

## *Introduction*

Emergence is thus the entry of forces; it is their eruption, the leap from the wings to center stage, each in its youthful strength.

—Michel Foucault, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History” (1971)

**B**Y THE TIME the stock market crashed and the Great Depression provoked a widespread reappraisal of U.S.-style capitalism, Americans were already well on the way to defining themselves as a nation of consumers. We tend to think of consumerism as a recent or even “postmodern” phenomenon, but as historians Richard Wightman Fox and T. J. Jackson Lears note, “the American culture of consumption did not emerge full-blown at mid-century” (ix). In the late nineteenth century, many Americans felt uneasy about the economic transformation they were witnessing, from the facelessness of corporations owned by stockholders dispersed around the country to the blandishments of advertisers who challenged the prevailing Protestant ethic of thrift and industry. But by the early 1930s, they and their children had grown accustomed to the signature experiences of the new consumer society, such as buying on credit, shopping in department stores, seeing national brands advertised in local newspapers, watching the “talkies” made in Hollywood, and being the subjects of market research and public relations campaigns. What had happened? An “economy of abundance” had come to rival and supplant an “economy of scarcity,” as sociologist Simon Patten put it in 1907. But why had this occurred?

The industrial revolution had enabled the manufacture of more and better goods than there were markets for those goods, so the long-term stability of the economy required that demand be manufactured as well. “Mass production has made mass distribution necessary,” the department store magnate Edward Filene told the American Economic Associ-

ation in 1927. He continued, "Certain types of retailing are in effect dams in the stream of distribution—a stream which should be broad, deep, and swift flowing" (1). For the first time ever, the 1933 edition of the federal study *Recent Social Trends in the United States* included a chapter entitled "The People as Consumers." As this title suggests, the democratization of the marketplace of goods had effected a dramatic change in the way many Americans—affluent and working-class, urban and rural—imagined their identities and conducted their lives, a transformation that became in turn the ideological and material basis for the flourishing of consumer society later in the twentieth century. In part, this book is about that transformation, about the emerging consumer society's consolidation and contestation, about its institutions, and above all about the written discourses—literary, imaginative, and critical—to which it gave rise.

Though this story is somewhat familiar by now, I want to make a case here for revising it by considering its relationship to the concurrent history of race. Reading the influential scholarly accounts of America's consumer revolution, we encounter provocative references to racial thinking and racism, but they are mainly confined to footnotes and digressions. For example, we note that in the late nineteenth century, rumors that Sears and Roebuck were "a Jew" and "a Negro" were widely circulated by rural merchants who were anxious about the displacement of locally owned stores by mail-order entrepreneurs.<sup>1</sup> We learn that world's fairs and other popular turn-of-the-century exhibitions not only identified commodity consumption with American citizenship and historical progress but sometimes barred African Americans from participation in exhibitions and employment and placed pseudocommunities of live, exotic "savages" on display. In material culture, we are confronted with commercial iconography that relied routinely on racial stereotypes and subtexts, even when the advertised products bore no self-evident relationship to anyone's race, as, for instance, in the ubiquitous images of "pickaninnies" pursued by alligators. In "high" culture, we read in the work of many modernist writers and intellectuals a critique of modernity's "commercial values" and "overcivilization," casting whites as the special victims of modern society and nonwhites as the repositories of pastoral virtue.

However, with few exceptions, most of them recent, race has been rel-

egated to the margins of analyses of consumer culture during this period. This neglect is all the more striking considering that the period in which our consumer society took shape was one in which race in the United States was transformed decisively by Jim Crow segregation; the “new immigration”; imperial forays into Cuba, the Philippines, and Panama; and the Great Migration, through which two million African Americans moved to northern industrial centers. Further attention to the relationship between these developments and emerging consumerism will allow us to raise new questions, cross disciplinary boundaries, and produce a “reconfigured genealogy” of the culture of segregation and the culture of consumption.<sup>2</sup> As the preceding examples indicate, the development of racial identities and communities did not occur in isolation from the consumer revolution. To the contrary, this book suggests, they were bound up intimately with one another, not by mere accident of simultaneity or the machinations of powerful individuals but by an articulation of discourses—a process in which the struggle for hegemonic power requires the performance of ideological work on multiple fronts at once and thus generates reciprocity and tension among them.<sup>3</sup> The emergence of consumer society relied on the concept of race and the persistence of white-supremacist thinking. Likewise, the ways in which people thought and wrote about consumer society helped to maintain the concept of race and reproduce assumptions about white supremacy.

