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“The best people”: The Making of the Black Bourgeoisie in Writings of the Negro Renaissance

Pamela L. Caughie

It need hardly be argued that the Negro people need social leadership more than most groups; that they have 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.

W. E. B. Du Bois, “The Talented Tenth” (1903)

What are representations of class representations of? In this article I want to analyze the work of class making as performed by literary authors and critics by revisiting the debate over representations of the black bourgeoisie in writings amalgamated under the rubric of the Harlem Renaissance. My title, “The Making of the Black Bourgeoisie,” deliberately invokes two other well-known works on class making: *The Making of Americans* (1925), Gertrude Stein’s massive experimental narrative of middle-class assimilation among German immigrants that was published during the Harlem Renaissance era and *The Making of the English Working Class* (1966), E. P. Thompson’s highly influential interrogation of class as a cultural and not just a socioeconomic formation—that is, something *made*, not represented—that appeared in the heyday of class analysis in the academy.¹ But it has been Pierre Bourdieu’s work that has most rigorously interrogated the notion of the *making* of social class in a complex argument distilled in his succinct formulation that a class is made through the very terms used to name it. “Groups are not found ready-made in reality,” writes Bourdieu in “What

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520 Makes a Social Class?," but "are always the product of a complex historical work of construction."² The work of creating a black bourgeoisie has often been discussed in terms of black schools, black social organizations, and black journals. For Bourdieu, however, the ontological status of such a class presents a problem precisely because "the group represented is nothing other than what represents it." One must, he argues, explain the move from a theoretical class, what he calls a "class on paper," to a "*probable* real class," and that explanation, "the performative power of naming," is the political work of class making.³ Thus, the question "What are representations of class representations of?" might be rephrased as "What's in a name?"

For the period in question here, the name "Harlem Renaissance" has become an abiding temporal signifier of African American modernism. Even if in this period formulation "Harlem" denotes less a specific location than a symbolic field, it was also, as the cultural center of the New Negro aesthetic movement, decidedly *not* bourgeois. Artists of the Harlem Renaissance may well have aspired to the same educational and socioeconomic status as the black bourgeoisie, yet the more they differentiated, in their writings, a black bourgeoisie from a distinctly black cultural elite—namely themselves—the more refined became the class distinctions within that shared social space. To call the writings of this period the "Harlem Renaissance," then, is already to take a position on the black bourgeoisie, thereby eliding the implication of a modernist black aesthetic at a critical moment in the making of that social class.

For this reason, I prefer the now dated designation used by African American writers from Alain Locke to E. Franklin Frazier, the Negro Renaissance, a movement perhaps more concerned with creating distinctions of social class than with forging a distinctive black aesthetic. Although one of the two novels I examine here is set in Harlem, the other takes place in Washington, D.C., and the cultural differences and spatial distance between those two geographic sites in part accounts for the novels' different attitudes toward what has been commonly referred to, at least since Frazier's definitive 1955 work, as the black bourgeoisie.⁴ That term, rarely used in American writings before Frazier's work, competes with others more commonly used in the 1920s to designate educated middle-class African Americans: "the best people," "the Talented Tenth," "the thinking Negro," "the thinking few," "colored society," "the colored aristocracy." These various terms mark different kinds of class formation based on different principles of distinction; they are not different names for the same thing. The "black bourgeoisie" has come to designate a class long defined through its similarity to and difference from the white bourgeoisie and by intraracial similarities among members of this group in contrast to the black "folk." But also, and more key to my argument here, the "black bourgeoisie" is created through intraracial rivalry around aesthetic markers of class.

In analyzing the making of class, I compare two novels of the Negro Renaissance, one that has received too little critical attention, the other, perhaps, too much. Edward C. Williams's epistolary novel of manners *When Washington Was in Vogue* was initially serialized in the *Messenger* magazine, from January 1925 to June 1926, as *The Letters of Davy Carr* and not published as a novel until 2003. Adam McKible, whom we have to thank for bringing Williams's long-neglected work out of the archives,

invites its comparison with the other novel considered here, Nella Larsen's critically acclaimed and now canonical *Passing* (1929). In his introduction, McKible writes that *When Washington Was in Vogue* "most closely resembles" Larsen's *Passing*, "which offers both praise and blame for the black bourgeoisie."⁵ I might quibble with the word "praise," but my concern here is not which author offers a more sympathetic, which a more scathing portrait of "the best people." More important to the central question of this article is that the writings long at the center of this Negro Renaissance debate have been understood to have more to do with representing an already existing black bourgeoisie than with representing the actual making of that class or, in point of fact, the making of class itself.

Williams's novel, I contend, shines a critical light on categories of perception and appreciation that, for Bourdieu, constitute the forgotten stakes in the class struggle, thereby highlighting the *acts* of classification that create what is called "the black bourgeoisie"—a misguided shorthand for the *making* of class that cannot be simply defined against a ready-made category, the white bourgeoisie. Yet Williams naturalizes those distinctions so that they disappear into the racialized body, thereby assuring his readers that they were natural all along. "The best people" merit that distinction. In this sense, Williams *believes in* "the best people" as an ontological class. In contrast, Larsen's *Passing*, ostensibly about the same social class and sharing the same class markers with Williams's novel, delivers a decisive blow to the myth of merit that distinguishes that class. Larsen's novel, as I show, offers an incisive critique of the *making* of the black bourgeoisie, its plot evolving into an unexpected, and as yet unnoticed, dismantling of class itself. And Larsen does so, I argue, less through implicit criticism of "the best people" than through her narrative treatment of passing.

Nearly everything I think and do is a result of class-distinctions. All my notions—
notions of good and evil, of pleasant and unpleasant, . . . of ugly and beautiful.

George Orwell, *The Road to Wigan Pier* (1937)

One of the most prominent institutions of class making in the early twentieth century was the Negro press. Thadious M. Davis argues in her 1994 biography of Larsen that the rise of African American magazines after World War I brought a black middle-class community together by paying "equal attention to political and economic occurrences, social and literary trends, educational and religious affairs, and entertainment and sports events" and functioned, along with social clubs, schools, and alumni groups, as institutions of class making.⁶ Of the many newspapers and journals associated with the Negro Renaissance—for example, the *Chicago Defender*, the *Pittsburgh Courier*, the *Baltimore Afro-American*, the *Crisis*, *Opportunity*, and *Survey Graphic*—perhaps none more clearly spoke to and for the black middle class than the *Messenger*, where Edward C. Williams's novel was first serialized and where, incidentally, Nella Larsen published her first review.⁷ According to George Hutchinson, even in its more radical socialist beginnings, under the direction of A. Philip Randolph, and especially during George Schuyler's tenure as editor from 1923 to 1926, the *Messenger* disdained the

522 notion of a black aesthetic in favor of a class-based vision of racial amalgamation.⁸ Ironically, the *Messenger*, whose masthead was “The World’s Greatest Negro Journal,” was also the most segregated of black journals in relying almost exclusively on black contributors and having a largely black readership, at least under Schuyler’s editorship.⁹ These class and racial features of the *Messenger*, coupled with the fact that the magazine was never fully committed to the Harlem Renaissance, made it the perfect venue for a novel like Williams’s.¹⁰ Its publication in that journal reinforces Frazier’s observation that the Negro press focused almost exclusively on the social aspects of the black middle class, as does Williams’s novel in its attention to the spectacle of Washington society. And unlike other novels written at this time, *When Washington Was in Vogue*, as McKible first pointed out, has no white characters, a literary feature that mimes the racially segregated character of the class it depicts (xxxiii). As documented by McKible, Davis, Hutchinson, and other scholars of African American little magazines, in the pages of these journals, a black bourgeoisie was consolidated—or more accurately, constituted *as* a class—through principles of distinction that, we will see, Williams’s serialized novel lays bare.

