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The Hollow Class: African-American Class-Passing and the Popular

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The Hollow Class: African-American Class-Passing and the Popular

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Abstract

My project presses to include popular fiction, television, and film for serious critical consideration. To contextualize my research, I use theories that critically examine popular literature, connecting to the work of Janice Radway and Keenan Norris, and I study the African-American focus on class as explored by E. Franklin Frazier. In focusing on the popular, I highlight the everydayness of class and race anxieties. I build on Gwendolyn Foster's work on class passing but stress racial intersections with identity performance. I rely on New Historicism and Critical Race Theory to substantiate my examination of the literature. I look at specific moments in black America in the latter 20th century as inspiring literary responses to class concerns. My research contributes to the cultural discourse on respectability politics and racial uplift. Challenging the class focus of African-Americans, through literature, television, and film, I seek to reenergize discussions on the routes to black equality in America and contest notions of "making it" advanced by some cultural critics. My approach undermines the idea that class performances including, sartorial presentation, linguistic codeswitching, and distance from racial justice conversations can cover racial realities. The historical focus on lifting and climbing to a better American experience has attenuated the African-American community's power and my project intervenes in the discourse on the best path forward. In concentrating on the hollowness of "making it," I hope to encourage a re-prioritization of holistic racial uplift over respectability politics and class.

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Dedication

I dedicate this project to my son, Sterling. I thank you for inspiring me to finish. May you always love learning.

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Introduction

*"Pull up your pants… Respect where you live… finish school… Just because you can have a baby, it doesn't mean you should. Especially without planning for one or getting married first" – "Black people. Clean up your act!" –CNN commentator, Don Lemon, July 27, 2013 (*Lemon)

CNN journalist and commentator Don Lemon made these comments during the coverage of the summer 2013 trial of George Zimmerman. This excerpt was part of a larger manifesto that Lemon presented on the problems facing the black community. In the age of political pundits and black public intellectuals, Lemon's comments are common. Cable news contributors, Larry Elder, Crystal Wright, and Reverend Jesse Lee Peterson, have joined Lemon in condemning blackness and equating poverty, criminality, and sexuality with racial identity. What Lemon and others did not consider in the rush to racial shame and blame in the wake of Trayvon Martin's death is the socio-economic realities of the Martin family. According to the 2010 U.S. Census, the community of Sanford, Florida enjoyed a median income of $43,470. With the U.S. government setting the poverty line at half that amount, this community is middle-class. Nevertheless, the seventeen-year-old tried to pass himself off as a thug. Usually, the thug hails from an impoverished inner city. This person turns to a life of crime, drug dealing, stealing, and pimping, to survive. Because of the conflation of authentic blackness and poverty, many black Americans pretend to be thugs, adopting his speech and dress but do not share his bleak economic reality. When Trayvon, a Skittles and juice-toting child, was gunned down, Lemon and others implied that the murder happened because Trayvon was not performing respectability. "The politics of respectability," a phrase coined in Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham's *Righteous Discontent*, refers to black people's attempt to assimilate into the mainstream culture and realize

the American Dream by performing good manners. Despite having proponents from Booker T. Washington to Charles Barkley, respectability politics are problematic for two reasons. First, it often involves an attempt to police other African Americans who fail to display "acceptable" behavior. This policing restricts identity expression and suggests that those who fail at respectability somehow deserve what happens to them. Second, respectability politics lets the mainstream society off the hook for its marginalization and rejection of African-Americans. If blacks can be blamed for not fitting in or being respectable enough, then American society does not have to deal with racism. Being respectable is the goal of much middle-class striving in the black community. Black cultural beliefs hold that respectability minimizes racial vulnerability. Put another way, if black people behave a certain way, we will be worthy of equality and can isolate ourselves from racial discrimination and violence. However, the realities of Trayvon Martin's home life suggest that membership in the middle class will not provide security. Lemon would have been keenly aware of this fact because of another racial scandal that had happened years earlier.

In 2009, Harvard professor Henry Louis Gates Jr. was arrested at his home in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Police arrested the African-American scholar while investigating a possible break-in in the neighborhood. Officers refused to believe that Gates was the owner of his home and charged him with disorderly conduct. Despite Gates's fame and success, his race interfered with officers' ability or desire to read his class performance and membership. Gates is a world-renowned academic and documentarian. But because he is black, the white officers had no obligation to be aware of just how respectable or famous Gates is. Hence, respectability fails. Writer Jelani Cobb explains:

> With Skip Gates, there's this idea among African Americans that you have to live a blameless life in order to be exempt from racism. It's not necessarily an idea that holds

> up, but nonetheless, it still has some resonance when you see someone of the magnitude of Skip Gates' achievements, and even he is not exempt from the unfair prerogatives of law enforcement. (Cobb)

This incident shows that no matter how Trayvon and other blacks dress or behave or achieve, we are still subject to racial vulnerability. Ironically, Gates penned an article on this subject for the *New Yorker* in 1995:

> Erroll McDonald, Pantheon's executive editor and one of the few prominent blacks in publishing… tells of renting a Jaguar in New Orleans and being stopped by the police—simply 'to show cause why I shouldn't be deemed a problematic Negro in a possibly stolen car.' Wynton Marsalis says, 'Shit, the police slapped me upside the head when I was in high school. I wasn't Wynton Marsalis then. I was just another nigger standing out somewhere on the street whose head could be slapped and did get slapped.'… Nor does William Julius Wilson—who has a son-in-law on the Chicago police force…wonder why he was stopped near a small New England town by a policeman who wanted to know what he was doing in those parts. (Gates)

Given the Gates scandal and other instances where race undermines class, why do middle-class African-Americans endorse class performance as a means of weakening the hold of race?

E. Franklin Frazier sought to answer this question in the 1950s with his *The Black Bourgeoisie*. His work concerned the delusions of the black middle class. He writes that the middle class harbored a deep resentment of and separation from the so-called black masses. He believed that this class had deluded itself and weakened its revolutionary and political potential by emulating whiteness and disdaining blackness. The intra-racial class tension, evident in Lemon's manifesto, has existed since the end of slavery. Throughout that history, middle-class intellectuals and religious leaders aimed vitriol at working class black people who, they believed, were the reason the whole race was the target of white racism. Khalil Muhammad, who researches the historical background for the black criminal stereotype, writes that the black upper-class "had embraced Victorian ideals of morality and respectability, [and saw] … themselves as walking billboards for the race's capacity for equal citizenship, and distinguishing

themselves from 'uncouth' and 'criminally inclined' poor blacks… their talk about black criminality seemed indistinguishable from that of their white counterparts" (10). Lemon's condescending advice to the rest of the black community subconsciously replicates this earlier example because he presents himself, a respected TV personality, as a black exemplar. But, his solutions to the black community's "problems" suggest that somehow black people can avoid murder by belting their pants or through family planning. Frazier's research explores this type of deluded thinking in the middle class. He argues, "The black bourgeoisie… has created a world of make-believe to shield itself from the harsh economic and social realities of American life" (Frazier 229). Frazier's tone here shows a general impatience with the black middle class. Such pretensions are hypocritical and troubling. But in a racially divided country, it is not surprising that the vulnerable black community has over-emphasized the potential of middle-class status to protect them.

Currently, African American intellectuals, like Michael Eric Dyson, contend that members of the middle class have betrayed the black majority. Dyson argues that the contemporary classist rhetoric of respectability and personal responsibility "reinforce suspicions about black humanity" (Dyson 2). But these theorists gloss over the desperation and vulnerabilities that ground the rhetoric of "traitors." So, when Don Lemon publicly asserts that the answer to racial ills can be found in a good class performance, he may not be a self-hating race traitor, but rather desperately attempting to navigate between continued racial inequities and the promises of the American Dream.

The Hollow Class concerns these intersections of race and class in African-American literature. I argue that in response to these tensions, black people fabricate class identities, or class pass, to become members of privileged black communities. Because this is a wider cultural

phenomenon, I want to primarily focus on popular narratives because while black people are *sometimes* picking up canonical literature to read as a means of negotiating these identity challenges, we are *always* engaging with popular texts, films, and television. My project relates to the everyday-ness of identity formation and class anxieties and joins a larger critical conversation on class status and racial progress. Through researching popular media and the commonalities in author or producer approaches to class and race depictions, I argue that fear of isolation, racial vulnerability and loss of community cause class anxiety. I see this anxiety playing out in popular literature and media in response to specific historical moments that have challenged the definition of blackness in America. I also suggest that class passing, like racial passing, produces ambivalence and seclusion in the midst of belonging.

So, what is middle-class? While most Americans self-identify as members of this income segment of the population, the Pew Research Center found that about 50% of American households fall into that category. Pew defines middle-class broadly as possessing a median income, or between $41,000 and $125,000. Economists and federal agencies also characterize the middle class by education, wealth, aspiration, and consumption. For example, spending on food, entertainment, and housing; amassing an investment portfolio; and goals of home ownership and family vacations marks the American middle class. When race is added to the metrics, middle-class begins to look a lot different and more exclusive. In 2010, The US Bureau of Labor Statistics reported that the median income of African-Americans was $600 per week, 20% less than that of whites and that the black unemployment rate was double that of whites.

With racial roadblocks to economic parity in America, African Americans define “middle class” in terms that are not solely income based. Sociologist Mary Pattillo researches black middle-class culture and habits. She notes that behaviors and values are more important in

marking the black middle class than earnings. In addition to educational attainments, she writes, "People mow their lawns, go to church, marry, vote, work, own property" (Pattillo 15). I borrow from Pattillo's definition of the black middle class. However, I assert that these behaviors are not just a part of the American Dream. The black middle class participates in a series of performances, including home ownership, marriage, and educational attainments to insulate its members from the racism and economic vulnerability that the black lower class experiences in America. These performances appear in the narratives that follow, but each provides little or no security. Even characters that do not self-identify as middle-class class-pass and attempt to adopt these behaviors, marriage, home ownership, even vacationing, for protection. These behaviors express stability and community investment, the first steps to achieving middle-class membership and comfort.

Passing usually signifies a racial performance. Traditional passing is the rejection of black culture and people by phenotypically white, black people. For this project, I redefine the term "passing" to explain class performances. Passing occurs when characters push their personal and economic limits to perform middle-class values for acceptance to a genteel or privileged black community, a community that *seems* free from the social, racial, and financial vulnerabilities associated with the black masses. This passing functions much in the way that racial passing works; identity is presumed or assigned by physical attributes and class status is assumed. For example, *Passing's* Irene Redfield is immediately shown to a table in the luxurious Drayton's dining room because the waiters and maître d assume she belongs based on her appearance. In addition to her light skin, Irene is always meticulously dressed, signifying upper-class status to those around her. In fact, while she is at the Drayton, she is planning her class performance for the evening. Irene is focused on "the problem of the proper one of two frocks

for the bridge party" (15). Heretofore, critics have considered the social challenges and class benefits in race passing narratives. One such critic, Elaine K. Ginsberg, writes in *Passing and the Fictions of Identity* that passing problematizes identity and its creation, adoption or rejection, and the attendant rewards or penalties. Race passing involves cultural anxiety about boundaries and their transgression. Nella Larsen's Clare Kendry leaves the memories of an abusive father and poverty behind for life as the wife of a wealthy white man. She occupies two identities, one black in Harlem and one white downtown. Her dual identity frustrates Irene and her husband, who are both invested in racial and social separation. However, the boundary Clare has transgressed made her "so lonely since...not close to a single soul" (Larsen 52). Clare has the trappings of a wealthy life, but she is penalized with an isolated existence. Meanwhile, Irene, heavily invested in the social boundaries of race, evinces considerable anxiety about Clare throughout the story. One interpretation of Irene's nervous reaction to Clare is that Irene demonstrates the tension that a passer creates through frequent transgressions. In the stories that follow, characters struggle with class boundaries but regularly transgress them for a chance at a better life. Passing also applies to characters who down-class or hide higher-class status through silences and misrepresentations, although this occurs less often. Ginsberg's discussion of Adrian Piper, a woman who intentionally identifies with her black cultural heritage despite her light skin, explains this type of passing. Ginsberg writes:

> Piper's decision to pass as black, to self-construct an identity perceived by a white majority as less desirable disrupts the assumptions of superiority that buttress white privilege and self-esteem. Piper demonstrates how challenging racial categories threatens those whose sense of self-worth depends on their racial identity and the social status that accompanies it (15).

Reading Piper in this way opens a pathway to explain why an individual from the middle class would try to impersonate a less desirable class position and the perceived social rewards and material limitations of such self-invention.

While the loneliness that Clare alludes to is common in the literature of race and class passing, Kathleen Pfeiffer's work on passing in literature concerns self-definition. Pfeiffer defines passing as an expression of American individualism, rather than as a space of identity loss and racial rejection. To Pfeiffer, "literary characters who pass for white demonstrate the liberation available to Americans seeking self-actualization," but I question the level of self-actualization that is possible when founded upon race and class deception (14). This type of deceptive foundation does not equate to essentialism, as there are not universal truths about the social construct of race. However, race passers do lie about who they are. They will claim to be an orphan or claim mistaken identity when recognized. Class passers tell the same types of falsehoods, claiming they went to private schools, misrepresenting their parents' occupation or feigning legitimate, middle-class success that is actually built on criminal enterprise. All of this deception is unlikely to be the basis of true self-definition or actualization. Self-definition that challenges racial limitations is part of passing, and that perspective applies to class as well. Economic limitations have a similar effect on social prospects and therefore passing again seems necessary. For example, attending the right church, charity galas, or golf retreats can have a direct effect on someone's ability to better their economic and class circumstances through networking. Certain opportunities or business deals might be discussed at these venues and so passing is important to fit in, to be invited, and to rise in exclusive circles. While Pfeiffer looks at the positives of race passing, I focus on what the class passer loses, parts of identity and community like Allyson Hobbs's *A Chosen Exile*. Of passers she writes, "What they could not

know until they had successfully passed was that the light of freedom was often overshadowed by the darkness of loss" (27). Plessy v. Ferguson and the rise of minstrelsy and violence motivated passing in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. During that time, blackness became attached to objectification, and whiteness signified agency. Passers wanted to overcome social separations, mockery, and violence by aligning themselves with the dominant group. *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man's* unnamed narrator chooses to pass after witnessing a lynching. James Weldon Johnson writes, "A great wave of humiliation and shame swept over me. Shame that I belonged to a race that could be so dealt with…it was not necessary for me to go about with a label of inferiority pasted across my forehead" (147). Similar shame exists for class passers who are "so dealt with" as a result of perceptions of class status. Just as the Plessy court case prompted race passing because of the case's effect on African-American material and social access, key moments in the late twentieth century have led to intra-racial class anxiety and passing. These moments include the Clarence Thomas confirmation hearings, the trial of O.J. Simpson, the Californian repeal of affirmative action in college admissions and the election of Barack Obama. The authors and creators in this project show passing as a means of negotiating anxiety in response to these examples like the race passers of old.

Lastly, critic Giulia Fabi's *Passing and the Rise of the African American Novel* demonstrates how the passing phenomenon works in literature as a narrative approach to political action. Fabi's project, directed at salvaging pre-Harlem Renaissance writing from negative perceptions, examines language in passing narratives. Fabi writes, "the strategic bilingualism whereby characters shift from standard English into the black vernacular as needed, the many metanarrative statements that point directly to the double-voicedness of texts… the pervasive presence of black tricksters … are some of the extravagant and distinctive literary

strategies" (4). These vacillations also occur in popular narratives as characters employ similar identity/code switching when faced with different classes. Annelise Keating switches between Southern BVE and "standard" English in *How to Get Away with Murder*. Sarah Jane does the same in *Imitation of Life* (1959) to highlight the race and class differences she experiences. Passing narratives have been marginalized in favor of slave narratives and folk tradition as the true black story. Similar critical marginalization exists for popular literature in favor of canonical texts, but an authentic black story can come from pop culture.

Popular fiction is distinguished from literary fiction based on how it is sold. These books are affordably priced so that they can be bought on impulse. They are intended to fit into the racks near checkout counters at grocery stores and airport newsstands. Historically, paperbacks were printed on "pulp" and could fit in the reader's pocket, hence the term pulp fiction. This format is used for popular fiction like romances, thrillers, and mysteries. In addition to sales and design format distinctions, content sets popular fiction apart. Content and storylines are the key way that I categorize the texts, programming, and film in the project as "popular." These narratives are most famous for positive endings with intact binary oppositions. Light and darkness; heroes and cowards; rich and poor; in these binaries, the good characters are saved or enriched, and the evil characters are jailed or frustrated. These formulas are well liked because real life rarely fits into such clear categories with neat endings. Popular fiction and visual media appeal to a wide audience and follow a formula in its narrative approach. For example, romance books and films unfold as follows: boy meets girl, boy and girl have a misunderstanding and are separated, boy and girl reunite and live happily ever after. Janice Radway considers this genre and its effect on readers in *Reading Romance*. She maintains that popular romance allows its readers' to be indulgent in their personal lives and asserts readers' need to confront their fears of

masculine dominance, which drives them to patriarchal-focused romantic fiction. Radway posits that romance fiction audiences deal with these tensions in their daily lives, at home and work. The audience, comprised of a large contingent of stay-at-home mothers, uses reading and book club memberships to briefly escape family responsibility. This audience also reads popular literature to confront their fears of masculine dominance, which drives them to patriarchal-focused romantic fiction. Radway posits that romance fiction audiences deal with these tensions in their daily lives, at home and work.

African-American popular fiction readers also confront class and race tensions. The narratives Radway explores also have class intersections. Romance stories habitually feature lower class heroines who can achieve a better class status through their attachment to the heroes. These women use beauty and (almost always) accidental motherhood to secure their place in the upper crust. The regularity of this formula demonstrates that audiences eagerly seek stories about upward mobility. Radway's work with popular romance joins a larger critical conversation on the importance of popular fiction, particularly scholarship on the popularity of hard-boiled detective stories in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

Here I turn to Michael Denning's *Mechanic Accents*, which evaluates the classed elements of literacy and discusses the critical reception of pulp fiction and the reading habits of the laboring classes in the 19th century. In considering the role of popular fiction, he writes that "popular narratives … offer new metaphors for [class] divisions and contest the received and enforced metaphors of the dominant order…[I]n the subsequent period of prolonged crisis, class conflict, and labor organization, the cheap stories became a terrain of struggle about class, about the lineaments of the characters that made up the republic" (79). The same economic divisions between the working class (uneducated manual laborers) and the middle class (specialized non-

manual workers) that defined the 19th century still shape African-American culture. The community continues to equate racial freedom with middle-class values and performance. Unlike the stories that Denning discusses, African-American popular literature is consumed by lower-, middle-, and upper-class readers despite often being dismissed for lack of social protest and depth. Crime fiction is another genre that critics often judge as lacking in complexity. However, Erin Smith, author of *Hard-boiled: Working-Class Readers and Pulp Magazines,* asserts a different perspective. Smith analyzes the lives of the people who read and enjoyed popular fiction, particularly detective novels. These readers were worried about employment status, and they used these stories to mollify their anxieties. She writes that the popularity of these books in the early 20th century was not due to their focus on crime and policing, but rather to "the hard-boiled private eye's struggles for autonomy at work, his skill at reading class and social positions from details of dress and decor, his manly physical and rhetorical prowess, and his tortured relations with women" (17). Reading about a man who successfully traverses class situations gave hope to a group who felt their masculinity threatened by minority and gender progress**.**

African-American popular narratives provide relief for class anxiety that parallels the relief provided by the detective novel. Justin Gifford's *Pimping Fictions* enters the critical conversation on popular texts through the study of African-American crime fiction. As Gifford reviews fictions that center on pimps and hustlers, he notes that critics believe that "these books are formulaic and that their individual differences are insignificant in the face of their negative ideological effect. … [Critical appraisals do] not account for the significant differences between individual authors of the genre, nor [do they] take seriously that readers are anything other than passive dupes" (7). Gifford's work also explores the contentious relationship crime fiction authors have with their own middle-class status, and how these writers use crime fiction as an

answer to both white racism and the ineffectual black bourgeoisie. Like Gifford, I analyze a depth of political value in popular books and visual media and connect them to black literary and cultural traditions. Further, I hope that my work will help reevaluate what counts as literature. Practically, I want to reassess the literature classroom, using popular narratives that interest students as I teach the methods of literary criticism.

Popular fiction, television, and film help audiences explore sometimes contradictory messages about class in an accessible way through the passing trope. These are the novels and films that people read on the subway or rent on impulse; the books, films, and television recommended by Essence, USA Today, or Rotten Tomatoes' audience poll. They do the substantial work of involving black people outside the academy in processing how class and identity work together and highlight everyday instances of passing that many black people experience. Anxiety is a recurring reaction to the struggles over black Americans' class identification and racial loyalty in canonical fiction. Stories like Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*, Dorothy West's *The Wedding*, and Gloria Naylor's *Linden Hills* grapple with class and race tension. Popular narratives contend with these tensions similarly. Passers create a façade to impress other people, and that façade is reflected in film and television. Gwendolyn Foster contends in *Class-Passing: Social Mobility in Film and Popular Culture* that the popularity of this type of passing is rooted in fantasies about upward mobility and the American Dream and those fantasies play out through media consumption. She writes, "Class-passing simply has been normed so intrinsically that it no longer stands out, much like whiteness. Like whiteness, it has been dangerously adopted as a norm" (3). Whiteness is the norm and everything else is qualified or considered an other. Americans v. Asian-Americans, literature v. African-American literature, Voters v. Hispanic voters etc. The first term implies white, the second

speaks to an anomaly or an outsider. This type of language interferes with social justice conversations. Class works in the same way. This norm exists to buttress the American Dream of a classless society. If everyone is middle-class or passing as middle-class, then conversations about economic equity and opportunity are unnecessary. Foster focuses on "class-act" performances in the adaptations of *Anne of Green Gables*, *The Talented Mr. Ripley* and *West Side Story* These movies focus on the characters' ability to pass, rather than discussions about the child welfare system, sociopathy, or racial inequities, respectively. This project's use of popular media reflects Foster's theories on normativity and class, but my investigation focuses on popular literature and visual media where class passing is necessarily complicated by racial identity and performance.

My study of the popular begins with Karen Quinones Miller's *Satin Doll* and Sister Souljah's *The Coldest Winter Ever.* These novels, published in 1999, both grappled with the same sexual and racial vulnerabilities that America witnessed as Anita Hill stood up to Clarence Thomas in the early 90s. The Thomas confirmation hearings emphasized the demands of community and public performances of blackness and class. Although both Thomas and Hill are firmly middle-class in education, aspiration, and lifestyle, this was not the performance that Thomas relied on. Thomas invoked a lynching narrative as his defense against Hill's sexual harassment charges. His indictment of the confirmation proceedings signaled affinity with the African-American community, a group he had shunned prior to and since the scandal. In the wake of the hearings, Hill was vilified and alienated from the community while Thomas was lauded for his judicial accomplishments. The message from these proceedings was evident: A time might come when you need this community. This message was reinforced in 1994 with the murder trial of OJ Simpson. In addition to the communal triumph over his acquittal, the pre-trial

car chase underscored the idea that connection to lower class blackness is a necessary part of survival. Before his arrest for murder, Simpson and his friend Al Cowlings engaged police in a low-speed chase. Similarly, the narratives I examine in the first chapter explore identity anxiety and show how rising from a life on society's margins haunts the main characters' search for class ascension despite the alienation and vulnerability that accompany it.

In Chapter 2, I consider popular film as a means through which African-Americans confront ideas about gender, class membership, and identity. Donald Bogle's *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, & Bucks* reviews the history of black film, and his account of the "New Negro" considers how black class issues appear on film . I link popular filmmaker Tyler Perry to this history. His body of work is popular with black audiences. The films I consider were released in 2005 and 2006 and join a cultural shift in black America. In the early 2000s, our community celebrated the accomplishments of African Americans Kenneth Chenault, Franklin Raines, and Stanley O'Neal as CEOs of Fortune 500 companies. But this unprecedented success reawakens class anxiety within the black community. Tyler Perry's films dramatize this anxiety. In addition to the patriarchal messages Perry espouses through film, he enters the conversation on identity politics and class in his *The Diary of a Mad Black Woman* and *Madea's Family Reunion* with the inclusion of two class passers. In *Diary*, much attention is paid to the main character, Helen, and her love interest, Orlando; however, my study highlights the antagonist, Charles, Helen's estranged husband. Charles's thriving legal practice and his grandiose home suggest a man that epitomizes racial uplift and a new black identity married to middle-class striving. Yet, the audience discovers his earnings originate from narcotics trafficking rather than legal means. The criminalization that haunts upper-class performance in Perry's cinematic world is also evident in the character Carlos, the antagonist in *Madea's Family Reunion*. Carlos, like

Charles, presents himself as classy and successful. However, in key scenes, Carlos's mask slips and the audience discovers his embezzling and domestic violence. These films are adaptations of Perry's theatrical productions, which hit the stage in the wake of the OJ Simpson verdict. The Simpson scandal challenged African American suitability for class ascension and reenergized stereotypes about black male violence. Perry's films suggest that these stereotypes are true and only working class striving is appropriate for black people.

The late 90s and early 2000s were characterized by increasing social anxiety about the tension between class and race in the black community. In 1997, Tiger Woods won the Masters Championship, and in 2001 Condoleezza Rice and Colin Powell garnered national attention with their appointments to the presidential cabinet. A genteel blackness was in vogue, and Chapter 3 addresses the desire for respectability and social and class progress. The chapter begins with a discussion of Benilde Little's *Good Hair*, which emphasizes issues of class passing from within the upper classes. Little's Alice Andrews confronts intra-racial and interracial class conflicts in Manhattan society. Tonya Lewis Lee and Crystal McCrary Anthony focus on class passing in *The Gotham Diaries,* also set among the Big Apple's elite. The characters in the Lee/Anthony novel have tenuous membership in society's best circles, but their backgrounds and economic realities conflict with their social position, driving some to desperate acts to maintain a consistent upper-class performance. These novels were published in the midst of welfare reform and legal challenges to affirmative action policies at the college level. These legislative efforts added to the class anxiety African Americans experienced and may explain these authors' focus on class desperation. I argue that, like the government officials who drafted these reform and reversal policies, white characters in these novels are unable or unwilling to discern class differences among African Americans and interfere with class performance and class ascension. Despite

their carefully practiced class performances, these characters are reminded that race still trumps class. In considering these novels, I navigate the discourse on race, sex, and class and evaluate how these themes intersect in the depiction of a class passer and what the intersections say about black progress narratives.

Chapter 4 returns to visual media, with a consideration of Bravo's reality TV programming. *The Real Housewives of Potomac* follows five women as they class pass amid a "real" depiction of upper-class life in a Washington D.C. suburb. Two of these women are involved in interracial relationships for class security. During their discussions about these "love" interests, the women continually reference the men's race and wealth. Their racialized fortune-hunting romantic attachments suggest that black upward mobility is not possible without a white male, even one that lacks the right class performance himself. Again, I examine the history of black female sexuality and its position in fortifying or diminishing class status. *Potomac* comes at the tail end of the Obama years. I assert that this televisual focus on class and whiteness parallels the political attention to the Obama family's class and race performance. Instead of focusing on race, political pundits and opponents continually accused the First Family of being déclassé or elitist. However, the absence of whiteness in this American model family was key to the criticism. In response to such criticism, Andy Cohen, producer of *Real Housewives* and an Obama supporter, weaves stories that spoof women who navigate class by actively seeking white mates to further their class-pass. He mocks the mercenary interests of these women and the déclassé behavior of the men to challenge the connection between whiteness and the upper class.

To conclude, I discuss my own experiences with respectability politics, class passing, and ambivalence. What emerges in what follows is a recurrent theme regarding the middle class and

class performance: class status does not yield race status. Aspiring to middle-class values is important because it includes educational attainment and economic comfort. But, these authors and producers show the costs of performativity and deception, demonstrate that the mainstream remains dismissive of black identity and difference, and reveal the internalization of that dismissal. Therefore, the dogged pursuit of class status leads to further isolation instead of community power.

Let the Lady Pass: Femininity, Vulnerability, and Class

In 1991, Clarence Thomas shocked the nation with his response to Anita Hill's sexual harassment allegations. Hill alleged that while in Thomas's employ, he pressured her for dates, joked about his sexual prowess, and asked her to view pornographic films with him. After his categorical denial of any attraction to Hill, Thomas declared, "This is a circus. It's a national disgrace…It is a high-tech lynching for uppity blacks who in any way deign to think for themselves, and it is a message that unless you kowtow to an old order, you will be lynched, destroyed, caricatured by a committee of the U.S. Senate rather than hung from a tree" (Miller 118). By invoking the rhetoric of lynching in his response, Thomas effectively aligned himself with the black community in a very specific way. In calling upon the racial abjection of lynching, Thomas erased the class division that was clearly in place throughout the hearings. Neither Hill nor Thomas represents common conceptions of the middle and upper class and blackness. Their education and access to the halls of government and justice set them apart as members of an emerging black upper middle class. And while Hill's class status was underlined as the senators continually addressed her as "Professor Hill," Thomas's response downplayed his class status. At that moment, Thomas effectively *passed* to fit in with a black community that he anticipated would support him, a community that he had mostly distanced himself from before (and since) the hearings. Hill did not have a similar rhetorical strategy available to her, as lynching, in popular imagination, only involved black males. Thomas's ability to seamlessly class-pivot, and Hill's relative alienation from the community after the allegations, served as a touchstone of the 1990s, shaping literature and culture. The intersections of sex, class, and race in the scandal intensified black American worries about economics and status. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the popular literature of the period.

Karen Quinones Miller's 1999 book *Satin Doll* engages the connections of sex, class, and race as she charts the story of Regina Harris, a young freelance journalist in New York City, who has escaped a violent past as a shoplifter, fence, and escort. Miller focuses on the theme of the book as Regina confronts writer's block. Miller writes, "[Regina] was supposed to send a 2000-word article on the crisis of the African-American middle class to *Time Magazine* in three days and she had barely written 300 words… for some reason she couldn't think of anything to write" (80). On the surface, Regina's failure to produce an article for the prestigious publication can seem like a part of the writing process, but Miller emphasizes Regina's inability to write on class concerns. As Regina's life unfolds, the audience sees that issues of class, status, and belonging are ever-present in the character's mind and trigger passing grounded in her romantic relationships and friendships.

Another 1999 popular novel, *The Coldest Winter Ever,* represented similar instances of passing. Sister Souljah weaves the tale of Winter Santiaga, the daughter of dispossessed drug kingpin, Ricky Santiaga, who "deserved the best, no slum jewelry, cheap shoes, or knock-off designer stuff, only the real thing" (3). From the very beginning of the novel, Souljah emphasizes that status and presentation of wealth are important in Winter's Brooklyn enclave. This description of Winter's clothing shows the intensity of that. Winter goes to illegal lengths to ensure her class status. In response to sexual assaults, she fakes middle-class values that give the perception of comfort and control to her friends and intended romantic partners. Each of these stories portrays its main character's desire to be a member of an unwelcoming classed community and follows their anxiety and manipulation surrounding any attempts to force entrance and membership. In addition to entertaining readers with snappy dialogue and attention to popular culture in the 1990s, the main characters' reactions to class anxiety provide audiences

with a means of confronting community, economics, and race by imagining a myriad of classed scenarios with different outcomes. In this chapter, I argue that in response to sexual and economic vulnerabilities, Miller and Souljah's protagonists concentrate on passing as a means of negotiating sexual politics, which compromises their sense of self and community. The role of deception in passing is key. Since all passing is a series of performances, the performer or passer needs an audience to receive the presentation. Each woman experiments with class performance in clubs and with the commoditization of offspring and motherhood, but ultimately experience ambivalence regarding community and the concept of home. Faced with isolation from family and exposed to sexual violence, these characters seek membership in new communities and mirror new class possibilities represented by the Hill/Thomas scandal. The scandal between these two black cultural icons demonstrates class membership is dependent on performance and racial and gendered histories.

From Detective to Prostitute: The Popular Crime Story

Each of these stories chronicles the lives of women who use their sexuality to class pass. Both Regina and Winter dabble in prostitution to secure better financial positions. More specifically, they engage in indirect prostitution or concubinage. Indirect prostitution, as Christine Harcourt, researcher on HIV and sexuality, explains is much more ambiguous than direct prostitution (i.e. varying fees for varying sexual acts) because the transactional nature of sexual interactions is obscured by the exchange of expensive gifts in lieu of cash (Harcourt). For example, individual arrangements might entail sex with a landlord in place of rent or agreeing to become a kept woman. Souljah's and Miller's characters use the blunt language of sex and money, which joins a longer tradition of stories that concern crime and the fringe members of

society. The trajectory of popular crime fiction icons begins with the detective narrative, continues with the pimp autobiography, and contemporarily focuses on the prostitute story.

In her study of early twentieth century popular fiction, *Hard-Boiled: Working-Class Readers and Pulp Magazines*, Erin A. Smith explores the reading habits of working-class men. She posits that this group chose pulp and detective fiction because the genre aggrandized their gender, class, and professional identities. These works, published in pulp magazines and distributed in lending libraries, stressed masculinity and social advancement. With the changes wrought by the 1920s and women entering previously masculine spaces of work and leisure, pulp fiction functioned as a re-creation of a homosocial space for men. And at the core of this imagined space is the detective. In particular, these male-centered texts respond to the identity crisis men experienced because of women's suffrage, allowing women power in governance. The voting booth, a previously masculine space, and its attendant societal control, became gender-neutral. Enter the hard-boiled detective, the very definition of masculinity. Audiences were drawn to "the hard-boiled private eye's struggles for autonomy at work, his skill at reading class and social positions from details of dress and decor, his manly physical and rhetorical prowess, and his tortured relations with women" (Smith 17). At once, the detective represents class struggle, gendered performance, and sexual politics. His uber-masculinity, cunning intelligence, and romantic entanglements with femme fatales all assist him in establishing and maintaining male privilege. The detective, the unpredictable urban vigilante, possesses style, both in fashion and wordplay, which allows him to negotiate social and class situations to his advantage while remaining a symbol of power.

The detective fiction of the 1930s evolved when adopted by black authors in the 1940s-1970s. When writers like Chester Himes, Iceberg Slim, and Donald Goines wield the crime

fiction genre, they feature the racial implications of crime and emphasize expressions of black masculinity. Chester Himes's detectives, Grave Digger Jones and Coffin Ed Johnson, are characterized by their struggle with social, economic, and urban forces to defeat crime precipitated by society's racist patterns. These characters' masculinity and class performance inspired a generation of crime fiction more concerned with crime than detection, giving rise to the genre of the pimp autobiography. The pimp addresses the same concerns outlined in Smith's study of the detective, but the explicit inclusion of sexualized capitalism further highlights his masculinity. Like the detective, the pimp in popular narratives is a witty adventurer traversing the rugged frontier of the crime-riddled city. Justin Gifford explores conceptions of the pimp and his intersections with masculinity, capitalism, sexuality, and race in pimp narratives. In *Pimping Fictions*, he writes that the pimp is "a figure who organizes the oppositional style of the zoot suit and the hermeneutic of hipster talk into an economic system of sexual exploitation…[and] has been read as an icon of Black masculine working-class heroism" (45). While the detective can read and adapt to class to "get his man," the pimp character, too, is a class passer, performing complicated style, wealth, and security. He is an icon of upward mobility for black males, using style to subvert historically subservient and emasculated roles. The pimp's status symbolizes reclamation of power for black men and solidifies his popularity in the black crime fiction genre. Like the detective fiction before it, pimp fiction responds to the crisis of black masculinity. The 1965 Moynihan report cast a negative light on black masculinity by implying that black males were largely absent from the family unit, at once highlighting supposedly emasculating women and diminishing the influence of economic limitations. The report characterized black men as "financially dependent" and alienated from the black family (Moynihan). Hence, to mitigate this example of public emasculation of black men, the pimp emerges as a character who answers

these anxieties and humiliation. He overpowers the so-called emasculating woman and forces economic and sexual service from her; he bests the white males, that black men are continually normed against; and, he negotiates the carefully constructed performances of class and control.

