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Black Bourgeois: Class & Sex in the Flesh by Candice M.
Jenkins (review)

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Griffin are reflexive about the impossibility of collapsing Black women's orature into definitive meaning.

Nevertheless, *The Race of Sound* encourages listeners to think critically about the act of listening and the racial politics of vocal timbre. Musicologists, voice studies scholars, or scholars interested in analyzing voice in Black music will find Eidsheim's *The Race of Sound* immensely helpful. Quite masterfully, the work provides new insights into the naturalization of listening and makes way for research interested in disentangling the relationship between race and voice.

Candice M. Jenkins. *Black Bourgeois: Class & Sex in the Flesh*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2019. 280 pp. \$108.00 cloth/\$27.00 paper.

Reviewed by Roberta Wolfson, Stanford University

On June 14, 2005, Oprah Winfrey was denied entry into the Hermès boutique in Paris during closing time. On July 16, 2009, Harvard professor Henry Louis Gates, Jr. was arrested for allegedly breaking and entering into what turned out to be his own home in Cambridge, Massachusetts. On April 12, 2018, two Black real estate agents waiting in a Philadelphia Starbucks for a business meeting with a white associate were arrested after the store manager demanded they leave because they had not made a purchase before requesting to use the restroom. In none of these incidents were the material wealth, professional status, and social capital enjoyed by these Black individuals sufficient to protect them from being racially profiled, snubbed, or criminalized. Each of these situations is discussed in Candice M. Jenkins's insightful and readable book *Black Bourgeois: Class & Sex in the Flesh* as critical examples of how the Black body continues to be viewed in the contemporary period as inherently out of place in middle-class spaces that are racially marked as white.

These examples reflect the existential paradox of the Black bourgeois subject, who is privileged by class but rendered vulnerable by race, a paradox that forms the central focus of *Black Bourgeois*. Jenkins calls this phenomenon "the black and bourgeois dilemma" (6), a conundrum that defines the lived experiences of the middle-class Black subject who enjoys the protection of material wealth while simultaneously enduring the precarity of blackness. At the heart of Jenkins's book lies a central question: "Does material privilege offer any *real* protection from the operation of black vulnerability?" (7). The answer, as Jenkins demonstrates, is complex: On the one hand, class privilege has been historically associated with whiteness but on the other hand, material wealth confers undeniable protections for Black people. In exploring the dimensions of this conundrum, *Black Bourgeois* offers a timely contribution to our understanding of how race, class, and gender intersect in the contemporary era and how these categories are complexly performed and complicated by the Black (materially privileged) body.

Jenkins grounds her analysis of the Black and bourgeois dilemma within theoretical frameworks from cultural studies, sociology, and Black studies. Drawing upon the work of cultural theorists Stuart Hall, Chas Critcher, Tony Jefferson, John Clarke, and Brian Roberts, Jenkins takes as a basic premise the claim that class is lived through race, that class is always and already racialized. This claim, coupled with sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's notion of *habitus* (the idea that we are taught how to perform our membership in a social category), forms the foundation of Jenkins's assessment of why the Black body does not seem to appropriately "perform"

middle-class status or, conversely, why attaining middle-class privilege can threaten the authenticity of an individual's claim to blackness. Jenkins also draws upon the work of Afropessimist scholars such as Hortense Spillers, Jared Sexton, Frank Wilderson III, and Alexander Weheliye, who demand renewed attention to how white supremacist structures render Black life precarious. As Jenkins notes, the reference to "flesh" in the very title of *Black Bourgeois* calls attention to the distinction Spillers makes between the body and the flesh, in which "the body" is marked racially as white and granted civic inclusion, whereas "the flesh" is associated with the abjectness of blackness and defined as a commodity that can be owned and exploited. Drawing upon this dichotomy, Jenkins makes the provocative claim that the Black bourgeois subject is necessarily an ontological impossibility, since the Black body that has acquired middle-class status (and thus a supposed proximity to whiteness) is nevertheless still informed by the historical legacy of Black flesh (and thus branded a commodity that can only participate in market exchange as property).

