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Chop-suey:

Asian Bodies Consumed in the Harlem Renaissance

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Professor English
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W.E.B DuBois states in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) that “the equality in political, industrial and social life which modern men must have in order to live, is not to be confounded with sameness. On the contrary, in our case, it is rather insistence upon the right of diversity; - upon the right of a human being to be a man even if he does not wear the same cut of vest, the same curl of hair or the same color of skin.” Nearly all Harlem Renaissance writers and thinkers would agree that the “right of diversity” belongs to all human beings. However, the “diversity” DuBois speaks of manifests as a diversity among black people, not between cultures, ethnicities, or races. During the Harlem Renaissance, many works boiled race down to black and white, overlooking other minorities in the process. In Nella Larsen’s *Quicksand*, Helga Crane and Anne Grey develop a certain "taste" for Chinese goods, while Chinese and Asian people remain absent from the text. Meanwhile, in James Weldon Johnson’s *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, the narrator develops an actual taste for Chinese culture and food. This interest in Chinese goods and practices, or Chinoiserie, precedes the Harlem Renaissance and has a long history of creating a divide between races and cultures. White, western cultures used Chinese products like porcelain and silk as markers of cultured “taste,” citing China’s ancient, foreign civilization as the source of their intrigue and value. Chinoiserie not only creates a cultural divide between east and west, but also reinforces white supremacy. Illustrating Edward Said’s definition of “Orientalism,” Chinoiserie “others” eastern cultures and flattens them into accessories. Chinoiserie reduces all Asian people and cultures into specifically *Chinese* exotic objects, erasing their depth and individuality. Many Harlem Renaissance novels hoped to uplift black people by displaying black characters as worldly and tasteful by white, orientalist standards. However, this simultaneously continued to dehumanize Asian people and remove any

opportunity for interracial solidarity. By replacing Asian bodies with Chinese objects, black writers reinforced the same racial hierarchy they hoped to dismantle.

“Taste” for, and possession of, foreign *things* signifies inclusion into the social elite. The theorist Pierre Bourdieu asserts in *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (1979) that one’s aesthetic inclinations represent their social status. He argues that “taste” for objects and culture signifies class, because consumption of “things” corresponds with a person’s social status. Aesthetic inclinations are traditionally shaped by a person’s social upbringing and cultural capital, rather than directly by his or her accumulated economic capital. Bourdieu defines “cultural capital” as “a familiarity, based in habitus and developed through education, both with the objects and practices that constitute the world of culture and with the categories necessary to classify and so fully perceive and respond to them” (Kelly). This situates physical objects and artworks at the head of “taste.” They operate as signifiers dividing the dominant and subordinate social classes. Bourdieu also believes that taste for food mirrors a person’s class. He notes that children from lower-classes are more likely to eat “heavy, fatty fattening foods, which are also cheap,” instead of foods that are “original and exotic” (Bourdieu, 177). The sensory quality of taste creates yet another divide between social classes. The ability to enjoy and experience “tasteful” objects and foods requires an excess of time and money. Those who labor all day would not have the means to acquire “valuable” objects or consume “exotic” food. They also wouldn’t have the need for them in the first place. A person’s “taste” delineates not only their social status, but also their identity. However, the dominant culture dictates the ideal “taste.”

In the United States, white culture is dominant. The white gaze exoticizes and others Chinese culture and objects, reducing them to commodities of luxury and signifiers of "taste."

Edward Said used the term “orientalism” to describe a Western tradition developed in the 18th and 19th century, both academic and artistic, of prejudiced outsider-interpretations of the East, that directly contributed to European and white imperialist or colonialist attitudes. He defines “orientalism” as a “Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient” (Said, 15). Orientalism groups all cultures and countries east of Europe into a monolithic “Orient.” This also condenses all Asian people into dimensionless caricatures. Said describes how an “oriental woman... never [speaks] for herself, she never [represents] her emotions, presence, or history. *He* spoke for and represented her” (Said, 17). The “*he*” to whom Said refers is the white, western male viewer. Orientalism creates a power hierarchy between East and West by taking away “oriental” voices. It others eastern people, declaring their differences in culture as evidence for their “backwardness.” These orientalist caricatures of non-white people also justified European colonization by erasing their depth as individuals. The replacement of Asian people with caricatures and material objects reinforced white European superiority.