Yet, a pimp does not exist without prostitutes, another fringe member of society with narratives joining the crime fiction genre. Similar admiration exists for the post-modern, sexually liberated female who commoditizes her body to achieve economic progress. In the pimp autobiography sub-genre of black crime fiction in the 1960s and 70s, the prostitute is an ancillary character, present only to burnish the display of ferocious black masculinity. However, as a new wave of black crime fiction emerges with more female authorship, the pimp's subjectivity is subverted in favor of the prostitute or female hustler. This character entices female audiences with her negotiation of gender politics, sexual pleasure, and material excess. Gifford contends, "Once the object of sexual exploitation in the narratives of Iceberg Slim and Donald Goines, the urban female … uses her sexuality as a form of mobility… [She] gains power by adopting a number of tactics to subvert the aims of would be pimps, hustlers, and gangsters and reverses the power dynamics in those misogynistic relationships" (152-153). The modern street fiction genre, which Souljah and Miller engage, allows the prostitute to reach the heights that the pimp and detective had in the past. Now, with the prevalence of women in this genre, female protagonists like Winter and Regina open a space for female readership to revel in the uber-femininity, desirability, and class mobility of the call girl.

The literary focus on prostitution is reminiscent of the popular romance genre, namely in Harlequin romances, replete with instances of prostitution "light." Authors of books like *The Italian's Blackmailed Mistress* or *Untamed Italian, Blackmailed Innocent*, focus their stories on brutal, wealthy heroes who offer money and class advancement for sexual gratification with a

meek or vulnerable heroine. Couched in the language of blackmail and centered on costly medical treatments, tuition, or other sympathetic causes, Harlequin and Mills Boon romance authors have dabbled in the world's oldest profession with much success. So, while prostitution "light" gives her access to sexual expression and economic freedom, the heroine's dependency upon the hero and traditional gender roles reproduce patriarchy. The apparently weakened position of the heroine, despite pleasurable sex and money, reads like an exercise in futility. However, reinforcing power dynamics allows readers to confront fears of sexual expression and economic insecurity. The hit novel *Sex in the City* explores the female response to the "indirect" prostitute in the vignette "International Crazy Girls." The character sketch follows the lifestyle of Amalita Amalfi, a well-bred woman who participates in this indirect prostitution, to the consternation and admiration of the narrator. The dispassionate Amalfi shuffles between loveless relationships with wealthy men, collecting money, designer clothing, and expensive jewelry along the way. As the narrator recounts the reunion of Bradshaw and Amalfi, there is a mix of emotions in the tone. Candace Bushnell writes, "You middle-class American women who always want to hook a man, you're the ones who must play by the rules. But there is a certain type of woman—very beautiful and from a certain class—who can do whatever she wants" (49). At first read, Bushnell's assessment of these women can be read as jealous admiration for an exotic man-eater, better at the dating game than the average Jane. But this assessment expresses the intensity of the class limitations that ordinary women experience regarding their sexuality. Because a woman is middle class, certain sexual mores are expected. Later, however, as an unemotional and cynical Amalfi is recounting the breakdown of her latest relationship, she underscores its transactional nature. She says, "I was doing my geisha routine, back rubs, bringing him tea, reading the newspaper first so I could point out what was interesting" (50). Describing her role in

the relationship as a "routine" highlights the performative elements of her sexuality. Also, by invoking the geisha, Bushnell is challenging her readers to see Amalfi in commoditized and classed terms. The geisha is a high-class, trained escort, focused on entertainment for men of Japan's upper crust. Amalfi and other escorts or indirect prostitutes serve the same type of men though sex plays a specified role, rather than the implied role in the geisha's world. Through her protagonist, who acts as an observer and tour guide through much of the novel, Bushnell is focusing the joy and even jealousy that her female audience feels toward a woman who easily collects male attention, designer gifts, or captivating life experiences. Yet, Bushnell also shows the downside of Amalfi's experiences. When she is sexually unavailable due to pregnancy, her lifestyle downgrades considerably. She relies on public assistance to survive, which raises questions about the level of power she actually has. Souljah and Miller both engage these themes of sexual vulnerability. While these women seem powerful, their dependency on men for financial security leads to only a tenuous grip on their preferred class position. So, the passing they have done to secure these relationships and status does not yield permanent improved status.

Too Sexy To Read

Amalfi, Winter, and Regina use sex to secure their status, and authors in this genre describe it in detail. Because of the sexualized elements of woman-authored genre fiction, critics have dismissed the works and focused solely on their negative sociopolitical consequences. However, in her brief treatise on the war between the academy and the so-called streets, Kemeshia Randle argues for the elimination of literary hierarchies based on value judgments about content. She argues:

> This trend in the academy – of critiquing, defining, and therefore limiting certain works only to revive them later – does not seem to be shifting. Those who suffer are popular fiction writers, like [Zora Neale] Hurston, who resist and revolt against the academy's prescribed norms …It would be a disservice to the field of literature/literary criticism to

> dismiss the works of popular fiction writers today… they provide an intergenerational dynamic by which to bridge the gap between generations of scholarship, specifically that on black female sexualities. (15)

Randle also points out that Richard Wright and Alain Locke did not appreciate the depth of possibility in Hurston's work because they were concerned with cross-racial perceptions of blackness. Now, Hurston has achieved literary giant status, but her concerns with sexuality and folk culture were maligned for their perceived negative effect at the time of initial publication. Richard Wright, in particular, suggested that Hurston's work lacked a social protest angle and undermined black people in the eyes of whites. The same might be said of contemporary critics' reactions to the street fiction genre, although the new focus is on its sexual and criminal content. In his critique of the street fiction genre, "Their Eyes Were Reading Smut," author Nick Chiles blasts the genre and dismisses it as pornography. He writes that "serious black fiction is crowded out by sleaze" (Chiles). His assessment of popular literature is reductive because at the foundation of the novels is a grave anxiety about membership in certain classes and the performances necessary to achieve that membership. Chiles' inability to analyze the sexual and criminal content mirrors Wright's dismissal of Hurston. Neither critic was interested in new authors who provided nuanced explorations of black life, particularly of black female life.

Despite critical disapproval, the popularity of generic fiction remains. The interest in the detective and his representation of masculinity to a male working-class community in the 20s, 30s, and 40s mirrors the current interest in the prostitute autobiography. In her review of the role of gender in popular fiction, Kaye Mitchell analyzes the popularity of chick-lit and its subgenres, the erotic memoir and the prostitute memoir. Mitchell explains that this corner of popular fiction appeals because it is supposed positive example of female sexual agency that demonstrates a way that women participate in capitalism to their sole advantage. She explains that generic fiction

accomplishes "contradictory tasks… to explore and yet contain—even suppress—anxieties about changing gender roles… to titillate readers…whilst speaking to quite personal, private and idiosyncratic desires and fears" and providing escapism (137). While fulfilling escape fantasies, popular sex blogs and erotic memoirs highlight women's shift from sexual object to sexual subject. However, these tales of sex solidify patriarchy rather than subvert it. If the protagonist in tales like *Intimate Adventures of a London Call Girl* and *Girl with a One-Track Mind* is leaning into the commoditization of sex, she becomes the casualty of patriarchal limits that highlight vulnerability. To be a sexual subject, men must consider these women desirable objects, which often excludes women of different ages and body types. The worth of these sexual subjects is tied to their ability to maintain conventional feminine attractiveness and self-police through the male gaze. At their core, these narratives still privilege men, while claiming that men are ancillary to their lives. Souljah's and Miller's main characters also attempt to control their sexual interactions by obscuring their vulnerabilities in front of the men who give them access to different classes. In focusing on becoming the professional girlfriend or "wifey" of powerful mates with economic security, they can ignore institutional and societal failings that have not allowed for class security of these women on their own. The commodification of sex *seems* to erase economic vulnerability and increase access to the upper classes, but ultimately fails on both counts. Their class access remains dependent on men, which highlights an overall sense of loss and loneliness. Miller encapsulates this theme toward the end of Regina's story. Regina's middle-class husband locks her out of their home, proving to her that she is alone despite all she has done to belong. Meanwhile, Souljah portrays Winter's loneliness by locking the character in. Her boyfriend, Bullet, purposefully leaves his "vicious-looking, no nonsense killer" Rottweilers alone with Winter in their apartment, effectively caging Winter in their bedroom for an entire

day (267). When she asks him to corral the dogs and release her, he replies, "Them some loyal bitches. They do whatever I tell them to do. I tell them to sit, they sit…Are you loyal, Winter?" (269). Bullet compares Winter to a pet, demonstrating his low opinion of her and her dependency on him. Though Winter talks tough throughout the story, like the characters of erotic memoirs, her freedom is tenuous or nonexistent. Winter views her relationship with her boyfriend as the pinnacle of class status, but his treatment of her shows just how much she has given up. By leaving Winter alone all day, caged in the apartment, Souljah emphasizes Winter's alienation from family, friends, and community. Winter's dogged focus on status means that there is no one to call for help and nowhere to run after this abusive incident.

Yet, this style of prostitution continues to intrigue audiences. Despite accentuating the disadvantages of the lifestyle, the allure remains. Audiences focus on female gratification as a place of power detailed in these stories. These novels perform important work in helping readers negotiate power dynamics in everyday life. In addition to the focus on sexual agency and pleasure, *Satin Doll* and *The Coldest Winter Ever* allow audiences to fantasize about class possibilities. While Winter and Regina have vastly different experiences with class, sex, and race, the approaches to relationships during their most troubled times reflect a particular attitude: Men provide class and financial protections, women provide sex. No love or other sentimental emotions are exchanged. The transactional nature of their relationships underscores the economic determinist concerns outlined in these books. Gifford contends that "in a range of complicated and contradictory ways, black crime fiction displays deeply conflicted feelings about the styles and ethos of the criminal underworld as well as about middle-class discipline and respectability" (Gifford 5). This tension is ever-present in the books as both heroines attempt to realize power in either extreme.

Women might find even the appearance of power alluring in the wake of sex scandals of the 1990s. During the Thomas confirmation hearing, Anita Hill was careful to toe the line between stereotypes. On the one hand, black women are characterized as sexually available and aggressive, and on the other hand, they are pigeonholed as neutered. The first stereotype is a relic from American slavery to excuse systematic rape. The second is the response to the first, a manner of security and reputation creation. The hearings challenged Hill to walk that line, and the results were negative, proving to black women that Hill's status, race, class, and gender have material implications. To position her as a sexual being, seemingly necessary for the male chorus of inquisitors, her former boyfriend described their relationship, but in such a way as to never escape the neutered stereotype. John Carr, Hill's former boyfriend explains to the senators, "We didn't get but so far" (Miller 236). His characterization of the relationship is nonsexual, and Hill herself noted that it took place mostly over the phone. In her study of the sexual and power dynamics of the hearings, Lisa Thompson describes Hill's performance of chastity. Thompson writes, "With guarded language, she makes revelations about her relationships but never undercuts her image as a private, chaste black lady…by presenting them [the relationships] as informal dates, she implies minimal sexual involvement… [and] challenges the perception of her as asexual or undesirable but shields her from accusations of promiscuity**"** (Thompson 36). Hill's carefully constructed performance fails to empower her to the level of believability and leaves her disempowered and a social and racial pariah. The theme of female sexual vulnerability in classed environments again takes to the national stage during the Monica Lewinsky scandal. While President Clinton remained relatively unscathed by the scandal, the national media blamed and shamed Lewinsky and alienated her as a social pariah. The President's masculinity and role in the ruling class insulated him in ways not available to Lewinsky, despite her upper-class

status. With these two important stories in the national conversation, the desire to subvert these power dynamics to present women as empowered through sexual commodification explains the allure of the prostitute in mass-market women's fiction.

The Protected Black Lady?

Both *Satin Doll* and *The Coldest Winter Ever* explore responses to sexual vulnerabilities based on class. Winter and Regina are victims of violence, specifically rape, and they resolve to pass as a coping strategy. Regina's life story is uneventful until her mother suddenly dies, leaving Regina responsible for her elder sister and niece. Before this tragic event, Regina's mother, a bookkeeper, solidified the family's place in the middle class through the performance she expected from herself and her daughters. Miller writes, "she tried to raise her daughters as good West Indian girls – demure, polite, and ladylike" (36). Miller's description of Regina's rearing is reminiscent of Anita Hill's class performance at the hearings. Regina's mother, Matilda, is trying to evoke the behavior requirements of a black lady in her daughters. Despite the neighborhood that they live in, middle-class performance is possible and even necessary because Matilda is a single mother without the protection of a husband and father for her girls. She instills early in Regina that the performance of a black lady is the only shield available to her. Matilda's death left thirteen-year-old Regina economically vulnerable with her sister's baby to raise. In order to maintain the class performance, Regina turns to a life of crime, but her attempt at class-passing is unconvincing and ultimately misread. Shoplifting is Regina's crime of choice and requires her to age-pass (dress, speak and fake confidence of someone older than her 13-15 years) to gain access to the boutiques and stores that she victimizes. Regina gains the attention of a neighborhood drug dealer, Rico, with whom she has a mild flirtation. In this relationship, the commodification of sex becomes a possible route to security. Since she is naïve,

she believes that these interactions are benign and based on affection. Thus, she misreads his intentions. She avoids intimacy with him until he rapes her. After the attack, Rico apologizes and makes a telling statement about sex and money. He says, "I want to make you my woman. Let me take care of you.… I'll buy you anything you want" (Miller 172). In response to his crime, he offers Regina class and economic security that have eluded her since her mother's death. In her young mind, money, sex, and class are all confused, and men are clearly in control of all three. As the girlfriend of a drug dealer, Regina has life has more security than as a shoplifter. Hence, this is a class climb for her. The attack hardens Regina, and Miller shows the audience that she has bought wholesale into a new way of life. In her final verbal exchange with Rico, Regina says, "don't you think I'm worth it… Daddy?" (Miller 173). Regina uses this type of language to encourage Rico to give her money as a parting gift and clearly refers to the previous assault in this conversation. Regina gets to test drive her new sexuality, a commodity, and it's worth to men. By calling him "daddy" Regina is appealing to his ego and is highlighting his status in their relationship. "Daddy" suggests that he is her caregiver and protector rather than her rapist. It also links to a common term of endearment within a romantic relationship, thus giving Rico hope that they can move past this abuse. However, Regina has lived most of her life without a father figure. As such, calling Rico daddy lets the audience know that she can live without this daddy, too. This scene hints that Regina has power and has not been hobbled by this assault. Instead, she continues to use her newfound commodity to become the "professional" girlfriend of various drug dealers. In actuality, she is the underage orphan left completely vulnerable by institutional failings of the social services system, her community, and her remaining family.

Regina's decision to "sell" herself is reminiscent of Winter's choice to do the same. Winter is also sexually violated, but when she is victimized, she is already amid actively

attempting to redefine her class status. Winter's response to this violation mirrors Regina's response: detachment for survival's sake. After her life is upended in the wake of her father's arrest and her mother's assault, Winter flails, desperate to reclaim her former status as queen bee. She has minimal success attracting men like her father, particularly her reluctant hero, Midnight, so she targets another type of moneyman, GS, a rapper. On the class spectrum, the rapper outclasses the drug dealer, and Winter will have to pass to get this rapper's attention. Once again, Winter is down to her last few dollars, and rather than spend that money to help her family, she buys a Calvin Klein dress to pass for GS. Winter is not middle class, however; she aspires to those class goals. Particularly, she sees marriage as a way to secure status, a middle-class value. Winter muses, "just to keep it real, I had my eyes set on the big catch, GS. I knew if I could hook him, my problems would be over. Life would be all Range Rovers, rugs, chips, cheddar, and pleasure" (Souljah 294). Again, the audience is exposed to Winter's avaricious attitude toward material comfort that a life with GS brings. She makes no mention of enjoying his art form, his personality, or his company. She has no illusions about a deep relationship with him, just with his bank account. She believes she has the chance at a party and makes her move. GS's entourage encourages her to have sex with him and points her to a room where he is allegedly resting. However, the group has played a malicious trick on Winter by misleading her about the identity of the man she's been intimate with. At first glance, Winter seems to be the victim of bad luck and cruelty. However, the legislatures of twenty-three states consider this type of sexual fraud rape by deception. Though physical force was not used in Winter's story, her sexual autonomy and consent had been ignored through impersonation and dishonesty. Winter only briefly manifests anger when she discovers the deception, and the underlying sexual violation remains largely unexamined. Winter seems more upset about having wasted her commodity on a

nobody than about the sexual violation itself because having sex with this random man does not come with any material rewards. Winter thinks to herself, "Vendetta is the word, except it isn't strong enough" (Souljah 328). This musing is the extent of her introspection over this rape. This encounter serves to underscore her vulnerability and incites her to return to the class of her origin, the criminal class. However, to attract a new protector, Winter must pass.

After her attempt to lure GS ends in rape, her life careens, but in a stroke of luck, she connects with Bullet, a drug dealer. Initially, Bullet is the character Souljah uses to titillate her female audience and show Winter's free and pleasurable sexuality. Winter celebrates her 18th birthday with Bullet, drugs, and sex. Because she seems to control her sexuality and pleasure during her encounter with Bullet, the audience is led to believe that she can escape paradigms of patriarchy, especially male-centered sexual encounters. Souljah writes of Winter's pleasure, "All the energy in my body started running wild and high, then moved to the center and released" (85). Writing about orgasm is not raunchy, as Chiles charges. Rather it explores black female sexuality in a positive light. Winter's pleasure here is reminiscent of Janie's pear tree in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. The clear language and lack of metaphor to describe sexual pleasure show that black female sexuality does not need camouflage. The sexual pleasure and power that she achieved during her birthday interlude are quickly subverted when the audience discovers that Bullet has videotaped the encounter and shown it publicly as a means of humiliating Winter's father. This type of violation led to the passage of Stephanie's Law in New York, which makes it illegal to use a device to secretly record or broadcast a person undressing or having sex when that person has a reasonable expectation of privacy. However, this law was not enacted until 2003. Hence, this violation within the narrative goes unmarked and unpunished. When Souljah reintroduces Bullet to the storyline, the audience is reminded of her initial encounter

with him, the sexual details, and illusory power associated with this character. Now, the audience expects more sexual violation from him. As is the case with the rapper's entourage and sexual assault, Winter does not dwell on Bullet's previous violation because she wants to secure access to a class that is familiar to her. Her inability to confront these violations demonstrates the loss and alienation, even from self, associated with class-passing. Winter's access to class is dependent on negotiating sexual politics. She ultimately suppresses any reactions to abuse. Having Winter quickly gloss over the hurt from their initial relationship wrenches away whatever power the female audience may have vicariously experienced through Winter's pleasure–seeking sexual behavior, and reinforces familiar societal norms.

To entice Bullet back into her life, she must perform her former class, one not readily available to her given her economic straits. She passes as a still-reigning queen of Brooklyn with access to the material security of her youth. In a telephone conversation with her target, she conceals the fact that she has no money and no place to live. She says, "I just came out here to do a little shopping. You know how I do it" (Souljah 359). Winter lies about her financial circumstances to prevent Bullet from believing that she is desperate for his protection. To make the best performance of class she can, Winter spends her "last yard" on lingerie from Victoria's Secret. The novel is rife with references to designer clothing because these are visible means of performing class in Winter's culture. In addition to Victoria's Secret, Winter is focused on Nike, Coach, Nordstrom's, Armani and Lexus (362). The usage of so many name brands on a single page of text in the novel underscores the importance of conspicuous consumption in passing. Once again, Winter endorses middle class values because she considers marrying Bullet to secure her class status. Being with Bullet also requires Winter to down-class. The Santiaga family has a longer history of success in the drug business than upstart Bullet does. As a result,

he does not have the confidence or cool that Winter is used to with her father. Bullet's lack of security in his new position as drug kingpin directly affects Winter and makes her sexually vulnerable to him. Winter aborts the result of the aforementioned sexual assault and Bullet refuses to give her time to heal from the surgery. Souljah writes, "he pulled my head up and said, 'a nigga wants pussy. This is my pussy, right?' He questioned. I answered with a nod.… How can I describe the feeling? It wasn't pleasure. It wasn't pain. It was nothing, like a dick plunging into an ocean. But still, I conjured up some moans for him" (406 – 407). The use of profanity here provides another reason for critical dismissal of works like this. But rather than simple vulgarity, the use of tart language has a purpose in the popular fiction and this narrative in particular. Profanity gives voice to strong human emotion, but it also encourages a level of familiarity with the audience. Like speakers, these authors use profanity as a means "of marking and developing intimacy, because, in using it, you speak things with one or two other people as though you are talking to yourself" (Adams 59). By using these coarse slang terms for genitalia, Souljah is capturing Winter's visceral reaction to sex with Bullet in a way that more sedate language cannot. The reader knows that this is painful and degrading. Furthermore, Souljah is pressing the reader to share a confidence regarding this abuse. Using profanity to characterize it allows Winter to vent her feelings to a friend, something she sorely lacks. This brutal sex scene between Bullet and Winter provides a stark contrast to their previous relationship. Her inability to regain access to the pleasure she experienced with him before emphasizes Souljah's critical statement about class, sex, and gender. Though Winter seems to have it all together, and initially female audiences cheer for her sexual prowess, in reality she is just as vulnerable as before. So, while critics like Chiles focus exclusively on the titillation of the sex scenes in popular fiction, it is only in drawing the contrast between the pain of this scene and the pleasure of an earlier one

that the audience can see the holes in Winter's plan and confront the class-based and sexual vulnerabilities that remain.

Miller also uses Regina's sexuality to both excite and warn her readers. The pleasure Regina experiences later in the novel is undercut by her continual class struggle. Miller uses explicit sex scenes to soften the previous violations. Despite the pleasure of sex with Charles, Regina's love interest, Miller does not allow Regina's sexual independence to go unchallenged throughout the novel. Though she is sexually autonomous as an adult, the audience cannot escape the prior rape. Furthermore, Charles finds other ways to remind Regina of her subordinate class status despite the power she enjoys in their intimacy. Both authors' use of romance and sex to convey greater meaning connects to Janice Radway's discussion of the role of popular fiction in readers' confrontation of societal norms. In *Reading the Romance*, Radway suggests that female readers seek out novels bursting with female sexual expression in conflict with male domination in order to manage their own relationships to both. Radway argues for the purposefulness of the genre. She writes, "romance [is]…an exploration of the meaning of patriarchy for women. As a result, it is concerned with the fact that men possess and regularly exercise power over them in all sorts of circumstances. By picturing the heroine in relative positions of weakness, romances are not necessarily endorsing her situation, but examining an all-too-common state of affairs in order to display possible strategies for coping with it" (75). When Souljah and Miller problematize sexual independence in their heroines, the results are not necessarily anti-feminist, a common charge against generic fiction, but a dose of class reality.

The Long Shadow of White Men

In addition to intraracial sexual violence, both Winter and Regina must contend with interracial sexual dangers. Souljah and Miller amplify the sexual pressures on these women to

emphasize their decisions to class pass. Winter and Regina are susceptible to sexual degradation not only at the hands of black men, but also white ones: white men often misread their class performances and attempt to use the women for sexual gratification. This type of sexual powerlessness is reminiscent of the congressional hearings with Anita Hill. Long after the bygone era of antebellum South, stereotypes about the sexual availability of black women were paraded through the halls of congress in the 1990s, proving that interracial sexual vulnerability was still a concern for black women regardless of their class status. America watched as senators, divided along party lines, attacked Hill's allegations and re-categorized them as minor offenses. Republican Senators Arlen Specter and Alan Simpson were particularly intense in their interrogation of Hill's allegations. Throughout the proceedings, both of these men tried to reposition Thomas's comments as benign. As he considered the evidence she offered, Sen. Specter said, "this is not too bad, I can read it –' Thomas liked to discuss specific sex acts and frequency of sex'… Prof. Hill, you said you took it to mean that Judge Thomas wanted to have sex with you, but in fact, he never did ask you to have sex, correct?" (Miller 42). Specter is offering a value judgment on the severity of Thomas's comments. His interrogation implies that because Thomas did not ask Hill directly for sexual intercourse, her sensibilities should not have been offended. Further, Sen. Simpson and others charged that because Hill had continued contact with Thomas after the sexual harassment, what he said must not have been offensive. The scene that this proceeding created for the American public is one of the white males deciding what is or is not offensive to a black female. As the senators tried to characterize Thomas's interactions with Hill as non-threatening, black women, including Souljah and Miller, saw a re-victimization of Hill through a tone that suggested that she had no sensibilities to offend. Despite her attempts to position herself as an all-American girl from a conservative Oklahoma family, the room full of

white males ultimately would not believe her performance of "appropriate" womanhood and rejected her allegations. The Hill scandal showed in vivid detail that these misidentifications of the black lady were still a part of the discourse on race, class, and their intersections with sexuality.

This type of misreading of black womanhood by white males has informed the literature of black women. Beginning with *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, black women have been writing about the prurient advances of white men and their inability to escape sexualization. In *Quicksand*, Nella Larsen provides a framework for reading similar instances of white male marginalization of black womanhood and sensibilities in the twentieth century. While Helga Crane searches for work and family in Chicago, she is often accosted by white men who insist that she is a prostitute. Larsen writes, "a few men, both black and white, offered her money, but the price of the money was too dear" (34). Although Larsen is discussing both races of men in this instance, there is another exchange that highlights the role of white men in the sexual vulnerabilities of black women. Larsen writes, "a man, well-groomed and pleasant spoken, accosted her. On such an occasion, she was wont to reply scathingly, but tonight his pale Caucasian face struck her breaking faculties as too droll… He retired in haste probably thinking her drunk, or possibly a little mad" (29). Larsen makes sure that the audience does not miss the undertones of this exchange despite the fact that the man has no dialogue in the text. Her use of "accosted" lets the reader know that nothing positive happened in this interaction. It is interesting to note that the Senators in the Hill proceedings also accosted Anita Hill on the same basis, her sexuality and alleged availability. Larsen demonstrates that in failing to distinguish between Helga and an actual prostitute, these men are failing to recognize the class performance of the black lady, which Helga is trying to perform. This series of misidentifications helps to drive

Helga East. By moving to New York and among the black elite, Helga's class performance has a better chance of being believed and accepted.

Regina is similarly constrained by popular perceptions of the sexual availability of black women. After Regina is shot, a doctor approaches her for sex in the hospital. When she flatly refuses his proposition, he reminds her of her weakened position and sexual powerlessness. He insists, "all I want is a blow job… It's not like you've never done one before… I wouldn't call the nurses if I were you… I just came in to check on you and then you propositioned me. I should be shocked, but then again, why would I be, considering the fact that you're nothing but a two-bit whore" (Miller144). The doctor's assurance that Regina would be disbelieved echoes the disbelief that the senators express toward Hill. Calling her "a two-bit whore," situates their encounter in class terms. "Two-bit," a dated monetary denomination, refers to his assumption about how much money she might charge for sex (twenty-five cents). Also, he calls her "nothing" which shows that in his eyes, she has no class status to recognize. Regina tacitly accepts his characterization of her because she does not raise the alarm. By including a white male in the narrative, Miller is invoking the historical stereotype that claims black women do not have sensibilities to offend. Further, positioning the violation in the hands of a doctor exacerbates it. This scene mirrors the historical moment with the senators at the confirmation hearings. Both the lawmakers and the doctor have a reputation, as helpers and authoritarians. Yet, in these cases, both real and fictive, the power of whiteness and male sexual desire supersede occupation and propriety. Regina's response echoes the response that Winter had to her sexual violation. Once again, she remains alienated from the pain and hurt of this exchange and quickly pivots to focus on class. Miller writes, "She'd show him. She'd show the world. She was just as good as anybody else. In fact, she was better than most, and she'd prove it" (149). By

repeating ‘show’, Miller focuses her response on perfecting a performance that can be better accepted by men like the doctor. Yet, because she does not allow her character time to confront and negotiate these violations, Miller reminds her audience again of the loss of self inherent in passing. Further, Miller impresses upon the reader that social standing and class do not provide the cover Regina (and perhaps the reader) seek.

Winter experiences similar treatment in a pharmacy. Souljah pushes the exchange even further than Miller, stressing the same point. Winter wanders into the pharmacy to procure bandages to dress an injury. After he accuses her of shoplifting, a white security officer orders her to his office for a search. She notices his reaction to the search, “this bastard, whose hands couldn’t stop shaking, ran over the center of my back… he then ran his two hands from my shoulder blades right over each of my titties, cupping them a bit… I looked down at this man’s little hard dick poking through his pants” (Souljah 258 – 259). When he asks her to disrobe completely to further the search, the reader is left for a moment cringing, feeling the imminent violation. Winter has a brief internal struggle between complying and knowing what will likely happen should she disrobe and reviewing the possibilities of raising the alarm and confronting his depravity. In a classic move of popular fiction, Souljah spares the audience with an “in the nick of time” arrival of a female security officer, who simultaneously shames the male officer and saves Winter. The audience breathes a sigh of relief at the arrival of this savior, yet the violation has already occurred. The officer, another man in an authoritarian job, does not have the opportunity to further his sexual agenda, but the implications of sexualized racism are palpable. He polices and confines the black female body because of his assumption about Winter’s class, economic status, and sexual availability. Her blackness stands as a symbol of poverty and criminality that allows him access to her, while her gender makes her further

vulnerable to sexual overtures. Souljah and Miller use these interracial exchanges as an impetus for more class performances in which each heroine hopes to be insulated from further violation. However, both authors complicate this assumption about security by showing that both intra-and interracial exchanges are fraught with the possibility of rape and disparagement.

As the authors have outlined the vulnerabilities these women face based on perceptions of class, their characters are set up for new class performances with varying degrees of success and failure. Each woman experiments with class performance in clubs and the commoditization of offspring and motherhood, but each experiences ambivalence regarding community and displacement from home. These elements work together to focus both authors' opinions regarding loneliness of class passing.

In The Club

Regina's group parties at a club called Perks, while Winter and company carouse at a concert hall with the same nightclub effect. These concentrated environments demand class performances from the protagonists. The club represents a place for adult play, but in his study on bouncers and behavioral risk at clubs, George Rigakos finds that class plays a critical role in the function and popularity of a club. Through the lens of Foucauldian theory regarding gaze, Rigakos invokes the panopticon of the prison as a disciplining and punishing factory where one constantly watches many, transmuting that theory for the nightclub. He refers to the nightclub as a "synopticon" or a disciplining and pleasure factory, where the few watch the many and the many watch the few. While this study focuses mostly on the disciplining factors that preoccupy bouncers and security officers, he also considers class in the nightclub. He writes:

> Inside the nightclub space, the optical orgy of being seen is valorized as a productive process. Surveillance of patrons becomes the productive activity insofar as it creates static spaces of optic consumption, of privilege, distinction, and hierarchies of symbolic capital.… The few watch the many and the many watch the few. VIP and celebrities are

> roped off in display pens, privileging the scene with their injection of elite social capital, and we are in turn made special by the space vested with this distinction. Patrons are extolled to valorize the symbolic, the superficial, the material. Depth of communication is intentionally stunted, manipulated in deference to the optics goal (188 – 189).

The focus on the gaze in the nightclub compels the patrons to rely entirely on image and performance to assess class status. New York clubs are known for their limited access through the class-conscious, watchful eyes of bouncers. The club encourages the visual cues of consumption (top shelf liquor or bottle service), placement, and costuming (fresh hairstyles, designer wardrobe). The performative elements of the club attract patrons who wish to class pass, at least for a few hours. The link between performance and class in the club explains why Miller and Souljah feature this space in the novels. Both Winter and Regina party in clubs and concert halls in New York in order to attract men and present their tenuous or falsified class status to a captive audience. Souljah writes, "Brooklyn's finest, Uptown and the Boogie down filled the concert hall.… Females and spring leathers, leathers, plastic, leaf, cellophane shorts, skirts, the works. Enough gold on necks, arms, and teeth to fill Fort Knox… it was a car show, a hair show, a fashion show, and a hoe show all rolled up into one" (162). Souljah's use of "show" reminds the reader that performance is most critical in this environment. Prior to going out that evening, she had procured, albeit illegally, a new designer outfit for the event. To complete her performance Winter rents a limousine to transport her to the club and fit in with the status quo of consumption. When confronted with Natalie's (her former best friend) superior placement in the club, in VIP, Winter immediately feels angry and alienated from the class that she formerly occupied so easily. Souljah highlights the location of the two women. Natalie is in the section reserved for the wealthy, which is located above the general patrons. Natalie is literally looking down on Winter at this moment, creating in Winter a synoptic frenzy. Like Rigakos suggests, the VIP patrons lend their social capital to the club, encouraging the many to desire more. He writes,

"people attend nightclubs to be seen and see others, to consume others as aesthetic objects of desire and to elicit desire in others – the desire to be desired" (42). The frenzy comes from the keen awareness of being watched and judged, all while watching and judging. Winter muses, "In all the noise, a silence surrounded my head. My body shook with anger" (Souljah 163). She is unable to enjoy the musical performances because she is so concerned, to frenzy levels, with her own. Winter's envy and embarrassment do not obscure her class performance even if her material reserves are low.

Jealousy at the seemingly permanent markers of class invades Winter's friendships. In a confrontation after a concert, Winter is resentful that Natalie has assumed the role of queen bee in their friend group. Natalie has the clothes and the man, while Winter is couch surfing and trying to keep her life in check. However, it is clear that Natalie's up-class performance is not believable. As soon as he has a minute, Will, Natalie's drug dealing boyfriend, makes overtures to Winter. He says, "you would look better in that Chanel suit than she does. Just give me the word. I'll tear that shit right off her ass and put it on yours" (Souljah 166). This crass comment could be taken as simply a compliment to Winter's beauty, but because Will knows Winter's previous class status, he believes her current class pass. Natalie does not share that history, so she is dismissed as a fake. Winter's performance is read more convincingly as she argues, "yeah, your little suit is nice, too.… It's just my style" (167). Winter's use of the word style stands in for class in this case. Despite both Natalie's and Winter's claims, neither fully belongs to the class that Will is attempting to read on them. While Will is not duped by Natalie, Winter does fool him. Natalie recognizes that she cannot escape her class status, she breaks out of her role as loyal friend and exposes Winter's true class identity as a punishment for endangering Natalie's new class identity. After referencing the FBI's seizure of Winter's family home, Natalie accuses,

"You sneaky bitch. Always thought it was all about you… Here the whole block talking about your crazy ass crackhead, baldheaded mother and your broke, homeless ass" (168). Despite Natalie breaking ranks, the other members of the group attempt to smooth out the edges of this confrontation, writing off Natalie as jealous. Despite this revealing outburst, later in the novel, Will seeks out Winter, not Natalie, to become his kept woman.

