

**OUR KIND OF PEOPLE: SOCIAL STATUS AND CLASS AWARENESS  
IN POST-RECONSTRUCTION AFRICAN AMERICAN FICTION**

Andréa N. Williams

A dissertation submitted to the faculty of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Department of English

Chapel Hill  
2006

Approved by  
Advisor: William L. Andrews  
Reader: James W. Coleman  
Reader: Philip F. Gura  
Reader: Trudier Harris  
Reader: Jane F. Thraillkill

© 2006  
Andréa N. Williams  
ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

## ABSTRACT

ANDREÁ N. WILLIAMS: *Our Kind of People: Social Status and Class Awareness in Post-Reconstruction African American Fiction*  
(Under the direction of William L. Andrews)

Postbellum African American fiction provides an index to the complex attitudes toward social status and class divisions that arose within post-Civil War black communities. As I argue, African American narratives in the last quarter of the nineteenth century encode the discourse of class in discussions of respectability, labor, and discrimination. Conceiving of class as a concept that does not necessarily denote economic conditions, both well-known and largely ignored narratives of the period emphasize moral and ideological parameters for judging social distinctions. Writers theorize whether intraracial class stratification thwarts black sociopolitical advancement, fracturing black communities from within, or conversely, fosters racial uplift led by the black “better class.” Though the fiction variably delineates social classes, each of the texts under study in *Our Kind of People* imagines classification as an inevitable and useful means of reforming the turn-of-the-century American social order.

Subverting the class disparity spurred by Gilded Age materialism, Frances E. W. Harper’s novels *Trial and Triumph* (1888-89) and *Iola Leroy* (1892) examine conventional social designations and supplant them with a morally-inflected language of class. The works of Katherine Tillman, Sutton Griggs and Paul Laurence Dunbar elucidate the problematic relation between labor and status, given black people’s proscribed access to diverse occupations. Stories from Charles W. Chesnutt’s *The Wife of His Youth* (1899) explore the concept of “class-passing,” interrogating status as a social performance that antagonizes

competing factions within African American communities. In *The Marrow of Tradition* (1901), however, Chesnutt highlights intraracial class divisions to foreground the similarities between middle-class whites and blacks, thereby challenging Jim Crow segregation by promoting class-based social relations. The study concludes by examining the concept of “The Talented Tenth” (1903), W. E. B. Du Bois’s articulation of the social and political saliency of intraracial stratification. “The Talented Tenth” aptly encapsulates the predominant class ideology reflected in post-Reconstruction African American literature. By underscoring class as an analytical category central to historicized readings, *Our Kind of People* complicates critical approaches that heretofore have analyzed postbellum African American literature primarily in terms of race, gender, and religion.

*For my nephew,  
Dalerick Armand Williams  
(1980-2004)*

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I extend a special note of gratitude to Dr. William L. Andrews, my dissertation director, and Dr. Trudier Harris, in whose seminar I first began to think about literary representations of intraracial class differences. I appreciate and hope to emulate their model of excellence in scholarship, teaching, and mentorship. I thank my committee members—Drs. James W. Coleman, Philip F. Gura, and Jane Thrailkill—who offered constructive criticism and support, as did my graduate colleagues in African American literature (Kristina Bobo, Kimberly Burnett, Rachelle Gold, Pamela Hamilton, Jennifer Larson, and Mary Alice Kirkpatrick). Thanks also to Dr. P. Gabrielle Foreman and Dr. William Darity for their mentoring and friendship. My friends Elizabeth Harper, Dr. Melissa Meeks, Talithia Williams, Geniece Granville, Dr. Zakiya Leggett, Afiya McLaughlin-White, Yolonda Wilson, Monté (Adisa) Fowler, Alarie Tennille and Derrick Drakeford lent much needed encouragement and prayers. During my graduate career, my mother, Mrs. Annie V. Williams, willingly indulged my scholarly conversations, learning more about nineteenth-century literature than she perhaps ever wanted to know; I appreciate her love and the support of my sisters (Vallory, Cheryl, Vanessa and Roslin) and other family members. My graduate education was funded by a multi-year fellowship from the Thomas H. and Caroline S. Royster Society of Fellows. However, all glory goes to God, without whom this project—and my maintained sanity—would not have been possible.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

### Chapter

I.	Nineteenth-Century African American Literature and Class Discourse: An Historio-Critical Overview .....	1
II.	The Language of Class and Respectability in Frances E. W. Harper's <i>Trial and Triumph</i> and <i>Iola Leroy</i> .....	33
III.	Labor, Status, and Competing Myths of Class Mobility: The Fiction of Katherine Tillman, Sutton Griggs and Paul Laurence Dunbar .....	72
IV.	Class Performance and Discrimination in Charles W. Chesnutt's <i>The Wife of His Youth</i> and <i>The Marrow of Tradition</i> .....	135
V.	Conclusion .....	189
	Bibliography .....	210

## CHAPTER I

### **Nineteenth-Century African American Literature and Class Discourse: An Historio-Critical Overview**

In the spring of 1878, the Philadelphia-based African Methodist Episcopal *Christian Recorder* featured an exchange of two letters to the editor debating the politics of social class stratification. In keeping with the newspaper's objectives, the two letters expressed a fundamental interest in advancing African Americans as a race. But the pseudonymous writers disagreed about how social class divisions among African Americans affected racial progress. Criticizing what he considered inappropriate cross-class interactions, the subscriber known as "A Looker on in Venice" contended that ladies of "taste and refinement" had no business greeting chimneysweeps on the streets of Philadelphia. As he reasoned in his April 11 letter, "Think Well of Yourself," those "refined and elegant in breeding" needed to separate themselves from "the company of the vile and illbred [sic]" in order to motivate the latter group's educational, economic, and moral improvement (1). "There is too much of commonness pervading the colored people's society of this city," the writer lamented. "Equality is taken to too great an extreme" (1).

On May 9, 1878 the *Recorder* printed a reader's caustic reply to "Think Well of Yourself." Quoting heavily from the most objectionable lines of the previous letter, the respondent protested:

That theory which draws a dividing line between the cultured and aristocratic on the one hand and the illiterate and common people on the other



[...] can only originate and continue bitter antagonisms which are prejudicial to the interests of both classes. (2)

Assuming the pen name “Plebeian” in sympathy with the city’s common laborers, the author reminded readers that “four fifths of the colored people [...] just emerging from a moral, intellectual, religious and social darkness” in slavery hardly could attain the refinement that social propriety demanded (2). Breeding, occupation and proper speech should not determine one’s status, the author insisted: “Let the only lines drawn among us be those of purity of life, industry and patriotism. Possessed of these elements in their widest sense, we, and all other peoples will be rendered prosperous and happy” (2). Plebeian did not suggest that black Philadelphians dismiss all differences among them, but that they judge lines of social difference by other criteria.

The contentious exchange published in the *Recorder* resonates with discussions of class that black and white spokespersons posed throughout the mid- and late nineteenth century. Americans during the period were embroiled in what historian Martin J. Burke terms the “conundrum of class,” the problem of determining how class figured as a useful concept in the United States (Burke xi). During the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, most Americans accepted “class” as an uncontested or “relatively neutral” social descriptor: “Neither the reality of socioeconomic classes nor the utility of a language of class was an issue” (52). However as industrialization, capitalism, and other developments increased the social and economic chasm between different classes, “class” became a more debatable issue in nineteenth-century public discourse (Burke 52). What should be the relationship between different social classes? How were classes determined? How did class function in a democracy? Was class more than an economic category? In sermons, politics, economic theory and fiction, authors explored the conditions of those who lived in luxury

and those in lack. Newspaper headlines announced strikes staged by the discontented “laboring classes.” Advice manuals counseled how to be polished “gentlemen” or “ladies.” Reformers organized programs to support “the poor.” Yet despite much debate and the advent of social sciences devoted to analyzing constructs such as class, the idea of “class” and its attendant vocabulary—rich, poor, laboring class, working class, better class, lowly, elite and middling—remained unstable and variably defined.<sup>1</sup>

Nineteenth-century African Americans approached the nation’s “conundrum of class” with particular interest in how interpretations of class affected the conditions of blacks. Many whites in the late nineteenth century considered black Americans an undifferentiated mass, intent on remaining dependent on the auspices of charity and the government (Gatewood 7). Along with a developing cadre of black historians, who compiled accounts with titles such as *The Black Man: His Antecedents, His Genius and His Achievements* (1863), *Men of Mark* (1887), and *The Work of the Afro-American Woman* (1894),<sup>2</sup> to exhibit those whom they considered appropriate representatives of the race’s potential, African American fiction writers aimed to represent the social gamut that existed in black communities. Kevin Gaines

---

<sup>1</sup>Nineteenth-century commentators noted the multiple, politically inflected terms associated with class. William P. Harrison, a Methodist minister who promoted economic renewal in the New South, suggested in 1873 that the vocabulary of class unnecessarily polarized socioeconomic classes: “[I]t is a fatal error which regards the ‘working classes’ as only those who labor with the hands. Every man worthy the name of man is a workman of some sort” (1). In Harrison’s opinion, “working class” was an ambiguous term. Likewise William Sumner observed in 1883, “‘The poor,’ ‘the weak,’ ‘the laborers’ are expressions which are used as if they had exact and well-understood definition” (13). He contended, “The ‘poor man’ is an elastic term, under which any number of social fallacies may be hidden...The reader who desires to guard himself against fallacies should always scrutinize the terms ‘poor’ and ‘weak’ as used, so as to see which or how many of the classes they are made to cover” (19, 20). Sumner feared that liberal writers manipulated language to gain sympathy and financial support for the lower classes, whom he disparaged as “negligent, shiftless, inefficient, silly and imprudent” (20). For an extended study of the concept of class and its shifting lexicon in the United States, see Burke’s *Conundrum of Class: Public Discourse on the Social Order in America* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1995).

<sup>2</sup>William Wells Brown, *The Black Man: His Antecedents, His Genius and His Achievements* (New York: Thomas Hamilton, 1863); William J. Simmons, *Men of Mark: Eminent, Progressive and Rising* (Cleveland: George M. Rewell, 1887); and Mrs. N.F. Mossell [Gertrude Bustill Mossell], *The Work of the Afro-American Woman* (1894. New York: Oxford UP, 1988).

notes, “Generally, black elites claimed class distinctions, indeed, the very existence of a ‘better class’ of blacks, as evidence of what they called race progress” (xiv). Recognizing the political saliency of class distinctions, some African Americans invoked them to refute racist sentiments. Yet intraracial distinctions could also undermine racial collaboration, alienating those who considered themselves “better class” leaders from the masses of blacks they proposed to “uplift.” In their narratives of racial uplift, spiritual conversion, and urban living, nineteenth-century African American novelists attempted to mediate the extremes of black elitism on one hand, and the total denial of intraracial difference on the other.

This dissertation explores how African American authors analyze and represent intraracial social class difference in post-Reconstruction fiction. While overtly focused on the racial divide and “the Negro problem” of weaving African Americans into the country’s social fabric, black writers also were interested in the differences that, for better or worse, fractured black communities along class lines. As they catered to a growing audience of literate blacks, as well as to white American readers, African American novelists directly and indirectly broached several issues related to social class: African American education, the conflict of labor and capital, urban degradation, Gilded Age consumerism, and social equality. Authors experimented with the parameters of social class, exploring how stratification among blacks either thwarted or exacerbated white prejudice. Yet blacks’ heightened awareness of social class did not fuel simply a reactionary defensiveness in the face of white racism. At stake, too, was the question of whether African Americans as varied as the light-skinned teachers and matrons of Frances Harper’s novels; the urban manual laborers and professionals in fiction by Katherine Tillman, Sutton Griggs and Paul Laurence Dunbar; and the middle-class male protagonists of Charles Chesnutt’s making could or

should privilege their racial identity over their social class affiliation, thereby endorsing ideals of solidarity that would transcend class differences.

### **Methodology and Concepts for this Study**

In his 1899 study *The Philadelphia Negro*, W. E. B. Du Bois surmised that analyzing social classes among African Americans required a different approach than the then-developing disciplines of political economy and social theory offered. According to Karl Marx's concept of class as defined by labor, capital, and the means of production, the majority of postbellum African Americans constituted a single class: working-class wage laborers (Marx 41). Another of Du Bois's contemporaries, Max Weber, construed the term "class" to apply explicitly to economic groupings, while "status" applied to social groups, and "party" labeled political groups. Weberian philosophy suggested that interethnic social distinctions were better described in terms of "status" rather than "class" (Weber 44). Yet by judging class in strictly economic terms, nineteenth-century research and white public opinion tended to overlook the subtle social differences in black communities. "Since so much misunderstanding or rather forgetfulness and carelessness on this point is common," Du Bois asserts, "let us endeavor to try and fix with some definiteness the different social classes which are clearly enough defined among Negroes to deserve attention" (Du Bois 310). Delineating four social classes or "grades" in chapter XV of *The Philadelphia Negro*, Du Bois footnotes, "It will be noted that this classification differs materially from the economic division in Chapter XI [...] The basis of division there was almost entirely according to income; this division brings in moral considerations and questions of expenditure, and consequently reflects more largely the personal judgment of the

investigator” (311). Besides reflecting Du Bois’s own “personal judgment,” his methodological emphasis on morality and lifestyle as class indices paralleled how his black subjects often expressed the social distinctions among themselves.

This dissertation similarly proceeds from the assumption that when historicized in nineteenth-century African American culture, “social class” does not necessarily denote economic status. As Kevin Gaines explains, “the material condition of many blacks with [middle-class] aspirations was often indistinguishable from that of impoverished people of any color” in post-Reconstruction America (Gaines 16). In Gaines’s estimation, social class is ideological—indicated by values, beliefs, behaviors and tastes—rather than strictly socioeconomic. A person may be poor but consider himself or herself as “higher” or “better class,” to use historically precise terms, through speech and action. Though not disregarding material measures, “social class” for post-Reconstruction African Americans delineates sometimes subtle differences over morality and values, social influence or power, and wealth, with these indicators prioritized nearly in the order in which they appear here. Social class is an intangible, coded term, not easily registered in the censuses that marked the occupation, net worth, and street addresses of black Americans. Postbellum African American fiction affirms class as a concept defined best according to parameters laid out by Paul Lauter and Ann Fitzgerald, editors of the collection *Literature, Class, and Culture* (2001):

[C]lass involves a more complicated set of relationships, relationships expressed not just in possessions or even in more personal attributes—like patterns of speech and dress—but mainly in ways of feeling, thinking, and understanding. To say it another way, class involves not just what you “have” or even what you “are,” but what Raymond Williams calls “a structure of feeling”: how you look at the world, what you see there, how you experience what you perceive—and how all of that differs from what other groups of people look at, see, and experience. (Lauter and Fitzgerald 3)

While informed by twentieth-century innovations in the field of class studies, my use of the term “social class” also yields to the ways that nineteenth-century thinkers and writers configured the concept.

Because a number of other key terms feature repeatedly in this study, I take the liberty to outline them here. Both nineteenth-century writers and twentieth-century scholars sometimes use the terms “class” and “caste” interchangeably. Yet as Oliver C. Cox asserts in his historic study *Caste, Class, and Race* (1948), caste and class are functionally different. After the rise of Jim Crow segregation in the American South, law mandated the complete social distance between blacks and whites, but in Cox’s estimation, such separation still did not produce the kind of caste system exemplified by Indian society. Cox insists, “So far as we know, there has been no instance in which a class became increasingly stable until at length it crystallized into a caste” (299). Therefore ‘caste’ appears here only when used by nineteenth-century speakers and writers in primary sources.

“Class awareness” and “class consciousness” also function separately in this project. As Marx delineates the latter term, consciousness ideally eventuates in unified social action, such as labor strikes or collective voting. However, critic Burton Bledstein asserts that as the discipline of class studies develops, “at the turn of the millennium few Americans, including academics and intellectuals, currently speak the language of class ‘consciousness’” (Bledstein 24). Instead, tracing “class awareness” allows us to investigate the function of class when, as in nineteenth-century black literature, people may not proceed in ways they identify as class-based. Anthony Giddens elucidates:

The difference between class awareness and class consciousness is a fundamental one, because class awareness may take the form of *a denial of the existence or reality of classes*. Thus the class awareness of the middle class, in so far as it involves beliefs which place a premium upon individual

responsibility and achievement, is of this order. (Giddens 162, emphasis in original)

Many of the writers included in this study indeed deny the reality of set classes, implying that values such as thrift, cleanliness, monogamy and education are simply “right” and “moral” rather than indicative of the ideology of a particular class. As Amy Schrager Lang explains in her own study of class in American literature, “class awareness” is a useful approach because nineteenth-century writers and public figures often avoided discussing class explicitly: “To publicly admit the reality of class in America was to open the nation to the threat of class conflict” (Lang 2).

Understanding the reticence with which Americans addressed the issue of class demands a careful treatment of post-Civil War literature; as such, this study approaches class both as a categorical term and as an ideological concept. In treating “social class” as language, I trace the varied ways that African American authors define social class. Nineteenth-century African American writing—historical documents, journalism, polemical essays and literary works—reveals that black Americans used the term “class” in a range of ways, not all of which can be explored in the scope of this dissertation. On one level, writers apply the word “class” in its broadest sense interchangeably with the term “group.” Similarly African Americans use “class” to indicate the general racial separation between whites and blacks; in this sense, African Americans constitute a single, united “class” while white Americans constitute an opposite one. This study traces the third use of class and its attendant vocabulary, as the language serves to identify individuals, values, or behaviors within intraracial and interracial comparisons. For instance, in Pauline Hopkins’s historical romance *Contending Forces* (1900), which is partly set in a Boston boardinghouse owned by a widowed black woman, the narrator denotes, “Boston contains a number of well-to-do

families of color whose tax-bills show a most comfortable return each year to the city treasury” (142). Does Hopkins’s provisional definition of “well-to-do” in the urban North correspond with Charles Chesnutt’s description in *The Marrow of Tradition* (1901) of “a well-to-do colored farmer” who lives near Wellington (Wilmington), North Carolina (678)? In the following chapters, I parse the surface-level language of class that African American writers use to represent individuals’ ethical, financial, and social conditions in relation to other black and white Americans.

Secondly, this dissertation explores how the language of class translates into less perceptible ideologies of class. Amy Lang explains that in lieu of directly broaching class inequalities, “Americans displaced the reality of class into discourses of race, gender, ethnicity, and other similarly ‘locked-in’ categories of individual identity” (Lang 6). This dissertation traces social class difference that is sublimated into at least three larger social concerns of the post-Civil War period: morality and respectability, labor and occupation, and intraracial and interracial discrimination. These selected topics, while not surveying all the possible ways that black writers invoke social class, provide manageable, direct access to the period’s predominant literary, historical, and intellectual trends. Wai Chee Dimock and Michael T. Gilmore note, “Understood as such, as a relationally derived construct rather than a self-executing entity, the operations of class necessarily involve an entire spectrum of interdependent terms, whose mutually defining character is progressively obscured as social identities become “real”—become solid, integral, and perhaps even acquirable—to the point where they appear entirely objective and self-evident” (Dimock and Gilmore 3). Rather than assuming that the impact of social class was more or less significant than that of race, I examine how class and race combine to make the conditions black writers record appear



“objective and self-evident.” As such, this dissertation restores social class as an analytical category central to historicized readings of postbellum African American literature.

## **Literature Review**

During the past three decades, historical scholarship has begun to recover the bases of class and class awareness in nineteenth-century black America. Research has concentrated on two predominant classes of black Americans: the elite or upper class, situated mainly in the Northeast, and working class blacks in the South. Bette Ann Davis Lawrence’s *Philadelphia African Americans: Color, Class, and Style, 1840-1940* (1988), Willard B. Gatewood’s *Aristocrats of Color* (1990), Adelaide Cromwell’s *The Other Brahmins: Boston’s Black Upper Class, 1750-1950* (1994), and Janette Thomas Greenwood’s *Bittersweet Legacy: The Black and White “Better Classes” in Charlotte, 1850-1910* (2001) examine social class among African Americans in specific cities, noting that the construction of class varies across time and location. A second trend in historical research treats nineteenth-century African American class structure in the larger context of working class and labor studies. Herbert Gutman’s *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750-1925* (1976) reconstructs the income, occupation, accommodations, and composition of the “typical lower-class Afro - American household” (433, emphasis in original). Robin D. G. Kelley’s *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class* (1994) and Gerald Jaynes Branches without Roots: *Genesis of the Black Working Class in the American South, 1862-1882* (1986) further trace the distinctive culture developed among African American laborers. However, historical approaches to class still remain largely interested in African Americans’ economic

and political conditions, whereas a study of black literature reflects how postbellum African Americans *perceived* class difference in their daily social interactions.<sup>3</sup>

The recovery and revaluation of nineteenth-century black literature during the last thirty years—culminating in projects such as the Schomburg Library collection of black women’s literature in the 1980s—has left class an as yet uncharted territory in scholarship. As bell hooks surmises, “Nowadays it is fashionable to talk about race and gender; the uncool subject is class. It’s the subject that makes us all tense, nervous, uncertain about where we stand” (hooks vii). Supplementing this critical gap, Amy Lang’s *The Syntax of Class: Writing Inequality in America* (2003) includes a chapter about the intersections of class and race in Frank J. Webb’s *The Garies and Their Friends* (1857) and Harriet E. Wilson’s *Our Nig* (1859). However, Lang’s study covers only antebellum fiction, and analyses of class in postbellum literature—among them Christopher P. Wilson’s *White Collar Fictions* (1992)—allot little or no attention to African American texts. Literary scholars who have addressed class awareness among African Americans usually proceed from the assumption that turn-of-the-twentieth-century black literature is fundamentally middle-class. But rarely has literary scholarship offered a serious consideration of what or who constituted the black middle-class. In his literary history *Black Writing from the Nadir, 1877-1915* (1989), Dickson Bruce Jr. states almost as a given, “the middle-class orientation

---

<sup>3</sup>A discrepancy often exists between blacks’ self-identified class status and their status as judged by sociologists and historians. E. Franklin Frazier in *The Black Bourgeoisie: The Rise of a New Middle Class in the United States* (1957) proposes that African Americans collectively lack the economic means to constitute separate classes. Tracing class from before the Civil War to the 1950s, Frazier argues that black Americans who claim a “middle class” identity arbitrarily create a “world of make-believe” inconsistent with their meager economic realities (27). Frazier disparages blacks’ class awareness as flawed and deluded. Relying on literature as the primary source—rather than censuses, surveys, and legal documents, from which historians attempt to draw “objective” facts about the material aspects of class—this dissertation probes African Americans’ subjective construction of class. My study applies Oliver Cox’s summation of social class as “a heuristic concept significant mainly to the person conceiving of it” (Cox 306, emphasis added) and privileges nineteenth-century black writers as the agents conceiving class.

of these [late nineteenth-century black] writers provided a defining background to the works they produced” (8). Bruce further supposes that late nineteenth-century authors, including Harper, Chesnutt, Victoria Earle Matthews and Anna Julia Cooper, and the themes they invoke do not represent the black masses (4). Other brief surveys such as Amiri Baraka’s essay “Afro-American Literature and Class Struggle” (1980) tend to classify post-Reconstruction black literature as either embarrassingly “capitulationist” or, in contrast, subversively “revolutionary” (Baraka 5). By evaluating this literature in binary terms, both Bruce and Baraka treat middle-class subjectivity as both a fixed and self-evident notion. Instead I suggest that in the late nineteenth century, “class” is a category still under negotiation. The presumed “middle-class” identity and affinities of “middle-class” black writers must not be treated as an established fact.

### **Class Awareness in Early Nineteenth-Century African American Literature**

Although no one is sure when concepts of social class first appeared in African American literature, literary history allows us to trace the treatment of class issues as they evolved during the nineteenth century. Antebellum slave narratives suggest that by the 1840s and 50s black writers were highlighting social class distinctions to promote their texts’ literary and rhetorical ends. Ex-slaves did not consistently use the term “class” to register their observations of life in the South. However their narratives customarily differentiate between house and field slaves, suggesting a nascent understanding of social class formation. Generally denied ownership of their labor, few slaves directly participated in the cash economy, success in which determined most whites’ class status at the time. A slave’s status could derive from a number of variables, as ex-slaves Moses Grandy and Frederick Douglass

indicate, including one's occupational skills, skin color, biological relation to the master, market value, and the social status of the master.

In *Narrative of the Life of Moses Grandy* (1843), former North Carolina bondsman Grandy infers his status in the social hierarchy by detailing his encounters with local whites and blacks. Grandy maintains a cordial rapport with white "gentlemen," whom he consistently differentiates from white "men" of lesser social standing. Respecting his sterling character and skill as a riverboat pilot, the gentlemen refer to Grandy as "captain" rather than by the diminutive titles "uncle" or "boy" generally applied to African American males, regardless of their age. As he is allowed to hire his time and accrue funds toward his self-purchase, his class status translates into privileges of physical mobility, leadership, and material comfort in relation to other slaves. After being relegated to fieldwork, Grandy lobbies for his freedom, not only to avoid slavery's brutality and exploitation, but also because he seems to resent a demotion from self-regulated waterman to common laborer. Confronting his master, he explains, "I told him one night, I could not stand his field work any longer" (Grandy 167). Refusing Grandy's request for freedom, the master agrees only to offer more rations to all the malnourished, overworked field hands. In language marking his social distance from the other slaves, Grandy recalls, "The black people were much rejoiced that I got this additional allowance for them. But I was not satisfied; I wanted liberty" (167). Elsewhere in the narrative Grandy refers to slaves as "the black people" or "the coloured people" rather than using the first-person collective pronoun "we" to reiterate his solidarity with rank-and-file slaves (180). His subtle treatment of social difference implies a burgeoning awareness of class dynamics. Grandy realizes that by maintaining the proper balance of self-respect and deference, he could sometimes gain additional privileges from

wealthy whites, as well as leadership among enslaved blacks. However on the whole Grandy comes to the conclusion that Peter Randolph's *Sketches of Slave Life* (1855) and Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) assert: that is, for enslaved African Americans, higher social status usually afforded little protection from the institution's worst indignities, and slaves seldom benefited from adhering to stratification among themselves.<sup>4</sup>

In the course of writing and revising his autobiography, fugitive slave-turned-statesman Frederick Douglass addresses class distinctions with more insight than did Grandy and several other antebellum narrators. The most well-recognized slave narrative of its time, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (1845) comments on class separations early in the text. In his overview of slaves' general treatment, Douglass supposes that mixed race slaves, often the offspring of white masters' illicit sexual relations with their female slaves, constituted a distinctive "class of slaves" (14). He adds, "a very different-looking class of people are springing up at the south, and are now held in slavery" (14). Skin color, which also appears as an indicator of class affiliation throughout nineteenth-century black literature, is the primary marker for those whom Douglass labels a "class." The term functions ambiguously in this context.

Yet with subsequent editions of his autobiography, Douglass more lucidly registers his interpretation of social class structures among Americans, white and black. A detailed study of the author's revisions from his 1845 to 1855 autobiographies reveals that Douglass

---

<sup>4</sup>Randolph's narrative devotes a chapter to describing "house slaves." While the narrator admits that house slaves enjoy some privileges, he maintains that racism usually disregards intraracial status distinctions, ultimately categorizing house and field slaves together. Jacobs's position between bond and free, disadvantaged and privileged relies on what Carol E. Henderson terms the "critical matrix of caste, class, and color" (Henderson 49). Jacobs enjoyed certain advantages because her grandmother was a freed, mulatta businesswoman with connections to influential whites. However, in the chapters "The Flight" and "Months of Peril," the author implies that she benefits most by disregarding social class boundaries. Cross-class cooperation among field and house slaves, as well as free blacks and sympathetic local whites enables Jacobs to plot and execute her escape from slavery.

increasingly figures social status as the category that separates slaves from various classes of white men. In *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855), Douglass outlines a tripartite class structure operating on the Maryland plantation where he grew up. He explains, “Its whole public is made up of, and divided into, three classes—slaveholders, slaves, and overseers” (45). Lest readers assume that he uses the term “class” loosely, Douglass reiterates that he intends class as a deliberate word choice:

I speak of overseers as a class. They are such. They are as distinct from the slaveholding gentry of the south, as are the fish-women of Paris, and the coal-heavers of London, distinct from other members of society. ...They have been arranged and classified by that great law of attraction, which determines the spheres and affinities of men. (75)

The idea that classes are based on a “law of attraction” denotes that in 1855, Douglass interprets class as a concept indicating lifestyles and values rather than economics alone. The narrator attributes his impression of the American social class structure to his experience as a freedman in the North. Recalling his former naiveté, Douglass admits that as a slave, he lacked a sophisticated understanding of political economy and social class. Before he arrived in the North, he assumed that people in the free states were necessarily poor since they did not own slaves and rely on their labor. Douglass recalls, “A free white man, holding no slaves, in the country, I had known to be the most ignorant and poverty-stricken of men, and the laughing stock even of slaves themselves—called generally by them, in derision, ‘poor white trash’” (210). Amazed to find that rather than being poverty-stricken, both the white and black people in the northeast’s mercantile and marine economy experience a higher standard of living than people in the South, Douglass reassesses his judgment of classes.

In *My Bondage and My Freedom*, Douglass implies that social affinities are also the basis of status differences among enslaved blacks. As do other slave narrators, Douglass

notes house servants as a distinctive status group “discriminately selected” by slaveowners (71). Describing the slaves’ general appearance, he recalls:

These servants constituted a sort of black aristocracy on Col. Lloyd’s plantation. They resembled the field hands in nothing, except in color, and in this they held the advantage of a velvet-like glossiness, rich and beautiful. The hair, too, showed the same advantage. The colored maid rustled in the scarcely worn silk of her young mistress, while the servant men were equally well attired from the overflowing wardrobe of their young masters; so that in dress, as well as in form and feature, in manner and speech, in tastes and habits, the distance between these favored few and the sorrow and hunger-smitten multitudes of the quarter and the field, was immense; *and this is seldom passed over.* (*Bondage* 71, emphasis added)

Labeling house slaves as “aristocracy” represents not only social class formation based on patterns of lifestyle, but also suggests tentative class fixity maintained by customs of separation. Douglass replicates this lengthy passage almost verbatim in his final autobiography, *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* (1892), published in 1881 and reprinted and enlarged in 1892, just three years before his death. Yet in the 1845 *Narrative*, he had delved less into stratification among slaves, perhaps because he feared weakening his argument that bondage uniformly undermined slaves’ self-respect and humanity. To appeal to the sympathetic emotions of their readers, antislavery advocates often rendered their subjects as brutalized black individuals and families unwillingly separated from one another through sales and other forced separations. As he reveals the prejudices that occur among plantation blacks, Douglass anticipates his readers asking, “Who, but a fanatic, could get up any sympathy for persons whose every movement was agile, easy and graceful, and who evinced a consciousness of high superiority?” (*MBMF* 72). More often underemphasizing class delineation, antebellum slave narratives argue that whether body servants, field hands, or skilled workers allowed to hire their time, all slaves were relegated to the same monstrous system that needed to be eradicated.

In comparison to antebellum narratives, accounts of slavery published after the Civil War offer slightly more commentary on the social spectrum among African Americans. Chronicling their transition from slave to industrious citizen, many postbellum black writers indicate that even while in bondage, they demonstrated the qualities that marked them as deserving of respect and upward mobility. Carefully crafting her self-portrayal in *Behind the Scenes*, Elizabeth Keckly<sup>5</sup> notes that while enslaved, she worked earnestly to support her master's entire household of seventeen people. Such persistence serves her later as a shrewd businesswoman who manages a small staff of employees and caters to an elite clientele, including first lady Mary Todd Lincoln. Xiomara Santamarina argues that by highlighting the economic value and, more importantly, the social esteem of her work, Keckly rhetorically claims ownership of both her enslaved and free labor. Furthermore, challenging the degradation of "women's work," Keckly argues that laboring does not preclude black women's claims to gentility (Santamarina 140).

As does Moses Grandy, Keckly renders her class position by noting the facility with which she moves in mostly white circles; her narrative features only limited interactions with other African Americans. When she returns to her former owners for a social visit, the Garlands welcome her as their guest and peer, summoning the servants to cater to her needs. "The servants looked on in amazement," Keckly recounts, "While I was eating, the cook remarked, 'I declar, I nebber did see people carry on so. Wonder if I should go off and stay two or three years, if all ob you wud hug and kiss me so when I cum back?'" (250).

Representing the servants, no doubt former slaves like herself, as speaking a dialect while she

---

<sup>5</sup>Jennifer Fleischner cites the author's preferred spelling of her last name as "Keckly" rather than "Keckley," as scholars have previously identified her. See *Mrs. Lincoln and Mrs. Keckly: The Remarkable Story of the Friendship between a First Lady and a Former Slave* (New York: Broadway, 2003).



speaks standard English allows Keckly to show that her self-cultivation in terms of speech, decorum, and wealth class her above the status of servant. She interprets the white aristocrats' hospitality, and the black servants' envy and indignation, as recognition of the respectability and status she has gained since slavery.

Like Keckly's text, which appeared four years earlier, John Quincy Adams's *Narrative* (1872) is a success story that shows how one may overcome racial obstacles to climb the social class ladder. Despite occasional abuse by his masters in slavery, as a freedman Adams retains his faith in hard work, education, and the American legal system. Penning his narrative a decade after escaping slavery, Adams posits himself as an exemplar to all industrious citizens, black and white. As his most favorable white endorsers attest, "He is an instance of an illiterate colored man relieved from a state of bondage, who has by his own natural talents, industry and force of intellect raised himself to a respectable standard of learning and considerable mental culture, showing more knowledge and better education than is generally exhibited by men of the white race when starting under superior advantages" (Adams 62-63). Adams refers to biblical verses and political doctrine, such as the U.S. Constitution that he appends to his narrative, to argue against inherited status. Critiquing the white FFVs' (first families of Virginia) claim to respectability, Adams remarks, "They used to talk about their blood and ancestors. Well if ancestors do not do any more for the South during the next ten years than they did the past ten years, I do not want anything to do with ancestors. It was negro ancestors that kept them up" (46-47). Mediating his discussion of class through the language of gender, Adams argues that the true measure of manhood is success in the marketplace balanced with secure domesticity. This model of middle-class manhood, exemplified by self-starters such as Benjamin Franklin, prevailed throughout the

nineteenth-century. Accordingly Adams mentions that his greatest joy is returning home after work each day to read a newspaper by the fireside. Throughout the narrative Adams portrays his aspirations for meaningful labor, literacy, and a home as natural and essentially American, rather than recognizing such values as class-based desires.

The genre of African American fiction, inaugurated in the 1850s, highlighted class difference in the South, as did slave narratives, but concentrated more consistently on the economic and social class conditions among free blacks in the North. Frank J. Webb's *The Garies and Their Friends* (1857), recognized as the second earliest African American novel, traces class stratification in Philadelphia to show that black communities are as complexly defined and self-sufficient as others. Against claims that blacks fared better in slavery than in freedom, the narrator avers, "we [free blacks] not only support our own poor, but assist the whites to support theirs" (Webb 49). The author portrays three classes of black residents represented in Mr. Walters, a millionaire real estate tycoon; Mr. Ellis, a mechanic providing for his "highly respectable and industrious coloured family"; and Kinch De Younge, the ill-kempt son of an illiterate shopkeeper (Webb 16). Historians attest that the novel offers a realistic literary depiction of the range of black Philadelphians in the 1840s.<sup>6</sup> Webb categorizes the characters throughout the novel by citing behavior, language, and taste as indices of social class affiliation. In one pivotal scene, Mr. Walters advises the Ellises not to allow their young son Charlie to work as a servant for a white family. The prototype of black success and power, Mr. Walters explains that Charlie should begin some low-risk

---

<sup>6</sup>By the 1840s in Philadelphia, "a distinctly multitiered black society" encompassed an elite class of wealthy landowners, a small number of skilled artisans and laborers, and a majority of working poor (Nash 247). See Gary Nash, *Forging Freedom: The Formation of Philadelphia's Black Community, 1720-1840* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1988); Joseph Willson, *Sketches of The Higher Classes of Colored Society in Philadelphia by a Southerner* (Philadelphia: Merrihew and Thompson, 1841); W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Philadelphia Negro: A Social Study* (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania Press, 1899).

entrepreneurial job, such as selling newspapers or matches that will allow him to gain independence, industry, and self-respect. In order for the Ellises to gain social and financial status, as Mr. Walters has, they must not only emulate middle-class behaviors, such as tea time, but also adopt the ethics and business savvy of the prominent classes.

Although Webb outlines the hierarchical class structure among black Philadelphians, he stresses that those classes are interdependent rather than rigidly separate. For black Philadelphians, shared racial concerns often superseded class affiliation. As Anna Engle explains, when Philadelphia's black communities were violently targeted by white residents, particularly Irish immigrants, beginning in the 1830s, African Americans united across class lines to defend their property and their lives (Engle 158). In *The Garies* black residents of various classes take refuge in Mr. Walters's home when the community is under attack. The parlor, a domestic space usually reserved for genteel interaction among middle-class peers, is converted into a fortress from which African Americans collectively wage battle.<sup>7</sup> The cross-class unions that conclude the novel—including the marriage of Charlie Ellis, the mechanic's son, to the blue-blooded mulatta orphan Emily Garie—show that while attentive to the social differences among them, black Americans can overlook class distinctions when doing so will better serve the black community.

Meanwhile, Harriet E. Wilson's *Our Nig* (1859) broaches the issue of class at the outset of the novel. Economic necessity motivates Wilson's writing—she explains that she is “forced to some experiment which shall aid me in maintaining” a livelihood—and awareness of social class difference also begins the novel's plot (3). Describing the seduction of “Mag

---

<sup>7</sup>See Robert Reid-Pharr's introduction to *The Garies and Their Friends* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1997) for a convincing reading of the antebellum black home as a political domain. Reid-Pharr observes that the black defenders in Walters's home protect themselves using “means found within the properly managed household,” such as pepper and cleaning products (xi).

Smith, *My Mother*,” the narrator notes that Mag becomes vulnerable because rather than observing the expected social distance between higher and lower classes, she aspires to “elevation...ease and plenty” through a love affair with a man of higher status. “She thought she could ascend to him and become an equal,” the narrator explains (5). Pregnancy and abandonment are the price Mag pays for crossing class boundaries. Throughout *Our Nig*, Wilson traces how social relations manipulate and reinforce tenuous class boundaries. At the hands of the white “she-devil” Mrs. Bellmont, the mixed race servant girl Frado undergoes violent, humiliating treatment meant to forcibly mold her into “our nig,” a racialized, lower-class family possession. Mrs. Bellmont cuts the girl’s hair and forces her to stay in the sun in order to darken her skin; these forced physical alterations effectively limit the likelihood that light-skinned Frado can pass for white or be mistaken for a member of the Bellmont family. Mrs. Bellmont intends to ensure the fixity of her servant’s social position by denying her a thorough education, moral instruction, and the physical attributes associated with middle-class white womanhood.

As Glenn Altschuler notes, although writers addressed class concerns in the antebellum period, the post-Civil War period witnessed a more pronounced cultural anxiety concerning class conflict. During the period from 1865 through the turn of the twentieth-century, class difference became “the ‘stuff’ of novels, paintings, and journalistic jeremiads, which hinted darkly about cataclysmic social conflict” (77). In their treatment of social class distinctions among African Americans, slave narratives and antebellum black fiction often portray individuated social classes—such as field and house slaves in the South, or moneyed and menial free blacks in the North—uniting across class lines to protect the black community’s collective interests. Webb’s depiction of harmonious cross-class cooperation

among blacks and Wilson's introductory appeal "to my colored brethren universally for patronage" (Wilson 3) present African Americans as collaborators against the common foes of slavery and racial oppression. More often than does antebellum black literature, post-Civil War black writing approaches social class as a point of possible intraracial antagonism. Responding in part to historical conditions during the last quarter of the century, postbellum black fiction features African Americans of different social classes who determine that their sociopolitical and economic concerns are not identical, despite their shared racial background.<sup>8</sup>

### **Historical Changes and Social Difference in the Post-Civil War Period**

During the nineteenth century, many Americans insisted on the democratic superiority of their country over others, claiming that the United States constituted a classless society, or at least one with "natural" social divisions. Influential thinkers distinguished between what they considered artificially imposed classes, as in the British system of social ranking, and social classes that evolved from citizens' success or failure in a meritocracy (Burke 54).<sup>9</sup> Jabez L. M. Curry, nationally recognized as an advocate of universal education, emphasized that America could avoid outright class antagonism, as Europe witnessed in the 1840s. Offering "Some Thoughts for Working Classes" in 1874, Curry conceded, "No legislation can abolish or establish [social distinction]. Laboring men who

---

<sup>8</sup>The conflict between the urbane Dr. Miller and the laborer Josh Green in Charles Chesnutt's *The Marrow of Tradition* (1901), which I treat in Chapter IV, is a notable example of the tense class encounters that I suggest more readily appear in post-Civil War black literature.

<sup>9</sup>Burton Bledstein explains that British society considered ranks "to be a given in the cosmic ordering of the social structure. To transgress the cosmic geography was synonymous with original sin." A person generally remained in his or her inherited rank of gentry or commoner, seldom trespassing those boundaries (Bledstein 3). American spokespersons proposed that by contrast, "class" in the United States "mapped the way stations along the route from pauperism to wealth open to each white, male American" (Lang 1).

clamour for the obliteration of social distinctions are pursuing a will-o'-the-wisp. Lines of separation and distinction may be erased to-day; they will reappear to-morrow" (3).

According to Curry, however, America's redeeming point was that unlike countries with more rigid stratification, "[i]n this country there is no heritability in distinctions...God endows all children—the children of the rich no more and no less than the children of the poor...Differences there may be in individual men in their intellectual capacities, but these are not class differences" (3). Denying that the current American structure perpetuated inequality, Curry claimed that inequities in social power, education, wealth, and lifestyle either were due to individual effort, over which a person had complete control, or divine providence, over which one had no control.

Curry's position at once reinforced and challenged the predominant thought of the period concerning social mobility. Even if one were born into disadvantageous circumstances, the general argument ran, America's open market system rewarded hard work, thrift, and courage, allowing the most deserving citizens to become self-sufficient landowners and entrepreneurs. Curry added optimistically, "Men frequently rise out of themselves and assert, unmistakably and by universal acknowledgment, their superiority to the accidents of birth or apprenticeship" (3). Yet as an agent for the Slater Fund and Peabody Educational Fund, philanthropic endowments intended for black education, Curry acknowledged that newly-freed African Americans needed additional skills and opportunities to compete in the open market.

Touting the model of the self-made man, a persevering figure who overcomes challenges to claim wealth, reputation, and happiness, late nineteenth-century Americans assumed that the wealthy proved themselves "virtuous and industrious" by their own hard

work, while the poor chose to be “vicious and indolent” (Altschuler 77). In his controversial tract, *What Social Classes Owe to Each Other* (1883), Harvard professor William Graham Sumner insisted that the poor were to blame for their poverty. Sumner’s answer to the question the title posed—what social classes owe to each other—was an emphatic “nothing.” Indignant that capitalists were the subject of critique, he sarcastically observed, “Those who are bound to solve the problems are the rich, comfortable, prosperous, virtuous, respectable, educated, and healthy; those whose right it is to set the problems are those who have been less fortunate or less successful in the struggle for existence” (Sumner 8). Informed by Social Darwinist rhetoric of “survival of the fittest,” the emphasis on meritocracy justified the status quo and underestimated how racism, sexism, and other prejudices impacted class status.

Emancipation dramatically disrupted the country’s social structure, prompting black Americans to reevaluate their social class status. Most freeborn African Americans had rallied for abolition, arguing that so long as one black person was held in slavery, none was free from the institution’s grasp. “Free blacks welcomed the end of slavery,” Eric Foner notes, “but many resented the elimination of their unique status and feared being submerged into a sea of freedmen” (Foner 101). In cities such as New Orleans and Charleston, home to some of the largest and wealthiest free black populations in the South, black elites separated themselves socially from both whites and poorer groups of free laboring blacks. These “aristocrats of color”—black elites from old upper class families, usually of mixed race ancestry—occupied a middle or third space between the races that they feared would be compromised if they were classed with all other African Americans (Gatewood ix, 28). Making the most of their position, some privileged blacks asserted themselves as race leaders, living exemplars of respectability for the lower classes to imitate. Like other women

of her class, Charlotte Forten, granddaughter of a prosperous Philadelphia sail maker, became involved in reform groups and government agencies to provide funding, education, and life skills intended to “uplift” the “lowly.” Forten’s “Life on the Sea Islands,” published in the *Atlantic Monthly* in May and June 1864, details her service as a nurse and teacher at Port Royal, St. Helena Island. William L. Andrews asserts that Forten’s optimistic report of the slave refugees’ progress indicates her “abiding sense of a community of color that made all African Americans one in freedom, regardless of color or caste” (*Classic* xxxiii). Yet Gatewood stresses that though they sometimes engaged with other blacks for racial uplift purposes, most black elite maintained exclusivity in social matters (Gatewood 29).

The shifts of African American populations following emancipation also affected how black social classes formed and reformed. After slavery, hordes of former slaves traveled north; those who remained in the South after freedom, as most did, often moved away from the plantations where they had been held in bondage to congregate in cities. Joel Shrock estimates that in the decade after emancipation, “68, 000 African Americans left the rural South and this number increased every decade of the Gilded Age, culminating in the 1890s when 185,000 left their homes” (Shrock 3). Many African Americans relocated in hopes of gaining economic and social opportunities, but found a limited range of available jobs in densely populated cities. Discriminatory hiring practices, lack of skills, and competition from European immigrants kept most African Americans locked out of industrial occupations and restricted to low paying fields of domestic service (Gaines 23). African American literature of the period registers concerns about the indigence, violence, and crime that, by the 1890s, marked as black ghettos sections such as the Tenderloin District of New York, as in Paul Laurence Dunbar’s *The Sport of the Gods*, or the Louisville, Kentucky



district portrayed in Katherine Tillman's urban novel *Clancy Street*. Fearing the rise of a permanent black underclass beyond the reach of social reform efforts, black spokespersons warned African Americans of the economic disappointments and physical dangers of city life. "Whether the blacks emigrate [to the North] or not, I say to them, keep away from the cities and towns," William Wells Brown counseled in 1880. "Go into the country. Go to work on farms. If you stop in the city, get a profession or a trade, but keep in mind that a good trade is better than a poor profession" (Brown 247). Reformers hoped to uplift the restless masses by instilling in them virtues of self-reliance and industry, such as the "better class" practiced.