This is not to say that the articulation of race with consumer culture during this period was monolithic or unambivalent. It occasioned transgressions of social roles and expectations; it was subject to regional variations and informed by issues of class and gender; and in certain ways and in certain areas, it unsettled and even subverted prevailing social relations.<sup>4</sup> But I argue in this study that it primarily served to maintain the viability of racial thinking and the normativity of whiteness. Though I here make no attempt to chart a teleological narrative of historical progress (if “progress” is the appropriate word here), I cannot help but think that the legacy of this articulation is our inheritance today. In the contemporary United States, consumption and the private interest of corporations shape our identities, our desires, our public sphere, and our horizons of political possibility in ways that are certainly unprecedented but not, given the period under discussion, entirely unpre-

dictable. Race continues to differentially determine our access to resources and life chances and to conceal its status as a social construction behind a false screen of nature and common sense. That this is the case despite the efforts of the civil rights struggle and the discrediting of biological accounts of race testifies to its resilience and utility in the U.S. social imaginary. "Race is as healthy today as it was during the Enlightenment," wrote novelist Toni Morrison in 1992, because it has "become metaphorical."

[It is] a way of referring to and disguising forces, events, classes, and expressions of social decay and economic division far more threatening to the body politic than biological "race" ever was . . . It seems that it has a utility far beyond economy, beyond the sequestering of classes from one another, and has assumed a metaphorical life so completely embedded in daily discourse that is perhaps more necessary and on display than ever before. (63)

In what ways might thinking across the disciplines that have constituted race and consumer culture as objects of historical study help to demystify their antidemocratic force and contest their authority to frame our contemporary common sense? What critical perspective emerges when we "read together . . . the putative 'objects and subjects' of disciplines which are thought to be distinct and mutually exclusive" (Brody 6)?

Pursuing these questions has required me to leave the comfort of my training in literary studies for long stretches in order to acquaint myself with relevant work in history, sociology, anthropology, ethnic studies, and critical race studies. My limitations in this effort are reflected in this book, but so, I think, are the strengths of work that is not indigenous to the fields from which scholars typically approach these questions. Disciplinary conventions have shaped the significance of the period between the 1890s and 1930s very differently for different groups of observers: "the culture of consumption" and "the culture of segregation" are spoken of in ways that do not fully acknowledge their concurrence, much less their conjunctions. It was in the same year, 1890, that two of the most critical pieces of legislation that spurred the consumer revolution and the Jim Crow era were both passed. One, the Sherman Antitrust Act, was a formal recognition of the dangers of concentrated power in the hands of corporations, while the other, crafted by lawmakers in

Louisiana, enforced racial segregation on train cars. Both laws soon acquired tremendous symbolic and material significance, the Louisiana law for its effectiveness and the Sherman Act for its ineffectiveness. Affirming the Louisiana law in the landmark case *Plessy v. Ferguson* six years later, the U.S. Supreme Court put the official stamp of the federal government on “Jim Crow.” The concentration of corporate power at which the Sherman Act was aimed quickly accelerated beyond the reach of this and other similarly toothless antitrust legislation. Corporations, possessed now of the legal status of persons and unprecedented wealth and influence, began the arduous but ultimately successful task of selling consumption as a way of life. Just as segregation was intended to resolve a crisis that emancipation and Reconstruction had precipitated in a white-supremacist society structured by relations of dominance, so the reorientation of the economy toward consumption aimed to resolve a crisis in American capitalism, which was terribly embattled at the time by overproduction, labor uprisings, and severe depressions. Both of these attempts at crisis management, historians have argued, served to exacerbate existing social and political inequities, and both had a dramatic impact on the realm of culture. It is now commonplace to speak of a culture of consumption and a culture of segregation, however contentiously the exact nature of these cultures is debated.