The location of the club further emphasizes the importance of class to Regina. Charles responds exactly as synopticon of the club requires by using only visual cues to assess Regina's class. He uses only the group's fashion sense and their alcohol consumption to determine what kind of women they are. Miller notes that the exchange between the two groups does not occur until after Regina and her friends have procured drinks on their own. Charles and his friends are making a class judgment based on what these women order and how they pay for it. Regina is assessing Charles's group in the same way. She notes that Charles and company do not approach her and her friends until after they have left the bar, drinks in hand, leading her to believe that this group of men is at least partially lacking the money to buy drinks. The result is a profound misunderstanding about class and compatibility. Based on the performance that Regina enacts for Charles, he believes that she is an upper-middle-class lady, merely slumming with working-class women Yvonne, Tamika, and Puddin'. Regina is dressed in a powder blue fit and flare dress with navy blue shoes. Her attire is contrasted with Yvonne's "tight, low-cut black dress that showed off her large bosom," Tamika's tight miniskirt and sheer blouse and Puddin's "electric blue spandex pants" (Miller 24). Her friends are dressed seductively. Regina's comparatively sedate fashion signals class to Charles. He insists, "no offense but it's obvious you didn't grow up in the same environment as your girlfriends. Look at you… Your friends on the other hand… I'm sure they're nice girls and all, but it's obvious they're not in your class" (Satin

Doll 66). Charles relies on looking at Regina to discern her class. Though Regina and the others all grew up together, Regina's costuming allows for a successful class pass. He further upbraids her friends for being at the club at all and purposefully misunderstands their intentions. In a conversation at another club, Charles and Regina argue over the merits of setting out to ensnare rich men. Charles refers to his sister and the pride he feels at her recent marriage. He says, "She picked the right one, too… the guy is a plastic surgeon and bringing in at least three hundred thousand dollars a year after taxes" (Miller 66). Charles easily differentiates his sister, of the same class as he, and the women at the club. He maligns women for going to clubs with the intention of snaring a rich husband but excuses his sister's similar behavior. Similarly, he excuses Regina, a person he perceives as a member of this class, for the same behavior in the club environment. He has entirely misread her class, and the club has done its important class work for Regina as a passer.

Misidentification of class in celebratory environments continues in this novel, in particular at Charles and Regina's wedding at the storied Zanzibar Blue in Philadelphia. The wedding provides a similar environment to the nightclub in which class passing is mandatory. Consumption, spending and costuming are again highlighted as a means of class performance before one's friends and family. Like the nightclub, the wedding also focuses on the synopticon and the synoptic frenzy. As at the club, during the wedding, the many watch the few and the few watch the many, yielding another ideal space for class performance. In her book, *Class Passing: Social Mobility in Film and Popular Culture*, Gwendolyn Foster argues that "young women of all classes, races, and sexualities are raised to think that the wedding itself is a transformative event. Beneath the messages, however, lurk the issues of class mobility and the performance of a spectacle of opulence and outrageous expense… Your wedding is probably the only time that

you will wear such expensive clothing. It is the one event in which you and your families must class-pass as upwardly mobile American success stories" (74 – 75). The institution of marriage is a marker of class privilege because of its attendant economic and social privilege. The wedding is a new beginning at least in theory for the couple's relationship. Additionally, it is a new beginning for the couple's finances and its social capital in the community at large. The exchanges that happen during the wedding between the community and the couple serve as a site of possibility for new class status. The couple lavishes guests with food and drink and, in turn, the guests lavish the couple with monetary gifts "to help them start out." The disparity between Charles's and Regina's class backgrounds resurfaces during this traditional rite of passage into the middle class as adult contributing members. Charles's class is easily read. However, it is clear at Regina's wedding that she is not accepted as a member of the class she has just married into. In particular, Regina is forced to compete with a romantic rival, Angela, an upper middle-class lady, for the spotlight on her wedding day. Angela challenges the bride to a salsa dance-off. Miller writes, "the woman obviously took Regina's unwillingness to dance as inability, and Angela was taking advantage of what she saw as an opportunity to show she was the better woman. Was Angela really crass enough to try and compete with her on her wedding day? She watched as Angela seductively wet her lips as she danced with Charles. Yep. She was crass enough. So much for good breeding" (194). Regina's niece tries to ease the tension in this competition by saying, "she does a mean waltz too" (195). Renée is attempting to reintroduce class into the conversation by highlighting Regina's ability to vacillate between classes, hinting at Regina's ability to be seductive with the salsa and sedate with a waltz. However, Angela is certain that Regina's performance as an upper class black lady cannot compare to her own. In Angela's attempt to best Regina at the wedding, she passes as a member of Regina's class,

sultry, seductive, and expressive. Angela capitalizes on the classist attitudes that some of Charles's guests hold. Psychologist Barbara Jensen, who studies the effects of classism on mental health, argues that "classism harshly judges people who put on a show … people who come off too strong in style, opinions, food or behavior … many working-class cultures put a premium on color fullness, taking up space, and being real, rather than on reserve and diplomacy. Classism sees and judges louder, more expressive and emotional human behavior as flaws of personal character" (45). Angela is secure in her own performance as a middle-class black lady and hopes her passing performance as a working-class seductress will show her as the better, more well-rounded woman. She wants to be fully recognized as a superior match for Charles while showing Charles that she can pass as working class and embody the seductive qualities attributed to Regina. Though Regina can easily dance circles around Angela, she is not recognized as a black lady and her dance solidifies her alien status. Because of her failure to embody the two spaces at once, like Angela, Regina needs further proof that she belongs and that proof comes when she is able to successfully reproduce class.

Mother, Where Art Thou?

Another means by which class is solidified in this literature is through motherhood. In her novels on race and class in America, Nella Larsen highlights the importance of motherhood in achieving a certain class performance. *Passing's* Clare Kendry has a "white" daughter, Margery, who concretizes Clare's whiteness and is proof of her ability to reproduce it. *Quicksand's* Helga Crane rapidly moves from identity to identity, but in the end, it is her repeated motherhood that fixes her to a class, albeit one she resents. In these instances, the children act as commodities to exchange for membership in the middle-class. Clare's child expands her performance as a white woman and allows her inclusion in the white, upper-middle class. Helga's five children shackle

her to the middle-class respectability of the black clergy, a respectability lacking in her interactions with male characters. Though she is deeply resentful of her place in this class, because of the children, she is unable to leave it. Souljah and Miller join this conversation on the class elements of motherhood. Both Winter and Regina have class concerns surrounding motherhood, but they have diverging responses to it. As Winter's life is falling apart after her father's arrest, she and her mother visit Ricky in prison. In the prison waiting room, the Santiaga women encounter Ricky's mistress, Dulce. Winter describes her as "sporting a Donna Karan pantsuit… a big diamond ring." The woman is carrying a little boy wearing "baby Jordans, a Guess jumper …[and] a gold identification bracelet" (128). Through Dulce, Winter sees the importance of motherhood as a class performance but sees that motherhood on its own is not enough. Although the intact nuclear family is marker of middle- class status, it must yield the child the father wants. In this case, Winter's father covets a boy. Winter's mother has given Ricky a family and secures her place in his life early. Though the two are married and Ricky *seems* to give her and his daughters first priority in his affections, Dulce and Ricky Jr. occupy a level of importance as well. In the prison waiting room, Winter sees class markers on the bodies of the mistress and son. While they are not accorded legitimacy, their class status is more readily observable than it is on the struggling Santiaga family. While Lana, Winter's mother, wears a synthetic blonde wig and shabby dress to visit her husband, Dulce looks well put together, a class act. The visible qualities of Lana's class performance fail to meet the standards she is used to and as a result, she spirals into abject poverty. Winter, seeing motherhood as a necessary but limited class performance early on, has a Machiavellian response to her own potential motherhood.

After her sexual assault motivates her to pass in order to lure Bullet, Winter discovers she is pregnant. She considers motherhood very briefly. During her momentary calculations of the

costs and benefits of motherhood she reflects, “I wished it was Bullet’s… if it was Bullet’s baby he would marry me, give me the whole world…I couldn’t front [the baby] off. So I’d get it scraped out” (Souljah 400). She only considers her pregnancy as a commodity to secure her class performance with Bullet. However, the pregnancy would produce a child that will not afford her that performance and in fact may endanger her. Without further hesitation, Winter undergoes an abortion to remove the impediment to her new, hard-won class status. By commodifying children in the Santiaga story, Souljah is commenting on the level at which class obsession permeates society.

Even Winter’s own childhood does not escape the performance elements of class. When she is born, she is given “a diamond ring set in 24-karat gold” (1). Decking baby Winter out in this way suggests that she is helping her parents perform class and status. Family solidifies Ricky Santiaga’s position at the top of the Brooklyn drug trade. In showing that even the children, the most innocent in society, are not exempt from the demands of class and performance, Souljah demonstrates further loss and alienation. While Winter is making her abortion appointment, the doctor asks her to weigh her decision. Winter thinks to herself, “She acts like this is personal” (399). Her abortion may provide a feminist comment on the life/choice debate, but her response to this serious issue mirrors her reaction to the violent episodes in her life, especially the sexual assault. It is never personal for Winter because of her dogged focus on class, a focus that only yields alienation and loneliness. Her focus on specific types of motherhood is apparent in her considerations of family. While Winter has been able to maintain her independence, the state authorities have assumed guardianship over her younger siblings. She makes excuses for her lack of interest in her family. She reasons, “What was the sense in seeing my sisters when I couldn’t do shit for them. They’d start talking about they wanna come with me” (132). Although Winter

seems to be focusing on the girls' best interest, what the audience knows of her narcissistic class focus complicates this excuse. On one hand, Winter is in a precarious position. She has nowhere for she and the girls to live, so it might be best to leave them in the system. However, her earlier interactions with the siblings challenge this rationale. Earlier in the novel, Winter has to babysit the girls and takes them to the mall, wearing a t-shirt that says, "These are not my fucking kids!" (15). The vulgarity on her t-shirt demonstrates that Winter is very concerned about how motherhood is perceived. Her sisters will give an onlooker the impression that Winter is a mother; however, they do not yield her any status. Therefore, she wants to make it clear that she is not attached to them. Hence, when she fails to visit or worry about them, it has nothing to do with their best interest. Her sisters need Winter to mother them which will impede her class pass because they are not attached to a man who can improve her circumstances. So, she gives them no further thought until the very end of the novel. While Souljah is grim in her impression of the connection between social class and motherhood, Miller incorporates some light through motherhood for Regina.

The *Satin Doll* follows a similar class trajectory as The *Coldest Winter*. There is a marriage and then a child who serves to solidify Regina's status as a member of the black upper class. Regina is still not a full-fledged member of the class until Camille cements that position. The gender concerns of offspring also emerge in Miller's story. Early in her life, Regina has experienced the necessity of the reproduction of a child to solidify a woman's marriage and status. Regina's own father had also desired male offspring. Miller writes, "when Regina was six, James left the family for a younger woman who had presented him with what he wanted most in life – a son… Matilda [Regina's mother] took it as a personal shortcoming and was even ashamed that she was raising her children in a broken home" (36). While Charles does not

exhibit the same desire for male offspring, Regina knows early on the importance of a particular type of motherhood and also knows that her status in the Philadelphia upper class will not be cemented until she can reproduce a member of that group. Regina does not display the same ambivalence toward motherhood as Winter, but Regina's class status and power in her marital relationship experience nuanced changes that mirror Helga Crane's. Although Regina's child allows her to pass in the class she so wanted to join, she has never enjoyed full membership and has never been comfortable with even partial membership, resenting her own desire. As Charles seeks to assert his dominance as the true member of the upper class and cast Regina as an impostor, he uses Camille to make the point. When Regina cannot forgive his infidelity, he punishes her by attempting to push her out of the new life she has with him. To underscore her outsider status, he changes the locks to the house. Miller describes Regina's attempts to enter the house. She writes, "The key didn't fit into the lock. Regina looked at the key to make sure she was using the right one for the front door. She tried again… No luck. She walked around the side of the house and stood on tiptoes to try to peer through the window" (290). This image of Regina on the outside looking in reflects the status she occupies in the upper class.

It is during this lockout scene that her motherhood is used against her. The child, formerly a tool to gain acceptance, would be used as a method to remove Regina from the class that had never fully welcomed her. Charles tells Regina that his mother would take over custody of Camille and that Regina should return to New York. For Regina, New York is synonymous with her lower class origins. Charles insisting that Regina return to New York without her child indicates that Regina's time in the upper crust is completely dependent on his authority. In this scene, Miller is invoking a classic moment in maternal melodrama, like Olive Higgins Prouty's *Stella Dallas*. The film recounts the story of a working-class woman, a class passer, who marries

and has a child with a member of the upper class. Her child, Laurel, grows to resent the limitations her mother's class places on her own class possibilities. Stella Dallas ultimately severs the relationship for Laurel's happiness. In a tradition that goes back as far as Susanna Rowson's *Charlotte Temple*, this response to motherhood and class has been the expectation in literature. Charlotte Temple is ejected from the middle class for transgressing sexual mores and becoming pregnant out of wedlock. Her death makes way for daughter Lucy to ascend to the middle and upper class. The best way for characters to class pass "is to marry or reproduce. Ironically, the greatest sacrifice is to marry up, reproduce, and disappear, leaving a motherless child who can fully class-pass" (42). Stella Dallas's severing the familial bond became a prototype for maternal melodramas popular in literature and film in the 1920s and 30s. This formula is repeated in Fannie Hurst's passing novel *Imitation of Life*. Delilah, the black mother, dies after Peola decides to pass permanently. Her death solidifies Peola's new identity as a white woman. The self-sacrificing mother may have been ideal during economically precarious times of the earlier twentieth century, but Miller's alteration of this scene and its outcome shows that while class and childbearing are still linked, women have options in their negotiation of both. Rather than acquiesce to class standards and hierarchies, an idea that she had tacitly accepted, Regina fights against the possibility that Camille would be better without her. In perhaps a nod to hope and possibility regarding class, Regina retains primary custody of her daughter, whom the audience sees, in the book's sequel, *Satin Nights*, as having a hybrid class identity. Though Charles continues to use the child to battle with Regina's class performance, Miller shows that Regina's motherhood neither keeps her out of nor gains her entry into a class, but rather allows for the possibility that a formerly commoditized child can open new identity pathways. The lockout scene in Regina's story and the lock-in scene in Winter's story bring the idea of home

into sharp focus. Throughout the stories, neither Souljah nor Miller ever allows their protagonists a foothold in any community. So, despite the class passing and performing that each has done, a place to call home eludes them.

Home Is Where Your People Are

Alienation from community was the unfortunate result of Anita Hill's allegations against Clarence Thomas. Because the hearings were so public, she "was attacked not only by white right-wing misogynists, but by African-Americans who felt that she had stepped out of line by accusing a black man" (Smith 38). While Thomas successfully passed to fit in with the black community, Hill was ostracized. This message about community solidarity echoed a few years later before an even larger audience. In 1994, a white Bronco holding a suicidal Orenthal James Simpson and his friend Al Cowlings cruised on the 405 Freeway with the police in cool pursuit. The nation watched transfixed as the intersections of race, class, crime, sex and the justice system converged in Brentwood, the community Simpson had worked hard to join. Longtime friend and New York Times writer Robert Lipsyte elaborates on Simpson's class performance while pushing his way into the Los Angeles elite. He notes, "He realized that his Horatio Alger story was based on him being a pleasing person to white people…He was enormously self-conscious of who he was and who he needed to be to get over. There was this character OJ which he was creating" (Lipsyte). Simpson created a racial and class character to become accepted into the upper crust, emphasizing performance. Cowlings' availability to assist Simpson in a crisis suggests that Simpson had not been willing, however, to alienate himself entirely from the community that subsequently championed him in the wake of the trial.

Simpson and Cowlings grew up in the Potrero Hill housing project in San Francisco, joining a street gang, attending high school, and playing professional football together. While

Simpson, the more charming of the two, excelled and assimilated to his new class surroundings, Cowlings had more trouble. Simpson kept his friend within arm's reach despite class tension between them. In an interview with *The New York Times*, Jackie Cooper, a hotel employee and friend of Cowlings, described their contentious relationship. He remembers, "Sometimes OJ would put him down … Once OJ wanted accommodation in the La Quinta. He said, 'I don't want a hotel room. I want a condo. I'm not like AC. I can pay" (Wolff). But Cooper goes on to say that Cowlings played an integral role in Simpson's life. He said, "He was often the one who needed Cowlings to get along, be it at charity events in poor neighborhoods or simply when Mr. Simpson needed to catch a plane. He would take care of OJ… he was his security" (Wolff). Cooper implies that Cowlings worked as a security officer for Simpson, but his role could be read as more personal and psychological than that. Simpson's reference to Cowlings' inability to pay for the accommodations signifies more than mean-spiritedness. By maligning Cowlings publicly, he is emphasizing their class differences and the down-class performance that he enacts to maintain the relationship. By saying he is not like AC, he is distancing himself from any derogatory assumptions that might be made about OJ's status and economic ability. At the same time, the "security" Simpson felt with Cowlings may have been rooted in their shared class history. Although Simpson had removed himself from the black community, Cowlings acts as a symbol of that community.

Conspicuously absent from the Bronco and subsequent standoff were Simpson's Brentwood-based friends. When his life was falling apart, he sought out the class of his origin, symbolized by AC. He kept Cowlings close in case of an emergency when his class would be either unreadable or disbelieved. Simpson's story resonates with the literature of the 90s. Souljah's and Miller's work both engage class elements that echo this incident to further

highlight the role community ties play in class passing. Regina and Winter both insist on remaining a part of their previous communities. These characters are unable to let go of their working class or underclass communities and move back and forth between the spaces because they are never confident in their new class identity. Neither woman feels confident in the idea of home, and this is reflected in their residences. Miller opens Regina's story with a description of her expensive, one-bedroom flat on New York's Upper West Side. Miller writes, "the apartment longed for a respectable young Jewish couple … Regina felt the apartment's disappointment and spent a lot of time trying to reassure it that she was good enough… [but] the apartment simply refused to be her home" (16). Regina attempts to force the connection by decorating in Afrocentric design, but her home remains unwelcoming to her. Regina's attempts to "be at home" fail, and her alienation explains her intermittent return trips to her home in Harlem.

Winter witnesses the same attempts to use a home to prove class status. Ricky Santiaga moves his family to Dix Hills, Long Island to prove the family has full membership in the upper class. Souljah writes, "Santiaga agreed to allow Mommy to throw regular Saturday night parties... She got to show off her house, furniture, and all that good shit…Nobody from our neighborhood could lie and say that they had what we had" (21). Through her mother's (Lana) class-passing, Winter benefits from the status that these parties accord. Despite Lana's ability to show off her new home, neither she nor Winter are at home in their new higher-class surroundings, and both continually return to Brooklyn. Winter tries to make the most of her new surroundings in Long Island, but remains out of place. Winter muses, "I would have to find my way back to Brooklyn on a regular basis to keep my sanity" (16). She attaches her mental health to her connection to her community. Since she cannot belong in Long Island, she seems aware that her time there will be brief. Therefore, she keeps returning to Brooklyn though she does not

have friends or family there. Later, the ease with which the Santiagas are ejected from their new home and status belies the solidity of their membership in Long Island's elite.

Both Winter and Regina are aware that the passing they have done to gain access to a new class is tenuous at best. Regina summarizes this feeling in a conversation with Yvonne. She reflects, "I see you all as a kind of security blanket or a sanctuary. Somewhere I could go if all this shit got too crazy…You're my home" (284). The idea of security emerges again here. Like Simpson, Regina sees her friends as a symbol of Harlem. Because Regina is not welcome in Philadelphia, she cannot turn her back on Harlem. Souljah and Miller, in considering the class and racial constructs of the 90s, have explored the lack of home, both physical and figurative, that class passers experience. The authors demonstrate that vulnerabilities and hostility exist in both communities, so the deception that accompanies class passing will not yield sustained results. Hill and Simpson, despite their relative success, were quickly displaced from class and community, demonstrating that class and race have a confusing and often negative correlations does not on the black body and challenges the realities of both constructs. Sexual and economic vulnerability is the focus of class passing narratives with female protagonists. Stereotypes of black female sexuality inform these characters' experiences. The same stereotyping informs passing narratives with male antagonists. The stories feature characters with the same desperation to belong, but the class passing covers serious criminality rather than anxiety about sexual and economic security. The spectacle of Simpson and Cowlings shifts the focus from the written form to the visual form. In the next chapter, I will explore the representation of black masculinity and class in the popular films of Tyler Perry.

You Don’t Belong Up Here: Tyler Perry, Masculinity, and Class

It was the summer of 1994, and Arnold Palmer played the last round at the US Open. The Houston Rockets played their fifth game against the Chicago Bulls, the first NBA final for many years not to include Michael Jordan. And, Ken Griffey, Jr. tied Babe Ruth's record for home runs. Nevertheless, these exceptional events were not the central focus of sports television and news. On June 17, 1994, 95 million viewers tuned in to watch as the Los Angeles Police Department chased Orenthal James Simpson for over an hour on Interstate 405. Police pursued O.J. Simpson and his best friend Al Cowlings at low speeds. The chase culminated at Simpson's Brentwood address where he was arrested. Simpson had been armed with a .357 Magnum, a passport, $900 cash, and a few disguises. The police chased Simpson for so long because they were concerned that he might harm himself. His lawyer, Robert Kardashian, read a letter from Simpson to the media, which implied that suicide was his ultimate intention. The visuals of the pursuit and subsequent arrest gave the vast audience a spectacle of an African-American man quite literally being dragged from the class in which he had struggled so hard to gain membership. Los Angeles activist Harry Edwards discussed Simpson's racial identity in the recent documentary, *O.J.: Made in America*. In response to community requests for Simpson to join other black athletes in a sports boycott, Simpson told Edwards, “I'm not black. I’m O.J.” (Edwards). This created character allowed the Brentwood community to ignore Simpson’s race; but, the murder destroyed that progress and re-racialized him in the most negative ways. When Simpson lost his raceless status, it triggered historically resonant responses, the assumption of guilt and dehumanization of a black man. Enter the posse, or cop cars in this case. In October of the following year, Simpson was found not guilty in front of roughly 150 million viewers, which hinted that perhaps OJ might maintain his position in the Southern California upper class.

However, in 1997, Simpson's fall from class and grace was complete when he was ordered to pay punitive and compensatory damages to the families of Ronald Goldman and Nicole Brown, in the amount of $33.5 million. Simpson, formerly a Heisman Trophy winner, star running back for the Buffalo Bills and the San Francisco 49ers, a spokesperson for Hertz rental car, and a comedic actor, was permanently criminalized in the American consciousness. Simpson's rise to the upper class, his behavior while in the upper class, and his very public fall solidified certain ideas about the potential for and suitability of African-American class progress in the minds of many Americans, both black and white.

While Simpson's trial confronted those racial and class questions legally and televisually, in roughly the same period Tyler Perry's work confronts those concerns theatrically and eventually cinematically. Packing small venues in chocolate cities throughout the United States, Tyler Perry rose to stardom with 1998's *I Know I Been Changed*. Perry soon converted his theatrical successes to feature films. The theatrical version of *Diary of a Mad Black Woman* began its run in 2001, shortly after the Brown and Goldman families were awarded a civil judgment. *Diary of a Mad Black Woman* the film was released in 2005 and began the Perry phenomenon, which features mostly African-American casts and a loyal fan base. Perry's films focus on African-American women and their search for love and spiritual fulfillment. But, while Perry has been concerned with appealing to female audiences, the men in his films and his audiences are routinely marginalized and vilified based on class and skin tone. Perry's films cast black men as incapable of existing in the upper class honestly or legally. In this chapter, I consider how Perry's male antagonists are screened as hypersexual, violent, and criminalized, traits that play into the metanarrative of African-American male pathology that had been reinvigorated during the Simpson trial. I contend that despite representations of black life with

simple, positive messages to women in Perry's films, they are counterproductive to progress narratives and community empowerment. Perry, through his films, suggests that black men cannot and do not belong in the upper class and that women must be content with blue-collar mates. Through key scenes, Perry shows the disintegration of a man's class pass, which ultimately discourages class ascension in any form. While blue-collar mates can be and are desirable, Perry's negative opinions regarding the upper class reify negative scripts of black masculinity from a racist Hollywood tradition. A great deal of attention has been paid to Perry's female protagonists. Instead of focusing on the vulnerability of the female class- passers as in much of my larger project, here I concentrate on Perry's treatment of male passers beginning with the historical context of upper-class men in media. Then, I explore Perry's background as an abuse and poverty survivor and criticisms of his work. And, finally, I evaluate *Diary of a Mad Black Woman* and *Madea's Family Reunion* as exemplars of the negative portrayals of class and masculinity.

Lynching the Juice: Simpson's Fall From Class

Given his level of wealth and star status, Simpson was not a class passer in the same way as the male antagonists in Perry films. However, his race and the ease with which he was presumed guilty and ejected from the upper class indicates he only had a tenuous grip on that class. Simpson's general separation from the black community may have created too much pressure for him to occupy upper-class status with permanence. Friend Robert Lipsyte recalls the excitement that Simpson felt after hearing a white woman say, "There's O.J sitting with all those niggers." Simpson gushed to Lipsyte, "Don't you understand? She knew I wasn't black" (Lipsyte). But, Simpson's show of racelessness eventually backfired**.** The Simpson case has many of the hallmarks of historical racial terrorism. The images of the cop cars chasing the white

Bronco invoke the spectacle of lynching that became a part of the 19th-century American conversation on racial trauma and progress, especially as it affects black males. In this case, the patrol cars act as the wrathful posse, desperate to remind black men of their place in the racial and economic hierarchy. This visual, coupled with Simpson's interracial relationship with a white woman, and his economic progress, threatened racial and class status quo. In 1895, journalist Ida B. Wells wrote *The Red Record,* a report on the lynching of black men in the American South. Her interest in the subject intensified after her friend Thomas Moss was lynched when he was accused of harming innocent whites, a charge that implied sexual impropriety and depravity. In actuality, Moss was lynched because he ran a successful Memphis grocery store, which competed with a local white grocery store. Business owners, not accustomed to vying for the African-American dollar, responded violently to Moss's success. Initially, as Wells began her search for lynching stories, she believed and shared the outrage of the lynch mob because of the alleged sexual crimes of the lynching victim. She asserted, "I had accepted the idea meant to be conveyed – that although lynching was irregular and contrary to law and order… Perhaps the brute deserved death anyhow, and the mob was justified in taking his life" (Wells qtd in Giddings 28). Yet, when her friend was kidnapped and brought before a lynching party, she learned of the real motivations behind these radical acts. She writes, "lynching was merely an excuse to get rid of Negroes who were acquiring wealth and property and thus keep the race terrorized and 'keep the nigger down'" (Wells qtd in Giddings 28). One of the main components of the lynching spectacle is it insists a black body is somehow misplaced either sexually or economically. Lynching shows both threatened whites and fearful blacks the true position of the African-American body in the American landscape. While I do not wish to over-identify the Simpson trial with those who lost their lives to the rope and fire, it is important

to note that part of the metanarrative surrounding his case does involve these historical parameters and perhaps may explain why thoughts on his guilt or innocence were so sharply divided along racial lines.

In his collection of essays, *Black Men on Race, Gender, and Sexuality* UCLA law professor Devon Carbado suggests that considering race was essential to understanding the O.J. Simpson trial. His guilt or innocence was less important to the American public than the established "black male/white female narrative." Carbado asserts:

> In this narrative, white Americans are said to perceive Simpson as an uppity Negro, a black person who transcended racial and economic boundaries. Simpson is uppity in this narrative not because he politically identified with the black community and spoke out on its behalf, but rather because he achieved the American dream of economic wealth, married a white woman, and thus attained a racial identity that seemed to transcend what black manhood has been constricted to signify: criminal conduct. (172)

On the other hand, Nicole Brown Simpson, sadly, does not represent an actual crime victim but rather symbolizes innocent white femininity who provides a racialized bridge to the upper class. The narrative that circulated around the couple was that she was a "blonde, bubbly and beach-loving girl" from Dana Point, CA (Baker). Focusing these qualities situates her as all-American. This rhetoric relates to post-Reconstruction discussions that imagined white women as all-American and in need of protection from a black brute. The implication of these descriptions is that Nicole, a woman, was just a girl who got mixed up with the black manipulative older married man. Nicole's whiteness was part of the OJ character making him acceptable to the white upper class. With marriage being an essential class value, his impending divorce compromised his position. Simpson's defilement of her, as it is characterized in the narrative, feeds the overall anxiety regarding class placements, and of course, miscegenation. In this case, Simpson is cast not just as a brute who physically abuses his wife, but as a black brute, and the media coverage followed this narrative closely. For example, the June 27, 1994 cover of *Time* magazine featured

a darkened version of Simpson's mug shot which highlighted his supposed menacing nature. The public reactions to the verdict also adhered to this traditional narrative as white viewers explained their absolute certainty in Simpson's guilt, while African-American trial followers were equally sure of his innocence. The crime itself remained irrelevant. Popular crime watch program *American Justice's* 2004 trial retrospective showed the passionate disagreements about the jury's decision. One black man faces the camera and jubilantly exclaims, "This is justice for the black community. Finally, justice" (American Justice). Meanwhile, a flummoxed white man charges, "I think it's the biggest miscarriage of justice. I am ashamed to be an American right now because the guy is so guilty it's disgusting" (American Justice). The final component of the narrative is the actual lynching, which historically took place in the public square before picnickers, but in the late 20th century, it was on television news and Court TV. Not unlike the message woven into the spectacle of the body left hanging from the tree, the overall message from the trial is: black men do not belong in the upper crust. Even though OJ received a reprieve with a not guilty verdict, his footing in the Los Angeles upper class was permanently compromised.

Simpson's defeat accentuated race and class anxiety in the latter part of the 1990s. To contend with that anxiety, African-American actors and directors in Hollywood flooded the box office with films that emphasized the stories of the black middle class and positive depictions of masculinity. Makers of movies like *Love Jones*, *Love and Basketball*, *The Best Man,* and *Brown Sugar* sought not only to entertain black audiences with films starring actors that represented them but also hoped to alleviate the tensions surrounding class and race associated with the Simpson debacle. Donald Bogle's analysis of these films identifies the class components in this trend. He points out that Ted Witcher's film is:

> the antithesis of the type of black film the studios usually prefer to release. *Love Jones*--neither a crude sex comedy nor a black action flick – relies on its intelligence and its cool sophistication… [In this film] Witcher wants to articulate the sensibilities of a segment of the black audience that has always been ignored by the movies. Moody, pouty, and personal, *Love Jones* was in a class all its own. (393)

Love Jones was the forerunner to a trend in African-American film that focused on college educated, professional male characters surrounded by the symbols of privilege, like fancy cars and well-appointed homes, and these characters had an eye toward marriage, a middle-class value. However, the popularity of these black love films petered out by 2003. Concurrent with this film phenomenon were the plays of Tyler Perry, whose work rose to prominence just as the black love films were cresting. Perry soon filled that gap by converting his theatrical productions to feature films. The first movie, *Diary of a Mad Black Woman*, released in 2005, began the Perry film phenomenon, which features mostly black casts and has a loyal following.

Perry v. The Bougie

Perry, a New Orleans native, grew up marked by poverty and abuse. He readily recounts surviving severe beatings from his father. He described his mother's failed attempts to escape the abuse on his website before the release of *Precious* in 2009. Perry has also discussed how he overcame childhood sexual abuse by three different men in a 2010 interview with Oprah Winfrey. He recalled, "I knew I liked the little girls in the neighborhood, but this man was doing something to me, and my body kept betraying me. It took me all of my 20s to figure out what this was" (Perry). While his survival of these traumas is admirable, they likely inform his craft and color the way he characterizes black males in his films as sexually predatory and violent. Growing up in poverty with a family that struggled to afford costly medical treatments for a sickly Perry was not the only factor to influence his perception of class. As he attempted to launch his playwriting career, Perry says he lived in his car and in a "pay-by-the-week hotel that

was full of crackheads" (Perry). Eventually, *I Know I've Been Changed*, his first musical, became a hit, but his homelessness likely affects how he evaluates materialism and success. Further, African-American critics of his craft have not eagerly welcomed Perry's success. Renowned film director Spike Lee has been openly censorious of Perry's work. In a legendary interview at the 14th annual Black Enterprise Conference, Lee derided Perry's films for their content. He opined, "I still think that a lot of stuff that's out today is coonery buffoonery. And I know it's making a lot of money, breaking a lot of records, but we could do better… Are we going back to Mantan Moreland and Sleep n' Eat?" (Lee). Perry responded by likening the conflict between Lee and himself to the clash between Richard Wright and Zora Neale Hurston over content and stereotypes. Wright charged that Hurston was irresponsible in her portrayals of African-Americans in her work. However, the discord between Perry and Lee has certain class overtones. The venue in which Lee chose to denigrate Perry was significant because of its class associations. Black Enterprise is a media conglomerate that caters to the upper echelons of black people in business. Further, Lee's background is middle class. The son of a teacher and a composer, Lee graduated from Morehouse College; an institution distinguished for educating the best and brightest African-American men to rise to middle-class security. With this personal history and cinematic training at New York University's film school, Lee is positioned as the vanguard of socially conscious and class cognizant black film. As such, his criticisms of and distance from the self-taught Perry have class overtones that resurface in his work. So, when Perry exclaims, "I am so sick of hearing about damn Spike Lee…Spike can go straight to hell" he may be rejecting not only the artistic criticisms but the class condescension as well (THR Staff).

When Lee invokes the minstrel characters of Mantan Moreland and Sleep n' Eat, he attaches Perry's work to a larger film tradition and interrogates issues of cinematic control**.** These minstrel actors provide comedic relief, but also provide a means for white audiences to solidify a cultural identity amid a changing racial landscape of the early 20th century. Yet, these performances on the vaudeville stage and in film were often at the expense of black pride. Film historian Mark Reid describes how another icon from the era, Lincoln Perry or Stepin Fetchit, negotiated the social and political environment that surrounded his offensive exaggeration of blackness. He writes, "The interrelationship of economic production, psychic desires, and consumptive practices permitted Fetchit to repeat his hybrid minstrel caricatures. Stepin Fetchit never controlled a single aspect of film production. …In the production and reception of minstrel and hybrid minstrel comedies, whites can produce racial myths [and] believe myths that support their imagined racial superiority" (Reid 25) Fetchit became a millionaire, but his role in circulating comedic and distressing stereotypes problematizes his art form and its effect on the black political landscape. However, for the black performer and audience, this objectification produces both pleasure and pain. Perry films occupy the same contested space as they provide his fans a certain amount of nostalgia mixed with shame and allow them to navigate stereotypes. As his films are almost exclusively targeted toward and consumed by African-American audiences, the prominence of the minstrel stock characters perpetuates the same racial myths that have cast a long shadow of doubt on the potential of black people, a shadow familiar to his fan base. Perry, who controls nearly all levels of his films, from creation to distribution, should be held to a higher standard than the minstrel performers of yesteryear. Rather than raise the expectations of audiences and abandon common typecasts, he relies heavily on Madea, a modern-day mammy; coon characters like Uncle Joe for the easy laugh; and the stereotypes of

the buck and brute minstrel characters. These last few stereotypes only arise when Perry focuses on men in the middle class in his films, which recirculate old body scripts and racial fictions to the detriment of black men.