While the class boundaries between the black upper class and poor classes hardened, the line between the elite and rising middle or intermediate class became more tenuous in the late nineteenth century. Many freedpeople made tremendous economic and political gains through the period of Reconstruction. Even those whose incomes remained meager sometimes adopted some of the accoutrements of the higher-class lifestyle (Gatewood 29). During the period of industrialism and Gilded Age culture from the 1870s to the turn of the twentieth century, technological advancements in production and transportation made mass-marketed goods more readily accessible, even to people in isolated rural environments. Meanwhile, the system of credit purchasing allowed many Americans to enjoy a higher standard of living than they could ordinarily afford (Husband and O'Loughlin 151). For African American freedpeople in particular, purchasing power signified that they were no longer owned as property, but property owners. In his autobiography *My Southern Home* (1880), William Wells Brown notes the relish with which freed blacks in Huntsville, Alabama celebrated market day. Men bought finery for their wives, and spent money on

luxury items that they had been denied in slavery. Yet Brown asserts that luxury sometimes comes at the expense of what he considers wiser uses of money: farm equipment, homes, books, and other tools of self-improvement (Brown 168-170). He and other black spokespersons adamantly counseled against what Thorstein Veblen in *Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899) terms “conspicuous consumption” (Veblen 57). Possibly threatened by indications that other blacks enjoyed the material luxuries that had been exclusively theirs, “better class” African Americans insisted that social class must be judged by social respectability rather than merely material possessions. Modesty in one’s conversation, behavior, apparel, and spending was the signature of “better class” deportment, while ostentatious display was considered a sign of poor breeding and hypocrisy. The contradiction between crass materialism and modest good taste appears as an index of one’s “true” social class in Frances Harper’s serialized novels published in the *Christian Recorder*. As Harper and other black writers argue, a person’s external possessions are meaningless unless accompanied by the proper attitudes toward religion, family, work, and racial solidarity. By reiterating the criteria for better class status, African Americans confirmed social boundaries between hitherto tentatively formed classes of African Americans.

Yet the rise of legalized racial segregation was perhaps the single change that most impacted African Americans’ awareness of social class after emancipation. Focusing exclusively on racial antagonism as the root of segregation often obscures the class resentments of whites toward upwardly mobile blacks. Gaines observes, “Jim Crow was the white South’s, and the nation’s, solution to the social advancement of a rising class of African Americans that threatened a polity founded on white supremacy” (30). The end of Reconstruction and the subsequent legal rulings that disfranchised African Americans were

aimed at the economic, as well as political and social gains that African Americans had made since slavery's end. African Americans who judged their social status through comparison to their white American counterparts witnessed the dwindling of interracial social interactions. Even so, the remaining focus of intraracial social relations became more contested. After the Plessy vs. Ferguson ruling (1896) relegated all people of African descent to a shared second-class political status, regardless of social class, some African Americans continued to insist on social class distinctions among themselves. Yet under racial segregation, elite African Americans sometimes enjoyed few privileges beyond those conceded to other African Americans, and fewer opportunities than non-black immigrants, who did not suffer the stigma attached to African ancestry.<sup>10</sup>

During the last quarter of the nineteenth century, African American public figures responded to the period's developments with increasing attention to their implications in terms of race, gender, and class. In black intellectual forums including conventions, literary clubs, social reform groups, and newspapers such as the *Washington Bee*, *New York Age*, *AME Recorder*, and *Colored American*, African Americans considered questions of social class difference, often by mediating them through the language of racial uplift, labor, and social equality. Insisting that the "Organization of Colored Society" demanded serious examination, black columnist and Philadelphia city commissioner H. Price Williams expected in 1882 that "the journalists of our country will have to take initiatory steps" in discussing social stratification (1). Yet black fiction writers frequently took up the

---

<sup>10</sup>Irish and Chinese immigrants were subject to discrimination, as blacks experienced. Todd Vogel notes that following the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, "the Chinese enjoyed even fewer citizenship rights than African Americans" (Vogel 6). With the privilege of white skin, however, Irish immigrants assimilated into mainstream American culture more easily than did African Americans—a fact resented by some native-born black Americans who felt more entitled than immigrants to citizenship rights. See Noel Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White* (New York: Routledge, 1995).

responsibility Williams assigned to journalists. In the dual capacity of social activist and creative artist, African American spokespersons including Frances Harper, Katherine Tillman, Sutton Griggs, Paul Laurence Dunbar, and Charles Chesnutt registered their awareness of social class difference in both their nonfiction and fictional works this study explores.

## Chapter Summaries

Chapter II explores how Frances Harper engages class through the first and the most enduring of the three topics that this dissertation examines: black “respectability” via “racial uplift.”<sup>11</sup> Centering on *Trial and Triumph* (1888-1889), Harper’s serial novel first published in the *Christian Recorder* and *Iola Leroy* (1892), the study examines how Harper interrogates conventional social designations and supplants them with a morally-inflected language of class. As *Trial and Triumph* traces the conflicts between different “sets” of African Americans in a fictionalized version of Philadelphia, Harper reserves the complimentary term “better class” for community-oriented individuals, not wealthy residents. Likewise, she creates the concept “aristocrats of the soul” to indicate that people committed to social improvement are worthy of esteem and social status, regardless of their economic condition. Tracing Harper’s early ideas about class expressed in her speeches and letters to her later fictional productions, I contend that Harper’s attention to the language of

---

<sup>11</sup>Endorsed both by the elite and many working-class African Americans, the racial uplift initiative of the late nineteenth century promoted education, chastity, and economic self-sufficiency as indicators of African Americans’ social and political “respectability” (Higginbotham 205). The motto “Lifting as We Climb” adopted by the National Association of Colored Women, organized in 1896, epitomizes the late nineteenth-century idea that individuals’ responsibility to the race enabled collective progress. For a discussion of how the “politics of respectability” exacerbated social class differences among African American women, see Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham’s *Righteous Discontent: The Women’s Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1993). Higginbotham reads respectability as a gender-specific strategy, while Kevin Gaines notes that the politics of respectability extended to men and women alike through the uplift initiative.

class underlies her attempt to impose a “moral economy,” in which individuals’ character and social responsibility figure as the currency that trumps color, wealth, and other standards of class distinction.

Focusing on fiction by Katherine Tillman, Paul Laurence Dunbar, and Sutton Griggs, Chapter III examines the relationship between occupation and status in literary depictions of black labor. African American writers differed over the extent to which an individual’s job signified his or her social standing in the black community. Acknowledging that hiring discrimination often consigned black workers to jobs lowest on the nation’s occupational hierarchy, black writers created narratives that diverged from the rags-to-riches myths of upward mobility and boundless job opportunity. Representations of African American workers invoke three prevailing myths of class: “the self-made man”; “the rewarded faithful servant,” which portrays African American manual, industrial and service laborers whose faithfulness gains the favor of white employers; and “The Talented Tenth,” which highlights educated African Americans as the pinnacle of black success and agents of racial uplift. As I elucidate through close readings of previously understudied texts—Tillman’s *Clancy Street* (1898-99); Griggs’s *Imperium in Imperio* (1899) and *Overshadowed* (1901); and Dunbar’s *The Sport of the Gods* (1902), as well as his short stories “At Shaft 11” and “One Man’s Fortune”—many African American writers envisioned that upward mobility for African Americans could be attained only through the most extreme means of physical self-sacrifice and violence.

Chapter IV considers intraracial and interracial class differences in Charles W. Chesnutt’s *The Wife of His Youth* (1899) and *The Marrow of Tradition* (1901). Informed by recent scholarship in cultural studies, the chapter analyzes Chesnutt’s fiction through the

theories of “class performance” and “class-passing,” which propose that one’s class is an unstable, socially constructed identity enforced through everyday performed behavior. While previous critics have recognized that Chesnutt innovates the concept of racial passing, I note how the author also depicts people who class-pass to manipulate nineteenth-century social class hierarchies. In the Blue Vein short story trilogy in *The Wife of His Youth*, Chesnutt depicts class-passing as a strategy that allows African Americans to pursue the social status denied them. *The Marrow of Tradition* highlights the social performances that white Americans enact to maintain their race and class privilege. While Chesnutt seems to object to class prejudice in the former collection, in the latter text he underscores social stratification to suggest that one’s class affiliation should supersede racial identity. Chesnutt emphasizes class affinity, what he calls “kindred standards of thought and feeling,” as the foundation of cross-racial equality between “better class” whites and blacks. In this regard, Chesnutt’s fiction reveals how nineteenth-century black writers attempt to delegitimize racism by highlighting class as a more logical basis for distinguishing among Americans.

In Chapter V, I conclude the dissertation by highlighting the concept of “The Talented Tenth” as central in late nineteenth and early twentieth-century literary discussions of intraracial stratification. Beginning with Du Bois’s articulation of the Talented Tenth in 1903, I trace the shift in class ideology that led to the rise of the Harlem Renaissance. As Victoria Wolcott finds, through the 1910s and early 1920s, African Americans continued to deploy the language of racial uplift and respectability, as it appears in the nineteenth-century writing of Harper, Tillman, Chesnutt and Du Bois. Yet by the late 1920s and 1930s racial ideology increasingly highlighted “male self-defense, civil rights and industrial unionism” instead of the female-inflected resort to respectability (Wolcott 4). Key literary figures of the

Harlem Renaissance, including Langston Hughes who, incidentally, descended from the elite class of African Americans,<sup>12</sup> were much less concerned than their foreparents with presenting African Americans as respectable citizens whose morality and work ethic proved them worthy of social equality with whites. As I surmise, the backlash against talented tenth philosophy, and against the black middle class in general, epitomized in E. Franklin Frazier's *The Black Bourgeoisie* (1957), influenced twentieth-century African American literature and our scholarly understanding of it.

---

<sup>12</sup>Langston Hughes is the nephew of Reconstruction Congressman John Mercer Langston (1829-1897) (Gatewood 176).

## CHAPTER II

### **The Language of Class and Respectability in Frances E. W. Harper's *Trial and Triumph* and *Iola Leroy***

In Frances E. W. Harper's 1892 novel *Iola Leroy*, a former bondswoman's shrewd language emphasizes respectability as a primary criterion for judging social differences among postbellum African Americans. Conversing with the genteel title character Iola and her uncle Robert Johnson, the affectionately named "Aunt" Linda Salters observes:

"But dere's some triflin' niggers down yere who'll sell der votes for almost nuffin. Does you 'member Jake Williams an' Gundover's Tom? Well dem two niggers is de las' ob pea-time. Dey's mighty small pertaters an' few in a hill."

"Oh, Aunt Linda," said Robert, "don't call them niggers. They are our own people."

"Dey ain't my kine ob people. I jis' calls em niggers, an' niggers I means; an' de bigges' kine ob niggers. An' if my John war sich a nigger I'd whip him an' leave him." (Harper, *IL* 176)

Concerned with polite language and racial solidarity, Iola and Robert chide Aunt Linda for referring to other African Americans as "niggers." Aunt Linda, however, deliberately and discriminately deploys the term usually intended as a racial epithet to discern class distinctions within the black race. Her comments highlight a less obvious measure of intraracial social distinctions than skin color, income, or "book larnin'," as she elsewhere refers to formal education (156). In Aunt Linda's estimation, an individual's values and behaviors determine his or her social standing. Though she occupies a similar economic position as the unskilled black laborers Tom and Jake, Aunt Linda disassociates from them because by not voting conscientiously, the two men eschew one of the rights of responsible



citizenship valued by progressive African Americans. At a loss for terms to denote black people whom she does not consider her social peers, Aunt Linda offers a concise, derogatory description: “triflin’ niggers.” In her usage, being a “nigger” refers specifically to behaving in ways potentially detrimental to black advancement. Uttering a refrain commonly used to signify class distinctions, Aunt Linda declares, “Dey ain’t my kine ob people.”<sup>13</sup>

Aunt Linda’s inability or refusal to verbalize social difference in terms that her discreet listeners consider less offensive and more precise points to a larger dilemma of classification. Amy Lang notes that in mid-nineteenth-century America, “In a social world routinely, if sensationally, represented as divided [...] the failure of traditional modes of social description to accommodate new social and economic relationships heightened public awareness of class differences” (Lang 3). Lang’s observation also characterizes the post-Civil War period, as historical changes including emancipation, urbanization, and capitalist expansion altered race and class dynamics and called for new ways of expressing social position. For instance, African Americans who formerly were termed “slaves” indicated their status change in freedom by pronouncing themselves “women” and “men” or “ladies” and “gentlemen.” One Philadelphia columnist in 1865 noted that the concept of “gentleman,” which in the minds of most Americans conjured the image of a well-bred white man, needed also to apply to high-achieving African Americans, such as the prominent black Philadelphians profiled in his essay. Defining “gentleman” loosely as a man with “a big purse, and easy dignity,” the writer proposed “a loop-hole through which to slip a colored gentleman or two” (“Lights and Shadows” 2). Nineteenth-century African Americans accessed an available lexicon of class in common with white Americans. Yet as the above

---

<sup>13</sup>Lawrence Otis Graham adopts the phrase as the title of his twentieth-century exposé *Our Kind of People: Inside America’s Black Upper Class* (New York: Harper, 2000).

appropriations of “nigger” and “gentleman” suggest, African Americans also imbued conventional terms with additional meanings to convey the nuanced social distinctions black people recognized among themselves.

In her fiction and nonfiction works, Frances E. W. Harper both implicitly and overtly problematizes how African Americans determine and articulate class difference. Her novels *Trial and Triumph* (1888-1889), which appeared serially in the *African Methodist Episcopal Christian Recorder*, and her more famous *Iola Leroy*, depict black people actively conversing about who and what constitute “the poor,” “better class,” and “elite” in post-Civil War black communities. In these scenes of verbal contestation, individuals attempt to identify their position in the social order while avoiding the connotations embedded in terms such as “rich” and “poor.” The speakers instead use phrases and syntax that displace the traditional emphasis on material means with a renewed focus on morality. Writing during the Gilded Age of consumerism and increasing racial tensions, Harper argues against boundaries based on color, wealth, culture, and other external attributes and alternatively posits respectability as a more conclusive means of judging divisions. In the societal order Harper envisions in *Trial and Triumph* and *Iola Leroy*, black Americans who privilege spiritual wealth over financial gain distinguish themselves as the “better class” or “aristocrats of the soul,” a category Harper devises by merging the language of the market economy with the vocabulary of spirituality. Pierre Bourdieu’s understanding of struggles over classification offers a useful framework for analyzing Harper’s negotiation of terms of status throughout her works. As Bourdieu argues, classifications are “the basis of the representations of groups and therefore of their mobilization and demobilization” (Bourdieu 479). In order to mobilize post-Reconstruction African Americans for advancement within their own communities and

to change the representation of blacks in interracial contexts, Harper begins by reformulating the categories of social class. In her fiction, respectability serves as a “loop-hole” in conventional class criteria so that African Americans committed to racial uplift can aspire to “better class” status, regardless of their economic background. The black subjects of Harper’s novels attain status by serving their race and humanity, rather than through calculated pursuits of power and wealth, thereby dramatizing Harper’s belief that being an “aristocrat of the soul” outranks all other social distinctions.

Prior critics have interpreted Harper’s class politics as either an elitist endorsement of bourgeois morality, or contrarily, as a progressive commitment to extend dignity to lower-class African Americans. Houston Baker criticizes Harper and other late nineteenth-century black female leaders for asserting “a bright Victorian morality in whiteface” seemingly removed from the more immediate economic concerns of most black Americans (Baker, *Workings* 33). In contrast, based on Harper’s involvement with community building during her tours of the post-war South, Barbara McCaskill lauds the author for “refus[ing] to hide behind the petticoats of respectability and breeding in order to escape exposure to the suffering and the poor” (McCaskill 174). Similarly biographer Melba Joyce Boyd cites Harper’s favorable depiction of Southern black folk as evidence of her lack of class prejudice and elitism. Boyd concludes, “Unlike many of her contemporaries, [Harper] ignored the prejudices of the bourgeois imagination and thereby transcended the cultural and class contradictions of traditional writing” (Boyd 151). While differing as to their sympathies with Harper’s perceived class affinities, Baker, McCaskill and Boyd all base their conclusions about Harper’s class notions on the categories of black Americans she seems to privilege in her fiction, which can range from dark-skinned blacks to mulatta/os, dialect-speaking former

slaves to their formally educated counterparts, and working class laborers to black professionals.

Neither Baker's impression of Harper as elitist nor Boyd's assertion that the author transcends "cultural and class contradictions" captures the complexity of Harper's class ideology. My reading of the language of class in Harper's writing underscores how the author struggled to envision a social structure for African Americans that would not merely reinforce the color and class hierarchies already in place. Publishing *Trial and Triumph* in the late 1880s during a period when social divisions between African Americans remained tenuous and contested, Harper argued that intraracial stratification based on wealth, refinement or skin color could compromise African Americans' racial solidarity, hampering blacks' cooperation in challenging racism. She instead delimited classes according to Judeo-Christian ethics, constituting what may be called a "moral economy" in which an individual's selfless character trumps money, education and lineage as the currency that affords social position.<sup>14</sup> Nevertheless, while Harper intended this strategy of classification to be more egalitarian, especially with respect to poor or uneducated African Americans, her emphasis on respectability did little to ease the heightening class tensions between the "lowly" and "better class." As Kevin Gaines notes, a moral economy such as Harper created paradoxically reiterates racial inferiority by dismissing the masses of African Americans who willfully or unknowingly disregarded the proposed class standards (Gaines 4). Thus Harper's

---

<sup>14</sup>In economic theory, a "moral economy" is an economic model that "appeals to a moral norm—what *ought* to be men's reciprocal duties" in structuring businesses, labor practices and economics to benefit common welfare (Thompson 91). By the nineteenth century, disinterested capitalism displaced the earlier moral economy, though, as Sven Beckert notes, lower-middle and working-class Americans still valued the notion of moral economy (Beckert 291). I intend "moral economy" to highlight Harper's assertion that morality itself has value and serves as what Pierre Bourdieu considers "social capital." In Harper's work, this formulation of moral economy is most obvious in her essay "True Politeness" (1898), in which she proposes, "True politeness is the currency of everyday life. False politeness is a counterfeit coin with its brassy ring on the counters of existence" (398-399). I argue that this idea of authentic virtue as one's "currency" informs both *Trial and Triumph* and *Iola Leroy*, as Harper merges the terms of economy and respectability.

attempts to realign class boundaries tended to reinforce the social politics she aimed to reform. Harper's novel *Trial and Triumph* allows us to witness the author's self-conscious efforts to revise the language, construction and implications of social class distinctions. Read in concert with her nonfiction commentaries and *Iola Leroy*, *Trial and Triumph* also reveals the limitations that attend Harper's effort to reconceive of class according to ostensibly moral norms.

Harper's speeches and letters published prior to *Trial and Triumph* and *Iola Leroy* indicate how her concept of class evolved over her forty-year career, which spanned slavery, emancipation, Reconstruction and the Gilded Age. Boyd suggests that Harper's experiences as a "poor" African American woman likely fostered her "class sensitivity" to economically disadvantaged Americans and motivated her to mediate between social classes (Boyd 18, 166).<sup>15</sup> Freeborn in Baltimore, Maryland in 1825, Harper was raised by her uncle, abolitionist preacher William Watkins, and matriculated at the academy he founded and directed. Finding limited employment opportunities for young black women, she worked as a seamstress and taught in Ohio and Pennsylvania before associating with the Northern abolitionist movement and becoming one of its premier spokespersons in 1854 (Still 758). In her antebellum speeches, poetry and essays, which were devoted primarily but not exclusively to antislavery themes, Harper seldom comments on intraracial class differences, focusing instead on the

---

<sup>15</sup>Frances Smith Foster observes that while Harper's close friend William Still and Harper herself often presented her as having a particularly difficult childhood, it is uncertain whether or not this was because she was "poor," as Boyd suggests (*Brighter Coming Day* 6). As the niece of the prominent leader William Watkins, Harper may not have experienced the economic deprivation as a child that Boyd assumes was generally the plight of most African Americans. However Harper's autobiographical comments in letters, lectures and articles suggest that as an adult, she was often in dire financial straits, as her remuneration for lecturing proved unstable and unpredictable. In one speech she portrays herself as a poor farmer's wife, left in the hands of debtors after her husband Fenton Harper died in 1864, just three and a half years after their marriage (Harper, *Brighter Coming Day* 217).

larger social chasm between blacks and whites.<sup>16</sup> Occasionally, however, she does acknowledge the class gradations among African Americans, as in her essay “Our Greatest Want” (1859), published in the black-edited *Anglo-African* magazine. Harper insists that economically stable free blacks should feel a greater sense of duty toward slaves and other African Americans of less privileged conditions. While many free blacks intended that their success in the antebellum marketplace would prove that people of color did not fare better in slavery than in freedom, as some slavery apologists claimed, Harper argued that accruing wealth was not an active enough strategy to shift racist opinions.<sup>17</sup> The black race needs most “what money cannot buy and what affluence is too beggarly to purchase. Earnest, self sacrificing [sic] souls that will stamp themselves not only on the present but the future. Let us not then defer all our noble opportunities till we get rich” (104). Perhaps anticipating critiques that her recommendations were idealist and impractical, she clarifies her disposition toward economic gain, explaining, “here I am not aiming to enlist a fanatical crusade against the desire for riches, but I do protest chaining down the soul [...] to the one idea of getting money” (Harper, *Brighter Coming Day* 104). As early as 1859, Harper posits the anti-materialist ethic and emphasis on social responsibility that permeates much of her later writing. Though she acknowledges the black community’s need for economic self-sufficiency, she maintains that economic status alone does not indicate progress.

In the years immediately following the Civil War, Harper’s awareness of class distinctions in black communities and in the broader interracial social order left her

---

<sup>16</sup>Two of Harper’s poems—“Died of Starvation,” included in her second volume *Poems on Miscellaneous Subjects* (1854) and “Lessons of the Street” (1858), published in *The Liberator* newspaper—address economic class difference by focusing on the conditions of the urban poor. See pgs 69-70 and 89-90 of the edited collection *A Brighter Coming Day* for reprints of these poems.

<sup>17</sup>For example, in Frank J. Webb’s novel *The Garies and Their Friends* (1857), the narrator avers that free black communities are self-sufficient and “not only support our own poor, but assist the whites to support theirs” (Webb 49).

ambivalent about the feasibility of class mobility in post War America. At times wavering between hope and dissolution about conditions she witnessed during her tours of the war-torn South, she notes that wealthy whites had exerted their race and class privilege in the antebellum South to the detriment of poor whites as well as blacks. Based on Harper's trip to Darlington, South Carolina, her letter dated July 26, 1867, published in the *National Anti-Slavery Standard* observes:

To me one of the saddest features in the South is not even the old rebel class [...] but the most puzzling feature of Southern social life is, what shall become of the poorer white classes? Freedom comes to the colored man with new hopes, advantages and opportunities [...] but this poor "cracken [sic] class," what is there for them? They were the dregs of society before the war, and their status is unchanged. (*Brighter Coming Day* 124)

While Harper anticipates that newly freed blacks may be able to "force [their] way upward" in social position, she remains less convinced of the future of poor whites (124). As she concludes, the "cracken class" that had conspired with planters to maintain slavery received "the curse [of slavery] in their souls" (124). Unlike former slaves who had learned organization, discipline, and endurance in the "school of toil and privation," Harper concludes that poor whites lacked the moral fortitude to reform their lives and possibly change their status. She notes, "I do not remember ever to have noticed a face among a certain class of [whites] that seemed lighted up with any ambition, hope or lofty aspirations" (124). "Our Greatest Want" and the letter from South Carolina reveal Harper's impression that, as primarily a socioeconomic concept, social class unnecessarily distanced wealthy African Americans from their enslaved brethren and antagonized poor whites and enslaved persons who often shared a common oppressor. Harper does not indicate a desire to abandon the concept of class altogether, but her later postbellum writings innovate the idea of class by highlighting its potential moral dimensions.

Harper's desire to deconstruct and redefine the parameters of African American social classes appears clearly articulated in her essay, "Land and Labor" (1870), featured in the *Christian Recorder* as part of a series on the state of black America. She chides black people for "a disposition among some of our people when they were favored by fortune, to draw the hem of their garments a little too carefully from social contact with others less favored" (Harper, "Land" 2). Soon after objecting to elitism on the basis of "fortune" and wealth, however, Harper proposes that when applied as she prescribes, social distinctions among African Americans can facilitate black progress. She clarifies:

When I speak of exclusiveness and isolation among our people, I do not wish it to be understood that I would level all social distinctions. I think the time has come when colored women may begin to draw distinctions in society. I would advise no line to be drawn between riches and poverty, between knowledge and ignorance, *but there is a place where the line should be drawn, sharply and distinctly, it is between those who are living virtuous lives, and those who are arming themselves against the peace, the progress and the purity of the fireside*, for if a race would grow and grow in the right direction, that race must plant the roots of progress under the hearthstone. (2, emphasis added)

While she supposes that finances and education are arbitrary and artificial boundaries of social classes, she asserts that social distinctions depend on one's adherence to a strict code of morality. In keeping with the nineteenth-century logic of the woman as the guardian of society, she enjoins black women to carefully police the boundaries of social classes according to respectability.

By emphasizing virtuous living as a determinant of class, Harper's ideas of social distinction resonate with constructions of class in post-Civil War African American thought. By the last quarter of the nineteenth century, many African Americans conceded that class differences did and should exist among blacks. "The issue was not whether a class structure existed but what form its development and refinement should take in order to promote 'the



progress of the race,’” Willard Gatewood explains, “Of especial concern were the appropriate criteria for delineating between the upper, middle, and lower classes” (Gatewood 23). The means for judging social classes shifted over the course of the nineteenth century. In the antebellum period, the highest class of African Americans, alternately termed “aristocrats of color,” “the higher classes,” and “the elite,” referred to their freeborn status, mixed race heritage, and education to distinguish themselves from other classes of blacks. While education and wealth remained important variables, by the later decades of the century, respectability eclipsed other factors as a signifier of class among African Americans (Gatewood 24).

White and black Americans deferred to the discourse of respectability, but the enactment of respectability held special social and political significance for blacks. In the years following the Civil War through the Progressive era, black and white reformers intended that the widespread adoption of “respectable” values, namely thrift, modesty, sexual purity, temperance, work ethic, genteel taste, domesticity and polite manners, would improve the tenor of American society, countering the effects of urbanization, poverty, and ignorance. To this end, thousands of social activists, including many women, wrote and distributed informational tracts and books, conducted home visits, and organized charities to acculturate the lower classes to mainstream values (Dye 1). For black Americans, respectability was a central component of the racial uplift ideology that aimed to present blacks as organized, industrious, and ethical enough to manage the privileges of American citizenry.<sup>18</sup> Evelyn

---

<sup>18</sup>Barbara McCaskill provides a comprehensive definition of racial uplift ideology, which prevailed roughly from the post-Civil War period to the 1920s: “Uplift emphasized self-reliance, patriotism, philanthropy, civil rights, political activism, social reform, educational and material attainment, investment and thrift, bourgeois tastes and respectable manners, good citizenship, pan-Africanism, black history and heritage, modernity, urbanization, industrialization, hygiene, temperance, suffrage, culture, ethics, entrepreneurship, coalition-building, and Christian morality and wholesomeness” (McCaskill 168). Kevin Gaines’s *Uplifting the Race* contends that the uplift initiative led by middle-class African Americans was not a cohesive program, but

Brooks Higginbotham explains, “The politics of respectability emphasized reform of individual behavior and attitudes both as a goal in itself and as a strategy for reform of the entire structural system of American race relations” (Higginbotham 187). Against racist opinion and pseudoscientific evidence that assumed blacks’ inferiority, many African Americans in the post-Reconstruction era attempted to demonstrate that, like their white American counterparts, African Americans could attain stable patriarchal families, economic self-sufficiency, and moral purity. Yet by attempting to neutralize race and highlight class and character as more viable measures of a person, uplift ideology also paradoxically reiterated racial inferiority. As Gaines explains, the emphasis on self-help and responsibility tended to promote class divisions within the race as evidence of “evolutionary race progress” while blaming the lower classes for their supposed lack of progress (Gaines 20).

African American spokespersons insisted that blacks from any socioeconomic background could demonstrate and achieve respectability, so long as they ascribed to the behaviors and attitudes of racial uplift, but the quest for respectability inadvertently underscored the material disparities among African Americans. As historian August Meier proposes, from the 1880s to 1920s, at the height of Booker T. Washington’s racial leadership, the class structure and ideology among blacks emphasized the importance of supporting black businesses, saving money, and owning one’s own home where, as Harper mentioned in “Land and Labor,” African Americans could “plant the roots of progress under the hearthstone” (Harper, “Land” 2). Black enterprise was a priority “and in view of white attitudes this must be done by Negroes within their own community” (Meier 258). Yet the

---

multiple rhetorical, organizational, and political strategies all claiming to discern and advance the best interests of postbellum African Americans. Uplift reformers sometimes maintained conflicting agendas, privileging certain of the values McCaskill lists over others.

desire for respectability through economic gain bred competition among blacks who embraced the attitude of acquisitiveness that marked the Gilded Age.

With its consistent critique of consumerism, Harper's formulation of status counters the materialist aspect of contemporary class ideologies. As an activist who witnessed first-hand the needs of formerly enslaved people in the South, as well as the challenges of black Americans in the urban North, Harper agreed with racial uplift adherents by advocating land ownership, entrepreneurship, industrial education, and non-discriminatory housing and hiring practices as means for African Americans to gain economic stability. Harper, however, is careful to highlight the thin line between "respectable" ownership and frivolous consumerism. In many of her works, particularly *Trial and Triumph*, she discourages indulgent consumption as a waste of personal and community resources that could otherwise be expended in educating the race or supporting other uplift activities. The race's primary goal, in her estimation, should be to train African Americans to exhibit kindness and integrity in each area of their lives, whether or not one's moral decisions are rewarded with economic and social gains.<sup>19</sup>

In a speech in 1888, just months before her first installments of *Trial and Triumph* appeared in the *Christian Recorder*, Harper outlines the class structure she envisions based on moral character. Addressing the International Council of Women on March 27, 1888, Harper makes an even more stringent claim than the one she forwarded in her antebellum speech, "Our Greatest Want." Speaking before a mixed audience of blacks and whites, she asserts that in an ideal moral economy, financially wealthy Americans are counted "poor" if they do not conscientiously work for the good of others. As she figures, a more

---

<sup>19</sup>See "True and False Politeness," one of Harper's last published essays, for one of her strongest reiterations of the need to act consistently to win approval from Christ rather than from humans (*Brighter Coming Day* 396-400).

comprehensive strategy of classification and social reform would consider individuals' spiritual state:

Society organizes its charities and corrections for its perishing and dangerous class; builds prisons and reformatories and the gallows for one, and extends sheltering arms to the other...but who thinks of feeling or caring for the neglected rich—the men with plethoric purses but attenuated souls, the moral cripples who tread on velvet carpets, who suffer from the most fatal of all neglects—self-neglect—a neglect which projects itself into the lives of others? (“Neglected Rich” 119)

Rather than bridging the disparities between the rich and the impoverished, charitable efforts and the lexicon for distinguishing classes ideally would recognize “that while men may boast of the aristocracy of wealth and talent, *the aristocracy of the soul outranks all other*” (120, emphasis added). Harper’s concept of the “aristocracy of the soul” merges the conventional language of worldly hierarchy with an ethic of transcendent spirituality, significantly shifting the terms by which class would be measured. In *Trial and Triumph* that followed just months afterwards, Harper maps out how such a class structure—one that privileges unselfish, community-oriented aristocrats—might take form in African American communities. As she outlines, aristocrats of the soul situate themselves as the moral exemplars not only to the poor, but also to African Americans whose investment in worldly power leads them to misconstrue the true intent of social distinctions.

## II

Of Harper’s four full-length fictions, *Trial and Triumph* provides the author’s most extensive examination of social stratification among African Americans. *Minnie’s Sacrifice* (1869) and *Sowing and Reaping* (1876-77), both serialized in the *Christian Recorder*, and

*Iola Leroy* (1892) all feature characters apparently of different classes.<sup>20</sup> Yet those novels center on the controlling themes of Reconstruction, temperance, and slavery, whereas *Trial and Triumph* explicitly takes issue with the internal dynamics of postbellum black communities. *Trial and Triumph*'s thematic focus, as well as its publication history as a serial text in a black-owned religious periodical, make the novel an important index of discussions of class in the broader black discourse of the day. The novel also reveals how Harper, as both a product and a contributor to the social values of her time, interpreted class and the prospect of social mobility for black Americans in the 1880s.

En route to the triumphs foretold in its title, *Trial and Triumph* follows the Harcourt family and other residents of A.P.<sup>21</sup> through trials that raise their awareness about judging and naming social class difference among African Americans. At the novel's beginning, Annette Harcourt is a precocious, but troubled black girl struggling to overcome her "antenatal history" as the daughter of an unwed mother and an estranged father. Orphaned after her mother's death, Annette lives in the low-income Tennis Court tenements with her grandmother, who provides for her physical needs but neglects her emotional development. Annette is the target of ridicule by her white peers and the wealthier African Americans who deem her too unattractive, "bookish," and poor for their social circles. When the black "better class" community leaders Mr. Thomas and Mrs. Lassette, both former schoolteachers, recognize Annette's potential as a writer, they share with her lessons of self-denial,

---

<sup>20</sup>*Sowing and Reaping* focuses on racially indeterminate characters, and the class divisions outlined in the text cannot be said to apply to African American communities as explicitly as in *Trial and Triumph*.

<sup>21</sup>Carla Peterson concludes that the city of A. P. is likely Philadelphia, where Harper had lived since 1871 (Peterson 104). As the frequent site and subject of debates about black class formation, Philadelphia served as a likely setting for Harper's novel *Trial and Triumph* and the northern scenes of *Iola Leroy*. Agreeing with Peterson's claim, I correlate Harper's treatment of the city with other authors who similarly addressed the particular socioeconomic dynamics in Philadelphia.

perseverance and racial pride that help her become a veritable representative of black people's potential for virtuous living. Motivated by her Christian principles, as well as her "love for her race and a desire to serve it," Annette graduates at the top of her class at her newly integrated school, moves to the South to teach in a black school, and eventually marries a suitor, Mr. Luzerne, who shares her commitment to racial uplift (227).

The plot of *Trial and Triumph* recalls mid-nineteenth century "woman's fiction" by featuring a young woman deprived of familial support "who nevertheless goes on to win her own way in the world" (Baym ix).<sup>22</sup> Yet the novel's divergences from nineteenth-century "woman's fiction" suggest Harper's awareness of how race impacted African Americans' chances for social mobility. White-authored domestic novels, such as Maria Cummins's *The Lamplighter* (1854), aim to move their female protagonists outside class, "outside history, outside the play of interests—economic, social, and political—that render the world unstable," often by retiring them to the domestic space (Lang 18). Similar opportunities did not always exist for black American women to remain home as caregivers. As Jacqueline Jones explains, though labor opportunities and conditions for black women varied from South to North, the majority of black women in the late nineteenth century had to work to contribute to their households, and their limited gains in the marketplace made it harder for their families as a whole to achieve upward mobility (Jones 154). Accordingly, the black women's fictions that Claudia Tate categorizes as "domestic allegories" often move their central female character progressively into engagement with African American history, politics, and labor. In *Trial and Triumph*, women whom Harper presents as most admirable

---

<sup>22</sup>Though Nina Baym's analysis studies fiction for, by, and about white women during the antebellum period, the model of woman's fiction she identifies applies to Harper's postbellum novel. Baym prefers the term "woman's" rather than "women's" fiction to indicate that not all female writers constructed novels in this vein (Baym x).

insist on working for a living wage or engaging in community service that keeps them visible and active. By the novel's end, Annette is, in Tate's terms, the "true black woman":

"domestic nurturer, spiritual counselor, moral advocate, social activist, and academic teacher" whose life merges paid labor, public service, and domesticity (Tate 97).<sup>23</sup>

*Trial and Triumph* also departs from many postbellum black novels that address social mobility by deemphasizing the significance of skin color, a physical attribute that historians cite as a litmus of African American social distinction well into the twentieth century. In *Iola Leroy* and other uplift novels of the 1890s, black writers frequently featured protagonists who in appearance and conduct are notably distinguished from lower-class, darker blacks. Equaling or exceeding white Americans in adherence to bourgeois standards of decorum, the light-skinned women who populate much late nineteenth-century African American fiction are characterized to challenge racially exclusive claims to respectability by refuting negative impressions of people of African descent (Tate 104). Yet the preference for white skin could also suggest that black people acknowledged white identity as biologically and aesthetically superior to blackness. In *Trial and Triumph*, Harper provides few details about her characters' physical appearance, instead highlighting their actions as the sign of their social status. Annette lacks the conventional traits of outward physical beauty, unlike Iola Leroy, whose apparent whiteness and beauty fascinate her black and white observers and enable her, at least until her black heritage is discovered, to gain comfortable housing and work in the urban North (Harper, *IL* 207). Each of Annette's triumphs, including her

---

<sup>23</sup>Claudia Tate's *Domestic Allegories of Political Desire* argues that the conventional (white) woman's novel took on additional political saliency when appropriated by post-Reconstruction African American writers. Tate's 1987 study predates Foster's 1994 reprint of the serialized novels, and therefore does not include *Trial and Triumph* in its analysis of "eleven extant domestic novels" written between 1890 and 1901 though I contend that the text fits this category (Tate 4).

marriage to Mr. Luzerne, is attributed solely to her perseverance and personality. One comment in the novel implies that Annette possesses light skin, but her “big nose and plain face” clearly reveal her African descent, foreclosing the possibility of passing as white. Mrs. Lassette tells her, “if it were not for signs there’s no mistaking I should think you had a lot of Irish blood in your veins, and had kissed the blarney stone” (218). By imputing few advantages to Annette’s skin color, Harper acknowledges the need to represent African Americans other than mulattas as capable of social leadership. Furthermore, Annette expresses no desire to move beyond the social domain of African Americans. The class mobility that she aspires to entails remaining among African Americans, using the privileges of her education to benefit black Americans without feeling the resentment that plagues mulatto characters such as Tom Lowry in Charles Chesnutt’s *Mandy Oxendine* (Jackson 559). Likewise, when presented with the choice to pass as white and enjoy greater career benefits, Mr. Thomas and Charlie Cooper, a young man who is fired from his job when he is ousted for not revealing his black ancestry, both dutifully align themselves with their black mothers’ race, though they realize the possible social and economic limitations of choosing so.

A consideration of *Trial and Triumph*’s publication history may illuminate why Harper addresses social class as she does in the novel—more confrontationally than she would in *Iola Leroy* three years later. Published in the Philadelphia-based *Christian Recorder* in twenty installments from October 4, 1888 to February 14, 1889, *Trial and Triumph* used a popular venue to facilitate theoretical considerations of the function and nature of intraracial social stratification. As Philadelphia’s black population grew from 22,000 in 1870 to 63,000 by 1900, African American residents examined their relationships to one another and to the



city's white citizens, often through the pages of the *Recorder* (Williams 8). Gilbert Anthony Williams estimates that during part of the period when Harper published in its pages (1853-1911), the paper's subscription base ranged from a high of 8,000 in 1876 to a reported 5,500 in 1884 and 1890; however, its circulation among nonsubscribers may have been much larger (Williams 19).

Carla Peterson suggests that Harper's awareness of audience—the explicitly African American audience of the *Christian Recorder* and the mixed black and white audience of *Iola Leroy*—may have influenced how she attends to the issue of class differently in the two texts. Harper's serialized fiction in the black periodical demonstrates “not only Harper's commitment to working with fictional and novelistic forms as she shaped them to fit her political, social, and ideological ends, but also her willingness openly to broach certain problematical issues [...] that *Iola Leroy* approaches only indirectly or at the margins” (Peterson 98). Class contention among African Americans was one such problematic issue Harper sought to address, especially given her concerns about black Americans' pettiness and materialism in Philadelphia and the larger black society. If, as Charles Johanningsmeier explains, readers of periodical fiction interpret the text “in light of surrounding materials and other environmental factors,” we must examine the “paratext” of articles, advertisements, and news surrounding *Trial and Triumph* to understand how Harper's audience would have interpreted it (Johanningsmeier 91). Frances Smith Foster's 1994 collected edition of *Trial and Triumph* obscures its serialized nature for the sake of fluid reading. What is lost in this move, however, is how Harper's story and her focus on the issue of class responds to the original literary and historical context. With chapters of *Trial and Triumph* juxtaposed on the pages of the *Recorder* against advertisements for beauty creams, silk robes, pianos, organs,

chandeliers, and other goods, Harper lodges her objection to the growing consumerism among African Americans that she felt threatened racial uplift by fostering artificial distinctions of taste and possessions.

Though it is not clear whether Harper or the paper's editor determined the serialized format of the novel, its incremental nature was especially well suited for inciting dialogue about relevant issues such as social classification. Michelle Toohey explains, "As was the custom of the nineteenth-century readership, each new chapter of Harper's serialized novels would have been read aloud as it became available, so that the oral nature of such an event became an opportunity for communal discussion and reflection" (Toohey 204). Encouraging a dialogic relationship among the readers, the *Recorder*'s editor Benjamin Lee solicited reader response at various points during the course of *Trial and Triumph*'s publication. In the November 15, 1888 issue featuring the seventh chapter of the novel, the editor remarks, "'Trial and Triumph,' the story now running through THE CHRISTIAN RECORDER, is meeting with high commendations. Several persons have written for back numbers. Call the attention of your friends to this popular story" (4). While the paper does not offer critical reviews that clarify whether readers responded specifically to the novel's discussion of social class or primarily to the story's generally inspirational tone, a notice printed February 14, 1889 announces, "'Trials [sic] and Triumph' closes with this number. Many have thought well of the story. How do you like?" (4). Through the fictional characters of *Trial and Triumph*, Harper contends that readers who may have considered themselves black "better class" because of their education and lifestyle need to understand the deeper mission of the black better class: to be moral exemplars in their intraracial and interracial relations. The conversations in the novel model for readers how to reconsider the boundaries and

implications of social divisions. Tracing the characters through spiritual, economic, and social reversals, *Trial and Triumph* examines the relationship between moral respectability and intraracial stratification first by drawing attention to the vocabulary and standards of class.

### III

In *Trial and Triumph*, Harper represents a multi-tiered black class structure of African Americans ranging from the “lowly” to the “elite” to dramatize how social distinctions fracture black communities and how, conversely, delineating class in the ways she intends may benefit the race. The importance of naming social classes is crucial in *Trial and Triumph* because, as Bourdieu theorizes, group identification is reinforced through classification. He explains:

Systems of classification would not be such a decisive object of struggle if they did not contribute to the existence of classes by enhancing the efficacy of the objective mechanisms with the reinforcement supplied by representations structured in accordance with the classification. (Bourdieu 480)

In order for a black “better class” to assume its position as the moral Talented Tenth of society, the class is constituted first through language. When explaining their social status within the black community, speakers in the novel find that traditional vocabulary fails their intentions. Speakers devise “neither/nor” or “both/and” classifications to indicate, for example, that poverty and respectability are not mutually exclusive conditions. This reformulation of terms underlies Harper’s ideal social order led by “aristocrats of the soul.”

Early in the novel, circuitous social descriptions resist conventional economic terms to instead express the social uplift mission of the better class. Describing Annette’s grandmother, the narrator explains: “Mrs. Harcourt was a Southern woman by birth, who

belonged to that class of colored people whose freedom consisted chiefly in not being the chattels of the dominant race—a class to whom little was given and from whom much was required” (Harper, *Trial* 188). The lengthy account anticipates readers’ possible assumptions about the class privileges of freeborn black women. Though many African Americans considered free ancestry a condition of acceptance into exclusive social circles, the description of Mrs. Harcourt’s condition explains that her freedom afforded her few privileges. Instead the phrase that follows the dash—“a class to whom little was given and from whom much was required”—intends to offer readers more about her social position.<sup>24</sup> The language of the passage presents class as more about being positioned to fulfill biblical principles than about lineage. Further description reveals the complexity of Mrs. Harcourt’s class position, for while as an unschooled black woman she struggles to “keep the wolf from the door,” she has “obtained that culture of manners and behavior which comes through contact with well-bred people, close observation and a sense of self-respect and self-reliance” (188). Not until much later in the text does Harper disclose that Mrs. Harcourt works as a live-in domestic or “sick nurse,” as did many black women who lived in the urban North in the nineteenth century.<sup>25</sup> Yet the narrator’s sequencing in this passage distinguishes Mrs. Harcourt’s humble occupation from her social standing in the black community.

In her own first-person speech, apart from the narrator’s description, Mrs. Harcourt labels herself “poor.” Yet being self-conscious about the negative stereotypes of poor urban

---

<sup>24</sup>Luke 12:48 states, “For unto whomsoever much is given, of him shall be much required.” Harper alters the scripture to read ironically.

<sup>25</sup>Unlike black women in the rural South who worked in agriculture, African American women in cities supported themselves through a limited range of occupations that usually entailed some form of domestic service to whites. W. E. B. Du Bois’s *The Philadelphia Negro* (1899) appends a “Special Report on Negro Domestic Service in the Seventh Ward Philadelphia” compiled by his colleague Isabel Eaton. Eaton cites domestic service as the single most predominant occupation for black Americans in the post-Reconstruction period (Eaton 427).

dwellers as drunken, criminal and otherwise immoral, as they often were sensationally portrayed in the literature and sociological research of the period, she insists on a more positive evaluation. Mrs. Harcourt's class anxiety repeatedly leads her to defend her integrity in verbal confrontations with other A. P. residents. When a neighbor in Tennis Court sends Annette on an errand to buy beer without her grandmother's permission, Mrs. Harcourt indignantly rebukes the woman, explaining, "I am poor...but I mean to keep my credit up and if you and I live in this neighborhood a hundred years you must never do that thing again" (196). Her sentence pivots on the conjunction "but" to relate two ostensibly contradictory traits—poverty and "credit" or good reputation. Mrs. Harcourt insists that her worth be judged independently of her environs, especially since housing discrimination rather than personal failure or financial mismanagement confines her family to the undesirable neighborhood. Although she intends her respectability to offer a loop-hole to excuse her from the negative connotations of being "poor" and black, she finds that "however decent, quiet or respectable she might appear on applying for a house," she cannot barter her social propriety for entry into more "eligible" neighborhoods among whites (197). Based on Sven Beckert's study of the difference between bourgeois and lower class in the nineteenth century, we may conclude that Mrs. Harcourt is among the lower-middle class, though she does not herself deploy the term. While just eking out a living, Mrs. Harcourt manages to host charming dinner parties in the home she owns, dressed "in her white apron, faultless neck handkerchief and nicely fitting, but plain dress" (204). Though her belief in the dignity of all kinds of labor resonates with working class ethics, she also endorses values such as domesticity and temperance usually ascribed to the middle class. Beckert elucidates, "Perhaps what defined lower-middle-class citizens most decisively was the very ambivalence

of their position; their embrace of both bourgeois and proletarian strategies and values” (Beckert 294).