The *Opportunity* debate between Langston Hughes and Brenda Ray Moryck over Washington society models the making of a black bourgeoisie in the pages of black journals as in Williams’s novel. Hughes famously caricatured “the best people” as “pompous pouter-pigeons” overly impressed by family heritage, college degrees, social connections, the latest fashions, and expensive cars.¹¹ Moryck retorted that had Hughes lived in Washington, D.C., as long as she had he would have discovered that his characterization may have pertained to some individuals but was a false representation of the class as a whole, even though her portrait of Washington society reinforces many of Hughes’s points. Describing her first visit to a prominent society woman’s home, Moryck writes:

I . . . went into as exquisite a home as it has ever been my good fortune to enter, and since in my varied experience, it has been my privilege to cross the thresholds of the nouveau riche, time-worn aristocrats, and the mellow wealthy, I have seen some fine houses. But no one called my attention to the solid silver, the priceless linen, the Persian rugs or the old mahogany, nor the quantity and quality of the food. . . . [A]nd though I felt culture in the invitation, refinement and prosperity in the home, intelligence in the conversation, and knew my hostess to be a very charming modern edition of an old family with solid background, these things were not even whispered on the air.¹²

Although no one at the party may have called attention to these marks of distinction, Moryck does, as did Williams in his serialized novel, whose run ended the year before this exchange. To argue with Moryck that Hughes presents a skewed portrait of “the best people” is, however, to miss the point, or at least the effect, of Hughes’s essay. Hughes does not describe a people but establishes principles of distinction that serve to make Harlem the capital of the black intelligentsia as distinct from Washington, D.C. Washington can now be called, if not the capital of the black middle class, a distinction Frazier bestowed on Durham, at least the social capital of the black bourgeoisie.¹³ If in

1903 W. E. B. Du Bois could say the Negro people had "no well defined social classes," by the mid 1920s, writers of all kinds were following his implicit program in crafting such social distinctions, and none more effectively than Williams.

No other novel I know portrays the act of class making so conspicuously as does Williams's. This novel alone could have provided the evidence for Frazier's later depiction and critique of the black bourgeoisie, confirming as it does all that Frazier says of this class's pecuniary values and social pretensions. One could argue that Williams has captured the finer points of speech, dress, and manners of the class he represents, and that his novel, as Frazier says of the Negro press, works to sustain this class and its make-believe world by satisfying its desire for recognition and status.¹⁴ Keeping my initial question in mind, however, we might look more closely at how the novel creates the value distinctions it seems to capture so faithfully.¹⁵

Davy Carr, the narrator and protagonist of *When Washington Was in Vogue*, frequently describes class *purely* as a series of distinctions. When the novel opens, in October 1922, Davy has just arrived in Washington, D.C., where he plans to research a book on the African slave trade, though we see little of this work during the course of the narrative, which is focused almost exclusively on his social world. Provided with a letter of introduction, he takes up residence as a boarder in the home of a prominent black family headed by Mrs. Margaret Rhodes, whose late husband knew Davy's father. His first impression of the Rhodes home can serve as an example of class differences as purely formal distinctions. "Rarely have I seen a room . . . that I have liked better," Davy writes to his friend Bob, his interlocutor in all the letters that make up this novel: "Solid, substantial furniture, walls lined with bookcases filled with good books, and more good pictures and art objects, well selected and in the best of taste. . . . Nothing seemed new, but, on the contrary, everything showed signs of use, and looked as if it were an integral part of the room" (17). This description is filled with what I would argue are "naturalized distinctions." What is lacking here, however, is the basis on which Davy makes these socially and culturally critical distinctions. Davy assures us the books and pictures are "good," indeed, in the "best of taste," but at this point we have no idea what those books and pictures are. (Later, as he becomes increasingly interpellated into this class, Davy names some authors on those bookshelves.) Or we *do* have some idea, and that knowledge classes us as readers as much as Bob, Davy's addressee, who is also presumed to know. Davy's adjectives function, as do Moryck's "solid" and "priceless," to affirm the value of these possessions without providing any specificity.

Compared with the Rhodeses' well-appointed parlor, Davy's room is "reasonably good-sized," with "two very *satisfactory* electric lights with *rather attractive* shades" and "a *small, but quite serviceable*, library table" (56-57, emphasis added). Davy's description tells us little about the décor but much about his place in this social space. As the boarder, *in* yet not *of* this society, Davy's position is qualified—"reasonably" good, "rather attractive"—and measured by his proximity to theirs. His furniture is "serviceable," not "solid," indicating his role in this household. Davy will earn his right to membership in this class through his service to the family (saving their youngest daughter from scandal, for instance) and through the invidious comparison he continu-

524 ally draws between the Rhodeses' social circle and that of the jazzy new-monied class their daughter frequents.¹⁶

Likewise, his description of the guests at his first dinner party in Washington, like Moryck's description of her first social occasion there, serves more to bolster his class standing than to reveal their characters: the guests are "all highly cultivated people," and in their dress, all the ladies present "showed real class" (10). In contrast, the class "parasites" (46)—those who engage in conspicuous consumption, who dress too well and spend too lavishly, whose homes are "too ornate" (38), and whose faces are "overly" madeup (27)—are distinguished simply by excess. These are indistinct distinctions indeed. Davy's lack of specificity establishes a set of distinctions without substance, yet those classifications produce real differences in the social world.

In "What Makes a Social Class?" Bourdieu takes up the debate over the ontological status of social class. He offers an alternative to what he sees as a false opposition between objectivists, who classify social agents like objects, and constructivists, who hold that classes are "mere statistical artefact[s]," not empirical groups.¹⁷ The objectivist vs. constructivist opposition fails, he says, to acknowledge the "symbolic work" of the *act* of classification itself. Bourdieu argues instead for a concept of social *space* rather than social *class*. To speak of class is to draw boundaries around social groups. To think in terms of space, in contrast, is to attend to relationships rather than substances, proximity rather than similarity. This "multi-dimensional space" is structured by the distribution of various forms of capital: economic, cultural, social ("resources based on connections and group membership") and symbolic ("the form the different types of capital take once they are perceived and recognized as legitimate").¹⁸ Bourdieu's concept of social space focuses on "principles of differentiation," not the characteristic traits of distinct social groups.¹⁹ It is precisely those principles of differentiation that we tend to forget in discussing social class.

