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What is the negro woman's story?: Negro Story Magazine and the dialogue of feminist voices

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What is the Negro Woman's Story?: *Negro Story Magazine* and the Dialogue of Feminist Voices

by

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Thesis

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Acknowledgments

I first encountered *Negro Story* magazine through a summer workshop run by the National Endowment for the Humanities in 2012. This weeklong, immersive course, entitled “Renaissance in the Black Metropolis: Chicago, 1930s – 1950s, worked to expose secondary educators to the often overlooked Chicago Black Renaissance. We had the opportunity to explore the expansive Vivian Harsh Collection at the George Cleveland Hall library, and it was here that I first leafed through a copy of *Negro Story* and read Melissa Lin’s “All That Hair.” From that moment on I knew I wanted to work with this periodical and investigate the fascinating women who contributed to it. I am forever grateful to Dr. Erik Gellman and Lisa Oppenheim for their work in coordinating this workshop and exposing me to an emerging area of scholarship. I would also like to thank Dr. Robin Lucy for her support in navigating the historical context and political climate of Black Chicago during the later years of World War II, as well as for sharing her expansive knowledge of African American literature in the early 20th century. Dr. Abby Coykendall has been instrumental in helping me to refine my critical reading of texts from the very first semester of my coursework at Eastern and has been an incredibly patient and insightful critic of my writing over the past few years. Finally, Brian and Tom, who have offered me inexhaustible support in balancing work, school, and family, and Charlotte, who teaches me patience and joy in the face of seemingly insurmountable odds: thank you, thank you, thank you.

Abstract

Too often, writing by and about Black women has been sidelined in scholarly work about African American writing prior to the post-World War II era. This is especially true in the recently emergent school of work surrounding the Chicago Black Renaissance. This thesis focuses on a single literary magazine, *Negro Story*, in order to explore the complexity of Black female identity in the 1940s through the work of the female editors and contributors to the periodical. These contributors come from varied racial and socioeconomic backgrounds, but their work takes on a cohesive quality as the stories are constantly in conversation with one another. *Negro Story* represents a unique opportunity for women to assert themselves as both activists and artisans, and the stories collected here pave the way for an emergent Black female voice over the second half of the twentieth century.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

In the 1930s a Black cultural epicenter began to emerge on the south side of Chicago. The neighborhood was known as Bronzeville. Like Harlem before it, the neighborhood's population exploded as a result of the Great Migration but, unlike Harlem, Bronzeville represented not only an urban cultural center, but an industrial one as well. This unique blend of art and industry is what characterizes the Black Chicago Renaissance, the often-overlooked successor to its more famous precursor in New York city's famous borough.

Bronzeville's emergence took root in the desperation of the Great Depression rather than the excess of the roaring twenties. This bleak origin is reflected in much of the most famous art from the period, from Richard Wright's raw literary explorations to Charles White's hyper-realistic prints and murals. Even the music scene echoed the harsh reality, for while jazz remained popular throughout the early 20th century, the more moody urban blues music of Otis Rush and Buddy Guy remain Chicago's most famous export. Accompanying the crippling poverty of the Depression, the 1930s also reintroduced an era of major labor disputes that had provided the basis for Chicago's national reputation as a bastion of the Progressive movement at the start of the century. Major strikes emerged in the railroad and steel industries, and a general climate of distrust flourished between employers and poor, often Black, laborers. This led to accusations of socialist/communist sympathies against the working class as well as the very real reemergence of the Communist Labor Party of America, first founded in Chicago in 1919. The efforts of organized labor and the left leanings of the urban poor are a direct reflection of the dangerous living and working conditions and lack of political power felt by this population.

The realities of urban life in Chicago have been well documented in fiction and reference works alike. The city, like so many others in the North, grew exponentially over the first part of the 20th century, and the Black migrant population was the single most important factor in this growth. Chicago's Black population was only 955 people in 1860. Following the Civil War it grew to 6,480 in 1881 then to 44,000 with a wave of migrants in 1910 and finally it exploded to 250,000 in the mid 1930s, when the Black Renaissance and the Great Depression both reached their peaks (Hine xvi). This exponential growth often seemed to be a blight rather than a blessing. The famously squalid tenement houses of Chicago sheltered the majority of this population, and for Black residents there was little escape from these conditions due to financial limitations, political pressure, and questionably legal roadblocks, like restrictive housing covenants.

Responses to the limitations placed on the Black and artistic population became the strength of their work and the foundation of the Chicago Renaissance itself, a movement which actively cultivated racial consciousness. These communities dealt with “overcrowded housing, restrictive covenants, few opportunities for economic advancement, low wages, inadequate health care, and limited access to higher education and professional training” but managed to build solidarity, racial identity, and an artistic and intellectual community all their own (Hine xxi). The tensions between the negative external factors on Black life and the community which merged from them embody the themes captured by the artistic movement, including class mobility, hope and despair, Black violence, white resistance to social change, and conversations regarding the role of Black culture and its creations.

Bronzeville emerged as an escape from many of the hardships that faced African American residents of Chicago. An almost entirely Black neighborhood, its residents found ways to make segregation work to their benefit. They cultivated their own community rather than resign themselves to the restrictions imposed on them from without. Like the Harlem Renaissance before it, the Black Chicago Renaissance emerged in response to cultural and political misrepresentation by mainstream culture; however, unlike its New York cousin, which was funded and in many ways shaped by wealthy white patrons, the Black Chicago culture of the 1930s – 1950s was supported from within, allowing what was perhaps a more unfiltered expression of Black experience. Emory professor of African American Studies Michael D. Harris considers the importance of this assertive representation, insisting that “White power enforced and depended on Black racial identity. We reinvented ourselves repeatedly to resist and frustrate the oppressive systems and representations that circumscribed us collectively, acting on the belief that we either became co producers or might change the worldview with our actions. We re-presented ourselves to counter the other form of representation” (qtd. in Hine vx-vxi). As Harris suggests, this, or any, Black Renaissance was necessary as a response to historically white presentations of race, which reinforced unequal dynamics of power. The refusal of white patronage required that a different kind of backing emerge to support the arts. Within the Bronzeville community, myriad supports developed for the emerging artistic community, including the South Side Writers Group and the South Side Community Arts Center. Equally important was the role of the publishing community in actively promoting the Renaissance, including the *Chicago Defender* and the *Chicago Bee*.