However, the 90s and early 2000s saw more than its share of scandals involving men in the black elite that seemed to prove the stereotypes common in Perry films. Michael Jackson settled a sexual molestation claim; Mike Tyson was jailed for rape; and Kobe Bryant was charged with sexually assaulting a young white hotel worker in Eagle County, Colorado. The subsequent criminal and civil proceedings in the Bryant matter received intense media scrutiny and placed African-American masculinity, sexuality, and class in the national conversation anew. Bryant's case involved the same black/white narrative regarding the out-of-control black brute and the white, blond-haired, blue-eyed, sexually pure female. Despite Bryant's defense team calling her purity into question, media outlets like *The Orange County Register and the Denver Channel* described the accuser, Katelyn Faber, as a former cheerleader who had tried out for American Idol. While these details may seem benign, their inclusion in reports about the case position Faber in the same way as descriptions of Nicole Brown had done previously. Her connection to cheerleading signals her status as all-American and white. So, the same violent reactions materialized. Employees in the Eagle County sheriff's office ordered shirts that featured a hangman coupled with quotes from Bryant. These shirts show that even though these allegations had not been adjudicated, the racial responses had emerged. Furthermore, a few media outlets traded on this historical response to interracial rape accusations to criminalize black athletes generally. *ABC News's* Bill Redeker penned an article questioning why NBA players found themselves in more trouble than other sports organizations. Using the Bryant case as a springboard, Redeker used only African-American examples to make his point about

violent, sexually aggressive, rule-flouting athletes, and thus reinscribed stereotypes. Like Simpson, Bryant had risen to American hero status through his athletic prowess and his all-around nice guy image. This case was spectacle mostly because Bryant was already a visual commodity as a popular basketball player with a white fanbase. Several times a week during the season, Bryant's body was subjected to general commentary regarding its performance, and camera close-ups of his musculature were broadcast. Jonathan Markovitz's "Anatomy of a Spectacle: Race, Gender, and Memory in the Kobe Bryant Rape Case" makes several connections between the 2003 controversy and the Simpson case. He claims, "Because NBA players are always already at the center of an eroticized and racialized mass media spectacle, it is not surprising that the allegations of sexual misconduct on the part of an NBA superstar should be immediately seized on and scrutinized for larger lessons about celebrity, gender, and racial conflict in American society. When the allegations involve charges of interracial sexual assault… the resulting media attention can powerfully, and uncomfortably, resonate" (Markovitz). Despite the dismissal of the criminal charges against Bryant, the spectacle reignited class and race pressures. Though the wheels of justice turned in Bryant's favor, the national conversation surrounding Bryant's supposed guilt complicates his status as an American hero, celebrity, and member of the upper class, and tarnishes his legacy. Both of these very public incidents involving African-American men in the upper class invoked black masculinity scripts that date back to the Reconstruction period.

Class and Comedy

In *Scripting the Black Masculine Body,* Ronald Jackson hypothesizes, “the public narratives pertaining to black men’s lives comply with several racialized projections about the Black masculine body as…violent… [and] sexual” (75). These, along with a lack of intelligence,

are projections on the black male body that emerge as scripts, or stereotypes that are embedded in Hollywood conceptualization of black masculinity. The Simpson and Bryant spectacles played into these scripts, encouraging speculation about the suitability of black men in these affluent settings. Directors Ted Witcher, Gina Prince-Bythewood and Rick Famuyiwa contributed to black love film, a genre that challenged common perceptions and reclaimed black masculinity from the negative perceptions these scandals invited. Perry's comedies, though similarly focused on love and marriage, seem to reinforce the scripts and further challenge African-American men's ability or suitability toward economic progress and class ascension.

Comedic film is a longstanding method by which actors, directors, and audiences have grappled with class anxiety. The post-World War II comedies allow for the safe exploration of tensions in unequal society. Films like *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* and *How to Marry a Millionaire* demonstrate that marital partner selection was not focused on emotional fulfillment, but on the blatant pursuit of money. Christopher Beach's *Language and American Film Comedy* explores the role class plays in the comedic genre of film. He observes that "with the rapid growth of the middle-class that characterized the postwar US economy, Americans wanted more than ever to believe in the myth of a socially homogenous and virtually classless society" (128). Nevertheless, class did not disappear from society as some hoped and film reflects its significance. At the same time, postwar Americans, who were better off than their depression era counterparts, experienced a kind of status panic or a tenuous grasp on any claim to social status or class distinction. White-collar workers became more sensitive to and passionate about the material markers of success: homes, cars, and promotions. Beach continues with a close reading of *Father of the Bride* (1950) as representative of how the tensions between class status and consumption play out in male characters. He argues that the film is in part a "satire on the upper-

middle-class commodity culture symbolized by the wedding" (133). Spencer Tracy plays Stanley Banks, a middle-class everyman who is humiliated throughout the course of the film. The source of most of his embarrassment is rooted in his status panic when faced with his upper-class in-laws-to-be.

As I explored in chapter 1, the wedding becomes a key event in the solidification of class, and this film shows how class anxieties play out from a male perspective. However, Stanley Banks's anxiety does not ultimately interfere with his class pass, and his daughter gains entry to the upper class by the end of the film. Stanley Banks's race allows for class mobility and readability. Despite inhabiting male body scripts of incapacitation and incompetence usually attributed to the black male body, he can manage his interactions with wealth and privilege, even with glaring class faux pas (Jackson 85, 91). He is very sure of the superiority of his class, but when he sees that the Dunstans, the in-laws-to-be, are wealthier than he, he gets drunk at their house and falls asleep during a conversation with them. His excessive drinking conforms to the incapacitation body script, but, his and his daughter's suitability for class ascension are unquestioned.

Contemporarily, Woody Allen's films show the same implicit suitability of white males for class ascension despite the presence of the same scripts that Jackson outlines. In his films, Allen mocks bourgeois attitudes and class anxiety. While Allen is mostly a comedic director, his 2005 drama *Match Point* shows how social class is readily legible on the white male body. The main character, Chris Wilton, aggressively seeks a place in England's upper class through marriage. While chatting with an old friend, Wilton describes his wealthy girlfriend: "I got involved with a woman. Very nice. Family's got nothing but money, big estate, servants, polo ponies" (Match Point). Wilton is more concerned with the trappings that come with his girlfriend

and eventual wife than with the woman herself. Though he has wormed his way into the upper echelon by class passing, his status is threatened by his affair with a woman from his own lower-class background. Wilton makes the decision to murder his lover, but in Allen's film, this white male protagonist does not suffer from a humiliating exposure. The body script present is the hypersexual brute. The audience sees his consuming passion for his lover that leads him to public sexual encounters with her. Later, when he plans to murder her, he shows himself to be violent, not only for his decision to kill her but for his decision to kill her neighbor as well. Even though violence, criminality, and overt sexuality are easily read on Wilton's body, his race and masculinity save him from police interference and suspicion and allow him to maintain his class pass. During a police interview after the murder, the investigators ask Wilton if he has access to guns. He replies, "My father in law shoots on the estate but not me. You can check it out, but I beg you to consider mine and his position" (*Match Point*). Wilton is trying to proclaim his innocence here, but he is using class to do so. His reference to the estate alerts the police to his class position. Also, his departing word about his family's position can have two meanings. On its face, he is alluding to the embarrassing position in which news of an affair would place the family. At the same time, his reference to position also highlights the family's class once again. Since it is his final statement to the police, it is their prevailing impression of him. The police catch Wilton in a few lies during this interview, but Wilton's whiteness allows for his class to protect him. Despite some loose ends, the police do not press him any further, claiming that Wilton wouldn't know the first thing about a gun. This assumption is based on no evidence or inquiry, just Wilton's performance of genteel whiteness. Wilton gets away with murder by passing. Conversely, Tyler Perry's male characters of the upper class have the same body scripts as Wilton and Banks, but their class "masks" slip very publicly and very easily. Perry's own

circuitous path to wealth and acceptance may explain, at least in part, why his male characters perform class in the ways they do.

The Myth of the Black Lawyer

Perry uses the Madea character to lock women in patriarchal patterns. Although his audiences and most ardent supporters are women, the gun-toting, pot-smoking Perry in drag, Madea, instructs the female protagonists in his films to follow the constricting life plans that landed them in her home in the first place. By telling them that their lives are incomplete without loving mates and children, Perry unsettles the chief feminist action (leaving a man or remaining man-less in favor of self-reflection) that these protagonists employ. The common thread in Perry movies is a woman leaving her ruthless mate and seeking asylum with Madea. As Timothy Lyle has argued, Perry misuses the drag art form to reinscribe the very notions drag is meant to disrupt. He contends "drag acts have the political potential to point to the utterly constructed, fabricated nature of the social scripts regarding a natural, fixed gendered identity" (Lyle 945). Non-subversive drag, like Madea, maintains the gender status quo. In short, Perry is a man dressed as a mammy, a potentially destabilizing and feminist character, who instead simply reiterates dominant heteronormative ideologies that are the cause of much of the female characters' pain. In the play version of *Reunion*, Madea silences the independent female voices of partner-less characters to discourage women seeking paths that depart from convention. Madea pushes *Diary* protagonist and recent divorcee, Helen, to attach quickly to another man, and she maneuvers *Reunion's* Vanessa, a sexual abuse survivor with a trail of broken relationships, into a new romance, too. With this adherence to patriarchal traditions that state women must have a man to survive, it is not surprising that similar outdated patterns emerge regarding race and class.

Audiences are invited into the discourse on race and class from the very beginning of the movie *Diary of a Mad Black Woman*. During the opening credits, the camera pans across the luxurious mise en scene of Atlanta's business districts and stops on a Bentley rolling up to an opulent hotel in Atlanta's downtown. The audience glimpses the lavishness of upper-middle-class society that parties in an elegant ballroom with crystal chandeliers, a jazz quintet, and white-gloved waiters passing butler style with hors de oeuvres. The tables are laid with fine china and white tablecloths. As the chief antagonist and protagonist, Charles and Helen McCarter (Steve Harris and Kimberley Elise), enter the ballroom, they resemble a newly married couple. Helen is decked out in all white, symbolizing an understated elegance, while Charles grasps her arm lovingly to escort her. Charles is similarly attired in a black tuxedo, and as the pair pause in the ballroom's archway, they are reminiscent of a topper on a wedding cake. The imagery of the wedding conveys the class implications of marriage. In a study analyzing the race and class elements of Perry's films, Nicole Files-Thompson explores the role of matrimony in the films. She writes, "Middle-class Blacks must act continually to stabilize their position. The stabilization is done for marriage and the married lifestyle, which includes establishing a firm, residential base and the institutional ties and positions that commiserate with white middle-class behavior and patterns" (Files-Thompson 131). Marriage helps to mark African-American people as members of the middle class, so the wedding imagery highlights more of the class considerations of the movie. It is also the main goal of Perry characters in many of his films. However, there is trouble in this marriage and therefore trouble in this class performance.

Similar class performance hallmarks of weddings and parties that I investigated with *Satin Doll* and *The Coldest Winter Ever* are present in *Diary*. As Helen and Charles pass through the ballroom, elements of the synopticon are evident and aid in Charles’s class performance.

Comparable to class and surveillance paradigms in a nightclub, the couple is subjected to the gaze of the other attendees at the awards dinner, which accords them status. The camera slows significantly for a tight shot of a fair-skinned woman with soft curly dark hair outfitted in a daring black halter gown and adorned with pops of red at the lip and nail. As she raises a champagne glass in a mock toast to the couple, the woman provides a brief contrast to Helen's sedate style with an overtly sexy one. Because the couple continues to move through the crowd, the presence of the woman in black does not stand out initially. When Charles has the attention of the crowd, he begins the scripted portion of his class pass. He boasts to the crowd, "I never thought I'd see this day. I was just saying to my wife Helen, if I died and came back, I want to come back as me [the audience chuckles]. Truly, it is an honor to receive this Jacob Feinstein Attorney of the Year Award. There is no way that I could have done any of this without my wonderful wife of 18 years" (*Diary).* As Charles accepts the award, he gestures toward his wife, Helen, and the camera offers a close-up of Helen, her sepia skin, her neat and orderly hair, her large pearl necklace and dignified lace neckline. At this moment, Helen, in a voiceover, mentions that "he [Charles] is so into appearances" and that Charles's growing focus on class performance has made him unrecognizable to her. Helen's language regarding appearances and alienation allows the audience to begin to understand that Charles is a master performer. His performance concludes as the two drive up to their ostentatious house. Charles tersely commands Helen to "get out of my car" *(Diary).* Although the audience primarily experiences Charles through Helen's eyes, Perry's message about black masculinity is clear. It's all smoke and mirrors. The polish of the upper class does not extend to Charles and Helen in private spaces**.** Patrice Harris outlines the tropes circulating in *Diary* in *Black Masculinity in Tyler Perry's "Diary of a Mad Black Woman"* She associates Charles's traits with the bad man, or Stackolee, a typical character

in African-American literary and oral culture. She asserts, though, that Charles prefers to present a respectable front rather than reveling in his sexuality and evil acts (Harris 214). Charles waits to suspend the performance until he and Helen are alone. When he dismisses Helen from the car, the implication is that he will go and meet his mistress, the tantalizing woman from the banquet. The fact that Charles does not adhere to his marital vows problematizes his class placement; or at least class stereotypes and assumptions in black cultural consciousness. Philandering, violence criminality, etc. are behaviors of lower class men. Untrue, but this narrative circulates widely in our culture. Based on that narrative, Charles's gruff exchange with Helen hints at his class instability, which is substantiated throughout the rest of the film. Charles's offenses against Helen present like they were constructed with every negative stereotype of black masculinity in mind. Perry includes a violent showdown between Charles and Helen to emphasize stereotypes about black male violence.

Perry assails the audience with a seeming laundry list of Charles's offenses. Helen awakes on the morning of her 19th wedding anniversary, and the audience discovers that Charles has not returned in the night after their tense conversation. Ever the optimist, Helen makes a lunch basket for Charles and takes it to his law office. Once again, she is confronted with the light-skinned woman from the awards dinner the previous night. Charles is escorting Brenda Marcos from his office as Helen approaches. Brenda is clutching a male child in her arms and is bedecked in white. Her white attire underscores her motherhood and reasserts the wedding imagery. Brenda is much taller than Helen and possesses a thin statuesque figure contrasted to Helen's more curvaceous one. While Perry does not allow the audience full disclosure of Brenda's identity during this interaction, the overtones are unmistakable because Charles refuses to explain his relationship with Brenda. Later, when Charles is violently ejecting Helen from

their lavish home as Brenda looks on, the audience learns that the child Brenda had been clutching is one of Charles's illegitimate sons with her. Charles's offenses against Helen present like they were constructed with every negative stereotype of black masculinity in mind. Perry constructs Charles much in the same way that D.W. Griffith, Amos and Andy and the directors of the blaxploitation films have imagined black masculinity throughout cinematic history. The presence of Brenda Marcos and her illegitimate children in Charles's life directly relates to stereotypes about the supposed voracious sexuality and paternal irresponsibility of black men. Not only does he insist that he and Helen divorce, but when she refuses, he drags the prostrated Helen across the marble floor by her wrists to the door. While this is the only scene that the audience views firsthand of Charles's rage, Helen continues to provide context for this stereotype as she reviews the problems within her marriage. She confesses that he has hit her on more than one occasion. His aggression concretizes this brute stereotype and is complicated by what Gwendolyn Audrey Foster says is the relationship between class passing and masculinity. She maintains that "although women are often constructed in popular culture as the guardians of class and family, men and manhood are ineluctably connected to class performativity. Put simply, men are born to class pass in capitalist culture. For men, adulthood is inherently associated with a Darwinian business model of class rise" (Foster 43). So, to prove himself the fittest to survive, he accumulates symbols of superiority. The amount of time Perry spends on the mise en scene of materialism--Charles's home, car, occupation, clothes--shows that Charles experiences the same status panic and the need for external markers of success and class that popped up in the postwar comedies. Still, race further complicates this consumerism. Since the postbellum period, African-Americans have sought to transition from the status of commodity to consumer as a means of improving class status. Many believed and continue to believe that "material possessions and

consumption-oriented affluence … lead to social empowerment" (Podoshen). Put another way, class will follow consumption. As such, returning to and pausing on the opulent house and his other middle-class trappings shows Charles believes that a series of purchases must accompany class performances.

Perry further alludes to Charles's violent tendencies in a key scene when a new client/old comrade interrupts Brenda and Charles in the middle of the night. It is a peaceful evening, and in a jump cut, the camera lands on Charles's bedroom where he cradles Brenda in his arms as they sleep. Though the camera shot is brief, the image resonates. Charles's deep complexion contrasts Brenda's, but what is more visually startling is the sizable diamond ring on Brenda's left hand splayed across Charles's chest. Though his imminent divorce should interrupt his economic solvency and complicate his social standing, Charles fills the class void that Helen leaves. To preserve the continuity of his class performance, Charles quickly attaches to another woman with an eye toward marriage, a great class stabilizer. This peaceful still of Charles at rest is disturbed by the cacophony of the phone. The sound of the phone ringing upsets Charles's comfort level in his home and, by extension, in this class. Prior to the phone call, the audience can dismiss his behavior as par for the upper-class course. However, Perry complicates his placement in this class through one phone call. In response to the call, Charles goes out into the night to confront his past, a past that underscores the passing of his present.

In the darkness of a warehouse, Charles comes face-to-face with Jamison Milton Jackson, a drug dealer who needs Charles's legal counsel. Charles tries to fend off Jackson at the beginning of the interaction saying, "you know I don't deal with your kind anymore" (*Diary*). Charles's use of "anymore" gives the audience the impression that once upon a time he did, in fact, deal with this "kind." Jackson confirms this assumption when he says, "Brother, before you

started defending all these rich white boys, it was my kind that got you down" (*Diary*). Jackson's use of the black vernacular term of affection, brother, alludes to intimacy between these men, an intimacy that further proves that Charles is a passer. Charles rejoins, "I'm going home" to which Jackson promptly replies, "I ran so much coke for you back in the day, I paid for that house" (*Diary*). The exchange about the house demonstrates that Charles's trappings of class have not been garnered through his law practice. This ostentatious home that Perry frequently focuses on acts as the chief reminder that Charles does not belong. Perry fully demonizes Charles in this interaction not only by hinting at a violent past attendant to drug dealing but also shows yet another stereotype, the black man as criminal. Perry's films do not imagine that a black man could rise to the heights of success without engaging in criminal enterprise. This pattern evokes tropes of the blaxploitation film genre. Replete with pimps and drug dealers, this genre, which sought to reclaim black masculinity from a narrative of cowardice and emasculation, only reawakened deep-rooted prejudices. The blaxploitation films, marketed as pro-black, were written, produced, and directed by whites. Hence, the black community protested, claiming it would no longer be "exposed to a steady diet of so-called black movies that glorify black males as pimps, dope pushers, gangsters and super males" (Junius Griffin, qtd in Bogle 244). Perry's movies circulate the same body scripts, but the outrage is muted in comparison. To date, Perry's films have amassed over $800 million in box office sales. The level of Perry's success suggests that the same objections have not resonated. Despite the message, the black community has rallied around Perry because his audience is regularly excluded from representation on film. Even with the black love films popular in the early 2000s, the USC Annenberg's Media Diversity and Social Change Initiative reports that only 12 percent of films feature black characters (USC

Annenberg). Perry's films bridge that gap, but a byproduct of his efforts are the negative messaging on class and race.

Community alienation is also a characteristic of Charles's class pass. Jackson's claim that his "kind" helped to make Charles the success he is, and the lack of reciprocity, is further highlighted when Helen laments her isolation from her family. While Helen's family is not a part of a criminal class, they are more blue-collar than Charles. She cries, "He has alienated me from my entire family… He made me put my mother in a home because she didn't fit into his American Dream" (*Diary*). While the audience only learns of Charles's attitude toward the working class through reportage, his conversation with Jackson alludes to his belief in a social hierarchy. While he cannot be faulted for his desire to distance himself from criminals, his condescending use of "your kind" has larger implications. Placing his mother-in-law in a home further insulates Charles's class performance from his lower-class roots. Charles views Helen's family as the same "kind" as Jackson, more racially marked and therefore, unsuited to his class aspirations. In fact, the first scene with the entire family shows them at a party playing Spades and dancing the Electric Slide, symbols of black cultural traditions. To reintegrate Helen into the community, Madea and the rest of the family guide her toward Charles's antithesis, Orlando played by Shemar Moore. Helen initially meets Orlando after she is violently put out of the house. Comparatively, moving man Orlando is patient and gentle, driving Helen around Atlanta for hours after the disintegration of her marriage. The dichotomy of these two male characters participates in the I-Other dialectic outlined in racial and cinematic terms in Jackson's work. He writes, "an I-Other dialectic [is] constructed to transfer one's own baggage to the other so that one does not have to deal with it. It is the structured dismissal and displacement of one inscribed body while superimposing another and all the values that accompany the newly inscribed body

or placed body. Consequentially, if the Black masculine body is Otherized and labeled violent, then that would logically suggest that the I gets labeled nonviolent" (Jackson 75). This dialectic is noticeable in the minstrel films and theatrical production of yesteryear. The black body is the other, and the white body is normalized. *Birth of a Nation* and other films featured actors with dark makeup used to mock black skin and ascribe brutish behavior to African-Americans with deep complexions. Charles's behavior is constructed in such a negative way to easily create and highlight an identity for Orlando. Where Charles is harsh, violently dragging Helen across the marble floor, Orlando is kind, calm, and gentlemanly. Where Charles is the villain of the fairytale, Orlando rides to Helen's rescue on a white steed, or, in this case, a white U-Haul truck. Charles's complexion is dark, alluding to a more Africanized and dangerous masculinity, but Orlando is fair, which relates to a whiter, safer, more acceptable masculinity, reminiscent of the historical minstrel content.

As Helen's and Orlando's relationship grows, Perry treats the audience to a visual montage of their dating relationship. The montage unfolds in slow motion set amid more naturalistic scenes near bodies of water, in grassy fields and among her goodhearted working-class family. These scenes are a sharp contrast to the highly stylized, lavish, class-conscious shots of downtown Atlanta that characterize Helen's relationship with Charles. Charles and Orlando are contrasted in even more specific ways. After the dating montage, the camera stills on Helen and Orlando on his couch as the sun rises. Helen is careful to mention, "Somewhere out of all of the pain came a man who is strong, beautiful, sensitive, and Christian. Last night was so amazing. Even though we both wanted to make love, he chose to give me something better. He gave me intimacy. In a way, I thank Charles because if he hadn't been such a terrible man to me, I wouldn't know what a good one feels like" (*Diary*). Helen's voiceover juxtaposing

these two men reminds the audience that they are in competition for the definition of masculinity and appropriate class status. Harris suggests that Perry is attempting to reclaim black masculinity. She contends, "he is consistently making an effort to honor intelligent, and just plain good black men who are not celebrated enough. Perry's projects routinely feature a kind of masculinity defined by the strength of character rather than physical dominance or wealth… With *Diary*, Perry appears to have taken seriously the need for filmmakers to counteract negative and limited black male characters" (Harris 217).

However, if this is Perry's intention, *Diary* fails to elide the stereotypes and difficult and complex traditions of representation. For example, abstinence does accentuate the film's overall Christian message and could explain Perry's reluctance to represent Helen and Orlando in a sexual relationship. However, Orlando's on-screen abstinence also joins a longer tradition of constricting black sexuality. Censors cut a scene of Lena Horne in a bubble bath from *Cabin in the Sk*y in 1943. *Sweet Sweetback's Bad Ass Song* was edited for sexual content in 1971. Perry's failure to confront and work with positive sexual expression renders Orlando "neuterbound" and his masculinity stilted. Perry seems to rely on Shemar Moore's attractiveness to stand in for any suggestion of a sexual relationship between Helen and Orlando. Moore, a long- time cast member on CBS's daytime drama, *The Young and the Restless*, brings a certain sexual awareness to the audience based on his other work as a soap opera heartthrob. However, within the confines of *Diary,* the character Orlando purposefully does not enjoy the same sexual freedom. The result of this omission is that sexual expression from a black male is by definition negative and always presents a challenge to black women. Additionally, Orlando and Charles are contrasted based on their incomes and careers. While Charles is white-collar through and through, Orlando conversely is a steelworker who moonlights as a moving man. Because Charles has not risen in

the class ranks based solely on his legal acumen, his placement in the upper class is challenged and negated. Meanwhile, Orlando is aware of, happy with, and humanized by his position in the working class. By criminalizing Charles, Perry seems to acquiesce to the criticisms leveled throughout history about black men's fitness for economic progress in general and the rumblings surrounding O.J. Simpson and Kobe Bryant in particular. The public downfalls of these athletes suggested that black men were not suited for the upper class. These ideas leaked into the American imaginary and as a result, recur in Perry's films.

The Banker, Too

A year after *Diary*, Perry continues the story of Helen's and Madea's extended family in *Madea's Family Reunion*. This film, which tells the story of two abused sisters' quest for love and marriage, begins with lavish real estate shots of downtown Atlanta suggesting that this movie will concern class dichotomies as well. Soon the audience joins Lisa (Rochelle Aytes), her sister Vanessa (Lisa Arrindel Anderson), and their friend Donna (Tangi Miller). Donna and Vanessa have planned a bridal surprise for the soon-to-be married Lisa. In her essay, "It Ain't Where You Comin' from, Honey," Carol B. Duncan assesses class passing among the female characters in *Reunion.* She "considers the significance of skin color and shade-ism and their links to class and gendered notions of femininity in relationship to black American women's marriageability and class mobility" (Duncan 115). Lisa is the film's most sympathetic, yet flat, character and is maneuvered by other people for financial gain. She is engaged to the film's chief antagonist Carlos Armstrong, an investment banker. Carlos makes many attempts to pass, and Lisa's relative flatness allows the audience to pay more attention to the complexities of Carlos's class performance. Carlos, played by Blair Underwood, is very reminiscent of the Charles character in *Diary.* Lisa lives with the abusive Carlos in an ultra-modern penthouse apartment in

downtown Atlanta. Perry's focus on the decor and placement of the home, a visible marker of class, situates the film in class terms. Visually, the apartment is a "mountaintop … perhaps as far removed as you can be from the authentically black urban setting typified in most Hollywood films. This setting effectively distances these middle-class blacks from working class blacks in the popular imagination" (Files-Thompson 132). Carlos's offices occupy the same type of space in the film. As Victoria Breaux pays her daughter's fiancé a visit to discuss the relationship, the camera pans upward toward the top floors of an office building, further emphasizing Carlos's separation from the working class. Placing African-American characters in these types of environments in film has implications regarding racial progress. Nicole Files-Thompson explains, "the dimensions of setting and the exposition of occupation and educational attainment serves to produce America as a meritocracy…Blacks must be seen in positions of achievement as evidence that racism no longer exists" (132). Through a jump cut, the audience is welcomed inside Carlos's high-rise office, an investment-banking firm. Just as Victoria enters the office, Carlos is concluding a business meeting where he announces an increase in quarterly profits. Carlos stands at the end of a long conference table looking down at his white subordinates as he makes his grand announcement. He stands in order to command the room and his placement highlights his leadership and the success of the investment firm. He dismisses the workers and reminds one in passing to complete a task. Carlos seems to have attained the American racial dream. He is upper-class and non-threatening to whites. This scene, a model for racial progress in the New South, only heightens the disappointment when class passer Carlos's true nature is revealed.

The cracks in Carlos's class performance become evident during the meeting. The audience may notice that his workers do not respond to his praise and seem anxious to be out of

his company, making no eye contact with their leader. There is no workplace banter or laughter, which could hint at Carlos's stern leadership, but I believe Perry does this to show that employees know the true Carlos despite his best efforts to hide. Carlos attempts to portray business acumen and leadership, but Victoria's presence in this business environment automatically undercuts the class performance he perpetrates. She knows him outside of the office and is keenly aware that he is passing. Victoria is unimpressed with Carlos's businessman act and quickly reminds him what his true colors are. She asks, "how can I convince her [Lisa] of what a great man you are if you insist on acting like such a savage" (*Reunion*). There is a span of only 20 seconds between Carlos's command performance in the business world and his mask slippage in his personal life. The rapidity with which both Carlos and the audience confront his true class position may mean that his performance is not as convincing as he believes. Victoria's use of the term "savage" demonstrates Foster's argument regarding behaviors required of men in a capitalist society. She contends, "Men are expected to call on their beastliness to be upwardly mobile and succeed in the aptly named "urban jungle" of the corporate world. The same supposed "instincts" of masculinity that they must shed to have good manners are often called upon in the interest of passing as successful businessmen" (Foster 49). Carlos seems to chafe under the savage description and responds, "Savage? I'm a collector of beautiful things, Victoria. Now, would I scratch my Monet? Would I deface my Picasso?" (*Reunion*). Carlos quickly mentions his collection of fine art in order to distance himself from the beastly description. But, he doesn't mention just any fine art. He revels in the fact that he is the owner of artwork that fetches multi-million dollars in value. Additionally, his name-dropping of these two artists suggests that not only does he want to be surrounded by "beautiful things" but also that he desires external recognition of the value of his collectibles. While I do not claim that domestic

violence is classed, as it exists at all levels, I do look at the remainder of this scene, because in Perry's Madea universe, class and criminality correlate.

His encounter with Victoria contains many of the stereotypical body scripts of black masculinity. He neither confirms nor denies his violent tendencies, but rather focuses on his material goods. He offers up his inventory to deny the abuse without denying the abuse. The audience is left with the impression that not only does Carlos believe it is his right to be violent with Lisa, but that he has no shame about it. In addition to underscoring his attitude toward violence, Perry takes this opportunity to further criminalize Carlos, challenging his place in the upper class. Victoria's refusals to return Lisa to Carlos without stipulations causes him to codeswitch and completely abandon his upper-class performance. He angrily retorts, "let's not get this thing twisted… I know better than anyone why you want this [relationship]" (*Reunion*). Carlos is referring to the access that he has provided Victoria to Lisa's trust fund. Together Carlos and Victoria are embezzling from Lisa. This criminal act undermines the successful quarter Carlos has reported in his business meeting. Perhaps, those increases in profits may have come from similar white-collar crime. On its face, Carlos's criminal behavior is class-based and "better" than ex-drug dealing Charles, but it is a crime just the same; and it provides further support for his argument that black men cannot rise through the class ranks cleanly. Although Victoria is complicit in his crime, Carlos's responsibility for and access to other people's money intensifies his role in the crime.

Perry continues to cycle through the body scripts of black masculinity by sexualizing Carlos. This encounter between mother-in-law-to-be and fiancé is initially sexualized by Victoria's thinly veiled references to Carlos's genitalia. To embarrass him, she insinuates his lack of masculinity and penile size. However, it is Carlos who becomes overtly sexual during their

conversation. While Victoria uses witty, gauche banter to put Carlos in his place, he initiates physical proximity and touch to return the favor. First, he positions himself behind Victoria and caresses her hair with his lips and lowers his voice to an intimate volume. When she rises from her chair to put distance between them, he closes the distance and grasps one of her hands to press a kiss into it. Then he caresses her cheeks and neck while insulting her for her age and ambition. These characters are the most class conscious of the cast and the most glaringly stereotypical. So, while Victoria *speaks* to Carlos in sexualized terms, Carlos's *actions* underline the negative perceptions about black male sexuality. The first scene in the movie also underscores the sexually depraved stereotype that Carlos embodies throughout the film. When the camera sweeps across downtown Atlanta and into Carlos's penthouse apartment, his distance from blackness is not the only thing emphasized. The camera stops at the very fair Lisa Breaux alone in bed, with her left hand prominently displaying a massive engagement ring. Lisa rises from her slumber and is greeted by rose petals on the bedspread and floor directing her path toward the bathroom where the audience encounters Carlos. He is leaning on a filling garden bathtub and is accompanied by a small symphonic band. As he stretches his hand out to Lisa, He says, "I thought that this salt bath would help with your soreness" (*Reunion*). He drops a kiss on her bare shoulder and slides off her nightgown. At this point in the film, the audience has no idea about the violence that exists between Lisa and Carlos. Therefore, the exchange between these two in this scene is positioned as overtly sexual. His allusion to her soreness coupled with the kiss on her bare skin hints at a robust and passionate evening. When he disrobes her in front of strangers, the audience is further pushed toward this conclusion. While the audience does not see Lisa's nude body, the camera angles make Perry's intent hard to miss. The straps of the nightgown fall and Lisa gets directly into the bathtub thereafter. Disrobing Lisa serves a two-fold

purpose. First, it further emphasizes Carlos's sexuality. Though it is Lisa who stands nude in a room full of people, Carlos is the chief actor in the exhibitionist display. Lisa's flatness as a character becomes clear when she has no reaction to Carlos's lack of propriety. Her lack of reaction to this violation of privacy foregrounds Carlos's desires and seems to validate the buck stereotype. Second, disrobing Lisa provides further context to Carlos's conversation with Victoria. When he likens Lisa to his Monet and Picasso, he is placing a value on her and highlighting that he believes her to be a "beautiful thing" rather than a person. Although the symphonic trio is composed of women, Carlos's actions suggest that he completely ignores Lisa's personhood by denying her privacy. This privacy breach also signifies that he believes fully in a social hierarchy in which servants and entertainers do not rate notice. However, the entertainers do become witness to Carlos's class performance. Not only do the bath, rose petals, and entertainers reveal that Carlos is a man of taste, but Lisa's light-skinned body, which evokes the tragic mulatto trope, also serves as accouterments to the class-passing Carlos.

Whiteness and the Jezebel

To explore the ways that Lisa's body and Brenda Marcos's body occupy a tragic mulatto space, it is important to review the role of the tragic mulatto in popular culture. In Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin,* a main character, Eliza, in both the novel and theatrical version, is depicted as nearly white. Stowe imbued this character with this quality to bridge a racial and empathy divide. Critics have argued that Eliza's lack of African characteristics make her more suited for freedom when compared to Uncle Tom and other darker skinned characters. The tragic mulatto makes appearances in mid-twentieth century films like Elia Kazan's 1949 film *Pinky* and Douglas Sirk's 1959 film *Imitation of Life*. Both films tell the story of multi-racial women who pass for white. Pinky's whiteness makes her uniquely suited to inherit a white

southern belle's plantation home. *Imitation of Life's* Sarah Jane's white skin gives her access to white men and the social and financial freedoms that accompany them. Overall, the tragic mulatto character's whiteness suggests that they are somehow more suited to a higher-class status. So even as Perry's films feature mostly, if not all, black casts, these fair-skinned female characters connect to a longer tradition regarding beauty, class, and colorism. In these films, like their predecessors, the fair-skinned female characters are linked to a class ascension. Carlos and Charles treat Lisa and Brenda as the ultimate external marker of material success. Both women are sexualized, and both are positioned as more capable or more deserving of class ascension than their browner skinned rivals and/or family members. For example, before Helen is ejected from her home with Charles, she finds her wardrobe filled with slinky, designer clothing that she assumes is a gift for her. When Charles arrives home, she models one of the dresses, and she comments that the clothing will require alterations. Since the narrative of the movie rapidly shifts from the clothes to Charles's violent streak, it is easy to overlook the significance of her request to tailor the ill-fitting dresses. However, in addition to telling Helen that their marriage is over, Charles's purchase of these clothes, underscores the idea of fit or suitability. The fact that Helen does not fit the clothes alludes to the fact that she does not fit the life either. Brenda, on the other hand, does fit the clothes and the lifestyle that Charles has planned.