So familiar have these rubrics become in U.S. cultural studies that they seem to suggest discrete entities, their distinguishing features and dominant figures falling neatly into parallel columns. But in fact their historical coincidence bound the culture of segregation inextricably with the culture of consumption; indeed, the phrase “historical coincidence” is misleading insofar as it suggests an arbitrary simultaneity and implies the autonomy of the developments said to coincide. For one, the regime of visibility on which race depends found a hospitable climate in the visual orientation and technological innovation of consumer culture, from the two-dimensional spaces of print advertising and increasingly inexpensive reproductions of images to the semipublic spaces of chain stores, Pullman cars, restaurants, expositions, shop windows, and leisure and amusement sites that constituted this emerging culture of spectacle and display.

In addition, the consumer revolution occurred at a time in which the authority to define racial categories was vigorously contested, the con-

ventional discourses for framing race—legal, scientific, and popular—having fallen out of sync. If it was clear that the Manichaean opposition between white and black would continue to determine people’s legal status and shape their social identities, and if who was black and who was white was also clear to many people, it was far less clear what these categories would continue to mean or whether they could be reconciled with a citizenry whose national origins, somatic features, languages, and religious and ethnic affiliations increasingly troubled the neat legal fiction of black versus white. Historian Matthew Guterl expresses the turn-of-the-century conundrum well.

In this moment of widespread social, economic, and cultural tumult, a vast tide of racial categories washed over American culture, its ambiguities and confusions hidden by multiple political motives. Several fundamental questions plagued discussions about “race problems” throughout the United States. What, exactly, was a race? Where, precisely, should the boundary lines of racial difference be drawn? What, specifically, marked race physically upon or within the body? Race, it was argued, could be marked by language, nation, skin color, relations between the sexes, arts and technology, social standing, government and laws, or religion. One popular encyclopedia, capturing the depth of the problem perfectly, listed several conflicting definitions of race without explaining or exploring the contradictions. Scientists, journalists, politicians, and cultural figures wavered between allegiance to one set of physical traits and to another, leaving a remarkable looseness of fit in the language of race. And as “the science of races” grew more sophisticated, “race charts” and “purely somatical classifications” became ever more confused and complicated. (16)

For that matter, the stability of the supposedly self-evident distinction between black and white was not entirely secure. Despite Jim Crow legislation (and arguably because of it), this distinction came under attack, and indeed the integrity of the very concept of race was subjected to intense skepticism in the late nineteenth century and again beginning in late 1920s. Having formerly been associated with nation or geographic origin, race had been “biologized” by eighteenth-century comparative anatomists and by nineteenth-century eugenicists and physiognomists. But this biologist paradigm, despite enjoying a renaissance in the years

around World War I, was undermined by postwar anthropologists, among others, who took an ethnicity-oriented approach to the question of race. Navigating these competing discourses was, as this book demonstrates, a regular endeavor for many U.S. writers, some of whom did so deliberately and with an intent to imaginatively intervene, others of whom wound up writing about race more or less unwittingly.

Thus, the historical moment of consumer culture's emergence was one in which neither science nor the law fully shouldered the ignominious burden of stabilizing and reproducing race, as they often competed with each other and with conventional wisdom for cultural authority. The crucial part that emerging commercialism and the cultural conversation to which it gave rise played in deepening or managing this crisis has yet to be fully examined. Though a significant body of work exists on "commodity racism"—the racially coded material artifacts of consumer culture—what occupies me here are the ways in which race was inscribed within the imaginative and critical discourses that consumer culture provoked, working itself into what W. E. B. DuBois called "the warp and woof of our daily thought with a thoroughness that few realize," into the fabric of novels and short stories, nonfiction prose and travel writing, white-authored and nonwhite-authored texts alike.<sup>5</sup>

A first step toward "reading together" the disciplines that have focused on the history of consumption and the history of race is to acknowledge the whiteness of the scholarly tradition on consumer culture. By this I mean its tendency to universalize white experiences, to proceed as though whiteness signifies the absence of race, and to subordinate race to class and gender as its primary categories of analysis. Recall, for example, that the urbanization of America in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that historians identify as a chief catalyst in consumer society's emergence—that cityward drift chronicled in much of the classic fiction from the turn of the twentieth century—was accompanied and fueled by the demographic shift of African Americans from the rural south to northern cities. According to the 1935 U.S. Census, the decade between 1910 and 1920 saw the "Negro" populations of New York, Chicago, Cleveland, and Detroit grow 66 percent, 148 percent, 308 percent, and 611 percent, respectively—figures that would each increase again by over 100 percent during the following decade (C. Hall 55). A migration of this scale could not possibly change the