In his watershed 1984 book, *Distinction*, Bourdieu argues that taste, an acquired "cultural competence," is used to legitimize social differences. Tastes—for food and fashion, literature and décor, manners and morals—function to *make* social distinctions, Bourdieu claims—the social distinctions necessary to create the "well defined social classes" Du Bois desired. Taste is neither personal nor is it necessarily formally taught. One acquires certain tastes or dispositions through the practices of everyday life, what Bourdieu calls the "habitus." A key term in Bourdieu's sociological thought, habitus refers to a system of acquired dispositions that are internalized and that function, on the practical level, as "categories of perception and appreciation of the social world."²⁰

Lifestyles are thus the systematic products of habitus, which . . . become sign systems that are socially qualified (as "distinguished," "vulgar" etc.). The dialectic of conditions and habitus is the basis of an alchemy which transforms the distribution of capital . . . into a system of perceived differences, distinctive properties, that is, a distribution of symbolic capital, legitimate capital, whose objective truth is misrecognized.²¹

Misrecognized because the act of classification is forgotten, leading one to mistake the shifting principles of distinction as material signs of individual merit. When one

dismisses the bourgeoisie as pretentious, as Hughes did, for example, one is not just identifying a characteristic of that class but also naming the principle of differentiation that generates an array of distinctions between that class and others. The criteria used in the construction of that social space are not simply differing assessments of that class—Hughes finds “the best people” pretentious, Moryck finds them charming—but, says Bourdieu, also weapons in the class struggle. For what individuals and groups invest in the meaning they give to certain classificatory schemes, says Bourdieu, is “their whole social being.”²²

This investment clearly motivates the structuring principle of Williams’s novel. Davy’s description of Lillian Barton’s parlor, for example, reads much like Moryck’s description of the society woman’s home: “Dark walls, with a few good paintings; heavy furniture in keeping with the size of the room; a wonderful rug; and a big fireplace with a real fire. Altogether it is the most attractive room I have been in—as a guest—and you know I have seen most of our handsome houses between New Orleans and Boston, and as far west as Chicago” (37–38).²³ The description tells us more about Davy’s class pretensions than about Lillian’s decorative tastes.²⁴ More than once Davy writes to Bob, saying, “I cannot describe it adequately” (37), whether “it” is Lillian’s parlor or Caroline Rhodes’s “fetching” attire (36), because his own “provincial upbringing” (25) has deprived him of the words to describe it. That is, whatever “it” is, it *is* what it is *not*: good, not bad, in the best of taste, not the worst. By his reticence Davy exhibits the self-consciousness that Bourdieu says characterizes the petite bourgeoisie, an unease manifested in his body, leading him to watch and check himself, to be fastidious in manners and morals, and to be careful not to betray himself through an inappropriate word choice.²⁵ For he might describe the furniture as old mahogany only to learn it is black walnut. Thus Davy’s expressions, such as “I said the things obviously demanded by the occasion” (118) seek to assure Bob, and the reader, of his knowledge of social class without telling us anything we might want or need to know. Yet the knowledge he holds back (something that is really nothing, no one thing) becomes a mark of distinction by means of which we are to identify “the best people.” Whether or not Bob knows what should be said, whether or not we do, we learn with Davy that class is a question of morality, of knowing what is done and what is not done, of knowing the occasion demands a certain response appropriate to the situation—or at least, of not betraying that one does not know by saying too much.

Habitus, a cultural competence adopted through upbringing and education, is a habitual performance. One wears one’s habitus on one’s body, so to speak, in Bourdieu’s words, “consenting to be what [one has] to be.”²⁶ In this way, class manifests itself in embodied actions that act as a “memory jogger,” such that, in Bourdieu’s memorable locution, “complexes of gestures, postures and words . . . only have to be slipped into, like a theatrical costume, to awaken, by the evocative power of bodily mimesis, a universe of ready-made feelings and experiences.”²⁷ The theatrical metaphor is particularly apposite apropos of the black bourgeoisie. Paul Laurence Dunbar early on described Washingtonians as “earnest actors who have learned their parts well,” a characterization memorialized by Frazier when he notoriously described the black bourgeoisie as living

526 in a world of make-believe.²⁸ More to the point, Bourdieu's habitus replaces an older notion of class consciousness that informs most debates over the black bourgeoisie. Habitus denotes the *activity* of differentiating oneself from others in a field through playing the game, with its various stakes and players, not simply recognizing oneself as belonging to a given social position.²⁹ For Bourdieu, then, the forgotten dimension of the class struggle are the *acts* of classification, the consciousness of which is often lost as class categories become naturalized through bodily mimesis.

If Davy represents a bourgeois in the making, Caroline, the youngest Rhodes daughter with whom Davy is unknowingly in love, most clearly shows its naturalization. Caroline begins the novel as the flapper and matures by the end into bourgeois respectability: she quits smoking, abstains from alcohol, and tones down the makeup. Most importantly, she stops going to Davy's room, which she has frequented, uninvited, from the time Davy moved into her family's home.³⁰ By reclaiming Caroline in the end, the narrative assures the naturalization of her socialization that Davy has been nurturing throughout the novel by commenting on her clothing, correcting her behavior, and criticizing her friends. Observing Caroline at a social gathering, Davy tells Bob she bears "the unmistakable bodily marks of aristocracy. . . . Anyone with half an eye could discern *race* in every line of her face and figure. That clean-cut profile . . . surely came from forebears out of a ruling class" (145–46, emphasis in original). Class slips imperceptibly into race, anchoring slippery and imprecise social distinctions in the visibility of racial markers and the permanency of family heritage. Davy may read class off her racialized body, one Caroline inhabits with ease, slips into comfortably through bodily mimesis, but ironically, class is now so naturalized that there is really *nothing* to read, so much so that it's as if one could close the book on class. Williams's novel exposes, unintentionally I think, the circularity of this social logic: as Bourdieu puts it, "People's image of the classification is a function of their position within it," so that having the marks of distinction, such as the right tastes and manners, becomes evidence of their right to claim entitlement to the social and cultural capital that accrues to those bearing those marks of distinction, namely, "the best people."³¹

I do not mean to suggest that Williams never provides specifics, even though Davy admits to Bob that his descriptions are very vague, calling attention to the singular narrative feature that, for me, exposes the novel's pretext. Later in the novel, for example, as Davy sits in the Rhodeses' back parlor, he names some books on those shelves, books that form the canon of Western bourgeois literary culture: standard editions of Balzac and Dumas, a French edition of Victor Hugo, definitive editions of Thackeray and Dryden, and "practically all of Edith Wharton's works." "No wonder Caroline, for all her occasional 'jazzy' manners, has such an unusual speaking vocabulary," Davy tells Bob. "It must have been a liberal education to live with her father" (205). We do not know Davy's or Caroline's assessment of these authors, and we do not need to know. For the bourgeoisie are judged less by their *judgments* of authors, says Bourdieu, than by their *selection*.³² Caroline's habitus, the dispositions that obtain from her family heritage and her upbringing, has been inscribed on Caroline's racial body, associating aesthetic value with moral value and naturalizing both as intrinsic to "the best people."