The directorial choice to cast both of these women in this way illustrates that both of the male antagonists are attempting to approximate whiteness. In his study of the racial implications of OJ Simpson's trial, Devon Carbado writes about the cultural assumptions surrounding interracial relationships. He writes:

> Black men date white women because they internalize the notion of White women as the "'socially identified' female ideal." Dating white women becomes a status symbol, an indication that one has transcended the attributes white America has ascribed to black manhood... It has been the ultimate way for some Black men to reclaim their status as

> men, to transgress racial boundaries, to remasculate their Black male identities (Carbado 173-174).

Although neither character is white, their skin tones perform the same racial and class work as a white character would in the storyline. Though Jackson's work mainly concerns the Black masculine body in film, he also builds on Bogle's stock female character categories. Both critics contend that the audience is witness to the tragic mulatto's often failed negotiation between two disparate racial identities. Ronald Jackson writes, "her skin color is its own body politic that referees what is essentially a tug of war between intimacy and distance, desire and control" (34). This stock character's physical nature is identifiably white through her light complexion, loose curly or straight hair, and slender figure. Black audiences would be keenly aware of the subcategory of tragic mulatto that the racially ambiguous Brenda occupies. Ronald Jackson reminds readers of the Jezebel character who is less tragic and more calculating version of the tragic mulatto. Like the tragic mulatto, the Jezebel is fair-skinned with European features, but where the tragic mulatto is troubled by the sexual tension that surrounds her, the Jezebel connivingly revels in her sexuality and its effect on others. The Jezebel, known for greed and sexual availability, definitely defines Brenda. Throughout the film, Brenda is sexualized from her gown at the awards dinner to her shouted promise that she knows "how to get and keep her man." However, when Charles is bound to a wheelchair, she absconds with his money. The jezebel characterization takes a complicated turn with *Reunion's* Lisa. While Brenda actively participates in the jezebel trope, Lisa's mother and fiancé push her into it. Although Victoria consistently cautions her daughter not to end up like working class Vanessa, Lisa seems to have little interest in or reaction to the trappings of Carlos's lifestyle or to intimacy and sexuality in the relationship. The audience is not given a glimpse into much of the interiority of either woman. As a result, these women stand as symbols for the attainment of class stability in the

lives of the male antagonists. To put it another way, Charles and Carlos need a companion with a fair complexion to complete their class pass.

It is interesting to note that both men are unable to keep their fair-skinned love interests. When Charles's life hangs in the balance after Jackson shoots him, Brenda beats a hasty retreat. And Lisa frees herself from the violent Carlos and outs him as a brute to the larger community. The failure of either relationship to work out confirms the paradoxical message embedded in Perry's films. On one hand, Perry is leaning into the stereotypes about the color hierarchy and stating that neither man is suited to upper-class living because he cannot hold onto his near-white love interest. On the other hand, this film also suggests a moral superiority of the darker female protagonists Helen and Vanessa. Helen sacrifices her own happiness to help Charles walk again while Vanessa lets go of a traumatic past to be a better mother and eventually a wife. The fact that the antagonists do not initially desire companions with complexions to match their own and are ultimately left out in the cold by film's end is Perry rather clumsily nodding to African-American women who have been the primary victims of colorism within the African-American community. However**,** using color as a trope and as a shortcut interpretation of human behavior alienates and marginalizes large segments of the black audience.

Reunion also introduces another light-skinned, blue-collar love interest for Vanessa. Frankie, a full-time bus driver and part-time artist, woos Vanessa in the same chaste way as Orlando pursues Helen. Despite Vanessa's best efforts to put him off, Frankie declares, "Some men come to restore" (*Reunion*). The courtship between Vanessa and Frankie differs from Lisa and Carlos's relationship along class lines. While Lisa and Carlos dine in exclusive restaurants and cohabitate in an extravagant apartment, Frankie and Vanessa enjoy outdoor playdates with their respective children and abstain from physical intimacy. Carlos's aggression is contrasted

with Frankie's gentleness. Frankie easily blends in with Vanessa's working-class family, while Carlos avoids them for as long as possible. As in *Diary*, *Reunion* reproduces the I-Other dialectic in which the blue-collar love interest is the I and the white-collar deviant is the Other. However, as Perry presents Frankie as Carlos's antithesis, he misses another key opportunity to reclaim black male sexuality from the buck or deviant stereotype. In his desire to show purity in black masculinity, deviancy carries through the narrative. Carlos's aberrant sexuality in his interactions with Lisa and Victoria can be counterbalanced by Frankie's presence. However, the deviancy of Vanessa's stepfather is not counteracted. In a very emotional scene among the Breaux women, Vanessa discloses that Lisa's father sexually assaulted her with Victoria's permission. Further, Vanessa has two failed relationships with the fathers of her two children, men who do not acknowledge or care for the kids. While Perry's chief message of Christian-centered relationships based upon abstinence is reasonable, the abstinence between Frankie and Vanessa does not allow for her character or the audience to redefine a healthy black sexuality within the film's narrative. Perry settles their relationship with a lavish wedding; however, the abuse and trauma Vanessa has suffered are unresolved.

Who's Classing Whom

Alienation from community is another way Perry shows how intensely Carlos is committed to passing. At the beginning of *Reunion,* when Vanessa and Donna return Lisa home after the spa trip, she and Carlos meet for the first time. With the big wedding fast approaching, the timing of this important family introduction is problematic. Vanessa, a working-class woman, and the rest of the extended family cannot and do not fit into Carlos's American Dream. He is formal with and dismissive of both Vanessa and Donna, who do not conform to his vision. Their spa trip is the impetus for a violent exchange between Lisa and Carlos. Although there is

no justifiable reason for Carlos's aggressive behavior, the stimulus for this beating deserves a closer look. One reason Carlos seeks to alienate Lisa from this side of her family is to assert control. Another reason is to firm up the class stratification in his life. Vanessa and Donna have transgressed those boundaries, as they do not fit in his apartment or in the trappings of upper-class life. Their desire to take Lisa to the spa and break out of their own class undercuts the hierarchies that he has invested in so heavily. Further, the three friends are entertained by a deeply brown-skinned stripper with dreadlocks as part of the bridal ritual. The physicality of the stripper and the Afrocentricity of his hair hints at a deeper connection to blackness and community than Carlos is comfortable with. When he catches the stripper and the three women in his apartment, he reacts violently. His class pass necessitates alienation from community and from the blackness represented by the other black man and these black women. To redraw those lines, Carlos uses his fists. Jarring camera work stresses Carlos's desperation regarding class status. Carlos slaps Lisa to the floor, and the audience endures a close-up on Carlos's face to highlight his position above Lisa. The spatial disparity between Carlos and Lisa in this shot exemplifies the class disparity between them. Carlos snaps, "see how nice your life could be if you just do what I say?" (*Reunion*). On the surface, Carlos is referring to ways that Lisa could avoid violence. However, Carlos's use of the term "nice" indicates more than civilized behavior from him. He wishes to impress upon Lisa that he is a necessary element of her own class status and her direct link to "nice" things. Lisa's trip to the spa without his financial support belies this idea. Therefore, Lisa's class status is not dependent on Carlos, but rather he is dependent on her. His insistence on firm class separation is reminiscent of Charles's insistence that Helen no longer fraternize with her family.

Carlos's discomfort in blurring the class lines is even more apparent at the family reunion. As he feels his hold on Lisa slipping, he redoubles his efforts to lock her in place. Hence, he attends the family gathering. Carlos drives up to the picnic in a brand-new silver Mercedes. Brian, Lisa's cousin and recurring character in *Diary* and *Reunion* (played by Tyler Perry) retrieves a basketball that *nearly* hits Carlos's car. Brian catches the ball in time, but Carlos is ruffled by the near collision and quickly tends to his car, investigating the non-damage. Carlos's hypersensitive reaction to what he perceives as a working-class ritual (a pick-up basketball game) further accentuates how strongly he believes in class hierarchies and highlights his anxieties about his performance. Brian hints that he knows Carlos's identity before he can even introduce himself Carlos asks, "is it that obvious?" (*Reunion*). In this very brief exchange, Carlos is testing the limits of his class performance. Brian's ability to easily pick Carlos out of the crowd means that Carlos's performance as a member of the upper middle class is easily readable. Brian is the necessary character to witness Carlos's performance because Brian also holds a white-collar job. Although Carlos's tone suggests slight embarrassment at being so identifiable, this recognition is a victory for Carlos. Brian, a member of the upper class, accepts Carlos's class pass. Unlike Carlos and Charles, Brian is not caught up in class structures. In both films, Brian plays the superior father, long-suffering husband, and dependable family member, unaffected by the trappings of the upper or upper-middle class life. Though Brian breaks through many of the stereotypes that the antagonists fall directly into, he too has a very fair wife that he cannot seem to keep. Deborah, played by Tamara Taylor, occupies the tragic mulatto stereotype. Deborah's alienation from the community is not race-based but rather due to a nondescript drug dependency which renders her unsuited to street life and to home life simultaneously. But, unlike Charles and Carlos, Brian finally breaks through to Deborah and gets his girl in the end. In *Reunion,* Brian

alludes that Deborah has been completely integrated into their life and family, indicating that Brian's strength is unparalleled. In a self-aggrandizing move, Brian is the only one suited to life in the upper class and the only one able to strike a healthy balance between the working-class roots of his family and the social mobility of his occupation. However, the colorism that accompanies his class performance as Brian re-inscribes male body scripts. Deborah's complexion occupies the same political landscape as Brenda's and Lisa's. Their light skin occupies a racially ambiguous space and approximates a certain amount of whiteness that Perry paradoxically deems necessary to upper-class performance.

Perry continues to challenge class performances in his subsequent movies. His somber 2008 *The Family That Preys* explores the harsher realities of class passing and economic striving in white-collar women. His 2013 *Peeples* mocks an uptight upper-class family and celebrates a working-class man's quest to help them regain their black authenticity. Consequently, Perry's work is subject to criticism from various sources. Cartoonist and racial critic Aaron MacGruder devoted an entire episode of *The Boondocks* to lambasting Perry's colorism. Additionally, cultural critic Touré called Perry's films "cinematic malt liquor" in a CNN interview (Touré). However, Perry's success emerges because of Hollywood's long neglect of African-American audiences. Despite the problems with his message, the fan base remains loyal. Perry's films show the internalization of negative messages about class capability and race. En masse, Perry's films cover romantic, spiritual, and familial fulfillment, but neglect economic or class uplift, an imperative for the very community he persistently professes to represent. Perry claims to give voice to characters from his own life, but his net worth of $600 million dollars belies the idea that he has no understanding of or experience with black people from all strata of society. While the representation of blackness is important, Perry's films help to color the American perception of

black male suitability for the upper class. His films show the extent to which white supremacy exists in Hollywood and its insidious effect on black filmmaking. Perry films rarely include white characters, but racist and classist narratives persist in his work. When white characters have an active role in African American stories, they influence class performances in the African American characters. In the next chapter, I focus on the ways that even auxiliary white characters can upset class performance and re-introduce race to the narrative, further contesting the efficacy of class passing.

The Pressures of Invisibility: Popular Literature of the Black Elite

Like Viola Davis, Dr. Ben Carson, and Oprah Winfrey have in the past, Jackie McCoy is receiving TANF or Temporary Assistance for Needy Families. This safety net for families living in poverty is commonly associated with laziness. These superstars and common folk like Jackie McCoy, an African-American, defy this stereotype. Jackie is a licensed dental assistant. She felt that race played a role in her inability to secure work in her profession and so turned to welfare for help. Welfare reforms limit the time and opportunities that Jackie and others have on government assistance. A volunteer for Welfare Rights Organizing Coalition, she explains:

> We are seeing a lot of people running into deadlines…[The Department of Social and Health Services'] main concern is getting you off the welfare rolls. Tracking you after that is a slim concern of theirs... with cuts in human services… food banks here are packed with people who work full-time but can't make ends meet. That reality isn't being addressed at all. (Halloran 447)

The reforms also restrict the length of time a recipient can train for a new profession while on the rolls. Jackie speaks to the material consequences of imperceptive legislation that affects the class, educational and social capabilities of African Americans.

In the first two chapters, I focused on African-American men and women who perpetrate elaborate, sometimes criminal ruses to gain access to the protections they believe are associated with middle-class striving. The men and women use each other as accouterments to secure superior class positions. These characters believe in the respectability politics that accompany a middle-class lifestyle. However, they find that their class pass has alienated them from the African-American community, and each experiences regret, ambivalence, and isolation by the end of each narrative. In chapter 1, I touched on interracial and gendered aspects of class passing. I looked at the sexual vulnerabilities of African-American women at the hands of white men and the illusion of protection middle-class membership held for them. Neither Winter nor

Regina ever does find complete physical or emotional safety from sexual vulnerability. Both were very concerned with partnering well to secure their class status. This focus on finding the right man shows that both Miller and Souljah were keenly aware of the role men play in the economic and social stability of women. The Clarence Thomas confirmation hearings clearly reignited this awareness. Anita Hill was vulnerable for the entire nation to see. Moreover, while she was independent and highly educated, she was unwed. Her marital status may have played a role in Thomas's sexual impropriety and her "un-believability" during the hearings. In fact, her former boyfriend, John Carr, was called to testify, not only to her credibility, but he was also asked to describe their relationship for the committee. Her credibility was judged insufficient by a roomful of white men, who had little stake in the outcome of these proceedings on the black community. Anita Miller compiled the testimony from the hearings for a book, *The Complete Transcripts of the Clarence Thomas - Anita Hill Hearings.* The book cover shows photos of Senators Joe Biden, Orrin Hatch and others, all whispering to each other during the hearings. Miller's depiction of the scandal is apt because Thomas and Hill were tangential to the proceedings. Ultimately, the cover shows white legislators passing judgment on black life, a recurring theme through the 1990s.

Anita Hill's status as a black professional did not provide protection from humiliation, which undermines many blacks' rationalization for upward mobility. Her unmarried status is not why she was treated disrespectfully, but women are always looking for any reason that something happens so that we can prevent it. Maybe it happened because she's not married; maybe it happened because she spoke out against a black man; maybe it happened because she wore a turquoise suit during her testimony. Whatever the reason, women are desperate to find it, so we can go on with life. This deluded thinking reflects the pitfalls of respectability politics, but

these conventions are still present at many levels of the black community. While respectability politics are usually associated with middle-class black behavior, they are also present in the class performances of the black upper class. The black upper class is like the middle class in values, but differs based on income, which is usually above $200,000 per year. Its members are CEOs, lawyers, doctors, politicians, and entrepreneurs. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, America boasted a high number of African-American CEOs of Fortune 500 companies, including Kenneth Chenault of American Express; Merrill Lynch's Stanley O'Neal; and Franklin Raines from Fannie Mae. However, these high achievements were diminished by several incidents in both the legislative and social arenas that reinforced racialized classism. In 1996, President Clinton signed the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA). This piece of legislation limited the length of time a family could receive government assistance, restricted food stamp eligibility, and instituted work requirements for recipients. The act was celebrated for ending dependency on the government and for promising to break the cycle of poverty. However, some critics, among them social economist Barbara Ehrenreich, suggest that the reform only added to the vulnerabilities women experience. In a 2011 retrospective interview with NPR's Michel Martin, Ehrenreich described the reform act and its causalities. She said, "[There was] a campaign coming from the right to say that people who took welfare were degenerates, that they were promiscuous, that they were lazy, that there was something wrong with them... That was, you know, a deeply racist and misogynist campaign" (Ehrenreich). She credits this campaign against women and African-Americans for her involvement with the anti-reform movement. In an extension of Reaganomics "welfare queens" language, this legislation focused on African-American poverty and was designed to fix the alleged culture of laziness among black people. Though racial language was not used specifically

in the act, the new law affirmed that African-Americans were the chief recipients of welfare and occupied a permanent place in the American underclass. Bill Clinton's 1992 campaign dog-whistled to a conservative base of voters, focusing on his harsh criminal justice record and his opposition toward the "welfare state." His campaign ad asserted that under his administration welfare would be, "a second chance and not a way of life. [He and Al Gore] sent a strong signal to criminals by supporting the death penalty" (Clinton-Gore). Inserting welfare reform to his campaign platform alongside a tough-on-crime stance conflates these issues. In the American consciousness, these issues are racialized, allegedly only affecting African-Americans. Clinton was able to win the white vote through these promises because they positioned him as a New Democrat, unsympathetic to minorities. In actuality, roughly 60% of welfare recipients are white Americans, but the reality of these statistics does not change the rhetoric or public opinion on race and government assistance. During the Thomas hearings, a room full of white men passed judgment on Hill's credibility and controlled the combative tone and outcome of the hearings. The same white ruling class made decisions and assumptions regarding black economic striving and class mobility in the welfare reform discourse and legislation. The same year, the California legislature outlawed affirmative action. The framers of Proposition 209 insisted that racial considerations in college admissions were no longer necessary to achieve a racially diverse student body. However, after its inception, African-American enrollment rates dropped significantly. A 2008 Brigham Young Education and Law Journal study of the effects of this act shows that a balanced student body was not the result of Prop 209. Attorney Ian Wang found that:

> The overall applications, admissions, enrollment, and graduation rates of minorities in the University of California (UC) system has declined since the passage of Proposition 209 … The year prior to the passage of Proposition 209, the UC received 51,336 freshman applications, of which 21.1% were from underrepresented minorities. Following its

> passage, that percentage dropped to just 17.3% in 1999. Thus, it appears that the publicity of Proposition 209 discouraged underrepresented minority applicants. (156)

Education is a key component in the American ability to rise through the class ranks. Legislation like this and its effects sent a clear message to African-Americans throughout the country. Governments can and will limit African-American ability to redefine the link between race and poverty. By keeping African-Americans out of interracial educational spaces in California and eventually Michigan, the same racist legislative control asserted in the Thomas hearings prevailed. Again, there was a remote group of majority white legislators and electors making pronouncements about African-Americans. These statutes served to solidify the American fixation on the class capability of African-Americans and highlighted stereotypes about the black work ethic.

In social settings, African-Americans were reminded that race trumps class. In 1997, Tiger Woods became the first African-American to win the Masters Tournament, one of golf's highest honors. The winner of the tournament is usually responsible for choosing the cuisine at the celebratory dinner. A fellow golfer, Fuzzy Zoeller, sarcastically expressed concerns that Woods would serve soul food for dinner. Woods's success in a traditionally white elite sport was mitigated by a racial stereotype hurled at him publicly. These incidents proved that race and class continued to have a symbiotic relationship in America. Race defined class and class defined race in the minds of Americans, but data does not support these assumptions. Consequently, the American fixation on the class status of black people bred anxieties in the black community anew. Welfare is only for blacks; keep blacks in the underclass through educational restrictions; and blacks do not belong in white, wealthy spaces were the messages of the day. These messages influenced popular novels of the late 20th and early 21st centuries.

Authors Benilde Little and co-authors Tonya Lewis Lee and Crystal McCrary Anthony use their novels to challenge ideas about the existence of the black upper class and focus on characters precariously placed in that class as a response to the racist classism that haunted American class performance in the 90s and 2000s. Little's novel *Good Hair*, published in 1997, tells the story of Alice Andrews, an African-American reporter looking for love and increased wealth and status with her boyfriend, Jack Russworm, a member of New York City's black elite. *Gotham Diaries'* writing team Lee and Anthony give audiences an inside look at the African-American uber-rich in Manhattan and follow an ensemble cast as they desperately try to stabilize their place among the elite by passing. The story follows Tandy, a recent, impoverished widow losing her grip on her place in black high society; Lauren, an upper-middle class woman, struggling to find her place among the black uber-rich; and Manny, a gay Alabama transplant desperate to break into the black elite. Quinones Miller and Souljah focused on sexual vulnerabilities that accompanied interracial interactions with white males. In these novels, instead, the characters experience negative interracial interactions that are not gender specific but are still fraught with class and race tension. The authors use white characters to destabilize the passing of the African American characters. I argue that these minor characters reinsert race tension into a largely intraracial high-class narrative to contest the idea that African-Americans can truly "make it" in American society. These authors also question the point of class striving and warn of the dangers of alienation from the larger African-American community. These novels expose respectability politics as blind to racial obstacles that exist outside the black community. Further, I argue that each of the characters experiences pressure, ambivalence, and regret despite making all the right moves.

But I'm Not Like Them

The white American preoccupation with black class status and success predates Reaganomics rhetoric and the 1996 reforms. As I mentioned in Chapter 1, in1965 Daniel Patrick Moynihan, sociologist and Assistant Secretary of Labor under President Lyndon Johnson released a report focused on the supposed pathologies and obstacles facing black Americans. His report provided "official" documentation and justification for negative attitudes toward African-Americans. The report touched on the supposed criminality, family troubles, and retarded economic striving within the black community. In a section entitled "The Tangle of Pathology," Moynihan writes:

> There is considerable evidence that the Negro community is, in fact, dividing between a stable middle-class group that is steadily growing stronger and more successful, and an increasingly disorganized and disadvantaged lower-class group… the emergence and increasing visibility of a Negro middle-class may beguile the nation into supposing that the circumstances of the remainder of the Negro community are equally prosperous, whereas just the opposite is true at present, and is likely to continue so. (Moynihan)

The report was rife with assertions like this one and cast the African-American community as inherently degenerate and unlikely to achieve the American Dream. Moynihan intended to shine a light on the struggles that African-Americans faced in a postbellum America but his report, coupled with prevailing attitudes at the time, served only to render "black" and "poor" synonymous. The back-handed approval that Moynihan seems to give to the African American upper classes in this passage provides a focal point for class anxiety in the black community, and gradually separation within the community intensified. These class separations that began even in antebellum America, continue to attenuate the revolutionary power of blacks as a racial group. Instead of racial uplift, African-Americans became focused on more individualized class mobility in response to class vulnerabilities and the popular fascination with black prosperity and poverty.

In a *New York Magazine* article on the summer vacation destination of the Obama family, Touré writes that Martha's Vineyard is a prime example of black people separating by class. Martha's Vineyard has been a preferred vacation destination for the black elite since 1912 when a former slave opened Shearer Cottage on Oak Bluffs for black vacationers. Since then, Touré writes that the Vineyard has been a microcosm of black class anxieties and exclusions. He explains, "over the years Oak Bluffs has become the summer meeting place for scores of what could be called the Only Ones—black professional and social elites who travel in worlds where they're often the only black person in the room… They aren't assimilationist; they're ascensionist" (Touré). The Only Ones are very invested in maintaining their exclusivity. For example, when lower-class black college students attempted to move an annual Fourth of July party to the Vineyard, the seasoned vacationers and residents invented obstacles to restrict their access. One resident said, "It was a different sort of person coming—the difference between *Ebony* and *Jet,* or between Marvin Gaye and Biggie" (Touré). These comments encapsulate the stratification that exists within the black community along class lines. A chief concern among the Only Ones is being conflated with lower-class blacks because of skin color alone. As a result, Vineyard residents are dismissive of other blacks because of skin tone, religious traditions, and "street" manners. These markers are generally associated with middle- and lower-class blacks. The uber-rich are invested in differentiating themselves from this ilk.

Despite these exclusionary efforts, white residents of the Vineyard do not recognize class on the black body regardless of the material evidence that accompanies the Only Ones. Touré writes, "Sheila Johnson, the billionaire ex-wife of Bob Johnson (together they co-founded BET), was … at a tennis tournament when a white woman asked if she would mind introducing her maid to some black people" (Touré). The dismissal of Mrs. Johnson's status on Martha's

Vineyard is apparent in this exchange. Despite Mrs. Johnson being one of the richest black people in the country, the white Vineyarder could not or would not distinguish between the maid and the billionaire. All she saw was black skin. Despite the Johnsons being the model of success, their blackness is never far from the minds of the white elite. What is more compelling about the exchange is that black Vineyard residents definitely viewed this incident as a slight or insult, rather than an opportunity. He also notes that the Obamas are viewed in similar ways. The wealthiest residents bemoan the Obama family's familiar manner, claiming that they do not identify with the black elite. One resident said, "His wife definitely doesn't [relate]; she is basically a ghetto girl. That's what she says—I'm just being sociological. She grew up in the same place Jennifer Hudson did" (Touré). Class stratifications are so complex in this group that even the President and First Lady do not meet upper-class standards. However, this black snobbery and dismissal of the common black person demonstrate that the focus on class has replaced the focus on race, solidarity, and power in portions of the black community. Meanwhile, the unnamed white Vineyard resident and Fuzzy Zoeller do not appreciate these differences and either aimlessly or purposefully seeks to reestablish racial boundaries, limitations, and assumptions.

Zoeller's comments to reporters evidence similar disregard for black achievement. His diatribe, though couched in complimentary terms, condenses several racial insults and stereotypes into a single statement. Zoeller said, "That little boy is driving well, and he's putting well. He's doing everything it takes to win. So, you know what you guys do when he gets in here? … tell him not to serve fried chicken next year...or collard greens or whatever the hell they serve" (Zoeller). Zoeller first refers to Woods as a little boy. Though Woods is younger than Zoeller, historically, "boy" is used in exchanges between black and white males when white

males want to undermine the maturity and masculinity of black men. Further, when Zoeller mentions fried chicken and collard greens, he is reminding his audience of common stereotypes about African-American food culture and the class assumptions about these food items. Finally, Zoeller concludes this insult with "whatever the hell they serve" to further highlight Woods' supposed otherness in the face of white standards. By saying "whatever the hell," he is suggesting that the foods Woods might pick are so foreign as to be offensive to the dinner attendees. Zoeller does not take into account either the Americanness of the dishes listed or the Americanness of Woods' blackness. Also, to further emphasize Woods' difference from the previous Masters' winners, Zoeller uses the pronoun "they" to reiterate that he is not a member of "the club." Although Zoeller apologized and explained that his comments were meant in jest, the inference is clear: Woods' blackness precludes him from full acceptance into golf, a white bastion.

While Zoeller expressed regret for making these statements, some critics suggested that Woods had his own apologies to make to the black community. In an interview with *Esquire* magazine, he made sexually and racially suggestive jokes regarding black males and later he refused a presidential invitation to participate in a tribute to Jackie Robinson. Coupled with Woods' marginal acknowledgment of his black heritage (despite his rich skin tone), these incidents indicate that he too sought to differentiate himself from the black community. However, his insistence that he was only a little black and his estrangement from the black community would result in isolation during a scandal later in his career. Woods' behavior is reminiscent of James Weldon Johnson's *Ex-Colored Man*'s decision to pass as white. The unnamed narrator describes "a great wave of humiliation and shame….Shame that I belonged to a race that could be so dealt with…" However, he later laments, "I cannot repress the thought,

that, after all, I have chosen the lesser part, that I have sold my birthright for a mess of pottage" (Johnson 146, 163). It is not surprising that given the opportunity and a diverse racial background, Woods and others might seek to distance themselves from a race that is "so dealt with": continually maligned as lazy and insulted publicly through governmental rhetoric and media coverage.

Still Not White

For all their dismissals of and separations from the larger black community, however, to the black upper class, white approval and inclusion remain elusive. While black upper-class society always includes upper-class whites, the inverse is not true. Popular fiction like Plum Sykes's *Bergdorf Blondes*, Meg Cabot's *The Boy Next Door*, and Candace Bushnell's *Trading Up* demonstrate modern-day segregation and show that completely white spaces are possible for the upper class. Each author weaves stories of New York's upper classes, but there is little diversity in the Manhattan their characters inhabit. In one of the most cosmopolitan and diverse cities in the world, these authors see a wealthy "whitopia" and only include black characters (or other characters of color) tangentially, if at all. Bushnell's popular *Sex and the City* has been criticized for occupying a similar dimension, where diverse characters exist at the periphery of the white upper class. Her 2003*Trading Up* follows Janey Wilcox, Victoria's Secret model and avaricious social climber, as she uses her beauty and sex appeal to ascend the upper echelons of Manhattan society. The difference between Bushnell's character and the ones in *Good Hair* and *Gotham Diaries* is race. Despite having a reputation for promiscuity and egoism throughout the novel, Janey Wilcox is still able to access and move among the elite. Janey evidences desperation similar to that of the women in previous chapters, but the difference is that when she is confronted with white males, Janey does not cower in shame, as Winter and Regina do. The

blackness of these women acts as a crude invitation to control and to sexually abuse in the minds of the white men they encounter. Janey's whiteness provides protection and unquestioned acceptance. For example, although one of Janey's former lovers attempts to scare her out of attending a social engagement, Janey persists. Film producer Comstock Dibble cautions, "Goddammit, Janey. Why can't you just stay home? … I'm just trying to give you a friendly warning. It's better for both of us if no one knows we know each other" (9). Even though her embarrassed former lover wishes to assert control over Janey's comings and goings, he does not have the power actually to keep her out of social functions. As Gwendolyn Foster has written, her whiteness normalizes her licentious behavior and acts as a passport into very exclusive circles. These circles are entirely white and rich. Bushnell lets the reader know that Janey does not actually belong to the billionaire class that she insists on mingling with because Janey is a passer and her performance is elaborate. She plans everything from her wardrobe to her dining venues to her choice of husband, all to mold perception of her social status. For example, Bushnell writes, " [Janey] lifted the hem of her long yellow Oscar de la Renta dress that she'd borrowed for the occasion" (21). The fact that she does not own the dress she is wearing emphasizes that she is passing at this party. However, Janey's whiteness covers a myriad of flaws in her character and reputation. By the end of the novel, Janey's promiscuity has caught up with her and is splashed across the covers of newspapers and tabloids. Nevertheless, within two weeks, she finds a new beginning among the upper crust of Hollywood because she still possesses the only thing outside money that matters in this social group: whiteness. While it is true that Janey possess the requisite conventional beauty, the black women in *Gotham* and *Good Hair* are beauties too, so race is key. The characters in *Gotham Diaries* and *Good Hair* cannot behave in the brash and sassy and possibly feminist ways that Janey Wilcox does. Janey is able

to own and use her sexuality in a way that would only trigger gendered racial stereotypes about licentiousness if black female characters did the same. Hence, certain types of feminist expression, i.e. sexual autonomy, are not available to black women who seek middle and upper class status. Acceptance in the black upper class requires respectability, chastity, and a stellar reputation, as evidenced by the great lengths to which each protagonist in *Good Hair* and *Gotham Diaries* goes to pass as respectable and perform the perfect reputation. However, even though these characters make all the right moves, their attempts to pass to establish or maintain status do not impress the tangential but powerful white characters. Their inability to garner the same respect as Janey Wilcox emphasizes the invisibility of black people in white, upper crust Manhattan.

To highlight the absence of black people in Janey Wilcox's and Bushnell's world, a closer look at a minor character in the novel is necessary. Janey's torrid affairs are discovered and publicized by a black film production assistant, Scooter Mendelsohn. Mendelsohn only receives a few paragraphs' notice despite having been instrumental in Janey's downfall in Manhattan. While Bushnell was probably trying to add some diversity to her cast of characters, the addition of Mendelsohn falls embarrassingly short. Not only is he given very little consideration in the book, but Bushnell's name choice also highlights the level of dismissal that black people experience when confronted with these all-white landscapes. According to the 2000 Census, 0% of African-Americans have this last name. The name is more commonly associated with families of Jewish descent, another rarity among blacks. These curiosities cried out for further explanation, but Bushnell gives her audience none. In short, the world that Bushnell describes is not concerned with black culture, and her black character is interchangeable with a white one. In Bushnell's New York, whiteness is standardized because the white characters do not have to

include African-Americans in their circles, or as Bushnell shows, know anything about black people, at all. Conversely, the black upper crust explored in *Gotham Diaries* and *Good Hair* necessarily includes white characters. The numbers of white elite dwarf the numbers of black elite. The black upper crust is simply too small to exclude white people in the same way that whites exclude or dismiss upper-class blacks.

High-Class and Lowbrow: The Role of Chick Lit

What Bushnell's novels do have in common with Lee's and Anthony's and Little's is that they are all chick lit, despite the differences in how race and class intersect in them. These novels join a long tradition of popular romance novels, which connect the heroine's happiness and love to economic security. Whether it is *Fetters of Gold* (1988), *Bargaining with the Boss* (1998), or *The Italian Tycoon and the Nanny* (2008), the last 30 years of romance have highlighted not only happy endings for ordinary girls but also the importance of class in choosing a fairy tale mate. Popular novel publishing powerhouse Harlequin Enterprises boasts countless titles about rich men and the working class women that attract them. Janice Radway touches on the importance of wealth and status in her study of the reading habits of romance book clubs. Her study's subjects believe that the ideal hero is "a man among men… he must be a leader able to command respect from everyone around him…Not only are they wealthy, indeed, often aristocratic, but they are also active and successful participants in some major public endeavor" (Radway 130). Little and Lee and Anthony join the ranks of chick lit authors popular among single women in their 20s and 30s.

Chick lit, a subgenre of romance novels, alter the tenets of romance by peopling the works with ambitious women who desire both self-sufficiency and domesticity. This genre contains narrative conventions including a young independent woman living in a metropolis. The

heroine is focused on her career, which is usually media or fashion driven. The protagonist's identity is threatened by fears about a man shortage, motherhood, and career exhaustion. Each main character is searching for a mate who will not only provide the romance she believes she deserves but who can also provide improved social and financial standing. In her article on class and chick lit, Joanne Knowles suggests that these protagonists are more concerned with property and its social significance than love. The heroine in Jane Green's novel *Straight Talking* lists her partner's qualities as, "Handsome, well-dressed, [with] a beautiful flat in Maida Vale, a Mazda MX-5, knew brilliant people, was great in bed ... Well, the list goes on and on, really" (Green 10). Knowles explains, "The order of this list prioritizes a desirable location - it's no accident that the right man for [the heroine] in *Straight Talking* has a flat in Maida Vale, while the wrong one she initially pursues lives in Clapham" (Knowles 39). Maida Vale is equivalent to New York's Upper East Side, while Clapham parallels Queens. While Knowles studies novels set in London, Little and Lee and Anthony focus on New York with similar results. The Manhattan protagonists in *Gotham Diaries* and *Good Hair* do focus on the properties of their mates. *Gotham Diaries'* Tandy is very proud of the Upper East Side home that her husband has bought for her. Lauren feels the awe of the palatial apartment overlooking Central Park that she occupies with billionaire husband, Ed. And, Manny never misses an opportunity to describe his posh Harlem brownstone. Anthony and Lee highlight the importance of address as Manny Marks peruses Lauren's abode. Manny notes, "surveying the palatial digs that overlooked Wollman Skating Rink in Central Park, that when she and Ed decided to sell, he would make a huge commission. The place had to be worth twenty million today, and more than that in a couple of years. Sometimes he still couldn't believe that he was so intimate with one of the world's wealthiest people" (49). *Good Hair's* Alice Andrews considers Jack's residence and occupation major

advantages to their relationship and even begins to forgive him for his infidelity when he offers her an apartment on the Upper East Side.

