

## ESSAY

# Passing as White Collar: The Black Typewriter and the Bureaucratization of the Racial Imaginary

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As a polysemic term referring to both a worker and an object fused in the social relations of labor, the typewriter haunts the modernist imagination. That figure exhumed Victorian fascinations, fantasies, myths, and anxieties about the effects the instrument would have on authorship and the social production of writing (Shiach 118). The typewriter has thus been key for media theorists including Friedrich A. Kittler and Marshall McLuhan in their efforts to conceptualize modernity's interpenetration of social practices, communication technology, and the materiality of writing. Kittler saw in the typewriter "the convergence of a profession, a machine, and a sex" (183). He argued that the machine facilitated women's entry into the workforce, although Margery W. Davies, Morag Shiach, and others in their histories of gendered labor have challenged the association of typewriting with women's emancipation. In all these accounts, however, race is often absent, primarily because typists have historically been studied and conceptualized as white.

In the United States, that cultural association between typewriting and whiteness resulted from material and imaginative developments that occurred as part of the modernization of the white-collar workforce. C. Wright Mills's sociological study of the psychosocial restructuring of America's labor force, *White Collar: The American Middle Classes* (1951), shows that between 1880 and 1930 the American economy shifted from the epoch of the small entrepreneur into a new mode of capitalism characterized by bureaucratization. For Max Weber, the cornerstone of modern bureaucracy was what Karl Marx labeled the "bureaucratic medium"—namely, the document: a symbolic, social medium through which the (type)written rules and

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regulations of an organization communicate and codify the hierarchy of authority and the division of labor (Kafka 10). The formation of a bureaucratic culture of paperwork necessitated the elaborate specialization of white-collar occupations within large-scale corporations, as well as the coordination and administration of employees by a propertied managerial class. That class presided over numerous subdivided workers whose jobs were created to lubricate institutional operations: “private secretaries and typists,” “a thousand kinds of clerks,” “the operators of light machinery,” plus “receptionists to let you in or keep you out” (Mills x). Systems of “control through communication” were subsequently adopted to rationalize and depersonalize workplace relations (Yates 9), while clerical labor was routinized, mechanized, and thus dehumanized. The production and reproduction of paperwork, the medium of knowledge and power, supported a governance structure that minimized affect and voided individual employees of agency (Gitelman 31).

Rapid developments in communication methods and technologies informed this nineteenth-century bureaucratic “control revolution,” whose goal was to manage “the societal forces unleashed by the Industrial Revolution” (Beniger 6). Yet what media histories often neglect is how race as a technology of bureaucratic knowledge and power functioned within that well-documented “control revolution.” Bureaucratization had a paradoxical effect on the racialization of America’s middle classes: the prestige of salaried white-collar office occupations waned between 1880 and 1930 because of the enlarged scale of production and the subdivision of functions throughout the white-collar pyramid. That lost status was partially recovered through a hierarchy achieved not only by the sexual segregation of office work but also by the regulation of whiteness that authorized “white-collar people . . . to claim higher prestige than wage-workers because of racial” and “national origin” (Mills 248). Bureaucratization did not reshape how race was imagined in the American public consciousness; rather, its methodization of power and knowledge reified long-standing myths about race and labor. At the intersection of markets and administration,

and business and governance, bureaucratization enabled a racialized division of labor to proliferate systemically in the white-collar office. In that system, the typewriter became the convergence of a profession, a machine, and a sex, but no less crucially a race.

From the late 1880s, the bureaucratization of the modern workplace fomented new cultural mythemes about white-collar labor, generating “types” of white-collar professionals based on sexual and racial stereotypes. I call this process the “bureaucratization of the racial imaginary.” “Imaginative possibility is bureaucratized when it is embodied in the realities of a social texture,” according to Kenneth Burke (225);<sup>1</sup> put another way, since fictional characters are built compositely out of the “raw materials of pre-formed social typologies” (Frow 107), the typewriter in American literature found its characterological basis in the figure of the white, middle-class young woman. The typewriter—part reality, part myth—became a crucial type, and a racialized category, in the collective repertoire of America’s white-collar personae. If the typewriter became the medium of modernity’s symbolic order by giving standardized, typographical form to intersubjective communications (Kittler 15), it also occupied significant space in the imaginative order. The typewriter was an almost obligatory character in bureaucratic myths that attempted to contend with the imagined and real experiences of what Ben Kafka calls the “psychic life of paperwork” (17), contradictions that stimulate frustration and disempowerment. Yet the formation of the white-collar middle class between 1880 and 1930 also produced another less conspicuous type that I have labeled the Black typewriter: an overlooked but vital figure used by African American authors to narrativize and unsettle the racialized division of labor internal to white-collar bureaucratization. Given how myths are “the imaginative or imaginary resolution of real contradictions, the myths of bureaucracy seek not only to resolve paperwork’s contradictions” but also to resolve those “in our own thought,” Kafka observes (11). As one means of scrutinizing the role of race in the psychic life of paperwork, the Black typewriter who passes as white to become white collar formed

a strategic trope in the unfolding project of an African American literary tradition that contended with the contradictions that capitalism's mythopoeitic paradigms of race, technology, and labor posed to Black aesthetics.

This essay traces the Black typewriter from the post-Reconstruction era to the New Negro Renaissance, as two generations of African American authors configured the relationship between the color line and the collar line. The Black typewriter first appeared in the post-Reconstruction writings of the stenographers-turned-authors Pauline Elizabeth Hopkins and Charles W. Chesnutt, for whom the creation of middle-class personae represented by Black white-collar "types" indexed the new ambitions of W. E. B. Du Bois's "talented tenth" at the onset of the workforce's bureaucratization. Chesnutt's speeches and essays from the 1880s endorsed stenography as a "stepping-stone" from labor to culture for the Black middle class, creating a theory of stenographical uplift that glossed over the white-collar sector's discriminatory hiring practices ("Some Uses" 76). But Hopkins found that the stenographer who passed as white to become white collar radically tested the notion that social equality could be achieved through middle-class uplift. Hopkins's *Contending Forces* (1900)—the first novel featuring a Black female stenographer protagonist—exposed how white-collar labor required the Black worker to assume a functionally white identity, a bureaucratic act of passing that was incommensurate with actual social equality. When various class-conscious members of the New Negro movement (ca. 1919–40) later probed beyond the respectable middle class for innovative literary types, several authors, including Dorothy West and Jean Toomer, found an unexpectedly useful "proletarianized" figure in the typewriter. They harnessed that extant labor type in more nuanced ways, by creating characters with complex interiority to scrutinize the Taylorization of white-collar psychology. Two short stories, West's anthologized "The Typewriter" (1926) and Toomer's critically neglected "Withered Skin of Berries" (1922), radically reengineered Hopkins's passing-as-white-collar narrative to consider the constraints that white-collar professionalization put on agency, affect, and imaginative possibility in and

beyond the office. While in Toomer's narrative the Black typewriter is a repressed Black woman passing as white, in West's story a dark-complexioned Black janitor creates the alter ego of a white-collar businessman by dictating fraudulent letters to his typist daughter.