As this neighborhood and movement established themselves as having both a political and artistic presence, a new kind of voice emerged for Black writers. The first issue of *Negro Story* magazine surfaced on the Chicago literary scene in May of 1944 with an editorial letter outlining the role that Black publications and Black art might take in shaping racial perceptions:

The other day the idea struck us that among thirteen million Negroes in America, there must be many who were eager to write creatively if they had a market. At this point, *Negro Story* was conceived and quickly the machinery was started which would bring it to you. There must be thousands of you hungering for stories about Negroes who are real people rather than the types usually seen in print. (*NS* 1.1:1)

The editors, Fern Gayden and Alice Browning, were hardly writing a manifesto; instead, the casual tone seen in this initial commentary pervades *Negro Story* magazine, creating an inviting space for writers of all experiences and racial backgrounds. There, women who were interested in sharing stories about the Black community counteracted the white-enforced identity to which they had traditionally been subjected. In the context of the magazine, as well as of this project, the editor's designation of "real people" is one that includes complex, nuanced characters as opposed to the Black stereotypes perpetuated in media thus far. This did not mean, however, that only Negro writers would be included in the magazine; in this first editorial stories from "white fiction writers who portray the Negro sympathetically and honestly" are sincerely requested (*NS* 1.1:1). Thus from the very start the magazine placed equal emphasis on the political message and on the craft of fiction writing.

The launch of the magazine was propelled by the efforts of the editors and the inclusion of the previously published story “Almos’ a Man, written by the already well-known and widely lauded Richard Wright. Gayden, a social worker, was connected to Wright through their joint membership in the South Side Writers Group, and she used this connection to bring many well-known voices to *Negro Story*, including Wright, Langston Hughes, Ralph Ellison, and Arna Bontemps. Browning, the true heart of *Negro Story*, was both a scholar of early African American Literature and an aspiring writer herself. She founded the magazine, in part, due to her own difficulty in finding a publisher for her work as a Black woman. After Gayden’s departure from the magazine in December of 1944, Browning continued to put a tremendous amount of energy into the publication, expanding it to include a drama section, a poetry prize, and even a companion children’s magazine called *Child Play*. Despite these efforts, *Negro Story* ceased publication in May of 1946; the relatively high cost (\$0.40 an issue) could not draw a large readership and the magazine was chronically understaffed. Still, as Bill Mullen points out, “*Negro Story*’s slow death was offset by what might be called the foretelling birth of political and cultural capital its extinction at least symbolically marked” with the emergence of a “Black literary activism” that had been renounced by Wright and his compatriots in the early years of the Black Chicago Renaissance (*Popular* 11-12). The bitter cynicism of the Great Depression made way for the optimism borne of recovery, and *Negro Story* reflected this larger trend in national thought. The stories collected in the periodical represented a wide array of voices and demonstrated a clear belief in the power of fiction to create change and awareness. At the same time, African Americans did not experience the supposed economic “recovery” springing from World War II that white Americans did. The effects of the Depression lingered far longer for

Black Americans, and though many were involved in the war effort as workers, they did so under segregated conditions and while doing the most demeaning and dangerous work. This, too, is reflected in the pages of *Negro Story*, tempering the hope for change with a stark realism that made the need for activism all the more explicit.

This kind of empowerment had its roots in the years just prior to the creation of *Negro Story* as the United States was slowly drawn into first financial and industrial and then military involvement in World War II. While the nation as a whole made the transition from isolationist neutrality to direct wide-scale involvement after the bombing of Pearl Harbor, Black Americans had an additional set of concerns to consider. To enlist in the war meant to abandon, temporarily, the efforts to fight the all too proximate specter of racial oppression at home in favor of fighting for the liberty of those overseas. The so-called “Double V” campaign promulgated by the Black press and the NAACP advocated for victory at home against racism and victory abroad against fascism, “always plac[ing] the war abroad as the struggle which had to be won first.” *Negro Story* was among the publications that took up this banner call, aiming to “combine this struggle—with which Blacks displayed a heightened sense of awareness—with the struggle abroad” (Finkle 693, 694). Returning to the first editorial, readers can see Browning and Gayden addressing the ways in which the goals of the magazine connect to the goals of the Black community as a whole in a time of war: “We believe good writing may be entertaining as well as socially enlightening,” they wrote, “[W]e emphasize the belief that the future of the world is at stake during this World War II. But we also believe that Negroes have a great opportunity to achieve integration with the best elements of our society” (*NS* 1.1:1). Echoes of Du Bois's proposed “talented tenth” model seem to echo in this last line as Browning and Gayden suggest

that elevating Black art might serve the same purpose as furthering higher education in establishing the talent and ability of African Americans as equal to that of their white counterparts. Using writing to establish a voice and an intention, *Negro Story* and other publications supported the Negro wartime campaign in its goal of maintaining the fight for equality at home even while the general population turned its attention to the war.

Both the national Double V campaign and the regional Black Chicago Renaissance fall into a historical gap that is often overlooked. Explorations of Black civil rights often move from slavery to emancipation, then from the Red Summer of 1919 to Martin Luther King and Malcolm X, with an underdeveloped sense of the interim periods. Similarly, the study of African American Art tends to jump straight from the Harlem Renaissance in the 1920s to the Black Arts movement of the 1960s. Yet the work produced in this era is distinctive and important in telling the story of how both Black identity and Black art changed over the first half of the 20th century. If the Chicago Renaissance is recognized at all, it is in large part through the work of Richard Wright, the colossus of the Chicago scene. Wright's scenes of despair have been made iconic in the widely read and taught *Native Son* and *Black Boy*, but as powerful as these texts have proven over time, they are far from representative of the Negro community as a whole, especially during the 1940s. *Negro Story*, with its wide range of contributors, represents a more complicated, rich image of Blackness in its own time.