racial makeup of urban America neutrally and without fallout. If it facilitated for many African Americans access to the wages and material goods that whites enjoyed, it also engendered the anxiety and resentment that led to widespread racial violence and rioting in 1919. Our scholarly tradition has in effect magnified the significance of white experiences without actually treating them as white, obscuring both the experiences of nonwhites and the role of whiteness in whites' experiences. As recently as 2000, Blackwell Publishers brought out an anthology entitled *The Consumer Society Reader*—one of many such collections of foundational essays and subsequent interventions in the field, but an especially ambitious one—and among its thirty-nine chapters there are exactly two references to race.<sup>6</sup>

Far more interest has also been shown in consumerism's relationship to ethnicity than in its relationship to race. This is a fairly recent distinction; it did not really obtain during the period I discuss here (when many differences we would now call ethnic were considered racial), but it is meaningful for our current scholarship. Its significance is clearly demonstrated in *Making a New Deal*, Lizabeth Cohen's analysis of Chicago's industrial workers between the wars. Against the notion that consumer culture homogenized society and flattened social differences, Cohen contends that the second generation of European immigrants—the Italians, Jews, and Poles who enthusiastically embraced mainstream mass culture—did not perforce “abandon ethnic and class affiliations” but rather integrated these disparate concerns in ways “that preserved the boundaries between themselves and others.” However, African Americans, she adds, “developed a different and complex relationship to mass culture.”

Black more than ethnic workers satisfied those who hoped a mass market would emerge during the twenties. Unlike ethnic workers, blacks did not reject commercial insurance, chain stores, and standard brands. But blacks disappointed those who assumed an integrated American culture would accompany uniformity in tastes. For ironically, by participating in mainstream commercial life, which black Chicagoans did more than their ethnic co-workers, blacks came to feel more independent and influential as a race, not more integrated into white middle-class society. Mass culture—chain stores,

brand goods, popular music—offered blacks the ingredients from which to construct a new, urban black culture. (147–48)

The excellent existing scholarship on ethnicity's relationship to emergent consumer culture has brought welcome attention to social differences other than those of class and gender, but as Cohen's account indicates, this work cannot simply be extended by analogy or implication to African Americans. Rather, additional attention to race as distinct from ethnicity is required.<sup>7</sup>

Indeed, the storied refashioning of “the people as consumers” was not confined to those whites and “not-yet-white ethnics” whom the scholarly tradition typically treats as “the people.”<sup>8</sup> When the National Negro Business League announced in 1931 its “determined fight for the Negro to gain for him some more secure economic place in American life,” it tellingly cast that struggle in terms of the strength of collective consuming practices: “[T]he strongest argument we have is the power represented in the dollars we spend through stores of various kinds” (Weems 19). That same year, DuBois wrote in an editorial in *The Crisis* that “advertisement and installment buying have made the nation blind and crazy.” He explained: “We think we must buy whatever is offered. The orgy must be stopped, and no group is strategically better placed than the American Negro” (*Emerging Thought* 393). In the following year, 1932, African American economist Paul K. Edwards published a groundbreaking study, *The Southern Urban Negro as a Consumer*. Of course, the highly segmented marketing practices we see today—the hyperrationalized mapping of potential purchasers along axes of race, gender, class, ethnicity, age, and sexuality—had not evolved yet. But as these three examples illustrate, the period leading to the 1930s had already constructed “the Negro as a consumer” (albeit differentially), and “the Negro” had come to participate in and experience consumer culture in ways that overlap with but are not reducible to the participation and experiences of other groups.

Attending to the complexity of this process does not require us to neglect the importance of class and gender on which the critical tradition was established. In fact, one recognizes immediately how thoroughly the relationship between consumer culture and race is shot through with gender and class ideologies. A few examples will illustrate

this point. Women's experiences and issues of gender have an unusually and understandably important place in the scholarship on consumer culture. Because of women's traditional role as the point-of-purchase agent for the family, and because of prevalent assumptions about their innate predisposition toward irrationality, emotion, and appearances, women figured in many ways as the paradigmatic consumers. It is therefore significant that no less an authority than the eminent sociologist Robert Park, founder of the Chicago school of urban sociology, relied on an explicitly gendered construction of materialistic desire in distinguishing "the Negro" from other races. In a claim that rehearses longstanding stereotypes about the inferiority of "the Negro," Park wrote in 1924 that "the Negro" expresses "an interest and attachment to external, physical things rather than to subjective states and objects of introspection," exhibits a "disposition for expression rather than enterprise and action," and is therefore, "so to speak, the lady among races" (quoted in D. Baldwin 127). Thus, questions of gender are never far from the analysis of race and consumer culture, as several of the chapters in this book demonstrate.