Black Bourgeois is divided into seven chapters, each of which explores one or more works of African American literature that consider the tensions and paradoxes embedded in the contemporary Black bourgeois experience. Nearly all of these works were published during a period that Jenkins (following Nelson George) refers to as "post-soul," which spans the decades immediately following the civil rights and Black Power movements and ends before the election of Barack Obama. In focusing on this period, Jenkins demonstrates how the precarity of Black flesh continued to endure despite the gains in civil rights legislation during the 1960s that made socioeconomic advancement for the Black middle class possible. *Black Bourgeois*'s focus on the post-soul era is refreshing and important, as this move allows Jenkins to provide critical historical context for the persistence of racial violence and police brutality in our post-Obama present.

Jenkins's grounds her analysis in nuanced close readings of literary texts, building from Raymond Williams's claim that "structures of feeling" (intangible cultural or ideological shifts) are often first sensed in art and literature (23). In the introductory chapter, Jenkins examines Andrea Lee's novel *Sarah Philips* (1984), noting that the limitations of the heroine's Black flesh continually thwart her attempts to achieve individualism through class privilege. In chapter one, Jenkins discusses how Toni Morrison's novel *Tar Baby* (1981) and Spike Lee's feature film *School Daze* (1988) explore the "classed metaphor of a black body penetrated by whiteness" (33) that became popularized in the 1980s..

In the subsequent four chapters, Jenkins examines the bodily anxieties attached to Black bourgeois status, beginning in chapter two with analyses of Danzy Senna's novel *Caucasia* (1998) and Rebecca Walker's memoir *Black, White, and Jewish* (2001) in which the mixed-race body simultaneously "possesses 'whiteness' and is possessed by blackness" (62). Chapter three focuses on the experiences of the Black artist living abroad in Reginald McKnight's novel *He Sleeps* (2001) and Shay Youngblood's novel *Black Girl in Paris* (2000), concluding that the Black bourgeois intellectual's class status is contingent upon and complicated by place. In chapter four, Jenkins uses the tropes of futurity and Black interiority to analyze Percival Everett's novel *Erasure* (2001), which explores the tension between how the body can on the one hand be made hypervisible by blackness and on the other hand "whitened" and rendered invisible by class privilege. In chapter five, Jenkins analyzes two more novels, Colson Whitehead's *John Henry Days* (2001) and Michael Thomas's *Man Gone Down* (2007) as examples of what she calls "(post-)post-soul texts" (34), which reveal how technological transformations in the early twenty-first century inform the social death (following Orlando Patterson) of the Black bourgeois protagonists, who teeter between the provisional privileges conferred by middle-class status and the bodily vulnerabilities resulting from laboring within a capitalist system.

In the concluding chapter, Jenkins turns to what she calls the Black Lives Matter (BLM) era to examine how Claudia Rankine's poetry collection *Citizen: An American Lyric* (2014), Issa Rae's HBO comedy *Insecure* (2016-), and Ava DuVernay's OWN drama *Queen Sugar* (2016-) represent Black bourgeois vulnerability and solidarity during moments of social and sexual intimacy. By ending her book with a turn to the BLM present, Jenkins demonstrates how the project of post-soul authors to "narratively imagine black privilege as an existential and representational paradox" (203) continues to develop in the immediate contemporary moment when highly publicized police killings of Black people have turned national conversations about race relations away *from* a focus on Black progress and *toward* an emphasis on Black vulnerability. To further demonstrate the post-soul extension of the Black and bourgeois dilemma into the present day, Jenkins occasionally pairs her close readings of post-soul texts with discussions of social incidents from the BLM era, such as an episode in 2014 in which a Black women's book club was ejected from a California "wine train" for laughing too loudly. In expanding her archive of analysis to include such public altercations, Jenkins skillfully highlights the relationship between fiction and social reality, revealing that fiction is both produced by and productive of key sociopolitical phenomena.

One of the greatest strengths of *Black Bourgeois* is its ability to move beyond making simplistic observations about the relationship between race and class and to instead advance complex arguments that speak to the various paradoxes inherent in the Black and bourgeois dilemma, or the ontological impossibility of being both rendered abject by race and protected by class. This book explores such paradoxes by considering the Black subject as an entity that can be both protected and imprisoned by material privilege, how the precarity of Blackness can be both a source of pride and also a cause for violence, and that the vulnerability attached to Black flesh can be used to simultaneously deny Black humanity and affirm Black life. In deconstructing these paradoxes, *Black Bourgeois* offers fresh insight into ongoing conversations about the tension between Black (social) death and Black life. Such insight yields new understandings about the Black experience of double consciousness—a duality that exists even within the gap between Black "body" and Black "flesh," and raises questions about what avenues for Black agency may be possible today.