Another problematic effect of making Wright the de facto voice of the Chicago Black Renaissance is that it almost completely obscures the female voices of that era. Just as there is a gap in Black American history from the 1930s and 1940s, there is also an interruption in the history of the women's movement between first-wave suffrage efforts and second-wave

feminism. This problem is compounded for Black women, who are doubly silenced by this lapse. Both of these iconic periods in American feminist history are conspicuously absent of color, representing the victories of white, middle class women rather than denoting the broader success of women as a whole. Recuperating *Negro Story*, with its strong female editors and contributors, helps to fill this gap in literary history. More than just creating a space for Black women writers, *Negro Story* was indelibly marked by a Black feminist perspective. The female editors of the magazine represented a rather small subset of women with any kind of position of power in the publishing industry, and their perspective shaped the magazine into a space in which female voices could emerge on equal footing with those of their male counterparts. In general, issues of *Negro Story* saw a balanced line-up of male and female contributors, with the poetry section dominated by women's voices. These pieces provided a counterpoint to male writers on everything from romantic relationships to racial prejudice to the war abroad. *Negro Story* also provided a voice for a variety of women, white and Black, educated and uneducated. It featured not only established writers and activists like Grace Tompkins and Margaret Borroughs and launched the career of Gwendolyn Brooks, but it also showcased women who wrote as a hobby: homemakers, college students, and schoolteachers. The collection of writing represented by *Negro Story* magazine represents the origins of a Black feminist literary movement that began decades before the traditional starting point of the 1960s, a feminism grounded in the basic notion that writing about and by women is a necessary component in voicing a truly diffuse and complex representation of Black experience.

This investigation is grounded theoretical constructs of ecologies of writing, as represented in the work of Marilyn Cooper and Richard Coe, as well as M.M. Bakhtin's concept

of dialogism. In reviewing the writings of the women within the magazine, it became clear that what shaped the message of *Negro Story* was the way in which the community of writers built on each other's work and interacted with one another, forming a blended voice. It is only in looking at this writing as a collective work that one can see the formulation of an identity over time; it is the work of many, not of one. The writings in Moraga and Anzaldua's *This Bridge Called My Back* demonstrate the importance of communities of color and how they can work to create and wield power most effectively as a collective force. Julie Brown's collection *American Women Short Story Writers* addresses a similar concern for female writers of short stories, building on Susan Koppelman's claim that "the creation of a literary genre is not the work of a single individual; it is an antiphonal and collaborative work" (qtd. in Brown xxii). All of these approaches to the role of discourse and dialogue through creative writing are central to my argument about *Negro Story*'s singularity in providing a space and a voice for Black women in its place and time.

The intersection between race and gender is also a key component of *Negro Story* and what it represents as a feminist work. It is important to contextualize the magazine and its place in Black and feminist movements. *Negro Story* was published between the so-called first and second waves of feminism in a somewhat forgotten space in the history of race and gender in America, making it uniquely situated in shaping identity consciousness. The magazine also published the work of women who were from different racial backgrounds, of different social classes, and had different levels of experience in writing and publishing fiction, thus presenting a series of challenges to the restrictive "wave" model of characterizing the American feminist movement. The works of Lauren Berlant and Kimberlee Crenshaw also help to create a

framework for thinking about gender and race as complex and multi-faceted, warning against the compulsion to reduce “women” or “African Americans” to a single, cohesive subject.

Finally, for detailed analysis of the work within the magazine, the writing of Bill Mullen has been central to the development of this project. While Mullen tends to focus rather explicitly on the war and the ways in which the magazine shows the Black community’s response to it, his is essentially the only work that directly focuses on *Negro Story*: its content, editors, and writers. Using his arguments as a jumping-off point provides the opportunity to look more deeply into the lives and work of female contributors to the magazine as well as the editors themselves. One of the most exciting elements of this investigation, prompted by Mullen’s work, is the exploration of Alice Browning’s voice, both editorially and as a writer, in shaping the message of *Negro Story*. As Mullen notes, Browning wrote under two pen names in contributions to the magazine: first the female Lila Marshall, then the male Richard Bentley. The decision to pass herself off as a male writer adds an interesting layer of complexity to the focus on female voices within the magazine. Only by examining the multiplicity of voices within the magazine, voices which came together to reveal the complex, layered concerns of modern Black women, can readers truly see how *Negro Story* lays the groundwork for the Civil Rights and feminist movements that emerge in the post-war era.

Chapter 2: What is “the Negro story”? Editorial Voice in a Community of Writers

“As we see it, the problem for the Negro Writer is to know the real facts and to have an understanding of the complexities of Negro life and Negro-white relationships”

“A Letter to our Readers,” Browning and Gayden (NS 1.2, 1)

In the first issue of *Negro Story* magazine, one of only nine issues published between May 1944 and May 1946, co-editors Fern Gayden and Alice Browning open with “A Letter to Our Readers,” verbalizing their intentions for the fledgling publication. Here, the women lay out both the ideological and the practical impetus for starting their own magazine. At the outset, the editors mark themselves as writers, who “have been attempting to improve [their] writing techniques and to express [themselves] through the short story” (NS 1.1, 1). This declaration is the first instance of many in which Gayden and Browning intentionally create a community of writers of which they are a part, striking a collaborative and invested tone. This interest in cultivating a space for Black voices seems a natural progression for both women. Gayden was a founding member of the South Side Writers Group, a community built on collaboration and social engagement by the emergent stars of the Black literary scene in Chicago. For her part, Browning wrote a thesis on the early African American novel at Columbia, then embarked on her publishing venture shortly after her short story “Tomorrow” was rejected by *Esquire* magazine. It would later be published under a pseudonym in *Negro Story*. Both women, therefore, came to the magazine with a strong sense of the past as well as the present in Black writing and used this knowledge to construct a vision for the future.

There is something simultaneously casual and quite purposeful about the way in which the editors present their decision to establish a venue for the Negro story. Describing their realization that many Black writers must be looking for a market in which to publish, they note that “the other day, the idea struck us,” as though the entire endeavor is something of a whim.