From Hopkins's prototype to Toomer's and West's alterations, these passing-as-white-collar narratives divulged the intensities that must be suppressed to become what is valued by the white bourgeoisie. Their Black typewriters provocatively insinuated that white-collar identity is inherently an act of racial passing, since white-collar status is itself already contingent on racial segregation as much as the delegation of menial clerical labor to white women. By tracing this historical passage from Chesnutt and Hopkins to West and Toomer, I show how their Black typewriters exposed the ways America's white-collar hierarchies conditioned rather than disordered the power structures of segregation. If one of the primary preoccupations of the African American literary tradition in the twentieth century was to confront the "insufficiency . . . of dominant white American ideals," as Kenneth W. Warren notes (22), the Black typewriter not only unsettled the racial imaginary that accompanied the rise of America's salaried middle classes; it also challenged the narrowness of a liberation conceived of in terms of African American admission to the white-collar sector.

### Hopkins, Chesnutt, and the Fiction of Stenographical Uplift

The Black typewriter of the post-Reconstruction period was based on an emergent white-collar labor type that came to salience within debates over the range of professional opportunities available to the educated Black middle class. Although by 1886 the term *typewriter* already conflated sundry secretarial duties typically performed by female typists (Kittler 183), stenography constituted skilled technical labor that required literacy, specialist training, and eventually certification. Stenographers quickly condensed dictated information into handwritten or steno-typed shorthand, then converted that code into long-form

typescript, a process with “important connotations” of symbolic professionalism within “business, journalism, corporate and state bureaucracy, education, and scholarship” (Gitelman 13). Given how racial uplift necessitated a cultural shift from orality to literacy, stenography offered reformers a concrete example of how talented individuals, particularly women, could practically engage in the discursive structures of knowledge and power that were shaping the destiny of the race. Thus, it usefully indexed the bureaucratizing racial imaginary that was rippling across fin de siècle discourses of racial uplift, particularly the belief that a cultivated group of educated Black elites would elevate those beneath them into the formation of a respectable, literate middle class. Challenging Booker T. Washington’s accommodationist approach, which focused on semiskilled labor and industrial training, Du Bois articulated that view in his 1903 essay “The Talented Tenth,” which petitioned the race’s acculturated “tenth” to “guide the Mass away from the contamination and death of the Worst” (33). However, another pressing issue was whether the bureaucratization of the North, already taking effect in the 1880s, was fostering de facto ethnic and sexual discrimination in ways that might undermine such political goals.

Indeed, the employment statistics Du Bois cited in “The Talented Tenth” hinted at the discriminatory color line within the collar line, a barrier that was deterring college-educated Black applicants from clerical roles.<sup>2</sup> These complications followed the “extension of the division of labor” at this time, which reorganized “firms into functionally defined departments” and subdivided “clerical work within” them (Davies 50). The overall growth of offices and paperwork from the late 1880s, expedited by the integration of machines including the typewriter, necessitated these workplaces’ steady bureaucratization: “hierarchal structures of authority” that were previously “left to the discretion of an individual” became “codified” in the social relations of the office hierarchy (50). At the hierarchy’s base, women constituted 4.5% of all typists in the United States workforce in 1870, but their participation rose to 35.5% by 1880 (Davies 52; Kocka 99). Even though between 1890 and 1930 most clerks

were men, women increasingly filled stenographical and secretarial positions, at lower salaries and with fewer promotional pathways (Davies 56). Poverty, race, and ethnicity remained the most substantial barriers to white-collar occupations, which by 1900 made up 10% of all working women’s roles in the United States. Employers emphasized “written or spoken English and American manners” as essential job criteria (Blackwelder 16–17), which had the effect of reserving “accountant, bookkeeper, typist, stenographer, and office clerk” positions chiefly for white people born in the United States (17).

Exemplifying the Black liberal response to these issues, the speech by the young stenographer Chesnutt—not yet a novelist—entitled “Competition,” delivered to the Ohio Stenographers’ Association in 1892, glossed over such social stratification. Employing the “rhetoric of competition” that permeated the transition from the small-entrepreneur epoch to the white-collar era (Mills 34), Chesnutt sidestepped social determinism in his analyses of the northern division of labor, arguing that individuals must rise on their “own merits” (“Competition” 93). He chided the young men who wrote to him regarding their “purific krays’ to learn shorthand” for their “misplaced ambition” (91). Such unprofessional types—as designated by their poor written communication and oral vernacular—should try “running an elevator and working on a street-car” (91). Dismissing the political forces behind the surging numbers of female stenographers at the time, he urged young men to take “the broad, manly ground” and either “compete with the women” or “retire” (91). In 1889 he cautioned the association that stenography should provide a “stepping-stone” to culture, not a “step-ladder” to perfunctory wealth (“Some Uses” 76); too many “neophytes, who dream of golden harvests” and find in shorthand “the wonderful lamp which will put at their command the treasures of the world,” were being “turned out by battalions upon a suffering public,” undermining the profession’s credibility (77). Although his 1913 essay “Race Ideals and Examples” conceded that “environment is a powerful factor of development,” he felt these conditions would improve with the “rise of notable examples of intellectual and

esthetic development” in the Black community (337), including himself and Hopkins, who had both used stenography as a “stepping-stone” to cultural uplift. As Mark Sussman argues, advancements in stenographic techniques of recording and preserving the texture of speech later profitably informed Chesnutt’s mimetic realism as a novelist (48). Chesnutt nevertheless underestimated the extent to which “the well-designed bureaucratic hierarchy” produced “delineations of power and responsibility” that adhered to the ideologies that governed wider society (Davies 39); hence he downplayed the constraining social forces that white-collar bureaucratization might impose on racial uplift, especially as stenography became popularly associated with mechanical automatism rather than knowledge and intellectual skill (Thurschwell 156). The association of whiteness with typewriting was also reinforced in his unpublished white-life novel, *A Business Career*, rejected for publication with Houghton Mifflin in 1898. It centered on a convoluted office romance between Stella Merwin, a white “typewriter” (a term she resents), and her employer (Chesnutt, *Business Career* 139).<sup>3</sup>