Moreover, the city allows for complex class performances. As Marian Keyes writes of her protagonist in *Last Chance Saloon*, "She often feared that people she met … weren't giving her the full picture. That to some degree they 'd reinvented themselves. Simply because they could…almost no one was actually from London, so they hadn't any annoying family hanging around to contradict the lie or whatever fantasy they fed people" (31). Lee's and Anthony's characters are also given the space to construct identities in the blank slate of the metropolis. Tandy creates an elaborate ruse to convince her social circle that her financial circumstances have not changed since her husband's death. In actuality, she has no job or assets, which challenges her role as a doyenne in the black upper crust. She laments, "She had worked so hard to be a part of this world… not only was she in a position where sustaining her annual [charitable] contributions would embarrassingly, have to stop; she would also have to figure out how to make ends meet…still, she would persevere"(14). To Tandy, "persevering" is maintaining her place in society rather than general survival. The lengths she is willing to go to are made clear by this charity event. Not once do Lee and Anthony discuss the importance of the charity to Tandy; instead, they focus on how the charity benefits her public image as a wealthy and connected woman and its role in substantiating her deceit. Tandy's lack of interest in charity for charity's sake leads the audience to understand the complexity of her passing. Manny uses the same near-theatrical means to persuade Manhattan's upper crust that he is a member or at least a member in training. He occasionally muses that his mother's efforts to climb the social ranks in small-town Alabama were not as successful as his were because of her location. From his Etro designer jacket and Hermes handkerchief to rented town car and driver, Manny is

meticulous in his presentation of class in a way that is only possible in a big city. Manny's class performance mirrors that of upper-class blacks in Karyn Lacy's study of class and race in *Blue-Chip Black*. Lacy explains that to signal the "right" type of blackness in different social settings, study participants are detailed in their public presentation. She writes, "Blacks hope to avoid … confusion by creating a look that intimates affluence through the erection of exclusionary boundaries. In real terms, this would mean selecting clothing that contrasts sharply with the attire associated with black popular culture" (Lacy 94). Lacy defines exclusionary boundaries as those behaviors and choices that indicate that an African-American is high society and well versed in white standard class behaviors. Manny's choice of clothing and transportation and Tandy's self-serving involvement in charity are meant to herald their belonging among the city's elite. However, these efforts are ultimately frustrated when their passing is uncovered, and their society memberships are revoked. New York also allows Alice to evade the truth about her background. At the beginning of her relationship with Jack, she lets him make certain assumptions about her background. Alice passes as an upper-class debutante, because her parents, a seamstress and a mailman, are not in New York to challenge her performance. She purposefully distances herself from them in nearby Newark to continue the charade. Along with her careful attention to clothing, language, and social setting, the city permits the reinvention and anonymity for Alice. This explains why the highly classed narratives in chick lit invariably take place in metropolises, rather than in less populous areas where a lie can be more easily uncovered.

Good Hair, Gotham Diaries, and other chick lit novels with black heroes and heroines share this class-consciousness with novels focused on white characters. However, Lisa Guerrero differentiates these novels, calling them chick lit and *sistah* lit. She suggests that chick lit is

popular with the daughters of the feminist movement, but the complex desires for career and domesticity are further complicated when there are racial concerns. She writes, “While the heroines’ odysseys involve the complications of relationships, *sistah lit* more often shows its heroines running from domesticity in an attempt to reassert an identity that is unconnected to a history of forced compliance with the roles of caretaker, breeder, and sexualized object” (Guerrero 90). So, while chick lit stories like *Bridget Jones’s Diary* and *Fifty Shades of Grey* have happy endings that balance marriage, family and career, *sistah lit* like Terry McMillan’s *Waiting to Exhale* often concludes with the reassertion of self and friendship with romance and home life purposefully deemphasized. From this perspective, both *Gotham Diaries* and *Good Hair* qualify as *sistah* lit because at the ends of the novels, these domestic concerns are unstable, but friendships and self-esteem are re-balanced. McMillan may have started the genre that Guerrero describes, but other authors have contributed to its shape. One beneficiary of McMillan’s success is literary powerhouse Pearl Cleage. Cleage characterized her work for *Ebony* magazine's Charles Whitaker. She said, "I don't talk in terms of commercial fiction or literary fiction because my readers don't make those distinctions…What I find is that our readers are looking for the 'Sister truth' in the work. If you write the truth, they will find you, no matter what genre you're working in” (Whitaker). Cleage alludes to a truth that is unique to the black women’s experience. This truth can be just for black women, but often relates to the community as a whole because of the maternal role that many black women hold in their communities. Benilde Little further differentiates her works from the general genre of chick lit in a manner similar to Guerrero’s argument. In an interview with the *New York Times’* Felicia Lee, Little said, “The black chick-lit books that I’ve read, it’s all about ‘gotta find a man’ and that’s it… These characters just spring up, they don’t have a background, they don’t have parents, they

don't have brothers and sisters and concerns" (Lee). Little builds on the chick lit genre and fashions it to better fit *sistah* concerns. *Good Hair* and her other works involve buppie ennui, class divisions and the struggles to balance work and home among privileged black women. The Sister Truth that Little and Lee and Anthony are trying to clarify is that passing, social climbing, and dismissal of the "wrong" type of black people do not ultimately yield satisfaction for the characters. In the end, both Alice and Lauren are married to wealthy men they do not or cannot trust while Manny and Tandy have forfeited their moral compasses for a chance at a better class position. The Sister Truth is that none of this striving leads to happiness.

Within contemporary literary fiction, key authors have woven class considerations into the fabric of their work. Toni Morrison's *Tar Baby*, Gloria Naylor's *Linden Hills*, and August Wilson's *Radio Golf* all contend with the divisions of class within the black community. While Morrison's work mainly concerns the sexualization of protagonist Jadine in the name of class climbing, Naylor's and Wilson's works focus on the intraracial conflict of class striving and community-building. Tim Engles' essay on class and *Linden Hills* suggests that the residents of the prestigious neighborhood have lost focus on racial justice and equality and instead attempt to be raceless for class mobility in the exclusive Linden Hills community. Naylor examines the subtleties and ubiquity of white supremacy in a narrative with no white characters. Engles writes, "Naylor dramatizes a desire to shed blackness and become rich. While the latter seems more a matter of class than of race, it nevertheless entails a "whitening" process that parallels the workings of white racialization" (Engles). Naylor has previously explained that she chose *Inferno* as a model for her novel because of the parallels she saw between class striving and the levels of hell. Interestingly, people with the highest-class position in Linden Hills are marked as possessing the least black consciousness. Engels also examines the ways that characters attempt

to distance themselves from perceived blackness. A minor character, Mrs. Tilson, is actively whitening her connections to black culture. In a dinner scene with protagonists Willie and Lester, Mrs. Tilson apologizes for the fried chicken she has served, calling it "peasant food" (49). Mrs. Tilson's opinion of the food mirrors white supremacist stereotyping of black food culture. She further sets herself apart from the cuisine through its preparation. Her dinner guests note that the chicken is underdone. This scene is reminiscent of the Fuzzy Zoeller commotion, showing fictional black people grappling with the tensions between race, class, and cultural norms in a quest to improve white society's perceptions of their class status. In *Linden Hills*, class status means the ability to imitate white people in class performance. August Wilson's play includes similar themes of whitening in the name of class ascension. Of the class conflicts within the black community, Wilson asserted:

> Today I would say that the conflict in black America is between the middle class and the so-called underclass, and that conflict goes back to those who deny themselves and those who aren't willing to. . . . Most blacks in the ghettos say, 'If I got to give up who I am, if I can't be like me, then I don't want it.' The ones who accept it go on to become part of the growing black middle class and in some areas even acquire power and participation in society, but when they arrive, they are no longer the same people. (206)

Wilson's *Radio Golf* uses an ever-present poster of Tiger Woods as a symbol of ascension, but its characters still occupy unsteady ground where race continues to intrude on the emergent black upper class.

My Type of Black, Your Type of White

For a long time, racial bias has been an obstacle to the black middle and upper classes' striving for a place among America's elite. The businesses, professions, and social engagements that Wilson and Naylor examine in literature were studied in sociologist E. Franklin Frazier's analysis in *Black Bourgeoisie* in 1957. Frazier outlined the history and customs of black society while excoriating the group for its inattention to racial justice and community. He writes, "Since

the black bourgeoisie has rejected identification with the masses, its isolation has been further intensified. In escaping from identification with the masses, the black bourgeoisie has attempted to identify with the white propertied classes…this has been impossible, except in their minds, because of the racial barriers" (141). Frazier calls any pretensions that the black elite has about acceptance from white elites or their insistence that they are somehow better than the masses of black Americans as make-believe. He explains that this make-believe masks the same inferiority and reactions to white supremacy that all black Americans face. Frazier continually notes that despite similar income levels, common cultural norms and comparable living conditions, the white upper classes do not or will not recognize these commonalities, only racial differences. Little and Lee and Anthony all highlight these sites of re-racialization amid high-class surroundings. *Good Hair* shows that so complex are these sites of class and race tension that they do not only affect adults. As Alice muses about her background as a middle-class striver, she remembers an art appreciation enrichment class that she attended in her youth, taught by a suburban housewife. Little writes, "The teacher was patronizing to Evelyn Hawkins, Eddie Hauser, and me, the only brown ones in the bunch …Whenever one of us asked a question, she would usually tell us that there were things she didn't expect us to understand. I began to despise the woman's pale, pinched face encased in a mass of blond straw" (24). The art teacher's dismissal of the children's questions is reminiscent of the repealed Californian policy on affirmative action because it demonstrates attempts to control the education and class mobility of black students. Now it could be that the teacher, not a professional, does not know the answers to the questions and so skirts the issue. However, Little points out that her dismissal is only directed at the black children, not at the children generally. Her refusal to answer the questions suggests that she does not feel that art education is important for black children to have. Alice reads the

teacher's attitude and has a strong reaction to all the visible parts of her whiteness. Young Alice's hatred situates these encounters in race. She focuses on the woman's whiteness, critically describing her pallid skin and hair. Calling the hair straw signals to the reader that this woman likely dyes her hair blond, a key marker of whiteness. Dyeing her hair can be seen as a method of intensifying her whiteness. Little's scene in the highly classed environment of the museum can be construed as a site of class molding, a molding that the teacher believes is unimportant for these children.

Alice continues to have trouble with interracial interactions throughout her life. Later in the story, Alice begins to feel career exhaustion at the newspaper where she is a reporter. In a conversation with Jack, the audience sees the separation between lower and upper-class blacks. When Alice complains about the type of stories her white supervisors send her and other black reporters to cover, Jack responds, "Mmm, I see. Kinda like you're Black, so you're supposed to know about pathology…Well, why don't you just tell them that you aren't that kind of Black?" (50). This conversation with Jack shows two sides to the issue of class and race. On the one hand, Alice's white supervisors will not recognize that she has little understanding of criminal life, relying instead on racial stereotypes. Her class status is not readable to her bosses, and as a result, her career is restricted to the crime beat. On the other hand, rather than seeing an opportunity for investigative reporting to expand understanding of the black community and to start conversations about social justice, Jack and Alice only see this as an insult. Both only lament that the "type" of blackness that they perform will not be appreciated. This type of blackness is supposed to be immune to stereotyping because its performance mirrors whiteness so closely. However, as Frazier writes, "Their incomes and occupations may enable them to escape the cruder manifestations of racial prejudice, but they cannot insulate themselves against

the more subtle forms of racial discrimination" (182). The racial interactions that Little and Lee and Anthony outline are never overtly racist. Alice's work assignments can be construed simply as journalistic duties, but it is the subtlety of the stereotyping and racialization that adds to African-American class anxieties. The point is the racism is still there, even if the class performance is near perfect, like Jack's.

Despite his performance as the perfect buppie, Jack also has to reassert his type of blackness in the workplace. He relates a similar story in which a white medical intern insists that Jack would be better able to understand and help a particular black patient. Jack complains, "the man, the patient, spoke with a heavy sort of southern dialect. The intern was White [and] assumed that I would understand the guy because we were both Black…I asked him about his background…just as I figured, the intern was merely second-generation college educated. I let him know right then and there that he was closer to that patient's background than I" (Little 51). Jack tries to use class to outmaneuver racial assumptions, but he is only partially successful. He has to review a lot of the intern's background to explain the class differences between himself, the intern, and the patient. The intern only has to use phenotype to make certain assumptions. The fact that Jack has to explain himself in such detail undermines what he is trying to signal. His race already undermines his class in the mind of the intern. Furthermore, Jack plays into the very behavior that Frazier despises. He differentiates himself from the patient in front of the white intern, but the larger issue is that to achieve this class performance, he refuses to help a member of the black community. The audience never does discover if the patient is helped by anyone. At the expense of both this patient and perhaps his Hippocratic oath, Jack establishes his membership in the upper class, but he also shows that the black privileged class spends a lot of

time establishing and explaining class boundaries for white people in hopes of gaining their respect. Gaining that respect can involve putting down other black people.

Gotham's Manny is already an outsider in the black upper class because of the aforementioned sexual mores among the elite, and his homosexuality transgresses these standards. As Tandy angrily points out to him later in the story, homosexuality will prevent him from furthering his climb up the social ladder. Despite the outsider status that he laments throughout the novel, he still condescends to the black clientele that he deems beneath him. When the reader first meets Manny, he is taking a black couple on a housing tour of the most exclusive neighborhoods in Manhattan. The couple is newly arrived from the Midwest and Manny, while not openly rude, keeps up a running commentary on their class shortcomings. He muses to himself, "the barely millionaires no longer intrigued him… he found them dull. They both were so ordinary in their drab midlevel designer wear, and they lack sophistication" (2). He has a similar reaction to the nouveau-riche clients, rappers Darryl and Coffee Raye. Their investment in entertainment and flash make them ill-suited for the upper class according to both Lauren and Tandy, but Manny needs their business to maintain his class performance. Manny's opinion about these couples exemplifies Frazier's point about the purposeful alienation to which the black upper class subjects lower class blacks. While these clients are vying for real estate among the black upper crust, Manny's and Tandy's attitude about them shows that they will not belong. Tandy chastises Manny for having a professional relationship with the couple. She chides, "Oh, Manny where has your taste gone?" Then, she muses to herself, "Apparently her referrals were not enough. He had to go and attach himself to the lewdest, wealthiest people he could find" (Lee and Anthony 33). Despite the couple's work with black literacy charities, Tandy only sees them as interlopers whom she actively avoids. The slights that these characters

experience (real or imagined) demonstrate the problems with investment in class performance. The black upper class insists that it is special, but its uniqueness is not appreciated by the intended white upper- class audience. Therefore, its uniqueness is defined at the expense of the lower class. Even though the Rayes have plenty of money, their ghetto origins continue to cause them to be excluded.

Little's characters correct white characters' racism with a healthy dose of classism, but race trumps class in the end. Consequently, class protections are challenged and dismissed. Alice finally makes the decision to leave the Newark newspaper for what she and Jack hope will be a more lucrative job. However, on the interview, Alice is again reminded that race trumps class. Alice recalls the interview with Holly Thomasson, magazine editor and potential new boss, which begins with what the reader might believe is high praise from Holly. She compliments Alice: "So, your résumé is very impressive. You went to Holyoke? I went to Simmons" (160). But, Little quickly undercuts that positive assumption when Alice thinks to herself, "We were about to play White Girl Poker. … Holyoke is more celebrated than Simmons, so she had to raise me, asking personal questions, referring to my résumé for more info to best me. 'So you live on the East Side? So do I … she asked, "You're on Eighty-fifth between . . . ?" When I told her Madison and Park, she ended the game… I'd won the round…But she, by dint of birth, won the set" (160-161). Holly engages Alice in this social poker game in an attempt to outclass Alice. In this exchange, the audience again sees how important real estate and education are in the establishment of class. Mount Holyoke is a Seven Sisters school, institutions that informally partnered with Ivy League universities before co-educational days, even sponsoring mixers in the hope that students might marry members of their own class. Simmons is not a part of this tradition, so Alice's education out-classes Holly's. When that fails, Holly always has race to fall

back on. Rather than requiring Alice to supply the standard three references for the job, Holly asks for 15. Even though Alice may outclass Holly, Alice must submit to further scrutiny before she can get the job. Although Alice is seeking to leave one racially tense workplace in rough and tumble Newark, the high-class environment of a Manhattan magazine does not provide a shield from similar conflict.

Lee and Anthony also highlight the racial pitfalls of class in *Gotham Diaries*. When the audience meets Tandy, the reader sees that she is passing as a wealthy woman and using her charitable contributions to secure the performance. Lee and Anthony further undercut the rules and regulations of class by showing the racial conflicts that still exist in the upper class. In Tandy's case, the conflict threatens her position in the black upper class. Tandy's financial situation continues to deteriorate throughout the novel, and she decides to start selling off her belongings. In addition to selling artwork, she decides to have her furniture appraised for sale. However, her experience with a white consignment representative highlights the importance of race in the narrative that largely focuses on class. First, Tandy's doorman calls her to say that he consignment man has ignored their appointment and needs to see her immediately. Meanwhile, Tandy and her publicist are strategizing, and Tandy has to juggle the consignment guy to keep him away from the publicist, lest she discover the truth about Tandy. She successfully dodges this conflict at first, but it isn't long before race comes crashing into her kitchen. Lee and Anthony write, "As Tandy finished her sentence, the swing door of the kitchen blew forward, and the portly consignment man sauntered in. 'There you are, Tandy. I wanted to go over the items that I've reviewed. First, in the living room, you have a couple of respectable pieces that I could probably fetch a decent dollar for, but as far as the sofa and chairs go, my clientele don't generally'" (84). Tandy ponders this serviceman's familiar manner and wonders if race plays a

role in her treatment. However, the racial tension built long before he used her given name. First, when he insisted on moving their appointment without notice, Lee and Anthony are suggesting that he believes his time is more valuable than Tandy's. After he bursts into the kitchen and disrespectfully uses her first name, he denigrates her furniture. He calls her furniture "respectable" and is dubious about his ability to sell it. His attitude about the furniture and Tandy suggests that he doesn't believe that her furniture is nice enough to sell, although given what the reader knows about her, the pieces are likely flawless, high-end, and beautiful. He might just know the tastes of his clientele and his attitude could be all about business. However, his dismissal of her furniture coupled with his use of her first name racializes the encounter. As when Zoeller calls Tiger Woods "boy," the unnamed white serviceman's use of Tandy's first name invokes a long history of racialized disrespect or unwarranted familiarity on the part of whites. Using her first name dismisses their status as strangers to each other, dismisses her maturity, and most importantly dismisses her status in front of her publicist. His status as a workman encourages him to rely on old racial scripts to remind Tandy of her inferior racial place in the larger society despite her class status. While in this interaction, he is clearly at a class disadvantage, but his whiteness gives him power. Though Tandy ultimately wins this battle by refusing to do business with him, the weakness of class in the face of race lingers. Frazier's study provides further context to Tandy's response. He explains, "Despite their attempt to escape from real identification with the masses of Negroes, they cannot escape the mark of oppression any more than their less favored kinsmen… their pathological struggle for status within the isolated Negro world and craving for recognition in the white world leaves them with a feeling of emptiness and futility" (Frazier 176). Even though the workman is not a member of the white elite, Tandy still hopes that he will recognize the differences in their class and show deference.

When she realizes that he is not reading her class performance and that he inadvertently uncovers her pass in front of her publicist, Lee and Anthony show Tandy as despondent and vulnerable.

Lee and Anthony consistently feature these racial tensions, microaggressions, and slights throughout the novel with other characters. Lauren's positive remembrances of her childhood also remind the reader about the ever-presence of race in the lives of the black upper class. Lauren recalls her first experience with illicit drugs in high school at a party with her mostly white classmates. Her friend Margy singles Lauren out for a special honor. Lee and Anthony write:

> Margy took Lauren aside and told her she wanted to show her something. Curious, Lauren followed Margy up one side of the marble double staircase to Michael's [Margy's brother] room, where a very good-looking chocolate-brown boy was bobbing his head to the Sugarhill Gang …'Margy, close the door. I don't want anyone coming up here, seeing what we've got.' …To Lauren she said, "Michael said of all of my friends, you were the coolest, so he said I could bring you up here. (77)

In this exchange, Lauren remembers feeling that being included is a high compliment. However, the set up for this introduction to drugs is riddled with racial implications. First, Lauren is no different from the house full of people that she and Margy have just passed to get to Michael's room. She attends the same school, is a stellar student, and her parents enjoy similar economic success. Hence, Margy's declaration that Lauren is her coolest friend has the beginnings of racial overtones. Additionally, the only other person included in this private drug party is also black. Margy and Michael clearly believe that their black friends are uniquely suited for drugs and behave in front of them in ways they would not in front of their white friends. In fact, both Margy and Michael demand that this drug binge be kept secret from the other partygoers. While Lauren does not recognize this racialized slight even in her recollection, Lee and Anthony allow this instance of stereotyping to go unchallenged by the story's characters; they have included this

instance and Lauren's lack of reaction to show the subtleties of racism among the upper class. The racism is not aggressive, but it is oppressive and inescapable just the same.

Even Manny experiences racial tension over a cup of tea. When he meets an uber-wealthy potential client, Dana, he perceives that she is making assumptions about his class level based on race. As they sit to discuss business, Lee and Anthony explain, “Dana laughed, and her eyes continued to appraise him. She took the liberty of ordering him some lavender tea before grilling him. She probably assumed she was saving him the embarrassment of asking for Lipton with extra sugar” (121). While the racial overtones of this scene are faint, they further explain the conflicts of race and class. First, Dana’s assumptions exist exclusively in Manny’s head. She did not say she thought he could not order tea on his own, but he assumed that she had some bias. Dana may well have racial bias and believe that Manny would order tea that she deems low class, but her language or behavior does not necessarily indicate that. However, what his internal dialogue shows is that members of the black upper class can never be sure if their white counterparts are accurately reading their class performance. Hence, defensiveness and doubt are part and parcel of these interracial interactions. The interactions that Lauren and Tandy endure are insidious. The history with incidents like these precipitate Manny’s reaction at tea. Put another way, once a black person experiences clear slights or insults, even benign comments can provoke class anxiety.

The Pressures of a Make-Believe Life

The interracial conflicts are only one dimension of the struggle of black high society. While trying to prove their worthiness and uniqueness, the group also suffers from internal struggles from the pressure to be perfect. Frazier examines the repression that the black elite is known for. These repressions and rules the black upper class live by indicate membership in the

upper class and hopefully signify to the white upper class that they are closer culturally to them than whites assume. However, living under these repressions leads to destructive behavior of the characters in these novels. Little and Lee and Anthony further challenge the conventions of the wealthy by showing the members of the class as deeply unhappy. Their attempts to pass fail, and sometimes these characters display behaviors that are stereotypically associated with lower class blacks.

Jack's best friend Jeffrey Doran, passer and successful surgeon, and his fiancée Laura, are prime examples of Frazier's argument about the desperation and anxiety evident among society. Laura's insistence on distinguishing herself from the black community at large becomes clear when Alice and Laura first meet. Laura drones on about the importance of class distinctions in her native Washington and her comfort with exclusivity. Laura opines, "There are just so many Blacks in D.C., it's just important to make distinctions since there aren't enough Whites or other kinds of people to make enough separate groups …After all, there have always been house Negroes and field Negroes and there always will be" (90). After this pronouncement, Little adds, "No one touched what Laura said. It hung in the air like pollen" (90). Little lets the statement hang in the air. Later, Jack and Alice discuss this statement in negative terms, but at the time, both remain silent. Their silence suggests tacit approval of Laura's attitude. Though it is uncomfortable, the group shares these values. Furthermore, Jeffrey occupies an even more precarious place in the black upper class. His background is even further from the upper class than Alice's. Jeffrey accepts Laura's attitude because he is continually embarrassed by his working class roots. At his wedding to Laura, Jeffrey further proves that he belongs among the upper class, by ignoring his family and leaving them out of family photos. He is desperate to differentiate his type of blackness from that represented by his family. Little creates a serious

conflict between Jeffrey and Laura later in the book. He attacks her in their home and is jailed. While there is no excuse for domestic violence, Little seems to connect Laura's earlier alienating statement to the pressure and violence that Jeffrey ultimately displays. In the visiting booth of the jail, Jeffrey explains, "she just wouldn't stop, man, she was talking to me like I was garbage" (182). Jeffrey insinuates that this is a common fight between them, a fight over class. Laura and Jeffrey's violent break up suggests that despite evidence to the contrary, membership in the black elite is tenuous at best. Prior to the violent episode, Laura continually challenged Jeffrey's place. Little shows the reader that Laura belittles him and alienates him from his mother. Jeffrey is never granted full membership, despite his achievements and economic success. Moreover, the insistence on alienation and the level of pressure that Jeffrey experiences may foreshadow this destructive result.

In addition to displaying perfection in education and career, Frazier claims that to the black upper class sex is key to demonstrating their kinship with the white elite and their difference from the black lower class. He writes, "The young men but more especially the young women, were to live chaste lives… it was only 'common' Negroes who engaged in premarital and unconventional sex relations… Was this not the best proof of respectability in the eyes of the white man, who had constantly argued that the Negro's 'savage instincts' prevented him from conforming to puritanical standards of sex behavior?' (71). Jack, the character who seems the most at ease with the class distinctions, transgresses these chaste standards. Jack is the character most invested in his place within the black upper class. Though he tries to hide his snobbish tendencies from Alice, class firmly and nearly exclusively defines Jack's identity. Upon meeting Alice, he proudly outlines his family's pedigree. He boasts, "[w]e descended from freeborn people of color" and follows this information up with a listing of the occupations of his great-

grand and grandparents, all business owners, and white-collar workers. He weaves these facts about his family background and upbringing into many of the conversations in the novel. This reliance on class for self-definition makes his fall from grace more intense. When Alice begins to confront her childhood sexual abuse, she withdraws from Jack. In response to her brief withdrawal for self-care, he has an affair with an ex-girlfriend. Early in the story, Little informs the audience that the rules Frazier outlined are still a part of black upper class conventions. She writes, "There's a rigid code among the Bup—Black urban professional—crowd. The rule is three dates before any heavy petting and then screw on the fourth or fifth, usually at some weekend bed-and-breakfast… Do it sooner or without an agreement and you're considered a slut at worst, no pedigree at best" (42). Since outsider Alice is so concerned with adhering to these standards in their relationship, upper-class insider Jack's failure to maintain these standards is jarring. The betrayal is more intense because Jack's affair results in a child. This sexually indiscriminate behavior is even further outside class norms. Like his friend Jeffrey, Jack is pressured to be perfect. While much of this pressure is self-imposed, Jack's placement and fame in black society are burdensome. In her first meeting with Jack's friends and family, Alice notices a near-royal position Jack occupies in his social circle. At Jeffrey's wedding reception, Alice observes, "[Jack] was still stopped continuously by revelers who seemed to want nothing more than to touch his hem…They treated him like Prince Russworm of the long-lost tribe of Freeborns" (99). This level of admiration causes Jack some inner conflict. While he repeatedly tells Alice, he does not care about the trappings of his status; he actively courts the attention and revels in the exclusive culture. Hence, Jack's affair and out-of-wedlock fatherhood seem more extreme. His affair conjures up historical stereotypes about the sexual appetites of black men and

the broken black family. Although infidelities are commonplace, Jack's attempts to pass as perfect in a highly regulated black upper class highlight the pitfalls and falsities of this class.

Sexual betrayal rears its head again in the *Gotham Diaries*. Billionaire Ed has carefully cultivated his success and a class performance to accompany it. He insinuates that he has chosen Lauren as his wife because of her upper-class upbringing, which differs widely from his own meager beginnings. During their courtship, Lee and Anthony write, "[h]e was fascinated by her privileged upbringing and her ability to remain so unaffected by it all" (21). Here, the audience understands that Ed is a class passer. Though he has amassed a fortune, in order to fully belong to the black upper class, he needs an alliance with a full-fledged member to complete the performance. And while he may love Lauren, Ed is impatient and coarse with his wife. His terse and abrupt behavior suggests a dissatisfaction with his class pass performance. Because of this repression and his lack of belonging, Ed cheats on Lauren with a dancer from South Central LA. Again, infidelity knows no class boundaries. However, the way in which he cheats and his mistress demonstrate that there are class implications to his sexual transgression. Ed asks Manny to meet him at his pied-à-terre, so he could demonstrate how little he cared for his place among the upper classes. Lee and Anthony write, "The grotesque sounds coming from the bedroom made him want to squirm. He could only assume the "Aww, shit! Damn, baby!" noises were from Ed, though the guttural sounds clashed with everything Manny knew about Ed and certainly ran counter to anything he had ever heard escape Ed's mouth" (169). Ed has purposefully invited Manny to witness his affair in the most voyeuristic way. Although Ed waves money at Manny to ensure that he will not reveal the affair to Lauren, Ed has invited Manny to this tryst to demonstrate how little he thinks of class behavior expectations. Furthermore, Ed's choice of mistress shows that he is at odds with the conventions of class. She is not a proper

black lady with a comfortable background, but rather a woman whose background matches his own lower class origins. She uses sex to try to climb the class ladder because she buys into the mystique of high society. However, unlike Bushnell's Janey Wilcox, Alyssia is not permitted class mobility. In a public confrontation between Ed, Alyssia, and Lauren, Alyssia cannot hold on to Ed or to her tenuous grip on the upper class. Because Lauren has continued to adhere to the group's rules, she has remained attractive to Ed, while Alyssia appears mismatched to his ultimate desire. So, despite an ugly scene of infidelity and pain that resulted from Ed's sexual repression, he still believes, as does Jack Russworm, in the tenets of class, and he still wants to be a part of the upper-class community.

Karyn Lacy's *Blue Chip Black* shows the frustrations at the rules of the black upper class. Though carefully following the rules of fashion, language, and social status yield some success, her study participants are often overwhelmed. She writes, "Even when such strategies pay off, they can be tiring and irritating, exerting a potential psychological toll that [study] respondents either are unaware of or tend not to express" (Lacy 76). The psychological toll is most apparent with Tandy and Manny. Though sexual behavior is not what leads to their dismissal from the group, desperation that echoes Lacy's findings does. Manny and Tandy conspire to defraud Ed and Lauren of $10 million in a real estate deal. Both feel completely justified in their plan because of the demands of class. Ed, Manny, and Tandy all work tirelessly to gain a more stable place in the black elite, but the pressure corrodes each character differently. Ed marries the right woman to settle his upper-class placement; Manny and Tandy are selective in their friendships, fashion, and social engagements to secure their places, but the pressures cause them to engage in deplorable and criminal behavior.

Lonely Luxe Life

By the end of these stories, the isolation that both Alice and Lauren feel suggests that their striving for better mates and a more secure place among the upper class has not afforded them satisfaction with their class status. Alice discovers Jack's infidelity, and within twenty pages, she has forgiven him. Her forgiveness is purchased with a new apartment at an even more exclusive address in Manhattan, but Alice seems more than a little ambivalent about her future with Jack. Little wraps up Alice's story in a lovely bow, but the rapidity of the story's end signals that Alice has not had the opportunity to process and forgive in earnest. Little introduces the new apartment at Central Park West to demonstrate that without the accouterments of class that Jack offers, Alice would likely not have forgiven him. Alice's new digs will better her class status, while the fractured status of her relationship hangs in the air. Days before her wedding (in the new apartment), Alice considers the involvement she will have to have with Jack's child. Alice complains, "I mean this baby thing. He cheated on me…I'd be a stepmother, I'm not sure I wanna be one" (221). Just after she considers these problems with continuing a relationship with Jack, her thoughts return to the apartment. Alice's ambivalence illustrates that the role of domesticity that she has worked to achieve will not provide her the solace she seeks. However, she has managed to reestablish family relationships in time for the wedding. Her focus on family hearkens back to Guerrero's assessment of the sistah lit genre. The reader likely has doubts about Alice's marriage, but her family relationships and friendships provide more comfort. The end of Lauren's tale is rife with the same uncertainty about her relationship with a philandering Ed, and is peppered with class concerns. Lauren feels a distance from her husband that he is anxious to close. Lee and Anthony write, "She was trying to appreciate his newly revived attentiveness, but… she wondered if his gestures were genuine" (263). However, one triumph at the end of

Lauren's tale is her renewed focus on cultivating a stronger friend group than the one she had with Manny and Tandy. As Guerrero explains, the friend network and career stability are the wins for the *sistah.* Her previous focus on class has not netted her the security she desires. Even as she enjoys her friendships, the end clearly calls into question the importance of class in the pursuit of happiness for black people. Both Tandy and Manny have been pushed out of New York's elite, which suggests that their place within it was never secure. If stalwart Tandy and mover and shaker Manny can be pushed out due to mounting pressures and Lauren feels sad and disenchanted by the end, then what place should class occupy? Lee and Anthony and Little remind readers that all the wheeling and dealing that each character has done to rise through or maintain class placement conflicts with white supremacy, both in interracial interactions and in response to it in intraracial interactions.

In his story "The Wife of His Youth," Charles Chesnutt gives his readers a glimpse into the nineteenth-century black gentility in the fictional group the Blue Vein Society. His main character Mr. Ryder's words best encapsulate the striving of the black upper class. Mr. Ryder opines, "Our fate lies between absorption by the white race and extinction in the black. The one does not want us yet but may take us in time. The other would welcome us, but it would be for us a backward step" (Chesnutt 3). Ryder's perspective expresses the attitudes that Little and Lee and Anthony present regarding the black upper class. The desire for equality with white counterparts, along with a disdain for the lower class, isolates this group. Their attempts to be solely defined by class lead to isolation in the wake of racial conflicts. For example, with whom could Tandy discuss the racialized encounter with the consignment representative? Since Jack will not, who comforts Alice when Holly reminds her that race still matters when applying for a job? And Lauren has been raised as raceless to the point that she does not recognize when she is

being categorized by race. These characters are isolated from the larger black community and therefore cannot benefit from its succor. In 2009, Tiger Woods experienced a similar isolation from the black community when his career hit the skids. When his wife discovered that he was involved in no less than 15 extramarital affairs, the nation discovered it, too. Woods had effectively cut himself off from the black community and therefore had few public figures to defend him from the racialized and unfair coverage of his affairs. So, while Marv Albert, Ben Roethlisberger, and Brett Favre's whiteness protected them from scandal resulting from sexually aberrant behavior, Woods' class and success in golf provided him no such protection. Though he had done nothing *criminal* like these white sports figures, he lost endorsements and national respect; they did not. He was stereotyped for his sexuality, with many commentators implying that his race was the cause of his sexual avarice. Woods was left to experience that alone. He was highlighted as an outsider to the white upper class and as having no black community to surround him. For all of his passing as raceless and upper-class, he and the black community learned that in America, race still matters more than class in the end.