They also observe that “there must be” a large group of readers waiting for these kinds of stories to be told and that “[they] feel that, with few exceptions” the creative writing of Black Americans has yet to reach maturity. This somewhat apologetic, self-effacing tone, which characterizes the first half of the letter, then makes way for strong declarations about the role of the magazine, of Black writers, and of the African American in the United States: “we are aware,” “we emphasize,” “we have an obligation.” The collective, first-person voice used in this opening statement of intent indicates the way in which Browning and Gayden think of themselves as part of a larger community; their plural pronoun does not just indicate the two of them as editors, but the larger magazine staff, the contributing writers, and, ideally, the publishing industry as a whole. The piece also rings with an almost juvenile sincerity, closing with the postscript, “We want very much to please all of you, and for that reason we want you to write us” (NS 1.1,1). When pieced together these phrases indicate a clear sense of the immensity of the task before them paired with a seeming belief that their small publication might truly begin to respond to it. The result is an odd mixture of confident idealism and eager accommodation.

Rather than demonstrating inconsistency, this contrast highlights the careful way in which Gayden and Browning present themselves and their magazine. Emerging in the midst of United States involvement in World War II and a backlash within the white and Black communities alike against the Communist party, *Negro Story* needed to position itself carefully in its call for solidarity. Echoes of the Double V campaign for victory against fascism abroad and discrimination at home ring through as the editors work to establish their patriotism and link it to Black integration and equality, all the while distancing themselves from positions that might be seen as extreme. They write near the close of the letter, “[W]e emphasize the belief that the

future of the world is at stake during this World War II. But we also believe that Negroes have a great opportunity to achieve integration with the best elements of our society” (*NS* 1.1, 1). The role of the fiction writer, therefore, is linked explicitly to the role of both patriot and activist.

The editors work to strike this careful balance in each issue of the magazine; many of the stories published after the war’s end are still deeply concerned with the conflict and its impact on the Black community. By linking the issues of the Double V campaign to writing, Gayden and Browning are able to keep civil rights and the Black experience at the forefront while still making these issues relatable to a wider audience. Though the bulk of the (minimal) scholarship on *Negro Story* tends to concern itself with the effect of the war on Black fiction, my reading emphasizes the many ways in which the editors cultivate a collection of stories that speak to common experiences, within the Black community and beyond it. Class issues, domestic disputes, romance, workplace dramas—all of these everyday concerns extend the reach of *Negro Story* as it works to be accessible to all readers and, therefore, to be influential in crafting complex, human, and relatable Black characters.

Most notably, Gayden and Browning state that, “We, the editors, *as Negro women*, not only welcome the opportunity to participate in the creation of a better world, but feel we have an obligation to work and to struggle for it” (*NS* 1.1, 1, emphasis mine). The intersection of gender and culture in this statement is hardly incidental. While *Negro Story* is ultimately an attempt to understand and improve the lives of Black subjects, there is clear recognition throughout the magazine of oppression on many levels, including that of gender. Indeed, these topics are areas of strength for the magazine as they help to fulfill the mission, as described above, of relating to a broader audience. The role of women specifically in constructing this thematic arc is central to

Negro Story's identity and impact. This is most visible by way of contrast with male writers. In reading through the periodical, the vast majority of stories written by male authors are about the war, at least tangentially. Those that are not are still very much focused on exclusively male and Black experiences. The centerpiece of the inaugural issue, Richard Wright's "Almos' a Man," is an excellent example of this school of fiction. The story, which centers on a young Black man coming of age in the South and trying to forge an identity for himself, is marked by violence, disillusionment, and hyper-masculinity as well as political and sociological complexity. While stories with such stark realism as Wright's are central to presenting a response to the stereotypes that white audiences had come to expect with respect to Black characters, they fail to create a space in which *all* readers have a chance for self-recognition because they focus so explicitly on masculinity and aggression. Taking a closer look at the writing of female authors in the magazine, who have been consistently overlooked in contemporary scholarship, readers will find a range of stories that balance inclusion of expected women's topics and exposure to broader concerns for their audience. Gayden and Browning's ability to meld together stories that accomplish each of these objectives is what makes *Negro Story* influential and significant.

In their follow up to the inaugural issue, the editors work to clarify the idealistic aims of the magazine expressed at its commencement by giving a more concrete image of what the magazine might be. The bulk of this second "Letter to Our Readers" focuses on the need to break down stereotypes in existing literature about the Black experience. This goal is not a departure from their initially declared intentions, as the women remain focused on "present[ing] real live characters," but they make clear that the magazine has further potential to "help eradicate the stereotypes in American thinking, concerning the Negro" (*NS* 1.2, 1). Most

significantly, the letter highlights by way of contrast the special role that fiction plays in the creation of real perceptions of the Black community by the public at large, insisting that “Just so long as the Negro is shown in the movies and in fiction as a menial or buffoon, he will be seen in this light in the eyes of the public” (*NS* 1.2, 1). Again, the variety of both the stories and the authors represented in the pages of *Negro Story* demonstrate the pursuit of this stated goal. In the second issue alone are contributions from well-known figures Ralph Ellison and Margaret Goss as well as from “Lucile Milton [who] is a schoolteacher, married” and Roma Jones, “wife of a prominent Chicago attorney, mother of three, former school teacher” (*NS* 1.2, 2; 1.1, 2). The stories of female contributors demonstrate breadth, covering topics from the lives of young boys in the South or the army, to a working woman at the end of her career, or a young wife who cannot keep a job. As promised by Gayden and Browning, the stories run the gamut, including “humor and entertainment. ... exciting love stories, [and] stories of psychological conflicts,” but all these stories come together in the goal of “reflect[ing] the struggle of the Negro for full integration into American life as well as the many aspects and aspirations of his life” (*NS* 1.2, 1). The goal of integration is nothing new for Black artists and activists, but *Negro Story* represents a clear aim to accomplish this objective by embracing and reflecting complexity and diversity within the African American experience rather than adapting to white expectations.