It is not just that her dark skin presents a challenge to the black bourgeoisie's preference for light skin; it is that her black body absorbs her class distinction in such a way that class, not just race, can be read off the body by "anyone with half an eye." This is what I mean by saying class is naturalized; class disappears into the body, presented not as an imitation of white tastes and values (which is why it is significant that there are no white characters in this novel with whom to compare the black bourgeoisie), but as a birthright. William's representation of class is a representation of the distinctions that produce the class category the novel apparently represents.

Nella Larsen's *Passing*, though ostensibly about the same class, functions differently in relation to these categorical distinctions on which the novel also appears to rely. Like her protagonist Clare Kendry, Larsen turns her back on the political work of class making that characterizes debates over the black bourgeoisie by skewing the expected conventions of class fiction, which is why, perhaps, she could be claimed as an ally by *both* sides in this debate.³³

Larsen's protagonist Irene Redfield, for all her comfortably bourgeois accoutrements, exhibits, as does Davy, the self-consciousness of the petite bourgeoisie. Not that she does not know the proper thing to say or wear or purchase; rather, she has not come to embody her class "naturally." Let me cite by way of example the scene that has always struck me most as a send-up of the black bourgeoisie. One morning, Irene and her husband, Brian, a Harlem physician, have been discussing Irene's encounter with Clare Kendry that opens the novel. As they descend the staircase from their bedroom, Irene senses Brian's disapproval of her childhood friend, a woman now passing as white:

They went into the dining-room. He drew back her chair and she sat down behind the fat-bellied German coffee-pot, which sent out its morning fragrance, mingled with the smell of crisp toast and savoury bacon, in the distance. With his long, nervous fingers he picked up the morning paper from his own chair and sat down.

Zulena, a small mahogany-coloured creature, brought in the grapefruit.

They took up their spoons.³⁴

One almost expects them to speak "in frightfully correct English," as Hughes says "the best people" do.³⁵ And then they do! "My dear," Brian begins, "you misunderstand me entirely" (184). The narratorial "they took up their spoons" creates the effect of stage notes so that when the scene freezes the Redfields in a tableau of class stasis, it is meant to strike one as a performance.³⁶ In contrast to Davy's expressed assurance that he knows the right thing to say, betraying through omission his fear of using the wrong word, the Redfields have learned their lines. Unlike Dunbar and Frazier, though, Larsen does not simply dismiss the black bourgeoisie as actors living in a world of make-believe; she dramatizes, as well as ironizes, the *making* of class distinctions. Not only do the Redfields have a maid, for instance, but the maid wears high heels. "Zulena's heels, faintly tapping on their way to the door" (193) is a telling detail—the kind of detail Williams does not provide—that draws attention to an act of "vicarious consumption" that functions, as does the breakfast scene, as an orchestrated ritual that conjoins individuals through practices designed to uphold class distinctions.³⁷ Irene's domestic milieu is clearly a stage set for her performance of class.

528 This discussion of performance brings us to the central theme of the novel, the performance of passing, and sets the scene for my reading of the initial encounter between Irene and Clare, after a twelve-year separation, that takes place on the rooftop of the Drayton Hotel, a scene that “outs” Irene, not Clare, as the passer. Sitting at her table alone, Irene has been assessing Clare at a distance without yet recognizing her, noting that the woman exudes a “certain impression of assurance.” In contrast, when Clare returns the gaze, Irene is disconcerted and does what Barbara Johnson once delightfully dubbed a “narcissistic check”: “Had she . . . put her hat on backwards? . . . [Was there] a streak of powder somewhere on her face [?] . . . Something wrong with her dress?” (146).³⁸ She fails to recognize her childhood friend in this scene not because Clare is passing as white but because she herself is passing as bourgeois. Her nervous self-consciousness does not arise, as she thinks at first, from a fear that she might be read as black, a possibility she quickly dismisses as “absurd” (150). Her discomfort has more to do with her petit bourgeois self-consciousness, her sense that she does not belong in this social space, a feeling that overcomes her as she attempts to look away, to act indifferent, while the other woman’s stare “never for an instant fell or wavered” (149).³⁹ One might suspect Clare, the daughter of an alcoholic janitor, who ascends to the middle class through her marriage to a white man, to be the class passer, but Clare’s self-assurance works against her being *read*.

Indeed, Irene is the one who expresses annoyance “at having been detected” (157), not only in this scene but later when Clare reads through Irene’s insincere invitation to the Negro Welfare League dance, while Clare remains inscrutable. In the opening passage of the novel, Clare is represented through the synecdoche of her letter, which, significantly, bears “no return address to betray the sender” (143), a rootlessness that confounds Irene, attached as she is to her middle-class home in her segregated Harlem community.⁴⁰ Irene expresses incredulity when Clare tells her that she never had to account for family or background when she passed into white society: “You mean that you didn’t have to explain where you came from?” Irene asks. “It seems impossible.” “As a matter of fact,” Clare replies, “I didn’t” (158). In contrast to Caroline, who in embodying her habitus naturalizes class in her racialized body, Clare discloses class as pure performance, putting distinctions of both class and race at risk.

In short, Clare distinguishes herself by *not* making distinctions, by her very indifference to the social distinctions that Irene, Davy and Caroline must uphold to secure their social being. When Clare shows up for the Negro Welfare League dance, for instance, Irene describes her as “exquisite, golden, fragrant, flaunting, in a stately gown of shining black taffeta, whose long, full skirt lay in graceful folds about her slim golden feet,” and Irene feels “dowdy and commonplace” by comparison in her “new rose-coloured chiffon frock ending at the knees” (203). Here the descriptive details work less to expose the class differences between Clare and Irene than to highlight the differences between Larsen’s and Williams’s representations of class. Clare’s dress may be conspicuous, but not because Clare is vulgar, overdressed for a party, as Williams might have it; for the color and material of the dresses, the length and fullness of the skirts enable us to visualize these women as Williams’s adjectives—“stylish,” “fetching,”

"frumpy"—do not. Where Williams's descriptions reveal a character's status in relation to someone else, Larsen's specificity of detail sets a scene that divulges more about an individual character's psychology than her social position. Clare's "utter disregard of the convenience and desire of others" (201), as Irene puts it, her indifference to social conventions, gives her an air of security that Irene desperately wants. Clare wears that dress, and inhabits her body unself-consciously, not because she is the real thing but because, in Clare, Larsen has created a character who, unlike Davy, Caroline, or even Irene, exists outside the representational conventions of class fictions. In Williams's novel of manners, the black bourgeoisie must reclaim the beautiful woman (Caroline, the flapper) if that class is to be secure in its identity, just as Irene acknowledges that members of the black bourgeoisie ultimately protect the passer they disdain for the sake of the social group, the black *bourgeoisie*, not necessarily the black community. What threatens Irene, and what threatens the sustainability of a bourgeois class, is "the menace of impermanence" (229), a phrase Larsen uses in free indirect discourse to describe Irene's deepest fear. The danger is that the unreclaimed woman, the flapper or the passer, will slip across the line—whether the color line or the class line—and be lost to them forever, which would mean a loss of distinctions on which their social being depends. A passage from Bourdieu's *Distinction* is worth quoting at length in this regard:

All the agents in a given social formation share a set of basic perceptual schemes, which receive the beginnings of objectification in the pairs of antagonistic adjectives commonly used to classify and qualify persons or objects in the most varied areas of practice. The network of oppositions between high (sublime, elevated, pure) and low (vulgar, low, modest), . . . fine (refined, elegant) and coarse (heavy, fat, crude, brutal) . . . is the matrix of the commonplaces which find such ready acceptance because behind them lies the whole social order. . . . These mythic roots only have to be allowed to take their course in order to generate, at will, one or another of the tirelessly repeated themes of the eternal sociodicy, such as apocalyptic denunciations of all forms of "leveling," "trivialization" or "massification," which identify the decline of societies with the decadence of bourgeois houses, i.e., a fall into the homogeneous, the undifferentiated, and betray an obsessive fear of number, of undifferentiated hordes indifferent to difference and constantly threatening to submerge the private spaces of bourgeois exclusiveness.⁴¹

It is highly significant in terms of Larsen's deflation of class that Clare, herself "indifferent to difference," remains unreclaimed; she disappears at the end of the novel, and this is a disappearing act that works only because of the novel's unusual narrative perspective.

Larsen's choice of an unreliable narrator in Irene undercuts Williams's more explicit use of this narrative convention. Davy too is unreliable, but Davy's unreliability derives from his naivety. We see through Davy, know he is falling in love with Caroline before he does, and have our suspicions confirmed in the end. In contrast, Irene's unreliability derives from her paranoia, her suspicions, her self-protection, in short, her desire not to *know*, not just not to offend.⁴² She does not pretend to know what she does not know; she actively desires *not* to know what she *must* know (in both senses of "surely

530 she knows this” and “she needs to know this”). This narrative trait is most striking in the final scene of the novel, when Clare’s husband, John Bellew, bursts in on a party and calls Clare out on passing:

What happened next, Irene Redfield never afterwards allowed herself to remember. Never clearly.

One moment Clare had been there, a vital glowing thing, like a flame of red and gold. The next she was gone. (239)

Reticence, in other words, inheres in the narrative itself. As such, this narrative of racial passing works against reading for distinctions, as we try to grasp “a thing that couldn’t be registered” (206), which is Irene’s definition of race. (The equivalent concept in terms of class is the *je ne sais quoi*, a distinctive, albeit intangible, quality; the phrase captures precisely the mode of class making operative in Williams’s novel, which never names the precise quality it extols.) Ending in Clare’s disappearing act, Larsen’s novel exposes not the black woman or the black bourgeoisie but the making of class itself.⁴³

If Williams’s epistolary novel serves a pedagogical function by detailing the “embourgeoisement” (a term used by Bourdieu if not his coinage) of Davy and of the reader, as we learn with Davy what kinds of distinctions are important to uphold, Larsen’s novel is literally a novel without a moral (to appropriate the disingenuous subtitle of Jessie Fauset’s highly moralistic novel *Plum Bun*) in that the narrative’s unreliability makes it difficult to assume a position as the text’s interlocutor, making us feel inadequate to our task as readers of this novel and as readers of race and class distinctions.⁴⁴ Larsen’s remarkable narrative reticence, her keen descriptive details, and her predilection for theatrical scenes over narrated events undermine the social psychology of distinction and prestige that theorists such as Bourdieu and Jean Baudrillard argue has long consolidated the bourgeoisie as a class and that “finds its philosophical resonance,” according to Baudrillard, “in the ‘dialectic’ of being and appearance.”⁴⁵ For those who are “relegated to a position of non-marked terms,” as one might argue Clare was in her youth when her class status bore no marks of distinction, “their revolt thus aims at the abolition of this code, this strategy composed of distinctions, separations, discriminations, oppositions that are structured and hierarchized.”⁴⁶ Such subversion, Baudrillard continues, is “nondialectical” in that it does not seek to replace a valued or “marked” term with the devalued one but seeks to disrupt the code itself. Baudrillard clarifies what he means by this in a telling note: “But one can also aim to simply pass to the other side of the line in order to become the marked term, to change positions without breaking the code: The ‘White’ Black man.”⁴⁷ This is what members of the black bourgeoisie are often thought to do, to become white in becoming bourgeois. “Passing” in the conventional understanding of this term upholds the dialectic.⁴⁸

But Larsen has not given us a conventional novel of passing. Clare can disappear because unlike other characters in narratives of passing, she is not caught in the dialectic of being and appearing. Larsen’s revolt is directed instead at the code, the dialectic itself. Such a revolt cannot simply offer an alternative representation of a race or class, as those engaged in the Negro Renaissance debate revisited here have been understood

to do. For, as Baudrillard cautions, such a revolt "is irremediably lost at the level of representation."⁴⁹ In that clash of classes, the kind of struggle Williams, Hughes, Moryck, Frazier, among others, engage in, "the bourgeois class always prevails," warns Baudrillard, for the bourgeois class is distinguished by the distinctions that set it off against the vulgar masses. "If the class struggle has a meaning, it is not in the encounter of one class with another," Baudrillard argues. "This meaning can only be the radical refusal of letting itself be enclosed in the being and consciousness of class."⁵⁰ This is Clare's and Larsen's great refusal, what Baudrillard terms an "immense, latent defection."⁵¹ Hughes's attack on the bourgeoisie and Williams's good-natured critique of bourgeois pretension both sustain class distinctions. Larsen's "latent defection" collapses the dialectic of being and appearing essential to bourgeois representations of class, even and especially when they are naturalized.

What, then, are representations of class representations of? Nothing—no-thing.⁵² Larsen has broken the mirror of production, "the discourse of representation . . . by which the system of political economy comes to be reflected in the imaginary and reproduced there as the determinant instance."⁵³ But why, one might well ask, would Larsen—who owned a Paul Poiret dress, who resided in the Paul Laurence Dunbar gated community, who was feted by the Women's Auxiliary of the NAACP—want to explode the myth of the very class she appears, and apparently desires, to inhabit? I am not sure she did. She may have aimed at race and hit class. It was, however, a devastating blow. For the precision of that hit undermined not just the black bourgeoisie, her ostensible target, but the game of class making that sought to distinguish as well the black intelligentsia with which she was and is more commonly associated, especially now as a canonized representative of the Harlem Renaissance in particular and modernist literature in general.

The definition of art, and through it the art of living, is an object of struggle among the classes.

Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction* (1984)

If at the turn of the twentieth century African Americans needed to establish social distinctions so that the "thinking Negro" could be differentiated from the unthinking masses, by the 1920s, in response to the ascendance of consumer society through manufactured clothing, commercial magazines, department stores, cinema and radio, gramophones and jazz clubs, the more important distinction was between the thinking Negro and a newly amalgamated black middle class.⁵⁴ The underlying anxiety in these debates is not that blacks will assimilate and become too white but that the newly educated and propertied will merge with the intellectual class and render its distinctions of taste, both in the realm of art and in the art of living, indistinguishable from those of the proliferating black middle class. If, with the "embourgeoisement" of the masses that so disturbed George Orwell, class differences were becoming less discernible, facilitating class passing and making class boundaries ever-more permeable, the Negro Renaissance debate served, whether intentionally or not, to make class visible, that is, readable.⁵⁵

532 Symbolic power, the power to name and thereby to bestow aesthetic and moral value on a people, the power wielded by writers and critics in the Negro Renaissance debate under consideration here, must be interrogated along with the different representations of the black bourgeoisie—a “class on paper” that has become a plausible real class.⁵⁶ The aesthetic judgments and moral values that are often used to assess the differences between classes are themselves products of class distinctions. As Bourdieu puts it in what is perhaps his most famous statement, “Taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier.”⁵⁷ Value-producing and truth-producing systems are themselves aspects of social class, which means that class relationships have more far-reaching consequences than many social theorists and literary scholars presume. The political work of class making is what is at stake in the modernist-era debates over representations of the black bourgeoisie as well as in the ascendance of Larsen and the loss of Williams in the modernist canon.

By reading Williams and Larsen as laying bare the act of class making in writings of the Negro Renaissance, I do not want simply to dress these writers in the threadbare garments of social constructionism. Instead, I want to conclude by unfolding another wrinkle in this argument. By championing Larsen as a brilliant deflator of class, I may have done no more than affirm my own class status as an academic, proving Bourdieu’s point that “taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier.” “Art and cultural consumption,” Bourdieu insists, “fulfill a social function of legitimating social differences,” thereby implicating critics and teachers in the perpetuation of the social distinctions our scholarship and classrooms may also seek to oppose.⁵⁸ The axiological logic that underlies the formation of a Harlem Renaissance canon elides the real issue here: *how standards are determined and by whom*. It is not, Bourdieu would say, that we cannot assert that Larsen or Hughes is a better writer than Williams or Moryck, only that we must make clear what we are comparing evaluations in terms of, for evaluative criteria are created by social institutions of value making, like universities. Pace Davy, who rests in the comfortable cliché that there is no accounting for some people’s taste, that accounting, and accountability, is precisely what Bourdieu asks of us.

In his essay from the millennial issue of *PMLA*, “Rereading Class,” Peter Hitchcock provides an important clue as to how we might proceed in the face of this insight. “Representations of class are active negotiations on the meaning of class as it is lived,” he notes, and as such they impose on us, as scholars and teachers of literature, a certain “answerability” or “ethical responsibility” with respect to the descriptions we provide of the relations between art and life.⁵⁹ Bourdieu’s imperative, that one must *explain* the movement from a “class on paper” to a “*probable* real class,” is here given an ethical as well as a social import. Representations, whether of workers (Hitchcock’s topic) or the black bourgeoisie, “not only address the lived relations of . . . existence,” Hitchcock says, “but also ponder a *culpability in the form of representation itself*.”⁶⁰ They must be represented, and yet to ponder a culpability in the form of representation means they can’t be represented, for any such representation necessarily establishes social and cultural distinctions. Perhaps the best we can ever hope to do given the circularity of the social logic Bourdieu lays bare is to acknowledge that whatever aesthetic choices

we make will inevitably reproduce distinctions that affirm our own class status, that distinguish us as a class of intellectuals no matter what social class we may claim allegiance to. That is, we can accept this ethical imperative by pondering the culpability that inheres in the work we do as modernist scholars.

Notes

1. The date of Stein's novel is significant here, for it is when the Negro Renaissance was launched with the publication of *Survey Graphic* magazine's March 1925 special issue, "Harlem—Mecca of the New Negro," edited by Alain Locke. As George Hutchinson observes, the Negro Renaissance as a literary movement developed "in conjunction with debates about the Americanization of immigrants" (*The Harlem Renaissance in Black and White* [Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1995], 9–10).

2. Pierre Bourdieu, "What Makes a Social Class? On the Theoretical and Practical Existence of Social Groups," *Berkeley Journal of Sociology* 32 (1987): 8.

3. Bourdieu, "What Makes a Social Class?," 14, 7.

4. E. Franklin Frazier, *Black Bourgeoisie: The Rise of a New Middle Class in the United States* (New York: Free Press, 1957). Frazier first published his classic work in French under the title *Bourgeoisie noire* (Paris: Plon, 1955).

5. Adam McKible, introduction to Edward Christopher Williams, *When Washington Was in Vogue: A Love Story (A Lost Novel of the Harlem Renaissance)* (New York: Amistad, 2003), xxxiii. Hereafter cited parenthetically by page number.

6. Thadious M. Davis, *Nella Larsen, Novelist of the Harlem Renaissance: A Woman's Life Unveiled* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1994), 171. More critical of that class formation, Frazier suggests the Negro press reflects the values of the class it represents: "The exaggerated importance which the black bourgeoisie attaches to 'society' is revealed in the emphasis placed by the Negro press upon the 'social' aspects of events concerning Negroes" (*Black Bourgeoisie*, 170). Focusing on social occasions, the dress of those attending them, and the company they keep, even if the occasion being reported is an event to honor an individual's distinction in a particular field, the black middle class, as represented in the press, ascribes more importance, he says, to the spectacle than the substance, taking "more seriously their recreation than their professions" (171).

7. Larsen's first publication was a review of Kathleen Norris's novel *Certain People of Importance* (1922), a book that, Thadious Davis notes, did not deal with racial issues or people of color but did deal mightily with class as well as gender issues (*Nella Larsen*, 150). See Nella Larsen Imes, "Certain People of Importance by Mrs. Kathleen Norris," *Messenger* 5, no. 5 (1923): 713.

8. In contrast to the *Crisis* and *Opportunity*, Hutchinson remarks, the *Messenger* ridiculed the notion of a distinctive African American culture, and as editor, Schuyler promoted creative work that "served its founders' social and economic message" (*Harlem Renaissance*, 292). Randolph, cofounder of the journal, in particular "disapproved of blues and jazz" (290).

9. Hutchison, *Harlem Renaissance*, 289, 292.

10. Hutchison, *Harlem Renaissance*, 290.

11. Langston Hughes, "Our Wonderful Society: Washington," *Opportunity* 5, no. 8 (1927): 226–27; Brenda Ray Moryck, "I, Too, Have Lived in Washington," *Opportunity* 5, no. 8 (1927): 228–31, 243. The fact that critics often cite Hughes's essay but rarely mention the riposte offered by Moryck betrays a class bias in scholarship of this period.

12. Moryck, "I, Too," 229.

13. E. Franklin Frazier, "Durham: Capital of the Black Middle Class," in *The New Negro: Voices of the Harlem Renaissance*, ed. Alain Locke (New York: Albert and Charles Boni, 1925), 333. Bourdieu defines "social capital" as resources derived from social connections or group membership, but "symbolic capital" also pertains here. "Symbolic capital" refers to the forms capital takes once it is recognized as legitimate. That is, debates such as this one created a set of distinctions that served to

534 name and legitimate a black bourgeoisie against which a black cultural and intellectual elite could define itself. See Bourdieu, "What Makes a Social Class?," 4.