The practice of Asian, particularly Chinese, material objects operating as markers of wealth and culture in the West dates back to the 17th and 18th centuries, and sets the table for standards of “taste” during the Harlem Renaissance. The surge of imports of Chinese porcelain, silk, lacquer, and other *things*, began in the early 18th century. They first appeared in the homes of westerners as markers of class distinction: to own such goods required a certain amount of wealth. China had existed as the most well known “distant port of call” in the western psyche for all of the 18th century (Porter, 398). Westerners who traveled to China returned with knowledge of some Chinese cultural practices. They would disseminate their “wondrous” encounters with the Chinese language and writing systems, religious practices, and even gardening styles across Europe. They were imprinting an image of a distant China in western thought. China captured

the west's interest not only because of their distance from China, but also because China exists as a complex civilization with thousands of years of history and cultural heritage. Chinese exports were not just aesthetically pleasing fashion statements, they were markers of cultural capital. This kind of cultural capital moderated the restrictions of class among white Europeans. Historically, in England in particular, individuals inherited class from their ancestors through an accumulation of wear on silver furnishings. However, the acquisition of blue and white porcelain, *china*, allowed anyone with enough money to seem to enter an elite social class. Class became a commodity that could be bought. One commodity that could be bought was Chinese objects.

In the process of colonizing China through objects, the west also feminized Chinese culture; "taste" for Chinoiserie targeted primarily women. Chinese exports of porcelain, silk, and tea are considered fragile and feminine. They held a "seductive charm" and beauty that are associated with a masculine gaze. Western viewers sexualized Chinese objects while emasculating Chinese culture. This feminizing of Chinoiserie attracted women who desired to reach a cultured social elite. The most well-known collectors of Chinoiserie in the 18th and 19th century were queens, duchesses and other powerful *women*. Even once Chinoiserie reached the upper-middle and middle classes, its firm associations with the feminized rituals of the tea table suggest that it remained predominantly...an object of female consumption" (Porter, 406). This development of a new cultural aesthetic places taste for Chinese goods in juxtaposition with female subjectivity. This sets the stage for both Helga Crane and Anne Gray, as they use Chinoiserie to attempt to overcome their own subjectivity.

Helga Crane and Anne Gray's attempts to use Asian goods to display their "taste" through Chinoiserie and subvert stereotypes of black people as uncultured only objectifies

Chinese and Asian culture and people. The first moment the reader sees Helga Crane, she is spotlighted by “a pool of light on the blue Chinese carpet...and on the oriental silk which covered the stool at her slim feet.” The narrator continues to describe Helga’s “comfortable room [as] furnished with rare and intensely personal *taste*” [emphasis added] (1). This physically creates a spatial hierarchy orbiting Helga, as she sits on top of and above the carpet and silk. The only descriptors of the carpet are “blue” and “Chinese,” and “oriental” for silk. The objects’ origins trump their materiality. They function solely to display Helga’s “taste,” her living space reflects her personality and values. Right away, the narrator encourages the reader to read Helga’s values as “taste.” We are introduced to Helga at Naxos at the start of the first chapter, tranquil amongst her “tasteful” things. But, by the conclusion of the second chapter, her tastes tell her to leave. The reader’s final image of Helga at Naxos are of “her fingers [adjusting] the Chinese-looking pillows on the low couch that served for her bed,” (14) she holds her material objects as close as she can to her. The bookends of Helga’s time at Naxos are images of her surrounded by her things, “Chinese-looking” things. Anything that bears any resemblance of an eastern culture is reduced to being Chinese. During this stressful time in Helga’s life, she clutches signifiers of her “taste;” believing that as long as she appears a certain way she will feel safe.