Most revealing of their intentions is the editors’ inclusion of a small call for submissions that covers a third of a page near the back of the second issue. Claiming to be “the only story magazine of its type dealing with stories pertaining to the Negro,” it explicitly lays out the following aims:

1. To publish stories by and about Negroes in a realistic manner and to afford the Negro writer a creative outlet.
2. We welcome and encourage white writers who treat the Negro subject honestly and objectively
3. To aid in discovering new writers.
4. To give the reading public fiction free from the old stereotypes that have passed for true characterization of the Negro.
5. To stimulate and create an interest in the Negro theme. (*NS* 1.2, 56)

This list represents a crystallized version of the ideals expressed in both letters to the readers as discussed above. It continues to highlight writing as a process, the development of new voices, and, most importantly, presents the magazine as an inclusive space in which common goals and values unite artists and readers alike rather than solely external qualities.

As both Black and female editors, Gayden's and Browning's most significant impact can be seen in the way in which they create a community, both through the diverse stories included in the magazine and between readers and the fiction they consume. As seen from the inaugural issue on, the editorial voice of *Negro Story* was resolutely inclusive and decidedly responsive. The final page of the first issue, which is simply entitled "Quotes," is a series of declarations of support from readers, writers, and publishers alike. Interspersed between positive responses to the magazine's mission and promises of financial aid for the fledgling publication are requests and suggestions. Political poet Stanley Burnshaw implores that, "whatever you do, try to maintain a high quality, and if this means less frequent appearances and a smaller magazine, don't let that deter you. No magazine can hope to get anywhere today unless its content is really

good” (NS 1.1, 64). The bimonthly publishing schedule might be seen as a response to this type of plea, though it can be argued that *Negro Story* concerns itself far more with process than with final product. Eleanor R. Parker advises, “You have to develop your own writers, and God knows this takes time, money and skill... in some cases you will actually have to rewrite... that, my friend, is no simple task... that’s why the greatest and best editors are teachers” (NS 1.1, 64). This kind of note reflects the direction that the magazine will take as Browning and Gayden, then Browning alone, take a firm hand in shaping the magazine’s direction.

Most significant to the culture of writing developed through *Negro Story* is this insight from Dorothy Rappe: “If your magazine should become a sort of official organ for your entire group, success could be assured” (1.1, 64). This simple statement reflects the magazine’s particular strength: the development of an ecology of writing. This theory of *ecomposition* highlights the relationship created among writers and readers of texts, and how both the physical context in which works are written and read and social relationships come to inform writing.

Richard Coe, one of the earliest scholars to formalize this theoretical approach, defines eco-logic as “[a]ny logic which considers wholes as wholes, not by analyzing them into their component parts” (232). This framework is essential to understanding the intent and impact of *Negro Story*. More significant than the many well-known writers published in the pages of this magazine is the development of a community of writers and readers and the elements that unify their work. Each story on its own provides only a small piece of the larger image; when considered together, the stories weave the rich and complicated tapestry that more clearly depict the experiences of Black Americans.

In her book *The Chicago Black Renaissance and Women's Activism*, Anne Meis Knupfer considers *Negro Story* as having the role of a “writers’ workshop,” developing writers and stories as opposed to isolating the final product alone (66). She sees this emphasis as a larger pattern within the Chicago Black art scene, of which community support of the arts was central to its success, and upon which the Works Progress Administration (WPA) of the Great Depression had a huge influence. According to Knupfer, the WPA encouraged writers “to use the sociological methods of interviewing and participant observation to ‘get at’ community perspectives” (52). This observation falls clearly in line with the work of *Negro Story*, both in content and process. The magazine’s efforts to provide a space for amateur writers and to create collaboration between this group and its prestigious “advisors,” including Langston Hughes, Chester Himes, and Ralph Ellison, encouraged the development of an intellectual community, while the magazine’s professed desire to publish stories “about real people” (*NS* 1.1, 1) reflects its sociological approach.

These core components of *Negro Story* make ecomposition a useful framework for investigating the magazine’s significance. Marilyn Cooper, another early proponent of ecologies of writing, notes that “language and texts are not simply the means by which individuals discover and communicate information, but are essentially social activities, dependent on social structures and process not only in their interpretive but also in their constructive phases” (366). Again, both the creation and the consumption of *Negro Story* represent the work of writers in conversation with one another and with their readers. Emerging from the community-based atmosphere of the New Deal art scene and the reality of World War II and its reception by the Black community, *Negro Story* can best be understood as an ideological intervention. As the

opening “Letter to Our Readers” suggests, the output of the magazine appears to be secondary to the process of building it. The editors highlight the role of the contributors over their output and close the letter by considering the place of their work in “the creation of a better world”—an act of construction not passive communication (NS 1.2, 56). This cooperative process also produced a distinct kind of writing, leading to stories that are reflections of the neighborhood in which they were published as well as products of the places in which they were produced, and which coalesce into a collection marked by harmonious diversity.

Browning and Gayden purposefully shape the collaborative nature of *Negro Story* by being responsive to their readers from the start. Whereas the initial issues lay out the editors’ vision for the magazine, subsequent editions focus more on public responses to content as they might shape the future of the publication. For example, the fourth issue includes an item titled “What Should the Negro Story Be?: Letters from Our Readers” and responses to the question reflect a wide array of priorities to synthesize. Earl Conrad, a white, Jewish writer who investigated lynching for the *Chicago Defender* and later co-wrote a memoir with one of the Scottsboro Boys—along with contributing to, and editing, *Negro Story*—highlights the ways in which the “Negro stor[ies]” which make up the magazine must simultaneously be particular and universal, elucidating the specifics of the Black experience while still commenting on those human experiences of “*truth, freedom, justice, and love*” (NS 1.4, 58, emphasis original). This request for a balance between political commentary and everyday experience is at the heart of each issue of *Negro Story*. A second letter comes from Jack Conroy, a white, Irish-American author who edited several literary magazines himself and worked with Arna Bontemps on writing Black history for the Illinois Writers’ Project. Conroy calls attention to the problems

Blacks face after the war as well as the problem of relating their concerns in a simultaneously relatable and realistic manner. His advice is to seek out “Negro names of the past which offer stirring and dramatic historical material for writers,” considering the field of historical fiction to be “as inexhaustible as life itself and ... almost virginal” (*NS* 1.4, 60). *Negro Story* manifests the core of this recommendation in its quest to represent very real scenes of Black life. Rather than pulling from the far past, the magazine features stories with settings that draw from more recent African American experience, from incidents of lynching to Black soldiers’ experiences both at war and on the home front. While the stories are not historic in nature, they certainly meet Conroy’s criteria for authentic sources of conflict and represent an equally vast source of inspiration. The final and shortest letter in this section comes from Alain Locke, noted Negro scholar and architect of the Harlem Renaissance. His vision for the “Negro story” is simple: “base this material on a high regard for originality and authenticity without the slightest regard for the racial identity of the authors” (*NS* 1.4, 60). This practice will not only result in the best representations of Negro experience, it will hold Black and white writers accountable for reaching the same standard and creating an authentic product, out of the “courageous collaboration” that is at the heart of Gayden and Browning’s vision (*NS* 1.4, 60).