The description of the Harcourts’ living arrangements again suggests the difficulty of concisely naming the family’s spatial and social position. Grandma and Annette reside in “a secluded court, which was shut in on every side but one from the main streets, and her environments were not of the most pleasant and congenial kind” (196). For twentieth-century readers, the Tennis Court community resembles the geographically isolated and economically stagnant black neighborhoods in Ann Petry’s *The Street* (1946) or Gloria Naylor’s *Women of Brewster Place* (1982). While the protagonists in those two novels live in recognizably low-income housing, the narrator of *Trial and Triumph* mentions less directly, “The neighbors, generally speaking, belonged to neither the best nor worst class of colored people” (196). The phrasing suggests that describing this class of people requires some delicacy, lest the narrator reinforce negative stereotypes of pathological, urban black masses. Harper lacks a more precise term to categorize this intermediate class of largely uneducated black residents who gossip, drink, and fight among themselves, occupying a tentative position between the “best” and “worst” class.

Harper’s descriptions attempt to challenge uniformly pejorative connotations of the category “the poor,” absolving economically deprived people of culpability for their conditions. The text highlights conditions of individual and institutional racism that deny many blacks the education and occupations that conventionally signify middle and upper-class status. Rather than depicting them as victims of conditions entirely beyond their control, however, the author also aims to retain for her financially struggling characters a sense of agency. When readers are introduced to Mr. Thomas, a friend of the Harcourt

family, he has been dismissed from a teaching position in the city's newly integrated public schools and replaced by a white instructor. Refused employment in professional fields, Mr. Thomas tries to work as a journeyman and carpenter and even then is fired because prejudiced white laborers refuse to work with him. Though he remains unemployed for much of the novel, his lack of income never threatens his social reputation in the community. Jennifer Campbell notes significantly, "Mr. Thomas is identified not by the work he does but by the work he once did: he is a "former teacher" (Campbell 93). Even when out of work, Mr. Thomas continues to enjoy the social intercourse of better class residents such as the educated matron Mrs. Lassette, who mentors Annette, and the pious, but poor Mrs. Harcourt because he retains the proper attitude toward work. Presented with decisions about leisure activities, associates, work, politics and romance, the black residents of A.P. consider how their choices confirm the social standing they desire or have attained. Using similar language as Mrs. Harcourt's in her moment of self-classification, Mr. Thomas refuses the offer to work as a clerk in a saloon that, incidentally, is owned by Annette's father Frank Miller:

The first thought that rushed into Mr. Thomas' mind was, "Is thy servant a dog that he should do this thing?" but he restrained his indignation and said...  
"I am a poor man, but I would rather rise up early, and sit up late...than to roll in wealth by keeping a liquor saloon." (238)

As Stuart Blumin explains, in the mid-nineteenth century and thereafter, temperance was one determinant of a developing middle-class identity. "Liquor dealers and others in the infernal trade would disqualify themselves from even the outward appearance of respectability" (200). Harper was deeply invested in the Women's Christian Temperance Union, and the issue of temperance recurs throughout her fiction as a point of distinction between

respectable and disreputable Americans.<sup>26</sup> Mr. Thomas's stance reiterates that in African American communities, and more specifically in the moral economy that Harper envisions, ethical decision-making is a more accurate sign of favorable social class designation than are external symbols of success.

By maintaining virtuous lives, Mrs. Harcourt and Mr. Thomas demonstrate the qualities practiced by the "better class," a category similar but not identical to our twentieth-century notions of middle class. While scholars note that the term "middle class" appeared in American popular usage around the 1830s and 1840s (Bledstein 9), the term does not appear in *Trial and Triumph*. Harper instead uses the comparative category "better class," which held economic and moral connotations in the nineteenth century. Historian Janette Greenwood cites the classification as the preferred term of the black and white business and professional classes beginning in the 1870s. While "middle class" connotes a class situated between distinguishable elite and working classes, many postbellum African American communities displayed a two-tiered rather than a three-tiered class structure. African Americans who classified themselves as "better class" often had meager incomes, occupations and accommodations and lacked the wealth or political power that marked white middle class citizens in the larger American socioeconomic structure (Greenwood 5). In Harper's novel, "better class" black Philadelphians carefully dissociate their integrity from their material means, disparaging the ostentatious display, colorism, and exclusivity of the elite.

---

<sup>26</sup>Temperance figures in *Trial and Triumph* and *Iola Leroy* as one of many issues related to African American progress. Harper makes temperance the central theme of several of her poems, the short story "The Two Offers" (1859), and the serialized novel *Sowing and Reaping* (1876-77), and in those texts, as Debra Rosenthal argues, Harper features racially ambiguous characters to show that intemperance negatively impacts Americans of all classes and races.



In the novel, Mrs. Lassette is the embodiment of the “better class” or “aristocracy of the soul” that Harper outlines in her ideal class structure. Willing to ignore boundaries that call for her social separation from those less privileged, Mrs. Lassette welcomes Annette into her home. When Annette’s aunt, Mrs. Hanson, who occupies a tentative position in elite social circles, categorizes Mrs. Lassette as rich, the ensuing conversation offers a lesson in judging the proper basis of social class. Mrs. Lassette rebukes those who repeatedly snub Annette as a bookish girl from the tenements who is unfashionable by society standards. Mrs. Lassette defends her protégé against the elite:

“I do not think *your set, as you call it*, has such a monopoly of either virtue or intelligence that you can afford to ridicule and depress any young soul who does not happen to come up to your social standard. Where dress and style are passports Annette may be excluded, but where brain and character count Annette will gain admittance.”

“Mrs. Lassette,” said Mrs. Hanson, “you are rich and you can do as you choose in A. P. You can set the fashion.”

“No; I am not rich, but I hope that I will always be able to lend a hand to any lonely girl.” (231-232, emphasis added)

Assessing her own class status, Mrs. Lassette hastily redirects Mrs. Hanson’s observation through language that underscores service to the race. Free from the necessity of laboring outside the home—as the majority of African American women needed to in order to sustain themselves and their families—Mrs. Lassette insists that her financial security obliges her to commit herself to “a labor of love” in the community. As she plans a social event that will be more inclusive than those hosted by the elite, Mrs. Lassette muses to herself, “I, too, have some social influence, if not among the careless, wine-bibbing, ease-loving votaries of fashion, among some of the most substantial people of A.P” (256). Mrs. Lassette’s phrasing neatly substitutes the external signs of class with emphasis on character, or in her terms, substance and social responsibility. The “better class” people in *Trial and Triumph* who fit

neither the category “rich” nor “poor” occupy an interstitial position that allows them to associate with the elite or conversely with the lowly, as Mrs. Lassette best demonstrates.

Like many of her contemporary supporters of racial uplift, Harper asserts that the “better class” must intervene for the lower classes, as Mrs. Lassette attempts to do by visiting the Tennis Court homes of “lowly” women to train them in managing their households. Harper presents this “neither the best nor worst class” of black folks as bearing the brunt of both racism and black elitism: whites despise them for their color and more privileged blacks resent their inability or unwillingness to meet middle-class norms. To the extent that she depicts low-income African Americans as not the best but at least not the worst class of people, Harper rehabilitates negative public images of “the poor” as social leeches or menaces. Yet their relationship to the “better class” is complicated partly by resistance on the behalf of lower-class African Americans. Mrs. Lassette’s sometimes troubled interaction with “the lowly” indicates their skepticism about the supposedly altruistic intents of “better class” outreach efforts. She finds that her charitable work is not always appreciated: “To her it was a labor of love, but it was not all fair sailing. She sometimes met with coldness and distrust where she had expected kindness and confidence; lack of sympathy where she had hoped to find ready and willing cooperation; but she knew that if her life was in harmony with God and Christly sympathy with man; for such a life there was no such word as fail” (Harper 198). A close reading of the text reveals that Harper often attempts to omit the possible tension between the lowly and better class, partly by seldom giving voice to the poor. Harper seems unable to imagine uneducated African Americans in alternative class positions. It is useful to note, for example, that only in one instance near the novel’s conclusion when Annette interacts with one of her students, Lucy, does Harper refer to any

of the lowly by name, or otherwise individualize them as agents in facilitating their own uplift. More often she presents them in mass as “the folk” and the wards of the better class.

The black better class also bears responsibility for modeling positive interactions with white Americans. In these cases, “better class” blacks assert their character as a kind of social capital that supersedes even the advantages of white privilege. When an Irish American classmate harasses Annette at school, Mrs. Harcourt concludes that little Mary Joseph’s resentment of Annette, while couched as racism, is also rooted in class antagonism. As one of Annette’s sympathizers recalls, Mary’s immigrant mother “had been an ignorant servant girl, who had married a man with a little money [...] she was still ignorant, loud and dressy[,] liked to put on airs. The nearer the beggar the greater the prejudice” (182). According to Anna Engle, nineteenth-century popular culture often equated Irish Americans’ social position with blackness and racial inferiority. The comparison incited resentment from both Irish and African Americans as they competed for limited jobs, housing and political clout in nineteenth-century Philadelphia (Engle 154). On the basis of her character, Mrs. Harcourt claims class superiority over the Josephs, who attempt to stabilize their own precarious social status in the American hierarchy by degrading African Americans. In a moment of vengeful indiscretion, Mrs. Harcourt remarks, “an Irishman is only a negro turned wrong side out” (Harper, *Trial* 217), ironically affirming the rhetoric of Anglo-Saxon superiority that disparaged both Irish and African Americans. Annette’s mentor Mrs. Lassette goes further to explain that the Josephs should not be resented because of their ethnicity or former poverty; what is most objectionable is that they own a saloon. As a mouthpiece for Harper’s temperance advocacy, Mrs. Lassette relates:

No, Annette, if Miss Joseph ever attempts to quarrel with you don’t put yourself on the same level by quarreling with her. I knew her parents when

they were very poor; when a half dozen of them slept in one room. [Her father] has made money by selling liquor...He has gone up in property and even political influence, but oh, how many poor souls have gone down, slain by strong drink and debauchery. (220)

Instructing Annette to demonstrate passive resistant courtesy, Mrs. Lassette insists that she can trump her nemesis by displaying self-controlled, lady-like behavior, a true sign of distinction. The Josephs' questionable respectability positions Annette, the modest granddaughter of a prohibitionist domestic, to challenge their supposed superiority.

Although the novel concentrates on the social structure of black communities, African Americans' encounters with white Americans are important in *Trial and Triumph* because, as Harper astutely notes, the need to combat white racism was one catalyst for blacks' intraracial social stratification.<sup>27</sup> In one of the earliest social histories to treat black social stratification, *Sketches of the Higher Classes of Colored Society in Philadelphia* (1841), long time Philadelphian Joseph Willson recognizes that the racist assumption that black people constituted a homogenous degraded mass marginalized them as citizens. According to Willson's rationale, the respectable sector of blacks might gain "those equitable and just considerations which are enjoyed by all others of a different descent" if people did not hastily attribute to the whole race the "errors and crimes of one" black person (Willson 119, 82). In an effort to emphasize their difference from those whom W. E. B. Du Bois calls the "submerged tenth" of criminals, idlers, and others whose behavior might reflect negatively on the race, respectable black people either isolated themselves from the lower classes or attempted to uplift the lowly to their standards.

---

<sup>27</sup>Though an African American freedman in Harper's *Iola Leroy* states, "I beliebs eberybody, Norf and Souf, is lookin' at us" (170), I mean to resist the view that nineteenth-century African Americans calculated every detail of their lives to appeal to a literal or figurative white gaze. As Willard Gatewood does, I suggest that white prejudice may have been a primary reason for blacks' awareness and practices of intraracial social difference, but racism was only one of many possible factors (Gatewood 24).

In *Trial and Triumph*, Harper strongly objects to African Americans who choose the former approach to social organization by distancing themselves from the darker or less cultured of the race. Harper's pattern of identification makes an important separation between those whom she terms the "better class" and "elite." Naming class is important here as Harper adjudicates among African Americans based on their motivations and disposition toward crucial issues such as education, politics, religion, temperance, and community outreach. She dismisses those culturally refined, educated, and wealthy African Americans who might otherwise appear to be the best representatives of their race. Harper suggests that black society's preoccupation with white opinion and white standards divides the African American community along superficial lines of color and refinement. In what amounts to a politely phrased accusation of acting white, the narrator describes the society folk—alternately called the elite and "the upper tens":

Although they were of African descent, they were Americans whose thoughts were too much Americanized... The literature they read was mostly from the hands of white men who would paint them in any colors which suited their prejudices and predilections. The religious ideas they had embraced came at first thought from the same sources. (240)

Applying the terms "elite" and "society" pejoratively to describe self-interested African Americans, the narrator elsewhere notes the superficiality of those who considered themselves cultured: "[The socialites] had leisure, a little money and some ability, but they lacked the perseverance and self-denial necessary to enable them to add to the great resources of natural thought" (226). Belittling the significance of leisure class status, Harper privileges the "better class" invested in black arts, enterprise, and service.

Notably, the female protagonist of *Trial and Triumph*, Annette Harcourt, like the central character of Harper's later novel *Iola Leroy*, often remains silent during African

Americans' discussions of important social issues.<sup>28</sup> Less vocal than her grandmother, Mr. Thomas, and Mrs. Lassette who repeatedly correct assumptions about their respectability, Annette does not articulate her class awareness through indignant monologues defending her values. Her silence may be attributed partly to her youth at the beginning of the novel; though sometimes privy to adult conversations at dinner parties and socials, she is more often the object of conversation rather than a participant. Her exclusion from the social cliques of A. P. situates her so that she can observe and critique black society, but even as an adult, she does not directly broach the issue of intraracial social stratification. After making the noble decision to break her engagement, freeing her fiancé to be reunited with his long-lost first wife whom he thought was dead, Annette moves south to nurse her broken heart by serving others "whose advantages had been less than hers" (282). Harper uses the people around Annette to witness to her transformation from a mischievous, homely social outcast to a selfless community servant. On the occasion of her 31<sup>st</sup> birthday, the southern townspeople praise the teacher's positive influence, granting her the social affirmation largely denied to her in A. P. One observer mentions, "she has been the making of my Lucy. She's just wrapped up in Miss Annette, thinks the sun rises and sets in her" (284). Readers may speculate that Lucy, the young scholar Annette inspires, will be the next generation's model of "true womanhood." Notably, the girl shares the name of Annette's mother, Lucy. By guiding the younger woman in habits of respectability, Annette makes amends for her

---

<sup>28</sup>Elizabeth Ammons and Carla Peterson observe that besides offering her speech on the "Education of Mothers," the title character of *Iola Leroy* seldom contributes to the sociopolitical debates carried on around her. Peterson adds, "[I]t is primarily through her actions as nurse, schoolteacher, and loving daughter that Iola exemplifies the public work of black women in the 1890s" (Peterson 107). The same seems true of Annette Harcourt.

dishonored, misguided mother Lucy Harcourt.<sup>29</sup> Furthermore, when Annette marries at the novel's conclusion, she not only redeems her familial "ante-natal history" by choosing the lawful marriage her mother forfeited. She also embraces her racial history by determining that even her marriage should serve the needs of the race. The novel makes a point of noting that Annette's suitor "had not come to separate her from her cherished life work, but to help her in uplifting and helping those among whom her lot was cast" (285). By choosing a modest life in the South, free from ostentatious fashion or self-interested ambition, the couple serves as the novel's better class exemplars according to Harper's standards.

For a novel in the vein of sentimental fiction, which is conventionally interested both in the marriage plot and in upward mobility, it is significant that most of the admirable characters in *Trial and Triumph* end up not far from where they started economically, albeit with appropriate marriage partners who support their triumphs. A careful reading of the final chapter reveals that pecuniary rewards are not always a part of the happy endings for the "better class" who faithfully serve their race. After undergoing setbacks in the novel's intervening chapters, at the conclusion Mr. Thomas is a happily married contractor for a carpentry firm. Forced to rely on his industrial training rather than his liberal education, his new occupation may not be more lucrative than teaching, but he has at least gained strength of character. A minor character, Charley Cooper, had begun a career as a clerk before he was ousted for passing for white. Convinced by Mr. Thomas to embrace his mother's heritage and live as a black man, Charley encounters many of the difficulties finding work that Mr.

---

<sup>29</sup>Frances Smith Foster's editorial notes indicate that either Harper or the editors of the *Christian Recorder* sometimes confused or misprinted the names of the novel's characters. For example, the original printed text occasionally lists Mr. Thomas as Mr. Thompson, and the name of Annette's advisor is spelled alternately "Mrs. Lassette" and "Mrs. Lasette." The newspaper often suffered from poor editing and featured several typographical errors, which Foster takes the liberty to correct in her 1994 edited collection of the serialized novels (Foster xlii). However, naming Annette's student Lucy may have been Harper's deliberate choice rather than an accident.

Thomas experiences. Eventually, however, a liberal white merchant offers him a clerk position in a different store. Charley accepts and is “promoted just the same as others according to his merits” (283). This opportunity restores him to a clerkship, though perhaps no higher than the level of the position he lost. Meanwhile, as a teacher in the South among largely unschooled people of color, Annette ends up situated in neighborhoods of people who might be said to constitute “neither the best nor worst class of people,” much like those whom she encountered in Tennis Court. This time, however, she renders the “labor of love” instead of being the recipient of the better class’s benevolence. Rather than distancing her from lower-class blacks, Annette’s status change to better class depends on her interacting with lowly people while maintaining immunity to the “moral contagion” they may unknowingly or deliberately pose.

The single most obvious inadequacy of Harper’s moral economy in *Trial and Triumph* lies in the fact that the novel cannot accommodate people who attempt to gain social status through means other than respectable living. Annette’s antagonist Mary Joseph, who does not appear in the text after chapter eight, presumably will continue to enjoy the privileges over African Americans that her family’s wealth and her whiteness afford her. Meanwhile Annette’s father Frank Miller, a “selfish and unprincipled” saloonkeeper, proudly declares, “everything I touched turned to gold” (184, 238). While Annette’s mother dies of consumption, he lives on to associate with the “elite” of A. P. who overlook the moral implications of his previous sexual history and his ill-gotten wealth; he reaps no doom by the conclusion of the novel. By contrast, Harper’s other fictions, such as *Sowing and Reaping*, forecast depression and death for those who actively or passively endorse intemperance, poor decision making and downright meanness. Yet the conventional distribution of rewards and



punishments is not fulfilled at the conclusion of *Trial and Triumph*. As Harper's Christian worldview suggests, there remains an unseen, future culmination of sowing and reaping according to individuals' true morality. According to this value system, the modest ending of *Trial and Triumph* is consistent with Harper's intent to "quicken and invigorate human hearts" to reconsider the boundaries and functions of social difference (Harper 285).

#### IV

The centrality of the discourse of class in *Trial and Triumph* contrasts notably to Harper's limited direct treatment of intraracial class differences in *Iola Leroy*. In the former novel, personal conversations are a useful narrative device for revealing African Americans' understandings of social class. Through the discussions among African Americans in *Trial and Triumph*, Harper models for readers how to negotiate the boundaries and implications of social divisions. As Jennifer Campbell suggests, "Harper posits conversation—Christian, intellectual, rational, just—as possessing the power to effect social reform" (Campbell 94). However, in *Iola Leroy*, such conversations only infrequently raise the issue of social stratification. Harper may have thought that after addressing antagonistic intraracial divisions in *Trial and Triumph*, she did not need to prioritize the theme again in her subsequent novel which, as a history of emancipation and Reconstruction, focuses more on cross-racial than cross-class encounters.

In *Iola Leroy* the *conversazione* depicted in chapter thirty provides a formal opportunity for African Americans to address concerns crucial to their communities, but speakers do not deliberate much on intensified class divisions. Staged and attended by black intellectuals in the North, the debate addresses a number of topics, including emigration,

patriotism, the need for African Americans to collaborate across generational divides, the moral progress of the race, and as Iola's paper offers, the "Education of Mothers." To an extent all of the topics raised at the forum implicitly relate to social class, for as Harper implies in *Trial and Triumph*, an individual's stance on issues such as temperance, black unity, and domesticity reflects social standing. Yet only one commentator during the *conversazione* in *Iola Leroy* expresses interest in how social stratification relates to racial progress. After detailing the educational and economic progress of black communities he witnessed during a recent tour of the South, Rev. Carmicle explains, "I also fear that in some sections, as colored men increase in wealth and intelligence, there will be an increase in race rivalry and jealousy" (Harper, *IL* 259). The evidence of his fears already had been dramatized in *Trial and Triumph*, as competitive African Americans consider their material gains and knowledge as the basis of their class difference from other blacks.

Personal conversations among the "peasantry" of *Iola Leroy*, whom Peterson notes are conspicuously absent as equal contributors to the intellectuals' *conversazione*, provide overt discussions of African Americans' class distinctions (Peterson 103). At least twice Aunt Linda Salters, an unlettered freedwoman who has observed the social changes following emancipation, delineates the gradations of the local black community. In addition to the passage cited at the beginning of this chapter, Aunt Linda in another dialogue with Robert Johnson clarifies that her use of the term "nigger" is class-specific rather than racial: "I ain't runnin' down my people. But a fool's a fool, wether he's white or black. An' I think de nigger who will spen' his hard-earned money in dese yere new grog shops is de biggest kine ob a fool, an' I sticks ter dat" (160). Her illustration distinguishes between respectability and the moral corruption of intemperance and extravagant spending. In Houston Baker's

estimation, “Aunt Linda as the chief black woman and southern spokesperson spends most of her words comically condemning the tomfoolery of her people, whom she labels ‘niggers’” (Baker 32). Yet Baker’s impression of Aunt Linda as a comical figure misreads the content of her conversation. Her exact point is that people prone to “tomfoolery” are not her people, at least not in terms of social class affiliation. Characterizing Aunt Linda as self-respecting and goal-oriented, Harper counters popular stereotypes of good-natured, hopelessly uneducable ex-slaves yearning for the security of paternalistic slavery—as later portrayed most famously by Joel Chandler Harris, Paul Laurence Dunbar, and other black and white writers of the plantation tradition of popular fiction.

Yet the scenes featuring Aunt Linda also expose the limitations of judging social class divisions by respectability. Like Mrs. Harcourt who repeatedly articulates her claim to respectability in spite of her poverty, Aunt Linda’s language challenges impressions of slovenly freedpeople. Reuniting with Robert after they have been separated by the war, Aunt Linda invites her old friend to join her for supper. She prefaces her invitation by noting that despite apparent differences in education and skin color, which later make Robert upwardly mobile in the North, she shares his ideology of self-improvement. Asking him to introduce his new-found niece Iola, Aunt Linda requests, “You jis’ fotch dat chile to see me, if she ain’t too fine. I’s pore, but I’s clean” (157). Through her cleanliness, thrift and domesticity, Aunt Linda aligns herself with “better class” ideology, and feels honored to welcome Robert and Iola into her home, specifically into the “front room” or parlor that she “regarded with so much pride, and on which she bestowed so much care” (169). Yet Aunt Linda’s first meeting with Iola suggests that contrary to its implied intents, the model of racial uplift often reinforced the social hierarchy established in slavery. Iola appreciates Aunt Linda’s attempts

to replicate middle-class domesticity, but she cannot yet envision Aunt Linda as her social peer. At best, the older woman reminds Iola of her black mammy and “the bright, sunshiny days when she used to nestle in Mam Liza’s arms, in her own happy home” (169). While it can be argued that Iola and Harper herself intend the reverie as a compliment to Aunt Linda’s maternal nature—a trait considered particularly admirable in women during the nineteenth century—the statement also implies that Iola lacks a less diminutive term than “mammy” for describing nurturing black women. The language of social class fixes Aunt Linda’s position as “lowly” while Iola ambivalently determines whether she “ain’t too fine” to associate with other former slaves besides in her capacity as model and teacher. In *Iola Leroy*, the “aristocracy of the soul” does not significantly challenge the intraracial and interracial social hierarchy that already existed in late nineteenth-century America. On one hand, Harper contests the conflation of race, class, and character by suggesting that one might be poor but respectable, rich but corrupt, white but lower class. On the other, even respectability seems ill-equipped to challenge the kind of power for naming one’s social class position that the biracial, sophisticated Iola assumes over Aunt Linda.

Harper’s conflict of representing poor but respectable African Americans in relation to the “better class” is shared by other late nineteenth-century writers. Pauline Hopkins’s *Contending Forces* (1900) accepts the available social descriptors of class at face value, seeming less troubled about the implications of language. When introducing the novel’s central protagonists, the mulatto Smith family of Boston, Hopkins does not avoid material standards as a measure of social status. Conversing with her daughter about their family history, Mrs. Smith recalls her parents’ respectability partly by cataloguing the fine furnishings of her childhood home, including “a large astral lamp trimmed about the edges

with long crystal pendants” (93). In place of the equivocal language of *Trial and Triumph* that represents certain black Americans as not quite rich and not quite poor, *Contending Forces* describes class in more conventional, tangible terms. Describing the Smith family’s associates, the narrator explains, “Boston contains a number of well-to-do families of color whose tax-bills show a most comfortable return each year to the city treasury. Strange as it may seem, these well-to-do people, in goodly numbers, distribute themselves and their children among the various Episcopal churches with which the city abounds” (142).

Throughout the novel, Hopkins represents fuller descriptions of the homes, clothes, food, and leisure activities of her African American characters than does Harper. *Contending Forces* suggests that other African American writers relied on a conventional lexicon of terms, metaphors, and standards for representing class stratification that Harper aimed to avoid but sometimes found inescapable.

For Harper respectable moral character is one’s greatest asset and often the most reliable determinant of social class standing. Her insistence on prioritizing service and ethical action must shift our scholarly understandings of class as an objective, economic category. Frances Foster astutely observes, “Since the turn of the century, literary critics and scholars have been embarrassed, offended, or perhaps merely disconcerted by literature that is unabashedly sentimental, religious, or didactic” (Foster “Gender” 49). By marginalizing the moral implications of Harper’s discourse of class, however, we miss how she and many of her African American contemporaries construe social class difference. Harper’s attempted refiguration of the language of class and the notion of social mobility is central to her agenda to reform black communities, and by extension, interracial relations into more harmonious cooperation. Yet Harper could not fully actualize her ideal moral economy under post-Civil

War social conditions; African Americans like Aunt Linda and the working-class characters depicted by Katherine Tillman, Sutton Griggs and Paul L. Dunbar—even after exhibiting the tenets espoused by racial uplift—bore the designation of servant, “nigger” or “neither the best nor worst class of colored people.”

## CHAPTER III

### **Labor, Status, and Competing Myths of Class Mobility: The Fiction of Katherine Tillman, Sutton Griggs and Paul Laurence Dunbar**

During the Gilded Age, labor struggles preoccupied Americans' interest, vying for attention with "the Negro problem." Yet literary scholars seldom have examined how this historical context of national and regional anxieties about labor and class influenced turn-of-the-century African American literature. Scholarly inattention to the theme of labor may seem to parallel black writers' own neglect of the issue. Novels such as Frances E. W. Harper's *Iola Leroy* (1892) and Charles W. Chesnutt's *The Marrow of Tradition* (1901), now considered representative black fiction from the nadir, seem to marginalize discussions of work conditions for blacks. In *Iola Leroy*, Harper describes Iola's experiences as a wage earner in an eight-page chapter of the 282-page novel. After gaining freedom from slavery and relocating to the North, the genteel Iola confidently announces her plan to "win for [herself] a place in the fields of labor" (Harper 208). Her employment as a saleswoman lasts only a brief stint, however, partly because she repeatedly is fired when her white co-workers discover her mixed race heritage. Iola finds more success as a nurse, but the storyline tracing her position among "respectable young working girls" fades as the novel's romantic plot crescendos (208). In another instance during the climactic *conversazione* later in *Iola Leroy*, the black spokespersons who gather to strategize racial uplift do not explain how African Americans with limited employment opportunities would achieve the upward mobility that black leaders prescribe. Likewise Chesnutt's *The Marrow of Tradition* pays little attention to

questions of labor. When the urbane Dr. Miller encounters “dirty, and malodorous” farm workers in a Jim Crow train car, he focuses on their hygiene rather than the work conditions that consign African Americans to “dirty” occupations (Chesnutt 511). What is evocative about such scenes, Carla Peterson significantly notes, “is the relative silence of the elite over issues of black labor—that of both the peasant in the South and the urban worker in the North” (103).

Yet a cursory glance at only the most canonical postbellum African American texts belies the extent to which black Americans focused on labor struggles, especially with respect to how conflicts between labor and capital, employee and employer, working and upper class impacted post-Reconstruction black communities. Whereas Harper dismisses work summarily in *Iola Leroy*, the author was quite vocal on the issues of fair hiring practices, southern peonage, and intraracial social distinctions based on occupation. She discusses these topics at length in her essay, “Land and Labor” (1870), and her serialized novel, *Trial and Triumph* (1888-89), texts that I examine in Chapter II. While Chesnutt does not address the plight of black farmers in *The Marrow of Tradition*, in his nonfiction essay, “Peonage, or the New Slavery” (1904), published in the *Voice of the Negro*, the author demands for southern laborers fair wages accompanied by political rights. In addition, his last published novel, *The Colonel’s Dream* (1905), traces a white industrialist’s attempt to revitalize the economy of his southern hometown; the plot exposes how labor relations in the New South exploited black and white workers, often exacerbating the tensions between them. These examples from Harper’s and Chesnutt’s less frequently studied writings indicate that African American authors indeed featured occupational concerns as the subject of their texts. Yet as Peterson proposes, recovering this strand of literary history requires two critical shifts:



closer readings of labor and class dynamics in nineteenth-century literature; and thorough, serious evaluation of fiction outside the usual scope of scholarly examination—namely, the minor works of canonical writers, recently recovered works of lesser-known authors, and archived periodical literature that speaks usefully to the topic (Peterson 98).

In both its method and focus, this chapter responds to Peterson's astute recommendations by highlighting "buried and silenced" postbellum black texts that foreground labor and class conflicts (Peterson 98). Clustered in a five-year span at the close of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries, the seldom examined narratives under study here—Katherine Tillman's *Clancy Street* (1898-99), Sutton E. Griggs's *Imperium in Imperio* (1899) and *Overshadowed* (1901), and selected fiction by Paul Laurence Dunbar, including *The Sport of the Gods* (1902)—demonstrate how black writers mediated class difference and stratification through literary depictions of black labor. Black Americans constituted a significant sector of the country's work force, and their eagerness or refusal to participate in the capitalist economic system had crucial consequences for the nation as well as the race. Thus as agents of the period's cultural transformations, authors had the important task of instilling in African American laborers a positive work ethic, fueled by hopes for upward economic and social mobility. As I contend, during the late nineteenth century, labor struggles were not only about fair wages, the length of the workday, or the means and rewards of production, in a strictly Marxist sense. Instead post-Reconstruction black fiction indicates that what was also at stake was cultural control over the concept of "labor": the authority to determine what constituted "work," which kinds of labor were most "honorable," which individuals or groups in the American population should fill certain

occupations, and how an individual's labor correlated to status.<sup>30</sup> Conventional studies of stratification often use occupation as an index of social class designations, but research differs about the extent to which occupation signified status among nineteenth-century African Americans. The contentions over the meaning(s) of labor were especially crucial for postbellum black Americans because they often were limited to menial occupations. Aiming to overcome the stigma of “nigger work”—the monotonous, rigorous, or otherwise undesirable labor relegated to black workers—turn-of-the-century African American fiction attempts to account for the social, not only economic, value of black labor.

Postbellum black narratives focusing on labor explore two implicit questions: how is African American labor rewarded in a supposedly open market; and how does an individual's work translate into non-pecuniary reward, including social status, influence and mobility in intraracial and interracial contexts? Tillman, Griggs and Dunbar respond to these two questions with varying degrees of depth and optimism. My reading of their fiction explores how depictions of black labor operate as part of broader cultural myths of class mobility. In a study of the novels of Sutton Griggs, Wilson J. Moses observes that Griggs repeatedly features the “folk mythologizing of sociological and historical experiences that had actually occurred in the patterns of black life in the South” (Moses 213). Similar moments of “mythologizing” occur in the works of Tillman and Dunbar, as characters use particular expressions, symbols, analogies, and examples to theorize how American society functions, and more specifically, how class differences are sustained in black communities. Appearing in narratives of black labor, myth functions as Bruce Lincoln explains it: as part of an either

---

<sup>30</sup>The terms “labor” and “work” appear interchangeably in the chapter unless otherwise specified. In particular, the word “labor” is not limited to its conventional connotation that refers to only working-class subjects; in my usage, labor extends also to work in trained professions. “Occupations” and “jobs” are specific kinds of work or labor.

overt or more subtle cultural process of interpreting existing social differences. Wielded by the dominant party and its constituents, myth “may be strategically employed to mystify the inevitable inequities of any social order and to win the consent of those over whom power is exercised” (Lincoln 5). Conversely, in the hands of subordinate groups, myth serves to “demystify, delegitimize, and deconstruct” social orders that work against the interests of the subordinate (5). Post-Reconstruction black authors, who exerted authority as “better class” reformers in black communities, but often lacked power in comparison to white Americans, deployed myths of class mobility for both purposes—to legitimate and delegitimize late nineteenth-century race and class inequalities. Tillman, Griggs, and Dunbar wrestled with the period’s labor concerns and its increasingly apparent class stratification by alternately endorsing and undermining myths of the “self-made man,” what I refer to as “the rewarded faithful servant,” and the “talented tenth.”

### **Bootstraps, Buckets and Battles: Labor and Work Ethic in Turn-of-the-Century Myths of Class Mobility**

Myths of the self-made man, the rewarded faithful worker, and the talented tenth permeated post-Civil War African American culture, appearing in the most popular autobiographies, journalism, and nonfiction prose. As Susan Harris Smith and Melanie Dawson note, “Delineations of class appealed to fin-de-siècle readers because of the mythologized argument that class positions were negotiable” (Smith and Dawson 6). During the last quarter of the nineteenth century, economic changes related to industrialization, big business, and urbanization extended new opportunities for some ambitious Americans; relatedly, however, poverty, working-class unrest and racial tensions also intensified. How was it that some individuals mastered the market economy while others languished in

poverty? In a period of such contradictory growth and decline, the figure of the “self-made man,” which emerged as early as the eighteenth century with Benjamin Franklin as its exemplar, prevailed as a central way for explaining material and social disparities. Business tycoon Andrew Carnegie and other “self-made” spokespersons tried to soothe class anxieties by assuring others that they, too, could pull themselves up by the proverbial bootstraps. In his frequently reprinted essay “The Advantages of Poverty” (1891), Carnegie argued that poverty is a necessary and beneficial prelude to later success. According to this model, those Americans who did not achieve were thought to have made poor choices to bring the damnation of unrelenting poverty upon themselves (Carnegie 53). Carnegie, an extreme case of rags-to-riches success, had his fictional counterpart in the many Horatio Alger novels that traced a young man’s journey from poverty through hard work to financial and familial security. In an 1882 address entitled “Self-Made Men,” Charles W. Chesnutt included Frederick Douglass in his list of American exemplars, thereby asserting African Americans’ potential for overcoming the additional obstacles imposed by racism. According to Chesnutt’s definition “in the strictest sense of the word self-made men,” the slave-turned-statesman Frederick Douglass and similar role models overcame “what seemed to be insurmountable difficulties” to propel themselves “to a high rank in life” (Chesnutt 34). The icon of the self-made man proposed that individual effort, rather than the nation’s class structure, determined a person’s outcome.

The idea that an individual could overcome humble beginnings through hard work and self-determination especially appealed to post-Civil War black communities. For some newly emancipated blacks, free labor indicated self-possession, the ability to control the work produced by one’s own body and reap its rewards. Several autobiographical writings by

formerly enslaved people, such as *Narrative of the Life of John Quincy Adams* (1872), indicate the narrator's pride at being able to make contracts and earn and retain wages. Postbellum narratives with titles such as *From Slave Cabin to the Pulpit* (1893), *Out of the Ditch* (1910), and most famously Booker T. Washington's *Up from Slavery* (1901) attested that some black workers moved through class gradations to become educated, respected, and relatively prosperous.<sup>31</sup> For these writers, work symbolized freedom, self-sufficiency and ambition. Yet African American labor also remained stigmatized and racialized by its association with slavery. After emancipation, most black people remained in the South and continued to constitute the majority of the region's agricultural labor force. The biographical sketch of "A Georgia Negro Peon," printed in *The Independent* in 1904, referred to agricultural workers' cycle of debt and exploitative labor as "the New Slavery in the South." Employment opportunities for African Americans in urban, non-agricultural trades sometimes were little better, as popular journalist Jack Thorne revealed in his article, "A Dock Laborer: Experiences of One Man Who Came to the Metropolis in the Late Eighties, Looking for Honest Employment" (1907). Thorne explains, "The uninitiated, perusing the columns of the great New York dailies with their innumerable 'Help Wanted' advertisements, would readily conclude that the seeking of employment in the great Metropolis need be no irksome task to any one," but such advertisements often were not intended for black Americans (Thorne 7). Thorne maintained a stable work history—he recollected holding three major jobs and spending "two years at odd jobs" over the course of

---

<sup>31</sup>Peter Randolph, *From Slave Cabin to the Pulpit: The Autobiography of Rev. Peter Randolph: The Southern Question Illustrated and Sketches of Slave Life* (Boston: James H. Earle, 1893); Joseph Vance Lewis, *Out of the Ditch: A True Story of an Ex-slave* (Houston: Rein, 1910); Booker T. Washington, *Up from Slavery* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, Page, 1901).

eighteen years—but many African Americans had to be flexible and mobile to find work (7). Thorne further observed, “The Negro workman, pushing out over the North and West, is confronted by more serious and exasperating obstacles than any other human creature. Securing work in big corporations only as a strike-breaker, he, in many instances, has only been retained until the white man chose to return to work” (9). Employment opportunities for African Americans were not entirely dismal, however, and certain geographic locations were particularly promising sites for career building. For example, Washington, D. C. offered black Americans a range of professional employment in education, state departments, law and business. Paul Laurence Dunbar assured *Harper’s Weekly* readers who were unfamiliar with “Negro Life in Washington” that “it would keep one busy counting or attempting to count the dark-skinned lawyers and doctors one meets in a day” in the nation’s capital (“Negro Life” 276). Dunbar, however, slightly exaggerated the point for dramatic effect; furthermore, educational and professional opportunities in Washington D. C., Boston, Philadelphia and selected major cities were not representative of areas elsewhere in the country, where both educated and unskilled African Americans encountered hardship finding the kinds of work that enabled self-making.

In both the North and South, laws and social custom often distinguished white and black jobs, relegating black Americans to those tasks that required the most servility, muscle work, and exposure to dirt and contamination. In “White and Black Jobs,” published in the *New York Age* on May 26, 1905, Atlanta correspondent Thomas E. Malone observed that African American men in the urban South were concentrated in the fields of porter, carriage and cart driver, and manual labor, jobs that were considered “worse than disgraceful for a white man” (Malone 1). By delineating certain occupations as “nigger work,” working-class

whites whose economic opportunities were stifled could at least frame their wage labor as preferable to that of black Americans. Avoiding “black jobs” allowed non-black workers, especially those from immigrant backgrounds, to strengthen their claims to “whiteness,” with all the political and social privileges that inhered in that racial category in the nineteenth century (Roediger 144). Yet rather than interpret the color line in employment as entirely repressive, Thomas Malone maintained that African Americans could still become self-starters. According to Malone, white Americans’ “silly prejudice against work” benefited black workers who monopolized lucrative fields such as catering and barbering. Contrary to its intent, “the disposition to regard particular classes of manual labor as being ‘Negro jobs’ redounds to the colored man’s advantage. It causes him to accumulate property and to acquire a bank account” (Malone 1). Malone’s interpretation of labor considered those occupations degraded by white Americans, such as porter, head waiter, or butler, as positive sources of status among African Americans.

To account for the fact that blacks frequently were barred from the occupations that would have otherwise signaled middle- to upper-class status, such as physician or lawyer, some African Americans like Malone proposed alternative ways of explaining social status. In an analysis revealingly titled “When Your Work is Not Who You Are,” Sharon Harley finds that African American female wage earners from 1880 to 1920 “usually did not believe that their presence or their position in the labor force was an accurate reflection of who they were or of how they should be viewed by members of the black community” (Harley 4). Harley proposes that because of the truncated occupational range in black communities, black women in the nineteenth-century relied less on occupation or income than on respectability for judging class; yet, such findings may be gender specific. As David Nielson

explains, in addition to respectability, the moral standard by which Harley's female subjects assessed their worth, post-Reconstruction patterns of "stratification within the black community also [were] in large part dependent upon occupation, a very functional type of index that tended to be closely related to respectability" (Nielson 56). In this case, African Americans constructed social hierarchies based on occupation precisely because most black people were concentrated in only a few fields of labor (domestic service, manual labor, and agriculture); promotion within those fields or employment outside of them was considered a positive sign of social standing. Occupation was "such an important criterion of social class position in [African American] society," August Meier concludes, "in fact the most important single criterion" (259).

Yet debates over occupation and class were intimately related to those over the proper educational training for post-Reconstruction black Americans. To shape interpretations of labor and its relation to status in the black community, the two leading educators, Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. Du Bois, developed competing curricular models and accompanying myths: the rewarded faithful servant and the Talented Tenth. Both men acknowledged the need to diversify educational opportunities for blacks, but differed about which form of training would most benefit black students and their communities.

Washington was one of the period's strongest, most visible proponents of the "rewarded faithful servant" myth of class mobility, a model related by degrees to the myth of the self-made man. In Washington's formulation, thrifty African Americans who desired to be self-made men first "cast down their buckets" in industrial trades and services that ideally would allow them to accumulate wealth. In addition, because such trades were considered less threatening to white Americans' monopoly of the professions, faithful servants gained the



reward of white Americans' favor and collaboration (Washington, *Up from Slavery* 100).

Attentive to the language associated with labor, Washington aimed to allay the concerns of black Americans who considered manual labor too much like the drudgery required of them in slavery. In his essay "Industrial Education for the Negro" (1903), Washington distinguishes between "being worked" and "working," explaining that the former term indicates passivity and "degradation" while the latter state enables "civilization" (9). He further maintained that individuals should do the work for which they are "fit"; notably, the language of fitness easily lent itself to the social Darwinist thinking of the time, implying natural differences in aptitude that marked people for certain occupations. In this way, the idea that one was "fit" for a job—that an individual was most fit to be a laundress, for example—inadvertently inscribed class immobility. Washington offset this concern by reiterating the value of individualism and work ethic. Enshrining the black worker as making an important contribution to American civilization, Washington asserted that "all forms of labor are honorable, and all forms of idleness disgraceful" (Washington, "Industrial Education" 9). As he and his adherents proposed, being an exceptional laundress, carpenter, domestic servant, blacksmith, or other manual laborer did not limit one's opportunity; faithful service offered ambitious black Americans access to many of the qualities of life white Americans enjoyed. After black people gained money through fulfilling any available job, they would have the leisure and means to enjoy the study of foreign languages, literature, and other liberal arts that indicated cultured, bourgeois taste (Washington 19).

W. E. B. Du Bois proposed an alternative myth of work and status based in a liberal arts tradition. Unlike Washington's rhetoric intended to inspire the black "masses," Du Bois focused his appeal on a select class of educated African Americans. In a commencement

address at his alma mater, Fisk University, in 1898, a decade after he had graduated from there, Du Bois apprised college-educated blacks of their role in a modern, romantic myth:

You cannot surely be knights and kings and magicians, but you can choose careers fully as wonderful and much more useful [...] you have been trained for skilled work, and it is throwing away the money of this institution if its college graduates are to become Pullman porters. (92, 93)

Contrary to Washington's optimism about concentrating African American workers in industrial and service occupations, Du Bois recognized the links between the color line in employment and the one in politics aimed at keeping blacks systematically subservient to whites. While Du Bois was careful not to malign industrial labor as dishonorable, he prioritized liberal education and skilled labor as the basis for African Americans' grand narrative. Disabusing students of aspirations to be Renaissance "knights and kings," Du Bois initiates a parallel quest that enjoins African American professionals to venture into the world and conquer in the name of civilization and racial progress: "You are gentlemen and ladies, trained in the liberal arts and subjects in that vast kingdom of culture that has lighted the world from its infancy and guided it through bigotry and falsehood and sin" (101). Although Du Bois did not coin the phrase "talented tenth" until five years later in 1903, his address suggests that by 1898, he already had begun to mythologize the labor of a group of cultured, black warriors who would lead the masses. His metaphor of the professional class as fighters encapsulates one of the prevailing ideas of the period concerning work. In commencement addresses, success guides and novels formulating the trajectory from poverty to prosperity, "the young man was exhorted to go into the battle of life in extended analogies of the pilgrimage on the one hand and the battlefield on the other" (Mukherjee 46). Through figurative language, nineteenth-century American class discourse invested the concept of work with both sacred and secular meanings.

I have lingered here in offering the historical and cultural context for Tillman, Griggs, and Dunbar's writing to indicate what is at stake in their depictions of black workers and their occupations. Beyond reproducing historical labor conditions in fictional form, these three writers depict black workers so as to theorize larger questions of class stratification and inequality. In this regard, post-Reconstruction black fiction that highlights labor recalls a similar American literary trend in mid-to-late nineteenth century. Michael Denning in *Mechanic Accents* explains that in the early stages of American industrialization, many white-authored dime novels featured characters such as the "honest mechanic" and "the factory girl" to privilege working-class literary subjects and to favorably interpret their work. As Denning argues, novels focusing on nineteenth-century laborers and work may be read as "enactments of social conflicts and cleavages. Particular formulas enact the conflicts and divisions of the social totality, trying to explain and resolve them; changes in these formulas may mark changes in a culture's view of those conflicts, or indeed in the conflicts themselves" (Denning 77). By tracing the stories that black people tell themselves and others about their labor, we recognize the self-made man, rewarded faithful servant, and talented tenth as "formulas" or myths through which black authors engage the "social conflicts and cleavages" of cultural authority to which Denning refers. Yet what distinguishes African American stories of labor from those by white Americans is the added burden of showing how racial disparity impacts blacks' undesirable, unstable work conditions and influences intraracial social organization.