Helga’s taste drives her towards the acquisition of “exotic” things that signify her arrival into an elite social class. Following the discomfort Helga finds in Chicago, she turns to New York to find a place to live. Helga’s employer introduces Helga to her niece, Anne Gray, and they quickly become friends. The narrator notes that “through Anne it had been possible for [Helga] to meet and to know people with *tastes* and ideas similar to [Helga’s] own” [emphasis added] (40). Helga decides that Anne complements her “*taste*.” Anne gives her access to meet new people with developed “taste” and “ideas.” Unsurprisingly, when Helga searches for

lodging, she finds that Anne's home "was in complete accord with what she designated as her 'aesthetic sense.'" She goes on to note the "beds with long, tapering posts to which tremendous age lent dignity and interest,...rare spindle-legged chairs,...brass-bound Chinese tea chests, luxurious deep chairs and davenports,...a lacquered jade-green settee with gleaming black satin cushions, lustrous Eastern rugs, ancient copper,...and endless shelves filled with books" (41). She places an emphasis on the "tremendous age" and "ancient" qualities that lend "dignity and interest;" similar to the quality of Chinese antiquity that holds the west's curiosity. Helga desires things that are "rare" and that only someone of a cultured, affluent background could acquire. Anne's furnishings are symbols of western colonization of Asia through objects. The "brass-bound Chinese tea chests" and "lacquered jade-green settee" point towards the object-hood of China; the west wanted to take things and practices from Asia, not engage with the people. Not only do the "lustrous Eastern rugs" generalize an entire geographic region as "other," but they also reflect Helga's taste for bright, excessive things like "endless shelves filled with books." Excess in the form of decorative objects is a show of wealth. It is unimportant to Helga what kind of books they are, or who the authors are, rather she focuses on the sheer quantity Anne has accumulated. The books function solely as cultural capital, not as vehicles to evoke thought or change. After New York becomes uninteresting and no longer exotic, Helga decides, once again, to leave for a new place. But before Helga leaves Anne's home, "some blue Chinese jars of great age" consumed her and she declares that Anne "*did* have such lovely things" (52). The descriptors of these "jars of great age" are the two used to introduce Helga: "blue" and "Chinese." What she'll miss about New York and Anne are the "lovely things," not the people or experiences. On her final night in New York, Helga goes to bed in her "best pale-yellow pajamas of *crepe de Chine*" (52). Her most intimate things are from foreign places. They become

extensions of her physical body. Despite the chaos of moving from place to place, their material values comfort Helga enough to allow her to sleep. In chapter eight, Helga arrived in New York enthralled by Anne's taste and objects, and in our final vision of her leaving at the end of chapter ten, she leaves in the same manner: captivated by the exotic, Chinoiserie. She dreams of the "different, strange places [she'll visit in Europe], among approving and admiring people, where she would be appreciated, and understood" (53). When Helga first moved to New York, she also described people as "approving" and "admiring," who "appreciated, and understood" her. Yet she quickly becomes dissatisfied with the familiarity of such people. She must move to a *new* place to meet *new* people to complement the objects she loves, because Chinoiserie will always be new.

Helga's happiness depends on characteristics of luxury and the exotic because of her excessive consumption of Chinoiserie. When the luster of Europe wears off Helga finds herself returning to New York. By this time, she has been to and experienced many cities, spoken with many people, and accumulated many things. However, these experiences and things have not brought her happiness. As a result, she decides to marry Reverend Pleasant Green. She describes how "at first the novelty of the thing, the change, fascinated her. There was a recurrence of the feeling that now, at last, she had found a place for herself" (109). Amidst Helga's initial time with Reverend Green, the narrator describes how "everything contributed to her gladness in living" (113). Everything includes material things, as well as features of the natural world. Even the sun and sky themselves become objects to be consumed. Helga describes the sun as "glittering [and] gold,...[and notes how] in the evening silver buds sprouted in a Chinese blue sky" (114). The sun functions as a bright, expensive accessory to Helga, "glittering" and "gold" like a fancy piece of jewelry. The sky becomes a representation of Chinoiserie, "blue" and

“Chinese.” Helga’s taste for Chinoiserie and “exotic” objects reaches the point where she must consume and own everything around her, even non-material things. Her happiness demands a life filled with luxury, newness, and the “exotic,” Helga’s search for these qualities and taste leave her moving in circles, never satisfied once the glitter of a thing fades.