In the summer of 2016, presidential hopeful Donald Trump made blanket and offensive statements that illustrated the eternal presence of race in African-American class struggles. He shouted to black voters, "You live in poverty, your schools are no good, you have no jobs, 58 percent of your youth is unemployed. What the hell do you have to lose?" (Trump). While roughly 75% of the black population in America are not accurately described by these statistics, the same brush has been used to paint African-Americans since the Moynihan Report in 1965 and continues to generate class anxieties. Investment in respectability politics to stem anxiety over this recurrent racialized rhetoric of class diverts attention from the concerns that African-American communities face as a whole. The idea that ascending to the middle class or higher

and disassociating from African-Americans who are lower class will somehow solve or provide protection from racial assaults is erroneous. This focus on class attenuates possible sites of community building to strengthen racial power. The whitening that Gloria Naylor writes of in *Linden Hills* and Toni Morrison writes of in *Tar Baby* reemerge in popular fiction with similar results of alienation, despondency, and cultural incompetency. These sites of frustrated class ascendancy and racial alienation in the popular genre show the ubiquity of the myth of the raceless, rich black person. The level of despondency experienced the characters shows that in their rush to "make it" they have given up a considerable amount of racial community capital. America's racial history is so long and complex that class cannot interrupt or disrupt it. In fact, the racialization of America took place in part to divide different racial groups from coming together for increased social and economic power since America's inception. Many high-class blacks underestimate the level of entrenchment these attitudes have, choosing instead to focus on mimicking the white upper class. While striving for a comfortable life and economic success is important, these novels show that the concerns of the racial community cannot be overlooked. Black people are not monolithic but the existence of inequitable treatment affects us all since we are the only ones who make these distinctions. Darryl and Coffey Raye rap about ghetto life in Gotham, but why is that a reality for so many black people? Alice runs from a newspaper job to a glossy magazine rather than use the power of the pen to advocate for black people. Upper-class blacks are uniquely able, in education and limited social access to whites, to aid in uplift, but are often blinded by the desire to be accepted by whites. These works show that rather than being focused on a losing battle, time could be better spent by upper class blacks spreading Sister Truths. Being acceptable to whites continues to be a reality in the class performance of African Americans. Heretofore, I have explored white characters that tangentially influence the

narratives. Now, I explore what happens when white characters take center stage in televisual narratives produced in the twilight of the Age of Obama.

Whitening the Black Upper-Class?
Passing, the Presidency, and Reality TV

"Yes We Can"
—Barack Obama, 2008 presidential election campaign slogan

At the 2008 Democratic National Convention, Barack Obama declared these words to hopeful voters. Obama's candidacy and eventual presidency signaled to America that maybe, just maybe, the national disgrace of racism was behind the country. Nowhere was this more apparent than in the *Yes We Can* music video, produced by Will.I.Am. The four-minute video showcased a diverse group of celebrities, including actor Adam Rodriguez, musician John Legend, actress Scarlett Johanssen, and singer Nicole Scherzinger. The video, filtered in black and white, indicated the seriousness of both the subject and the possibility of change. Each participant lip-syncs to the presidential candidate's speech, creating the impression that his words belong to and were felt by everyone (Will.I.Am). The multiracial group alluded to a future that an Obama presidency seemed to promise, a post-racial future. However, as Obama geared up to run against Republican John McCain in the general election, this hope for the future was tarnished by racial prejudice disguised as class performance concerns. The alleged post-racial and colorblind period meant that race could no longer be the great differentiator, so class took its place. The Republican Party focused on Obama's class status as a basis to rally voters against him. Rather than saying that his blackness made him alien to the American people, many pushed elitism and his alleged adherence to Islam as abnormal qualities. McCain adviser Steve Schmidt accused Obama of showing "an elitism and condescension towards hardworking Americans" (Bacon). Schmidt claimed that he was responding to Obama's comments about the working class. At a 2008 San Francisco campaign event, Obama stated:

> You go into some of these small towns in Pennsylvania, and like a lot of small towns in the Midwest, the jobs have been gone now for 25 years, and nothing's replaced them… each successive administration has said that somehow these communities are gonna

> regenerate and they have not. And it's not surprising when they get bitter, they cling to guns or religion or antipathy to people who aren't like them or anti-immigrant sentiment or anti-trade sentiment as a way to explain their frustrations. (Obama)

In context, Obama is, perhaps clumsily, explaining the economic downfall of former factory hubs throughout the country. However, Republicans did not discuss the rest of his comment but rather focused solely on the words "cling to guns or religion." Though it seems Obama tried to understand the motivations of people in working class towns, Republicans repositioned these comments as elitist.

However, McCain's own elite background was not scrutinized. McCain made similar comments, in that they seemed to minimize the economic struggles of the working class; but, these comments did not become infamous. In 2005 speech on the state of the economy McCain mused:

> Of those 80 million homeowners, only 55 million have a mortgage at all, and 51 million are doing what is necessary – working a second job, skipping a vacation, and managing their budgets – to make their payments on time. That leaves us with a puzzling situation: how could 4 million mortgages cause this much trouble for us all? (McCain)

His comments take on a different meaning in light of his privileged background. McCain hailed from a middle-class, traditional family of naval admirals and married into an even wealthier family. His 2005 speech can be construed as a condescending dismissal of the economic challenges that Americans face. To him, it seems, that if homeowners would exercise more financial discipline, work harder, and relax less, they would not cause trouble for themselves and the rest of the country. Meanwhile, Obama was raised by a single mother, received food stamps, and attended school on scholarship. Obama's upbringing is closer to the working-class people that his comments offended than McCain's. The difference in their backgrounds renders the charge of elitism hypocritical. Such charges were an attempt to highlight Obama's difference without actually pointing to race.

Even members of his own party gave backhanded class compliments to Obama that highlighted his difference. While evaluating the field of Democratic candidates, Joe Biden said, "I mean, you got the first mainstream African-American who is articulate and bright and clean and a nice-looking guy…I mean, that's a storybook, man"(Biden). Biden's comments smack of incredulity over Obama's upper-class performance. While trying to show that Obama fits into the political class, Biden focuses on the fairytale nature of Obama's candidacy. It is unlikely that he would highlight articulacy and cleanliness in a white Harvard graduate. Tertiary presidential candidate Ralph Nader was a little more transparent in his insults to Obama. He accused Obama of "talking white" and playing on "white guilt" to win the election (Nader). Although the presidential hopeful was trying to make a point about the social justice gaps in Obama's platform**,** Nader's charge that Obama "talked white" reminded voters that he is *not* white and suggested that his speech pattern, another class marker, was somehow inauthentic despite his educational background. McCain, despite his comfortable background (POW torture notwithstanding), and Nader, both refer to Obama's class performance and accuse him of getting it wrong. Meanwhile, Biden's comments play up stereotypes that black men are usually incapable of achieving the right class performance. These political footballs served to highlight the intersection of class and race that continues to haunt the Obama presidency. Pundits and political opponents would continue to insinuate that the First Family's upper-class performance is inappropriate, but the underlying message was clear. Regardless of their at least eight-year membership in America's ruling class, race constantly challenged the readability of their class performance because the Obama family lacked whiteness, a powerful but unacknowledged visual signifier of class in America. The absence of it opened the family up to many thinly veiled racialized attacks on their class status.

At the same time, the hope of Obama's presidency yielded more diverse television programming. *Modern Family*, *Black-ish*, *Fresh Off the Boat,* and *Jane the Virgin* are just a few of the programs that emerged in the wake of the election of America's first black president. These programs provide a glimpse into the diverse lives of a tapestry that makes up the new, hopeful America. While the age of Obama has encouraged more diversity in television programming, class and race issues continue to plague entertainment. Class is central to the storylines of both *Black-ish* and *Jane the Virgin*, raising questions about authenticity, education, and racial difference. For example, *Black-ish* follows a well-to-do black family living in the suburbs, but actively trying to maintain connections to the black community. In the episode, "The Gift of Hunger," Dre (patriarch) takes his family to a greasy spoon in the black neighborhood where he grew up. When his kids dismiss the restaurant as low-class, Dre makes them all get jobs. He is trying to teach them responsibility, along with teaching them to respect the hallmarks of the black community despite class difference. Alongside these scripted programs is Andy Cohen's *The Real Housewives of Potomac,* which typifies the tensions between class, race, and performance on Bravo TV. Cohen, an ardent Obama supporter, has crafted a show that demonstrates class possibilities in a well-heeled black community. In this chapter, I argue that in response to anxiety surrounding the Obama presidency, Cohen caricatures the Potomac housewives' interracial relationships to challenge assumptions about race and class. His show highlights black female passers who actively seek white romantic partners to secure their upper-class status. However, the wives and their partners present a deficient class performance, proving that whiteness is not key to an upper-class performance. Cohen is contradicting the racist assumptions that accompany perceptions about the presidency while disrupting the stereotypical link between whiteness and upper-class status.

In my previous chapters, white characters have served as a reminder of the vulnerability of the black characters. Winter and Regina both pass, at least in part, due to the unwanted sexual overtures of auxiliary white male characters. These advances reduce each woman to the unwilling object of a predatory desire. These fictional desires invoke the historical vulnerability black women have faced in America. While Tyler Perry's films do not include white characters, his black male characters do struggle against white male normativity that so often shapes and constrains black masculinity. Alice Andrews, Tandy Brooks, Lauren Thomas, and Manny Marks are reminded of the racial barriers to their upper-class performance by secondary white characters. The auxiliary nature of these characters and the level of discord they sow indicate the level of power that race has over class performance. But how do class performances change when white characters, men especially, take center stage in the narrative? I have argued before that white characters either refuse to or are unable to read class on black bodies and humiliate the black character as a result. E. Franklin Frazier has suggested that many in the black upper classes believe they are insulated from racial humiliations and seek to actively separate and differentiate themselves from the "black masses."

Lawrence Otis Graham, black upper crust insider, writes the history of the highest echelons of black society in his *Our Kind of People,* the kind of people starring *RHOP*. His book alludes to an alternate American reality where only black power relations and economics matter. To explain this culture, Graham, like Touré, describes the vacation habits of the black elite. A wealthy enclave of African-Americans has carved out space for themselves on Martha's Vineyard. However, some complain when "common" black folk vacation nearby. One of Graham's interview subjects, a dentist's wife, grumbles, "they obviously have no business here…All these loud, dark-skinned kids coming over here for the day...Just because we're black

doesn't mean we have to put up with this…they think they're fitting in, but they're clearly not our kind of people" (161). The arrogance of her complaint suggests that the black upper class feels superiority, a superiority that does not seem to account for the ways that white supremacy disrupts the economic and social lives of all African-Americans regardless of class. However, as in Touré's account of Oak Bluffs, whiteness has a way of hollowing out that attitude. Touré briefly recounted a few snubs that a few black vacationers faced. But, Graham devotes an entire chapter to whiteness, further demonstrating that the black elite is not completely insulated from race despite its best efforts. He suggests that even the class superiority that the dentist's wife displays is not enough protection for some in the black upper class. Graham explains that some in the black elite respond to the ongoing American fixation on color and race by race-passing. Since passing is a common practice among the black elite, the absence of whiteness and attendant class vulnerability are keenly felt among this group. Despite their best scholastic, economic, and social endeavors, whiteness is still relevant even to the black upper class. In response, some will pass for white or disavow black heritage and identity to access white social and economic circles. In this chapter, Graham chronicles a story about an upper-class black young man in Connecticut who was dating the daughter of a wealthy clergyman. His sister recounts how the relationship dissolved. She recalls, "they eventually broke up when he decided to become white. I remember Vicki coming to our house in this chauffeur-driven limousine, visiting my mother, trying to ask why Ernie wouldn't see her anymore. It was so sad" (Graham 379). So, a debutante in a limo does not possess enough class status to fulfill whatever gaps Ernie believed existed in his life. In this case, whiteness is the missing ingredient to total class security. Phenotypical whiteness has allowed some to enjoy class mobility. Most fictional passers have appeared in films like Patricia "Pinky" Johnson in 1949's *Pinky*; Sarah Jane in

1959's *Imitation of Life;* and Daphne Monet in 1995's *Devil in a Blue Dress*. Although fewer race passers have appeared on television with sustained storylines, *One Life to Live* featured actress Ellen Holly playing Carla Gray (1968-1980), a character fearful that her racial secret would be revealed. These characters benefit from the white heritage that shows in their appearance and gain access to life's finer things as a result. But, what is a class-passer or social climber to do when her complexion is rich and African features are undeniable? *RHOP* demonstrates that clinging to whiteness in the form of an interracial relationship is one way to deal with the dichotomy of class and race in America.

Currently, powerful and wealthy black women are the norm in television programming. Shows like *Empire*, *Being Mary Jane*, and the upcoming *Star Trek Discovery*, featuring black female leads, suggest that maybe black is back and better than ever. Andy Cohen undermines this seeming progress. Cohen's *The Real Housewives of Potomac* focuses on high-class black women living in the exclusive suburb of Potomac, Maryland, just outside Washington, DC. With exclusive charity events, balls, and yacht parties, class status and etiquette define the series. The show follows Katie Rost (philanthropist), Gizelle Bryant (former pastor's wife), Karen Huger, (the stay-at-home wife of a tech millionaire), Charisse Jordan (basketball wife), Ashley Darby (proud trophy wife and former beauty queen) and Robyn Dixon (public relations exec and former basketball wife). Two women, in particular, stand out for their double bind of financial precarity and class ambition. Ashley and Katie both allude to financial struggles, but what sets them apart is how they choose to deal with these concerns in order to secure a place among the Washington Metro elite. Ashley and Katie both have risen to certain class heights, but to maintain these positions both aggressively seek and doggedly maintain relationships with white male partners to secure class stability. Cohen shapes these class/ race narratives about real people, leading his

audience to new conclusions about the elite. But how can Cohen mold a narrative when it concerns *reality*?

Faux Life

Mark Orbe, a communications critic and Western Michigan University professor, synthesizes a definition of reality TV. He writes that reality television is:

> Non-Fictional programming in which the portrayal is presumed to present current or historical events or circumstances …as a genre, [it] involves placing ordinary people before the camera and deriving some entertainment value from the ***perception*** of their activities being unscripted… the key characteristic of this genre is that it asks its audience to view the individuals on the program as real, i.e., not actors (Orbe, my emphasis).

Initially, the Bravo network was not the purveyor of "docusoaps" it is known for today. Bravo was a performing arts platform but its format changed with the show *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* (2003). In 2004, Lauren Zalaznick took over as president of the network and focused her efforts on cultivating more programming concentrated on gloss, style, and the haves. Reality television had previously been focused on shaming and deriding the working class, but Zalaznick had a different idea. She refers to her audience as "affluencers: the educated, affluent, media savvy consumers who spend just as much time blogging about their favorite shows (and thus influencing taste) as they do watching them" (Zalaznick). This brand of reality TV does not follow subject's lives unedited. Bravo's style chronicles real people but creates a formula that follows the conventions of melodrama. With these affluencers in mind, Bravo produces glitzy reality series, showcasing well-heeled men and women with particular attention to blending filmic style with serialized television. *The Real Housewives* franchise complicates the discourse on class and television. Though its audience is affluencers who share commonalities with the casts, these shows do not overly idealize the rich. Rather these programs spoof the materialistic and shallow lives of its heroines. Most cast members fail to perform their public roles as

aristocrats. In addition to challenging class consciousness, these shows attenuate any power that these women enjoy by characterizing them as petty, unintelligent, and in need of masculine control. Audiences expect to encounter the poor coming to blows on daytime talk television, because "public displays of physicality and emotionality are associated with poverty" (Lee). However, these high-class women often step outside the bounds of class in displays of emotional outbursts and violence. These outbursts sometimes occur when the façade of class breaks down.

Despite Bravo programs featuring the upper crust, each program buckles under the weight of its own pretensions. The showrunners ensure that these casts are never the picture of upper-class ladies despite their economic comforts. Cohen and his colleagues cut show footage into what are called "Bravo winks." The winks show the cast failing at cultural expectations of class and gender, to the amusement of audiences. For example, producers will show a cast member claiming to be healthy and body conscious, but cut to scenes with the woman eating fast food and smoking. But the cutting room isn't the only place that producers shape these narratives. Andy Cohen, Bravo executive producer, admits that he and other producers do pressurize cast members in order to break down upper-class performances to ensure that these winks and altercations happen. He inventories "the elements that make the perfect storm in a *Real Housewives* episode, namely, real humor, conflict, emotion, heart, and something totally unexpected – let's say, a wig pull" (Cohen 163). Reality television producers acknowledge that these "wig pulls" do not happen organically, therefore staging, reshooting and editing are necessary. They readily influence cast members so that paroxysms of emotion or violence (stereotypical traits of the lower classes) occur when the camera turns on. For example, in 2013, the *New York Daily News* reported that Kim Kardashian, a prolific reality television starlet with the help of producers, faked her marital discord with then-husband Kris Humphries. Rachel

Maresca writes that *Keeping Up With the Kardashians* producer Russell Jay admitted, "Kardashian shot a scene with mom, Kris Jenner, talking about her marriage struggles with Humphries after she had already filed for divorce" (Maresca)**.** The scene led the audience to believe that Kardashian was still fighting for her marriage, despite difficulties, to garner sympathy. In another case, producers staged the 9/11 reactions of the *Real World: Chicago* cast. The group had been at a photo shoot at Wrigley Field during the tragedy. Mark Burnett, the executive producer for *Survivor*, admitted that he reshoots scene from the popular competition program to get a more picturesque shot. He believes that "reality" should not interfere with production value. He explains, "This is not a documentary" (Burnett). And sometimes a reality show's entire premise is fictional, like the Discovery Channel's *Amish Mafia*. Donald Weaver-Zercher, a professor at Elizabethtown College and scholar on the Anabaptist lifestyle said, "My sense is this Amish mafia is about as real as the Dunder-Mifflin Paper Company in *The Office*." These types of manipulations show that reality programming can be just as fictional as scripted TV. So, reality television in general, and the *Real Housewives* in particular, then, are a study in performances that readily stress the challenges of race and class.

Don't Want to See Them: Interracial TV

In 1973, the first program in the new reality TV format aired. *American Family* documented divorce inside an upper-middle-class white family. The show's creators initially considered using a black family but decided that the program, an exploration of the American family and its values, needed the audience to identify with the family in a way that only a white family made possible. Black people did not figure prominently in reality TV until the rise of the daytime talk show and crime watch shows in the 1980s. Reality TV reinforced existing racialized caricatures, and sometimes these portrayals served to strengthen these stereotypes, especially

because these representations are positioned as "real." This programming fixed blackness to poverty, sexual promiscuity, and desperation, alongside American voyeurism emphasizing stereotypes about class possibilities for the black body in visual culture. *Cops* accentuated these stereotypes by following the criminal interactions of the poor and racial minorities. The show's 1989 pilot featured Officer Jerry Wurms sweeping through poor black neighborhoods in Broward County, Florida. His interactions with black persons of interest showed that this program's focus would be, at least in part, on black criminality. During the pilot, after Wurms arrests black man after black man in a montage, he muses, "It's a game out here… it's a cat and mouse game. Some days they win, some days I win" (Barbour). In addition to "playing a game" with this community, Wurms also provides racial and class context for the show when he arrests white drug buyers in a black neighborhood. He warns these potential arrestees, "Don't you know what happens over here to white guys like you?... They will put a gun to your head, pistol whip you and take your car… I will give you a little slap on the wrist and tell you to be on your way, and I don't want to see you around here again…you don't belong here" (Barbour). Wurms goes on to state that his concerns are not racially motivated, but rather concern for the safety of these white young men. However, his statements belie that declaration. Wurms immediately interjects race into his discussion with these buyers, by reminding them of their whiteness. He also shows that criminal justice is unbalanced. He instantly handcuffs all the black people he interacts with (whether he is certain of their guilt or not) but leaves the white men unbound. Perhaps, in an effort to lighten the racially charged scene, *Cops* shows its audience the consequences of Wurms' racial bias. The white man he did not handcuff flees, showing that Wurms is not served by his beliefs. Despite this cute contradiction, *Cops* would continue to chronicle police interactions with financially and socially vulnerable black people for almost 30 years. While it is

true that these shows capitalize on the misfortune of the lower classes of all races, when the camera points to black subjects the narrative reinvigorates deeply embedded stereotypes and highlights the historical American fascination with disciplining and restricting the black body.

This kind of stereotyping extends to portrayals of interracial couples, which feature in television programming in very specific ways. In the reality genre, interracial couples serve to entertain talk show audiences. These shows highlight black-white couples as a means of reinforcing the sexual deviancy stereotype linked to such romances. For example, in a 2008 episode of the Maury Povich show, a guest, Leanne (white) sought to prove that her former love interest, Dre, (black), had fathered her son. Using plenty of faulty biological logic and insults to Leanne's womanhood, Dre denied the child again and again on national television, playing into stereotypes about black male sexuality and irresponsibility. This series, on-air for 26 years, continually shows interracial couples in this light, suggesting that these unions are ill-advised. These shows capitalize on the perceived promiscuity of the women involved in interracial relationships. Erica Childs, a critic of interracial relationships on television, writes, "Reality daytime talk show hosts … have never shied away from interracial relationships, routinely bringing out young or low-income white women who are trying to identify their babies' daddy and have one or more black men to test" (Class 25). These scenes serve to remind the audience that despite racial progress, some cultural integration should not occur. Scripted television shows have a more intermittent history with showcasing interracial relationships. The first couple to be featured was Lucille Ball and Desi Arnaz in 1951. Show producers implored Ball to choose a white actor to play her husband, but she insisted that her real life husband should be cast. However, if Arnaz had been an Afro-Cuban, it is unlikely that he could have appeared on television as a white woman's husband. Later, interracial romance would be revisited when

Captain Kirk, a white man, and Lieutenant Uhura, a black woman, kissed in a 1968 *Star Trek* episode. The kiss only occurred after an alien adversary had taken over Kirk's mind. This plot device alibied the kiss, suggesting that had he been in his right mind, he would not have transgressed this boundary. Despite this plot loophole, Nichelle Nichols (Uhura) received hate mail and considered quitting the show as a result. The relationship between Tom and Helen Willis on *The Jeffersons* (1975) was similarly positioned as undesirable. The couple, played by Franklin Cover and Roxie Roker, provided a "source of comedy … Helen was clearly the boss of the relationship, perpetuating the Sapphire image of black women as emasculating and domineering. This interracial relationship was less threatening, considering the history of interracial sex, where white men with black women was swept under the rug as compared to the strong, often violent, reaction to black men with white women" (Childs *Primetime*). *The Jeffersons* stayed on the air for ten years, but an interracial couple would not materialize again until the fleeting series, *True Colors* (1990-1992), which featured a black husband and white wife. The show's short shelf life, when compared to its predecessors, has to do with these violent and dangerous consequences to black men and white women in the American fabric. Low ratings and audience protests and threats contributed to the show's swift cancellation. Since this cancellation, scripted programming has mirrored its "reality" show counterpart in the representation of interracial romances. Childs writes, "Popular crime drama shows like *Law and Order* and *CSI* will use an interracial twist to create heightened surprise and intrigue, which also serves to solidify the idea of interracial relationships being associated with criminality and a lower class status" (Class 25). Several shows have dabbled with black-white interracial couplings after *True Colors*, but those couplings tend to focus on past relationships, teenage

romances, or short-lived relationships that do not anchor the program. *RHOP*, however, breaks this mold in displaying interracial couples to explore intersections of history, race, and class.

"Real Classy" Women on Reality TV

The exemplar show that emphasizes the intersections of race and class is the *Real Housewives of Atlanta*. First titled *Ladies of Atlanta,* the show is a commentary on class, race, and gender. The term "lady" in its original title suggests an attempt to claim a class identity usually denied black women. *The Real Housewives of Potomac* attempts to make the same claims that *Atlanta* does. Cohen populates this cast with women who belong to the old guard of the black elite. Gizelle Bryant (nee Graves) was once married to a pastor of a successful mega-church in Baltimore. But her background is even more elite. She is the daughter of Curtis Graves, the first Texas state legislator since 1899. He worked with Thurgood Marshall to break down racial barriers. Robyn Bragg Dixon is the former wife of Washington Wizards star, Juan Dixon. But, while Juan grew up with heroin addicts for parents, Robyn grew up in relative privilege. Her father was a dentist and her mother, a college professor. Her mother also served as the president of a chapter of Jack and Jill, an exclusive and class-conscious organization for African -American children. Karen Huger married a CEO of a $60 million Internet security company. While she did not grow up in privilege, Karen, through networking, charitable giving, and mentorship from other black society women, has perfected a class performance that is nearly indistinguishable from the women born into the upper class. But, race has always challenged black women's relationship to the middle and upper class. Traditionally, white women have used black women to buttress their own class status. Black maids, cooks, and wet nurses made it possible for white women to participate in the cult of true womanhood, but financial, sexual, and racial precarity precluded many black women from participating. By including Karen, Robyn,

and Gizelle in the cast, Cohen lets audiences see that blackness and privilege can and do coexist. However, Cohen's shows do not simply chronicle the lives of the elite.

Cohen regularly challenges wealthy women's claims to high social standing and refinement in Orange County, New Jersey, Beverly Hills, and New York in the larger franchise. The women in the series display a wealthy lifestyle and allow audiences to tag along as they shop, beautify, fight, and makeup on television. The *Real Housewives* series conforms to the generally class conscious and consumerist themes on the network. Alongside the *Housewives* are programs like *Million Dollar Listing*, a showcase of multimillion dollar properties and the realtors who sell them; *Southern Charm*, a docusoap concentrating on the Southern elite; and *The Shahs of Sunset*, a show devoted to the lives of wealthy Californian Persians. Though they are all presented as slices of glamorous life, the wealth of the members of the casts is always in question. As a result, the "social climber" epithet pervades the network, in particular among the housewives. For example, on the Real Housewives of New York, Alex McCord is often labeled a social climber from Brooklyn, the wrong neighborhood, earning her intermittent disdain from the other more established women on the show. Orange County's Alexis Bellino is accosted at a glamorous dinner in Costa Rica about her alleged lack of funds by her cast mates. Alexis is accused of talking too much about money, and the other housewives explain that they believe she is actually low-class and bankrupt. Fellow cast mate Tamra Judge chastises her, "You said, 'I'm buying a house cash'…you don't say things like that" (Rumble). The other women chime in to explain the ways that Alexis has transgressed class decorum, proving she does not belong. However, in previous scenes, each housewife has waxed eloquent on the material items she is proud to own, similarly transgressing expectations. When Alexis points out the hypocrisy of these arguments, the other housewives erupt, yelling about financial security, in a public space.

This breakdown of performance challenges the class stability of each. On one hand, the women are fighting loudly, showing the other patrons and restaurant staff that they are not ladies. Also, as I noted previously, emotional outbursts are positioned as lower-class behavior. At yet another sumptuous group dinner in Las Vegas, Camille Grammer (*RHOBH*), ex-wife of Kelsey Grammer, and recipient of a multi-million-dollar divorce settlement, accuses another wife of not owning her famed restaurant, SUR, thus calling her financial stability into question. The most prevalent class pass/economic pass accusations exist in the Atlanta addition of the show. Housewives in this franchise regularly point the "poor" finger at each other. Sheree Whitfield, the ex-wife of an NFL player, Bob Whitfield, insists on building a 100,000 square foot mansion, but "Chateau Sheree" is plagued with rumors and innuendo about the owner's financial solvency. In a private interview, cast mate Kenya Moore, former Miss USA, jokes, "With the tax liens that are against Chateau Charade, it just might be the future home of the IRS" ("Housewife"). Publicly, Kenya expresses her doubts about Sheree's membership in the upper class and shares her disbelief about Sheree's ability to finish her home build. Sheree responds, "Anybody who has built a house before, then they can come to me [with opinions], but if not, they should probably keep renting." In this scene, each woman is covertly claiming that the other does not belong in the social class she is trying to project. Kenya's focus on the liens and Sheree's retort about renting again challenges the class performance of both. True upper-class members have enough money to pay their debts and buy real estate. Kenya and Sheree have been plagued by documented financial difficulties that threaten to undermine their upper- class status. Sheree's divorce netted her a relatively small lump sum after years of legal battles, while Kenya has recently been levied with a tax lien for nonpayment of services. These financial issues and their public flare-up suggest that class passing is the order of the day for reality stars.

What makes Bravo's reality show format unique is the interactive elements that draw audiences. Each character spends time in a confessional addressing the audience, which creates a sense of dramatic irony. The confessional, like its religious counterpart, allows the cast member to address the camera directly and discuss her thoughts to the audience, thoughts that would only become apparent to the rest of the cast after taping concludes. This is a common element of reality shows, but Bravo's are unique because the confessionals on *The Real Housewives* are always shot with cast mates' homes as a backdrop. Cast members are flawlessly coiffed and couture-ed for these interviews, showing that these confessions are filmed after the action of the storyline. In film, this disrupted storytelling is usually used to mimic memory. In the case of *The Real Housewives*, this nonlinear narrative element serves to bring the cast and audience into an interactive relationship. The confessionals are produced as if the housewife is letting the audience in on a secret that she can only divulge from the comfort and safety of her home to a confidante. Turning the audience into fast friends of the housewives heightens interest because it creates the illusion of intimacy and investment for the audience. The confessional setting also reminds viewers of the class status of the housewives, which is usually filmed in the most elegantly furnished room in her home. Similarly, the rise of social media has also contributed to the uniqueness of the franchise. Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, and interviews with e-magazines allow the women to shape and extend the storyline outside of filming. In that vein, the housewives often post updates to the sites, speculating about the financial security and class status of other women. For example, Tamra Judge (*RHOC*) sat down for an interview with E! to express doubts about Brandi Glanville's (*RHOBH*) financial stability and proclaimed Brandi a passer. Glanville tweeted her response: "Tamra please STFU about me… I wasn't lying about what I make" (Cronin). This type of off-screen mudslinging increases cast visibility and allows

the viewers to participate in these interactions with commentary of their own, a concept that scripted television does not offer. It also maintains the focus on class and economics during show hiatuses.

What these series rarely have to focus on is race. These programs show a generally segregated American life belying the type of change promised by the 2008 election. For example, despite New York having the highest concentration of black people in the country, none star in *RHONY*. The Beverly Hills version also has an all-white cast, despite a robust enclave of wealthy black celebrities. The short-lived *RHODC* and Atlanta tried to integrate their casts. DC was canceled after only one season because of the negative attention the series received after one of the cast members crashed a White House State Dinner. But Atlanta's attempts at integration lasted longer with one nonblack cast member, Kim Zolciak, starring for five seasons. Overall, black and white casts have been separate, and race stays in the margins. Casting and the newest addition *RHOP* follows suit, regardless of the suburb claiming a white population of 75% per the 2010 census. These racial separations mirror real life in America, but they allow audiences to consider how class and race work specifically for black women in visual culture. Theri Pickens, a Bates College professor, considers the specificity of black women's participation in reality shows and the class performances that accompany them. Her "Shoving Aside the Politics of Respectability" explores how these purposefully intraracial environments allow for the constraints of respectability and upward mobility to fall away from these women. Traditionally in the black community, respectability is a unifying factor that proves worthiness of equal treatment. Low-class behavior supposedly interferes with the larger community's needs. Many of the reality shows on Bravo that feature black casts are positioned as both adhering to this implied directive and transgressing it with ratchet or ghetto behavior. Pickens defines ratchet

"as a performance of excess that makes and unmakes both performer and audience. The ratchet imaginary has no desire to participate in narratives of racial progression or social uplift; instead, it articulates a desire for individuality regardless of the ideas and wants of a putative collective" (Pickens). To put it another way, ratchet is low-class behavior. It is tacky, violent, loud, and stereotypical. Ratchet is respectability's worst nightmare. But, with so much pressure placed on the black female body to perform middle- and upper-class values to be worthy of the status of a lady, something or someone is bound to give way. In short, Pickens argues that the black female body is a highly contested space that binds women to unrealistic expectations. Therefore, ratchet behavior is a rebellion. When explosions of emotion and violence happen--including violent catfights, drink tosses, neck rolls, and streams of profanity--in white spaces in *The Real Housewives* franchises, it is only a comment on the class performance of the individual, but in the black spaces these "ratchet" outbursts relate to community expectation and reinvigorate negative stereotypes that lead to racist classism.

For example, in the fourth season of Bravo's *Married to Medicine,* cast mates go to a luxurious spa, each playing the lady, but end up in a screaming match before treatments are complete. The backdrop of the spa underscores the classed environment that these women occupy at the time that the ratchet takes over. There is cursing, neck rolling, name calling as the women sip champagne and reposition their plush robes between spates of fury. It is interesting to note that before this flare-up, two cast mates were embroiled in disagreement about ladylike behavior and class expectations. The pressure from this exchange quickly reached ratchet levels. Abandoning the expectations of respectability is clearly freeing to black Bravo reality stars because ratchet behavior happens so often. Ratchetness is an attempt to individuate. Ratchet means that the cast mates are feeling, acting, and dressing with disregard for the black collective.

The black collective is the cornerstone of respectability politics. Despite the liberation that may come from ratchet performance, the outbursts are not free from racialized rhetoric, stereotypes, and consequences. In *Married to Medicine's* first season Kari Wells, a white woman from Britain, also starred in the show. However, during catfights in that season, she always withdrew. In her confessionals, she chastised and judged the other participants for transgressing class boundaries and failing to adequately perform the role of doctor's wife. After a particularly vicious fight between two of the black cast members at a party Kari hosted, she meets with Toya, one of the brawlers. Kari describes the altercation: "It's like the circus came to town" (Anderson). Soon Kari accepts Toya's apology and deems her a "lady." Toya does not seem to notice that she has been likened to an animal, a historical way of dehumanizing black people. This interracial interaction is reminiscent of the ones in the previous chapter. The white participant holds the class cards and power, and the black character is desperate for class recognition. Despite Kari's reference to the circus in this exchange, Toya still holds her in high regard and desires Kari to see her as an upper-class woman, which suggests a yielding to white class supremacy. More importantly, Toya's ratchet performance at the party provided only a temporary break from class expectations. In the end, she behaves in an even more respectable manner to counterbalance the ratchet.

Kari's stint as a series regular only lasted for the first season. The absence of whiteness on this show and others in the Bravo stable removes the racial pressure from the show. Without Kari, the cast members don't have to worry about stereotypes or racial histories that can't be ignored in the interracial space. These women are free to be ratchet without fear for the reputation of the collective. *RHOP* showcases similar dichotomous scenes with the women insisting on etiquette and upper-class performance while letting their class masks slip. In the

episode “Mind Your Manners,” self-proclaimed grand dame Karen Huger gleefully inventories her list of Potomac etiquette rules and the social consequences of disobedience. However, by the end of the episode, she is involved in a screaming match over those same rules with cast mate Gizelle at a party. As confused guests look on, Karen shrieks, “It’s just a level of ignorance that I’m not going to reduce myself to.” Her loud, attention-grabbing response undermines her message. By screaming her grievances publicly, Karen has tarnished her reputation. To put it another way, her class performance as elite first lady of the community has come undone by means of this ratchet eruption.