Tillman, Griggs, and Dunbar all employ the language of self-making, service, pilgrimage, and battlefield, but they also interrogate the limits of such rhetoric and imagery as they apply to African American work experiences. The extent to which these three writers

complicate conventional class mythology emerges by comparison with other postbellum African American narratives that offer an uncritical endorsement of upward mobility. In the serialized novel *John Blye; or Trials and Triumphs of the White-washer's Son*, published in the African Methodist Episcopal *Christian Recorder* in 1878, the author known as “Will” blends myths of the self-made man, the rewarded faithful servant, and the Talented Tenth in a fantastic plot that spans the antebellum and postbellum eras.<sup>32</sup> John Blye rises from a relatively deprived childhood—during which he uses household refuse for “building his play factory”—to accomplish his dream of being an industrial engineer. Though a jealous white engineer secretly sabotages his major project, Blye prevails and gains the boss’s approval because of his reputation as a faithful worker.<sup>33</sup> Demonstrating piety, honesty, hard work, self-sacrifice and temperance, Blye also leads a colored troop during the Civil War, marries a belle from “Philadelphia’s most polished colored society,” and later, in a dramatic turn of events, becomes a US consul in France during Reconstruction. “Will” presents the occasional

---

<sup>32</sup>*John Blye* appeared in the *Christian Recorder* in weekly installments between July 11 and November 21, 1878. The writer who uses the penname “Will” also is listed as author of *The Gem of the Alley: A Tale of Alley Life in Philadelphia*, a briefer novella serialized in the *Recorder* between April 25 and May 30, 1878. I have not been able to confirm the identity of the pseudonymous author, but according to announcements in the *Recorder*, “Will” was a repeat contributor who also submitted occasional fiction to the *People’s Advocate* in Washington, D. C. *John Blye* was well-received by the *Recorder’s* readers, who considered Blye a hero. The newspaper editor recounts being asked by impressed readers, “Cannot the Manager somehow or other put ‘John Blye’ in book form? It is our mind that it would pay” (“[Untitled]” 2).

<sup>33</sup>Set primarily in an undisclosed northwestern city, *John Blye* is also one of the few African American fictions to depict its protagonist in the industrial work space rather than alluding to labor that remains out of sight. For example, in chapter five printed in the September 19, 1878 installment, “Will” portrays Blye’s increasingly complex and indispensable labor in the factory among his white peers:

Busy hands and hammers were flying in the Eagle works. Belts and wheels and pulleys whizzed and hummed while fire and blast blazed from forge and foundry. Great bars of red hot iron were being drawn between heavy rollers, while other huge bars and bolts were being forged under ponderous trip hammers into the shape designed for them Castings for wheels and pulleys were being turned and polished, while bed pieces and housings and shoulders in various shapes were being drilled and chiseled full of holes and slots, and brasses were made and bored out for bushings for journals, &c. (“Will” 4)

While this passage goes further to describe work than do some other African American fictions, the narrator uses passive voice throughout the description, shifting attention from the “hands” to the mechanic parts in action. In this way, the narrative affirms Cindy Weinstein’s thesis that nineteenth-century American culture and literature attempts to erase the visibility of labor (Weinstein 14).

setbacks that John Blye encounters, which sometime result from discrimination, as mere trials over which he triumphs through his strength of character. In their fiction, Tillman, Griggs and Dunbar depict African Americans who, unlike John Blye, experience episodes of melancholy, violence, and death while pursuing social status. Focusing on black people's struggles to find, keep, and enjoy work, as well as sustain and advance themselves through it, post-Reconstruction black narratives of work problematize the relation between status and labor.

### **“May the Work I’ve Done Speak for Me”: Labor and Morality in the Works of Katherine Tillman**

Collected and reprinted in 1991 in the Schomburg Library Black Women Writers collection, the turn-of-the-century writings of Katherine Davis Chapman Tillman laud manual and domestic labor as “honorable” work, corroborating the myth that African Americans could achieve contentment and prosperity through their faithful service. Like Frances Harper to whom critic Claudia Tate compares her, Tillman produced “domestic allegories” in which the plots of courtship, marriage, and family life encode messages for civic and political equality. “Despite the fact that Harper (born in 1825) and Tillman (born in 1870) were of different generations,” Tate adds, “[their] novels suggest that they were fervent believers in the mid-nineteenth-century ideology of love and duty” (Tate, *Domestic Allegories* 98). Yet Tillman makes an important departure from the conventional formula of female-authored black fiction. While Harper's novels primarily focus on “better class” African Americans who perform what Harper repeatedly calls “labors of love”— mentoring, representing, teaching, and reforming others—Tillman's fiction additionally portrays the material and physical nature of African American labor. For instance, the protagonist of her

first novel, *Beryl Weston's Ambition* (1893), diverges from conventional dainty heroines (Tate, "Intro" 24). While studying to become a college professor of modern languages, Beryl maintains a routine of daily farm labor that requires her to actually get her hands dirty.<sup>34</sup> Tillman's second novel, *Clancy Street*, on which I'll concentrate, chronicles the lives of "tobacco hands," domestics, laundresses, and other low-income residents of Louisville, Kentucky in the 1880s. At the novel's center is the Waters family: parents Zeke and Anne and their four children. Over the course of the novel, daughter Caroline Waters attains her first job as a household servant, completes a high school education, and dies after contracting typhoid fever while nursing her white employer. In both novels, Tillman's balanced depiction of physical and mental labor contrasts the division of work observed in Harper's *Iola Leroy* and Pauline Hopkins's *Contending Forces*, for example.<sup>35</sup>

Little is known about Tillman's own class background and how it may reflect in her valorization of manual and domestic work. After spending her early life in Illinois and South Dakota, Tillman studied at the State University of Louisville in Kentucky and Wilberforce in Ohio. She married an African Methodist Episcopal minister and published most of her writing in religious periodicals between the 1890s and 1920s (Saunders 396). Though African American preachers and their wives sometimes supplemented their ministerial

---

<sup>34</sup>In contrast, in *Iola Leroy* the former bondsman Tom Anderson urges the Union army to rescue Iola from slavery, lest she fall prey not only to sexual exploitation, but also to the threat of manual labor. Tom explains, "[The master] buyed [Iola], he said, for his housekeeper; as many gals as dere war on de plantation, why didn't he git one ob dem to keep house, an' not dat nice lookin' young lady? Her han's look ez ef she neber did a day's work in her life" (Harper 41). Saved from the degradation of being one of the black "gals" whose labor requires physical exertion, Iola later serves as a clerk and Sunday School teacher, capacities considered more fitting for a "young lady" of her status.

<sup>35</sup>In *Contending Forces*, the beautiful, mysterious Sappho Clark is a stenographer rather than an educator, the usual occupation black authors assign to "better class" female characters. Explaining why she refuses work as a nurse-maid, Sappho explains, "I could not do housework, because my constitution is naturally weak" (127). In contrast, the darker-skinned, stout Southern migrants Mrs. Davis and Mrs. White formerly worked as cooks and "second-girl[s]" before starting a joint business as laundresses. By characterizing the latter two women with harder "constitutions," Hopkins, like Harper, delineates classes by inscribing the signs of labor onto the female body.

incomes through other work, there is no indication that Tillman engaged in paid employment or that her texts bear any autobiographical parallels to her own life. Beyond these sparse details, the author's nonfiction essays perhaps provide the clearest indication of the myths of class to which she subscribed. Unlike Paul Laurence Dunbar, whose journalism generally is much more vitriolic and far-ranging than his early fiction, Tillman maintains consistent tones and themes in her nonfiction and fiction writing. Two of her essays are especially relevant to the following reading of *Clancy Street*. Published in the African Methodist Episcopal *Church Review*, "Afro-American Women and Their Work" (1895) surveys the past, present, and possible accomplishments of black women. Tillman thoroughly outlines black women's multifaceted occupations, ranging from enslaved women to the "society women" whose work it is to prove that African American women are "just like the rest of the feminine world" (Tillman 90). For the most part, the author organizes the essay according to a conventional occupational hierarchy, discussing in order the work done by field slaves, house slaves, religious missionaries, entrepreneurs, artists, and doctors. When offering descriptions of domestic servants and society women, however, Tillman questions the traditional stratification that ascribes greater honor to the leisure class. Noting that young black women generally disparage manual labor, Tillman praises washerwomen, laundresses and maids, protesting, "[I]t never has nor ever will it be, a disgrace to earn one's living honestly. There is no aristocracy in this country. All men are created free and equal and women ditto" (Tillman 89). Her delineation invokes the contemporary labor discourse that distinguished "honest" labor from lucrative, but "dishonest" labor, such as liquor sales, prostitution, and gambling. That Tillman felt the need to affirm the dignity of all labor and repudiate class inequality suggests her intense awareness of intraracial stratification as based in part on

occupational differences. A dozen years later in “Paying Professions for Colored Girls” (1907), Tillman again offered a nonfiction compilation of black women’s labor history, this time addressing explicitly the occupational and racial hierarchies that demanded that black women aspire to and perform the seemingly least glamorous work. “Debarred as our girls are from many avenues of lucrative employment,” Tillman explains, “it is wise for them to consider what work is open to them and what their chances of success are in their chosen field” (116). Providing anecdotal models of women who had gained relative success in available fields, Tillman pragmatically steers her readers toward careers as teachers, nurses, cooks, manicurists, dressmakers, and domestic servants. Written in the years well before and after *Clancy Street*, these articles indicate the consistency with which Tillman, like the New York Age writer, Thomas Malone, attempts to create paradigms for judging African American success and status within racially proscribed limits.

*Clancy Street*, published serially in the *AME Church Review* in 1898-99, allowed Tillman to develop her brief journalistic “pen-pictures” of women workers into an extended narrative featuring working-class characters.<sup>36</sup> When dramatizing the labor and lifestyles of African Americans in *Clancy Street*, Tillman partly relies on realism, a narrative approach that many late nineteenth-century American writers found especially well-suited for unsentimentally disclosing the conditions of everyday American life. The novel’s portrayal of the social organization, dress, speech, foodways, and folk knowledge of poor black Kentuckians also situates the text in the American regionalist tradition. Though *Clancy Street* is “held in great disrepute” as the most impoverished, ethnically diverse neighborhood in

---

<sup>36</sup>*Clancy Street* appeared in four quarterly installments: October 1898, January 1899, July 1899, and October 1899. In her essay “Some Girls That I Know” (1893), Tillman uses the phrase “pen-pictures” to refer to her anecdotal examples of black women workers (Tillman 69).



Louisville, the narrator highlights the community's redeeming charm as a quaint setting from the past (the 1880s). To the extent that Clancy residents value family, industry, thrift, and resilience, they exemplify so-called American values irrespective of class. Yet as Richard Brodhead explains, regionalist fiction often in fact draws attention to class dissimilarity, as audiences of primarily middle-class or aspiring middle-class readers consume the cultures of other regions and locales marked by ethnic difference or dialect (Brodhead 164).<sup>37</sup> By reading about working-class African Americans in *Clancy Street* who spoke with Southern accents and lived in "rickety tenements and mouldy cottages" (Tillman 254), the novel's upwardly mobile black readers may have reaffirmed their own social status through contrast to the black masses. The Philadelphia-based AME *Church Review* in which *Clancy Street* appeared claimed to target a sophisticated "class of up-to-date preachers" and "intelligent young ladies and gentlemen," providing readers with "the ripest scholarship of the Negro in the United States and in foreign lands" (Kealing 3). The *Review* advertised itself as "a literary journal, devoted to religious, moral, scientific and social questions," a more upscale publication than its weekly sister periodical, the AME *Christian Recorder*, which printed news of political import along with more pedestrian church business (Kealing 3). AME leaders intended the *Church Review* to extend to educated readers within and beyond the denomination, including potential white Americans who the editors hoped would be convinced of the race's capabilities.

Despite the novel's similarities to mainstream regionalist fiction, the narrative's abrupt shifts from realism to a more didactic, moral tone complicate such a reading of *Clancy Street*. The realist mode dissolves as the story develops, giving way to Tillman's increasing

---

<sup>37</sup>Brodhead's analysis applies to regionalist fiction published in periodicals such as *Harper's* and the *Atlantic Monthly*, but the AME *Church Review* in which *Clancy Street* was published considered itself an equally distinctive periodical among African American readers.

reliance on allegorical characters, plots and themes that attempt to minimize the profundity of class difference. The novel on one hand bears the realistic ethos of its protagonists—the “mechanic accents” of the working class—and on the other hand, the heavy-handed accents of a “better class,” sentimental narrator who implies, by the conclusion of the novel, that individual effort, love, faith and self-sacrifice gradually overcome the distressing realities of class inequality. By highlighting and then dismissing class difference, *Clancy Street* is an apt example of nineteenth-century African American fiction in which “class awareness may take the form of *a denial of the existence or reality of classes*. Thus the class awareness of the middle class, in so far as it involves beliefs which place a premium upon individual responsibility and achievement, is of this order” (Giddens 162, emphasis in original). It is in the contrived, uneasy narrative transitions between realism and idealism in *Clancy Street* that possible conflicts over labor and class status are most apparent. In these moments, as the dire conditions of black workers and the hope of future progress are juxtaposed, Tillman as author is most forced to confront the myths of class mobility.

The term “class” appears nowhere in *Clancy Street* to delineate one social group from another, but Tillman’s characterizations and descriptions immediately reveal a pattern of social class stratification. While avoiding the conventional language of class, with designations such as working, middle, and upper-class, the narrative relies on what Amy Lang calls “the syntax of class”: “an orderly arrangement of terms indicating mutual relationship,” constitutive elements that form and convey social class identity (5). Thus we can parse elements such as the apparel, home furnishings, speech, sentiments, and physical attributes portrayed in Tillman’s fiction to detect the class status she ascribes to individual characters and the myths of class mobility that the narrative engages.

As a foreman in the tobacco industry, Zeke Waters and his family enjoy the privilege of living in a cottage farthest from the stench of the factory; the home's distance from other houses and businesses demarcates the family's exceptionality. Zeke's occupation accounts in part for the reputation the Waters have among local factory folk, but the family's esteem depends as much on his wife Anne's relative leisure as on her husband's labor. Though the second chapter of the novel introduces all of the Waters family members, Tillman entitles the chapter "Anne," specifying the young wife and mother as the center of her family and the barometer by which other community residents are measured. In characterizing Anne's social superiority in the working class neighborhood, Tillman relies on a number of conventional class signifiers, including phenotype, education, and taste. Light skinned and literate with a "delicate appetite" that abhors the "coarse food" that is the staple of poor African Americans' diet, Anne "held her head just a little higher than the rest of the neighbors" (267, 255). Her family enjoys better food and clothes than do other factory families and, though some Clancy Street women live out at service, Anne only sporadically hires her time as a laundress and seamstress (254).

Though early descriptions of Anne repeatedly and carefully highlight her subtle difference from other working women, Tillman is as careful about repressing any status-based envy among Clancy laborers. Only one observation in the text hints of intraracial social conflict: the narrator mentions that "Clancy street folks had always accused [Anne] of spoiling her children" (267). Otherwise, the author often attempts to undermine the social distinctions that she portrays. For example, when readers first encounter Anne in the text in chapter two, the description of her appearance draws attention to her complexion as a sign of her relative gentility. However the narrative later stigmatizes light skin among African

Americans as a painful, visible reminder of illicit sexual relations between whites and blacks. Anne regretfully explains that she derived her “white face and straight hair and features like white folks” from her white grandfather and African grandmother (272). This discrepancy between light skin being valued and devalued in the novel registers Tillman’s ambivalence about relying on conventional markers of social status among blacks. On one hand, Tillman highlights the Waters family as distinguished from its peers, serving as the expected leaders of the working-class community. On the other, Tillman hesitates to admit social differences among the workers. Rather than attracting jealous contention, Anne’s household managerial skills, literacy, and manners gain her the encomium as “the sage of Clancy street [sic], and the pride of its multi-colored inhabitants,” including Irish American immigrants (255). The amiable relations between the Waters and their neighbors take for granted the existing stratification and, furthermore, imply that the Clancy residents respect the Waters household not for its material possessions, but because Anne genuinely is likeable.

Tillman’s strategy of raising and then dismissing status differences within the working-class community also applies to her handling of the relation between labor and capital. The novel represses the reality of class difference by diffusing the threat of discontent laborers challenging capital. Zeke is respected for his authority over other factory workers, but in broader terms, he is nearer to the bottom rung of economic power, as a conversation about his work conditions reveals. When Anne questions the miserly salary allotted to workers, neither she nor her husband imagines social action that can bring about better conditions for factory operatives. In the post-Civil War period, Louisville, Kentucky was one of the top tobacco industries in the nation. Because the city had an oversupply of available laborers, including many unskilled workers who had relocated there from rural

towns, employers could pay menial wages and easily replace workers who protested their wages or conditions (Wright 78). Mr. Waters tells his wife, “There’s so many of us colored folks here, the bosses can get all of the hands they need at their own prices. If I was to step out to-morrow, there’d be fifty men’d step up to take my place” (258). When Anne tries to continue the conversation, suggesting that her husband at least lodge his complaints to the employer, Zeke curtails the conversation, exclaiming, “The only trouble is, Anne, you and the boss don’t see alike that’s all” (258). Rather than offering an extended discussion of labor conditions, the text evades the inequalities that determine African Americans’ class position. Before Anne can posit a rebuttal to her husband’s emphatic statement, one of the Waters children interrupts his parents to describe a fight he witnessed among other Clancy Street residents. In the midst of discussing difficulty for laborers, the story jarringly transitions to an instance of domestic disharmony, implying that the more urgent conflicts are not between capital and labor, but among working-class people themselves. The moral discussion that follows proposes that poor people suffer more because of their own social behavior than as a result of their economic conditions.

That Tillman chooses not to represent her characters as planning or staging labor strikes or other organized class resistance likely reflects her own sensibilities as much as the characters’ class awareness. Between 1880 and 1905, 6.5 to 7 million workers launched between 23,000 and 37,000 strikes (Richardson 185; Trachtenberg 80). African American working people were organizing into segregated units of national labor unions by the late 1880s in cities such as Pittsburgh and Richmond; by the 1890s, African American workers in Louisville were welcomed into local tobacco workers’ unions and even served as officers in the organization (Wright 91). Yet the black professional class, as well as some working-class

laborers, often opposed unionization because such collective action seemed to conflict with values of liberal individualism they espoused (Gaines 133). Labor historians caution against interpreting union formation, strikes, and other institutionalized social action as the primary evidence of class consciousness, however. In *Clancy Street*, black Louisville residents' class awareness reflects in their formation of benevolent clubs, fraternal orders, lodges and informal networks to share resources and survive low wages, factory closings, and other adverse conditions.

That the Waters family's status is based on non-pecuniary indicators, such as the wife's respectability and the husband's antiunion work ethic and responsibility, is reiterated when the family faces bouts of unemployment that severely lessen its income. On these occasions, the family refuses public charity, for as the narrator explains, "the American Negro is an aristocrat by nature and holds in abhorrence city rations, city hospitals, and city burials" (264). During one economic depression, Zeke takes a job at the "poor house," which allows him occasionally to bring home leftover food. As a staff member, he has access to the rations distributed to the poor, but gains them without the loss of status he might incur as a client. At another time of economic depression, Zeke determines temporarily to shift jobs, sailing "Down South" as a deck hand to New Orleans. After returning, he renews his position at the tobacco factory, presumably under the same wage conditions. Zeke goes to extraordinary lengths to find work, clinging tenaciously to the model of black self-sufficiency. By emphasizing his flexibility in accepting various kinds of work, the novel reiterates that all honest work is honorable. What matters is not the occupation Zeke has, but that he fulfills his work thoroughly and devotedly with the sake of his integrity and family in mind.

What marks the Waters family as most respectable in their low-income neighborhood, however, is Anne's ability to cultivate the right relationships with white Americans. Though Anne's connections help to sustain the family through financial difficulties, Tillman does not show white patronage as undermining Zeke's role as provider. In the chapter "Hard Times," as the family awaits its evening meal, each member reports how he or she gathered food and resources by ingratiating whites. Caroline contributes food she gets from an Irish neighbor who, in stereotypic Irish habit, drinks too much and cannot fulfill her household duties without the young girl's help (265). Fourteen-year-old Abe procures coal from one of his mother's former employers. Most importantly, Anne helps the family survive by graciously accepting a loan from her white clients. Anne previously left her own household for a month to serve Mrs. Rue's diphtheria-stricken children, and in keeping with the rewarded faithful servant myth, her sacrifice fortuitously is repaid just in time to help her family avoid starvation and eviction. As Anne reiterates, "No one ever loses anything by being kind" (268). Anne models the kind of personal sacrifice that her daughter Caroline later makes for her employer. Drawing personal satisfaction from their work, the two Waters women imply that rendering care is not simply part of their formal job descriptions, but an element of their character that pays tangible and intangible dividends.

However much Tillman holds out the promise of material and spiritual gain as a result of service, instances within the novel repeatedly reveal the tensions between the mythology of class mobility and the limited life chances for working-class Americans. This disparity between reality and idealism is expressed most clearly by Hettie Ross, Caroline's adolescent playmate who engages in "a life of sin" to afford the luxury items she desires. Tillman does not efface the issue of sexuality, as did many Victorian writers who considered the topic

taboo. However, to challenge the stereotype that black women are inherently promiscuous, Tillman explains the young woman's economic incentives for bartering her sexuality. When Mrs. Waters attempts to warn Hettie not to accept the flattery of white men, the girl protests that aspiring to marry a black man will not advance her materially. Mrs. Waters counsels:

“You are a beautiful girl and if you will be a good girl, some nice young colored man will come along in a few years and marry you and take you to a good home.” “Where's any of 'em got good homes,” said the girl sullenly, “none of 'em on Clancy Street's got 'em.” (272)

Hettie's retort exposes the idea that proper behavior and hard work bring individuals the comfort of professional fulfillment and safe domestic lives. In this tense scene—as Hettie's statement comes dangerously close to demystifying the racially exclusionary underpinnings of myths of mobility based on work and virtue—the narrator abruptly shifts the focus of conversation, as also occurs during the conversation between Anne and Zeke about fair wages. Immediately after mentioning that Anne “failed to save Hettie” (272), a coded reference to the girl's strategic commodification of her sexuality, Tillman relies on the stock narrative retreat to good fortune to obviate the issues of material disparity Hettie raises. When Caroline is offered a job as a servant in a white home, that occupational option is considered “a splendid piece of good luck” that offers her an honorable means of gaining the “good home” Mrs. Waters idealizes (272).

Caroline's employment by the aristocratic Langdon family resonates with both the historical preponderance of black servants in white homes and, relatedly, the frequent representation of domestics in African American literature. As Trudier Harris explains, because of her contact with the private sphere of middle- to upper-class white American life, the domestic servant serves as a medium for black authors to examine both race and class disparity (Harris 14). The status of the white middle-class household, with its patriarchal,



single-income structure and conspicuous consumption, is reinforced through its difference from the working-class household. In *Clancy Street*, however, Tillman deemphasizes the disparity between the middle-class and working-class homes. On a visit to the Waters residence, Mrs. Langdon examines the dwellings and determines that, despite its economic deprivation, the family demonstrates the respectability that makes Caroline an assimilable addition to the Langdon household. Satisfied with the cleanliness of the white-washed “best room,” which Caroline exhibits “with considerable pride,” Mrs. Langdon “made a mental survey of the apartment and concluded that the girl would do” (Tillman 275). When Caroline first enters the lavish Langdon home, she briefly admires its luxury, but emphasizes the wealthy family’s discord: “she found that material things failed to bring happiness” (278). By privileging Caroline’s birth home over the mansion she enters for service, Tillman suggests that material wealth and immediate gratification should be neither the goal of work nor the measure of success. Caroline perceives the family’s lack of unity and considers it her personal mission to soothe and reconcile the feuding family. Easily adapting to the role of household servant, Caroline lives up to the expectations of her employer, who selected the girl precisely because she reminded her of her mammy and “the little Negro playfellow and maid, now a teacher in the far South” (274). Though Mrs. Langdon intends to send Caroline to school while she works, the girl gains that privilege by fitting the profile of the enslaved black women her mistress remembers.

Depicting an endearing relationship between the Langdons and Caroline, Tillman risks reiterating the status quo rather than questioning the inequalities that allow the Langdons to enjoy comfort denied to the working classes. The novel addresses few of the concerns registered by many black working women in the postbellum period. For example, in

her study of African American women's labor, Jacqueline Jones explains that urban black female workers who sacrificed time away from their own families to work for little remuneration "had few incentives to yield themselves up totally to the work ethic traditionally enshrined in American cities" (111). In some instances, domestic workers' tardiness, peculation, and insolence might be read as subversive resistance to their white employers and the larger racialized economic structure (Jones 111). *Clancy Street* instead reiterates the notion that one contributor broached in the *Christian Recorder* in 1898, almost contemporaneously as Tillman's novel appeared in the pages of the *Review*. In response to a spate of articles in northern newspapers criticizing black servants, S. Timothy Tice advised black church leaders to ensure the dignity of black domestic work and defend black workers against European immigrants' usurpation. "Call attention to this growing state of affairs," Tice enjoined, "and urge upon all our people, wherever their congregations are largely composed of domestics, to be careful, industrious, economical and trustworthy" (1). Black domestics needed to be as amenable as possible in order to retain their jobs "until they are able to honorably leave them to the betterment of their condition" (Tice 1). Caroline's work as a live-in domestic for the Langdon family demonstrates Tillman's attempt to reconcile the conditions of postbellum black workers with nineteenth-century notions of respectability proposed by white and black middle-class culture. The author maintains that by their strength of character, demonstrated in consistent, thorough work, black workers could gain the respect of the "better class" of white Americans who wielded the political and economic power to assist blacks.

In addition to providing honorable employment that saves Caroline from prostitution and wins her white allies, the girl's occupation gains her greater social influence among her

African American peers. While the racist market economy prescribes domestic service as Caroline's best chance to work, that job connotes relative privilege in the working-class black community. Caroline wears to school the gently-worn castoff clothes of her employer, and more importantly, she demonstrates among her friends the training in bourgeois tastes she learns from Mrs. Langdon. Tillman is careful, however, not to show Caroline as self-interestedly imitating her employers or alienating other black people. Rather than allowing Caroline an unchecked ambition that might be perceived as a threat to whites, Tillman marshals the girl's education, refined culture, and influence into the service of church and race. Caroline's spiritual conversion at a local black church sublimates her desire for social mobility into religious fervor. In this regard, the girl's apparent shift in material and social status is kept in check by her Christian ethics of self-denial and delayed reward.

On one level, the conclusion of *Clancy Street* goes furthest to corroborate the myth of the rewarded faithful worker, as Tillman shows Caroline as a loyal worker even to the point of death. After serving the Langdons for seven years, she chooses to miss her own high school graduation, the highlight of her personal life, to nurse her feverish employer. Mrs. Langdon is restored to health, but Caroline contracts the fever and dies, glimpsing heaven and uttering words of consolation to her mourners. Signals within the narrative and in Tillman's nonfiction writing indicate that Caroline should be interpreted as a Christ-like figure and, more immediately, as a literary descendent of Harriet Beecher Stowe's self-effacing Uncle Tom.<sup>38</sup> That Caroline dies from a disease that she contracts while serving her

---

<sup>38</sup>Tillman was an avowed admirer of Stowe. In the first chapter of *Clancy Street*, young Caroline devotes herself to reading *Uncle Tom's Cabin*; Anne mentions that she seriously considered naming Caroline after the famed antislavery author. Tillman also inserts a long passage from *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in her essay "Afro-American Women and Their Work" to indicate how enslaved women gained "consolation for all of their woes" through religious indoctrination (Tillman 75).

employer demonstrates her faithfulness to both her heavenly Master and her earthly mistress. Caroline's death thus is an extension of her labor, a private sacrifice symbolizing a more public service that African American workers fulfill for white employers and the national conscience. Framed by the credo repeated in the text—"Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends"—Caroline's demise dramatizes the all-encompassing service Booker T. Washington attributes to the southern black labor force. In his 1895 address to the Atlanta Cotton States Exposition, Washington assured white listeners that black workers remained ever poised for service, "ready to lay down our lives, if need be, in defence [sic] of yours" (Washington 100).<sup>39</sup> Such rhetoric enshrines the black worker, asserting his or her daily contributions not as drudgery, but as heroism that transcends the reality of class altogether.

Shifting from the realist depictions of black working-class culture featured in the early chapters to a religious-centered myth of work and reward, the conclusion of *Clancy Street* appears to foreclose further discussion of the Clancy residents' struggle for better employment opportunities. As black and white people gather around Caroline to celebrate her thrift, education, and faithful service, Caroline unites the city's inhabitants across racial boundaries and material inequalities, apparently collapsing class distinctions. Yet besides earning Caroline what the narrator considers the ultimate upward mobility—a physically and spiritually transcendent move to heaven—the legacy of Caroline's labor positively impacts economic conditions for her immediate survivors. After witnessing Caroline's faithful work, her employer Mr. Langdon confesses that he "can no longer doubt the capabilities of [the

---

<sup>39</sup>Just as she alludes to Stowe in her writing, Tillman directly and indirectly references and applauds Washington. In the story "Miles the Conqueror," the ambitious Miles Brown walks from his home in Virginia to enroll in an integrated "eastern College [sic]" (247). Tillman likely appropriated this incident from Washington's biography, in which he attests to traveling by foot from his home in West Virginia to Hampton Institute in Virginia.

Afro-American] race” (285). In memory of Caroline, Mr. Langdon and his wife agree to finance an education for Caroline’s brother and her boyfriend Otto. They also welcome Hettie Ross, redeemed from her fallen state, to fill the vacancy in their home as maid. In addition, after Caroline dies, her sweetheart Otto marries her little sister, Eva; this ending hints that Eva’s class position may be advanced through her newly-educated and presumably more marketable partner.

Caroline’s labor and life demonstrate a principle Tillman inscribed in “Paying Professions for Colored Girls” as she recommends that “[t]he trained colored nurse who enters white homes on deeds of mercy is a sure wedge in the walls of racial prejudice. Her patience and skill often cause an entire revulsion of feeling in regard to the colored race” (Tillman, “Paying Professions” 117). As Kevin Gaines adds, the “rhetoric of female domestic service” offered a palatable means of gaining the support of whites “in a region where black education in even its most conservative form might provoke violent opposition from white supremacists” (Gaines 141). While all eyes are on Caroline’s service and sacrifice, Tillman uses the myth of the rewarded faithful worker to manipulate the existing social order, granting greater educational and professional opportunities to selected African Americans.

Read closely, and in light of Tillman’s other writings, the resolution of the novel offers a disturbing commentary on African Americans’ social status and chances for class mobility in the New South. The religious myth of future hope, in heaven if not on earth, encodes African Americans’ lack of hope that present race and class conditions can be substantially changed without black people’s self-abnegation, as Caroline exemplifies. In each of her four fictions—two novels and two short stories —Tillman portrays black Americans who gain or maintain social status only after offering their physical bodies to be

inconvenienced, maimed, or killed in order to win the confidence of whites. Figuring consistently in her fiction, self-sacrifice is the primary means by which her African American characters make social and financial progress in the South: In *Beryl Weston's Ambition* (1893), an enslaved boy jumps into the river to save the two children of his white mistress and thus gains his mistress's favor. In Tillman's short story "Miles the Conqueror" (1894), the African American college student Miles endangers his life to nurse to health a racist Southern student who previously has been especially vicious toward him. In "The Preacher at Hill Station" (1903), a black minister is accused of being a "white fo'ks nigger" because he insists on protecting both the ego and the property of white Americans from black chicken thieves. Bishop Clark is shot in the arm when he tries to mediate a race riot that erupts as black men try to vote. These narratives, which highlight African Americans' morality, dependability, and forgiveness, imply that race and class boundaries are so rigidly set that only the most extreme means of black self-abnegation can create "an entire revulsion of feeling in regard to the colored race" (Tillman, "Paying Professions" 117).<sup>40</sup>

In Tillman's writing, the myth of the rewarded servant functions both to circumvent and reinforce prevailing class stratifications. The power to determine race and class conditions remains in the hands of white capitalists, such as the Langdons, who apportion education, funding, employment, and other resources to black Americans who know their place. Meanwhile, Caroline's life as a young black woman appears dispensable. The Langdons easily hire a new maid, and even Caroline's boyfriend, Otto, finds another woman

---

<sup>40</sup>Tillman was not alone in suggesting that self-effacing service was the way for African Americans to gain status in the postbellum era. Victoria Earle Matthews's "Aunt Lindy" (1894), a short story acclaimed in its time by African American reviewers, features an elderly former bondswoman who briefly contemplates revenging her master, but instead nurses him to health when he is injured in a fire. The master recovers and provides for the old woman for the rest of her life. In a slight variation, when an impoverished master arrives at the doorstep of his former slave's home in Dunbar's "Nelse Hatton's Vengeance," (1898), Nelse's bitterness subsides and he offers the master his own hard-earned cash and clothing.

to marry, Caroline's own sister. Tillman's steady attempt to silence her characters' class discontent instead draws attention to the conditions being repressed and averted. While Caroline's black survivors gain white approval and resources, they also literally lose an African American relative and friend, a point that Tillman ironically underscores in the very last scene of the novel. Rather than concluding with the union between Otto and Eva, highlighting the marriage plot as in other black female domestic allegories, *Clancy Street* ends with Otto visiting Caroline's gravesite, still revering and mourning her death years later. The text includes the entire inscription of Caroline's tombstone, revealing to the reader that Caroline is twenty-one years old when she dies.

Tempered by the protagonists' relative gains and Caroline's loss of life, *Clancy Street* exceeds the kind of moral respectability that Harper prescribes in *Trial and Triumph*. In the moral economy Harper establishes in her novels, African Americans seldom lose their physical lives in grand gestures of self-sacrifice meant to draw the attention of whites and the respect of blacks, ensuring social status. *Trial and Triumph*, however, is set primarily in the North and published a decade earlier; this difference in setting and historical context greatly impacts how Tillman and Harper contrastingly imagine black Americans' class mobility. Writing about labor conditions in the "New South," as its regime of racial repression and disfranchisement strengthened, Tillman depicts a model of class mobility that depends on an exchange of black Americans' non-threatening service for gradual economic betterment and white cooperation. The bittersweet ending of Tillman's novel posits that African Americans' literal and symbolic labor contributes to status adjudged according to respectability. Rather than suggesting that social class is entirely independent of occupation, as do several characters in Griggs's *Overshadowed*, the African American workers in *Clancy Street*

maintain a work ethic best articulated in the lyrics of a spiritual popularized by Mahalia Jackson: “May the Work I’ve Done Speak for Me.”<sup>41</sup>

### **Occupation and Class Awakenings in Sutton Griggs’s *Imperium in Imperio* and *Overshadowed***

Unlike *Clancy Street*, which denotes the Waters family’s status in part by highlighting its relation to “better class” whites, Griggs’s novels are notably more focused on how African Americans interpret class within their own communities. The author’s analysis of intraracial social differences is so pronounced that one critic proposes, “In better times, Griggs might have taught social anthropology in a university—but no such opportunities were present at the turn of the century, so Griggs wrote sociology in the form of the sentimental novel” (Moses 215). While many twentieth-century critics consider this sociological bent an aesthetic flaw in Griggs’s writing, the style and themes of his fiction offer a poignant study of nineteenth-century conflicts over leisure and labor. Griggs wrote five novels—*Imperium in Imperio* (1899), *Overshadowed* (1901), *Unfettered* (1902), *The Hindered Hand* (1905) and *Pointing the Way* (1908)—and dozens of nonfiction essays, manuals, and sermons, most of them printed through his own financially-strained publishing company, Orion in Nashville, Tennessee. Never gaining the mainstream, crossover appeal of Chesnutt or Dunbar at the height of their careers, Griggs peddled his novels door-to-door among working-class, sometimes newly literate black readers (Moses 213). This background about Griggs’s audience may help to explain why he addresses sociopolitical and economic concerns through sensationalism, melodrama and other narrative styles characteristic of

---

<sup>41</sup>I provide here an excerpt of the lyrics: “May the work I’ve done speak for me./ May the work I’ve done speak for me./ When I’m resting in my grave, there is nothing that can be said./ May the work I’ve done speak for me.” Verses two and three alternately assert that “the life I live” and “the service I give” should indicate the speaker’s worth (Pugh).



cheaply produced, widely distributed dime novels of the period. That Griggs courted an audience of laboring African Americans also may suggest why his fiction strongly critiques the black leisure class while representing working people—his potential buyers—as ennobled through their hard labor. Yet Griggs’s novels cannot be reduced to a simple supply and demand formula, with him supplying the representations that affirmed his laboring constituencies. Griggs satirized both the “Talented Tenth” and “rewarded faithful servant” models, undermining the idea that rigid intraracial class stratifications were a necessary stage in the race’s evolution and advancement.

Griggs’s best-known novel, *Imperium in Imperio* (“nation within a nation”), examines labor conditions in order to delegitimize the myths of American classlessness and meritocracy. *Imperium* traces from boyhood two male protagonists, Belton Piedmont and Bernard Belgrave, friends who compete with each other in school and, as adults, vie for leadership of a proposed black nation with headquarters in Waco, Texas. Griggs creates Belton and Bernard as representatives from disparate social classes within the black community, examining the compounded effect of race and class inequity on the characters’ lives. Belton comes from a poverty-stricken family while the mulatto Bernard lives a comfortable life financed by his estranged father, a white politician. Belton overcomes his deprivation, performs well in school, and gains a college education, but his wealth and influence are never comparable to Bernard’s. While Bernard benefits from his father’s finely laid and supervised plan for his career, Belton encounters significant difficulty in finding work and sustaining himself according to the principles of hard work, independence and self-sufficiency he adopts from the model of the self-made man. By comparing the two men

throughout the novel, Griggs pointedly cites Belton's unfair treatment at school and work to show the additional challenges black Americans face in pursuing professional careers.

Belton's search for work highlights the complex social factors that determine black employment. He repeatedly is fired from jobs such as editor and teacher because his white employers feel threatened by his revolutionary political philosophies. Furthermore, social restrictions within the African American community also limit Belton's job opportunities. As he negotiates the labor market, he discovers that he must take into consideration both discriminatory hiring and intraracial expectations of propriety:

It is true that such positions as street laborer, hod carrier, cart driver, factory hand, railroad hand, were open to him; but such menial tasks were uncongenial to a man of his education and polish. And, again, society positively forbade him doing such labor. If a man of education among the colored people did such manual labor, he was looked upon as an eternal disgrace to the race [...] This set Belton to studying the labor situation and the race question from this point of view. (90)

On one hand, professional African Americans try to convince "the masses" that the race requires a privileged leadership class whose education justifies a higher position on the occupational hierarchy. On the other hand, overqualified blacks recognize that the hierarchy prevents them from accepting jobs further down the social ladder, which would at least offer sustenance, if not prestige. By indicating "the labor situation and the race question" as complicit in ensuring the class immobility of African Americans, Griggs explicitly broaches a dilemma that Tillman addresses in her nonfiction essay "Paying Professions," but effectively skirts in *Clancy Street*.

The most incisive class analysis in *Imperium* reveals how black workers awakened to their fixed class position disrupt the class structures of their communities and larger American society. On this level, Griggs shrewdly explains how class myths function and,

conversely, how displacing those myths eventuates in sometimes violent class struggle. Belton and his fellow blacks experience a number of slights and discriminations each day, but the Talented Tenth most immediately begin to plot against the American government because black workers resist the employment discrimination that impedes their upward mobility. Gathering in informal and formal meetings to commiserate about their lack of work, educated black men shift their conversations from their personal circumstances to a sociopolitical analysis of the American class and labor structures. The narrator challenges the idea that education ruins black Americans' work ethic, explaining, "[educated black men] were willing to work but the opportunity was denied them...They began to abuse and execrate a national government that would not protect them against color prejudice, but on the contrary actually practiced it itself" (91). Belton's job search connects to the novel's larger plot as he and Bernard organize the Imperium. As I note, Belton's disappointing and life threatening work experiences convince him of the urgent need to establish a black nation. Put another way: when Belton repeatedly is denied the job of his choice and the status and sustenance it could provide, he questions American myths of class mobility so thoroughly that he determines to enact a separate black nation, complete with its own militia and policies, and more implicitly, complete with socioeconomic conditions that better accommodate black Americans.

Though Belton's wife intends to encourage him by spouting the rhetoric of meritocracy, "telling him that a man of his talents would beyond all question be sure to succeed in life," his experiences repeatedly disprove that logic (89). Two dramatic work experiences precede Belton's abandonment of the myths of class that previously had inspired his work ethic. After refusing employment in the manual trades, Belton determines to dress

as a woman and procure work as a nurse. He surmises that since black female domestics remained in demand, his temporary pursuit of domestic work not only affords him steady employment, but also grants him access to the private lives and thoughts of white Americans. While cross-dressing scenes frequently appear in nineteenth-century American fiction, and in Griggs's novels in particular, the implications of Belton's act of gender passing in this scene are especially ironic. In his attempt to be a self-made man, self-sufficiently providing for his family as a conventional patriarch, Belton literally is unmanned, appearing as a black female in a subservient role. On another occasion, when Belton moves to Louisiana to work as a college administrator at a black industrial college, he is kidnapped, hanged, and nearly dissected by white scientists who intend to use his body to affirm their pseudoscientific racialism. While both of these scenes admittedly are exaggerated—marked with the fantastic, gothic elements that characterize Griggs's fiction—it is significant that these events directly precede Belton's founding of the Imperium. This narrative order suggests that Griggs recognized the links between black Americans' unemployment and their larger sociopolitical marginalization; the novel posits limited labor opportunities as a viable reason for Belton to seek status and political defense in an alternate governmental system.

Crafting his second novel with a female protagonist, rather than the male antipodal figures of *Imperium in Imperio*, Griggs addresses additional class issues that, though present in the earlier novel, are much more central to *Overshadowed*. Focusing on the light-skinned Erma Wysong, the author broaches the thorny issue of miscegenation that often is projected onto and through the “passable” female body. Erma does not contemplate racial passing, but the narrator repeatedly refers to her skin color and beauty as indications of her initially esteemed status. More importantly, however, by tracing the concerns of a black female,

Griggs also highlights the difficult relation among gender, class, and labor for black working women in the late nineteenth century. *Overshadowed*'s class-related storyline begins when Erma places an ad in the newspaper for employment. Though she has gained a high school education, the highest level of instruction available for black students in Richmond, Virginia, hiring discrimination prohibits her from entering professional fields such as teaching or clerking. Determined to contribute to the mortgage left on the family's home after her parents die, Erma decides to work as a nanny or domestic servant in a white home, thereby filling a conventional occupation reserved for black women. Her decision to solicit work becomes the subject of dispute, as black and white citizens argue whether Erma is too well-educated and too beautiful, given her nearly white appearance, to work as a maid or whether she has a responsibility to provide for herself by any "honorable" means. Throughout the novel, Griggs emphasizes these discussions about the job challenges that Erma and lesser educated blacks encounter, questioning the expediency of judging class status by occupation in black communities.

In the context of nineteenth-century racial uplift fiction, Griggs's depiction of Erma as an educated black woman who willingly applies for work as a nanny or household worker possibly could appear inimical to black progress. Even when prescribed by protofeminists such as Anna Julia Cooper, who endorsed higher education and professional opportunities for black women, the rhetoric of racial elevation maintained that uplift ideally enabled black men to protect black women physically, economically and politically from strenuous, menial labor outside the home. As Xiomara Santamarina notes, "Yoking the concept of honor to black female employment was probably one of the most difficult of all rhetorical tasks to perform for the nation's most exploited population" (Santamarina 168). Free from the unsexing

degradation of working “just like men,” African American women of elevated status were expected to labor within the home or at least in the most refined public occupations, such as teacher, nurse, or entrepreneurial seamstress, as does autobiographer Elizabeth Keckly. Yet interpreting employment as “degrading” or “dishonorable” overlooked how wage earning could lend women independence and fulfillment (Santamarina 22).

By contrasting Erma to middle- and upper-class black foils who think less admirably of physical labor, Griggs underscores the idiosyncratic relationship among labor, class status, and social uplift. In *Overshadowed*, Richmond’s burgeoning black elite citizenry especially is concerned that since Erma represents her class and the black community, her concession to domestic work imperils the status of all aspiring African Americans. One of Erma’s classmates, the spoiled, self-centered Margaret Marston who considers herself the gatekeeper of elite black society, expresses the sentiments of their class. Shocked by Erma’s public solicitation for work, Margaret exclaims, “White girls occupying the social station in their race that we do in our race would suffer themselves to be carried out of their homes dead before they would perform such menial tasks...we must hold up our race just as they do their race. Why, just think, if we educated girls go to work, it can be truthfully said that our race has no first-class society” (Griggs 37). Margaret especially is invested in policing the boundaries of social classes because her own position among the elite is tenuous. She dresses well, speaks eloquently, and otherwise possesses all the qualities of a black society belle; however, Margaret’s social position is maintained only precariously through her mother’s work as a laundress. Thus Margaret, herself only a washtub away from labor, has the most to lose by the boundaries of class being renegotiated to include servant girls such as Erma.

Manipulating the principles of racial elevation, Margaret aims to “hold up [the] race” by distancing herself from many of the black people she claims to represent and inspire (37).

In order to present African American working women in the most favorable light, Griggs attempts to divest black female labor of its pejorative association with female sexuality. As Hazel Carby explains, late nineteenth and early twentieth-century charitable efforts to establish “working girls’ homes” aimed in part to police the sexuality of urban female laborers, who were perceived as being more vulnerable to wantonness when not monitored in a stable domestic setting (Carby 23). While the narrator of *Clancy Street* frames Caroline Waters’s servant job as honorable labor saving her from the threat of prostitution, the characters of *Overshadowed* fear that entering into domestic service will catalyze a downward social and moral spiral for Erma. Griggs exploits the association between work and sexual misconduct in two scenes that ironically point to the upper class, rather than common laborers, as most promiscuous. As Margaret Marston tells another black society belle, Ellen Sanders, about Erma’s employment, the suspenseful exchange between the two women employs the coded language used in Victorian novels to describe illicit sexual relations. Margaret and Ellen claim that Erma has “come to some bad end,” “brought disgrace upon [their] entire class,” and “just gone and ruined herself forever” (32, 36). Margaret fears that laboring will lead Erma to lose her reputation and sexual purity, but later Margaret is the one seduced and disqualified from respectability among the black middle class.