"Taste" not only drives Helga to desire Chinoiserie and its aesthetic qualities and exoticism, but also determines the way she lives and how she learns to value experiences. After the first few pages of the novel, Helga becomes bored with the drab, unchanging nature of Naxos and decides that city life will suit her taste. In Chicago, Helga sees the diversity urban settings facilitate, and this seeing of “others” inspires a feeling of excitement. She describes that after “[stepping] out into the moving multi-colored crowd, there came to her a queer feeling of enthusiasm, as if she were tasting some agreeable, exotic food” (28). The “multi-colored crowd,” a representation of difference, incites Helga’s “enthusiasm.” She isn’t interested in the individual people, rather she views them all as one indistinguishable body. Also, this “multi-colored crowd” does not infer any ethnic diversity. Helga doesn’t refer to or is aware of the different people as individuals with different backgrounds, instead she merely looks at them in terms of the varying shades of pigment in their skin,. Helga even goes so far as to reduce the physical people into “some agreeable, *exotic* food.” Then, when she finds herself “terrified and lost [and] a little hungry too,” (31) she appeases her hunger by buying “a book and a tapestry purse, things which she wanted, but did not need and certainly could not afford” (29). "taste" becomes an actual sensory experience of tasting something. The consumption of both people and things satisfies her physical hunger.

This sensory quality of "taste" also appears in other senses, including hearing music, actively dancing, and voicing words and ideas. Helga criticizes Anne for allowing herself to

develop a "taste" for things and ideas white people standardize as fine and cultured. She "ape[s] [white] clothes, their manners, and their gracious ways of living," and despises "the undiluted good of all things Negro,...the songs, the dances, and the softly blurred speech of the race." Anne "preferred Pavlova to Florence Mills, John McCormack to Taylor Gordon, Walter Hampden to Paul Robeson" (45). White culture in America sets the standard for "taste." The sensory qualities of black culture, "the songs, the dances, and the softly blurred speech of the race" are not "tasteful." Both Helga and Anne give up their subordinated black culture and follow the standards of the dominant white culture. When Helga attempts to escape white culture in America and move to Copenhagen, she describes it as "a realization of a dream." She focuses on the opportunity to have "the things money could give, leisure, attention, beautiful surroundings. Things. Things. Things" (61). Helga does not value the opportunity for the learning experiences living abroad might bring, rather she cares only for "the things money could give." She repeats "things" over and over, re-emphasizing how she desires an *excess* of material objects. Eventually, the "things" come to her. Herr Olsen and Aunt Katrina afford Helga with a "fantastic collection of garments," including bright colored dresses, "a leopard skin coat,...turban-like hats of metallic silks, feathers, furs,...Eastern perfume" (67-68). These material things incite Helga with "the unusual pleasure of having so many new and expensive clothes" and she "[begins] to feel a little excited" (68). Accumulating these exotic, "Eastern" objects, again, provides Helga with a sense of purpose and "pleasure." However, they "excite" her not only for their exotic qualities, but also simply for the fact that they are "new and expensive." This continues to expand the definition of "taste" to include qualities of newness and excess. Helga only cares about the moments the things are new and how they add to her excessive collection. She very rarely talks about wearing or using these things, only about the physical pleasure of having them.

By the end of the novel, Helga's desire for things remains the only thing she truly cares about. Right before she gives birth to her fifth child, she can only think of "clothes and books, about the sweet mingled smell of Houbigant and cigarettes...[and of] desired *things*" [emphasis added] (125). But, she cannot smell "the sweet mingled smell of Houbigant and cigarettes." She cannot taste "some agreeable, exotic food." She cannot touch her "desired things." Helga's search for "taste" consumes her life and leaves her weak, empty and without exotic objects to enjoy.