Nor is it possible to delimit race from those issues of class that have traditionally concerned scholars of consumer culture. The most economic critiques of consumer culture treat race as a second-order phenomenon, merely one among many instruments through which the ruling class has exploited and contained the poor and working classes. But race is not reducible to class, even as it is also unthinkable apart from class. Recent work in labor history, for example, has shown that the vastly widened and internally differentiated version of whiteness that emerged after the 1920s was the result of a hegemonic struggle over the self-affiliation of the millions of immigrant workers who might otherwise have cast their lot, so to speak, with the African Americans *with* whom they worked rather than the white bosses *for* whom they worked. Moreover, the question of the relationship of African Americans to consumer culture is always already a question of class. This is so not only because the majority of African Americans in this period were left impoverished by the failures of Reconstruction and by de facto and de jure racism, effectively barring their entry into the "able-to-buy" class that advertisers targeted, but also because the African American population in the

United States was itself highly stratified by class and thus differentially affected by the socioeconomic changes in the arena of consumption.

For example, anthropologist Paul Mullins has explored the ambivalent relationship between African Americans and the ideal of the “genteel consumer.” On one hand, Mullins notes, it was primarily in the arena of consumption (rather than politics, work, or social life) that African Americans of means could demonstrate their equality with whites and express, through their “modern” appearance and lifestyle, a fitness for modernity. This was of no small value at a time when many whites still thought that African Americans constituted a premodern race or indeed represented the very antithesis of civilization itself. Replacing folk consumer practices of barter and domestic production with genteel practices within the cash economy (e.g., brand-name, store-bought products and services) served symbolic as well as material purposes. On the other hand, African Americans who approximated this genteel consumer ideal were routinely subjected to the ridicule of both whites and lower-class African Americans, to whom they appeared to be “acting white,” pretending to be something they were not. Buying the markers of social prestige set African Americans up for the accusation—always close to hand among the legions of “observers of Negro behavior”—that they could not improve their actual economic standing because of their inherent weakness to spend their earnings on the outward pretense of that standing. One white essayist put it thus in 1928:

The Negro must learn the secret of the application of wealth; he acquires it, but he does not know how to apply it to advantage. The Negro is a spendthrift; he is reckless and also a hypocrite. He tries to make people believe what he is not, by the imitation of the shadow and not the real substance. (Quoted in Mullins 102)

In short, there is an extensive, politically charged history of the class inflections of African American consumerism and of the meanings that white observers have made of African American consumption, a history to which I return in chapter 1.

Even if our scholarship were to continue to privilege white experiences of consumer culture, it could no longer, in the current critical moment, be imagined to transcend race. As a great deal of recent work

has shown, race is something everyone has in a racialized society, such as the United States—albeit not in equivalent ways. Further, race is produced relationally and differentially, at least in the binary U.S. racial imaginary—the categories white and black existing in a mutually constitutive, dynamic tension. Consumer culture’s institutions, artifacts, and imaginative and critical discourses elaborated blackness and whiteness relationally, deploying them in multiple and conflicting ways. Examples abound in the chapters of this book. The 1893 World’s Columbian Exposition, whose role as a “cultural pedagogy” for consumerism has been widely remarked, forged an unspoken but unmistakable equation between whiteness and consumer citizenship. However, in the following decade, Henry James’s *The American Scene* relied on the inverse equation, keying a nostalgic ideal of American culture to a whiteness that was being tarnished by consumer culture’s “black” vulgarity and impudence. Later, as literary modernism elaborated its critique of consumer capitalism, “the Negro” became an atavistic, antimodern hero, his romanticized blackness the repository of a supposed authenticity and proximity to nature (and human nature) from which whites had been alienated. Yet in the popular fiction and drama of that same period, blackness was also deployed as a figure for consumer desire itself.<sup>9</sup>