Though sometimes noted in the biographical section, the race of contributors is most often left ambiguous, and when the writer in question is an amateur, it is nearly impossible for modern scholars to determine his or her racial identity. Consequently, in the following sections of this investigation, stories will be grouped together without regard for the race of the author, due in part to the difficulty of determining race but more significantly in recognition of *Negro Story*’s own firmly established editorial practice. Though racial designations will not be used to

organize the analysis of these contributions, it is still significant in considering the intention and impact of individual writers and works of fiction. The ways in which writers employ race—are they white or Black, are they writing *as* a white or Black individual?—are significant and are taken into consideration. Ultimately the collaborative nature of the magazine relies on the recognition of both similarity and difference, as does the analysis of the product this community produced.

Another place for reader comments are the “Editor’s Mailbox,” “Just to Mention,” and “Letter from a Reader” sections found in several issues. Overwhelmingly positive, most of these notes consist of praise for the magazine’s intentions and pledges of support. Other correspondents offer feedback on specific stories, such as a letter from Jimmie Daniels that comments on five of the eleven different contributions from the previous issue. While Daniels’ comments are glowing—he even constructs a florid metaphor comparing Richard Bentley’s first story “Tomorrow” to a delicately played cello solo (*NS* 1.4, 47) —other readers are less forgiving. The same Bentley story drew wide criticism according to a note in the “Just to Mention” section of the subsequent issue. While some readers found the reactions overblown—“After the present-day novels, I wonder why there is so much commotion about one little story” —Bentley’s relatively graphic story of sexual assault was not popular with many others. One woman threatened, “Let me know if there are any more like this so I *will not* read it” (*NS* 1.5, 53, emphasis original). This column offers the most direct access to the interaction between editors and readers of the magazine, and Browning pulls no punches in her responses. She takes certain commentators to task, pointing out to a children’s librarian that the magazine was intended for an adult audience, therefore justifying the inclusion of this story on sexual assault, and correcting

assumptions about its authorship by noting that it is by “a Negro writer writing about whites” (NS 1.5, 52). Browning offers uncomfortable readers an out, though it seems more like a rebuke: “you either like a frank and bold treatment of sex or you do not. One can hardly change his attitudes overnight if he is used to the ‘hush-hush’ and mystery attitude of sex portrayal” (NS 1.5, 53). In the end, the magazine editors not only defend the content they have published but insist on doing so in a public way. Browning holds herself accountable to her readers and welcomes their reactions, even if in this instance she works rather quickly to dispense of their critique.

The exchange in *Negro Story* regarding “Tomorrow” shines a light on the careful balancing act that *Negro Story* achieved between forging a united front and acknowledging the diversity within the community that it was building. Audre Lorde comments on how those who have been silenced must communally reject their own disenfranchisement in the essay “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House”:

As women, we have been taught to either ignore our differences or to view them as causes for separation and suspicion rather than as forces for change. Without community there is no liberation, only the most vulnerable and temporary armistice between an individual and her oppression. But community must not mean a shedding of our differences, not the pathetic pretense that these differences do not exist. (qtd in Moraga 99)

Negro Story not only attempted to unite writers, editors, and readers across racial groups, but sought readers from diverse class and gender backgrounds as well. The stories reflect Lorde’s insistence on acknowledging difference as a means of fighting oppression; they depict men and women, white and Black, wealthy and working class. The interactions between the editors and

readers create the same effect, recognizing the different interests and goals that individuals might have for the magazine rather than silencing dissenting opinions.

It must be noted that “Tomorrow” was, in fact, Browning’s own piece. While Browning worked behind the scenes to shape *Negro Story* through her editorial work, she also featured her creative writing, albeit under several pen names. These pieces, attributed to either Lila Marshall or Richard Bentley, are somewhat paradoxical, as they are simultaneously more personal than her relatively faceless editorial work and associated with names other than her own. These personae were even given clear backstories in the authors’ pages of the magazine, each reflecting different elements of Browning’s own life experience. Marshall is introduced as having “had stories published in the *Pittsburgh Courier* [and] is interested in athletics and social service work” (*NS* 1.1, 2). Browning did, in fact, publish her first story, “New Year’s Eve 1942,” in the *Courier* under the Marshall pen name (Tracy 135). In subsequent issues, she is further characterized as “a new writer who is exploiting various phases of Negro life” and interested in art (*NS* 1.3, 2).

The use of the word “exploiting” is interesting, as the issue that follows is the first that features Richard Bentley and the only one in which Browning also includes a story by Lila Marshall. This issue is also the first in which Browning is the sole editor, Gayden having found it necessary to leave due to the constraints of her social work. In the wake of Gayden’s departure, Browning unveiled an expansive new vision for the magazine, including a drama section, excerpts from a novel, contests to encourage new submissions, and even an entirely new youth magazine entitled *Child’s Play*, perhaps inspired by reader comments regarding

“Tomorrow.” Most significantly, however, Browning began to more heavily use the magazine to promote her own writing and to complement of the kind of fiction that she was creating.