Griggs combats the charges against female laborers by showing them as no more immoral than women and men from other class backgrounds. The narrative especially exposes the white upper class as depraved because of its leisure. With too much time and

money on his hands, James Benson hatches an elaborate plot to pursue Erma (who, unknown to him, is his mulatta half-sister), and he is dismayed to hear that she may “go into service.” As he surmises, without male protection or accountability, Erma may be vulnerable not only to her male employer, but also to “[w]hite youths [who] will feel that she has no further claims to respectability, and will proceed to deal with her accordingly” (48). Benson’s concerns for Erma’s safety and status are not entirely honorable, of course; he most fears that before he has a chance to make her his mistress, some other white man will debase her first.

Long after Erma has accepted a job as a domestic and prevailed by protecting her virtue, many local people remain intensely concerned about how her work reflects on her status and the impression of the race. Several residents oppose Erma’s marriage to Astral Herndon, a long-time friend who completes medical school and returns to Richmond to declare his love for her. The couple’s detractors “bitterly opposed the union on the ground that class distinctions were highly essential to the welfare of the race, which distinctions Astral’s course was calculated to obliterate, in that he, who was to earn his livelihood by mental exertion, was to marry a girl who had deserted that pathway and resorted to menial labor” (184). The hint of sexual misconduct still lingers in the black elite’s claim that Erma “deserted that pathway.” Yet by awarding the most handsome, professional bachelor to Erma rather than Margaret or the other society belles, Griggs acquits Erma of any insinuations and privileges the values of self-reliance, hard work, and economy that she espouses.

Discrediting the rigid standards of the black middle class, *Overshadowed* follows the tradition of Tillman’s works, similarly aiming to redeem domestic, manual and industrial labor as “honorable” or “respectable” work. This is expressed most dramatically through the character of Mrs. Mollie Marston, Margaret’s mother, who remains humble and



unpretentious while working as a washerwoman to propel Margaret into the upper echelons. Intent that the generation after hers should have a better life than she has, Mrs. Marston tries to dissuade Erma from becoming a servant, lest Erma lose clout in black society. In a chapter poignantly titled, “A Lady Who Did Not Know That She Was a Lady,” Mrs. Marston tries to share her wisdom with Erma, but it is the younger woman who convinces the elder that social standing in the black community should be independent of one’s occupation. Inspired by Erma’s determination and confidence, Mrs. Marston comes to a powerful moment of self-realization. “I ‘specks dese Suverners hes got us blevin’ wrong ter tink dat a washtub spiles yer ladyship,” Mrs. Marston muses to herself, “Mebbe arter all I hez been a lady and didnt know it all dis whiul. Been cheated outen my standing in life foolin’ arter dese Suverners!” (45). Through the kind of reappropriation of class designations implicit in Frances Harper’s concept “aristocrat of the soul,” Erma and Mrs. Marston reconceive of “lady” in terms of hard work, moral respectability, and religious fervor. Griggs not only suggests that Mrs. Marston is a lady despite her income-earning labor, but that she is a lady *because* of it. Mrs. Marston further devalues aristocratic lifestyles, arguing that leisure leads to physical and moral degeneracy, a point later proved through her own daughter Margaret. Using a folk character to assert an alternative interpretation of class and gender, Griggs highlights how Southern white women’s exclusionary claim to the title “lady” is linked to other ways of misleading black Americans to “blevin’ wrong”; in this way, the conflicts over the language of classification reinscribe those over political, economic and social boundaries.

In this scene, Griggs conceptualizes class status as a function of an individual’s subjective identification and cognizance. Though Mrs. Marston’s material circumstances remain unchanged, her moment of “knowing”—her careful consideration of the power of

naming and valuing African American labor—transforms her identification. Her self perception is a fundamental sign of working-class resistance against white racism and against what Griggs considers the short-sightedness of the black Talented Tenth that pointed to intraracial class distinctions as a sign of progress. Arguably Mrs. Marston's self-perception is in some ways externally inconsequential. Her understanding of herself as a "lady" neither allows her social intercourse with the light-skinned inner circle of African Americans, nor protects her daughter from the usual threats to Southern black women. Mrs. Marston's class awakening seems not to transmit to Margaret who, besides refusing to work alongside her mother as a laundress, attempts to pursue class mobility by affiliating with a white elite politician who seduces her, promising to confirm her status as a lady of leisure. Significantly, when Margaret is banished from town, Erma supplants the fallen girl in her mother's affections, going so far as to move in with Mrs. Marston. While Griggs assigns the black elite aspirant Margaret Marston to a social death, her mother and Erma reconstitute a family based on shared work ethic and class identification.

Griggs underscores his representation of Mrs. Marston's moment of class awareness through her foil, Rev. Josiah Nerve, another character who analyzes how occupation correlates with status. While he represents Mrs. Marston's folk language in earnest, the author intends Rev. Nerve's slippages between black vernacular and formal English as a parody of status-seeking African Americans. Unlettered but intent on fitting into elite social prescriptions, Rev. Nerve wants Erma to teach him a foreign language so he can complete a doctorate of divinity and retain his ministerial post in a local church. In representing Rev. Nerve's speech, Griggs goes beyond the usual heavy use of apostrophes, misspellings, and malapropisms that many black and white authors used to represent dialect visually; instead

he features dashes between each word, emphasizing the deliberateness and difficulty with which the pastor appropriates sophisticated diction. Recognizing that his clumsy speech reveals his modest class origins despite concerted effort, Rev. Nerve declares, “I-can-only-talk-straight-by calling-out-one-word-at-a-time...and-even-at-that-it-is-as-much-as-I-can-do-to-keep-my-tongue-from-twisting-back-to-the-old-time-nigger-dialect-which-I-spoke-for-thirty-years, with-much-more-pleasure-than-I-do-this” (66). The pressure he feels to be educated and articulate corresponds to changing expectations of postbellum black ministers. Secular black leaders and religious denominations alike cited an educated ministry as essential to racial uplift. Shunning superstition, unwritten sermons, and charismatic worship as primitive and embarrassing, Talented Tenth proponents of racial advancement recommended that black preachers should be educated, especially because they wielded tremendous social influence over their congregants and therefore could model and motivate reform. Explaining why he was dismissed from a previous preaching position in Richmond, Rev. Nerve theorizes that status in black communities evolves from a complex formula of skin color, occupation, and education:

All-of-the-mulattoes, whose-skins-are-such-that their-blue-blood-shows, have-decided-to-form-an-aristocracy. If-you-are-yellow-and-don’t-work-any-with-your-hands, you-are-all right. That-is-condition-number-one. If-you-are-black-and-don’t-work-any-with-your-hands-and-are-smarter-than-the-whole-lot-of-them blue-veiners-put-together, you-will-be-accepted-until-they-get-something-on-you. That-is-condition-number-two...I-did-not-work-with-my-hands, but-I-was-not-smart-enough. So, being-black, they-put-me-out. (63)

Readers can interpret Rev. Nerve’s analysis with a bit of humor when, in the following chapter, he burns down his present church to get the insurance money. We learn that though intraracial class prejudice may have contributed to Rev. Nerve’s earlier dismissal, his former parishioners likely expelled him because of his shady ethics. Yet some truth about intraracial

social differences resonates in the pastor's observations. Like Mrs. Marston, he notes the disparagement of manual work and dark skin color, conditions historically recognized as markers distinguishing between "lowly" and "better class" African Americans (Gatewood 24). If Rev. Nerve errs, he does so by proposing that class affiliation can be judged by such a definite formula, for as comparisons among nineteenth-century African American novels reveal, literary formulations of intraracial status differences vary from one location and time period to another. Griggs disposes of Rev. Nerve after mocking his vain and slightly unethical pursuit of approval from the elite. Fearing that police will discover his crime of arson, Rev. Nerve hastily leaves town, never to be heard from again. Compounded with Margaret Marston's fateful end, Rev. Nerve's dramatic exit conforms to Griggs's pattern of punishing and exiling from black community those African Americans who conceive of status in a way that does not affirm African American manual labor.

Yet this pattern is not consistent throughout the novel, for even the black people who seem to follow pragmatic career paths come to disconcerting ends. Griggs's earlier emphasis on the obstacles faced by black women workers is balanced by his focus on black men inhibited from advancing in industrial trades. This theme comes out in a secondary plot line focusing on Erma's younger brother John, who makes a deliberate decision to forego a liberal education and pursue a trade. John consistently proves his prowess as a machinist at the Bilgal Iron Works and, according to his belief that hard work facilitates upward mobility, he hopes to receive an accolade or promotion when the boss calls him into the office unexpectedly. Instead John is barred from the all-white labor union and fired. John "had been forced to join the large army of unskilled laborers, grabbing here and there in a desultory manner at every little job of work that appeared, having no steady employment...the labor

market among the colored men being glutted” (98). Excluded from the work for which he was trained, John can find work only as a carriage driver, who, coincidentally, has to escort the “Master Workman of the Labor Union of the United States,” the union leader whose racial policies lead to John’s termination.<sup>42</sup> Angry to see his myths and hopes for upward mobility dispelled by the reality of racism, John retaliates by pushing the union leader over a ledge, a move that symbolizes an overthrow of the exploitative labor system. When John confesses his crime to his sister Erma, she turns him in as a murderer. Not yet disillusioned with the myths of self-making, Erma insists that her brother should have continued his search for “honest” work rather than seek revenge. As Hugh Gloster notes, it is more than coincidental that Erma makes the fatalistic decision to surrender her brother to the authorities immediately after she hears Booker T. Washington lecture on “how the Negro could, if he would, pull up with all the odds against him” (Gloster 339; Griggs 127). While the novel mocks the educated elite such as Margaret Marston, the narrative comes across as equally critical of Washington’s accommodationist policies intended to pacify both white racial anxiety and black working-class discontent. Although a white sympathizer helps John to escape lynching through means of a cross-racial disguise, John spends much of the rest of his life in jail. His downfall occurs because, unlike Erma, he cannot reconcile his professional ambitions to his more proscribed realities.

By portraying John Wysong’s demise as a result of his unquestioning belief in upward mobility, Griggs paints a bleaker picture of the opportunities for black industrial workers than does *John Blye; or Trials and Triumphs of the White washer’s Son*, published

---

<sup>42</sup>This incident may recall a visit that Terence V. Powderly, the country’s best known labor activist, made to Richmond in January 1885 as part of a southern promotional tour (Rachleff 118). Contrary to the fictional description, Powderly went to the city to extend union privileges to black workers, not to deny them. Powderly was not assassinated during this visit; though this detail of Griggs’s description is purely fictional, the murder dramatically demonstrates the possible threat posed by disillusioned black workers.

twenty years earlier and set in the Northwest. John Blye's story demonstrates how African American laborers contribute to the nation's industrialization and use their trades as stepping stones to becoming self-made men. The pseudonymous author of *John Blye* adheres to the rags-to-riches narrative, granting social influence, wealth and geographic mobility to his protagonist while Griggs's depictions of black labor offer a pessimistic outlook for African Americans' socioeconomic opportunity. Most of his black characters end up exiled (Margaret Marston and Rev. Nerve), imprisoned (John Wysong), or dead (Belton and Erma by the end of the novels) either because their class awareness prompts them to self-destructive ends or because the characters' deny the reality of class, which prevents them from resisting their manipulation and destruction by the market economy, racism, and social detractors. None of the characters—except perhaps Mrs. Mollie Marston—finally is reconciled to the occupation and class position he or she fills. In this way, *Imperium and Imperio* and *Overshadowed* expose the dangers of African Americans accepting myths of class and classification that antagonize social relations within black communities, anticipating the grimness of Dunbar's narratives of black labor.

### **Working While Black and Other Occupational Hazards: Social Class, Race, and Work in Fictions by Paul Laurence Dunbar**

Seldom studied in terms of class or in relation to one another, Paul Laurence Dunbar's short fiction and his novel *The Sport of the Gods* (1902) indicate the author's ultimately unresolved ways of evaluating African Americans' work and worth. Dunbar occupies a more central place in the African American literary canon than either Tillman or Griggs, but his scholarly reputation has been based on his poetry almost to the exclusion of his prose. Two of his four novels—*The Uncalled* (1898) and *The Fanatics* (1901)—focus on

characters whose racial background remains unspecified, relating uneasily to the usual paradigm of black-authored, race-centered fiction during the nadir.<sup>43</sup> Meanwhile critics either have avoided or negatively assessed Dunbar's short fiction as formulaic and racially offensive. Written in the plantation tradition practiced most famously by Joel Chandler Harris and Thomas Nelson Page, many of the short stories focus on self-effacing African Americans who are inordinately submissive to whites. Other stories smack of minstrelsy, depicting blacks preoccupied with the sensual gratifications of charismatic preaching, possum-eating, and general good-timing. In much of Dunbar's dialect poetry and short fiction, black Americans are better known for evading work than for laboring and cultivating status. Yet for this reason precisely, those texts that highlight African American workers—"At Shaft 11," *Sport of the Gods*, and "One Man's Fortune"—elicit closer reading as subversions of the myth of African Americans' predisposition to laziness and mirth that otherwise pervades Dunbar's work. In his analysis of *The Sport of the Gods*, Houston Baker recommends that the novel be examined for elements beyond its links to "real" historical conditions (Baker, *Blues* 121). Shelley Fisher Fishkin and David Bradley challenge readers to "forget race" when approaching the novel (317).<sup>44</sup> Yet retaining history and race, in addition to an awareness of turn-of-the-century restrictions on black labor, possibly renders a keener understanding of *The Sport of the Gods* and selected shorter fiction. As I suggest, the

---

<sup>43</sup>Dunbar was among several African American writers whose fiction focuses on "raceless" characters. Amelia E. Johnson's two novels *Clarence and Corinne* (1890) and *The Hazeley Family* (1894) both feature racially indeterminate characters, as does Harper's short story "The Two Offers" (1859) and her temperance novel *Sowing and Reaping* (1877-78). Gene Jarrett in a recent analysis of *The Uncalled* cautions against assuming that the characters of Dunbar's novels are "White" or "raceless," since this assumption reiterates whiteness as the privileged, normative race that need not be identified (Jarrett 305).

<sup>44</sup>Baker faults previous scholars for flattening the "artistry" of the novel by examining it primarily through a sociohistorical lens (121). Fishkin and Bradley propose that "if one can forget race, even for a moment," we can read *The Sport of the Gods* as being about the struggle against fate, which, as they suggest, represents the author's struggle against tuberculosis while he was writing the novel (317).

historical context of race and labor helps us to access the layered discourses of the narratives. Symptomatic of the double consciousness that characterizes much of Dunbar's writing, his fictional portrayals of black workers offer dual or polyvalent meanings, working within the prevailing myths of class to challenge them.

The short story "At Shaft 11," published in Dunbar's 1898 collection, *Folks from Dixie*, is a striking contrast in theme and tone from the stories that immediately precede and follow it in the printed volume.<sup>45</sup> Set in the Appalachian mines of West Virginia, the story centers on Jason Andrews, the lone white miner who refuses to unionize when the other white workers determine to strike for better wages. When the unyielding corporation hires African American strikebreakers, white workers instigate a riot against the black laborers.<sup>46</sup> Siding with neither party, Andrews travels through dangerous terrain to summon the militia, who summarily break up the riot. As black and white miners return to work, the story hints of improved relations. On one level, as A. Robert Lee notes, the final depiction of interracial harmony between Andrews and Sam Bowles, the black foreman, "signifies Dunbar's perception that white and black class interests might profitably blend across the color-line" (Lee 169). Notably, however, the idealized ending disregards both black and white miners' demands for better wages; there is no shift in power and resources between management and the laborers.

---

<sup>45</sup>Set in Ohio, Dunbar's story "Nelse Hatton's Vengeance" examines the title character's capacity for forgiveness when his former slave owner appears at his house needing food and clothing. "The Deliberation of Mr. Dunkin" chronicles a rivalry between two black men pursuing the new schoolteacher in town.

<sup>46</sup>Dunbar's short story contributes to a larger tradition of fiction by black and white authors that highlights labor struggles and strikes. Unfortunately, Mark Noon's recent analysis of representations of African American strikebreakers does not include "At Shaft 11" though the article, which focuses primarily on twentieth-century literature, does cite Frederick Douglass's nonfiction commentaries on nineteenth-century labor relations. See Mark Noon, "'It ain't your color, it's your scabbing': Literary Depictions of African American Strikebreakers," *African American Review* 38.3 (2004): 429-439.



What complicates the story as well is that Dunbar presents Bowles and his black comrades as violent combatants who resist white racism and defend their lives and livelihoods. Before the militia intercedes, Bowles and his co-workers hole up in a building and shoot white agitators. As William Ramsey notes, “Here Dunbar grants the black miners enough virility and psychological self-reliance to fight back, in a gesture unusually militant for Dunbar’s fiction” (Ramsey 38). Though such militancy is uncharacteristic of his fiction, Dunbar elsewhere in his writing suggests that, given turn-of-the-century race relations, radical change for the Negro perhaps can be achieved only through extreme means. In “Recession Never” (1898), an essay considered so menacing that *McClure’s* magazine refused to publish it as planned, Dunbar argues that African Americans should not “relinquish” their ambitions as whites demand: “That is the cry of the miners when they ask [the Negro] out of the mines. It is the word of the whole commercial world when they ask him out of everything—the American shibboleth. Relinquish! Relinquish!” (“Recession” 37). When Bowles refuses to submit passively to the harassment of white workers, he earns a job promotion after the violence subsides. Rather than proving him a threat to white men and the company, Bowles’s leadership demonstrates the strength and integrity that the company usually appreciates in its white employees.

While I suggest the thematic links between “At Shaft 11” and “Recession Never,” which were published in the same year, there is also a notable discontinuity between the two, as Dunbar addresses the topic of social opportunity for blacks much more forthrightly in the latter text. After *McClure’s* declined his essay, Dunbar sent it out to a number of newspapers more sympathetic to his demand for social and political rights for blacks (Martin and Hudson 33). Though “At Shaft 11” features Bowles and his friends defending themselves, Dunbar’s

handling of working-class black resistance remains tentative in the story. The militia's interference quells the riot, and thereby steals the glory of black workers' efforts to demand recognition. At the story's end, Jason Andrews, who merely injures his arm while riding horseback to call the militia, is hailed as the hero instead of Sam. Andrews receives a promotion to lead foreman and accepts Sam as his "assistant and staunch friend" (215). Considered from this perspective, Dunbar does not imagine a complete reversal of fortune for the black workers. Bowles gains a promotion, but the narrative takes for granted that he is not considered for the lead foreman position. In addition, the description of him as a "staunch friend" recalls the image of African Americans in plantation fiction as the sidekicks of their white superiors. In this regard, it seems that the same power relations that exist between benevolent white masters and faithful black slaves or retainers in the other stories in *Folks from Dixie* are replicated in relations of free labor; the setting simply shifts from plantation to postbellum industry. Dunbar complicates the rewarded faithful servant myth by depicting the black workers resorting to armed self-defense. Still, the narrative undercuts Bowles's radicalism as he accepts the token promotion without further questioning race and class relations.

Because the story is set in an isolated mining town, "At Shaft 11" does not suggest how the black workers' occupation situates them in the social class hierarchy of a broader black community. Any status differences among the black miners—the fact that Sam Bowles is the leader, for example—seem to correlate to professional authority or seniority rather than income, speech, education, skin color or other status markers. The plot-driven narrative includes little detail about the black workers to distinguish them one from another. While such underdevelopment may indicate that Dunbar as author wished for the black miners to

remain flat characters, his construction of the strikebreakers as indistinguishable reinforces them as a common black mass.

What Dunbar does not reveal about intraracial class delineations in “At Shaft 11” appears in the early chapters of his final novel, *The Sport of the Gods* (1902). Although scholars generally cite the novel as an early foray into African American naturalism or as a cautionary tale against black urban migration, the text also engages and complicates turn-of-the-century discussions about intraracial social distinctions and the nature of class. Berry Hamilton and his family are self-proclaimed black aristocrats in the context of their Virginian hometown. They maintain a cozy cottage in the backyard of their employers’ mansion, furnished with the white family’s castoff household goods, as well as tasteful new accommodations. In the narrator’s estimation, the family enjoys the lifestyle befitting “a typical, good-living negro” (1). By repeatedly drawing parallels between the white and black families, the exposition of the novel emphasizes that the Hamiltons figuratively, literally, and contentedly live in the shadow of the Oakleys. Yet such a depiction of picture-perfect harmony sets the stage for the dramatic disillusionment that follows. When Berry is wrongly accused of stealing money from his long-time employer, the model of the rewarded faithful servant is exposed as an illusion. His occupation, work ethic, and loyalty to the family offer him no protection; instead, though Oakley and his supporters as easily might have accused any black man of the crime, they claim that Berry’s proximity to and attempted approximation of the white family make him more likely culpable. While Berry is sentenced to jail, his family is evicted from the cottage and socially alienated; his wife Fannie and their teenaged children, Kitty and Joe, reluctantly opt to make a fresh start in New York. The same

occupations from which Berry and his wife derived their status—as the butler and maid of the respected Oakley family—are the hazards that catalyze their downfall.

Dunbar's depiction of the black community's reaction to the Hamiltons' circumstances offers a brief but poignant look at how intraracial class dynamics prompt the family's escape from town. Whereas in Tillman's *Clancy Street*, black working-class residents collaborate in the midst of crisis, the Hamiltons cannot rely on a similar support system. After Berry is convicted, many of the black people shun the Hamiltons partly to avoid the personal risk that affiliating with them might entail. Seeing that the "ban of the white people's displeasure" was upon the family, black working people conclude that "their own interests, the safety of their own positions and firesides, demanded that they stand aloof from the criminal" (28). Additionally, having identified strongly with their white employers and patrons, the Hamiltons lack an equally strong racial or class affiliation with other black Americans.

Like Griggs's fiction, *The Sport of the Gods* problematizes efforts to pattern African American communities on the hierarchical class structure of white society. Though unlettered members of the black community lack the formal means of sociological analysis, they nonetheless offer their folkloristic interpretation of social order. One sage speaker theorizes, "You needn't tell me dat a bird kin fly so high dat he don' have to come down some time. An' w'en he do light, honey, my Lawd, how he flop!" (28). Berry's son, Joe, who had been a barber to elite white men, sees his professional ambitions curtailed when white patrons forsake him and many African Americans refuse to allow him to work with them. When Joe goes to look for work at a black barbershop, the owner reminds the vulnerable young man of his former hubris. "W'y, I hyeah you say dat you couldn't git a paih of sheahs thoo a

niggah's naps" (38). The difficulty Joe encounters after losing his white patrons reflects a shift in the economic base of the black community. August Meier explains that while early aristocrats of color often amassed their wealth through service occupations that catered to whites, the developing middle class during Washington's period turned inward to a black consumer base (Meier 259). As whites withdrew their support of black businesses, especially after the rise of Jim Crow segregation, African American businesses either dwindled or began to serve the black migrants that congregated in cities. But Joe's ego excludes him from benefiting from such a change in the market economy.

Shifting from a southern setting to the Tenderloin District of New York, where the majority of the novel's action takes place, the narrative contrasts the dualities of pastoral and urban, South and North, old and new. But *The Sport of the Gods* also illuminates how social standards are delineated from one geographic location to another. The Hamiltons arrive in New York possessing not simply southern values, but more specifically middle-class southern values and expectations. When news of Berry's imprisonment follows the Hamilton family to its northern home, Joe finds that esteem among his city friends is based on different criteria than among his small town neighbors. Rather than alienating him from society, news of his father's alleged criminal act gains Joe acceptance into a category of those whom Du Bois in *The Philadelphia Negro* (1899) labels "the lowest class of criminals, prostitutes and loafers; the 'submerged tenth'" (Du Bois 311). Yet people at the cabaret, the Banner Club, resist classifications imposed on them by middle-class standards. A man named Sadness, the Club's resident drunkard and sage, mocks the rhetoric of racial uplift by asserting, "Being respectable is very nice as a diversion, but it's tedious if done steadily" (65). Rejecting the conventional discourse of class, which associates class and status with moral conduct, Joe's

friends pose an alternate understanding of class, one in which male braggadocio, conspicuous consumption, and wit serve as the cultural capital. Dunbar's perspective on class difference seems at most ambiguous in *The Sport of the Gods*. The novel's reliance on naturalism suggests that the plot progresses according to fate rather than according to the immediate turn-of-the-century social conditions. At the least, however, "*The Sport of the Gods* may thus be read as Dunbar's critique of ideals and myths that he as well as Harper and Chesnutt had subscribed to in much of their fiction" (Andrews xi).

While *The Sport of the Gods* is perhaps Dunbar's most recognized foray into naturalism, he experimented with the mixed genre of naturalism and satire in his earlier fiction, particularly through the short story "One Man's Fortune," which appeared in *The Strength of Gideon* (1900). Diverging from chronological order, I have reserved my discussion of "One Man's Fortune" for last because it offers the clearest indication of how Dunbar exposes and manipulates existing myths of class mobility. This story shares with the novel not only a detached, ironic narrative voice, but also a concern with the dilemmas of occupation and class that I observe in the frame narrative of *The Sport of the Gods*. Like the title of Dunbar's novel, which forecasts the characters' circumstances as a function of the gods' will, "One Man's Fortunes" suggests that the protagonist, Bertram Halliday, faces adversities that are at once individual and universal. Yet as is also the case with *The Sport of the Gods*, Dunbar implies that the gods who control the fortune of nineteenth-century African Americans are often white racists who wield the economic, political and cultural authority. Rather than being "one man's" experience, Bertram's failure to find fulfilling labor resonates with the plight of other African American workers, and furthermore, with the occupational and class dilemmas Dunbar himself faced.

The story traces the work experiences of Bertram Halliday, a black graduate of an integrated Midwestern university, who finds his dreams of being a self-made man disillusioned by the reality of hiring discrimination. Unfairly terminated from his position as a law clerk and faced with the remaining option of being a janitor, Halliday resigns himself to teaching in the South. From its opening lines, Dunbar addresses the potency of myth in shaping individuals' interpretations of their social experience. Bertram and his two friends, another black student named Webb Davis and a white peer, reflect on the meaning of their college education and prospects for the future. Webb remains ambivalent about how myths of class apply to him: "He did not believe, as young graduates are reputed to, that he had conquered the world and had only to come into his kingdom. He knew that the battle of life was, in reality, just beginning" (131). However Bertram initially accepts the language of dragons, kingdoms, and knights as a useful mode for anticipating his future success. Convinced that young men simply face their challenges with the wrong perspective, Bertram attempts to be more optimistic about his opportunities as an educated black man.

As does Sutton Griggs, Dunbar reveals that in addition to unfair hiring by whites, pressures within the black community also influence black workers' search for employment. Unlike the socialites in *Imperium* and *Overshadowed* who discourage educated people from pursuing manual work, lest they lose the respect of their peers and subordinates, the black residents in "One Man's Fortune" counsel Bertram to reconcile himself to his limited choices. When Bertram declines jobs he considers beneath him, "people began to say that Bertram Halliday did not want to work; he wanted to be a gentleman" (151). Observers are more pleased when he accepts a job as janitor, for at least then he appears to retain a belief in the value of labor: "The people who had accused him of laziness now made a martyr of him"

(152). Through the responses Bertram elicits, Dunbar shows African Americans reconciled to their plight as black workers. Establishing the standards of social status to account for a lack of job opportunities, blacks in Bertram's hometown favorably denote workers who occupy menial jobs or remain unemployed through no fault of their own. Rather than adhering to a strict occupational hierarchy, the black community simply differentiates between what it considers productive labor and unproductive leisure.

As the narrative progresses, Bertram begins to critique the cultural venues by which myths of class permeate American class ideology. Initially denied work as a law clerk, Bertram gains employment only when a lawyer seeking political office wants to use Bertram's influence in the black community to court black voter support. After he wins the election, the lawyer summarily dismisses Bertram and replaces him with a white employee. Betrayed by his boss, Halliday questions the extent to which popular notions of American class mobility extend to African Americans. He bitterly reflects, "We have been taught that merit wins. But I have learned that the adages, as well as the books and the formulas were made by and for others than us of the black race" (160). Alluding to the success guides, rags-to-riches novels, and autobiographies by self-made men published during the Gilded Age,<sup>47</sup> Halliday suggests the need to reconcile the emphasis on individualism and work ethic with the economic realities faced by most post-Reconstruction blacks.

In Bertram's final resolution to use his education as a teacher rather than as a lawyer, Dunbar deromanticizes the positive status attributed to occupations such as teacher, barber, and porter in African American communities. Whereas teaching in the South is for Frances

---

<sup>47</sup>Judy Hilkey identifies 144 book-length, nonfiction success guides published between 1870 and 1910. Yet her research, like Halliday's primary reading, is limited to white-authored literature. See *Character is Capital: Success Manuals and Manhood in Gilded Age America* (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1997).



Harper's female protagonists a "labor of love" that confirms them as "aristocrats of the soul," Bertram considers teaching a last resort, the occupational glass ceiling to which he must resign himself. His decision about a career path and his understanding of class become increasingly economic and pragmatic rather than idealist and moral. Penning a desperate letter that serves as a kind of suicide note marking the death of his career ambitions, Bertram revises his notions of whether a black person's occupation reflects his or her racial pride, status, and identity:

One thing, my eyes have been opened anyway, and I no longer judge so harshly the shiftless and unambitious among my people...I now see why so many promising young men, class orators, valedictorians and the like fall by the wayside and are never heard from after commencement day. I now see why the sleeping and dining-car companies are supplied by men with better educations than half the passengers whom they serve. They get tired of swimming always against the tide, as who would not? And are content to drift.  
(159)

For the first time, Bertram begins to reconsider and affirm the stance taken by his college friend Webb Davis, who capitulates to the racial proscriptions of the market economy by becoming a barber whose white clients pay generously and condescendingly "joked with him and patted him on the back" (161). When Davis receives Bertram's letter, he articulates the closing lines of the story, which also constitute the narrative's bitter moral: "A colored man has no business with ideals—not in *this* nineteenth century!" (161, emphasis in original). While the printed line features in italics the term "this," as if differentiating between *this*—the immediate, real nineteenth century—and that, the distant or abstract, the line also encodes an additional meaning. After all, Bertram's dilemma is not only whether to maintain or eschew his ideals, but also how he will gain or lose "business," both in terms of its colloquial meaning as activity and its economic meaning as a market enterprise. The possible conflict

between ideals and business is underscored as Webb Davis utters his benediction (or malediction) while he “jingled the coins in his pockets” (133).

While Bertram dispels his previously held myths of class mobility, it is unclear what Bertram or Dunbar himself recommended as a more accurate or productive way for African Americans to conceive of their social class and opportunity. Though the story highlights liberal education as the source of the myths that unfit Bertram for a professional career, this is not to be taken as a Washingtonian indictment of a liberal arts education. Especially in the years from 1898 to 1901, a period that one biographer labels as Dunbar’s “protest period,” the author offered militant, satiric nonfiction commentaries that endorsed higher education and work opportunities for African Americans (Best 117). Responding in 1900 to an essay by Charles Dudley Warner, in which Warner proposes that educating blacks worsened the condition of black communities and the nation as a whole, Dunbar angrily discredited the white observer for making such a claim without facts to support it. Dunbar posits that he, as a black representative and artist, possessed more insight into African Americans than did Warner. He seethed, “I believe I know my own people pretty thoroughly. I know them in all classes, the high and the low” and from his observation, the work ethic of black Americans was strengthened rather than lessened by college exposure (Dunbar “Higher Education” 280). In “One Man’s Fortune,” Dunbar tests and ridicules the myth that education among blacks causes degeneracy; instead, the story argues that a lack of job opportunity and a conflict between ideals and reality accounts for African Americans’ stymied condition.

The story bears some autobiographical parallels to Dunbar’s own work history. After graduating at the top of his high school class, having already demonstrated his writing potential as “class poet” and editor of *The Tattler*, a local newspaper in his Ohio hometown,

Dunbar sought and was denied work at another newspaper; instead, he began working as an elevator operator (Martin and Hudson 17). Despite Bertram's charge that the majority of literature about class mobility and the culture of success was "made by and for" non-blacks, African American writers in the last quarter of the century produced adages, formulas, and books intended specifically to acculturate black readers to shifting class dynamics within black communities and in the nation more broadly. All of the texts examined in this chapter, including Dunbar's story itself, functioned as part of African Americans' cultural project of assessing and sometimes revising and prescribing the meanings of labor, work ethic, and class mobility.

## **Conclusion**

The two implicit questions outlined earlier in the chapter—how is African American labor rewarded and how does occupation relate to status—invite a final intertextual response, as Tillman, Griggs and Dunbar employ each of the aforementioned myths to broach and answer these questions. The three authors often use the same kinds of black workers—the domestic servant, the industrial laborer, and the displaced, educated worker—but each writer plots a different narrative about how African Americans' labor can gain them domestic harmony, economic self-sufficiency, and social class privilege. These varied representations of black labor correlate to two hypotheses sociologist Douglas Eichar offers: "occupational groups are heterogeneous in class terms," and secondly, "class position has an independent effect on income, other social rewards (intrinsic and extrinsic), and social perceptions" (Eichar 1-2). For instance, Tillman, Griggs and Dunbar variably represent African American female domestics who work in white families. In *Clancy Street*, domestic service is a means for the teenaged protagonist Caroline Waters to supplement her parents' earnings and steer

clear of the sex trade. Because Caroline has made alliances with “better class” whites, her parents can live out their old years in a snug home purchased with the help of white patrons. Yet in Griggs’s *Overshadowed*, black and white Richmond citizens equate domestic service with degradation when the educated Erma Wysong opts to work as a maid because she can find no more professional means of supporting herself. Meanwhile, the maid Fannie Hamilton in *The Sport of the Gods* considers her work for a Southern aristocratic family a source of prestige distinguishing her from the “less fortunate Negroes of the community” (Dunbar, *Sport* 4). Thus these writers’ depictions of characters show identical occupations that reap different material compensation and socially-perceived status, depending on variables such as locale and the worker’s skills and education.

In addition, the gender of the author and characters impacts the status associated with an occupation, as well as the narrative’s attitude toward social mobility. Bertram Halliday’s distaste for teaching may reflect a belief that teaching is an occupation more fitting for an educated female. Nineteenth-century African American fiction by female authors generally depicts the role of black schoolteachers favorably. Yet as Cassandra Jackson notes with reference to Charles W. Chesnutt and his depiction of Tom Lowry in *Mandy Oxendine*, male writers frequently present teaching as a financially unprofitable and intellectually isolating position—at best, an undesirable concession to black male exclusion from professional fields (561).<sup>48</sup> Furthermore, Bertram’s embittered but otherwise resigned decision to accept his “fortune” contrasts the violent resistance portrayed in Dunbar’s “At Shaft 11” and Griggs’s novels. Faced with the threat of unemployment and class immobility, black workers retaliate with conspiracy plots, strikes, and homicides. When their lives and safety are threatened by

---

<sup>48</sup>This observation also fittingly applies to the teacher John Jones in W. E. B. Du Bois’s short story “Of the Coming of John,” which I treat in Chapter V. After having his social and professional ambitions whetted at college and during a visit to the North, John loathes returning to his hometown in Georgia to become a teacher.

blacks, white employers and racist co-workers pause to analyze unfair work conditions and the threat they can engender. Considered together, these representations of violence at the hands of disgruntled male workers propose that social mobility among African Americans requires aggressive, publicly recognized disruptions of conventional cross-class and cross-racial interactions.

Reading fiction by Tillman, Griggs, and Dunbar with attention to labor and occupation, as Carla Peterson suggests, helps to fill in the lingering “silences” in the discourse of class in African American literature (Peterson 2). Black authors, many of whom stressed morality as a marker of class, did not entirely dismiss occupation and income as signifying social status. Neither did the writers ignore that hiring discrimination, as well as intraracial social pressures, presented additional challenges for African American workers who ascribed to the myths of class promoted by black and white culture. Black novelists often undermine or complicate these myths, pessimistically asserting a correlation among class (im)mobility, death and violence. Yet in conjunction with occupation and education, class lines among postbellum African Americans also often correlated with intraracial color lines, as Rev. Nerve reveals in his humorous, but poignant analysis of social classification in Griggs’s *Overshadowed*. As the pastor observes, “The-color-line-is-drawn-tighter-within-the-race-than-ever-it-was-on-the-outside” (64). Accordingly, the following chapter turns to the works of Charles W. Chesnutt, the post-Reconstruction African American author whose literary labors most consistently examine color, class, and classification.

**CHAPTER IV**  
**Class Performance and Discrimination in Charles W. Chesnutt's**  
***The Wife of His Youth and The Marrow of Tradition***

Relegated to the “Colored” train car after having paid first-class fare, Dr. William Miller in Charles W. Chesnutt’s *The Marrow of the Tradition* (1901) ruminates on how racial discrimination is not only unethical but impractical. Through a little quick number-crunching, this black physician concludes that the rail company expends extra fuel by carrying a separate Jim Crow car. Moreover, and of more immediate concern to him, segregating cars according to race disregards the social variance within each race: erudite and unlearned, well-dressed and dirty, rich and poor must jostle along in the car together, forced to tolerate each other’s company. Being “something of a philosopher,” Dr. Miller proposes, “Surely, if a classification of passengers on trains was at all desirable, it might be made upon *some more logical and considerate basis* than a mere arbitrary, tactless, and by the very nature of things, brutal drawing of a color line” (Chesnutt 512, emphasis added). Dr. Miller begins by meditating on the possible expediency of racial equality—integration is at least cost efficient, he notes—but his philosophy concludes by alluding to class inequality, which he considers more rational and less “brutal.” Articulated in a central scene of Chesnutt’s most important political fiction, Miller’s discursive shift from race to class distinctions typifies the narrative strategy of much of Chesnutt’s writing. Throughout his literary career, Chesnutt aims to displace the period’s emphasis on race with “some more logical and considerate basis” by which post-Civil War social relations might be organized. Most often, Chesnutt

asserts class status, manifest in terms of taste, manners, and social action, as the most viable classificatory system.

This chapter explores how Chesnutt negotiates the possibilities and limitations of class distinctions as the basis of turn-of-the-century social relations. On one hand, his fiction exposes the possible dangers of class distinctions that devolve into antagonisms and oppression. In the cluster of Blue Vein stories featured in *The Wife of His Youth* (1899), the author discredits skin complexion and biracial heritage as the sole or primary indicator of status among African Americans. His incisive analysis reveals class as a performative act, artificially imposed in ways that deny the interdependent functioning of black communities. Extending his analysis of class performance in *The Marrow of Tradition*, however, Chesnutt reasserts the importance of intraracial class differences. In this context, he highlights social differences to show individuals who share class values across the color line as more similar than people within the same race. Chesnutt emphasizes class affinity, what he elsewhere calls “kindred standards of thought and feeling,” among the black and white “better classes” as a productive means for organizing society.

Perhaps more than the works of any other author heretofore examined in this study—Harper, Tillman, Griggs, and Dunbar—Charles Chesnutt’s fiction has received sustained, but nonetheless divided, scholarly attention concerning the topic of social class difference. With attention to class, critical analyses focus on two main facets of Chesnutt’s fiction: his representation of black vernacular speech and his portrayal of mixed race characters versus those he terms “genuine” or “true Negro[es]” (Chesnutt, “White Man” 69). In *The Conjure Woman* (1899), Chesnutt contrasts the vernacular of the black storyteller Uncle Julius with the standard English of Julius’s white listeners, John and Annie. Critics disagree whether, in

using language to convey differences in race, region, and status, Chesnutt panders to the literary tastes of his white readership or subversively validates the black folk tradition.<sup>49</sup> A second long-standing debate addresses Chesnutt's apparent perpetuation of an intraracial color line among black Americans. In *The House Behind the Cedars* (1900) and *The Marrow of Tradition* in particular, the author usually privileges mulattas/os while projecting more undesirable traits onto darker-skinned blacks, earning the author a critical reputation as accommodationist, color-stuck, and classist.<sup>50</sup> These analyses script Chesnutt as either a black-identified or white-identified writer—binary categories that the author repeatedly attempts to reject through his self-identification and his long-term artistic project. In addition, scholarship generally has overlooked *The Wife of His Youth* (1899), Chesnutt's short story collection poised between the publication of the conjure stories and his three printed novels. Yet it is in this collection, and more specifically in the Blue Vein stories—so-called because the mixed race protagonists' blue veins show through their light complexions—that Chesnutt notes the limitations of color and class as organizing principles. These stories, which must be examined as more than mere aberrations in the author's literary corpus, offer a useful dimension to a study of class dynamics in Chesnutt's fiction, complicating previous readings of his work.

---

<sup>49</sup>In his analysis, Henry Wonham provides a good literature review of the two prevailing interpretations of Chesnutt's dialect stories as "an expression of politically contemptible acquiescence, or of creative subversion" (56). Wonham shows both these approaches as oversimplified and argues that "the structural ambivalence of local-color fiction itself" necessarily reflects in Chesnutt's ambivalent texts (Wonham 56).

<sup>50</sup>During the growth of Chesnutt scholarship in the 1970s and 80s, critics began to examine the author's possible biases. Most notably, John Edgar Wideman, Trudier Harris and SallyAnn Ferguson note Chesnutt's seeming dismissal of dark skinned characters. Ferguson, for example, assesses Chesnutt as "essentially a social and literary accommodationist who pointedly and repeatedly confines his reformist impulses to the 'colored people'—a term that he almost always applies either to color-line blacks or those of mixed races" (Ferguson 109). She bases her claim on Chesnutt's fiction as well as his nonfiction articles on "The Future American," a three-part series theorizing a plan of gradual racial amalgamation.



As illuminated by a growing body of scholarship on the mulatto/a figure and the trope of passing in American literature, Chesnutt and his contemporaries examined mixed race characters for a number of sociopolitical and literary reasons. Because of their barely recognizable difference from white Americans, biracial characters served notice that the color line was neither fixed nor impenetrable. The ease with which white-looking people of black extraction moved in white society, at least for brief intervals of undiscovered passing, indicated that few essential differences existed between white and black Americans. For authors and reformers who aimed to delegitimize racial discrimination, the figure of the mulatto—whether tragic or triumphant—bolstered the argument that race was, in Mark Twain’s terms, “a fiction of law and custom” and thereby an unstable criterion for determining political status (Twain 9).<sup>51</sup> Throughout his fiction, Chesnutt creates biracial characters who deconstruct racial difference, but he also seems attracted to this type for other reasons. Chesnutt himself was a person of mixed heritage and considered himself qualified to address the psychology of mixed blood people with more insight than white authors who had enjoyed success in addressing “the race problem” in fiction. Furthermore, Chesnutt considered representing biracial characters an artistic challenge, for as he claimed, “the problems of people of mixed blood [...] while in the main the same of those of the true Negro, are in some instances and in some respects much more complex and difficult of treatment, in fiction as in life” (Chesnutt, “Post-bellum” 547). Among the problems that he considered more “complex and difficult” was the dilemma of classifying mixed race people in terms of social affiliation and status. How were they to spend their time? With whom

---

<sup>51</sup>While I highlight how the mulatto/a functions in antiracist art and rhetoric, mulattoes also appeared in science, fiction and other media that argued that biracial people were physically and morally degenerate, supposedly having inherited the most recessive traits of the black and white races.

would they socialize and marry? To which social problems should they turn their concern? How did mixed race people figure in the period's social hierarchy? The response to these questions often correlated to the color line that not only distinguished whites from blacks, but further differentiated people of African descent according to gradations of skin color, hair type, and other physical attributes.

In *The Wife of His Youth*, Chesnutt manipulates and dislocates the color line, but also goes further to expose class as a performance maintained by customs—customs that, as he suggests, can be reinterpreted according to a basis that promotes the collective advancement of African Americans. I apply the concepts of “class performance” and “class-passing” to Chesnutt’s narrative strategies in order to illuminate how he unmakes and remakes the meaning(s) of social difference. As cultural studies critic Gwendolyn Audrey Foster explains, the idea of class performance accounts for the fact that “class is not only about wealth, status, and birth but also about everyday performed behavior. How one does everything from eating to speaking to any kind of behavior is classed or troped by class” (Foster 8).<sup>52</sup> To expound upon Foster’s broad framework, I further propose two premises that underlie the idea of class-passing: first, class status, like racial status, is a performance or fiction that must be maintained through social rehearsals and iterations; and second, class functions according to visible and invisible boundaries of institutions and spaces that have to be trespassed. While the supposed classlessness of the American social structure seemingly would preclude the need to “pass” by stealth or calculation, opportunities for upward mobility were not so open

---

<sup>52</sup>As Foster construes “class-passing” in her study of twentieth-century popular culture, figures as different as Oprah Winfrey, George W. Bush and Britney Spears are all considered together as class-passers who, over the course of their lives, move dramatically from one social class to another, embodying the “desire for a fetishized class mobility” (13). What Foster’s definition fails to explain, and what I attempt to clarify, is how class-passing differs from the traditional sense of hard-earned class mobility.

for African Americans in the nineteenth-century—a point illustrated in part by the previous chapter’s study of the limited occupational choices for most black Americans. Thus performing class allows individuals the agency to negotiate socially recognized boundaries. In Chesnutt’s texts, class-passing entails a character’s uneven or incomplete immersion of his or her class status or social identity into another status or identity. Such passing is marked by slippages, anxieties or ambivalence on the part of the knowing or unknowing passer, who always is vulnerable to his or her class conditions being divulged or changed for the worse.