Stenography’s racial and gendered criteria were ultimately furnished not by talent or skill but by the bureaucratization of the racial imaginary, which in turn determined the literary possibilities of the Black typewriter, as suggested in Fannie Barrier Williams’s 1905 piece for Du Bois’s short-lived periodical *The Voice of the Negro*. Williams—a founding member of the NAACP—plaintively defended “the colored girl,” a “character amongst us” who “is a constantly increasing factor in our progress” yet who has “inspired no novels,” because those “who write for the press and magazines seldom think of this dark skinned girl who is persistently breaking through the petty tyrannies of caste into the light of recognition” (402). Williams wondered why the colored girl was undeserving “of the honors” bestowed upon “the girl who plays the piano or manipulates the typewriter” (403). Though not a novelist herself, Williams knowingly sought a literary character who did not exist, based on the type of woman who was already “knocking at every door through which other women . . . have passed

on from one achievement to another” while she resided behind “this humiliating color line” (402). If the “dark skinned” typewriter had not yet formed a stable labor “type” among the social personae of the late nineteenth century, this was likely due to the rarity of Black stenographers, a result of both the South’s legislated apartheid and the North’s culturally racist division of labor. The Black typewriter was, then, an ideal figure for the passing-as-white-collar narrative.

One of *The Voice of the Negro*’s most prominent contributors, Hopkins had appropriated Williams’s overlooked “dark skinned girl” in the novel *Contending Forces* using precisely that formula. Like Chesnutt, Hopkins was a trained stenographer,<sup>4</sup> and she also drew on her familiarity with not only phonographic and typographic technique but also the racialized professional type the typewriter represented. In *Contending Forces*, Hopkins narrativized the prospect of a new “respectable” Black middle-class mode of womanhood by appealing to the privileged social status of a light-complexioned Black typewriter. The stenographer protagonist who passes as white to become white collar was not only a necessary appropriation of Williams’s labor type but also the ideal analogy for the ineffectiveness of economic uplift without radical political agitation for social equality and women’s liberation. The first section, set in antebellum North Carolina, tells of the tragic romance of the Bermudan enslaver Charles Montfort, who is murdered by lower-class whites who envy his property and beautiful wife, whom they allege is mixed-race. The second section depicts Boston’s emerging Black middle class in the 1890s, centering on the wittily named Sappho Clark, a mysterious, unmarried stenographer who rents a room in Ma Smith’s boarding house. There she is befriended by the owner’s children (who later discover they are Montfort’s descendants): Dora Smith, a housekeeper, and Will Smith, a Harvard philosophy student clearly modeled on Du Bois. Though Sappho identifies as Black among that community, she passes as white to work as a stenographer for a white-owned business. To mitigate the risk of raising suspicion among her white colleagues, her employer, who knows she is

Black, allows her to complete most tasks from home. When clients dictate to her, she does not correct their assumptions that she is white. Sappho captivates not only Will but also Dora's Black fiancé, John Langley, an ambitious lawyer and race leader. Readers soon learn that Sappho is really Mabelle Beaubean, a southern refugee who was raped and impregnated by a white man. John, who uncovers Sappho's real identity, becomes fixated with exposing her as a "fallen woman." To avoid a scandal, Sappho returns to the South, where years later Will reunites with her and they wed.

Beyond that melodrama, Hopkins appears ambivalent regarding the emancipatory promises of stenography, even as her novel "argues for the respectability and potential of working single women" across "community race and class divisions" (Fama 199). Throughout the Boston section of *Contending Forces*, Hopkins's intrusive narrator provides insistent commentary on the professional pathways available to African Americans (Wallinger 158). The narrator emphasizes the importance of the Black "middle-class standard" of respectability as it is viewed by members of the white middle class, who often appear surprised that "colored families manage to live so well when nearly 'every avenue for business' is closed to them" (Hopkins 86). This omniscient narrator, who as such resides in a racially neutral territory between those two implicit perspectives—that is, the Black and the white middle class—elaborates on the characters' discussions regarding race and labor, explaining to readers that "it is a common occurrence to find a genius" like Frederick Douglass "in a profession, trade, or invention" who has overridden "the barriers set by prejudice and injustice" (86), a description that espouses the basic tenets of racial uplift. Yet the narrator's sociological commentary explores widening systemic racial inequities across the color line, which Hopkins connects to Sappho's individual experiences of white-collar labor. Hopkins's descriptions of stenography insinuate that Jim Crow's racist and sexist ideology does not conveniently dissolve on the other side of the collar line, even if the Black worker performs the essential criteria of whiteness—which Sappho does, by passing as white in the workplace. Maria

Giulia Fabi has argued how miscegenation plots often foregrounded the "passer" to interrogate "whiteness as 'unmarked category,' as the invisible standard to racialize others" (5), thereby destabilizing the presumed hierarchies between other social qualifiers, such as feminine and masculine. Hopkins's narrative not only construes white passing as necessary for the Black typewriter to overcome segregated hiring practices; it also presents the performance of a white female identity as an unstated job criterion of that profession. In this sense, Sappho's act of passing unveils the invisible standard of whiteness central to white-collar labor in Hopkins's gendered variation of the lofty political goals of Du Bois's talented tenth and Chesnutt's stenographical uplift.

Hopkins's explicit discussions of stenography in *Contending Forces* condition a hypothetical space where Black subjects not only must face difficulties, precarity, and even danger to pass over the color line into the office; they also must relinquish all capacity for agency and affect while passing as white. Stenography forces the Black worker into direct contact with white people while requiring them to perform the role of an obedient, silent medium for the white male dictator's intellectual labor. This is illustrated when Sappho entertains her new friend Dora in her office:

"Do you like your work—is it hard?" asked Dora . . . pausing beside the desk to glance admiringly at a pile of neatly written sheets, just taken from the machine. . . .

"Sometimes the dictator is obtuse, or long-winded, or thinks that the writer ought to do his thinking for him as well as the corrections; then it is not pleasant work. But . . . I prefer it to most anything that I know of." (99)

What Sappho considers "hard" work does not involve the technical difficulty Chesnutt admired in stenography. "Typewriting" principally meant copying, transcribing dictated words in shorthand and onto a machine. It was repetitive, time-consuming labor, meaning that no "mettlesome poet Byron"—or in this case, no mettlesome Sappho—can endure the white-collar office, as Herman Melville prophetically observed in "Bartleby, the Scrivener" (1856; 642). As

that story famously articulated, the fact that one type of labor is “preferable” to others does not make it fulfilling. Sappho’s unromantic view of white-collar labor divorces typewriting from enjoyment because there is a disjunction between stenography’s rational elements—the “neatly written sheets”—and the “not pleasant,” irrational, autocratic aspects of white-collar employment: those emotional and psychological parts of themselves that workers are forced to sell along with their labor. The office politics in the passage above designate stenography as a test of the boundaries between superior and subordinate and between subject and object, creating a dialectical struggle between masculine (dictator) and feminine (medium) as well as between Black and white, as symbolized by the black ink on the white page—both on the typist’s sheet and on the pages of the novel. Given that Sappho’s work requires her to pass as white, typewriting clearly does not emancipate her: Sappho becomes machine-like, an impassive medium of the male dictator’s intellectual labor “from nine in the morning until late at night sometimes” (Hopkins 97).