14. Frazier, *Black Bourgeoisie*, 27.

15. In its slighting of work and politics to focus on social events, *When Washington Was in Vogue* reinforces Frazier's critique of the black bourgeoisie as more concerned with spectacle than substance. In a long aside in chapter 3, Davy rehearses the views of his friend Don Verney, the political consciousness of the novel, of Washington social life. Verney indicts the "lavish spending," "frivolous pleasures," and "conspicuous display" of "the best people" (46–47), a speech that reads like a synopsis of Frazier's portrait of that class. Admittedly, Davy's chance meeting with James Weldon Johnson, who has been lobbying unsuccessfully on behalf of the Dyer Anti-Lynching Bill, does foist upon the narrative a topic—racism—that the black bourgeoisie, Frazier says, prefers to ignore, a topic that makes Davy momentarily uncomfortable with the jazzy lifestyle he has been living (121). But such politics are soon forgotten. In an earlier scene, Verney remarks that the prosperous class spends more time and money pursuing pleasure than struggling with the race problem, a point the narrative bears out when, after reporting his conversation with Verney to Bob, Davy remarks, "But let me get back to our Sunday-evening tea" (39). The novel conforms *structurally* to the apolitical characterization of the black bourgeoisie. Perhaps the most telling sign of the elision of politics in the novel, though, is its silence on the treatment of Negro veterans who, like Davy and Bob, served in France during the war. Mary White Ovington of the NAACP wrote in the *Crisis* in 1919 that "the last place to which the returning colored soldier can look for justice is Washington" (quoted in Constance McLaughlin Green, *The Secret City: A History of Race Relations in the Nation's Capital* [Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1967], 187).

16. Veblen defines "emulation" as "an invidious comparison which prompts us to outdo those with whom we are in the habit of classing ourselves" (*The Theory of the Leisure Class* [New York: Penguin 1994], 103).

17. Bourdieu, "What Makes A Social Class?," 2.

18. Bourdieu, "What Makes A Social Class?," 3, 4; see also 10.

19. Bourdieu, "What Makes A Social Class?," 3.

20. Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), 6, 170, 483.

21. Bourdieu, *Distinction*, 172.

22. Bourdieu, *Distinction*, 478.

23. What goes unsaid here is that racism and racial segregation made it necessary for middle-class blacks to stay in one another's homes when traveling. This omission betrays Williams's focus on intraracial class relations rather than race relations, as well as affirms Frazier's observation that the black bourgeoisie segregated themselves from middle-class whites and lower-class blacks.

24. Space will not permit an extended comparison of Williams's novel with Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth* (1905), which the similarity in names, Lillian Barton and Lily Bart, invites, as does the appearance of Wharton's novel on the Rhodeses' bookshelves.

25. "Social distances are inscribed in the body," writes Bourdieu in "What Makes a Social Class?," 5.

26. Bourdieu, *Distinction*, 471.

27. Bourdieu, *Distinction*, 474.

28. Paul Lawrence Dunbar, quoted in Audrey Elisa Kerr, *The Paper Bag Principle: Class, Colorism, and Rumor and the Case of Black Washington, D.C.* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2006), 38.

29. For a fuller discussion of Bourdieu's work along these lines, see Fiona Devine and Mike Savage's introduction to *Rethinking Class: Culture, Identities and Lifestyles*, ed. Fiona Devine, Mike Savage, John Scott, and Rosemary Crompton (London: Palgrave 2005), 1–23.

30. As Charlotte Perkins Gilman had made clear twenty-five years earlier, marriage may be the middle-class woman's "proper sphere," "her natural end. . . . But—she must not even look as if she wanted it!," a lesson Caroline has taken to heart. See Gilman's *Women and Economics: A Study of the Economic Relation Between Men and Women as a Factor in Social Evolution* (Mineola, NY: Dover, 1998), 44.

31. Bourdieu, *Distinction*, 473.

32. Bourdieu, *Distinction*, 293. In her retort to a negative review of Walter White's *Flight*, Larsen criticized the reviewer for his ignorance of modern fiction, citing Huysmans, Conrad, Proust, and Mann as examples (Davis, *Nella Larsen*, 205) and dismissing Wharton as, in Hutchinson's words, one of the "outmoded fictional models" (*In Search of Nella Larsen: A Biography of the Color Line* [Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2006], 207). Comparing Larsen's list of books with Williams's discloses the class distinction between them, a distinction that might be lost were we to rely on more tangible markers of class, such as attire, domiciles, or income. See also Hutchinson, *In Search of Nella Larsen*, 137–42, on Larsen and Williams's professional relationship. Larsen served as an assistant to Williams at the New York Public Library in 1921, helping to organize the first art exhibition of the Harlem Renaissance. Williams encouraged Larsen to get a degree in library science and wrote a letter of recommendation on her behalf.

33. Hutchinson notes that Larsen's first novel, *Quicksand*, was read as an attack on the black bourgeoisie and yet won acclaim from both sides of the fence, so to speak. George Schuyler, editor of the *Messenger* when the serialization of Williams's novel began, Langston Hughes, W. E. B. Du Bois, and Carl Van Vechten, Larsen's friend and mentor, all praised it, and the Women's Auxiliary of the NAACP gave a tea in her honor even though the novel criticized these very women. It was the novel's "middle- and upper-class settings," Hutchinson says, that seemed to overshadow her critique. *Quicksand* was contrasted with McKay's *Home to Harlem* and Van Vechten's *Nigger Heaven* and seen as more cultured, less sensationalized. "The novel's incisive social critique and attack on racial subjection went almost completely unnoticed" in many reviews that showed "a fixation on what sort of Negroes were 'represented' in the novel[s]" (Hutchinson, *In Search of Nella Larsen*, 277).

34. Nella Larsen, *Quicksand, and Passing*, ed. Deborah E. McDowell (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1986), 184. Hereafter cited parenthetically by page number.

35. Hughes, "Our Wonderful Society," 226.

36. In an article on Wharton's *The House of Mirth* Jennie A. Kassanoff writes of the many scenes in which Lily is fixed in "tableaux of racialized stasis" ("Extinction, Taxidermy, Tableaux Vivants: Staging Race and Class in *The House of Mirth*," *PMLA* 115, no. 1 [2000]: 64). In the early twentieth century there was a fear, Kassanoff notes, "that immigrants, the poor, and the vulgar would 'overwhelm the native elite; that American culture would fall victim to the 'vulgar' tastes of the masses" (61). Such a development would be a form of "race suicide," the race in question for Wharton as for Kassanoff being Anglo-Saxon (61). Yet this seems to be the same fear that motivates representations of the black bourgeoisie, with its pride in ancestry and its distinctions between the cultured and the vulgar, those for whom the "sudden possession of money has come without inherited obligations, or any traditional sense of solidarity between the classes" (Wharton, quoted in Kassanoff, "Extinction," 62). Thus Davy's assurance that the books and furniture in the Rhodes's parlor are well used and not new serves to make them, in Kassanoff's terms, a birthright, not bought goods.

37. In defining the forms of vicarious consumption identified with the servant classes, Veblen cites the "wearing of liveries" as one example. Zulena's high heels are part of her uniform and as such reflect less her tastes than Irene's class status (*Theory of the Leisure Class*, 68).