Thus fraught with contradictions, the articulation of consumer culture and race in this period resists neat, totalizing analytical claims. This book proposes that the discourses of consumer culture served to reproduce racial thinking and the normativity of whiteness, but it does not attempt a comprehensive survey of the period’s cultural history or literature. Having sketched in chapter 1 the theoretical terrain from which my own approach emerged, I offer readings of the articulation of race and consumer culture in several literary texts and cultural institutions. Three of the chapters (chapters 3, 4, and 6) attend closely to a particular literary text or set of texts, while the other two (chapters 2 and 5) focus principally on institutional conditions of circulation and reception. Close reading does not require a narrow formalism, however, and what I have done is to trace—through a sustained treatment of figures, rhetorical gestures, and formal devices—the connection between a text and its social context. I have tried to avoid reductively interpreting works of imaginative writing as mere mirrors that reflect dominant ideologies, and I have sought to ask, as Dominick Lacapra puts it, how “a text

relate[s] in symptomatic, critical, and possibly transformative ways to its pertinent contexts" (4).

I do not take the critical and imaginative literature at the emergence of consumer society to be derivative of a more authentic object of study, of the institutions and commodities "in and of themselves." Such representations matter vitally because there is no such thing as an unmediated experience of these institutions and commodities, no extradiscursive experience of them "in and of themselves." Far from standing as second-order evidence, the work of the fiction writers on which I focus—Henry James, James Weldon Johnson, Nathanael West, and George Schuyler—was integral to the social changes they lived through and observed. Whether deliberately or unwittingly, they offer forceful reimaginings of the dynamic relationship between race and consumer culture. Although these writers are canonical (with the possible exception of Schuyler), reconceptualizing their work from this perspective produces unconventional readings. I have purposely avoided discussing writers—such as Theodore Dreiser, John Dos Passos, Sinclair Lewis, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and Nella Larsen—whose concern with consumer society is already thoroughly established, if still debated.

In chapter 2, "‘Stage Business’ as Citizenship," I examine a performance at the 1893 World’s Columbian Exposition of what we might (following Lauren Berlant) call "diva citizenship,"<sup>10</sup> were it not for the decidedly stoic disposition of the performer. To publicize and compensate for the fair’s policies of racial exclusion, the African American journalist Ida B. Wells solicited contributions from three other black public intellectuals for what would become an eighty-one-page polemic that she distributed in person on the fairgrounds. *The Reason Why the Colored American is Not in the World’s Columbian Exposition* exposed the systemic racism behind the fair’s refusals of African American contributions and, highlighting black culture and accomplishment since emancipation, served as an unofficial exhibit itself. I argue that Wells’s decision to produce not just a pamphlet but also her body on the fairgrounds was particularly responsive to the racialized, commercialized public sphere that the fair represented. In contrast with other black women who managed to break through the fair’s color line, the body Wells produced was neither depoliticized for ready consumption nor assimilable to a white political agenda.

In chapter 3, “Thrown into Relief,” I examine Henry James’s *The American Scene* (1907). James’s ostensible account of his two-year return tour of the East Coast of the United States after twenty years in Europe stages a series of reflections on and revulsions from commercialism and nonwhites. He calls both “presumptuous” challenges to the continuity of American national character and consequently to the observer’s capacity to represent that character in writing. Recent scholarship has addressed this and other late James texts in relation to either issues of race or issues of consumer culture, but I argue that these issues are inseparable. I situate this text at the juncture of two strands of racial thinking at the turn of the twentieth century—one scientific, the other popular. Rejecting the “100 percent Americanism” ascendant at this time, yet pulling up short of the cultural pluralism that emerged after World War I, *The American Scene* is exceptional in the anxious determination with which it raises the contradictions of racial and national discourse, contradictions that James himself concedes to harboring and ultimately needing to resubmerge. He casts himself in competition with mass culture, immigrants, and nonwhites for the authority to represent the American national character. Framed as an exercise in the rigors of observation and distinction making, *The American Scene* both advances a critique of mass cultural forms and is itself a performance of opposition against them. Chief among the distinctions James wishes to make are those he casts as racial. I argue that the process of excavating and papering over the problematic of race and national identity leads James to produce a consoling version of whiteness, one that does not reduce to color or blood. He recovers whiteness for American national identity through the idea of “consanguinity,” which holds in tension its literal meaning of shared blood and its figurative meaning of fraternity and fellow feeling.