Sappho’s thwarted desires for autonomy relate to the other predicaments posed by her “class” of work (128). Dora wonders how Sappho became a stenographer, given how notoriously challenging it is “for colored girls to find employment in offices where your class of work is required” (127–28). Sappho reveals how she was initially upfront about her race, but determined to pass after becoming worn down by the bureaucratization of the racial imaginary underwriting that selection process. Her first interview went smoothly, “until the man found I was colored; then he said that his wife wanted a nurse girl. . . . At the second place where I ventured to intrude the proprietor said: ‘Yes; we want a stenographer, but we’ve no work for your kind’” (128). In the racial imaginary, there is a categorical difference between a “kind” and a “type” of person who can perform a given “class of work,” in Dora’s phrasing. A “type” is purportedly rational; it is color-free, because it is defined by objective job criteria based on manners and abilities that crystallize into a recognizable identity, which Sappho outwardly embodies. A “kind,” however, is irrational; it settles into personal bias and structural stereotypes.

Hopkins prudently suggests how easily the two become conflated and institutionalized. Dora notes that Sappho’s case is not extraordinary but rather symptomatic, for “in the North we are allowed every privilege” (128–29), yet prejudice arises once “we seek employment; then every door is closed against us” (129). Because Sappho has “to live” but cannot teach without a college course or “do housework, because my constitution is naturally weak” (127), she must invent a white identity to open further avenues. Though light-complexioned, she passes in an irregular sense: by hiding within her medium, the print text. On her employer’s instruction, Sappho visits the office only to collect her assignments, meaning that “many of the other clerks have never seen me,” lowering the proprietor’s risk of complaints (128); she exists to them only as a typewriter, and they presume that typewriters are white.

Nevertheless, the discriminatory compromise her boss offers is “preferable to the insulting familiarity which some men assumed” when she sought employment as their Black subordinate (128). Though passing as white distances Sappho from many undesirable effects of office power dynamics, crucially it is into her bedroom-cum-workspace that the tormented antagonist John later intrudes. In this incident, John attempts to blackmail Sappho into sexual intercourse by threatening to reveal her secret child, forcing her to resign and flee Boston in disgrace. Before this scene, the novel shifts its focus from Sappho to John, who works as a lawyer for the Boston chapter of the American Colored League (ACL). His descent into immorality is foreshadowed when he sits in the league’s offices, listening to “the sound of the typewriter clicking away for dear life,” as Hopkins ironically inverts the presumed sexual and racial orders of the white-collar hierarchy by revealing that John has hired a white stenographer to pander to his white visitors’ expectations (225). In the novel’s soundscape, that noise has already been connected to the enigmatic Sappho in Ma Smith’s lodging house, as she “*passed* in and out each morning with a package of work in her hand” (59; my italics). The sound diverts John’s “attention” away from “the humdrum routine of the

office” and toward Sappho (126), whom he is clearly thinking about during his confrontation shortly after with Colonel Herbert Clapp, a white politician with whom he is negotiating on behalf of the ACL. Clapp upholds the “South’s rights” to disregard Black clerical applicants, who always “fail to compete favorably with an ordinary white clerk” (232). John retorts that for Black leaders to quell regional race agitation, “our men” must be “given something besides boot-blackening in the employment of the state,” and “our girls given a chance as clerks” (236). While John’s negotiations fail, partly because he is blinded by personal white-collar ambitions, Sappho truly understands that white-collar labor is deemed more respectable than other classes of labor only because of the prestige of whiteness it gradually acquired through the bureaucratization of the racial imaginary. Accordingly, the political demands John articulates are not enough to counteract Jim Crow practices or their diffusion into the North’s racial capitalism, nor do they confront the gendered politics of office work.

Sappho’s textual passing as white collar thus offers a subtle but important corrective to the racial imaginary in this period, even among the Black elite, which privileged the professional respectability stenography offered as a higher “class” of work than domestic and field labor, a perspective that failed to properly acknowledge the structural dynamics of race and gender within the division of labor. Since the publication of Gwendolyn Brooks’s notorious 1978 afterword to *Contending Forces*, which condemned Sappho as a “diluted,” “brain-washed slave” (406), critics have scrutinized Hopkins’s intermittently dismissive attitude toward proletarian and dark-complexioned characters,<sup>5</sup> indicating that her aesthetics may have perpetuated rather than destabilized the bureaucratization of the racial imaginary. Following Claudia Tate, Thomas Cassidy notes that although Sappho emulates “Eurocentric standards of beauty,” Hopkins saw African American identity as inherently “cross-racial” in ways that productively confronted “the very concept of ‘race,’” including the “philosophical underpinnings of racial discrimination and violence” (665). Indeed, Hopkins chose to represent a light-

complexioned Black typewriter who emulates refined middle-class values to examine and contend with the “humiliating color line” that presents itself as a collar line that bars Black people’s access. Although Hopkins arguably trades in moral “types” that would charm “*white public opinion*” (Baker 26), *Contending Forces* was pioneering in issuing the following crucial caveat for a theory of racial uplift that saw stenography as an emancipatory “stepping-stone” to social equality: the office bureaucracy was engineered as a white male power structure, not as a haven for those few who by passing as white collar can “intrude” on its designated zones of whiteness, as Sappho intimated (Hopkins 128). *Contending Forces* quietly proposes that, without more radical political and aesthetic interventions, existing power struggles would only intensify with the increasing bureaucratization of the white-collar middle class.

