, 2000).
  19. E. Franklin Frazier, *The Negro in the United States*, rev. ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1957), 693.
  20. Anthony M. Platt, "Between Scorn and Longing: Frazier's Black Bourgeoisie," in Teele, *E. Franklin Frazier* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2002), 79.
  21. Bracey, "Frazier's Black Bourgeoisie," 88.
  22. Schechner, *Introduction to Performance Studies*, 38.
  23. It is, of course, true, as illustrated earlier, that race and class have been taken up in various strata of academic work. Some notable academic contributions are Kimberlé Crenshaw's notion of "intersectionality" to discuss the intersections of race, class, and gender (see Kimberlé W. Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color," *Stanford Law Review* 43, no. 6 [1991]: 1241–99). Again, Valerie Smith's *Not Just Race, Not Just Gender* builds on Crenshaw's theoretical term. The focus of my discussion in this introduction is on how the matters of race and class are received in the public sphere, in public discourses outside the academy. Indeed, the everyday public, which also includes academics, shows that the conversations of race and class are still tenuous, problematic, little understood. The point cannot be overstated that more academic and public discussions and work are needed to bring the twinned conversation into regular consideration.
  24. Then-presidential candidate Barack Obama's speech was delivered on March 18, 2008, in Constitution Hall, Philadelphia.
  25. Nicholas Kristof, *New York Times*, March 19, 2008.
  26. *Plessy v. Ferguson*, 163 U.S. 537 (1896). I am indebted to the editor Brook Thomas for his invaluable *Plessy v. Ferguson: A Brief History with Documents* (New York: St.

- Martin's, 1997), which includes the Harlan dissent. The quote appears on p. 55.
27. Thomas, *Plessy*, 55.
  28. *Ibid.*, 30.
  29. Charles Chesnutt, *The Marrow of Tradition* (New York: Penguin Classics, 1993), 54, 57.
  30. See Touré, "Black and White on Martha's Vineyard," *New York Magazine*, June 21, 2009 <http://nymag.com/guides/summer/2009/57472/>
  31. "Blacks See Growing Values Gap," 1.
  32. Herbert Gans, "Race as Class," *Contexts* (fall 2005): 19–20.
  33. As an aside, it can be understood from this history how a black person who demonstrates middle-class habits and manners is thought to be performing out of racial character, acting white. As an epithet then, "acting white" is not a unique black expression used to criticize other blacks who display middle-class characteristics. It is an appellation produced by U.S. laws and ideologies that police the performance of race and class. For more on "acting white" and its relationship to U.S. laws and ideologies, see Signithia Fordham's "Beyond Economic High: On Dual Citizenship and the Strange Career of 'Acting White,'" *Anthropology and Education* 39, no. 3 (2008): 227–46. See also Vershawn Young, *Your Average Nigga: Performing Race, Literacy and Masculinity* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2007), esp. chap. 6, "To Be a Problem."
  34. Zora Neale Hurston, *Dust Tracks on the Road: An Autobiography*, 2d ed., ed. Robert Hemenway (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1984), 310; Booker T. Washington, *Up from Slavery* (New York: Dell, 1965), 79, 71.
  35. Joseph T. Skerrett Jr. "Irony and Symbolic Action in James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man*," *American Quarterly* 32 (1980): 88, 547.
  36. Walter Benn Michaels, *The Trouble with Diversity: How We Learned to Love Identity and Ignore Inequality* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2006), 6.
  37. Condoleeza Rice's jewelry store episode is recounted on numerous sites on the Internet and is also published in Glenn Kessler, *The Confidant: Condoleeza Rice and the Creation of the Bush Legacy* (New York: St. Martin's, 2007).
  38. Schechner, *Introduction to Performance Studies* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 171. For more, see Vershawn Ashanti Young's *Your Average Nigga*.
  39. Schechner, *Introduction to Performance Studies*, 22.
  40. Dwight Conquergood, "Performance Studies: Interventions and Radical Research," *Drama Review* 46, no. 2 (2002): 151–52.

41. E. Franklin Frazier, "The Failure of the Negro Intellectual," in Joyce A. Ladner, ed., *The Death of White Sociology* (New York: Random House, 1973), 66.
42. Erin Sniff, *Performance Studies* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 1.
43. Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 9; Frazier, *Black Bourgeoisie*, 230–31.
44. Hortense Spillers, "The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual: A Post-Date" in *Black, White, and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 428.
45. Teele, *E. Franklin Frazier*, 13.
46. Du Bois's essay is in Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Cornel West, *The Future of the Race* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1996), 162. See also W. E. B. Du Bois, "The Talented Tenth," in Booker T. Washington, ed., *The Negro Problem: A Series of Articles by Representative American Negroes of Today* (New York: J. Pott, 1903).
47. Houston Baker Jr., *Betrayal: How Black Intellectuals Have Abandoned the Ideals of the Civil Rights Era* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 1, 8.
48. See Mary Pattillo's *Black on the Block: Politics of Race and Class in the City* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007).
49. Frazier, *Black Bourgeoisie*, 26.
50. See R. Randall Vernellia's *Dying While Black* (Dayton, Ohio: Seven Principles Press, 2006).