Though the vocabulary of “class-passing” is a twenty-first century theoretical innovation, the concept and its application were an easy ideological move for Chesnutt as a nineteenth-century social thinker. By the time *The Wife of His Youth* was published in 1899, Chesnutt long had been at work theorizing and deconstructing the legal and social meanings of race. In his essay “What Is a White Man?” (1889), a survey of the varied and sometimes contradictory legal interpretations of “whiteness” from one state to another, Chesnutt argues that race is less a matter of fixed biological difference than of social interpretation. In addition, he began the manuscript tentatively titled “Rena Walden,” which later developed into *The House Behind the Cedars*, as early as the 1880s by examining Rena’s complex motivations for passing as white (Andrews 24). Rena in *The House Behind the Cedars* is “a poor young girl, who has the hill to climb”; she surmises, however, that as a white woman, she might be “some rich young lady, who lives on the Hill” (Chesnutt, *House* 281).<sup>53</sup> By highlighting the social gains of passing, Chesnutt proposes that passing is an act motivated not by self-loathing or betrayal, as argued by many critics both in the author’s own time and more contemporarily, but at least in part by a desire for greater social status. Furthermore, in

---

<sup>53</sup>Note the change in status marked by the exchange of “girl” for the class-inflected term “lady.” In addition, the metaphorical “hill” of social and economic struggle translates into the passer’s spatial relocation to “the Hill”; the narrator mentions that “the Hill was the aristocratic portion of the town” (Chesnutt, *House* 281).

his short story “The Passing of Grandison,” which appears in *The Wife of His Youth* but is not a Blue Vein story, Chesnutt uses the term “passing” in exactly the unconventional way that I propose—as a concept not restricted to racial passing. Instead the slave Grandison presents himself as a faithful servant and earns his master’s trust, only to escape later, taking with him his entire family; by “passing” in the role of a contented slave, Grandison creates opportunities that eventually allow him to exchange his performative slave act for the status of ambitious freedman. Each of these instances suggests that appearing as black or white, a girl or a lady, enslaved or free depends upon individuals’ day-to-day self-staged productions. In the case of Rena, Grandison, and most of the other class-passers in his fiction, Chesnutt does not show individuals as passing because they simply derive a thrill from beguiling others. Rather, as Kathleen Pfeiffer elucidates, passing is a form of criticism that indicts the structural and societal circumstances that restrict individualism. In other words, people pass to gain access to what is denied them, whether a claim to gentility in Rena’s case, freedom in Grandison’s, or “American notions of autonomy, self-determination, and free choice” (Pfeiffer 4).

Having highlighted the arbitrariness and performativity of social distinctions, Chesnutt proceeds to challenge conventional ideas of class that antagonized different classes of African Americans and segregated blacks and whites. Showing class status as performed offered the author latitude to imagine how American social groupings might be rescripted according to a standard not based on color, taste, or culture alone. Exposing class performance particularly targeted the nineteenth-century “better class” positioned between the working and upper classes. On the one hand, representatives from the “better class” considered themselves best positioned to mediate the social conflicts of the period. If middle-

class Americans could teach others to develop virtue through the practice of good manners and taste, the argument ran, postbellum American society could function smoothly with less labor, gender, and racial conflict (Koistinen-Harris 3). On the other hand, the middle class was also the most invested in maintaining its status through habits of acquisitiveness and discrimination. Thus in Chesnutt's fiction, "better class" protagonists face the moral dilemma over how much they want to extend the privileges of class to other Americans democratically, or how much they want (or need) to safeguard the signs of class distinction for themselves. The Blue Vein stories conclude with the central characters making decisions about how the relative advantages of their class status relate to the social conditions of others. By showing colorism and the most superficial elements of class as hypocritical, Chesnutt gestures toward a model of social relations based on mutual dependency.

While experimenting with the idea of class performance allowed Chesnutt to build his case, showing the Blue Veins as "acting" in unbecoming ways also risked recalling the socially and politically charged matter of black minstrelsy. This association between the black upper class and performativity resounds in William Dean Howells's review of "Mr. Charles W. Chesnutt's Stories," published in the *Atlantic Monthly* in May 1900. Throughout the review, Howells repeatedly announces his intentions to review Chesnutt's fiction according to color-blind literary standards, evaluating the texts' settings and originality, as well as the author's narrative handling (Howells 233). Yet Howells's personal curiosity about light-skinned middle class people betrays his intended objective professionalism. More than once in the course of his review, his critical analysis lapses into wide-eyed wonderment and amusement at the African American, yet genteel characters Chesnutt chooses as his fictional subjects. Chesnutt "dealt not only with people who were not white," Howells observes, "but

with people who were not black enough to contrast grotesquely with white people—who in fact were of that near approach to the ordinary American in race and color” (232). The critic seemed as fascinated by the characters’ social lives as by their nearly white physical appearance. “They [blue veins] have within their own circles the same social ambitions and prejudices,” Howells apprises his readers, “We may choose to think them droll in *their parody of pure white society*, but perhaps it would be wiser to recognize that they are like us” (234, emphasis added).

Howells’s choice of the term “parody” corresponds with the vocabulary of performance he uses throughout the review. Evaluating the title piece, “The Wife of His Youth,” Howells notes that Chesnutt “observes the play of contesting emotions in the drama under his eyes”; he adds that the author guides the “spectator” and “observer” through the “quiet self-restraint of the performance” the characters deliver (232). By thinking of Chesnutt’s black elite as actors whose lives are dramatized on the pages/stages of fiction, Howells signals his doubt about whether gentility genuinely could be embodied by African Americans. Eight years earlier in 1892, black activist Anna Julia Cooper had criticized Howells for this same mixture of fascination with and condescension toward a black upper class. Noting Howells’s one-dimensional depictions of African Americans in his novel *An Imperative Duty* (1891), Cooper protests, “He has not seen, and therefore cannot be convinced, that there exists a quiet, self-respecting, dignified class of easy life and manners [...] of cultivated tastes and habits” (Cooper 149). Howells intended “Mr. Charles W. Chesnutt’s Stories” as a compliment—and Chesnutt accepted it as much, writing to thank Howells for his “appreciative review” (Chesnutt, *Letters* 146)—but the tone of the evaluation

indicates how Chesnutt's serious treatment of a stratified black community could disarm his audience.

The depiction of black elites whose social lives included balls, literary clubs, fine dining and clothing demanded that Chesnutt's readers stretch their racial and class tolerance as the author stretched literary and cultural conventions. In the conjure tales, Chesnutt worked within the southern romantic portrayal of the avuncular dialect-speaking black male, a type that would have been familiar and pleasing to his audience, whose literary appetite was whetted by the likes of Joel Chandler Harris's Uncle Remus stories. Yet through Uncle Julius's shrewd storytelling and Annie's responding practice of moral discernment, Chesnutt launches a critique of black-white relations from within the local color genre. Likewise, the Blue Vein stories figure within and against (mis)representations of upwardly mobile black Americans, as the idea that blacks were predisposed to "putting on airs" was emblazoned in the public mind. As Barbara Lewis explains, popular figures such as Long Tail Blue rose to popularity in the antebellum period as parodies of the African American gentleman, later evolving into the more insidious figure of Jim Crow (Lewis 258). Minstrel shows, literature, and cartoons presented the black dandy as an African American whose exaggerated speech, manners and dress were failed attempts to replicate white upper class decorum and dress. Among a limited range of black character types, the figure of the dandy encoded complexly layered projections of desire intended to allay white Americans' race and class anxiety. In the spectacle of the self-important black social climber given to mispronunciation or mix-matched attire, readers and onlookers witnessed the black middle class as desiring, and

ultimately being denied, whiteness in the form of class distinction; these caricatures therefore reaffirmed white exclusivity over the domain of proper taste.<sup>54</sup>

In the *Blue Vein* stories, Chesnutt presents a class of African Americans that many whites considered threatening because, through their social, political and economic success, a rising class of blacks aimed to disprove claims of racial essentialism and inferiority, gradually eroding a central tenet of white privilege. Describing the social structure of Washington, D. C., for the readers of the *Saturday Evening Post*, Paul Laurence Dunbar noted the possible potency of more flattering accounts of black society. “The Negro in Washington forms and carries on a social life which no longer can be laughed at or caricatured under the name ‘Colored Sassociety,’” Dunbar retorts. “The term is still funny, but now it has lost its pertinence” (Dunbar 283). After caricaturing African Americans in his early writing and then growing increasingly disconcerted with the implications and artistic limitations of writing dialect pieces, much like Chesnutt, Dunbar attempts to represent an evolved, cultivated black community. In detailing lavish social events hosted by black professionals, he clarifies, “Do not think that these are the affairs which the comic papers and cartoonists have made you familiar with; the waiters’ and coachmen’s balls of which you know [...] *these* are not of the same ilk” (286). Understood in this context, Howells’s pronouncement that Chesnutt’s *Blue Veins* perform a “parody of pure white society” deflects the deeper conclusion that some of his readers may have hesitated to admit: “that they [aristocrats of color] are like us [upper class whites]” (Howells 234).

---

<sup>54</sup>Eric Lott’s investigation into white working-class consumption of minstrelsy adds dimension to this point. Lacking socioeconomic class privilege, white workers affirmed their whiteness through belittling the class status to which black Americans aspired. See *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford UP, 1993). More recent studies, such as W. T. Lhamon’s *Raising Cain: Blackface Performance from Jim Crow to Hip Hop* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1998), add that blackface performance was as much an expression of class-consciousness as one of racial animosity: “blackface distanced working-class youth from both the bourgeois and black” (Lhamon 43).



Yet the corrupted image of the black social climber was not only perpetuated among white Americans; many black writers and spokespersons conflated color and class when accusing Blue Veins of racial treachery, mimicry, and self-delusion. In the poem “The Blue Vein Club” by Katherine Tillman, whose fiction I treated in the previous chapter, Tillman ridicules the pretensions of black socialites who accept Eurocentric standards of beauty and taste as a marker of higher-class status. In the poem, the “ginger-faced Miss Dare” convinces the women of “Darktown” that they “[m]ust have straight or straightened hair” to qualify for inclusion among the Blue Veins (Tillman 196). After charging each social aspirant five dollars for straightening her hair, Dare absconds with her customers’ money, leaving the women angry when their hair reverts to its natural kinkiness after the first rain. In her comic rendering of the tensions between light and dark African Americans, Tillman shows both groups—the blue veins and the black wannabes—as deluded by artificial class delineations.

The backlash against light-skinned aristocrats of color, based on their real or imagined slights against darker and/or poorer African Americans, was sometimes so virulent in black communities that historian Kevin Gaines designates a term for the numerous nineteenth-century diatribes and parodies of the Blue Vein elite: “mulatto-baiting” or “mulatto-bashing” (Gaines 118). When intended for an African American target audience, these ridiculing portrayals of the black upper class took on a different function from those designed or consumed by white Americans. In the context of black cultural productions, critiques of the black elite served to emphasize collective racial advancement over case-by-case instances of upward mobility facilitated through racial or class-passing. In other words, detractors argued against upper class, mixed race people accruing wealth, talent, and privilege without accepting responsibility for and claiming relation to the black masses.

Chesnutt's Blue Vein stories are not so stringent as to be labeled "mulatto-bashing," but they do offer a serious reconsideration of the character and role of the biracial elite, proposing class status as more than a matter of birth and wealth. During his adult life in Ohio, after growing up in North Carolina, Chesnutt belonged to the Cleveland Social Circle, an organization of middle-class African Americans much like the one he describes in the Blue Vein stories. Yet the author explained his ambivalent relation to the exclusionary principles of the other members. "I shared their sentiments to a degree," he admits, "though I could see the comic side of them" (qtd. in Andrews 111).

Chesnutt represents the black middle class as neither the object of mockery, as in minstrelsy and mulatto-bashing, nor as an idealized model of selfless racial leadership, as in Frances Harper's *Iola Leroy* (1892) in which the mostly mulatto "better class" convene at the *conversazione* to strategize racial uplift. Given the prosperous person of color in the public mind as the object of ridicule by both white and black cultural arbiters, why would Chesnutt have chosen to use the Blue Veins as the subject of his fiction, exposing their foibles, insecurities and performances? Howells had noted how the Blue Veins consciously perform and guard their class status, but he missed the underlying social critique Chesnutt inscribes in the stories: racist conditions motivate light-skinned, affluent African Americans to extreme measures of performance and passing in order to gain the privileges denied them. Through the instances of class-passing in the Blue Vein stories, Chesnutt gains a way to analyze an African American social organization on bases that do not consist of race solely. In addition, by focusing on the class performance of black elites, Chesnutt could highlight the same tendencies of performance as illogical and hypocritical when practiced by whites as well as blacks. In this way, the short stories offer an argumentative premise for displacing color

prejudice; this is for Chesnutt a useful step in ultimately formulating an alternative, interracial basis of classification.

## II

Though William L. Andrews notes that “the book [*The Wife of His Youth*] defies analysis as a single entity” (*Literary Career* 74), the three Blue Vein stories invite a consideration as a narrative unit. Constituting a full third of the volume’s nine stories, this cluster of “The Wife of His Youth,” “A Matter of Principle,” and “Her Virginia Mammy” indicates that Chesnutt considered the social life of black elites compelling enough to warrant more than one treatment.<sup>55</sup> Besides their thematic relation, the stories are also linked by the repeated appearance of a minor character, Solomon Sadler, a member of the Blue Veins who recounts the history of the social group to the stories’ protagonists, and by extension, to Chesnutt’s reading audience. Each story is set in the Reconstruction era, an important detail to note because it is during this time that the class structure among African Americans underwent significant change as blacks pursued professions, especially in politics and the civil service, that provided the economic base for a postbellum black middle class. Reconstruction’s promise was demonstrated through myths of social ascendancy epitomized by exceptional figures such as Blanche K. Bruce, a mulatto man of slave origins who became a United States senator; in “A Matter of Principle,” a character alludes to Bruce to indicate the status of colored people with whom the Blue Veins associate. Each story takes place in Groveland, generally acknowledged as Chesnutt’s fictional version of Cleveland, Ohio. This

---

<sup>55</sup>After “The Wife of His Youth” was accepted for the July 1898 edition of the *Atlantic Monthly*, Chesnutt wrote to the magazine’s editor Walter Page Hines recommending arrangements for publication. Highlighting the obvious link between the stories featuring the black elite, Chesnutt suggested, “Or, if ‘A Matter of Principle’ could be used, it might be published with the ‘Wife of His Youth’ under the general heading ‘The Blue Veins’” (Chesnutt, *Letters* 97).

setting also corresponds to historical changes, as niches of prosperous black Americans developed primarily in urban centers in the North.

Considered together, the Blue Vein stories trace black communities in transition, moving from informal to more formalized systems of stratification. This stage of gradual class closure is highlighted in the opening paragraphs of “The Wife of His Youth,” the story that appears first in the collection.<sup>56</sup> The Blue Vein Society develops from an improvement organization designed “to establish and maintain correct social standards” to a more exclusive clique that institutionalizes class hierarchy within Groveland’s black community (Chesnutt 101). The omniscient narrator presents the history, purpose, and criteria for membership in the organization as a matter of rumor rather than uncontested fact:

Some envious outsider made the suggestion that no one was eligible for membership who was not white enough to show blue veins. The suggestion was readily adopted by those who were not of the favored few [...] The Blue Veins did not allow that any such requirement existed for admission to their circle, but, on the contrary, declared that character and culture were the only things considered. (101)

Rumors about the society’s guidelines qualify as what Audrey Elisa Kerr calls “complexion lore”: the rumors and speculations that circulate among blacks about how skin color gains or denies them access to resources within or beyond the black community (Kerr 271). As Kerr notes, whether the lore is “true” often is immaterial; it nonetheless functions to translate the seemingly mysterious formation of class distinctions into more tangible and comprehensible

---

<sup>56</sup>By “class closure,” I mean the process by which standards of class affiliation become more fixed. Chesnutt, James Weldon Johnson, W. E. B. Du Bois, and other turn-of-the-century black thinkers conceptualize class formation as an evolutionary process. These authors envision that class boundaries among African Americans, which remained partially fluid in the decades immediately following emancipation, would harden over time as the middle class gained the education, culture, and property that distinguishes it from the black masses. Chesnutt infers the notion of progressive class closure in “Her Virginia Mammy” in particular. In Johnson’s *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912), the narrator describes the African American middle class as “possessing *discriminating tendencies* which become *rules* as fast as actual conditions allow” (Johnson 59, emphasis added). In this case, consistent “tendencies” harden into set “rules.” However, instances of class-passing reveal that the process of class closure is never complete and remains subject to subversion.

rules (271). As Kerr might have added, complexion lore also offers the excluded a sense of respite through psychologically processing their social rejection or economic failure. Excluded black Groveland residents compensate by accusing the Blue Veins of color prejudice, “the very prejudice from which the colored race had suffered most”; yet when invited to join the society, new members disregard complexion lore and insist that “character and culture were the only things considered” (101). Noting the lack of a unified impression of the society, Chesnutt early in the text shows the criteria for social affiliation as a matter of shifting perspective and opinion. In addition, the narrator’s inconclusive account of the group’s evolution points to partially fluid class lines that, as readers learn later, provide enough of a fissure for the central character, Mr. Ryder, to class-pass into the black elite.

Moreover, in the extended discussion of the basis of membership, Chesnutt draws attention to a larger question of how much agency individuals wield in determining their class status. The Blue Veins refute the alleged prerequisites of color and free birth by stressing that “character and culture” are the proper guidelines. In doing so, the society attempts to shift its publicly acknowledged stipulations from physiology and ancestry, variables over which one has little control, to “character and culture,” factors influenced by self-cultivation. Yet some members admit that “light-colored” people “as a rule, had had better opportunities to qualify themselves for membership” (101) through formal education, encountering and emulating other people of class, and perhaps learning from the hundreds of self-improvement guides that proliferated in the late nineteenth century. Herein, however, remains a contradiction of the idea of forming taste. While social reformers produced and circulated tracts, sermons, etiquette guides and other written and verbal discourse prompting upwardly mobile Americans to appropriate habits of “good” taste, the rhetoric also implied

that good taste was inherent in some people and therefore beyond the reach of less privileged aspirants. This discrepancy resonates in the Blue Vein Society's defense of its selective social practices. According to its members, the organization comprises "individuals who were, generally speaking, more white than black" not because of formally stated bylaws but simply "by accident, combined perhaps with some natural affinity" (101). While "accident" implies that people outside the exclusive social circle possibly can acquire the signs of class distinction, "*natural* affinity" reinscribes class distinction as an inherent trait shared by some and lacking in others (101, emphasis added). The society's rhetoric, though intended to convey liberalism, nonetheless exposes deeply held values about class as more fixed than flexible.

Mr. Ryder, the "dean of the Blue Veins," attempts to reconcile within himself the difference between adapted and so-called natural distinction. The narrator's deft description presents Ryder's persona as a carefully managed performance of propriety. None of his peers knows his full background, including his age or his former condition before he arrived in the city and "worked himself up to the position of stationery clerk" (Chesnutt 102). Maintaining impeccable dress, manners, and morals, he masters the "genteel performance, a system of polite conduct that demanded a flawless self-discipline practiced within an apparently easy, natural, sincere manner" (Halttunen 93). Yet Chesnutt provides for discerning readers other clues of Mr. Ryder's tenuous claim to inclusion. Ryder draws the lines of social distinction so as to accentuate his qualifications for membership, and with the paranoia characteristic of passers, he takes personal responsibility for protecting class boundaries from the intrusion of others. When other members, perhaps more secure in their status, lose interest in the activities of the group, Ryder "fanned the embers until they burst again into a cheerful flame"

(102). The author illuminates the psychosocial role that group affiliation plays in structuring a social class identity. By assuming the position as leader, Ryder attempts to prove indispensable to the group; he is, however, more dependent on the society's functioning than the group is dependent on him.

Although Ryder masters many of the external conditions of his representation, bodily appearances hint of his difference from the other group members. Mr. Ryder's complexion is "not as white as some of the Blue Veins" and his hair, though "almost straight," is not entirely so (Chesnutt 102). Most provocatively, though Ryder organizes the entertainment for the social group and often renders poetic readings, "his pronunciation was sometimes faulty" (102). These failures of corporeal and linguistic class-passing reveal that Ryder's cultivated tastes and habits are not seamless adaptations; rather, even after having migrated to the city years ago and "forming decidedly literary tastes" (102), Ryder's class performance retains cleavages through which emerge remnants of his former status as a freeborn mulatto who grew up speaking Southern dialect. In this way, the discrepancy between acquired and natural distinction again aligns class with the body, which must constantly perform in an attempt to offset the advantages that accrue to those whose controlled social performances appear more flawless.

The threat that Ryder's complexion, hair, or speech might ordinarily disqualify him as a Blue Vein makes all the more important his role as the group's "recognized adviser and head, the custodian of its standards, and the preserver of its traditions" (102). As noted elsewhere in this dissertation, intraracial and interracial social class boundaries are guarded most zealously by individuals or groups whose status is most at stake. Ryder's possible unstable social standing explains the impetus behind the text's opening lines: "Mr. Ryder was

going to give a ball. There were several reasons why this was an opportune time for such an event” (101). Most obviously, as Thorstein Veblen proposes in *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899), lavish entertainments advertise the owner’s wealth, suggesting a surplus of possessions that the host “is unable to dispose of single handed[ly]” without the aid of guests (Veblen 47). In addition, just as a graduation or wedding ceremony marks the transition of an individual from one condition to another, the ball that Mr. Ryder arranges is intended as a public ceremony marking the final step of his successful class-passing. At the ball, he plans to announce his engagement to Mrs. Dixon, a young widow who is “whiter than he, and better educated,” possessing more of the conventional traits of colored aristocracy that Ryder lacks (103). As he plots, “His ball would serve by its exclusiveness to counteract leveling tendencies, and his marriage with Mrs. Dixon would help to further the upward process of absorption he had been wishing and waiting for” (104). Chesnutt’s attention to the role of public ritual in coalescing class performance is significant, and in his other *Blue Vein* stories as well as his novels, he relies on balls, contests, dinners, and tournaments as forums for concealing, revealing and deciphering class status.<sup>57</sup>

Before Ryder can execute his plan of upward mobility into the mulatto elite (and ultimately into the white race through whiter offspring), however, he encounters his foil: ‘Liza Jane, a formerly enslaved woman searching for her long-lost mate. ‘Liza Jane seeks out Mr. Ryder hoping that as the center of the city’s black community, he may have details about her husband. Chesnutt mines the irony of this cross-class encounter between ‘Liza Jane and Ryder so that just as he looks up from reading his book of poetry that heralds a pale heroine, he sees the approaching visitor as the very antithesis of his aesthetic ideal. The description of

---

<sup>57</sup>For example, in *The House Behind the Cedars*, the race- and class-passing Rena Walden enters white society by being publicly and dramatically deemed “Queen of Love and Beauty” at a jousting tournament.



‘Liza Jane, emphasizing her dark skin color, dialect, and outward unattractiveness, on one level appears consistent with the author’s often comical portrayal of dark African Americans elsewhere in his fiction: “She was very black—so black that her toothless gums, revealed when she opened her mouth to speak, were not red, but blue” (105). Yet the description in this passage may be taken as a reflection of Ryder’s colorism and perspective rather than the author’s. To the extent that Ryder’s body only occasionally fails to disguise his past, ‘Liza Jane’s body registers transparently her past, which is also her present. Untransformed by freedom, she maintains the attire, habits, speech and sentiments she held before the end of slavery. Curtsying before Ryder in a manner likely left over from her years of servitude, “She looked like a bit of the old plantation life, summoned up from the past by the wave of a magician’s wand” (105).

The interview that follows between Mr. Ryder and ‘Liza Jane indicates the dissimilar viewpoints of the two. The accent of the two speakers’ language—Ryder’s literary speech in contrast to ‘Liza Jane’s vernacular—is only the surface of their dialogue, for the content of their conversation reveals that the two ascribe to different myths of social mobility. ‘Liza Jane explains that her husband, Sam Taylor, who left her during slavery to avoid being sold downriver, was a trifling man who avoided work as much as possible. She doubts that he would have changed his work ethic after the end of slavery. Ryder counters that it would have been entirely possible for Sam Taylor to have “climbed up in the world,” motivated by the incentive of freedom, financial reward and prestige (Chesnutt 108). While Ryder calculates the financial and social gains of his possible marriage to Mrs. Dixon, ‘Liza Jane—still not realizing that Ryder is her former husband—holds out hope for a renewed marital relationship that she imagines will have little exchange value. In fact, she expects that if she

and Sam ever are reunited, her labor as a cook will have to be the main source of income, since he “nebber would work” (108).

Ryder does not lie at any point in his exchange with ‘Liza Jane, but his evasions, facilitated through careful verbal acrobatics, allow him to maintain his passing status:

“I don’t know of any man in town who goes by that name,” he said, “nor have I heard of any one making such inquiries. But if you will leave me your address, I will give the matter some attention, and if I find out anything I will let you know.” (109)

Ryder indeed does not know a man by the name of Sam Taylor, since he has abandoned his former name, much like Frederick Douglass (née Bailey) and other fugitives from the South who adopted new nomenclatures in the North. The new name at once serves to prevent recapture and extradition to Southern bondage and, further, marks a moment of self-making. “Class-passing” proves doubly apt for Ryder, for he not only conceives of his former class status as a boundary to be trespassed, but as an identity that has passed away or died; Sam Taylor is buried in Ryder’s memory for twenty-five years, only to be resurrected by ‘Liza Jane’s plaintive story.

Hearing ‘Liza Jane’s story is one incident that provokes Ryder’s later revelation that he is her long-lost husband, but in developing the plot of class-passing and revelation, Chesnutt also relies on scenes that involve visual inspection—a strategy similarly used in narratives of racial passing. To aid her in her search, ‘Liza Jane carries around a daguerreotype of her husband’s image. When looking at the picture, Ryder claims no recognition. After the woman departs, however, “he went upstairs to his bedroom, and stood for a long time before the mirror of his dressing case, gazing thoughtfully at the reflection of his own face” (109). In this scene of gazing, the author suggests that identity is a matter of perspective rather than truth and falsity. Ryder inspects his outer appearance, one might

argue, to determine which persona—Sam Taylor or Mr. Ryder—will govern him. He is unchanged physically from the moment before he encountered ‘Liza Jane; what has changed is his perception of himself in terms of his social context. The scene of gazing and recognition most clearly anticipates one in James Weldon Johnson’s *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912), as the young protagonist interrogates his own image in the mirror, realizing for the first time that he is not entirely white. Though the theory and practice of passing assume that the body is difficult to read, in literary instances of both racial and class-passing, the body retains signs that, in the proper context, give way to interpretation and categorization.

Ryder does not articulate his recognition while in the private space of his bedroom, however; he says nothing while looking into the mirror. Instead, continuing the paradigm of class subjectivity as performance, Chesnutt has Mr. Ryder choose to disclose his history at the public ball. The story resumes with preparations for the ball during which Ryder initially planned to announce his proposal to Mrs. Dixon. Solomon Sadler—in this story serving as toastmaster—introduces Ryder to make a toast, and Ryder takes advantage of this occasion to praise the “fidelity and devotion” of women by recounting ‘Liza Jane’s sentimental story of searching for her husband for twenty-five years. Importantly, Ryder tells ‘Liza’s story in first-person, “in the same soft dialect, which came readily to his lips,” although he presents Sam Taylor’s perspective in third-person. Some critics have interpreted Mr. Ryder’s dialect narrative as the height of artificiality, intended only to add authenticity to his telling and arouse his listeners. For example, Lorne Fienberg proposes, “Ryder’s performance is an elaborately structured dance of the veils, which relies upon concealment and several kinds of artifice to insure that his truth will be received as he wishes it to be” (Fienberg 224). Yet in

the context of class performance, Ryder's use of "the soft dialect, which came readily to his lips" is a return of the repressed, like Rev. Nerve's tongue "twisting-back-to-the-old-time-nigger-dialect" in Griggs's *Overshadowed*, though Chesnutt seems to intend the passage less mockingly than does Griggs (Griggs 66). In this the first of the three Blue Vein stories, Ryder's code switching highlights language as one of the devices through which Chesnutt signals crucial moments of class-passing and class revelation to his readers. Ryder asks his Blue Vein listeners whether, given a hypothetical situation, their consciences would advise an upwardly mobile man who "has qualified himself, by industry, by thrift, and by study" to acknowledge his uncultured former partner after the long separation (111). When Mrs. Dixon, his intended, and the guests agree that acknowledging the woman would be the morally acceptable thing to do, Ryder brings out 'Liza Jane as the wife of his youth.

While Ryder can be interpreted as a confidence man, deliberately foisting himself onto a "real" black elite with longer historical roots (and whiter skin, straighter hair, and better pronunciation), Chesnutt infers a different object lesson by shifting responsibility for Ryder's revelation onto the other Blue Veins. He reveals himself only after his audience recommends it as the right thing for the hypothetical character to do. While Ryder relates in third-person 'Liza Jane and Sam Taylor's condition, his audience "listened attentively and sympathetically," recalling similar situations they "had heard their fathers and grandfathers tell, the wrongs and suffering of this past generation" (110). In this way, the narrator highlights the attitudes and social climate that inspired Ryder to repress his former conditions, but also shows the Blue Veins as capable of compassion. By ending with a climactic moment, rather than allowing the plot to advance into the falling action and resolution, Chesnutt denies the reader a clear impression of how the cross-class reunion

between Ryder and 'Liza Jane might proceed. As one critic proposes, Ryder's reunion with 'Liza Jane, if converted from the bond of their past to a sanctioned marriage, might constitute "a sort of re-immersion in slavery, or what early in the story the narrator derisively calls a 'servile origin'" (Duncan 135). After all, Ryder's interaction with his former spouse and his attempt to share in her story are what provoke in him the tell-tale "soft dialect." Would he increasingly revert to the speech in which he rendered 'Liza Jane's story? Or, would 'Liza easily accept the changes to her speech, dress, and demeanor that Mr. Ryder might encourage or even demand? The question remains, "What is Chesnutt encouraging readers to conclude?"

In the moment when the central character makes his announcement, he is neither the Sam Taylor that 'Liza Jane takes him to be nor Mr. Ryder as the Blue Veins perceive him. He must merge both identities into a new performance, perhaps acting as a mediator between the darker, lower-class black community and the mixed race, relatively affluent one. The Blue Veins to this point have maintained the appearance of aristocrats of color, but their moral decision-making shows them as finally possessing the substance of noblesse oblige generally associated with the term "aristocrat." The only way out of his previous performances as Taylor and Ryder, since both personas have served him to the extent that they could, is for the protagonist to create a new performance—this time with fuller disclosure to those around him. Rather than functioning as a point of class closure among the colored aristocracy, the ball becomes an opening curtain call for the central character and the other Blue Veins to consider and renegotiate their class identities.

In "The Wife of His Youth," Ryder's class-passing and the subsequent threat of exposure cause him to struggle with class anxiety, which might have led him to guard social

boundaries even more compulsively. In “A Matter of Principle,” Cicero Clayton also polices social boundaries obsessively, though his class anxiety is inspired by the fear that someone else will class-pass into the black elite, which might rebound negatively on his constant protestation that “he himself was not a negro” (149). Thus Chesnutt shifts the focus from the passer to one who fears being trespassed against, showing the psychological and social demands of playing either role. Were the two stories more of a direct continuation of one another, we might imagine Clayton sitting around the banquet table as Ryder discloses his history and introduces the wife of his youth. Clayton, however, would not be among the Blue Veins who assent to Ryder’s decision to affiliate with a dark-skinned black person. While Ryder determines that a broadened sense of family and faithfulness supersedes color-based distinctions, Clayton remains inflexible, insisting on distancing himself from “pure Negroes” in an attempt to gain acknowledgement from “the better class of white people” (149).

Even more so than in the previous story, Chesnutt in “A Matter of Principle” exposes how rhetoric functions to construe and maintain social delineations. While the Blue Veins in “The Wife of His Youth” attempt to justify their elitist practices by asserting “character and culture” as the measure of distinction, Clayton unapologetically vocalizes his colorism, going so far as to resist being categorized as “Negro.” According to Clayton, thinking of himself as white offers “a clearer conception of the brotherhood of man” (149). In his attempt to subvert the existing delineations between “white” and “Negro,” he perpetuates the dichotomous thinking that reiterates racism and classism. Though he claims to promote brotherhood, when expressing his attitudes toward poorer or darker African Americans, Clayton uses the exact vocabulary that customarily functions in racist discourse: “principles,” “distinction,”

“discrimination,” and “prejudice” (163). The author frames the story with Clayton’s “social creed” of his brotherhood with whites so that at both the beginning and the end of the narrative, Clayton verbally insists on the classification and status that he wants to claim. In addition, throughout the story, the narrative highlights Clayton’s emphatic and repetitive speech: “The same sentiment in much the same words had often fallen from Mr. Clayton’s lips,—so often, in fact, that the younger members of the [Blue Vein] society sometimes spoke of him,” teasingly imitating his “oft-repeated proposition” (149). By noting the repetitiveness of Clayton’s rhetoric, Chesnutt implies how (per)forming an identity is a process that can never be completed; the process endlessly is reiterated and rehearsed.

The author uses a number of ironic cues to underscore the anxiety and hypocrisy underlying Clayton’s frenzied rehearsals. In an instance later in the text, Chesnutt draws attention to the slippage between Clayton’s rhetoric and his behavior. Though Mr. Clayton insists that he does not apply the term “Negro” to people of nearly white appearance such as himself, he refers to his peer group by the more colloquial term “darkeys” at a point when he fails to keep up his self-presentation or, should we say, forgets his lines. Drawing attention to this moment, which parallels Mr. Ryder’s occasional faulty pronunciation, the narrator highlights:

It will be noted that in moments of abstraction or excitement Mr. Clayton sometimes relapsed into forms of speech not entirely consistent with his principles. But some allowance must be made for his atmosphere; he could no more escape from it than the leopard can change his spots, or the— In deference to Mr. Clayton’s feelings the quotation will be left incomplete. (158)

By omitting the final phrase of the quotation—or the “Ethiopian change his skin”—the author ridicules Clayton’s desire to obscure any trace of African descent (Bryant 75). As the narrator suggests, understanding the force and failure of Clayton’s rhetoric “may safely be

left to the discerning reader” (Chesnutt 150). By showing Ryder and Cicero Clayton as both unable to overcome their physical features or speech patterns, Chesnutt mocks the Blue Veins’ pretensions. But the story’s larger and more implicit critique is toward the American social structure that would require that in order to move up the social ladder, people of color divest themselves of their values, immediate family relations, and lineage by attempting to pass. Since Clayton cannot change his skin (save perhaps through temporary cosmetic adjustments), the narrative underscores the need to revalue racial construction as argued in Chesnutt’s “What Is a White Man?”

Cicero Clayton is not the prime class-passer in the text, however. Rather, as in “The Wife of His Youth,” Chesnutt deploys a courtship and marriage plot to test out the bounds of the class stratification policies to which the Blue Veins subscribe. By using a marriage plot in all three of the Blue Veins stories, the author highlights how intraracial delineations impact the most intimate level of social relations. For Cicero Clayton’s daughter, Alice, attempting to maintain such distinctions proves disadvantageous. Alice is the “queen of her social set” and possesses all the benefits of breeding, beauty and wealth, but her choices for a suitable marriage partner are limited severely by her parents’ insistence on their superiority to darker people of color (150). A potential long-distance suitor, Congressman Hamilton Brown, writes requesting to visit Alice in Groveland, but having met Brown only once briefly, she cannot remember the crucial detail of his skin color. Assured by Solomon Sadler, the link in the three Blue Vein stories, that Brown is acceptably pale, Clayton makes elaborate plans to receive the congressman. At the train station, however, he confuses the congressman (who actually is light) with a “palpably, aggressively black” man in the waiting room and spins a



number of excuses—including the claim that his house is being quarantined because of diphtheria—to avoid hosting him (161).

Beyond showing Clayton's misjudgment of Brown as a simple case of mistaken identity, Chesnutt complicates the plot by including a case of class-passing. Clayton is preoccupied with protecting his family and the private space of his home from infiltration from without, but the class-passer in the story proves to be Clayton's young cousin, Jack. Though Jack has been raised by the Clayton family, Cicero treats him as a servant, relegating him to "a class of work that kept fully impressed upon him the fact that he was a poor dependent" (152). As Clayton's helper, Jack accompanies his uncle to the train station and misleads him to believe that Brown is the dark passenger in the waiting room. The conclusion of the story hints that with the competition for Alice effectively diminished, Jack will gain Alice's favor and inherit his uncle's catering business, expediently ascending the social ladder by marrying up.

Jack's actions, motivated by self-interest and a bit of good-natured retribution toward his uncle, highlight the agency that class-passing allows for infiltrating spaces, institutions, and affiliations that ordinarily may be forbidden to the passer. As Audrey Foster notes, "class-passing often involves marrying up, marrying down, and moving through social positions because of a change in job, marriage, or any number of plot contrivances" (Foster 4). Jack's consummate skill as a class-passer is foreshadowed earlier in the text as the narrator explains that Jack "had early learned the law of growth, that to bend is better than to break" (Chesnutt 152). While his meager income ordinarily discredits him as a suitor for Alice, Jack exploits Clayton's color prejudices to his own benefit. Like the slave Grandison in "The Passing of Grandison," Jack masks his class aspirations, feigning complete

contentment with his status as Clayton's subordinate, only later to gain entry into the family's elite social circle. Chesnutt applauds the class-passer for undermining rigid intraracial stratifications. But he also highlights the extreme manipulation and deception necessary both for Clayton to avoid darker blacks and for Jack to overcome (or at least circumvent) Clayton's color and class discriminations. By showing Jack as having to resort to class-passing to gain his uncle's respect, Chesnutt highlights that prejudices such as Clayton holds not only perpetuate social conflict in the public sphere, but also pervert domestic and familial relations.

Unlike the other two Blue Vein stories, "Her Virginia Mammy" features instances of class-passing aligned with the traditional racial passing narrative. Clara Hohlfelder, raised by German adoptive parents, hesitates to marry her insistent white suitor because she is uncertain of her birth heritage. Clara perceives that she has "warmer, richer blood coursing in [her] veins than the placid stream" of her adoptive parents, but she attributes this to temperament and has little reason to believe that she is not entirely white (115). She relates her courtship dilemma to a mulatta seamstress whom readers recognize as her long-lost mother, though Clara remains blind to the fact. Mrs. Harper partially reveals Clara's history, obscuring her kinship to the girl but assuring her that her father was a white gentleman from the first families of Virginia. The conclusion hints that Clara will proceed with her marriage, thinking herself secure in her whiteness and aristocratic background.

By framing Clara's dilemma as a concern about class differences within the white race, Chesnutt begins to move in a direction that he pursues in *The Marrow of Tradition*, showing the social performances necessary for white Americans to cling to their race and class identities. Clara does not accept John's offer immediately because she fears that her

pedigree does not match his New England heritage that traces back to the Mayflower.

Constantly fretting about being, by her own account, “a Miss Nobody, from Nowhere,” Clara nearly misses the chance to marry a man who seems devoted to her (116). After Mrs. Harper confirms that Clara’s father was an educated, cultured man whose family owned a plantation, Clara exults so much in her new-found class history that she boasts to her future husband that her ancestors actually looked down upon his. The story maintains a less satiric tone than “The Wife of His Youth” and “A Matter of Principle,” as Chesnutt depicts Clara as more naïve than Ryder or Clayton. Still, as in the other two stories, Chesnutt shows how psychologically consuming class anxiety can be. Clara’s repeated assertions about the importance of social standing indicate how she values status over unconditional affectionate ties with her fiancé, and unwittingly, with her long-lost mother.

Chesnutt heightens the story’s critique of class pretensions and differences by layering the narrative structure. While the frame story is about Clara’s decision whether to marry without knowing her family and class background, two other story lines in the text also highlight instances of social performance. Chesnutt combines the marriage plot as used in the other two Blue Vein stories with the story of a (nearly) reconciled mother-daughter kinship. As Clara shares her class-related concerns with the friendly Mrs. Harper, the elder woman realizes that Clara is the daughter she was separated from during a shipwreck. Mrs. Harper narrates Clara’s family history in third-person. Chesnutt uses elliptical speech to facilitate for Clara and indicate for readers the moments of passing; such instances occur frequently in the conversation between Clara and her unacknowledged mother:

“And how did you know about [my parents]?” asked Clara.

“I was one of the party. I was”—

“You were the colored nurse?—my ‘mammy,’ they would have called you in my old Virginia home?”

“Yes, child, I was—your mammy...and my heart loved you and mourned you like a mother loves and mourns her firstborn.” (127-128)

As Eric Sundquist explains, the dashes in the dialogue mark Mrs. Harper’s hesitation, suggesting that she, as much as her daughter, is acting out an alternate identity. “The dash is the sign of passing,” Sundquist explains, “the orthographic representation of secrecy written into textuality” (401). As consistently as he uses linguistic signals in the other two stories—highlighting Mr. Ryder’s evasion of ‘Liza Jane’s direct questions, for example—the author allows characters to choose which version(s) of subjectivity to disclose to listeners and observers. Mrs. Harper plays the role of servant and is willing to renounce her kinship to Clara in order to enable the young woman’s successful racial and class-passing through marriage.

A third story line, which receives the least narrative development but is central to the passing plot, traces Clara’s interactions with the Blue Veins’ dance class she instructs. As she finds, the group members are careful about their self-presentation in and out of the class: “Their manners were good, they dressed quietly and as a rule with good taste, avoiding rather than choosing bright colors and striking combinations—whether from natural preference, or because of a slightly morbid shrinking from criticism, of course [Clara] could not say” (Chesnutt 119). The conflict of “natural preference” versus social expectation is a question that Chesnutt raises throughout the Blue Vein stories, repeatedly alerting readers that tastes, habits, and speech that appear natural are nonetheless acculturated. Yet the characters in the stories, and critics as well, replicate the distinction between original and imitation that Chesnutt deconstructs. For example, in his reading of “Her Virginia Mammy,” McWilliams indicts the black middle class for being derivative of whites. He explains, “Thus these mulatto dance students mimic white society’s color prejudice, just as they imitate white

notions of genteel entertainment” (McWilliams 111). However, such apparent imitation is complicated by the fact that Clara—the dance teacher and model of “genteel entertainment”—is not herself entirely white according to nineteenth-century social and legal standards.

Chesnutt’s authorial voice throughout the Blue Vein stories seems best identified with that of Solomon Sadler, the custodian of Blue Vein history who recognizes the limitations of class distinctions. Sadler is an insider to the social circle, but he also maintains a critical eye on how the group’s class ideology fractures black communities and black psyches. As chaperone of the dance class in “Her Virginia Mammy,” Sadler offers Clara an overview of life along the color line, explaining how intraracial social delineations occur through a process marked by progressive stages of class closure. He articulates a policy that seems so much the collective thesis of the three stories, and so much the philosophy of the author himself, that it is worth quoting here at length:

the more advanced of us are not numerous enough to make the fine distinctions that are possible among white people; and of course as we rise in life we can’t get entirely away from our brothers and our sisters and our cousins, who don’t always keep abreast of us. We do, however, draw certain lines of character and manners and occupation. You see the sort of people we are. Of course we have no prejudice against color, and we regard all labor as honorable, provided a man does the best he can. But we must have standards that will give our people something to aspire to. (119)

Sadler reasons that in the post-emancipation period, when many African Americans had not recovered from the effects of slavery, social class delineations among African Americans needed to be flexible enough to support community building, and more importantly, to affirm family cohesion. Sadler’s reasoning, which seems to assert and then recant signs of class distinction including morality, manners, and occupation—aptly summarizes the delicate balance between class elitism and collective social reform that many upwardly mobile

African Americans attempted to maintain. As Willard Gatewood explains in the historical study *Aristocrats of Color*, the light-skinned black elite, colloquially referred to as Blue Veins, demonstrated a class awareness that sometimes “led to condescension and even arrogance toward other blacks, especially the poor, uneducated masses at the bottom of the class structure.” On the other hand, black class privilege “produced a sense of awesome responsibility that translated itself into a commitment to improve the lot of the race in general” (Gatewood 30).

In Chesnutt’s three Blue Vein stories, “class-passing” offers the passer both possibilities to delegitimize dualities and hierarchies and to reinforce them. For Mr. Ryder in “The Wife of His Youth,” class-passing allows him to enter the black elite and wield authority that, after his change of heart, may enhance his peers’ openness to extending social relations beyond the homogenous realm of the all-blue-vein society. On the other hand, Clara’s passing, which is accomplished without her knowing, does nothing to change her basic beliefs in social hierarchy. After she finds out that she descends from wealthy white planters, she is quick to assert, albeit facetiously, her social superiority over her husband and her colored “mammy.” By weaving the marriage and kinship plot through each of the narratives, the Blue Vein stories suggest that individual social ascendancy must be accompanied by responsibility for others, especially one’s family. Chesnutt also highlights how color and class prejudices pervert family relationships, a central issue that he further explores through the competing Carteret and Miller families divided by the color line in *The Marrow of Tradition*.

Featuring light-skinned, affluent African Americans in the Blue Vein stories, Chesnutt presents a cast of characters who serve to challenge readers’ likely conflation of

race and class by showing that not all African Americans are the impoverished, unlearned and much maligned figures frequently presented to the white public. But for “discerning reader[s]” willing to interrogate the performances of the Blue Veins, Chesnutt offers a social commentary on the motives for passing, given the limited means by which African Americans can gain status. By blending class-passing and racial passing in “Her Virginia Mammy,” Chesnutt shows both as motivated by a shared aim: the passer’s desire for the greater social and economic opportunity denied him or her. By highlighting class-passers such as the ambitious Mr. Ryder and Clara, who is not entirely complicit in her own racial passing, Chesnutt prepares his readers for Rena Walden in his next fiction, *The House Behind the Cedars* (1900). Rena shrewdly calculates how her class *and* race passing advance her from her undesirable status as a poor colored girl to a rich white lady. True to his career goal of moving his white audience toward attitudinal and behavior changes toward blacks, Chesnutt uses the themes of class and racial passing to lead his readership gradually to an acceptance of interracial social relations.

### III

Situating *The Marrow of Tradition* in relation to *The Wife of His Youth* and Chesnutt’s later works allows us to see how the novel’s portrayal of class differences reflects the author’s evolving literary and political project. In the Blue Vein trilogy, Chesnutt problematizes the concept of “natural affinity” among people of the same color and class. The short stories highlight the limitations of intraracial social hierarchies and mock the Blue Veins for their self-centered desire to affiliate only with people most like them in terms of taste, education, and above all, complexion. Chesnutt’s repeated ironic critique in these narratives leads one critic to read “A Matter of Principle,” for example, as Chesnutt’s all-

encompassing denouncement of prejudice. Earle V. Bryant observes, “Discrimination is discrimination, Chesnutt is arguing in the story, and intraracial racism is no less odious nor more excusable than white racism simply because black people are the ones discriminating against each other” (Bryant 77).