But, Cohen is an equal opportunity spoofer because he shows these down-class behaviors in all the housewives shows. These behaviors serve to demonstrate to audiences that regardless of race, the upper-class presentation the housewives spend so much of the show maintaining through shopping, speech, and real estate, etc. is a façade. However, he seems aware that certain ratchet performances are complicated by race in inextricable ways. Ashley and Katie both have ratchet performances amid their passing, but their performances are targeted specifically toward their interracial relationships. These women are not freed by transgressing expectations of respectability, but rather are constrained by the same prevailing stereotypes that their behavior evokes.

To Catch a White Man

The first episode of each *Real Housewives* season introduces the audience to the cast, one by one. The introductions show the women in their social circles, on family outings, in work environments, or receiving beauty treatments. In addition to allowing audiences a sumptuous look at the plush surroundings of each housewife, the introductions show the typecast of each woman. When the audience meets Katie, she deems herself "a ball and gala girl" and thus

positions herself as a cultural insider and philanthropist. However, the problem with Katie's assertion becomes clear as the season unfolds. In order to be a fixture on the charity circuit, Katie would need a substantial income. However, her recent divorce and lack of any discernible profession make her participation unlikely or difficult. As a self-fashioned charity leader, Katie is claiming a status that she does not have but is anxious to assert. Her charitable foundation, The Rost Foundation, is the subject of much derision during the season. Founded in honor of her late father, the organization's mission is to provide recreational opportunities to underprivileged youth. However, the *Washington Post* reports, "the foundation (created in 2006) raises almost no money — its sole source of income is from Rost's mother, Geico executive Rynthia Rost. Rynthia Rost's donations, totaling about $32,000 over the last five years, are the only contributions to show up on federal tax forms. In that time, the foundation gave out less than $3,000" (Heil). Katie told the *Post* that "bigger things are on the horizon" for herself and the foundation. Katie wants to secure a husband to achieve those bigger things. In her introductory confessional, Katie proudly proclaims, "I love the white boys" as the camera cuts to a leisurely lunch she is having with her boyfriend, Andrew Martin. Andrew is portrayed as a successful investment executive, often traveling for work and having expensive material possessions as evidence of his upper-class status. The trajectory of Andrew and Katie's relationship is her chief concern throughout the season, along with launching a Rost Foundation gala. Katie's concerns, presented in tandem, seem to fuel each other. Katie's desperation to ensnare Andrew connects to her financial precarity.

In the episode entitled "Desperately Seeking Marriage," Katie renovates Andrew's townhouse while he is out of town to be more suitable for her and her three children. Katie explains to him that she has moved his exercise equipment and created a "Mrs. Room" for

herself. The room is thus labeled and has pictures of the children with Andrew and romantic photos of the couple. Andrew scrubs his hands down his face in frustrated response and declares, "this is quite the aggressive move." Andrew's confusion and impatience at Katie's actions suggest that he is resistant to any permanence in their relationship. Katie's desperation becomes even more clear in an episode when she hosts a Jewish naming ceremony for her daughters. She insists on introducing Andrew as her fiancé, but Andrew roundly rejects the title. The rabbi refers to Andrew as Katie's intended, causing Andrew to verbally hedge and scrounge for another appellation. Instead of calling himself Katie's fiancé, Andrew says the rabbi should refer to him as, "the smart guy in the room" (Divas). Andrew's flip comment could have several meanings. First, he's the smart guy because he has attached himself to Katie and her family. He does appear content in the fatherhood role and regularly helps Katie with childcare tasks. On the other hand, he's the smart guy because he has only cursorily attached himself to Katie. By remaining uncommitted, Andrew can walk away at any time. The show then cuts to Katie's confessional in which she states that she is trying to apply pressure by constantly referring to Andrew as her fiancé.

But women focused on marrying commitment-phobic men is not a new phenomenon. What makes Katie and Andrew's relationship unique is the way producers focus on racial differences of the couple. Cohen focuses on racial issues and histories without addressing them directly. To lure Andrew, Katie uses her sexuality, on ratchet display, to entice. At Ashley's birthday party, Katie engages in aggressive public affection with Andrew. The scene is set at a dimmed nightclub with plush couches. The other housewives greet Andrew and Katie, but the couple remains distant from the group. They begin kissing on the couch, and the kisses turn even more aggressive as Andrew lies down on top of Katie to further the canoodle. The other cast

mates look on in a mixture of disgust and embarrassment. Katie appears nonplussed by their reactions and attributes the couple's embrace to alcohol and passion. The other housewives seem content to displace responsibility for Katie's behavior onto controlled substances or alcohol, but the season continues to revisit this incident. Despite Katie's claims of passion and drunkenness, the incident takes on racial implications that the housewives refuse to identify, but clearly respond to. Karen declares, "Be a lady. Keep what is supposed to be in the bedroom, in the bedroom" (Desperately). As Evelyn Higginbotham has written about the black middle class, "It was particularly public behavior that they perceived to wield power either to refute or to confirm stereotypical and discriminatory practices…There can be no laxity as far as sexual conduct, cleanliness, temperance, hard work, and politeness"(196). Interestingly, Higginbotham's list begins with sexual behavior. Karen and the other wives are not in a position to judge on temperance or politeness because of their frequent ratchet performances, however, they do respond to the sexual dimensions of Katie's behavior. Katie is engaging the stereotypes about black female sexuality that both shame and anger the other wives. First, the location of the passionate embrace is doubly public. In addition to Andrew and Katie's suggestive kissing taking place in a crowded nightclub, the clinch is recorded for a national audience. Katie shames the other housewives by playing into the stereotypes about uncontrolled, animalistic black female sexuality. Granting Andrew sexual access to her in a public place is an act of betrayal in light of a long history. However, in true interracial televisual form, Katie evidences separation from the black community in order to fully engage in her interracial relationship. The women involved with white men are depicted as "disconnected from black communities, and their beauty is often based on white standards" (Fade 47). Katie's distance from the black community is evident in a conversation she has with Gizelle and Robin regarding the racial identification of her three

children. When the other housewives ask her how she will identify her children and how she identifies herself, Katie responds, “They don’t necessarily understand that I identify as being biracial. It’s like choose one or the other” (Divas). On one hand, Katie is trying to claim a liminal identity that includes both her white and black heritage; however, this tightrope walk is rarely successful in America. For example, President Obama was not considered America’s first biracial president, but its first black president. So, Cohen’s focus on her biraciality hints that there is racial progress still to be made. On the other hand, Katie’s continual focus on her multiracial background also indicates a distance from a black identification. Even as Katie claims a post-racial identity, she continually uses stereotypes about aggressive black female sexuality to interest Andrew.

In another scene at Karen Huger’s yacht party, Katie is once again publicly open about sexuality. Ashley states that for an upcoming party that she will host, men are not permitted. Ashley quips, “if you have a protrusion in your pants, stay home” (Error). Katie responds, “what if you have a really big clit?” Andrew giggles at Katie’s response, but the other housewives again register embarrassment and shock at her crass comment. While Ashley’s comment is bordering on distasteful, she does not specify male genitalia as she issues her warning. However, Katie identifies an erogenous zone, using slang, once again in a public fashion, which extends stereotypes about black female sexuality. She seems unable to control her focus on sex in front of Andrew. However, none of the other housewives suggest that her comments and actions have racial implications.

What also stands out in the relationship between Andrew and Katie is that these sexualized encounters and conversations only occur when they are surrounded by other black people. When they are in mostly white spaces, they adhere more closely to upper-class principles

regarding sexuality. At a charitable event for *Washingtonian Magazine*, the attendees are mostly white, and Katie focuses mostly on her frustrations about the trajectory of their relationship rather than sexual outbursts as the couple mingles at the party. Before entering the event, Katie reminds the audience about one of the sources of attraction to Andrew. She reminds him, "What we are really trying to highlight is the Rost Foundation. Me making that money, making it rain" (Whiskey). Katie later explains the importance of networking with Andrew in order to raise funds. She foregoes a social engagement with the other wives to press the flesh with Andrew's whiter crowd. Her decision to attend this event with him demonstrates the type of class status that Potomac's black community is unable to give her. Andrew gives her access to white upper-class insiders who might fund her charity. Hence, his whiteness appears to give her more status. However, the price of entrance to Andrew's group seems coupled with sexualized racial betrayal of the black community. What the other housewives are reluctant to name is what Patricia Hill Collins calls the Jezebel image of black women. She writes, "Jezebel's function was to relegate all black women to the category of sexually aggressive women, thus providing a powerful rationale for widespread sexual assaults by white men" (Collins 81). Katie's Jezebel behavior, ratchet to be sure, shames the others. Racial traditions in America have not changed enough to permit this type of individuation. The other cast members' reaction to Katie and their continued judgment of her demonstrate that this type of ratchet, sexualized ratchet, goes too far. In short, if Katie is a Jezebel, then the group is too. Allowing Andrew to have different levels of respect for his circle and hers suggests that Katie knows in order to lure him, she must ignore her black identity while allowing him to behave like a stereotypical white man ensnared by black female sexuality in black settings.

But Andrew ultimately contradicts Katie's assumptions about the upper class and whiteness. Once again, digital sources extend *RHOP* storylines after filming. Radar, an online magazine, reported that Andrew has a criminal history. Six months before filming the series, Andrew was released from probation. In 2011, Montgomery County, Maryland SWAT executed a search of Andrew's home to find boxes of marijuana. He was indicted for conspiracy to possess with intent to distribute narcotics. Andrew wrote to the courts for leniency in 2015. He writes, "My employment [as a financial adviser] requires me to attain state license registration…the state licensing issue has negatively impacted my ability to reestablish my career" (DiMattina). He also stated that probation was precluding him from serving on charitable boards, including that of the Rost Foundation. This information suggests that Andrew is not the class act Katie was hoping for. While his whiteness does help him in the criminal justice system, Andrew's journey through the justice system challenges his standing in the upper class. First, the drug dealing charges suggest that his wealth has not been garnered through his work as an investment adviser. Also, probation interrupts his ability to make money through his legitimate career path. So, Andrew is actually a passer, who can offer Katie less status and further tarnish her reputation. Katie's focus on Andrew's whiteness suggests the level to which she believes that race and class are favorably linked for white males. However, circulating in high society with a felon will not inspire insiders to donate to her charity. This may be the reason that the Rost Foundation continues to flounder. Whether Cohen knew about Andrew's past before casting is unclear, but his criminal history further interrogates how America conceives of race, crime, and class. In fact, an incident involving the president's daughters demonstrates these classist and racist theories that Cohen, at least in part, confronts through the show's interracial relationships.

Children Need Class Too

Deep and complex race tensions in America complicate upper-class status as it relates to the presidential body. Sexuality, race, and class merge in attacks on the First Daughters. Indeed, racist incidents peppered the Obama presidency. Trump's and the birthers' obsession with Obama's birth certificate, Representative Joe Wilson's verbal assault during the State of the Union address, and Governor Jan Brewer's on-camera aggressive gesticulations toward the president are only a few of the insults that Obama has endured. But class tensions also dog the Obama family. In a reverse course from the charges of elitism that colored the election rhetoric, more recent commentary challenged the upper-class capabilities of the Obamas. These comments have targeted Sasha and Malia. For example, the Communications Director for Representative Stephen Fincher (R-Tenn.), Elizabeth Lauten, criticized how the girls dressed for the annual turkey pardon ceremony. She took to Facebook to complain: "try showing a little class…dress like you deserve respect, not a spot at a bar" (Lauten). Lauten went on to malign the parents in a similar fashion. She apologized and resigned from her post after her comment went viral; however, the Lauten hubbub shows a connection between class and race. Lauten, who is white, failed to recognize either the class or the age of the Obama daughters. Her whiteness positions her as an upper-class insider, capable of giving class advice. Her use of the word "show" about class suggests the underlying performativity of any class performance. In her assessment, the Obama girls had failed. Their positions in the first family and their residence in the White House are symbols of the highest possible class position in the US, so their blackness must be playing a role in the disparagement. Both girls, teenagers at the time of the criticism, were dressed casually for the symbolic turkey presentation. Their dresses did fall above the knee, but their ages make Lauten's comments even more problematic. Cornell University's Dr. Oneka LaBennett suggests

that Lauten's own history as a teenage shoplifter further problematizes her comments. When Obama supporters discovered her arrest record, they attacked her. Lauten failed to see how her adolescent behavior, unfairly scrutinized, might position her as low-class. Even if the Obama girls had committed a social/fashion faux pas, children are usually out of bounds. LaBennett writes, "Lauten's critique channels slavery-era class, race and gender politics in which White women's gentility was positioned in stark contrast to the wanton sexuality and classlessness of the Black family. That she should aim this critique at the First Family is just one of many reminders of the ways in which Black children's identities are marginalized, sexualized and deemed unworthy" (LaBennett). Lauten insinuated that the girls' attire was not worthy of respect and her comments gestured toward sexualizing these children. By declaring that these girls were dressed for the bar, Lauten invokes stereotypes about black children, namely that they lack innocence. More importantly, the bar has sexual implications in the American imaginary. Because of the amount of drinking and sexual pick-up rituals that occur in many bars, linking these clearly underage girls to that environment connects them to those rituals as well. Furthermore, Lauten's declaration that they would be better suited for such an environment shows that she believes they belong in a decidedly lower-class location than the White House.

Other first daughters have experienced aggressive criticism by boundaryless pundits. Jenna and Barbara Bush had serious drinking and legal troubles, but comics and critics nicknamed them the "Anheuser Bushes," rather than showing concern for them. Rush Limbaugh compared Chelsea Clinton to a dog several times. The attacks on these young women are deplorable because of their youth and the fact that their fathers, rather than they themselves, had signed up for public life. However, the whiteness of the previous first daughters differentiates these attacks from the ones against Sasha and Malia. While their behavior and looks were

disparaged, their suitability for the White House or their class performance was not in question. In the case of the Obama girls, the absence of whiteness centers class conversation. Political expediency prevented Lauten and others from expressing their distaste for the First Family's blackness. Instead, politicos like Lauten, Marco Rubio, and Bill O'Reilly focused on highlighting alleged class deficiencies. Class performance or the lack of it takes the place of racial difference. This isn't the only instance when the Obama daughters' appearances have been attacked for alleged class deficiencies, which encode race prejudice.

In 2009, the Obama family toured Europe and the *Free Republic* website posted a picture of Malia sporting kinky twists. The comment section for the photo read as follows, "We're being represented by a family of ghetto trash," "could you imagine what world leaders must be thinking seeing this kind of street trash," "Looks like a typical street whore" and continuing for over 100 comments (Halfrican). The continual emphasis on ghetto, street, and trash demonstrates that these commenters are using the rhetoric of class to disguise racial concerns. The discussion of the girls demonstrates a compound problem: black children are not afforded the protection of innocence and that in order to make a class claim, sexualization of them is somehow acceptable. Rush Limbaugh, Elizabeth Lauten, and others are public figures and have more responsibility for their comments than anonymous trolls. These public figures set the example for their followers regarding discussions of race and class and can be seen as culpable for the online vitriol. These incidents contest assumptions about the level of racial progress America has actually made. Andy Cohen's emphasis on interracial relationships in *RHOP* develops that challenge on television.

White Husband, Wrong Class

Katie Rost's embodiment of the Jezebel in black settings could provide a particular and peculiar connection to a recurring fight that the RHOP housewives have with Ashley Darby later in the season. Ashley invites the women for a man-free weekend at her husband's beach house. The weekend goes relatively smoothly until Ashley's husband, Australian millionaire Michael Darby, crashes the party. The other housewives, except for Katie, react very negatively to his surprise visit. While they all acknowledge that he is the owner of the beach house and has the right to stay the night, Karen angrily exclaims, "I am just not comfortable… I feel like a victim" (Reading Is Fundamental). Gizelle also contends, "Crocodile Dundee has taken it a little too far. He is a little creepy and disgusting. I'm out" **(**Reading). What the cast mates are most angry about is Ashley's response to her husband's presence. Although the other women seem to cursorily understand that she is excited about her husband's surprise arrival, they mostly read her response as a betrayal. Ashley separates from that black collective consciousness to have a successful interracial relationship. When the wives express concerns about Michael's presence, Ashley responds, "I understand your issues, but I just really don't care." Ashley dismisses the women's response as an overreaction. The real problem is sexual vulnerability to white men, but no one will name it. So, the grievances are positioned as more of the pettiness and ratchetness that have colored the series. Karen and Gizelle feel betrayed when Ashley prioritizes her husband over her guests, but there were clues to her devil-may-care attitude regarding sexuality and her husband earlier in the season. This is an attitude that middle-class black women have been unable to have, especially as relates to white men, but Ashley, a passer, can.

In true ratchet style, Ashley often describes sex with her husband to the other women. She details his sexual prowess, their methods of birth control, and her sexual satisfaction. In her

first episode on the series, Ashley tells the other wives (whom she has known briefly), "[Michael] has a really big penis. Swear to God" (Divas). Ashley does seem to be attempting to amuse the women, but her openness about sex with a white man shames the other wives, evidenced by their nervous laughter and averted eyes each time she broaches the subject. The other cast members either do not discuss their relationships this openly or if they do, the reactions are comparatively mild. Katie's antics throughout the season have placed these women in a risky spot. Katie's Jezebel behavior has painted them all as sexually available and triggered a collective fear of the white rapist. This fear is compounded with Michael's tasteless joke: "I thought this would be great. I thought that I could just walk in and I could be one guy with seven girls" (Reading). Ashley dismisses his joke as his Aussie humor, and her excuse mirrors Katie's actions in many ways. As a result, she may have the accouterments of an upper-class woman, stylish apartment, brand new Porsche, and business; however, she misses out on community. But, Ashley's financial precarity is more pronounced than Katie's. Some scenes in the season show the level of Ashley's vulnerability rather than her avarice. Ashley outlines her background: "I'm not from a wealthy area, like Potomac…we did not have financial security. We were evicted twice. We used to have to go to the church for food. Michael introduced me to a more luxurious lifestyle" (Divas). When she talks about Michael, she always talks about the lifestyle that he has provided, rather than his personality or any other characteristics**.** Her desperation for economic security is further contextualized as her mother faces bankruptcy. In a tearful conversation between mother and daughter, Ashley declares, "I want to give you everything that I can…you won't take all of the help I could give you because you're very prideful" (Error). Even though she has made a name for herself as Miss Washington DC, her class status still seems unclear and the way she zeroes in on a man 29 years her senior smacks of a desperate attempt to secure a

white husband. Based on the statements she has made throughout the season, and in interviews, Ashley does seem to associate whiteness with class and wealth. She explains, "I feel like I made it to the end of the rainbow and he's my big pot of gold" (Reading). Ashley's white father abandoned the family when she was young. Since she outlines an underprivileged background and focuses so much on her husband's wealth. As a result, she may be aware of the collective fear of sexual vulnerability that the women express, but does not feel comfortable asserting herself to her husband. During the beach vacation, Ashley makes a seemingly small confession to the other women. She admits that Michael will not sell the beach house, a symbol of his first marriage. Ashley wishes, "Hopefully after I get pregnant, we'll put it on the market" (Beach Sessions). Michael retaining the house is an indication that he does not respect his new wife enough to consider her feelings. Michael does not appreciate Ashley's value to their marriage, an attitude that becomes clear as the series progresses. However, Ashley regularly strokes Michael's ego by telling the cast mates and the American public about his virility during the season. She also proclaims his masculinity during show breaks.

In the tradition of the strong digital presence in the other *Real Housewives* programs in hiatus, Ashley sat down for an interview with an internet radio program, *The Breakfast Club,* to extend the narrative on herself and her marriage. The interview centered on her relationship with the much older millionaire real estate developer. During the conversation, she compliments his prowess. She says, "[My] sexual needs are being met" (Darby). Her public flattery of her husband seems linked to her access to the upper class because of how closely the two subjects are linked in the interview. She recalls that while working as a bartender at L2, a bar that Michael partially owned, "I sought him out." The show host begins to tease Ashley for her focus on Michael saying, "You were scouting him out. You were like I'm gonna get this rich man"

(Charlemagne). Ashley readily agrees with that assertion, adding, "The come up was real." Her statements make her seem like a "gold-digging hoochie," a stereotype that Hill Collins explains is a woman who "establish[es] a long-term relationship with a man with money. These gold-digging hoochies often aim to snare a professional athlete and can do so by becoming pregnant" (84). Now, Ashley is a wife, so she doesn't fit the stereotype completely. Ashley claims to love Michael, but her focus on Michael's money and her repeated requests to start a family with him show that perhaps securing class status is her goal. Ashley needs a baby to provide an additional tie to Michael's class. Like Andrew, Michael dodges this level of commitment. He has children Ashley's age, so his refusal could be construed in terms of life phases. He may feel he is too old to start a family. In order to put Ashley off the baby focus, Michael makes motherhood contingent upon her restaurant's success. Since most restaurants struggle and fail within the first year, he has created a ready excuse to postpone making a family indefinitely. Cohen shows this terrible example of the patriarchal power Michael holds over her to caricature him. Michael presents himself as a strong, laid-back, fun-loving husband, but his manipulation of Ashley shows he is not. Instead, he is a controlling mate. Cohen also spoofs Michael's class status and performance. At Karen Huger's yacht party, Michael begins to disrobe so that he can take a swim. When he opens his pants, Gizelle and Karen explode. Gizelle cries, "We don't do this… zip up your pants" (Error). In her confessional, Karen clarifies their reaction: Not at my event! Your pants stay up…I can't fault Ashley for her husband's behavior, but it doesn't make her look good." Ashley often exults Michael for bettering her class status, but this scene contradicts her assertions that Michael is upper-class. His desire to swim is not what challenges his class status, but his inability to read social cues is. None of the other partygoers are dressed for or planning a swim. However, it takes fevered admonition from Gizelle and Karen to make him

realize that based on his surroundings, disrobing is inappropriate. Social awareness is key to class performance and proves class membership. Michael has embarrassed Ashley by indicating that he has either not been to a yacht party before or doesn't know how to behave at one. Again, Cohen mocks the association of white masculinity with upper-class status. He resists the narrative that links these ideas in popular discourse. The housewives shows featuring white casts are one step toward extricating race from class. Through editing and manipulations, Cohen regularly positions white men and women as failing at upper-class performance. He does the same with his all-black casts, but an interracial element drives the point home. Black upper-class performance does not require white masculinity. In fact, he shows ways that white men can actually hinder the class mobility of black women.

E-race-ing Class

In 2009, President Obama visited a popular Virginia restaurant and ordered a hamburger, but popular conservative television personality, Sean Hannity took exception to the way the president wanted it. Obama asked for Dijon mustard, which according to Hannity is a classed condiment. Hannity opined, "I hope you enjoyed your fancy burger, Mr. President" (Hannity). Hannity's comment demonstrated the level to which class was forced into the national discourse surrounding the Obama presidency, with conservatives charging that the Obamas always lack the right class performance. Here Hannity accuses the president of elitism. But Hannity's $20 million annual paycheck and private plane render this charge hypocritical. So, if class and money aren't abhorrent to Hannity, what is offensive about Obama?

President Obama is accused of elitism while the First Lady and Daughters are charged with low-class performance. In November 2016, Jim Geraghty, a conservative blogger, and contributor to *National Review* took to Twitter to complain about an article that ran in the

Washington Post. The *Post* outlined about twenty racist and classist attacks that Michelle Obama endured during her eight years as First Lady. Geraghty and his amen corner criticized the *Post* article, saying that any criticism of black people or women is automatically labeled racist or sexist. The *Post* referred to Geraghty's 2008 criticism of the First Lady when she said that she was proud to be an American for the first time. Geraghty called her "strikingly ungracious." Now, his wording could be explained in two ways. From his privileged perspective, she had much to be proud of as an American before her husband's election, and it was ungracious to ignore American triumphs. At the same time, "grace" connects his comments to class, and during the Obama presidency, class continued to stand in for race. Grace often refers to appropriate and upper-class gentility and manners. So, when Geraghty calls the First Lady ungracious, he means that she does not possess these qualities, and positions her as unfit for her office. Once again, the Obamas get class wrong. This criticism of Michelle Obama was relatively benign, however, compared to the vitriol that was to come.

In addition to Lauten's statements about the class performance of the First Daughters and their parents, the latest election cycle included a rise in contempt for Michelle Obama. One white voter, Laurie Boilard stated, "She's not classy enough" and is an "atrocity" as first lady: "She makes a fool of herself — every time she comes on TV, I have to turn it off. Laura Bush was so classy, and that's what we really need again" (Kendall). Her reference to Laura Bush automatically racializes the remark. Though Boilard seems to want to focus attention on class, it's the absence of whiteness, the chief difference between the two first ladies, that embitters her. And the bitterness continues with public officials like Paula Ramsey Taylor, director of Clay County Development Corporation in West Virginia. Taylor wrote on Facebook: "It will be so refreshing to have a classy, beautiful, dignified First Lady [Melania Trump] back in the White

House…I'm tired of seeing a [*sic*] Ape in heels" (Taylor). In addition to the racist history (denying the humanity of black people) that her comment evokes, Taylor is also invoking class in this comment. Once again, Michelle Obama is compared to a white woman and judged as lacking, though she possesses many class credentials that the others do not. The national discourse on class, race, and the Obama family show that more images of upper-class African-Americans are necessary for progress in race relations.

As an arbiter of popular visual culture, Andy Cohen is in a unique position to help American audiences unearth the places that continue to hide racism. Class, a focus of much of his career, is one such place. Cohen is an Obama family fan. He has publicly asked Barack and Michelle to appear on his talk show *Watch What Happens Live* after he struck up an acquaintanceship with POTUS and FLOTUS at a $40,000 per plate campaign fundraising dinner in 2012. Cohen, an openly gay Jewish man, likely has an exceptional understanding of intersectional symbols and the body. He is very vocal about the importance of both cultures. When vandals destroyed headstones at a Missouri Jewish cemetery, Cohen addressed anti-Semitism on his show. He also sat down with CNN's Chloe Melas during New York Gay Pride parade festivities to discuss his journey out of the closet. He explained, "I was closeted until I was 22. I didn't think my friends would accept me because I heard them speaking in a certain way"(Cohen). As a Jewish gay man, he can recognize the tensions of race and sexuality. Religion and ethnicity can disrupt white racial identity of Jewish people. Similarly, homosexuality challenges masculinity in the American imaginary. Yet, he occupies all of these contested spaces, just as the First Family inhabits the contested spaces of blackness and the upper class. He encourages his viewers to tune-in to *The Real Housewives*, a multiracial group of bungling passers, to change the narrative on what it means to be upper-class. Cohen tries to

change the national discourse through the televisual format and his own celebrity, but race and class are tightly bound together. Passing is the way many ordinary people navigate these intersections in America. I conclude this project by discussing the impact passing has had on my life.

Memories of a Seasoned Class Passer

> "No matter how much money you have, no matter how famous you are, no matter how many people admire you, being black in America is tough. We got a long way to go for us as a society and for us as African-Americans until we feel equal in America."
> –LeBron James, response to racist vandalism of his house, 2017

On March 23, 2012, President Obama inflamed conservatives when he said, "You know, if I had a son, he'd look like Trayvon" (Obama). Pundits claimed that the president had inserted race into a conversation where it didn't belong. For example, Fox News contributor, forensic psychiatrist Keith Ablow responded, "Look, if the president had a son, he wouldn't look anything like Trayvon Martin. He'd be wearing a blazer from his prep school. He'd be driving a Beemer, and he'd be surrounded by Secret Service" (Ablow). The split here demonstrates how race and class are viewed in America. On one side, some white Americans allege that if black people dress and behave in a certain way, we will avoid racist treatment. On the other side, many African-Americans cursorily understand this is not true. The president's comments crystallize this dichotomy. The Trayvon Martin case inspired this project in many ways because his self-presentation was the key point in the debate on his death. Don Lemon implied that Martin should have taken more care with his clothing choices while, Bill O'Reilly claimed, "If Trayvon Martin had been wearing a jacket… and a tie… I don't think George Zimmerman would've had any problem" (O'Reilly). President Obama focuses on Trayvon's skin color and O'Reilly, Lemon, and others emphasize the right costuming for class performance. These messages are confusing, to say the least. So, how is a black body to navigate the quagmire of race and class? Even after all this research, I do not have a hard and fast answer.

Like Obama, I have family that looks like Trayvon. My cousin, Jacquet presented himself to the world in the same way. I remember when we were in elementary school Jacquet and I would compete in school for the best grades. We would compare report cards and test scores

over the phone. Somewhere along the way, Jacquet faded away from our competition and from his school altogether. Somehow, our academic achievements, our plan to attend college, and our desire to open a law practice were incompatible with our blackness, at least in his opinion. We grew up middle-class and were positioned by our parents to become productive members of the middle class, maybe even the upper class. But, Jacquet started passing as a thug, just like Trayvon and with a similar result. Trayvon was shot walking through the *wrong* neighborhood. Jacquet was stabbed in a drug beef. His death was not political and did not summon any media attention. Jacquet had stopped pretending, and this son of a baker became a real drug dealer. For me, his death was all tangled up in his blackness, class performance, and the American Dream. He was only 26, a year younger than me when he died eight years ago. As the photo of Trayvon circulated, my grief was renewed.

My memory is full of more examples of passing in my family, like my cousin Kenya's wedding. Kenya was perfect. She graduated from Spelman, was a member of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc., and got her J.D. Her father, Tom Thacker, had played for both the ABA and the NBA. When I was 17, she was married in one of the most lavish and beautiful weddings I have ever attended. I remember a prominent jazz band, a DJ, and a giant swan ice sculpture. I also remember a hushed conversation between my mother and another cousin. Kenya's mother, a flight attendant, had been working like a dog, picking up all the extra international flights she could, to pay for this lavish affair. But, the cousins wondered, "where was Tom's basketball money?" The event was designed to impress the sport's elite in Cincinnati. The Thackers pretended to still belong, but they didn't. I never did learn what happened to his basketball riches, and of course, in a "classless society," it is impolite to ask about money.

My nuclear family also passed as members of the middle class, but our problem wasn't money. It was values and behaviors. I remember the manifest joy that my mother had when she was able to differentiate us from the other black kids in my majority white junior high school. My school bus driver didn't want to pick me up in front of my house as he did for the other kids on his route. He wanted me to stand at the end of the road at a dangerous intersection instead. He was a lazy guy and to get him to do his job properly; my mom approached the all-white school board for help. During the meeting, one board member condescendingly said, "But all the Village Way kids wait at the end of the street for pick up. Why should your daughter be any different?" Village Way, the housing projects where most of my other black schoolmates lived. My mother smugly replied, “No. We live on Penn Drive above the prison, where I am the warden.” The prison, state correctional facility that employed plenty of the parents. She took such pleasure in letting the board know that we weren’t *that* kind of black. We were Cosby black. Maybe, we were. But we also had very un-middle-class problems. I had a rather chaotic home life, filled with domestic violence, which did not live up to middle-class standards. (Again, we like to think that behavior is class based, but it isn’t.) However, I could not get help, call the police, or tell anyone because of the mantras I grew up hearing in the predominately white town. "Don't do X in front of white people." "Don't embarrass me in front of white people." "That might fly at Village Way, but you will not behave like that." A lot of my life was dedicated to passing, despite our family’s difficulties, particularly distinguishing *us* from *them*. These memories are numerous and coalesced into this project.

But what was all this passing for? It wasn’t to keep me safe from racism. White classmates still called me nigger. What passing did was put a lot of pressure on me. Pressure to conceal abuse. Pressure to separate from the small group of black kids that I could have

befriended. Pressure to keep the performance going at great cost. And what is wrong with the black masses, The Village Way kids, anyway? Frantz Fanon predicted that they will be integral to any revolution that could redefine our place in America. But, the black bourgeoisie continues to chase after whiteness and view "making it" as the successful imitation of the white middle class. We go to school and buy houses in certain neighborhoods and for many it has less to do with personal comfort than racial protection. We have put revolution on hold indefinitely in hopes that white mainstream society will finally see *all* of our humanity. If only we could *act* right.

Here lies the limitation of this project. The pronouns I use are inclusive which shows just how heavily entrenched I am in both middle-class living and the psychology of the black experience. I wonder if a detached academic perspective has ever been possible in this project. Each chapter had a cousin, a friend, my mother, or myself in mind as I wrote it. With such a personal investment in the work, there are bound to be gaps in some of my arguments. However, I chose this subject anyway because I think that scrutinizing class performance shines more light on another dimension of black America. This group, the black middle- and upper-class are mostly left out of national conversations. When critics discuss social justice, they think of the black poor. When critics focus on the shrinking middle class, the emphasis is on white families that live on the proverbial Main Street. So, I wanted to read and critique the stories that focused on bourgeois race and class.

Class is an important part of self-perception in America. Some upper-class people self-identify as middle-class, while some middle-class people proudly claim working-class status. There's even a "blue-collar billionaire" in the White House. Class is complex with a multitude of definitions and parameters because most Americans consider themselves members. With so

many people involved in shaping the meaning, I expect that some audiences may see how I have defined middle- and upper-class as a project limitation. Also, the genres I have chosen do have their limitations. Sometimes these books, movies, and TV shows aren't bad because they have tart language, steamy scenes, or tidy happy endings. Some of these authors and producers have a skill problem. For example, Sister Souljah's narrative style is pedantic and relies on too much anti-feminist, pseudo-Islamic rhetoric. She also inserts herself into the novel as a savior character. Despite these limitations, I look forward to extending this research. In chapter 1, both Regina and Winter are black and Hispanic. Though the characters self-identify as black, I will explore how reading these women as Afro-Latina impacts their relationship with race and class. In chapter 2, I will incorporate a close reading of Perry theatrical productions and juxtapose the performance of class on stage and the film set. In chapter 3, I would spend more time discussing different New York locations and how characters' class performances change based on geography. In addition to writing more about the class history of Harlem, I will explore the black experience on Park Avenue, Central Park East and West and other tony neighborhoods. In chapter 4, I will include a discussion of beauty in class performance. Another point of contention in the *RHOP* series is hair. Wigs, weaves or natural, these women spend a lot of time critiquing each other's hair, which seems to be a testament to how well each performs class. After further research, I plan to publish these chapters as articles for *Callaloo* or the *African-American Review*. However, my main goal is to use this project as the basis for undergraduate courses on popular fiction, class, and race. I look forward to challenging student perceptions of literature and the American social, racial, and economic hierarchy.

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When I heard that my overachieving cousin Brian was dropping out of Xavier University in New Orleans, I remember thinking he was a failure. How could he give up middle-class striving so abruptly? He was going to be a dentist like he was supposed to and now he was moving to Las Vegas to pursue fashion, his true passion. What? As far as my family was concerned, he was moving to the moon. Something had to be wrong with him. Was it drugs? Some asked. Was it mental illness? Others speculated. What was it? He'd grown up in middle-class privilege in a Virginia suburb of DC. He was on the path to the upper class, and he left it all behind to work in fashion retail sales. I saw Brian again, after ten years of what I still considered a confusing rebellion. He hadn't finished college, didn't own property, wasn't married, and had no retirement savings; but, he was working in fashion and photography. He was happy. Being a bourgeois dentist would have been a performance for Brian. Instead of passing, Brian chose living. *The Hollow Class* has helped me to understand the difference.

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