### Passing as White Collar: The New Negro’s Black Typewriter

Throughout the early twentieth century, fantasies that racial uplift would be facilitated through middle-class economic uplift featured regularly in the advertising sections of popular Black periodicals—including *The Voice of the Negro*, *The Crisis*, *Opportunity*, and *The Messenger*. One vocational training advertisement appearing in *The Messenger* in 1921 declaimed that “knowledge is power” (“Braithwaite Shorthand School”). Advertisements for the one-hundred-dollar Oliver Typewriter machine, by virtue of its seventeen-cents-per-day affordability plan, explicitly guaranteed the “triumph of the typewriter over primitive *pen-and-ink*” and an “era of *universal typewriting*” that would have alarmed Chesnut (“Oliver Typewriter”). Accentuating the ideal characteristics of the white-collar type, Oliver Typewriters claimed that its machine connoted the “modern,” “professional,” and “progressive,” while pens signified the “primitive.” These discourses particularly affected women, given that the 1920s saw the sharpest increase in the feminization of typewriting and secretarial labor: by 1930, women made up an estimated 95.6% of all stenographers and typists



(Davies 52), though Black women constituted 0.5% of that number (Strom 300). Affluent Black communities could “support black business” and “demand” civil service positions to make good on these aspirations, leading to modest white-collar employment gains mostly in northern metropolitan areas (Strom 300). Yet there were other complications that accompanied this growth. Hopkins highlighted these in her 1916 *New Era Magazine* editorial coverage of the discrimination case of Jane R. Bosfield, a twenty-two-year-old African American typist who sued Massachusetts’s Medfield State Hospital after she was discriminated against and then fired because of her race.<sup>6</sup> Typewriting was nonetheless highlighted as a crucial growth area for Black women’s economic emancipation in Alain Locke’s *The New Negro: An Interpretation* (1927).

Despite residual public optimism about stenography’s potential for social uplift, when the Black typewriter resurfaced in Black-authored texts after 1919 it did so in ways that indicated how the socially conditioned contexts of white-collar labor strengthened, rather than corrected, race and gender dynamics outside the office. The situation *Contending Forces* had anticipated was now insisted on in works including Toomer’s “Withered Skin of Berries” and West’s “The Typewriter.” Both authors appeared concerned over a stage of bureaucratization characterized by Fordist mass production and Taylorist scientific management; the increasing mechanization and scientific management of the postwar office coincided with the devaluation of typewriting-associated positions, which became increasingly construed as “women’s work.” The year 1919 marked both the nationwide riots that precipitated the New Negro movement and the gradual institutionalization of Frederick Taylor’s *The Principles of Scientific Management* (1911). The Taylorization of America’s postwar white-collar bureaucracy proceeded as the managerial class’s scientific supervision of the office “further routinized work” and led to “further divisions of skills” (Mills 233). To ensure “efficient and untroubled production,” managers sought to control the “inner forces” of their employees, requiring them to sell their personality along with their labor; clerical workers had

evolved into proletarianized “machine attendants” (233). Now the clerk was merely a replaceable element of the bureaucratic apparatus and typewriting just one of many deskilled secretarial duties a worker must perform; the former status typewriters had enjoyed as labor types resided primarily in the preservation of the whiteness of that industry on an enlarged scale (209). This led many to question white-collar employment as an avenue of racial uplift and to seek more radical interventions. Such skeptics included Toomer and West, who reimagined Hopkins’s Black typewriter as a proletarianized, feminized type in whom they might concentrate the dizzying effects of the segregated office through increasingly complex models of characterization. Instead of construing white-collar labor as gainful employment, these authors insisted that white-collar labor per se was a form of racial passing—and behavioral conditioning—necessitated by the sociological contradictions and psychological effects of the expanded white-collar structure. West’s and Toomer’s stories narrativized the bureaucratization of the racial imaginary: the way that middle-class ambitions, and the routinizing imperatives of white-collar labor, colonized the inner lives of Black workers.

Toomer’s posthumously published story “Withered Skin of Berries,” written alongside his now-canonical novel *Cane* in 1922 and rejected for publication in *The Little Review* in 1923, focuses on a light-complexioned typist, Vera, who passes as white to obtain work in a segregated office in Washington, DC, in the early 1920s. This setting registers the surge in paperwork that accompanied the expansion of the administrative powers of the state during World War I and the effects of Woodrow Wilson’s segregation of the federal bureaucracy in 1913. In Toomer’s tale the relations between the alluring typewriter Vera and her openly racist clerical colleagues are juxtaposed against her romantic exploits with an “almost perfect[ly] white” bigoted clerk named Carl (142), and a Black man named Art Bond, who internalizes white racism. The story oscillates between scenes in which the “pounding” (153) of typewriter machines is punctuated by snippets of racist office gossip and scenes in which Vera’s third lover—a

racially ambiguous poet named David Teyy, who is an idealized projection of Toomer himself (see Foley 110)—exposes her to poetry’s sensual experiences. Toomer’s lyrical free indirect discourse, heightened symbolism, and stream of consciousness, recognizable to *Cane*’s readers, here contribute to the overall effect of Vera’s double consciousness,<sup>7</sup> as David’s radical poetry awakens her to the sublimity that has been sequestered from her white-collar domain and that she must repress to perform her white-collar identity.

The narrative opens with a disturbing image of that “grey,” “polluted” labor sphere, which foreshadows the imminent revelation of Vera’s veiled racial identity:

Departmental buildings are grey gastronomic structures, innocuously coated with bile. . . . Washington’s breath is sickish and stale because of them. With the slow, retarded process of dyspeptics, they suck the life of mediocrities. They secrete a strange preservative that keeps flesh and bones intact after the blood is dry. (139)

These Bartlebyesque images then shift to Vera. “Vera is a typist,” readers are informed, a statement followed paratactically by the following: “She is neither more nor less palatable than the other morsels that come in from South Carolina, Illinois, or Oregon.” She is also a “virgin whose notion of purity tape-worms her. Men sense her corporeal virginity” (139). The narrator thus raises the commonplace stereotype of the typist as a liberated New Woman who inspires erotic fascination (Mullin 2); but the narrator then immediately renders her a replaceable cog in the white-collar machine by using simple present indicative constructions to fix the typist in bureaucratic syntax in otherwise image-saturated prose. Toomer subsequently unsettles the racial assumptions of that alienated figure, too, as the narrator becomes an ironic conduit for the ambient racist gossip of Vera’s white-collar colleagues:

Unquestionably, Vera is white. Routine segregates niggers. Black life seems more soluble in lump. White life, pitiably agitated to superiority, is more palatable. . . . Niggers are all right as janitors, as

messengers; in fact, anywhere they keep their place. . . . But it is a different thing when niggers try to pass for white. (139–40)

Vera is presumably not “a Negro,” because she “is a typist,” which in the racial imaginary is sufficient proof that she “is white.” The reader nevertheless learns that she “listens to them, smiles, jokes, laughs, sometimes with a curious gurgle-like flutter, says goodbye to them of evenings outside the office door, and rides uptown to the respite of a Negro home” (140).