Chapter 4, “Race-changes as Exchanges,” focuses on James Weldon Johnson’s 1912 novel *The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man*, whose narrator decides on several occasions to trade his racial identity for a better one. The neoclassical economic model of the rational consumer, *homo economicus*, who is imagined to choose freely within the marketplace of goods, has tacitly informed most readings of the narrator’s changes. Perhaps most significant among these readings is Henry Louis Gates’s introduction to the Vintage edition, in which he writes that the narrator changes race “at his whim and by his will” (xviii). While I endorse the

trend in recent criticisms of this novel—Gates’s included—toward reading it as a constructivist account of race that challenges the dominant biological essentialism of its time, the notion that “passing” involves free choice among equivalent categories of identity obscures the economic context and social structures determining race. By emphasizing instead the novel’s attention to the commodification of blackness after the turn of the twentieth century and to the performative dimension of racial identities, I argue that consumer capitalism is a crucial determining context for the narrator’s repeated movements across the color line. Moreover, Johnson’s novel represents a color line that is not only productive of consumer culture (as race makes possible certain commodities, spectacles, and lucrative performances of the transgression of racial identity) but also one of consumer culture’s important products.

Chapter 5, “A Black Culture Industry,” takes the concurrence of a rapid commercialization in book publishing and a burst of African American literary production between World War I and the Great Depression as an occasion to examine their reciprocal impact. The firm of Boni and Liveright (1917–33) focuses this inquiry for two reasons. Although it cultivated high-culture ambitions and a stable of “difficult” modernists, it also embodied the pronounced shift toward the aggressive promotion and marketing practices that (to use book historian John Tebbel’s term) “revolutionized” the industry. This was a shift that Edward Bernays, the father of twentieth-century public relations, actively encouraged as B&L’s chief public relations officer. Also, B&L was among the first and most prominent venues for “New Negro” writers, publishing books by Jean Toomer, Jessie Fauset, and Eric Walrond, as well as playing a vital role in the Boni brothers’ publication of *The New Negro*. Although Horace Liveright and Charles Boni enjoy considerable prominence in histories of the Harlem Renaissance, the African American writers and editors who raised B&L’s stature earn hardly a mention in accounts of its history or in its officers’ biographies, a symptomatic omission that invites a critical reassessment. Likewise, the established critical accounts of the Harlem Renaissance tend to overlook the role consumer capitalism played in reproducing racial thinking, because they highlight individual patronage relations rather than the history of institutions and the broader economic transitions in which these individuals were participating.<sup>11</sup> By examining the advertising and public relations campaigns for

Toomer's *Cane* (1923) and Fauset's *There Is Confusion* (1924), chapter 5 argues that the reception of the "New Negro" had to contend with the persistence of the "Old Negro" in advertising discourse, which included the book-jacket blurbs, print ads, promotional materials for bookstores, ready-to-print reviews for newspapers, and staged publicity events that proliferated as advertising and public relations professionalized themselves in the 1920s. Though B&L is the immediate concern of chapter 5, the chapter raises questions about the translation of race between the "literary-art world," as Toomer called it, and the world of literary commodities and celebrity with which these writers had to make their peace to extend their audience beyond the readers of *Opportunity*, *The Crisis*, and the "little magazines."

In chapter 6, "Confessions of the Flesh," I discuss two arch satirists of the 1930s, Nathanael West and George Schuyler. Although the Depression provoked widespread challenges to capitalism and realigned the class affiliations of many Americans (in the process of impoverishing them), it only outwardly and temporarily changed the consumer society consolidated in the post-World War I years.<sup>12</sup> By the early thirties, the diffusion of advertising into new arenas of everyday life, the commodification of experience and discourse, and the rhetorical fashioning of the public as consumers became sites of frequent literary reflection. At the same time, among African Americans, the limitations of social advancement programs based on culture rather than economics had become more evident. Chapter 6 argues that while West is concerned with mass culture and commodification and Schuyler is concerned with white-supremacist thinking and racialized embodiment, the overt themes of one writer turn out to be the implicit concerns of the other. In the process, I discuss *U.S. v. Ozawa* (1922) and *Thind v. U.S.* (1923), the only two petitions for citizenship naturalization ever to reach the Supreme Court, both of which turned on a highly contested legal definition of a "white person," meeting which was a prerequisite for naturalization.<sup>13</sup>