While the content of some of Browning’s stories will be assessed later in conjunction with other contributions to *Negro Story*, what is of particular interest here is the way in which Browning is in conversation with herself and other writers through the use of multiple identities in seemingly separate roles. Richard Bentley, who has a far more developed identity than Browning’s previous, and female, pen name, is given considerably more commendation within the editorial sections of the magazine. “He” is first introduced in the fourth issue in the following way:

RICHARD BENTLEY, author of *Tomorrow*, the seduction story which appears in this issue, says he had not read Hemingway when he wrote this story, but he seems to have gone as far with it as the “great modern” did in his story “*Up in Michigan*.” Mr. Bentley has written several stories that will appear in our coming issues. *Negro Story* intends to be *experimental* and will print stories dealing frankly with sex as well as those dealing with any other phases of life. We are open to the unusual at all times. We do not have the inhibitions necessary for the slick magazine. (NS 1.4, 62)

Looking beyond the obvious self-promotion, this pseudo-biography initiates several important trends. First, it is one of many instances in which Browning alludes to conversations with Bentley, clearly constructing him as a figure outside of herself. This narrative voice is a practical necessity in maintaining her pen name, but it also allows Browning to exercise two very different voices, one male and one female, one editorial and one narrative. She claims that Bentley has

never read Hemingway; yet Browning, as editor, clearly has in prompting the readers to connect the style and effect of the two authors. This seeming contradiction draws attention to the different roles played by a reader and a writer while simultaneously uniting the tasks of creation and reception, just as Bentley and Browning are united in one person.

This first introduction of Bentley sets forth a new direction for the magazine, one that also serves as a personal challenge by Browning. Through her writing as Bentley, she pushes herself away from the more romantic topics she covered as Lila Marshall and ventures into more sensational topics, writing about sexual assault, infidelity, and incest in the first three stories attached to this name. Though she claims to be uninhibited and “frank,” Browning can only venture into these subjects under her alternate identity, disguised, so to speak, as a man. She may be intent upon pushing boundaries, but does it in the safest way imaginable by distancing herself from the product she has created. This simultaneously serves as a singular strength in her work; by using one identity for her fiction and another for her editorial content, Browning can begin to interrogate her own writing as an outsider might. This ability is a microcosm of what *Negro Story* is all about: putting different voices in conversation with one another to build a more complex whole.

Browning’s commentary on her own work, separated as it is from her role as editor and by her use of an alternate identity, is a starting point from which further collaboration and collective identification begins for *Negro Story*. In her essay “La Guerra,” self-professed “radical woman of color” Cherrie Moraga writes about the need to recognize the specificity of oppression in different groups while still maintaining genuine discourse: “one voice is not enough, nor two, although this is where dialogue begins. It is essential the radical feminists

confront their fear of and resistance to each other, because without this, there *will* be no bread on the table. Simple, we will not survive. ...The real power, as you and I well know, is collective” (34, emphasis original). Being in conversation with herself as both editor and author, Browning can only hope to begin this conversation. As Moraga insists, a large-scale collaboration is at the heart of any attempt to assert power from a disenfranchised position; there is a reason for the cliché about power in numbers. In *Negro Story*, Browning’s own identity is diffused, dispersed not only across her pen names but also throughout the magazine itself. When she insists that “we do not have the inhibitions necessary for the slick magazine” (*NS* 1.4, 62, emphasis added), the first person plural is not incidental, encompassing not just the physical magazine and the editorial staff, but herself as well as all contributors and readers. In this collective “we,” she beckons to readers with a newly constructed collective identity—risk-taking, raw, and real.

Simultaneously self-promoting and self-critical, Browning’s commentary regarding her pseudonymous writing can be read as a reflection on the process of the magazine itself. The many instances of Browning’s commentary on Bentley, and therefore on both herself and her magazine, embody this comparison. In defending “Tomorrow” in the subsequent issue of *Negro Story*, Browning insists, “This new author, while not yet having complete command of his interesting material, has a certain amount of skill in technique and detail as can be seen by *The Slave*, appearing in this issue. He is sincerely attempting to break down some of the fixed ideas in the minds of many people concerning miscegenation” (*NS* 1.5, 55). The vision of *Negro Story* presented here is that of evolution and amelioration. While the skill of the writer is commented on, it is not the central element by which the story’s impact should be judged. Instead, sincerity is highlighted as the most effective tool for creating a message with impact.

Again emphasizing the communal, Browning implies that Bentley's work is only truly successful in as far as it is received by the reader, declaring her intent as both author and editor to change minds, an inherently cooperative act.

Readers can also see Browning's own voice evolving over the course of *Negro Story's* publication, a small-scale representation of the effectiveness of the magazine in cultivating a community of writers who influence and improve each other. In her work as Lila Marshall, Browning tends to cover more superficial topics. Her first story is that of a momentary romance between two skaters at a public rink. While the story introduces an early interest in questions of fidelity when the flirtatious male skater is revealed to be engaged, this piece lacks the social concerns that take a leading role in Browning's later work. Her next piece, "Viney Taylor," also reads as relatively superficial next to her later work as Bentley. This Marshall story presents the complex tension between Black women and the influence of white standards of beauty using cheap stereotypes, such as the angry Black woman female who vents her frustration towards her unfaithful partner against another woman rather than the culprit himself. The use of superficial tropes like this one undermine the magazine's larger attempt to convey the complexity and nuance of Black life. Marshall's next few stories quickly introduce racial tension at the center of the conflict, considering a neighborhood race riot from the perspective of a small girl and the tensions that arise within a mixed-race marriage due to the pressures of individual families. These stories take place in a domestic setting, and while they anticipate the general themes of Bentley's work—miscegenation, infidelity, and isolation—they do so in a far less assertive voice.

In emerging as Bentley, then, Browning begins to develop an edge to her fiction that is absent from her work under a female name. Bentley's work is brash, starting with the racy and unsettling sexual conflict central in "Tomorrow" in which the inner thoughts of the male protagonist reveal him as a predator of the worst kind and which depicts the female victim as still in love with her assailant by the tale's end. To see this kind of story authored by a man evokes an initial outrage in modern readers, yet the revelation that Browning herself is the author transforms what might be a misogynistic ego trip into a subtle commentary on sexual violence and rape culture; in representing an altercation that is fundamentally all about power, she maintains the ultimate control as creator. Similar subtleties emerge in other stories due to the gap between the perceived male authorship and the real female author beneath. Browning not only takes advantage of a male name to cover topics that might otherwise seem out of bounds, but to subvert readers' expectations of what male and female writing can and should be.