Vera and the other typists, readers learn, are there effectively to “photocopy” bureaucratic documents. There are no Black white-collar workers, only messenger boys and janitors whom the white workers “joke about” (140). Nothing about the clerks’ labor objectively elevates them above such positions; by keeping Black employees in janitorial positions, clerical workers can maintain the illusion that their own work is “intellectual” and symbolic, not “manual” and mechanical.<sup>8</sup> Vera’s colleagues are the mouthpieces for reactionary responses to the perceived threat of increasing “tides” of Black Americans entering white power structures during the labor struggles of the Great Migration. While nationwide office hiring practices reinforced racial exclusion across white-owned enterprises, the recalibration of the division of labor during World War I led to notable increases in Black employment for clerical work. Taking “a message rapidly in shorthand and transcribing it quickly on a typewriter will fit you to be of more service to Uncle Sam than the trench-men,” advised an advertisement in *The Crisis* in 1918 (“Stenographer’s Institute”). But Toomer’s story dispels the glossy veneer of stenographical uplift; its main tensions concern Vera’s interactions with her bigoted colleagues, whose lack of professional fulfillment is sublimated into their quest to out white-passing employees, protecting the federal office against the shifting supply and demand of white-collar employment in a postwar recession. The logic of white supremacy in the North—responding to its own labor struggles—differed from that in the South only in the relative absence of lynching, a point one unnamed colleague

accentuates: “I don’t see what they want to be white for anyway. The way they boast about progress and all that youd think theyd be satisfied with their own race. But theyre not theyre always trying to push into ours” (Toomer 154). In the South, the colleague brags, “they know where their place is, and they keep it” (154). Here, again, concerns over the Great Migration loom, for Black people’s knowing “their place” translates either to their remaining in the apartheid South or to their harassment and unfair dismissal in the North.

In Vera’s private and public interactions, Toomer exposes the fragile frontier between races in the large-scale bureaucracy without recourse to the open moral didacticism of Hopkins’s narrator. Using free indirect discourse to represent Vera’s perspective of the white-collar sector, as a figure who has “wormed” her way into that sphere, Toomer invites the reader to decipher that world as unidyllic. Vera’s white fellow typewriters are not only “girls who work all month to imitate leisure-class flappers” but also “[w]idows of improvident men who had been something in their day. Boys who have left school. Men dreaming of marriage and bungalows in Chevy Chase” (153)—a deindividuated crew united only by the prestige they can claim by preserving the exclusive whiteness of the office space. Their alienation sounds like the “[t]ick, tick, tick, tick, pounding of typewriters, metallic slide of files, rustle of starched paper” (153), a bureaucratic soundscape that later overlays the interruptions of Vera’s colleagues as they discuss outing colleagues who “pass”: “nigger blood will out. . . . You cant fool all of the people all of the time” (154). The “smiling” head clerk awkwardly instructs his subordinates to “settle that at lunch” (154, 155), for the bureaucracy censures racism only insofar as it intrudes on “the governments time” (155). The story’s portrait of whiteness, as it is bound up with white-collar identity, refuses the prestige attributed to it in discourses of stenographical uplift. Although Vera’s performance of whiteness licenses her to function beyond the restrictive color line within the collar line, Vera finds herself reproducing her colleagues’ bigotry in her sexual encounters with Art, who interprets her rejection

of him as a white woman rebuffing a “Black nigger beast” with a slave whip (152).

Physically and emotionally sickened by this performance, Vera finds reprieve from her alienation only in her entanglement with the poet David Teyy, whose radicalism and spiritual connectedness to Native American and African American folk culture are juxtaposed against both the bigoted clerk Carl and the repressed Vera. Beneath the stylistic veneer of heightened symbolism that contributes to the impression of Vera’s complex interiority, Toomer’s story arguably uses basic types informed by the commonplace dichotomy between typist (woman) and genius (man). The typewriter propagated “an idea of the aesthetic that emerged in opposition to commercial culture and has as its parallel a model of the author defined in contradistinction to the clerk,” Leah Price and Pamela Thurschwell explain (2). What is innovative about Toomer’s story is how race dialectically informs the interactions between those types, distorting the expected outcomes of that relationship. Because typewriting is conditioned by the oppressive ideologies that underwrote the bureaucratization of white-collar labor, it becomes anathema to the liberative ambitions of poetry in Toomer’s equation; the “clattering” sounds of typewriters operating in unison create an aural image of the bureaucratization of the racial imaginary, which a “listless, nervous” Vera absorbs in a state of compulsion while denying how “impressed” David’s poems make her feel (Toomer 141). Whereas whiteness in the story’s recurring imagery is symbolically construed as anemia, Blackness symbolically figures as blood. To recover her racial identity, Vera must metaphorically “[suck] the blood” of David, who in her imagination forms “a red blood center flowing down” the Potomac River (155), all awash with “red blood” (158), which entombs John Brown’s body. Vera’s “pale, withered” mouth is revived under the poet David’s lips tinged with “copper and blood” (162). Like Melville’s “mettlesome poet Byron,” who does not belong in the scrivener’s chambers, Toomer’s Black revolutionary poet David forces Vera to confront the effects of the bureaucratization of the racial imaginary: during a ritual chant he performs for

Vera and Carl at the burial site of a Native American warrior named Tiacomus, she grows conscious of having repressed all sensual possibility to become white collar. If Washington's "dyspeptic" white-collar departments signal how white supremacy sickens the soul of the nation, Toomer insists on the curative effects of a radical aesthetic that imagines alternative possibilities to that mode of thinking. Though Vera, still typing endless copy, remains a pale, passive white-collar object at the story's withering end, Toomer's Black typewriter clearly informed the author's development of such an aesthetic.

In "The Typewriter," which became one of the canonical works of the Harlem Renaissance after it won second place in *Opportunity's* literary contest of 1926, West's portrayal of the Black typewriter corresponds with Toomer's portrait of psychological alienation. West, however, put a twist on its narrative about passing as white collar: this realist story depicts the struggles of its protagonist, Lucius Jones—an "abject little" middle-aged man from the South struggling after decades to adjust to the rhythms of life in the urban North—and his daughter, Millie, who is training to become a typist. The protagonist's frustrations spill out into his domestic relations with his adolescent daughter. Their nightly speed-typing practice sessions reproduce the power dynamics of the bureaucratized office; only in this case, Lucius assumes the role of the white dictator in ways that leave him dissatisfied with his reality. Written when the author was just sixteen, "The Typewriter" exemplifies Cherene Sherrard-Johnson's observation that West's early stories use "the domestic sphere as a recurring site to explore class and color, ambition and desire," and tend "to recycle character types" to critique "the social conventions and aspirations of the black middle class" (62). The story explores the disconnect between the individual's middle-class fantasies and the sobering reality of proletarian life under a racialized division of labor.