West wrote what many consider the first "Hollywood novel," *The Day of the Locust* (1937), but his effort to skewer the burgeoning culture industries began in the late twenties, when he embarked on *Miss Lonelyhearts* (1933), a short novel about a spiritually enervated advice columnist for a New York newspaper. Schuyler is best known for his essay "The Negro-

Art Hokum”—which provoked Langston Hughes’s famous rebuttal, “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain”—and perhaps also for the conservative positions he went on to adopt as a columnist for the *Pittsburgh Courier*. Early in his career, however, his picaresque novel *Black No More* (1931) performed a *reductio ad absurdum* on white-supremacist thinking, imagining that the so-called Negro problem could be solved by a machine that turns dark skin light at the touch of a button, effectively “eliminating Negroes.” As it follows the paradoxical ascendance of the first “whitened Negro” from the Harlem offices of Black-No-More, Incorporated, to a high office in a white-supremacist organization, Schuyler’s critique of American racial hierarchy also confronts consumer capitalism, the cynical manufacturing of desire that it requires, and the possessive individualism that it fosters. West’s critique of consumer society ends up smuggling in issues of race because it invokes skin color as an index of fitness for citizenship in the commercial public sphere. I trace the peculiar kinds of attention paid to skin color in West and Schuyler to the Supreme Court’s effort to bury the contradictions in racial discourse by freighting skin with an almost textual kind of legibility and referentiality.

While this book confines its attention to the significance of a roughly forty-year period, its conclusion, “Leaving Muncie,” suggests our inheritance of the negotiations of racism, race thinking, and consumer capitalism in the present. I take Robert Lynd’s decision to base the research for his seminal work on consumer culture, *Middletown* (1933), in Muncie, Indiana, as emblematic of the methodological problem this book invites us to redress. Confronted with what he took to be the unnecessary complication of a racially mixed citizenry in South Bend, Indiana, Lynd wished to restrict his inquiry “to the white American stock” and ultimately relocated to Muncie, 92 percent of whose citizens were native-born whites. The critical tradition that *Middletown* helped launch has impoverished itself by following suit and relegating questions of race to the margins. Further, the conclusion challenges the willful optimism of current popular reflections on the relationship between race and consumer culture as exemplified in Leon Wynter’s recent book *American Skin: Pop Culture, Big Business, and the End of White America* (2002), which takes the racial “diversity” of mass culture images as the death knell for the normative whiteness of American national identity.

Bringing race out of the footnotes of our scholarship on consumer

culture and according it an analytical priority should not be a strictly academic exercise, an esoteric corrective. The assumptions about race that have shaped American social and political practices and that continue to enjoy pernicious currency despite our supposed multicultural moment have reproduced themselves in part through social relations that do not announce themselves as racial. But race lives and breathes through these social relations; it does not exist outside of them. It is their effect, as well as their antecedent. How has our neglect of the reciprocity between the hegemonic development of race and consumer culture made them more resilient? How might we better recognize the ways in which they have worked—and have been worked—to mystify their mutual investments? I hope this study, rooted in the past, can begin to address these critical issues of the present and future.

This book represents but one of many possible ways into the question of the relationship between race and consumer culture. Of necessity, it makes but a modest contribution to the kind of far-reaching genealogy we need. Because of the complexity and even obscurity of this relationship in U.S. history, because of the contingencies involved in its articulation, what is needed is precisely not a traditional history that seeks determinate moments of origin or that “pretend[s] to go back in time to restore an unbroken continuity” with the present “beyond the dispersion of forgotten things” but one that “disturbs what was previously considered immobile; fragments what was thought unified; [and] shows the heterogeneity of what was imagined consistent with itself.”<sup>14</sup> Therefore, before turning to the particular sites of my own research, I begin by tracing a history of the scholarship on consumption in the United States, but one that does not, I trust, function blandly as a “review of the literature.” It focuses not only on this critical history’s moments of influence, revision, and repudiation but also on its aporias, its nonconversations across disciplines, and on recent efforts to make these conversations happen. In so doing, my hope is to inspire others to pursue related projects, even and especially those with little concern for the literary studies questions that tend to preoccupy me in this book.