Meanwhile, the only representation of Asian people and Asian culture in *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* takes the form of a Chinese restaurant: Asian objects, people and culture serve to satisfy the dominant culture's "taste." The "Club" that the narrator frequents during his time in New York is located in a townhouse. Beneath it, "in the basement was a Chinese Chop-suey restaurant [with] a red lantern at the iron gate to the areaway, inside of which the Chinaman's name was printed" (52-53). Chinese people and culture are relegated to the basement, literally below where the black and white men gamble. The restaurant doesn't have a name, the narrator only notes where *the* "Chinaman's name was printed." The narrator doesn't actually see the people who work there, he only sees the restaurant. The "red lantern at the iron gate" functions as a stereotype, and something to be looked at for a brief moment, then stepped past. The narrator and his friends immediately walk upstairs above the basement and don't give the restaurant any more thought. The second time the narrator returns to the "Club," he mentions the Chinese restaurant again. This time, the narrator acknowledges a physical person, but the person only receives a sentence of attention. The narrator briefly notes that "the Chinaman who kept [the restaurant] did an exceptionally good business." Instead, he focuses on the product, the chop-suey. The "chop-suey was a favorite dish among the frequenters of the ["Club,"] it is a food that, somehow, has the power of absorbing alcoholic liquors,...[the narrator

has] heard men claim that they could sober up on chop-suey” (55). The food satisfies both the men’s taste and their “taste.” Chop-suey’s exoticism gives it some kind of “power [to absorb] alcoholic liquors,” cementing both the actual food and Chinese culture as mystical. The Chinese restaurant represents Asian culture in the Harlem Renaissance. Chopsuey represents Asian objects, things to be consumed.

The narrator’s objectification of Asian people prohibits him from empathizing with them, and only feeds into white oppression of both black and Asian people. When the narrator returns to the America, he discusses the diversity of black identity he witnessed abroad. He recalls black people acting as “perfect [Englishmen],” and behaving “more Frenchy than [Frenchmen],” and goes on to say that he has “no doubt that the Negro would make a good Chinaman, with exception of the pigtail” (80). This presents Asians as the model minority in America. The narrator places being “perfect Englishmen” and “Frenchy Frenchman,” being white, on a pedestal. In his eyes, black people can only reach the status of “a good Chinaman.” Yet, the narrator doesn’t explain what “a good Chinaman” looks like, it is simply a stereotype. White people might desire and be interested in Asian goods, but they still exoticize and generalize Asian people as “Chinamen” with “pigtailed.” The dominant white culture uses the “Chinaman” type to blind the narrator. He doesn’t know what makes a “good Chinaman,” nor does he realize that Asian people also face similar barriers he faces as a black man. The narrator doesn’t see the Asian people, he sees Asian objects. The model minority puts a ceiling on both black and Asian people. The narrator only reinforces white supremacy by participating in the consumption of Asian objects and people.

There are no Asian people in either *Quicksand* or *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, except for one, unidentified “Chinaman.” The only Asian presence appears in material

objects: chop-suey, porcelain, silk, and tea-chests, among other things. Chinoiserie replaces Asian bodies. The dominant white culture in America not only marks Chinese objects as “tasteful,” but also exoticizes and orientalizes them. Helga Crane, Anne Gray, and the narrator’s efforts to become “tasteful” and cultured only continue to dehumanize Asian people because "taste" is defined in white terms. These characters consume Asian objects, attempting to gain social status. However, their objectification of Asian people does not result in entry into the social elite; to gain entry into the social elite, one must be white. Their fruitless attempts to gain status also prohibit any opportunity for interracial solidarity. In *The Souls of Black Folk*, W.E.B. DuBois states that “the problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line.” However, he draws the line between black and white and fails to account for other non-white people. DuBois and the characters in the novels, do not realize that in America, all non-white people suffer from white supremacy. Dubois, Helga Crane and the narrator become active participants in the subjugation of Asian people while also failing to uplift black people. They do not think of Asian people as they really exist: fathers, mothers, workers, business owners, immigrants, victims of racism. Rather, they think of blue and white porcelain, silk, chop-suey, of “exotic” luxury.

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