In reconstructing Hopkins's Black typewriter as a type that is part reality and part myth, and bound up in both instances with the performance of whiteness, West's story hinges on the reader's understanding that this tale exists in a matrix of racial

uplift fantasies that were incited by the Fordist mass production of typewriter machines in the 1920s. Although clerical work remained largely unrealizable for African American women because of the racist and sexist ideologies that white-collar bureaucratization propagated, Fordism made the means of white-collar production—the typewriter machine—theoretically within reach for the unsalaried masses. Those who aspired to what the white-collar myth stood for to those locked outside that labor sphere—success and security—could now acquire the means of symbolic production, joining a capillary network of homebound typewriter-artisans who contracted out their labor as piecemeal at unsalaried rates. This is the discursive backdrop to "The Typewriter." Having come to Boston fantasizing of acquiring a "fortune" like J. P. Morgan's, Lucius initially "promised himself: 'You'll have an office here some day'" (West 503). Not being "the progressive type"—the same adjective that was used in the Oliver Typewriters campaign—he instead becomes a "bell boy, porter, waiter, cook, and finally janitor in a down town office building" (503). Sherrard-Johnson notes that West's story "does not necessarily name racial discrimination as . . . a schematic or simple explanation for his predicament" so much as it attends to "debates over nature versus nurture and the struggle of the individual against the social forces of his environment" (64). The social forces of that environment—whether the overpriced rental building Lucius manages with its exorbitant utility bills, or his underpaid work as a janitor—are themselves conditioned by a racialized division of labor perpetuated by the bureaucratization of the racial imaginary, which envisions the Black man as unfit for white-collar positions.

Having rented a typewriter for his daughter for three dollars per month, Lucius must abide its nightly assaults: "the 'tack, tack, tack' that was like a vampire slowly drinking his blood" reminds him of his blue-collar status (West 503). Although this office soundscape resembles the "tick tick ticking" of Toomer's story, and the symbolism is similar to that of Toomer's pale Vera, who gains life from David's blood, Lucius's complaint alludes to Marx's famous depiction of capital as "dead-labor,

which, vampire-like, lives only by sucking labor” (342). West links that image of economic alienation to a process of deracialization: the blanching and bleaching of race through the loss of blood. The “clatter clatter” of Millie’s practice with the machine symbolically masks what would now be commonly understood as microaggressions: the array of subtly hostile behaviors Lucius has encountered as a janitor in a white-collar office, where his white superiors dictate letters to their white female typists in a racially and sexually segregated division of labor. Millie’s request—“Dictate me a . . . business letter. You know, like those men in your building dictate to their stenographers. Don’t you hear ’em sometimes?” (505)—forces Lucius to relive his daily dehumanizing experiences in the office.

Yet Millie’s typewriter ambitions also motivate Lucius to live out his own white-collar fantasies in typescript. He “conjured the image of Mr. Browning in the process of dictating, so arranged himself, and coughed importantly” (506). Millie’s pathway to stenographical uplift leads her father into a psychological power struggle with the feminized typewriter, frustrations that he reroutes into his fantasies of becoming a “dictator” like the white bosses at his workplace. The idealization of the white-collar type forcefully shapes his fantasies and anxieties, influencing his interactions and behaviors. He takes to buying cheap cigars and trade papers to find “reliable stock” to invest in (506), while the “letters Millie typed and subsequently discarded, he rummaged for later” and with “a great many flourishes, signed each neatly typed sheet with the exalted J. Lucius Jones” (507). Lucius not only fantasizes about transgressing the color line within the collar line; he also splits into two characters locked in a dialectical struggle between the white dictator and the Black subordinate, a dynamic that echoes Du Bois’s theory of double consciousness. At first, Lucius mimics “whiteness” only in the context of Millie’s typewriter exercises, parodying the behaviors he observes in the white-collar offices where he works. Nevertheless, he soon finds that these performances partially recover the race pride and masculinity that the system has bleached from him, and his delusions escalate.

Though Verner D. Mitchell and Cynthia Davis note that West remained notoriously elusive about claiming African American literary ancestors (40–41), “The Typewriter” channels Hopkins’s white-passing Sappho, in the sense that both Hopkins and West depict typewritten text as a way of cloaking the racial identity of the worker. Echoing contemporaneous suggestions that the typewritten word “conceals the handwriting and thereby the character” of man and “makes everyone look the same,” in Martin Heidegger’s words (81), West’s protagonist capitalizes on textual anonymity to pass as a “progressive” white-collar type, thereby confronting and bypassing, if only through his fantasies, a racist bureaucratic imaginary that construes Blackness as the antithesis of that type. Since the color line within the collar line obstructs his ambitions, Lucius must devise an imaginative means to become a more successful white-collar type. West emphasizes the “surreptitious” nature of Lucius’s “ventures” (507), as he deceives his daughter by purchasing envelopes and stamps to mail the fraudulent letters to himself. He forms a “habit of carrying those self-addressed envelopes in his inner pocket where they bulged impressively,” reading them on the streetcar to work (507). His fantasies that these letters “might be from J. P. Morgan” or “Henry Ford” prompt in him a “strange impulse” to post one letter, which makes him feel “as if he had committed a crime” (507). The story builds toward this climax: despite the difficulties posed by the color line, Millie finds employment as a typewriter, earning “[t]welve dollars a week to start with!” Robbed of his delusions of passing as white upon discovering that the rented typewriter has been returned, Lucius is overcome by “white, impenetrable” silence, voided of the “old, familiar sound” of typing (509). “Against the wall of silence J. Lucius Jones,” the progressive white-collar entrepreneur, “crashed and died” (509). It remains unclear whether Lucius Jones, a victim of the bureaucratization of the racial imaginary that has pitted him against the Black typewriter, dies too.

As Toomer’s and West’s stories indicate, the New Negro’s Black typewriter, as a character type, could articulate the complex, alienating effects that bureaucratization might have on literary and

political representation. For West and Toomer, to pass as white collar is to confront the bureaucratization of the racial imaginary: it is to deconstruct, in order to perform, the conditioning of white middle-class values within a repertoire of white-collar personae that do not register the Black subject as equal. Their Black typewriter thus tabulated the office as the expression of racial capitalism and exploitative Jim Crow power dynamics, not a refuge from them. In their hands, it became a radical symbol intimating the pyrrhic nature of individual gains realized through a theory of uplift that squared the political objectives of social equality with the mediocrities of white middle-class ambitions.