*The Marrow of Tradition*, however, does not manifest the egalitarianism that Bryant attributes to the Blue Vein stories. In both the short stories and the novel, Chesnutt objects to color prejudice against dark-skinned blacks and light-skinned people legally considered African American. But rather than arguing that “discrimination is discrimination,” *The Marrow of Tradition* reveals how Chesnutt posits some forms of discrimination as indeed “less odious” and “more excusable” than others (Bryant 77). Less troubled about combating intraracial class prejudices in the novel, Chesnutt explores class distinctions as a more viable way to assess people than by racial identification. *The Marrow of Tradition* depicts interactions among people of the same social class as logical, preferable, and in fact, most promising for the future of twentieth-century America. The novel proposes that by privileging class affinities over racial prejudices, “better class” whites and blacks can collaborate as the guardians of society, ushering in change through their shared commitment to refined taste, morality, and social responsibility.

Published two years after *The Wife of His Youth*, *The Marrow of Tradition* (1901) implicitly proposes standards of discrimination that the author crystallizes and articulates explicitly in his 1916 address, “Social Discrimination.”<sup>58</sup> After clarifying in the speech that

---

<sup>58</sup>In drawing upon such a comparison between Chesnutt’s fiction and his nonfiction, I disagree with Todd McGowan who claims that reading the novel through the lens of the essays “assimilates the complex (*Marrow*) to the simple (the essays), and hence disarms the novel by explaining it” (McGowan 74). Rather this paralleling of an author’s fiction and nonfiction—a methodological practice I maintain throughout the dissertation—seems especially fitting because the authors themselves refer to their fiction as an extension of their political ideologies expressed in nonfiction. In my opinion, such a comparison detracts nothing from the artistry of postbellum African American fiction.



he objects to forms of prejudice that deny political rights to all African Americans, Chesnutt asserts that “social discrimination” with “a narrower meaning, that is, to apply to the more intimate, personal association of human beings which we refer to as social intercourse” rightly should distinguish between cultured Americans and the common masses (Chesnutt, “Social Discrimination” 424). Addressing black and white representatives at the Amenia Conference, a foundational meeting sponsored by the burgeoning NAACP, Chesnutt proposes:

What we can justly ask of white Americans is not only that they cease to practice social discrimination *against* colored people, but that they begin to practice social discrimination *among* colored people—they do so already to a limited extent—that they give to colored people an opportunity to demonstrate their social value, and then recognize it as it appears. (425, emphasis in original)

Exchanging the preposition “against” for “among,” Chesnutt makes a minute syntactical change to register the significant conceptual shift from race-based to class-based distinctions he recommends to his audience. By 1916, therefore, Chesnutt endorses class differentiation to an extent that he did not in the Blue Vein stories.

Recalling the train car scene with which I began this chapter, I suggest that Chesnutt in “Social Discrimination” provides a response to Dr. William Miller’s appeal for “some more logical and considerate basis” for adjudicating among people. As he builds his case against racism, Chesnutt does not posit the familiar premise that segregation should be dismantled because black Americans are “created equal” and should be guaranteed rights under the law. He instead contends that what is so disruptive about racial categorizations and Jim Crow policies is that they prevent and interfere with cross-racial class affinity—“the inspiring friendships, the mental and spiritual stimulus which comes from meeting, as I say, others of kindred standards of thought and feeling” (Chesnutt, “Social Discrimination” 424).

This concept of “kindred standards of thought and feeling” provides the foundation for establishing civil relationships between middle-class whites and middle-class African Americans such as the Blue Veins or the Millers. Ideally, based on this formulation, the most advanced African Americans who demonstrate their refined tastes and feelings gain access to white-only public accommodations and private social gatherings that they otherwise could access only by passing. Chesnutt emphasizes, too, that white Americans benefit from cross-racial alliances and may find interacting with cultivated blacks “not only tolerable but desirable socially” (“Social Discrimination” 425). In this regard, Chesnutt’s endorsement of middle-class status is politicized strategically to foster social equality, or what he calls “social intercourse,” between the two races.

*The Marrow of Tradition* dramatizes the social conflicts that arise when the deeply entrenched ideology of racism in the post-Civil War South trumps the class oriented paradigm Chesnutt proposes. In a society polarized by racial antagonisms, whites and blacks who might share class affinities remain alienated unless, as the novel shows through the final desperate encounter between the white Carteret family and the Millers, they overcome the power of racism and recognize their kindred interests. Besides separating individuals who appear to share “kindred standards of thought and feeling,” racism produces awkward social affiliations between people of the same race who are notably dissimilar in dress, manners, occupation, speech, and sentiment. By portraying these cross-class encounters as strained and furthermore “brutal,” Chesnutt invalidates race and color-based models of social grouping to promote instead interracial alliances among people of the same class.

In order to show how the novel reveals the dangers of privileging race over class allegiances, I elucidate here the social structure of Wellington, North Carolina, the

pseudonymous site of the 1898 Wilmington riot at the center of the plot. The novel foregrounds in far greater detail how social relations function among white Americans than among blacks. Yet as Sundquist notes, “Although they are not all developed as characters with equal effectiveness, the blacks of *The Marrow of Tradition* represent a wider range of class and type than any other such fictional group of the period” (Sundquist 447). Chesnutt’s unequal development of black characters indicates as much about his vision of class relations as does his attention to the characters that he foregrounds. Many critics primarily have elaborated on the class disparity between Dr. Miller and Josh Green, his working-class patient who determines to lead black men in armed self-defense when Miller declines to do so. I want to proceed by magnifying the four strata of African Americans that exist in Wellington before I discuss the parallel social structure among whites. In the case of both blacks and whites, *The Marrow of Tradition* exposes how Southern racist conditions prevent the class identifications and relations that Chesnutt envisions.

The bottom rung of black society in Wellington is occupied by a broad unskilled laboring class, represented most visibly by Josh Green, a stevedore who works at the docks for Dr. Miller’s brother. In characterizing Josh, Chesnutt addresses a number of stereotypes about the black working class as either carefree and unthinking, or conversely, bitter and violent. At points throughout the novel, Josh embodies each of these attributes. He impulsively fights an immigrant co-worker who calls him a “damn’ low-down nigger” (550) and plots to kill Captain McBane, the white man partly responsible for the death of his father. By highlighting Josh’s violent potential, Chesnutt in part portrays him much in the way “the desperate class” of black Americans appears in James Weldon Johnson’s *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*. An intertextual borrowing from Johnson illuminates Josh’s character.

According to the ex-colored man, the “desperate class” comprises black men who “cherish a sullen hatred for all white man, and they value life as cheap,” choosing to die or be imprisoned rather than bear the insult of white Americans (Johnson 56). Josh’s revenge toward Captain McBane bears out this definition.

Yet Chesnutt depicts Josh as not entirely a “creature of conditions,” as Johnson’s narrator suggests of the black subjects he observes (56). In occasional appearances in the novel, Josh Green appears more complex and humane than most of the working-class male characters presented elsewhere in Chesnutt’s fiction. Described alternately as “a huge negro” (510) and “a black giant” (550), Josh possesses the physical type of the infamous “black beast” of postbellum white imagination. He is not, however, a misfit lurking and waiting to violate a defenseless white woman (an accusation erroneously leveled at Sandy Campbell). Even his hatred for McBane is targeted rather than aimlessly directed at all white people.

To the extent that Josh represents his social class, one point in particular is worth noting about how Chesnutt characterizes him. Again a reference to Johnson’s novel is useful. Using sociological detachment to mediate between the black community and the implied reader, the unnamed ex-colored man clarifies that his analysis of Jacksonville, Florida categorizes black people into social classes, “not so much in respect to themselves as in respect to their relations with the whites” (55-56). This is a crucial difference between how African Americans classify themselves and how they are classified in the context of broader white society. Chesnutt plays upon this distinction in his presentation of Josh, for while Josh fits the profile of black brute with murderous intents in relation to whites, his reputation is slightly different in the black community. When the riot erupts, Josh accepts responsibility for leading the black band of defenders. As importantly, when he anticipates that he may be

killed in the struggle, Josh attempts to make provisions for his family; he asks that Dr. Miller, who lives through the riot, bury his mother (685). Given Chesnutt's consistent emphasis on duty to one's family, Josh's request—perhaps as much as his self-sacrificial leadership—represents him as possessing noble traits that Chesnutt usually reserves for his mulatto characters. The discrepancy between how Josh is assessed by the black community and by whites highlights how racism serves as the lens through which non-black southerners interpret African Americans.

The retainer class (Sandy Campbell, Mammy Jane and her grandson, Jerry Letlow) derives its status from its relationship to the white community. The servants' needs are met in proportion to their ability to meet the needs and desires of their white patrons. Chesnutt notes this class as particularly difficult to situate. A personal servant to an old aristocrat, Sandy Campbell is "a survival of an interesting type. He had inherited the feudal deference for his superiors in position, joined to a certain self-respect which saved him from sycophancy. His manners had been formed upon those of old Mr. Delamere, and were not a bad imitation" (566). Yet Chesnutt shows how the black retainer's status is most vulnerable to attack from the whites who afford his privilege. However much Sandy shares his master's values and deportment, his blackness still makes him the target of ridicule and false accusation when his young master Tom Delamere passes for him at a cakewalk and in a murder.

Sandy's attempt to establish a black middle-class status for himself in Wellington is undercut by the ideology of racism, which disregards the class ambitions of African Americans and collapses them into a uniform mass. Passing for Sandy at the cakewalk, Tom is unconcerned about how his actions taint Sandy's reputation. Accused of enjoying a secular pastime, Sandy is banned from his church, one of the central institutions in the black

community for determining social standing. The church is for Sandy “a social club as well as a religious temple” (559). Disappointed by his loss of clout among respectable blacks, Sandy ends up idle, drinking beer with Josh Green, with whom he ordinarily did not associate. This cross-class interaction between the two men proves tragic because when Sandy is accused of murder, rather than serving as an alibi, his association with the volatile Josh Green lessens his credibility. From the perspective of white men, Sandy’s efforts to achieve middle-class respectability merely make him more suspect, for his accusers suggest that his desire for fine clothes and money motives him to rob a white woman. As a result of Tom’s blackface actions and the hostility they engender against his servant, Sandy experiences a progressively downward social spiral—from favored, self-respecting servant to inebriate among manual laborers to falsely charged criminal.

In the southern setting of *The Marrow of Tradition*, traditional means of class-passing such as performing middle-class manners, as Sandy attempts, marrying up, practicing thrift, pursuing a trained career, or gaining education offer limited agency for African Americans to attain upward mobility in the face of racism. The novel highlights this dilemma in a brief but poignant description of an academically trained servant class that gradually replaces black retainers. For example, a number of black nurses trained by Dr. Miller supplant the superannuated Mammy Jane in the Carteret household. Chesnutt points to one such nurse as representative of a transition in race and labor relations in the New South. Rather than fitting easily into a finite class position, the young nurse is “standing, like most young people of her race, on the border line between two irreconcilable states of life,” scornful of those she calls “old-time Negroes” and yet lacking the cultural and literal capital that was the “immemorial birthright” of freeborn colored Americans like the Millers (487). The young nurse’s conflict

with Mammy Jane is significant in that, beyond indicating a generational gap, the tension between the two reflects their competing attitudes about race and class. While Mammy Jane reinforces white superiority by performing her role as servant, the younger woman rejects the “rewarded servant myth,” which I delineated in the previous chapter. She conceives of her relation to the white family as “purely a matter of business; she sold her time for their money. There was no question of love between them” (498). By resisting the conflation of physical and emotional labor as practiced by Mammy Jane, the nurse bases the terms of her labor for the Carterets on a cash nexus. The young woman draws her income from her white employers, but she presumably derives her social value and sense of class from other sources including, perhaps, her ties to the black community.

The nurse’s place in Chesnutt’s narrative is as transitional as is her role in the social structure in Wellington. The narrator explains that as a representative of “the younger generation of colored people,” the trained nurse is “entitled to a paragraph in a story of Southern life” (497). Apparently she is entitled to one paragraph of ink and no more. Notably, Chesnutt does not even provide the nurse’s name as part of the brief description of her. In addition, the author uses the third-person narrator to convey what the young woman “said to herself”; in this way, he denies her the chance to articulate verbally her analysis of her own status and her difference from her predecessor Mammy Jane (497). Though marginalized to a single paragraph of the text, the space that the nurse occupies in the social world of the novel is worth elaborating. Her role highlights her as “in what might be called the chip-on-the shoulder stage, through which races as well as individuals must pass in climbing the ladder of life,--not an interesting, at least not an agreeable stage, but an inevitable one” (497). Chesnutt alludes to race and class status as stages in an evolutionary

social formation. Presumably after the “chip-on-the-shoulder stage” of self-conscious racial pride, black and whites will move toward collaboration and equality.

Yet the process of social change, which would foster greater class opportunities for African Americans, is thwarted by prevailing Southern prejudices. Rather than affording her additional job opportunities, the nurse’s education and her racially conscious self-perception make her less marketable in the limited workforce because she lacks the requisite unquestioning submissiveness that employers demand. Mrs. Carteret terminates the nurse after the young woman takes her ward, Dodie Carteret, for a visit at the Miller household, where her sister works. Besides demonstrating insubordination, the young nurse allows the unwitting white child to enter a black home, transgressing the spatial boundaries between blacks and whites in the town. It is for this last offense—her failure to maintain the social distance between the races—that Mrs. Carteret dismisses the young woman. Rather than showing her failure in the job market, the nurse’s termination exposes her employer’s race and class anxiety. For besides chaffing at the young woman’s relative education and self-respect, Mrs. Carteret feels threatened by the Millers, who are even more visible examples of black class ambition than the nurse.

Previous studies often examine Dr. Miller as an isolato figure, possibly because the narrative seems not to figure fully how he and his wife fit into the black community. In the narrative, black society in Wellington seems to center on the Miller family, whose training hospital will provide a medical, economic, and educational resource to the community. However, a close reading indicates that a black middle class flourished even before Dr. and Mrs. Miller returned to their hometown. The Millers fit into an existing, though perhaps small, class of economically stable African Americans who likely share their tastes. That



class included representatives such as the African American lawyer, Mr. Watson, with whom Miller consults as the riot escalates; an unnamed “well-to-do” farmer whom Miller visits and treats immediately before the start of the riot; Miller’s brother who inherited his father’s stevedore business; the African American newspaper editor, Barber; and the multiple political and civic leaders who earn the ire of the white conspirators who engineer the riot.

While I have taken the liberty to describe in detail intraracial differences among blacks, the fact that Chesnutt expends less effort doing so suggests that he perceives how race supersedes class to determine African Americans’ social position in the South. In the Blue Vein stories set in Ohio, class-passers manipulate the fissures in Groveland’s social structure so that Mr. Ryder in “The Wife of His Youth,” for example, can work his way up the professional ladder by demonstrating work ethic, thrift, and skill. In the North, his occupation and cultivated taste allow him to blend in with the black elites and aspire to “the upward process of absorption” among whites (Chesnutt, “Wife” 104). Chesnutt depicts the South, however, as less responsive in rewarding black people’s display of middle-class values. As Sandy Campbell, the black nurse, and other African Americans discover when their jobs are terminated and lives are threatened, at each turn racism obviates the economic and social power that black people attempt to gain through their adherence to middle-class ideology. Descended from an enslaved grandfather who purchased his own freedom and a freeborn father who thrived as a businessman, Dr. Miller represents one of the few instances in the text of a black American climbing the social ladder. Yet even the Millers’ “better class” status remains an unenviable social position, for the violent plot hatched by Carteret, Major Belmont, and Captain McBane aims most directly at middle-class blacks, whom whites consider a threat to the racialized social hierarchy. Southern restrictions on black class

ambition are enforced poignantly as white marauders burn the hospital Dr. Miller built with his father's money. As Amy Lang denotes, "as the central signifier of African American social and economic mobility, black owned property serves as the lightning rod for racist attack" (49). In this regard, *The Marrow of Tradition* suggests that few opportunities exist for African Americans to subvert the South's rigidly set social system through class-passing.

Given that class-passing seems nearly impossible for black Americans in Wellington, Chesnutt in *The Marrow of Tradition* uses the theme of class performance instead to expose how white Americans stage fiendish attempts to reinforce their racial privilege. Chesnutt's analysis of class among white Southerners, more detailed here than anywhere else in his oeuvre, details the postbellum transition from a slavocracy, complete with white aristocrats such as the elder Mr. Delamere, to a stratified class system that depends on breeding, birth and money, highlighting the first two, but increasingly less able to ignore the last. In noting the performativity of the Blue Veins in his review of *The Wife of His Youth*, Howells had overlooked the extent to which not only the black elite, but also white Americans perform their race and class identities. By citing the black middle class as feebly mimicking "pure white society," Howells presumed whiteness as the standard against which other identities are compared (Howells 234). Yet as Stephen Knadler proposes, extending the theories of Judith Butler, "Whiteness is not only a 'cultural fiction' but also a performance that is always in the process of (but never quite successful at) imitating and approximating itself" (Knadler 428). Through scenes of white Americans struggling to retain unstable markers such as "gentleman," Chesnutt particularly points to white aristocracy as an imitation for which no original exists. Faulting *The Marrow of Tradition* as a "bitter, bitter" exaggeration of the moral character of white Americans, Howells, and the reading audience guided by his

recommendations, seemingly were less prepared to interrogate whiteness as a precarious performance maintained, in many cases, through the sheer force of violence (Howells “Psychological” 882). By applying the notion of class-passing equally to whites as he earlier had to blacks, Chesnutt significantly shifts the expected relations of black and white, appearance and reality.

Chesnutt’s most masterful representation of class performance occurs in Chapter XIII, “The Cakewalk,” as Tom Delamere appears in blackface, dressed as his grandfather’s manservant Sandy.<sup>59</sup> Chesnutt contrasts the ease with which Tom acts as a black performer with his difficulty acting as an upper-class white man. Described as possessing a “certain element, feline rather than feminine, which subtly negated the idea of manliness,” Tom fails to embody the status of “gentleman” entitled to him by his lineage (Chesnutt, *Marrow* 478). His habits of drinking, gambling, and borrowing money from his servant reveal Tom as unable to maintain the required façade of his class position. Meanwhile, when Tom performs for northern visitors who want to gain a well-rounded impression of the Southern race problem, he in fact excels working-class African American dancers in executing the steps of the cakewalk. As Tom Delamere dresses up as Sandy later to kill and rob a white woman, Polly Ochiltree, his deception attempts to point to Sandy as the criminal and class-passer. In other words, Tom counts on his white peers’ racist assumption that Sandy was at best only passing as the honorable “gentleman in ebony” that his elder master Mr. Delamere believes him to be (485). Ironically, however, Tom Delamere’s successful passing

---

<sup>59</sup>In a further development of the theory of class-passing, Eric Schocket proposes the term “class transvestism” to refer specifically to temporary (rather than sustained) episodes of downwards class-passing. Schocket traces a trend among turn-of-the-century white middle-class authors and sociologists, including Stephen Crane, who disguised themselves among the lower classes to gain first-hand research. Tom Delamere’s passing does have the element of downclassing for a brief period that Schocket attributes to “class transvestism,” but Tom’s act lacks the self-conscious desire “to close epistemological gaps” between his usual perspective and the role he plays (Schocket 110).

inadvertently implodes the argument of racial regression, which proposed that cultivated African Americans merely masked their instinctive savagery.<sup>60</sup> As Dean McWilliams notes, Tom's overacting of blackness exposes his own failed performance of whiteness.

"Exaggeration is the key to the psychological power of this stereotypical representation and a tip-off to its falsity" (McWilliams 163). Instead of signaling Sandy's failed upward class-passing, Tom's success in passing for black argues that if there is any devolution at work in the novel, whites such as Tom, not to mention those who resort to savagery during the riot, provide the most compelling proof of social regression in the South. Tom's blackface crime and the ensuing riot enacted by howling, uncontrollable marauders appear as "merely part of the show, like the 'powder play' of the Arabs," revealing whiteness as a veneer masking corrupt primitivism (Chesnutt, *Marrow* 689).

Chesnutt further explores the idiosyncrasies of the race and class matrix in the South through the figure of Captain McBane, whose attempts at class-passing cannot achieve even the feeble appearance of gentility attempted by Tom Delamere. Despite his money, the parvenu McBane lacks the proper taste to denote him as a true gentleman. Showing McBane as lacking in manners, morals, and aesthetic sensibilities—all attributes that nineteenth-century readers would have associated with taste and class distinction—the narrator highlights McBane's inability to class-pass successfully, for his social performance undeniably conveys his poor white origins. Astutely analyzing the class distinctions among the white men he serves as waiter, Jerry Letlow assesses McBane and declares, "He ain'

---

<sup>60</sup>As a form of "scientific" evidence often marshaled to support racist biases, racial regression arguments proposed that black Americans freed from the civilizing effect of slavery and other forces of policing threatened to revert to a less civilized, bestial state. Promoting the credo "blood will tell," proponents argued that "much as one may resist, this agency [one's blood] will have its way, and such a condition of subjection to a remote force amounts to a form of possession" (Kerkering 174). Under certain circumstances, the argument ran, even the most outwardly cultivated person of color would revert to primitive patterns of emotionalism, lasciviousness, and violence.

nothing' but po' wi'te trash nohow; but Lawd! Lawd! Look at de money he's got,--livin' at de hotel, wearin' di'mon's, an' colloquin' wid de bes' quality er dis town!" (492). Jerry's observations note that McBane's whiteness partly compensates for his social status. However, the novel also underscores the superficiality of the relationships between white men on the basis of race alone, for while McBane collaborates with aristocrats to plan the riot, he is not welcomed as their social peer in private settings.

In a chapter entitled "The Social Aspirations of Captain McBane," Chesnutt distinguishes between the economic and ideological or aesthetic components of class that preclude McBane from high social status. The captain's unabashed self-assertion almost lacks the tenor of passing, for he aggressively asserts his ambitions without the stealth characteristic of the class-passers Chesnutt features elsewhere in his fiction. When McBane gains financial power over Tom Delamere through a gambling debt owed him, he uses his advantage to manipulate Tom into recommending him for membership in the elite Claredon Club:

Delamere was annoyed at this request. His aristocratic gorge rose at the presumption of this son of an overseer and ex-driver of convicts. McBane was good enough to win money from, or even to lose money to, but not good enough to be recognized as a social equal. (586-87)

Tom's reaction to McBane's request indicates, as Max Weber explains, "the status order would be threatened at its very root if mere economic acquisition and naked economic power still bearing the stigma of its extra-status origin could bestow upon anyone who has won them the same or ever greater honor as the vested interests claim for themselves" (Weber 53). Furthermore, Chesnutt shows the status order as threatened by racism, which forces ill-bred white men into awkward collusion with upper-class whites in the name of racial solidarity against blacks. In this respect, racism poses a threat not only to the black Americans at whom

it is directed, but also to whites such as Tom Delamere and Carteret whose class privilege is infringed upon by racist, ruthless men such as McBane. Chesnutt's characterization of McBane is important in this respect because he shows how McBane's "social aspiration" to assert himself among the old aristocracy poses more of a threat, and is less merited, than a similar upward move by middle-class blacks like the Millers. In this regard, the novel proposes that affiliations between better class whites and blacks should seem preferable to cross-class encounters between dissimilar white men on the sheer basis of race.

Exposing the limits of association between white men such as Delamere and McBane, the author emphasizes the more likely affinity between "better class" whites and "better class" blacks by using a narrative device that appears throughout nineteenth-century black literature aimed at combating racial segregation. Multiple black autobiographies and fictions of the 1890s and 1900s feature scenes of African Americans on Jim Crow railroad cars, where such quasi-public spaces invite readers to observe social class difference within the race as well as across the color line. Aboard the train, as he demands for Dr. Miller to be removed to the Jim Crow car, McBane performs according to the cultural stereotype of poor whites. Denoting McBane as a "broad-shouldered, burly white man" known for his profanity, incivility, and conspicuously gaudy, but nonetheless slovenly appearance (506), Chesnutt describes him in terms that bear an uncanny likeness to a scene in Anna Julia Cooper's nonfiction collection, *A Voice from the South* (1892). In her essay "Woman versus the Indian," Cooper recounts her encounter with a gruff white man, casting her authoritative gaze to mock the white passenger:

But when a great burly six feet of masculinity with sloping shoulders and unkempt beard swaggers in, and, throwing a roll of tobacco into one corner of his jaw, growls out at me over the paper I am reading, 'Here gurl,' (I am past thirty) 'you better git out 'n dis kyar 'f yer don't, I'll put yer out,'—my mental

annotation is *Here's an American citizen who has been badly trained. He is sadly lacking in both 'sweetness' and 'light.'* (Cooper 94-95, emphasis in original)

Positing an implicit argument for the practicality of class distinctions over racial ones, both Cooper and Chesnutt note the taste, intelligence and restraint of middle-class African Americans who are assigned seats equal or worse than those of less genteel passengers. As Chesnutt creates a taxonomy of travelers—ranging from Captain McBane, to a Negro nurse seated beside her white mistress, to a white dog—he indicates how jarring it is to have these passengers sorted according to the conventional means of racial inequality. The narrator implies that in terms of class, Dr. Miller proves a more fitting first-class passenger than Captain McBane. Were it not for his intense racial hatred for blacks, Captain McBane would perhaps find himself more comfortably seated among the farm laborers or chatting with “a Chinaman, of the ordinary laundry type” (510).

If we can take Chesnutt's understanding of “kindred standards of thought and feeling” as an interpretive key for his fictional depictions of social relations, then what is regrettable about Dr. Miller's relegation to the Jim Crow train car is not that he is denied the first-class service for which he paid. What matters is that the “mental stimulus” and “inspiring friendship” between Dr. Burns and Dr. Miller is disrupted by the “brutal” color line (“Social Discrimination” 424). On the journey south, the two men discuss medical journals, the Negro problem, their recent international travels, and other topics that reflect their shared middle-class lifestyles and ideologies. When the porter explains that black people can only ride in the first-class car in the capacity of servant, Dr. Burn objects, “The gentleman is not my servant, nor anybody's servant, but is my friend” (506). Attentive to the designations Dr. Burns uses to elide social inequality, the porter retorts, “I'm sorry to part *friends*, but the law of Virginia

does not permit colored passengers to ride in the white cars” (506, emphasis in original). By italicizing “friends” as a pivotal term in the exchange, Chesnutt casts racism as limiting affective ties even more so than civil and political privileges. Interestingly, Chesnutt does not portray Dr. Miller being ejected from the first-class car, which would underscore the physical brutality of the color line. Compelled to leave his white colleague and remove to the unkempt “Colored” section, Dr. Miller resents being consigned to the company of “noisy, loquacious, happy, dirty, and malodorous” working-class blacks who do not share his refined taste and intellect (Chesnutt, *Marrow* 511).

This principle of class affinity as friendship or “kindred standards of thought and feeling” also helps to interpret the conclusion of the novel, as the Millers and Carterets finally encounter one another face to face and determine whether kindred interests will prevail in their relationships. Unlike the collegial rapport between Drs. Burns and Miller, the embittered relationship between the Carterets and Millers requires a life-threatening crisis as a means of the black family being accepted, even temporarily, into social equality with the Carterets.<sup>61</sup> Lending symmetry to the novel’s structure, Chesnutt depicts young Dodie Carteret’s life at risk again at the conclusion as it was during his birth at the novel’s beginning. When the Carterets require a doctor to save their son’s life, all the white physicians are unavailable, many of them detained by circumstances related to the riot. In a fit of desperation, both husband and wife seek Dr. Miller’s assistance, at which point he agrees to assist their son only if his wife consents.

Though Carteret and his colleagues resent middle-class blacks, he realizes at last how racist principles and practices aimed to ensure black social immobility disservice both races.

---

<sup>61</sup>In this regard, the crises in *The Marrow of Tradition* open communication between whites and blacks in a way that recalls Tillman, Dunbar, and Griggs’s uses of death and violence to challenge race and class boundaries, as I elucidate in Chapter III.



Unlike the nurse, butler, and series of untrained or semi-trained servants who previously have interacted with the Carterets as subordinates, Miller is a skilled doctor whose professionalism and availability indicate the need for educated blacks in the South. Framing his encounter with Miller as a business exchange, Carteret explains that he approaches the black man “as a physician, to engage your professional services for my child” (711). “The veil of race prejudice was rent in twain” to allow Carteret to analyze his folly in starting the riot and previously refusing to admit Miller to his home. Still the two men cannot move past reason toward the “inspiring friendship” that Chesnutt aims to promote. When the doctor refuses to treat his son, Carteret agrees with his logical conclusion, given that Miller’s own son has been killed during the mayhem that he started.

Shifting to an interaction between the two women of the feuding families, Chesnutt underscores how emotional ties, rather than business transactions, create stronger relationships between middle-class whites and blacks. More so than their husbands, the half-sisters Olivia Carteret and Janet Miller determine whether “kindred standards of thought and feeling” can withstand the power of racism. After her husband’s failed attempt, Olivia seeks out the doctor and her half-sister. In the bitter confessional moment between Janet and Olivia, as Janet renounces her claim to her father’s name and money, the exchange between the two women nonetheless is built on their kindred interests as mothers. Although we cannot know whether an “inspiring friendship” will ensue between the two families, given that the novel concludes just after Janet grants her husband permission to serve the Carterets’ child, there is between the two women “the mental and spiritual stimulus which comes from meeting” (Chesnutt, “Social Discrimination” 424). Janet underscores the spiritual or emotional element of the meeting by divulging her motivations. Though her own son has

been killed, Janet explains to Olivia that she will allow her husband to render his services, “But that you may know that a woman may be foully wronged, and yet may have a heart to feel, even for one who has injured her” (Chesnutt, *Marrow* 718). In this case, the Carterets find that aligning themselves with people of the same class serves them better than pursuing strained relationships with people like Tom Delamere and Captain McBane in the name of race. By relaxing their adherence to the color line, the Carterets gain access to additional resources in the midst of their crisis: Dr. Miller’s medical services and his wife’s emotional empathy.

Janet Miller is, in Todd McGowan’s estimation, the single true aristocrat in the novel, the one who does not class-pass by the end of the novel; her rhetoric and behavior are exactly what they presume to be. To accept her sister’s money would suggest perhaps that she has been class-passing all along. Her renunciation of her father’s name and money attempts to move her beyond the realm of performance and commodification: “This rejection is, in addition, the most important gesture of the novel, because it signals that Miller has taken up the burden of subjectivity and agency upon herself” (McGowan 70). In the end, Olivia is the subject on stage at her sister’s feet begging that Dr. Miller might save young Carteret’s life. At once keen to the performative exchange and the shift of authority from white to black, Stephen Knadler envisions, “Onto the vacated pedestal, the black women step up to evoke the affective ties of a reimagined twentieth-century interracial community” (Knadler 437). Janet’s emergence “onto the vacated pedestal” distinguishes her as the single figure of upward mobility in the novel. Racism effectively negates other African Americans’ efforts to cultivate social status in the town. And white people such as McBane, whom Josh kills during the riot, and the Carterets suffer as a result of the racism that they endorse. Yet Janet

is able to undermine racism by allowing her gracious thoughts and feelings to prevail, despite the suffering that she, too, experiences at the hands of racism.

By the novel's end following the riot, the Millers are the only named black characters alive and remaining in Wellington. As representatives of the black middle class, Dr. and Janet Miller serve as the Talented Tenth of their race who will lead social relations at the turn of the century. Interrogating the social hierarchy of white and black communities in *The Marrow of Tradition*, Chesnutt indicates how both social structures are faulty because they separate literal family, such as the half-sisters, and a figurative family of white and black Americans who share similar class ideologies. Though the novel repeatedly shows how racism forces whites and blacks into repetitious social performances, in Chesnutt's script, class affinities displace what he considers more "brutal" forms of racial discrimination.

## CHAPTER V

### CONCLUSION

In his essay “The Talented Tenth” (1903), W. E. B. Du Bois offers what has become one of the most (in)famous paradigms for African American stratification and intraracial class relations. As Du Bois envisioned it, the Talented Tenth comprises an upper class of African Americans who bear responsibility for “uplifting” less privileged blacks. His theory of the differentiation and function of social classes so closely corresponds to that of many of the authors in the preceding chapters—and so strongly contrasts the attitudes about class in later twentieth-century African American literature and thought—that the concept warrants examination here as the culmination of this study.

Published just months after his magnum opus *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), “The Talented Tenth” argues for liberal education for African Americans rather than industrial training alone. Lest detractors, white and black, discredit the notion of a liberally trained class as impractical or superfluous, Du Bois summons examples of the pre-1900 black “Talented Tenth” whose legacy benefited the race and nation. Phillis Wheatley, Frederick Douglass, physician James McCune Smith, and congressman John Mercer Langston are among those the author lists to familiarize his readers. “You misjudge us because you do not know us,” Du Bois suggests, “From the very first it has been the educated and intelligent of the Negro people that have led and elevated the mass” (34).

Du Bois's assertion in this passage hints at what is at stake in his formulation of a Talented Tenth. First, through his careful selection of exemplars, he establishes a class-based genealogy, choosing as his forefathers and mothers African Americans who merged intellectual rigor and highbrow culture with social activism. Notably, he omits successful self-made entrepreneurs, barbers, head waiters, and other workers who, because of the limited occupational range in some nineteenth-century black communities, otherwise may have been granted favorable social standing.<sup>62</sup> Ignoring, for the most part, the economic leadership of trades people and businessmen and women allows Du Bois to highlight advanced education, which he imagines as producing cultivation and leadership, as the central standard of class status. The implications of Du Bois's biographical survey are significant because, as John Ernest explains, nineteenth-century black writers penned "liberation historiography," conscious of how their constructions of the past related to their futures in freedom. Rather than objective representations of lives and events, "conceptions of historical truth are culturally generated and necessarily reflect struggles for cultural authority" (Ernest 3). Du Bois's adulation of men including Benjamin Banneker and Alexander Crummell, leader of the American Negro Academy to which Du Bois contributed, reflects a contest in his era over which model of black social leadership would prevail: the

---

<sup>62</sup>One exception in Du Bois's class genealogy is Sojourner Truth, whom he lists among black abolitionists noted for "their own hard experiences and well wrought culture [that] said silently more than all the drawn periods of orators" (Du Bois 40-41). Perhaps Du Bois includes Truth, who remained unlettered throughout her life, because she was rich in "hard experiences" to share with her listeners, for from the perspective of many of her contemporaries, Truth lacked the "well wrought culture" Du Bois mentions. In fact, Frederick Douglass resented Truth's lack of "culture" during their encounters; according to him, she was a boisterous spokesperson who interrupted his public speeches with frank assertions and tried "to ridicule my efforts to speak and act like a person of cultivation and refinement" (qtd. in McFeely 97). An anomaly in Du Bois's compilation, Truth supplements the almost entirely male cadre of the Talented Tenth; Phillis Wheatley is the only other female figure mentioned in the essay. As Hazel Carby notes, Du Bois's vision of leadership most often was invested in black masculinity, though he ostensibly commended black women and endorsed their claims (Carby 10).

scholarly, professional one Du Bois endorsed or the practical businessman of Booker T. Washington's economic initiative.

Secondly, the syntax of Du Bois's sentence—"you misjudge us because you do not know us"—further reflects the struggle for authority during the early twentieth century. Not limiting his analysis to detached commentary, Du Bois uses a first-person pronoun to situate himself squarely among the educated elite. He sets up a triangular relation among the addressee or reader ("you"), the Talented Tenth ("us"), and the black masses (the implied "them"). As I propose, Du Bois's assertion can serve as a refrain that expresses the social class tensions resonating in twentieth-century African American literature and criticism. Fictional depictions of black stratification often reflect this struggle among the Talented Tenth, the black masses, and a third party, which is often the white American middle class. By tracing the shifting dynamics among "you," "us," and "them," we can follow the struggle over African American literary representation and class disparity in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. I turn first to a reading of Du Bois's "The Talented Tenth," examining how this turn-of-the-century manifesto shaped the identity and consciousness of the black elite. A brief look at Langston Hughes's commentaries on intraracial class inequality shows how New Negro artists in the 1920s shifted the labels "us" and "them," bringing to the center of literary depiction the working classes previously relegated to the margins. Finally, I examine how other twentieth-century reactions to the Talented Tenth limit the class analyses of nineteenth-century African American literature. This final section also situates the present project, *Our Kind of People*, in scholarly trends that attempt to interpret social class in African American fiction.

## I

As the historio-critical overview in Chapter I indicates, African American thinkers well before emancipation were attuned to intraracial social class differences and designated a professional class to guide social and political mobilization. In his 1841 social history, *Sketches of the Higher Classes of Colored Society in Philadelphia*, Joseph Willson proposes that making the black elite more visible in the city would perhaps change whites' impressions of the race, as well as provide a good model for other blacks. Examining the social structure in Philadelphia more than forty years later in 1882, city commissioner H. Price Williams reiterated the mission of the black elite. In his editorial "The Organization of Colored Society," Williams insists that the professional class should serve as "walking mirrors" for the lower classes to "look and pattern after." As he surmises, "The example of a refined, educated society tends to benefit the masses and inspire young men and women to seek the best associates" (Williams 1). Thus the social philosophy behind the formation of an educated elite is not original with Du Bois.<sup>63</sup> Yet his alliterative moniker "The Talented Tenth" and his innovations to the concept have been most enduring.

A counterargument to Washington's plan of industrial education, Du Bois's essay "The Talented Tenth" is framed as a debate on educational curricula, but the underlying message of the text interrogates the relationship between race and social class. "The Talented Tenth" was published in the 1903 collection *The Negro Problem*, a compilation of essays by black men who had distinguished themselves as adept at theorizing the race problem.<sup>64</sup>

---

<sup>63</sup>Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham notes that Henry Morehouse, an officer of the American Baptist Home Mission Society, used the phrase "the talented tenth man" in an 1896 article in *The Independent* (Gates 125). However according to David Levering Lewis, Du Bois's foremost biographer, Du Bois may have been developing the notion of The Talented Tenth as early as 1887, though he did not articulate the concept fully until 1903 (Lewis 73).

Booker T. Washington's "Industrial Education" appears first in the collection, and the volume also includes essays by Charles W. Chesnutt, Paul Laurence Dunbar, T. Thomas Fortune, editor of the black newspaper, the *New York Age*, and other figures well-known in their own time. Using statistics, charts and other social scientific measures to support the three enumerated points of his argument, Du Bois defends his position against the usual objections to African American higher education. His findings claim that the majority of educated blacks did find jobs, though in a limited range of occupations such as teacher, preacher, and doctor.

By assuming that animosity toward black social aspirants results from lack of insight—that his readers simply did not recognize the already long-standing tradition of a black upper class—Du Bois self-consciously objects to the conflation of the black elite with the masses. If a lack of racial cultivation were the reason that African Americans were legally and socially denied privileges in the United States, Du Bois seeks to correct that misjudgment:

Do Americans ever stop to reflect that there are in this land a million men of Negro blood, well-educated, owners of homes, against the honor of whose womanhood no breath was ever raised, whose men occupy positions of trust and usefulness, and who, judged by any standard, have reached the full measure of the best type of modern European culture? Is it fair, it is decent, is it Christian to ignore these facts of the Negro problem, to belittle such aspiration? ("Talented Tenth" 44)

In the course of the essay, Du Bois sets out to persuade his readers, "you," that for a select group of African Americans, liberal education and the class opportunities that it may afford should supersede the disadvantages associated with their race. Put another way: he suggests that the leadership responsibilities entrusted to The Talented Tenth, based on their education

---

<sup>64</sup>Booker T. Washington often is assumed to have been the editor of *The Negro Problem*, but David Levering Lewis contests that "a now unidentifiable white editor" compiled the volume (Lewis 288).



and class affiliation, help to lessen the problems of racial strife. Du Bois's stance, posited as a mixture of logic and obvious financial need for the funding of black schools, attempts to mediate the relation between white America and the black underclass by making the latter more palatable for participation in free society. The most immediate audience for his text was "men of America," likely white philanthropists who dispersed financial support to industrial schools such as Tuskegee and Hampton, but wavered as to whether supporting black liberal education was wise. Yet Du Bois also addresses African Americans who, especially after Washington's reception following the Atlanta Cotton States Exposition in 1895, considered seriously his proposition for economic progress at the expense of enfranchisement. As David Levering Lewis notes, "If the concept of status anxiety had validity, then the Talented Tenth experienced it as farmers, preachers, peddlers, grocers, and hairdressers formed up behind the Wizard for a march into prosperity" (290-291).

Henry Louis Gates suggests that "The Talented Tenth" serves as "a coda to *The Souls of Black Folk*," providing a corrective to the author's flattened representation of intraracial social class differences in *Souls* (Gates 119). In Chapter XII of *Souls*, Du Bois eulogizes his mentor Alexander Crummell, the late priest of the elite St. Luke's Episcopal Church in Washington, D.C.; the remaining essays concentrate largely on impoverished, rural black southerners. Yet the tenor of class differences is so pervasive throughout the fourteen chapters of *Souls* as to be almost unremarkable. In autobiographical pieces in which Du Bois depicts his interactions with other black Americans, he remains alien to the black South—in it, but not of it. As Shamoan Zamir notes, "Du Bois's evaluation of class differences within the black community is tied to a qualitative differentiation of northern and southern African-Americans within his political programs" (Zamir 149). This geographic privileging of North

over South aligns the North with class opportunity while the South symbolizes stagnation. Du Bois applies this contrasting representation of the two regions in terms of class in “Of the Coming of John,” a text in which Du Bois depicts the racist South as inhospitable to African Americans’ social class mobility.

By using a fictional form in “Of The Coming of John,” rather than the social scientific forms of his study *The Philadelphia Negro* or, for the most part, “The Talented Tenth,” Du Bois gains access to his black subjects’ thought processes, allowing him to show Talented Tenth status as a consciousness rather than an economic condition alone. Enrolled at the liberal arts college, Wells Institute, the black student John Jones begins as a product of his southern black community, shaped by the parochial perspective and inefficient habits that Du Bois in “The Talented Tenth” wants to dissolve through proper education. As he immerses himself in his new knowledge at the college, John gains worldviews that distinguish him from his hometown acquaintances. Du Bois poses the conflict between John and his family as arising in part from the two groups’ contrasting interpretations of the effects of upward class mobility. As they anticipate John’s return from college, his family members and friends expect his class transformation to occur in terms of material effects. They muse that when John returns, “what new furniture in the front room,--perhaps even a new front room; and there would be a new schoolhouse, with John as teacher” (220). The references to domestic furnishings and building renovations indicate that the town’s black folk conceptualize greater education as directly affording greater material consumption.

By tracing John’s evolving consciousness, however, Du Bois reveals class distinction is less a matter of tangible acquisition than what Charles W. Chesnutt elsewhere calls “standards of thought and feeling.” The narrative choices that Du Bois makes for his

character allow him to explore John's class awakening, aided in part by a physical relocation away from the South that is figured as stagnating. After completing his formal education at Wells, John makes a sojourn to the North where he witnesses the genteel performance of the elite. As a spectator in the North, he is not drawn to tawdry sites such as cabarets, "an institution for the lower education of negro youth" that attracts the displaced southern migrants in Dunbar's *The Sport of the Gods* (Dunbar 66). Rather he is attracted to those from whom he can learn the ways of being cultured. He positions himself in the city square where he can observe the informal procession of passersby:

He scanned their rich and faultless clothes, the way they carried their hands, the shape of their hats; he peered into the hurrying carriages. Then, leaning back with a sigh, he said, "This is the World." The notion suddenly seized him to see where the world was going. (222-223)

Though John appreciates the clothes, hats, and carriages that the passersby possess, his class ambition takes the form of desire for the demeanor—such as bodily posture—taste, and culture of the elite. Importantly, John spends his last five dollars not on consumer goods that outwardly signal class status, but on a ticket to the theater, where he is awakened to an appreciation of fine music.

John's alienation in his hometown stems from his growing sense of his class identity as entirely irreconcilable to the materialist class basis of his community. While his supporters expect John to return equipped for teaching conventional subject matter that prepares young scholars for industrial trades and service jobs, he instead attempts to inculcate in his students an appreciation of what he calls "The World," by which Du Bois means highbrow culture, individuality, self-assertion, and other traits associated with the middle class. Later when John kills a white man to protect his sister from rape and then patiently awaits the lynch mob, Du Bois presents him as awakened to the principle of manly self-sacrifice that underlies the

formulation of The Talented Tenth. The irony is that in one way, the white men who suggested that John would be ruined by his education are proven right. The statement is for them, rather than for John, a self-fulfilling prophecy, since racist logic prompts white men to prophesy his ruination and to enact the attempted rape and lynching that fulfill the claim. John's final action and demise are predicated on the racial tensions of the South because John, educated out of class affinity with his hometown, lacks a way to sustain the social status to which he aspires.

In "The Talented Tenth," Du Bois merges the insights into class that he proposes in *The Philadelphia Negro* and *The Souls of Black Folk*, theorizing further the relation between the working and middle class. Du Bois's social purpose, we might say, is to show that middle-class black men like John Jones have a mission to lead anti-racist initiatives as well as economic advancement. Beyond the work of class analysis that Du Bois accomplishes in either of the earlier texts, "The Talented Tenth" significantly coalesces Du Bois's sociological observations into a national plan. He shifts from isolated regional studies, conducted in Philadelphia and the rural south, to a countrywide strategy of African American social organization. Its national scope is what sets Du Bois's "The Talented Tenth" apart from Joseph Willson's *Sketches of Higher Classes*, H. Price Williams's editorial "The Organization of Colored Society," and prior formulations of intraracial stratification. Given that Du Bois by 1903 was, according to Gates, the "most widely published black essayist in the history of African Americans" since Frederick Douglass (Gates 119), Du Bois's recommendations in "The Talented Tenth" asserted that education and intraracial stratification among blacks were topics of crucial concern in the United States, central to the nation's broader "conundrum of class" in the postbellum era.

Du Bois's claim, "you misjudge us because you do not know us," presents the Talented Tenth in ways reminiscent of Charles W. Chesnutt's Blue Vein stories. Yet Du Bois also needed to present the Talented Tenth as deserving models to black Americans who believed that educated elites misused their time, energy, and power. By presenting the redeeming qualities of the highest class of African Americans, including the willing sacrifice on the part of educated leaders, Du Bois indirectly challenges the more ambivalent depictions of the black elite as a self-indulgent leisure class, as portrayed by characters such as Margaret Marston, a young woman who insists that the race's need for leaders justifies her avoidance of work, in Sutton Griggs's *Overshadowed*. What is missing from Margaret's rhetoric, and what Du Bois aims to supply in his essay, is a sense of mission for the Talented Tenth, whose mental labor could offer insight into The [white] World for the black working classes.