38. Barbara E. Johnson, "No Passing: Sula, Passing, and the Lesbian Continuum," Frederic Ives Carpenter Lectures, University of Chicago, May 1, 1990.

39. Phillip Brian Harper similarly reads this scene in terms of social class rather than race, noting that Irene's concern is less that she will be read as a Negro than that she will be ejected from the premises. What is most important for Irene is access to the material comforts that the Drayton tearoom represents. Harper's reading hinges on the difference between class and racial markings: "After all, if the quest for social access implicit in racial passing is consistently subsumed in an evident desire for material possessions, this is likely because material objects constitute the most convenient sensible representation of the achievement of social access itself, which does not register nearly so strongly in visual terms as does racial identity in the U.S. context. . . . Socioeconomic status, on the other hand, while it can certainly be registered through visual markers that indicate various class identifications, is less reliably situated in those markers than race (itself problematically visual, as we have seen), if only because, for class, the markers are less consistently and emphatically corporeal and, therefore,

536 much more tenuously associated with the identities they are supposed to signify" ("Passing for What? Racial Masquerade and the Demands of Upward Mobility," *Callaloo*, 21, no. 2 [1998]: 389). The tenuousness of class distinctions, however, makes it all the more imperative that they be readable.

40. That Irene sees Brian's restless desire to move to Brazil as a threat has more to do with her allegiance to American class ideology than with her allegiance to the race, referring as she does to his "increasing inclination to tear himself and his *possessions* loose from their *proper settings*" (193, emphasis added).

41. Bourdieu, *Distinction*, 468–69.

42. See Pamela L. Caughie, *Passing and Pedagogy: The Dynamics of Responsibility* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999), 126.

43. Harper draws attention to the passage in which Irene recalls Clare's father, Bob Kendry, who had attended college with some of the fathers of Irene's social circle but then had become a janitor for unknown reasons (Larsen, *Passing*, 154). When asked by Irene's brother what had happened to Kendry, Irene's father declines to explain, merely cautioning his son instead not to end up like Bob Kendry. Through their father's reticence, Irene and her brother learn that being lower class is a moral failing. Like Davy's reticence in not telling readers what exactly was said that was appropriate to a particular social situation, reticence in this particular scene functions to establish the principle of distinction—do not be that—not the substance. For all we know, Clare's father's sin is no more—and as Harper emphasizes, no less—than being poor ("Passing for What?," 390).

44. Bourdieu, "What Makes a Social Class?," 3. For a fuller discussion of the reader's position in this novel, see Caughie, *Passing and Pedagogy*, especially pages 125–34 and 139–44.

45. Jean Baudrillard, *The Mirror of Production*, trans. Mark Poster (St. Louis, MO: Telos Press, 1975), 122. Baudrillard cites Bourdieu's work throughout *The Mirror of Production*.

46. Baudrillard, *Mirror of Production*, 134, emphasis in original.

47. Baudrillard, *Mirror of Production*, 139n14.

48. Amy Robinson notes that racial passing owes its possibility precisely to the dialectic of being and appearing, which provides the subject with an "epistemological guarantee" ("It Takes One to Know One: Passing and Communities of Common Interest," *Critical Inquiry* 20, no. 4 [1994]: 716). Robinson's point echoes Baudrillard's, and Harper quotes a passage from a 1996 essay by Robinson that makes a similar point: "The social practice of passing is thoroughly invested in the logic of the system it attempts to subvert" insofar as the successful pass upholds the dialectic ("Passing for What?," 382). See Harper, "Passing for What?" and Caughie, "Passing" in *Passing and Pedagogy*, 11–56, for discussions of Robinson's work. Robinson's 1996 essay, "Forms of Appearance of Value: Homer Plessy and the Politics of Privacy," can be found in *Performance and Cultural Politics*, ed. Elin Diamond (London: Routledge, 1996), 239–61.

49. Baudrillard, *Mirror of Production*, 141. This is the problem of the ontological status of social class: "The group represented is nothing other than what represents it" (Bourdieu, "What Makes a Social Class?," 14). In short, "they must be represented," not in Marx's sense, where "they" is a pre-existing group that requires a representative to make them into a political class, but "they" as a class made by those who represent it.

50. Baudrillard, *Mirror of Production*, 156, 158. "No matter how often she came among them," thinks Irene of Clare, "she still remained someone apart" (209).

51. Baudrillard, *Mirror of Production*, 141.

52. Brian Carr also reads the novel as about nothing: "Less preoccupied with how something passes for something else, *Passing* doggedly pursues how nothing 'passes' for something" ("Paranoid Interpretation, Desire's Nonobject, and Nella Larsen's *Passing*," *PMLA* 119, no. 2 [2004]: 283).

53. Baudrillard, *Mirror of Production*, 20.

54. Orwell cites the cheap manufacturing of goods, such as clothing, and the ubiquity of the radio as "softening" class distinctions, though not eliminating the distance between classes. In Bourdieu-like fashion, Orwell notes that the middle-class revolutionary's "tastes" in clothes, wine, books, pictures, and so forth are still "recognisably bourgeois" no matter what his politics. "Here at least one cannot say that English 'education' fails to do its job," Orwell remarks, for one may forget one's Greek and Latin, but tastes become habitual, embodied (*The Road to Wigan Pier* [San Diego: Harcourt, 1958], 87–90, 132–37).

55. In a review of recent scholarship on the black intellectual class, James Smethurst remarks that "one might say that though the Harlem Renaissance made plausible the idea of a black intelligentsia and raised the possibility that black artists might form a recognizable class it did not ultimately realize either of these ideas. After all, Langston Hughes was really the only writer of the Harlem Renaissance who actually made his living as an author for any length of time" ("Genesis and Crisis: Foundations of a Modern Black Literary Intelligentsia," review of *The Indignant Generation*, by Lawrence P. Jackson, and *Anthem, Sonnets, and Chants: Recovering the African American Poetry of the 1930s*, by Jon Woodson, *Modernism/Modernity* 18, no. 2 [2011]: 450).

I am suggesting such a group *did* emerge in the writings of the time. Representations of class are not a matter of accuracy of the representation but of the usefulness of the construct. The more black writers represent the black bourgeoisie in terms of what it shares with the white, for example, the more it looks as if they are of the same theoretical class. Analogously, the more they represent the black bourgeoisie in terms of how it differs from the black intelligentsia, the more refined the social distinctions within that space. One could argue that by drawing these intraracial distinctions, a black intelligentsia *was* successfully constituted in the 1920s. The political work of class making, I am arguing, is the objective of writings about the black bourgeoisie in the Negro Renaissance.

56. Bourdieu, "What Makes a Social Class?," 7.

57. Bourdieu, *Distinction*, 6.

58. Bourdieu, *Distinction*, 7.

59. Peter Hitchcock, "They Must Be Represented? Problems in Theories of Working-Class Representation," *PMLA* 115, no. 1 (2000): 29, 27.

60. Hitchcock, "They Must Be Represented?," 27, emphasis added.