### The Black Typewriter's Legacy

Though higher proportions of African Americans were accessing white-collar employment by the 1920s, the intractable barriers to and politics of white-collar labor clearly preoccupied many authors, leading them to question the emancipatory potential of typewriting. The Black typewriter became an almost obligatory figure in New Negro writers' attempts to narrativize the conditioning effects of racial divisions of labor in the urban North on the racial imaginary. Black typewriters who navigate the bureaucratized racial imaginary include Emma Lou of Wallace Thurman's *The Blacker the Berry* (1929), who is fired from her stenography job so that a lighter-complexioned applicant can fill the position; the maligned West Indian stenographer in Eric Walrond's "On Being Black" (1922), an overqualified male applicant who is shuttled from one employment bureau to another; and the bewildered Helga Crane of Nella Larsen's *Quicksand* (1928), who is initially repulsed by the mechanical mannerisms of the secretaries at the employment bureau but subsequently accepts a clerical position. Numerous light-complexioned stenographers attend to the bureaucratic upheaval resulting from the invention of a "cure" for Blackness in George Schuyler's speculative satire *Black No More* (1931), and an aspiring typewriter is the subject of Langston Hughes's ironic poem "Graduation" (1948). After the 1880s, when publishers increasingly started

to demand costly typewritten fair copy for manuscript submissions (Jensen 261), the direct implications that the racialization of typewriting imposed on textual production became clearer, as many Black writers struggled to afford typewriter services and white typewriters habitually discriminated against Black patrons (Thurman 156). The white-collar office would remain an employment landscape that expressed the color line's regulation of Black aspirations, anxieties, fantasies, and frustrations.

In the 1890s and 1920s alike, the Black typewriter addressed patterns of professionalization, bureaucratization, and the long-standing practices of segregated sociality that weighed on the imagination of the Black author. In reconfiguring Hopkins's original type for the post-1919 new labor context, West and Toomer were among the many authors who used the Black typewriter to narrativize and contend with the complexities of Black modernity in ways that were indebted to but ultimately challenged the quest for middle-class respectability that stenography posed in Hopkins and Chesnutt's era. Though this essay traces the emergence of this historical type to between 1880 and 1930, the Black typewriter raised perennial concerns regarding racism and the deleterious effects of capitalism that have lingered in subsequent generations of African American literature, including the Black Arts movement in the 1960s,<sup>9</sup> even after the typewriter machine became a superannuated business technology. Over time, the fictional office in African American literature has become filled with microaggressions, power struggles, alienation, and psychological manipulation, as exemplified in Claudia Rankine's *Citizen: An American Lyric* (2014).

Then and now the Black typewriter disrupts the chimerical workplace toward which many liberal proponents of social equality, Black as well as white, had been striving since the late nineteenth century. Those authors, such as Hopkins, West, and Toomer, who first connected the Black typewriter to discourses of white passing, crucially interpreted white-collar identity as the internalization of complex, irrational, and violent social relations within the purportedly rationalized, objective workplace. In their hands, that figure was not an inert or insignificant

object: the figure, as both the typist and the machine, exists in the interstice between social practices and the racial imaginary, registering the dissonance between the realities of a restrictive white-collar hiring policy for clerical workers and the fantasies of opportunity that the expansion of paperwork in large metropolises seemed to offer those desperately seeking tolerable, if not meaningful, work.

## NOTES

1. For Burke, this embodiment involves “the complexity of language and habits”; “the property relationship”; “the methods of government, production and distribution”; and the “rituals that re-enforce” those methods (225).
2. Of 1,312 college graduates, 70.2% became teachers or clergymen. Just 4% entered government service, mostly clerkships, while 2.4% became editors, secretaries, or office clerks (Du Bois, “Talented Tenth” 51–53).
3. Stella falls in love with her boss over daily dictations, despite suspecting him of past fraudulence against her deceased father. Houghton Mifflin’s literary editor Walter Hines Page informed Chesnutt that he considered its topic too derivative to be commercially viable (see Wilson xii).
4. The Republicans Henry Parkman and Alpheus Sanford engaged her stenography services starting in 1892. After passing the civil service examination, she worked for the Massachusetts decennial census, monitoring “population rates” and “social statistics” relating “to the ‘distribution of the population by color and race’” (Hooks 130) before becoming the editor of *The Colored American Magazine* from 1900 to 1903. After a second literary venture, the *New Era Magazine*, failed in 1916, she worked as a stenographer for the Massachusetts Institute of Technology until her death in 1930 (Yarborough xliii–xliv).
5. Yarborough’s commentary in the 1988 Oxford/Schomberg edition also construed Sappho as a sign of the author’s “elitist” views of racial intermixture (xli). For further discussion, see Cassidy 661–62.
6. Her former employer later cited “insubordination,” after the case garnered national attention (Brown 522).
7. Double consciousness is the racialized experience of seeing “one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity” (Du Bois, *Souls* 3).
8. These terms refer to Sohn-Rethel’s critical distinctions between different kinds of labor.
9. After McLuhan claimed in 1964 that the “power of the typewriter” was its potential to formalize “the breath, the pauses, the suspension even, of syllables, the juxtaposition, even, of parts of phrases” as a poet really “intends” (181), Baraka retorted, “A typewriter?—why shd it only make use of the tips of the fingers as contact points of flowing multi directional creativity. . . . *A typewriter is*

*corny!!*” (156). Radically extending the Black typewriter’s earlier complaint, Baraka refused the technodeterminist view that an expropriated business technology could enhance creativity; because inventions express “the morality” of their inventor, typewriters had “shaped the world” around the West’s hegemony. For communication technologies to be truly liberative, they needed to “represent human striving”; hence, a liberated Black aesthetics needed to create new forms and technologies that reflected that goal (156).

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**Abstract:** The typewriter—the machine and the human operator at the nadir of the white-collar hierarchy—became associated with white female workers in the American racial imaginary. Although the color line deterred Black applicants from that side of the collar line, the Black typewriter as a literary type came to salience between 1886 and 1930, disrupting what I call the "bureaucratization of the racial imaginary": the process whereby the exclusionary white middle-class tenets underpinning the bureaucratized office both regulated and were also informed by the imaginative possibilities of race, gender, and labor. Tracing the Black typewriter from Pauline Elizabeth Hopkins and Charles W. Chesnutt to Jean Toomer and Dorothy West, I reveal how these authors construed white-collar identity as a form of racial passing, requiring the worker's acceptance of racial and sexual segregation. Their innovative narratives about passing as white collar foregrounded the Black typewriter's unsettling experiences inside that system, challenging the theory that economic uplift would inherently promote racial and sexual equality.