## II

Whereas Du Bois claims that his white and black detractors misunderstand the role of The Talented Tenth, Langston Hughes adapts the same terms to propose that if any class has been "misjudge[d]" and unknown, it is the black "folk" whom he considers to have been misrepresented in the art and arguments of the African American middle class. Hughes shifts the distribution of pronouns in the formula of class relations mentioned earlier: he figures "us" as the black masses who resist assimilation by "you" (self-important black social climbers) who imitate "them" (white Americans and their aesthetic standards). Hughes's attention to intraracial class disparities and his conscious alignment with working-class culture signal a shift away from the talented tenth principle represented in the fiction of Harper, Tillman, and Chesnutt, as well as in Du Boisian sociopolitical philosophy.

The fact that Hughes was the great-nephew of John Mercer Langston, one of the black Reconstruction politicians included in Du Bois's original formulation of The Talented Tenth, is not to be underestimated in evaluating Hughes's view of intraracial stratification. Though he has a verifiable claim to social standing among upper-class black Americans, he renounces the kind of class genealogy that Du Bois establishes. In his well-known essay "Our Wonderful Society: Washington," published in *Opportunity* magazine in August 1927, Hughes exposes the colored aristocracy as shallow and inconsequential. Analyzing his awkward experience socializing with his black elite relatives in Washington, D. C., Hughes recalls, "And I was reminded of my noble family ties and connections. But a few days later I found myself a job in a laundry, carrying bags of wet-wash. The dignity of one's family background doesn't keep a fellow who's penniless from getting hungry" (Hughes "Wonderful Society" 42). Into the romanticized myth of a black elite based on breeding, culture, and education, Hughes asserts stark economic realities. His juxtaposition of status-based dignity and dirty laundry suggests that social esteem in black communities did not always correlate with wealth passed down from one generation to another, as in longer-standing white upper-class families.

Hughes critiques the black genteel performance to displace middle- and upper-class lifestyles as the elusive goal of African Americans' class ambitions. Just as many authors of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century fiction set off the language of the black underclass with heavy apostrophes, malapropisms, and slang to mark unlearned speech as Other than standard, Hughes reverses the practice to show "formal sentences in frightfully correct English" as Other (42). Throughout his essay, as he recalls the speech of the informants who introduced him to the ways of the black elite, Hughes reproduces their phrases in quotation

marks, carefully distinguishing their language, which encodes their self-interested values, from his. Phrases such as “position,” “family background,” “society,” and especially “culture” appear in quotation marks as Hughes questions their meaning to the black elite and implies how those terms alternatively might be understood. In his poignant conclusion, Hughes, feigning the naïve and reluctant society initiate, suggests, “Or, perhaps they *were* the best people and it’s my standard of values that’s awry” (44).

Hughes’s subject position throughout this essay tracks his movement into the knowledge of the inner social circle, and then out of that circle to congregate among “dark working people who hadn’t yet acquired ‘culture’” (44). Such a movement, which leads Hughes to conclude that after seeing upper-class life he prefers to “live contentedly in Harlem,” is the opposite of the spatial move and class ambition of John Jones, Du Bois’s exemplar of the Talented Tenth in “Of the Coming of John.” John’s circulation among the northern upper class, even a hostile upper class that discriminatorily ejects him from the theatre, leaves him yearning for more access to highbrow culture and society. He feels alienated upon his return to the South and resents his subsequent interaction with rural blacks who do not share his tastes. Hughes, however, infers that more stimulating culture exists among the less self-conscious black folk. While he shares Du Bois’s devotion to social leadership, he proposes an alternate strategy of the black leader and artist immersing themselves in (or springing from) the working folk.

Hughes’s authorial alignment with the “dark working people” emerges clearly by comparison with nineteenth-century fictional representations of the black underclass as noted earlier in my study. With a consistency remitted only by occasional portrayals of self-possessed workers, such as the black strikebreakers in Dunbar’s “At Shaft 11,” postbellum

African American novelists tend to depict the African American working class as the object of charity, ridicule, or critique. In her novel *Clancy Street*, Katherine Tillman devotes two chapters to explaining how the “fervent, if oftentimes, ludicrous prayers and plaintive songs” of the cornpone-eating, conjure-practicing black people she depicts at the novel’s beginning are attributable to slavery (Tillman 251). In an attempt to offer redeeming representations, Tillman by the end of the novel portrays working-class blacks outwardly sanitized from the signs of labor and inwardly immune to the moral contamination of urban life. The narratives examined in this dissertation seldom feature the African American working class that Robin Kelley calls “race rebels”: African American laborers who deploy informal strategies of resistance to exert agency in the midst of stifling work and life conditions. According to employment policies and middle-class norms of conduct, these workers are “rebels” who made “the race” look bad by pilfering time or resources from their employers. As Kelley notes, records seldom document these occasions of rebellion, likely because labor historians attempt to undermine racist stereotypes by “remaking the black proletariat into the hardest-working, thriftiest, most efficient labor force around” (Kelley 22).

Hughes, meanwhile, offers little moral apology for the behaviors and beliefs of the lower class he depicts in his art. When critiqued by reviewers for his representations of prostitutes, cabaret singers, drunkards, and hustlers—a class that Du Bois casts as “the submerged tenth,” the antithesis of The Talented Tenth—Hughes insists on bringing them to the foreground of black literary imagination. “My poems are indelicate. But so is life,” he argues (Hughes, “Bad New Negroes” 39). By comparison with the earlier period, Hughes’s response again underscores an important change in how African American narratives plot social class mobility. In postbellum fiction, many black Americans gain social status, if not



through pecuniary advancement, then through greater respectability and esteem in the black community, as in Harper's *Trial and Triumph*. Yet as close readings of Dunbar's and Griggs's works indicate, black writers also were aware of how patterns of discriminatory hiring and other outgrowths of racism ensured class immobility among African Americans, so much so that Griggs's male protagonists in *Imperium* and *Overshadowed* contemplate or enact violence to defy their lack of occupational opportunity. In their representations of class hierarchies, these authors use irony as a mode of social criticism that undercuts the more idyllic depictions of class mobility and cross-class collaboration Harper idealizes at the conclusions of her novels.

Yet my repeated comparison of Hughes to the nineteenth-century writers I take as my subject does not intend to suggest that he was any more progressive, artistically sophisticated, or class conscious than they. Hughes's analysis of intraracial class differences revises cultural and class hierarchies rather than dismantling them. In his 1926 manifesto "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain," Hughes prescribes "racial" topics as the most appropriate subject matter for African American authors who were not "ashamed" to claim a black cultural heritage. Yet in implying that "the low-down folks, the so-called common element" provide a richer, more authentic store of culture for black artists (32), Hughes merely reverses rather than rethinking the exclusionary aesthetic tastes he noted among the black elite. Hughes's depiction of a black tradition energized by pulsating "tom-toms" and laughter endorses a romanticized African history no more critically examined than what middle-class writers offered as a history of "cultured" black society. During the New Negro Renaissance, equating authentic blackness with the lower classes and fake Negrohood with class privilege simply reinforced antagonisms between the Talented Tenth and black

underclasses, marked conversely as “you” and “us.” Hughes’s attitudes about class, which, admittedly, I have treated only summarily here, do not bespeak the attitude of all New Negro writers. Authors including Alice Dunbar Nelson and Jessie Fauset continued to write from their class positions as middle class blacks, but often revealed the emotional and psychological tensions accompanying Talented Tenth status. Still, as I have suggested, Hughes is an especially inviting figure for noting the shift in class representations after the turn of the twentieth century, given his links to black aristocracy and the deliberateness with which he critiques the nineteenth and early twentieth century models of intraracial social stratification.

As literary critics as well as historians indicate, a number of changes may account for the kind of dramatic shift we note between how Chesnutt or Du Bois envision and dramatize class differences and how Hughes does so. In “The Talented Tenth,” Du Bois diagnoses black Americans as having “no traditions to fall back upon, no long established customs, no strong family ties, no well defined social classes. All these things must be slowly and painfully evolved” (54). In the first two decades of the twentieth century, those traditions, customs and ties began to form through a growing professional class, solidifying a middle class identity. As Michael Fultz explains, while educational curriculum and higher education continued to be debated in black forums such as periodicals, “Nonetheless, the black middle class and professional group’s search for identity was more clearly defined in the 1920s than in the 1900s. ‘Signposts’ in the form of clearly delineated social and moral ‘duties’ were no longer needed” (Fultz 106). Though many descended from the Talented Tenth, Harlem Renaissance artists such as Langston Hughes were less invested in maintaining the role of a self-conscious black leadership distanced from those they presumed to lead.

In addition, as Willard Gatewood explains, an “economic elite” of moneyed and educated professionals displaced the Old Guard black families such as Hughes’s ancestors with roots in the antebellum or Reconstruction era. This newer class of elite, given to conspicuous consumption that the late nineteenth-century genteel aristocracy despised, veered from the leadership imperatives that Du Bois prescribes in “The Talented Tenth.” Witnessing for himself this growth of a black elite divorced from a sense of social responsibility, Du Bois revamped his paradigm in a speech he delivered in 1948, nearly a half-century after the original publication of “The Talented Tenth.” Noting how his philosophy inadvertently lent itself to black elitism, Du Bois confesses the naïveté and optimism of his earlier plan for an educated minority responsible for the masses:

I assumed that with knowledge, sacrifice would automatically follow [...] When I came out of college into the world of work, I realized that it was quite possible that my plan of training a talented tenth might put in control and power, a group of selfish, self-indulgent, well to-do men, whose basic interest in solving the Negro Problem was personal [...] 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. (161-162)

As he contends in his 1948 revision, he always intended for sacrifice to be a major premise for the building of a higher class. Yet not only his opponents, but also his followers seemed to have misjudged the talented tenth philosophy as an endorsement of class disparity.

Furthermore, the possible political saliency of intraracial class distinctions declined in the late 1920s and thereafter. While nineteenth-century black writers wanted genteel performance as a class-based strategy to prove their deservedness for civic and political rights, later racial discourse shifted from a model of “bourgeois respectability” to “a more masculine ideology of self-determination” (Wolcott 2). Thus the need to show African Americans as “aristocrats of the soul,” as in Harper’s formulation, who behave themselves

and attempt to lift the masses, gave way to increased activism among the masses themselves. This also meant that texts such as Tillman's novels, which she repeatedly asserts were to train young women in the ways of middle-class respectability, no longer served a necessary pedagogical role by the 1930s. Rather, undermining The Talented Tenth as myth, or at best, as shallow class performance, Hughes and other New Negro artists ushered in a version of black vernacular representation that has prevailed since the mid-twentieth century as the more "authentic" experience in African American literature and criticism.

### III

When read across literary periods, Du Bois's assertion "you misjudge us because you do not know us" also has a secondary audience: contemporary critics of African American literature. The dismissal of The Talented Tenth and the black middle class apparent in Hughes's art and nonfiction emerges also in critical approaches to nineteenth-century African American fiction, which is authored primarily by writers whose middle-class orientation permeates their work. Yet to indicate the majority of postbellum novelists as middle-class is only a first step—a misleadingly simple first step—in an attempt to "know" the class ideology reflected in the fiction the writers produced. As Dickson Bruce proposes, prior critical views that consider nineteenth-century black writers as middle class and thus escapist or assimilative fail to look closer:

[these views] tend to deal with "middle-classness" as such a general characteristic that [the critics] fail to perceive significant aspects of the literature itself, particularly the specific role that dominant values played in the post-Reconstruction era in the creation of literary works, the organizing of ideas and images, and the structuring of intentions. (Bruce 8)

Such an oversimplification of black literature during the period, as Bruce argues, limits our understanding of how the status of “middle class” varied by geographic region depicted, authorship, and the decade (1880s, 1890s, or 1900s) within the “post-bellum pre-Harlem” era. “Middle-classness,” or in the terms of the period, “better classness” was not a consensually agreed upon social standing, but a status reflected in attitudes and actions valued and revalued over the last quarter of the nineteenth century. This dissertation, *Our Kind of People*, supplements the critical lack of sustained scholarly analyses of social class by examining three factors—respectability, occupation and labor, and taste—under negotiation as postbellum African Americans crafted definitions of the middle class and, more broadly, outlined three- and four-tiered intraracial social strata in black fiction.

The fear of misjudgment that Du Bois anticipated for The Talented Tenth is epitomized most scathingly in E. Franklin Frazier’s *The Black Bourgeoisie* (1957), a text that has markedly shaped later impressions of class stratification in black communities. In Frazier’s estimation, the African American bourgeoisie always has lacked the economic foundation to constitute a class differentiated from African American working classes. Lending a social scientific basis to the kind of impressionistic observations Hughes makes, Frazier argues that the black middle class pursues status primarily as a consolation for a pathological, racial inferiority complex (Frazier 27). Frazier’s text privileges the black folk as the more authentic version of black experience. An indirect influence of Frazier’s argument appears in the work of literary critics who overlook or willfully dismiss the complex class dimensions of African American literature in a move likened to Hughes’s assertion of himself among the “dark working folk.” This is especially notable because, as J. Martin Favor speculates, “though most critics are, by definition, middle-class, they work

themselves into a strategic alliance with folk privilege by consciously emphasizing aspects of heritage and experience that link them to the folk while downplaying their own similarities to ‘buppies’” (Favor 13). Yet by eliding the social class differences that emerge among African Americans, or by treating “class” as if shorthand or synonymous with “working class,” twentieth and twenty-first century scholarship repeats the conflation of race and class that nineteenth-century black writers contested as denying their individuality and impeding their civil rights.

In the course of this project, which treats race and class as undeniably related, yet discrete identity markers, I have examined both well-known and largely ignored narratives of the late nineteenth century to highlight black authors’ growing awareness of the influence of social class on intraracial as well as interracial relations. While my dissertation focuses on intraracial stratification in black communities, it has been impossible not also to reference the class structure in predominantly white communities and in the broader post-Civil War United States. As apparent especially in the study of black labor conditions in Chapter III, the economic structure of the black community often depended on the employment, capital, and political advocacy of white counterparts. Many African American social leaders deliberately patterned their social habits and standards on white ones; yet, as I argue in Chapter IV, even versions of white culture, taste, and social hierarchy cannot be considered “originals” since they are formed in reference to the trope of blackness and the reality of African Americans’ presence in the United States. While many similarities exist, a comparison between white and black social hierarchies reveals that some signifiers of class status among African Americans have no parallels among white Americans during the period. Most obviously, the significance of skin color, mixed race heritage, and freeborn status is unmatched.

The movement from Frances Harper to Charles Chesnutt marks an important trajectory in African American novelists' representation of class difference. In her writing, Frances Harper privileges the moral aspects of forming an "aristocracy of the soul," but she does not ignore the economic realities of class difference. Harper's lifestyle as an author and lecturer, which brought her national celebrity balanced by periods of financial lack, testifies to the difficulty of reconciling moral respectability with economic sustainability. Conversely, while Chesnutt emphasizes taste and cultured "thought and feeling" as markers of class—markers that often coincide with skin color and education—he also understood class as manifest as moral conduct. In these ways, Harper and Chesnutt share their understanding of the criteria for judging class distinction and difference. Nevertheless, comparison of the two writers' works indicates a notable shift. While Harper's works, imbued with abolitionist and antebellum idea of duty, highlight respectability as the defining identifier for her characters, Chesnutt highlights class affiliation as a prioritized marker of identity. Thus by the turn of the twentieth-century, selected authors such as Chesnutt assert class markers to supplant race, differentiating the black middle class from the black lower class in ways to which Harper objects. Thus this dissertation has been arranged not only according to the chronological publication dates of the texts, but also so as to trace interpretations of social class across this historical and ideological change from race to class awareness.

Each of the nineteenth-century African American authors examined in *Our Kind of People* affirms the need for social stratification and class delineations. Whether adhering to the religious principles of sowing and reaping, as articulated in the female writers' fiction, or examining the sociopolitical implications of class-based "social discrimination," as does Chesnutt, African American writers accepted social classification as inevitable. In this way,

they reiterate the “functionalist theory of stratification”— the notion that “all complex societies must have rank orders to perform functions necessary for group survival” (Warner, Meeker and Eells 64). The African American physician Dr. Latimer articulates this best in Harper’s *Iola Leroy* as he asserts, “I know of no place on earth where there is perfect social equality, and I doubt if there is such a thing in heaven” (228). Latimer’s concession to classification as a function of sociopolitical and economic conditions in the United States—and perhaps also as a function of nature and the supernatural, as his reference to heaven implies—indicates how African Americans believed in the inevitability of class delineations, but insisted on establishing those delineations according to respectability, occupation, and taste as they saw fit in African American communities. While focused on the “problem of the color-line” in the post-Reconstruction era, black authors also recognized evolving social class distinctions as both a problem and a positive development demanding representation and analysis in African American fiction.



## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Adams, John Quincy. *Narrative of the Life of John Quincy Adams, When in Slavery, and Now as a Freeman*. Harrisburg, PA: Sieg, 1872. *Documenting the American South*. 1999. University Library, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. 12 Apr. 2005 <http://docsouth.unc.edu/adams/adams.html>.
- Altschuler, Glenn C. *Race, Ethnicity, and Class in American Social Thought, 1865-1919*. Arlington Heights, IL: Harlan Davidson, 1982.
- Andrews, William L, ed. *Classic African American Women's Narratives*. New York: Oxford UP, 2003.
- . Introduction. *The Sport of the Gods*. By Paul Laurence Dunbar. New York: Signet, 1999. v-xx.
- . *The Literary Career of Charles W. Chesnutt*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1980.
- Baker, Houston. *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1984.
- . *Workings of the Spirit: The Poetics of Afro-American Women's Writing*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1991.
- Baraka, Amiri. "Afro-American Literature and Class Struggle." *Black American Literature Forum* 14.1 (1980): 5-14.
- Baym, Nina. *Woman's Fiction: A Guide to Novels by and about Women in America, 1820-1870*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Urbana, IL: U of Illinois P, 1993.
- Beckert, Sven. "Propertied of a Different Kind: Bourgeoisie and Lower Middle Class in the Nineteenth-Century United States." *Middling Sorts: Explorations in the History of the American Middle Class*. Ed. Burton Bledstein and Robert D. Johnson. New York: Routledge, 2001. 285-295.
- Best, Felton O. *Crossing the Color Line: A Biography of Paul Laurence Dunbar, 1872-1906*. Dubuque, IA: Kendall/Hunt, 1996.
- Bledstein, Burton J. "Storytellers to the Middle Class." Introduction. *Middling Sorts: Explorations in the History of the American Middle Class*. Ed. Burton J. Bledstein and Robert D. Johnson. New York: Routledge, 2001. 1-25.
- Blumin, Stuart M. *The Emergence of the Middle Class: Social Experience in the American City, 1760-1900*. New York: Cambridge UP, 1989.

- Bourdieu, Pierre. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*. Trans. Richard Nice. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1984.
- Boyd, Melba Joyce. *Discarded Legacy: Politics and Poetics in the Life of Frances E. W. Harper, 1825-1911*. Detroit: Wayne State UP, 1994.
- Brodhead, Richard. "Regionalism and the Upper Class." *Rethinking Class: Literary Studies and Social Formations*. Ed. Wai Chee Dimock and Michael T. Gilmore. New York: Columbia UP, 1994. 150-174.
- Brown, William Wells. *The Black Man: His Antecedents, His Genius and His Achievements*. New York: Thomas Hamilton, 1863.
- . *My Southern Home; or, The South and Its People*. Boston: A.G. Brown, 1880.
- . *Documenting the American South: North American Slave Narratives*. 2000. U of North Carolina. 20 Apr. 2002 <<http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/brown80/brown80.html>>.
- Bruce, Dickson D., Jr. *Black American Writing from the Nadir: The Evolution of a Literary Tradition, 1877-1915*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1989.
- Bryant, Earle V. "Blue Veins and Black Bigotry: Colorism as Moral Evil in Charles Chesnutt's 'A Matter of Principle.'" *American Literary Realism* 34.1 (2001): 73-79.
- Burke, Martin J. *The Conundrum of Class: Public Discourse on the Social Order in America*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1995.
- Campbell, Jennifer. "'The Great Something Else': Women's Search for Meaningful Work in Sarah Orne Jewett's *A Country Doctor* and Frances E.W. Harper's *Trial and Triumph*." *Colby Quarterly* 34.2 (1998): 83-98.
- Carby, Hazel V. *Cultures in Babylon: Black Britain and African America*. New York: Verso, 1999.
- . *Race Men*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1998.
- Carnegie, Andrew. *The Gospel of Wealth and Other Timely Essays*. Ed. Edward C. Kirkland. Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 1962.
- Chesnutt, Charles W. *The House Behind the Cedars*. 1900. *Charles W. Chesnutt: Stories, Novels and Essays*. New York: Library of America, 2002.
- . *The Marrow of Tradition*. 1901. *Charles W. Chesnutt: Stories, Novels and Essays*. New York: Library of America, 2002.

- . "Peonage, or the New Slavery." 1904. *Charles W. Chesnutt: Essays and Speeches*. Ed. Joseph R. McElrath, Jr., Robert C. Leitz, III, and Jesse S. Crisler. Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 1999. 205-208.
- . "Post-Bellum—Pre-Harlem." 1931. *Charles W. Chesnutt: Essays and Speeches*. Ed. Joseph R. McElrath, Jr., Robert C. Leitz, III, and Jesse S. Crisler. Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 1999. 543-549.
- . "Self-Made Men." 1882. *Charles W. Chesnutt: Essays and Speeches*. Ed. Joseph R. McElrath, Jr., Robert C. Leitz, III, and Jesse S. Crisler. Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 1999. 33-39.
- . "Social Discrimination." 1916. *Charles W. Chesnutt: Essays & Speeches*. Ed. Joseph R. McElrath, Jr., Robert C. Leitz, III, and Jesse C. Crisler. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1999. 423-426.
- . *'To Be An Author': Letters of Charles W. Chesnutt, 1889-1905*. Ed. Joseph R. McElrath, Jr. and Robert C. Leitz, III. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1997.
- . "What Is a White Man?" 1889. *Charles W. Chesnutt: Essays & Speeches*. Ed. Joseph R. McElrath, Jr., Robert C. Leitz, III, and Jesse C. Crisler. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1999. 68-73.
- Clemens, Samuel Langhorne [Mark Twain]. 1894. *Pudd'nhead Wilson and Those Extraordinary Twins*. New York: Norton, 1980.
- Cooper, Anna Julia. *The Voice of Anna Julia Cooper*. Ed. Charles Lemert and Esme Bhan. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1998.
- Cox, Oliver C. *Caste, Class and Race*. 1948. New York: Monthly Review, 1957.
- Curry, J.L.M. [Jabez Lamar Monroe]. "Some Thoughts for Working Classes." *Independent* [New York] 7 May 1874:3.
- Denning, Michael. *Mechanic Accents: Dime Novels and Working Class Culture in America*. Rev. ed. London: Verso, 1998.
- Dimock, Wai Chee and Michael T. Gilmore, eds. Introduction. *Rethinking Class: Literary Studies and Social Formations*. New York: Columbia UP, 1994.
- Douglass, Frederick. *My Bondage and My Freedom*. 1855. Ed. William L. Andrews. Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1987.
- . *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave, Written by Himself*. 1845. Ed. William L. Andrews and William S. McFeely. New York: Norton, 1997.

- Du Bois, William E. B. "Careers Open to College-Bred Negroes." 1898. *W. E. B. Du Bois Speaks: Speeches and Addresses, 1890-1919*. Ed. Philip S. Foner. New York: Pathfinder, 1970. 86-101.
- . *The Philadelphia Negro: A Social Study*. 1899. Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1996.
- . *The Souls of Black Folk*. 1903. *Oxford W. E. B. Du Bois Reader*. Ed. Eric J. Sundquist. New York: Oxford UP, 1996.
- . "The Talented Tenth." 1903. *The Negro Problem: Centennial Edition*. Ed. Bernard K. Boxill. Amherst: Humanity Books, 2003. 31-75.
- Dunbar, Paul Laurence. *Folks from Dixie*. 1898. New York: Dodd and Mead, 1926.
- . "Negro Life in Washington." 1900. *The Sport of the Gods and Other Essential Writings*. Ed. Shelley Fisher Fishkin and David Bradley. New York: Modern Library, 2005. 274-278.
- . "Negro Society in Washington." 1901. *The Sport of the Gods and Other Essential Writings*. Ed. Shelley Fisher Fishkin and David Bradley. New York: Modern Library, 2005. 282-289.
- . "Recession Never." 1898. *The Paul Laurence Dunbar Reader*. Ed. Jay Martin and Gossie H. Hudson. New York: Dodd, Mead, 1975. 36-39.
- . *Sport of the Gods*. 1902. Ed. William L. Andrews. New York: Penguin, 1999.
- . *The Strength of Gideon and Other Stories*. New York: Dodd, Mead, 1900.
- Duncan, Charles. *The Absent Man: The Narrative Craft of Charles W. Chesnutt*. Athens: Ohio UP, 1998.
- Dye, Nancy S. Introduction. *Gender, Class, Race, and Reform in the Progressive Era*. Ed. Noralee Frankel and Nancy S. Dye. Lexington: UP of Kentucky, 1991.
- Eaton, Isabel. "Special Report on Negro Domestic Service in the Seventh Ward Philadelphia." *The Philadelphia Negro: A Social Study*. W. E. B. Du Bois. 1899. Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1996. 427-509.
- Eichar, Douglas M. *Occupation and Class Consciousness in America*. New York: Greenwood, 1989.
- Engle, Anna. "Depictions of the Irish in Frank Webb's *The Garies and Their Friends* and Frances E. W. Harper's *Trial and Triumph*." *Melus* 26.1 (2001): 151-71.

- Ernest, John. *Liberation Historiography: African American Writers and the Challenge of History, 1794-1861*. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 2004.
- Favor, J. Martin. *Authentic Blackness: The Folk in the New Negro Renaissance*. Durham: Duke UP, 1999.
- Ferguson, SallyAnn. "Chesnutt's Genuine Blacks and Future Americans." *MELUS* 15.3 (1988): 109-119.
- Fienberg, Lorne. "Charles W. Chesnutt's 'The Wife of His Youth': The Unveiling of the Black Storyteller." *American Transcendental Quarterly* 4.3 (1990): 219-237.
- Fishkin, Shelley Fisher and David Bradley, ed. *The Sport of the Gods and Other Essential Writings*. New York: Modern Library, 2005.
- Fleischner, Jennifer. *Mrs. Lincoln and Mrs. Keckly: The Remarkable Story of the Friendship between a First Lady and a Former Slave*. New York: Broadway, 2003.
- Foner, Eric. *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877*. New York: Harper and Row, 1988.
- Foster, Frances Smith, ed. *A Brighter Coming Day: A Frances Ellen Watkins Harper Reader*. New York: Feminist, 1990.
- . "Gender, Genre, and Vulgar Secularism: The Case of Frances Ellen Watkins Harper and the AME Press." *Recovered Writers/Recovered Texts: Race, Class and Gender in Black Women's Literature*. Ed. Dolan Hubbard. Knoxville: U of Tennessee P, 1997. 46-59.
- . Introduction. *Minnie's Sacrifice, Sowing and Reaping, Trial and Triumph: Three Rediscovered Novels by Frances E. W. Harper*. Boston: Beacon, 1994. xi-xxxvii.
- Foster, Gwendolyn Audrey. *Class-Passing: Social Mobility in Film and Popular Culture*. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois UP, 2005.
- Frazier, E. Franklin. *Black Bourgeoisie: The Rise of a New Middle Class in the United States*. 1957. New York: Macmillan-Collier, 1962.
- Fultz, Michael. "'The Morning Cometh': African-American Periodicals, Education, and the Black Middle Class, 1900-1930." *Journal of Negro History* 80.3 (Summer 1995): 97-112.
- Gaines, Kevin K. *Uplifting the Race: Black Leadership, Politics and Culture in the Twentieth-Century*. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1996.
- Gates, Henry Louis, Jr. and Cornel West. *The Future of the Race*. New York: Vintage, 1997.

- Gatewood, Willard B. *Aristocrats of Color: The Black Elite, 1880-1920*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1990.
- Giddens, Anthony. "Class Structuration and Class Consciousness." *Classes, Power, and Conflict: Classical and Contemporary Debates*. Ed. Anthony Giddens and David Held. Berkeley: U of California, 1982. 157-174.
- Gloster, Hugh M. "Sutton E. Griggs, Novelist of the New Negro." *Phylon* 4.4 (1943): 335-345.
- Graham, Lawrence Otis. *Our Kind of People: Inside America's Black Upper Class*. New York: Harper, 2000.
- Grandy, Moses. *Narrative of the Life of Moses Grandy*. 1843. *North Carolina Slave Narratives: The Lives of Moses Roper, Lunsford Lane, Moses Grandy, and Thomas H. Jones*. Ed. William L. Andrews et al. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 2003.
- Greenwood, Janette Thomas. *Bittersweet Legacy: The Black and White "Better Classes" in Charlotte, 1850-1910*. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1994.
- Griggs, Sutton E. *Imperium in Imperio*. 1899. New York: Modern Library, 2003.
- . *Overshadowed*. 1901. New York: AMS, 1973.
- Gutman, Herbert. *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750-1925*. New York: Pantheon, 1976.
- Halttunen, Karen. *Confidence Men and Painted Women: A Study of Middle-Class Culture in America, 1830-1870*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1992.
- Harley, Sharon. "When Your Work is Not Who You Are: The Development of a Working-Class Consciousness among Afro-American Women." *Gender, Class, Race and Reform in the Progressive Era*. Ed. Noralee Frankel and Nancy S. Dye. Lexington: U of Kentucky P, 1991. 42-55.
- Harper, Frances Ellen Watkins. *A Brighter Coming Day: A Frances Ellen Watkins Harper Reader*. Ed. Frances Smith Foster. New York: Feminist, 1990.
- . *Iola Leroy*. 1892. Intro. Hazel V. Carby. Boston: Beacon, 1987.
- . "Land and Labor. No 2." *The Christian Recorder*[Philadelphia] 19 Nov. 1870: 2.
- . *Minnie's Sacrifice, Sowing and Reaping, Trial and Triumph: Three Rediscovered Novels by Frances E. W. Harper*. Ed. Frances Smith Foster. Boston: Beacon, 1994.

- . "The Neglected Rich." *Report of the International Council of Women Assembled by the National Woman Suffrage Association, Washington, D.C., U. S. of America, March 25 to April 1, 1888* Washington, DC: National Woman Suffrage Association. 119-120.
- . "The Two Offers." *A Brighter Coming Day: A Frances Ellen Watkins Harper Reader*. Ed. Frances Smith Foster. New York: Feminist, 1990. 105-114.
- Harris, Trudier. *From Mammies to Militants: Domesticity in Black American Literature*. Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1982.
- Harrison, William Pope. "The New South." *Christian Recorder*[Philadelphia] 19 April 1877: 1.
- Henderson, Carol E. "The Critical Matrix of Caste, Class and Color in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*." *Legacy* 16.1 (1999): 49-58.
- Higginbotham, Evelyn Brooks. *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1993.
- Hilkey, Judy Arlene. *Character is Capital: Success Manuals and Manhood in Gilded Age America*. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1997.
- hooks, bell. *Where We Stand: Class Matters*. New York: Routledge, 2000.
- Hopkins, Pauline. *Contending Forces: A Romance Illustrative of Negro Life North and South*. Boston: Colored Co-operative, 1900.
- Howells, William Dean. "Mr. Charles W. Chesnutt's Stories." *Selected Literary Criticism*. Vol. 3. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1993. 232-234.
- . "A Psychological Counter-Current in Fiction." *North American Review* 173 (December 1901): 882.
- Hughes, Langston. "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain." 1926. *The Collected Works of Langston Hughes*. Ed. Christopher C. De Santis. Vol. 9: *Essays on Art, Race, Politics, and World Affairs*. Columbia: U of Missouri P, 2002. 31-36.
- . "Our Wonderful Society: Washington." 1927. *The Collected Works of Langston Hughes*. Ed. Christopher C. De Santis. Vol. 9: *Essays on Art, Race, Politics, and World Affairs*. Columbia: U of Missouri P, 2002. 41-44.
- . "These Bad New Negroes: A Critique on Critics." 1927. *The Collected Works of Langston Hughes*. Ed. Christopher C. De Santis. Vol. 9: *Essays on Art, Race, Politics, and World Affairs*. Columbia: U of Missouri P, 2002. 36-41.

- Husband, Julie and Jim O'Loughlin. *Daily Life in The Industrial United States, 1870-1900*. Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2004.
- Ignatiev, Noel. *How the Irish Became White*. New York: Routledge, 1995.
- Jackson, Cassandra. "'I Will Gladly Share With Them My Richer Heritage': Schoolteachers in Frances E. W. Harper's *Iola Leroy* and Charles Chesnutt's *Mandy Oxendine*." *African American Review* 37.4 (2003): 553-568.
- Jarrett, Gene. "'We Must Write Like the White Men': Race, Realism, and Dunbar's Anomalous First Novel." *Novel* 37.3 (2004): 303-325.
- Johanningsmeier, Charles. "What We Can Learn from a Better Bibliographic Record of Charles W. Chesnutt's Periodical Fiction." *North Carolina Literary Review* 8 (1999): 84-96.
- Johnson. *Amelia E. Clarence and Corrine, or, God's Way*. 1890. New York: Oxford UP, 1988.
- . *The Hazeley Family*. 1894. New York: Oxford UP, 1988.
- Johnson, James Weldon. *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*. 1912. Ed. William L. Andrews. New York: Penguin, 1990.
- Jones, Jacqueline. *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work, and Family from Slavery to the Present*. New York: Basic, 1985.
- Kealing, H. T. "Important Notice." *Christian Recorder* 3 Nov 1888; 15 June 1899: 3.
- Keckly [Keckley], Elizabeth. *Behind the Scenes. Or, Thirty Years a Slave, and Four Years in the White House*. New York: Oxford, 1988.
- Kelley, Robin D. G. *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class*. New York: Free, 1994.
- Kerkering, John D. *The Poetics of National and Racial Identity in Nineteenth Century American Literature*. New York: Cambridge UP, 2003.
- Kerr, Audrey Elisa. "The Paper Bag Principle: Of the Myth and the Motion of Colorism." *Journal of American Folklore* 118.469 (2005): 271-289.
- Knadler, Stephen P. "Untragic Mulatto: Charles Chesnutt and the Discourse of Whiteness." *American Literary History* 8.3 (1996): 426-448.
- Koistinen-Harris, Janice. *Social Reform, Tastes, and the Construction of Virtue in American Literature, 1870-1910*. Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen P, 2002.



- Lang, Amy. *The Syntax of Class: Writing Inequality in Nineteenth-Century America*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2003.
- Lauter, Paul and Ann Fitzgerald. *Literature, Class and Culture: An Anthology*. New York: Longman, 2001.
- Lee, A. Robert. "The Fiction of Paul Laurence Dunbar." *Negro American Literature Forum* 8.1 (1974): 166-175.
- Lewis, Barbara. "Daddy Blue: The Evolution of the Dark Dandy." *Inside the Minstrel Mask: Readings in Nineteenth-Century Blackface Minstrelsy*. Ed. Annemarie Bean, James V. Hatch, and Brooks McNamara. Hanover, NH: Wesleyan UP, 1996. 257-272.
- Lewis, David Levering. *W. E. B. Du Bois: Biography of a Race, 1868-1919*. New York: Henry Holt, 1993.
- Lewis, Joseph Vance. *Out of the Ditch: A True Story of an Ex-slave*. Houston: Rein, 1910.
- Lhamon, W.T., Jr. *Raising Cain: Blackface Performance from Jim Crow to Hip Hop*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1998.
- "Lights and Shadows: Colored Gentlemen of Philadelphia." *Christian Recorder* [Philadelphia] 4 Nov. 1865: 2.
- Lincoln, Bruce. *Discourse and the Construction of Society: Comparative Studies of Myth, Ritual and Classification*. New York: Oxford, 1989.
- A Looker on in Venice. "Think Well of Yourself." Letter. *Christian Recorder* [Philadelphia] 11 April 1878: 1.
- Lott, Eric. *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class*. New York: Oxford UP, 1993.
- Malone, Thomas E. "White and Black Jobs." *New York Age* 26 May 1905: 1.
- Martin, Jay and Gossie H. Hudson. *The Paul Laurence Dunbar Reader*. New York: Dodd, Mead, 1975.
- Marx, Karl. "On Classes." *Social Class and Stratification: Classic Statements and Theoretical Debates*. Ed. Rhonda F. Levine. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1998. 41-42.
- [Matthews], Victoria Earle. *Aunt Lindy: A Story Founded on Real Life*. New York: J.J. Little, 1893.

- McCaskill, Barbara. "'To Labor...and Fight on the Side of God': Spirit, Class, and Nineteenth-Century African American Women's Literature." *Nineteenth-Century American Women Writers: A Critical Reader*. Ed. Karen L. Kilcup. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1998. 164-83.
- McFeely, William S. *Frederick Douglass*. New York: Norton, 1991.
- McGowan, Todd. "Acting Without the Father: Charles Chesnutt's New Aristocrat." *American Literary Realism* 30.1 (1997): 59-74.
- McWilliams, Dean. *Charles W. Chesnutt and the Fictions of Race*. Athens: U of Georgia P, 2002.
- Meier, August. "Negro Class Structure and Ideology in the Age of Booker T. Washington." *Phylon* 23.3 (1962): 258-66.
- Moses, Wilson J. "Literary Garveyism: The Novels of Reverend Sutton E. Griggs." *Phylon* 40.3 (1979): 203-216.
- Mossell, N. F, Mrs. [Gertrude Bustill Mossell]. *The Work of the Afro-American Woman*. 1894. New York: Oxford UP, 1988
- Mukherjee, Arun. *The Gospel of Wealth in the American Novel: The Rhetoric of Dreiser and Some of his Contemporaries*. Totowa, NJ: Barnes and Noble, 1987.
- Nash, Gary. *Forging Freedom: The Formation of Philadelphia's Black Community, 1720-1840*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1988.
- Nielson, David Gordon. *Black Ethos: Northern Urban Negro Life and Thought, 1890-1930*. Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1977.
- Noon, Mark. "'It ain't your color, it's your scabbing': Literary Depictions of African American Strikebreakers," *African American Review* 38.3 (2004): 429-439.
- Peterson, Carla. "'Further Liftings of the Veil': Gender, Class, and Labor in Frances E. W. Harper's *Iola Leroy*." *Listening to Silences: New Essays in Feminist Criticism*. Ed. Elaine Hedges and Shelley Fisher Fishkin. New York: Oxford UP, 1994. 97-112.
- Pfeiffer, Kathleen. *Race Passing and American Individualism*. Amherst: U of Massachusetts P, 2003.
- Plebeian. "That Venitian" [sic]. Letter. *Christian Recorder*[Philadelphia] 9 May 1878: 2.
- Pugh, Sullivan. Lyrics. "May the Work I've Done Speak for Me." Perf. Mahalia Jackson. *Great Songs of Love and Faith*. LP. Columbia, 1960.

- Rachleff, Peter J. *Black Labor in the South: Richmond, Virginia, 1865-1890*. Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1984.
- Ramsey, William M. "Dunbar's Dixie." *Southern Literary Journal* 32.1 (1999): 30-45.
- Randolph, Peter. *From Slave Cabin to the Pulpit: The Autobiography of Rev. Peter Randolph: The Southern Question Illustrated and Sketches of Slave Life*. Boston: James H. Earle, 1893.
- . *Sketches of Slave Life: Or, Illustrations of the "Peculiar Institution."* Boston: The Author, 1855.
- Reid-Pharr, Robert. Introduction. *The Garies and Their Friends*. By Frank J. Webb. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1997.
- Richardson, Heather Cox. *The Death of Reconstruction: Race, Labor, and Politics in the Post-Civil War North, 1865-1901*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2001.
- Roediger, David. *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class*. Rev ed. New York: Verso, 1999.
- Rosenthal, Debra J. "Deracialized Discourse: Temperance and Racial Ambiguity in Harper's 'The Two Offers' and *Sowing and Reaping*." *The Serpent in the Cup: Temperance in American Literature*. Ed. David S. Reynolds and Debra J. Rosenthal. Amherst, MA.: U of Massachusetts P, 1997. 153-64.
- Santamarina, Xiomara. *Belabored Professions: Narratives of African American Working Womanhood*. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 2005.
- Saunders, Kirsten. "Katherine Davis Chapman Tillman (1870-?)." *African American Authors, 1745-1945: A Bio-Bibliographical Critical Sourcebook*. Ed. Emmanuel S. Nelson. Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2000. 396-399.
- Schocket, Eric. "Undercover Explorations of the "Other Half," or the Writer as Class Transvestite." *Representations* 64 (1998): 109-133.
- Shrock, Joel. *The Gilded Age*. Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2004.
- Simmons, William J. *Men of Mark: Eminent, Progressive and Rising*. Cleveland: George M. Rewell, 1887.
- Smith, Susan Harris and Melanie Dawson, ed. *The American 1890s: A Cultural Reader*. Durham: Duke UP, 2000.
- Still, William. *The Underground Railroad*. 1871. Salem, NH: Ayer, 1992.

- Sumner, William Graham. *What Social Classes Owe to Each Other*. 1883. Caldwell, Idaho: Caxton, 1963.
- Sundquist, Eric. *To Wake the Nations: Race in the Making of American Literature*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard UP, 1993.
- Tate, Claudia. *Domestic Allegories of Political Desires: The Black Heroine's Text at the Turn of the Century*. New York: Oxford UP, 1992.
- . Introduction. *The Works of Katherine Davis Chapman Tillman*. New York: Oxford UP, 1991. 3-62.
- Thompson, E. P. "The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century." *Past and Present* 50 (1971): 76-136.
- Thorne, Jack (David Bryant Fulton). "A Dock Laborer: Experiences of One Man Who Came to the Metropolis in the Late Eighties, Looking for Honest Employment." *"Eagle Clippings" by Jack Thorne Newspaper Correspondent and Story Teller, A Collection of His Writing to Various Newspapers*. Brooklyn, NY: D. B. Fulton, 1907. *Documenting the American South*. 2004. University Library, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. 15 Feb. 2006. <<http://docsouth.unc.edu/nc/thorneeagle/thorneeagle.html>>.
- Tice, S. Timothy. "Colored Help Unpopular—White Servants in Demand." *Christian Recorder* 3 Nov. 1898: 1.
- Tillman, Katherine Davis Chapman. "Afro-American Women and Their Work." 1895. *The Works of Katherine Davis Chapman Tillman*. Intro. Claudia Tate. New York: OxfordUP, 1991. 70-92.
- . "The Blue Vein Club." *The Works of Katherine Davis Chapman Tillman*. Intro. Claudia Tate. New York: Oxford UP, 1991. 196.
- . *Clancy Street*. 1898. *The Works of Katherine Davis Chapman Tillman*. Intro. Claudia Tate. New York: Oxford UP, 1991.
- . "Paying Professions for Colored Girls." 1907. *The Works of Katherine Davis Chapman Tillman*. Intro. Claudia Tate. New York: Oxford UP, 1991. 116-121.
- . "Some Girls I Know." 1893. *The Works of Katherine Davis Chapman Tillman*. Intro. Claudia Tate. New York: Oxford UP, 1991. 65-69.
- Toohey, Michelle Campbell. "'A Deeper Purpose' in the Serialized Novels of Frances Ellen Watkins Harper." *'The Only Efficient Instrument': American Women Writers and the Periodical, 1837-1916*. Ed. Aleta Feinsod Cane and Susan Alves. Iowa City, IA: U of Iowa P, 2001. 202-217.

Trachtenberg, Alan. *The Incorporation of America: Culture and Society in the Gilded Age*. New York: Hill & Wang, 1982.

“[Untitled].” *Christian Recorder* 21 Nov. 1878: 2.

Veblen, Thorstein. *The Theory of the Leisure Class*. 1899. Mineola, NY: Dover, 1994.

Vogel, Todd. *ReWriting White: Race, Class, and Cultural Capital in Nineteenth-Century America*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 2004.

Warner, W. Lloyd, Marchia Meeker, and Kenneth Eells. “What Social Class Is in America.” *Social Class and Stratification: Classic Statements and Theoretical Debates*. Ed. Rhonda F. Levine. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1998. 60-85.

Washington, Booker T. “Industrial Education for the Negro.” *The Negro Problem*. 1903. Ed. Bernard Boxill. Amherst, NY: Humanity, 2003. 7-29.

---. *Up from Slavery*. 1900. Ed. William L. Andrews. New York: Norton, 1996.

Webb, Frank J. *The Garies and Their Friends*. 1857. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1997.

Weber, Max. “Class, Status, Party.” *Social Class and Stratification: Classic Statements and Theoretical Debates*. Ed. Rhonda F. Levine. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1998. 43-56.

Weinstein, Cindy. *The Literature of Labor and the Labors of Literature: Allegory in Nineteenth-Century American Fiction*. New York: Cambridge UP, 1995.

“Will.” *John Blye: The Trials and Triumphs of a White Washer's Son*. *Christian Recorder* 12 Sept. 1878: 1.

Williams, Gilbert Anthony. *The Christian Recorder, A.M.E. Church, 1854-1902*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1996.

Williams, H. Price. “Organization of Colored Society.” Letter. *Christian Recorder* [Philadelphia] 23 Nov. 1882: 1.

Willson, Joseph. *The Elite of Our People: Joseph Willson's Sketches of Black Upper-Class Life in Antebellum Philadelphia*. Ed. Julie Winch. University Park: PA: Pennsylvania State UP, 2000. Rpt. of *Sketches of The Higher Classes of Colored Society in Philadelphia by a Southerner*. 1841.

Wilson, Harriet E. *Our Nig; Or, Sketches from the Life of a Free Black*. 1859. New York: Penguin, 2005.

- Wolcott, Victoria. *Remaking Respectability: African American Women in Interwar Detroit*. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 2001.
- Wonham, Henry B. “‘The Curious Psychological Spectacle of a Mind Enslaved’: Charles W. Chesnutt and Dialect Fiction.” *Mississippi Quarterly* 51.1 (1997/98): 55-69.
- Wright, George C. *Life Behind a Veil: Blacks in Louisville, Kentucky, 1865-1930*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1985.
- Zamir, Shamoan. *Dark Voices: W. E. B. Du Bois and American Thought, 1888-1903*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1995.