Chapter 3: Repression and Autonomy: Women's Writing About Men

"The first movement he made the following morning was to reach under his pillow for the gun. In the grey light of dawn he held it loosely, feeling a sense of power. Coud killa man wida gun like this. Kill anybody, black er white. And if he were holding his gun in his hand nobody could run over him; they would have to respect him."

Richard Wright, "Almos' A Man" (NS 1.1, 54)

Browning is the only established example of a female writing under a male pen name found in *Negro Story*, but many women chose to write stories with a male protagonist or even from a masculine point of view. These pieces might initially seem easy to pass over when considering that the magazine also specifically exposed female experience, but in some ways they are the most illuminating contributions when considering how women positioned themselves as writers. These stories allowed female writers to step outside of themselves and consider male and female characters from an outsider perspective. The depictions of men and women within such writing offers a counterpoint to established gender roles and gives insight as to which ostensibly male concerns and qualities most impacted the women writers in their lives.

Many of these stories concern war in some measure, as do a large share of the pieces in the magazine overall. Beyond the specific concerns of African Americans during World War II, these narratives share a common focus on poor communication, conflict, and violence in relation to their male protagonists. While those same issues arise throughout the magazine, these stories stand out in that the miscommunication happens *within* the Black community, whereas in many other stories misunderstanding or hostility occurs between African Americans and whites.

Frequently the disconnection seems to be a result of gender itself, as men and women fail to recognize each other's basic needs while dealing with the pressures surrounding race, class, and wartime politics.

To contextualize this type of story, it is interesting to consider two of the leading voices in the Chicago literary community at the time: Richard Wright and Gwendolyn Brooks. Wright, of course, was well established as an icon of the Black Chicago Renaissance, emerging out of the Great Depression like so many other African American artists. By the time *Negro Story* was first published, he was the single most iconic Black writer in the city, and thus obtaining permission to publish one of his stories in the inaugural issue was a huge coup for Browning and Gayden.

The young writer Brooks was also published in the first issue of *Negro Story*, but she was hardly a household name. These ventures in *Negro Story* were among her earliest successes, and she rose to prominence after the publication of her first poetry collection, *A Street in Bronzeville*, in 1945.

Two writers, one at the peak of his influence and one very early in her career, thus appear side by side in *Negro Story*. These artists also took an active role in the rich literary community in Chicago in the first half of the 20th century. Wright, alongside Fern Gayden, was a founding member of the well-known South Side Writers Group, while Brooks took part in a series of poetry workshops through the famous South Side Community Arts Center. Perhaps as a result of this kind of collaborative work, Wright and Brooks went on to publish their own visions of what Black writing ought to be. While the two pieces, Wright's "Blueprint for Negro Writing" and Brooks's "Poets who are Negros," are written over a decade apart, which must account for some of their differences, they present strikingly similar overall claims that may serve as a template for considering the writing within *Negro Story*.

Wright's famous didactic piece "Blueprint for Negro Writing" was first published in 1937, a year before he received national attention for his collection *Uncle Tom's Children*. In

this multi-part essay, Wright sets forth a new vision within the Black artistic community for what African American writing ought to be. In the past, he argues, the church and the emerging Black middle class took the lead in guiding the Black community; however, Wright believes their influence was then waning. He insists that “a new role is devolving upon the Negro writer. He is being called upon to do no less than create values by which his race is to struggle, live and die” (Wright 102). This intention, he claims, has not been served by the bulk of the writing that emerged from the Harlem Renaissance, work which was created under the patronage of the white upper class and did not represent the experiences of “real” African American subjects. The divide between Black workers and the Black bourgeoisie resulting from this white patronage led Black artists to create works for a white audience rather than for their own communities. Thus, Wright paints the role of the Negro writer in largely political terms, seeing it as a sort of reclamation and an impetus for societal and structural reform.

Brooks’s “Poets who are Negroes” was published in 1950, years after the end of both the Great Depression and WWII have brought prosperity to much of white America, yet left Black citizens as disempowered and disenfranchised as when Wright’s piece was published. Brooks’s essay is brief, just over a half of a page and nearer to poetry than manifesto. While Wright sees Black writing through the lens of politics, Brooks sees it through the lens of art. She insists that

Every Negro poet has “something to say.” Simply because he is a Negro; he cannot escape having important things to say. His mere body, for that matter, is an eloquence. His quiet walk down the street is a speech to the people. Is a rebuke, is a plea, is a school. But no real artist is going to be content with offering raw materials. The Negro poet’s most urgent duty, at present, is to polish his technique,

his way of presenting his truths and his beauties, that these may be more insinuating and, therefore, overwhelming. (Brooks 312)

Brooks insists that Black writing must elevate itself beyond plot and carefully consider the artistic merit of the presentation in order to communicate effectively. This belief closely echoes sentiments from Gayden's and Browning's second "Letter to Our Readers," which states:

[T]he major portion of creative writing by the Negro writer has been of a protest nature; he has used fiction as a vehicle for shouting aloud his problems. He is still crying aloud for justice. That the Negro writer should propagandize and reflect bitterness of attitude is understandable, but he must try to study the techniques of writing and portray his material as artistically as possible. (NS 1.2, 1)

The stress on fiction as a means of protest in *Negro Story* also takes readers back to Wright.

Brooks implies that the Negro experience is in itself grounds for a story and, if told well, does not necessarily need a greater agenda. Wright, however, seems more concerned with the content of the stories themselves, agreeing with Browning and Gayden that Black writing is inherently propagandistic. He does interest himself in the way in which the stories are told, specifying that

[The Negro writer's] vision need not be simple nor rendered in primer-like terms; for the life of the Negro people is not simple. The presentation of their lives should be simple, yes; but all the complexity, the strangeness, the magic wonder of life that plays like a bright sheen over the most sordid existence, should be there. To borrow a phrase from the Russians, it should have *complex simplicity*.

(Wright 103, emphasis original)

In this description readers can see a presentiment of Brooks's stronger interest in artistry, though it lacks specificity: what is this "magic wonder" of Negro life and how can these writers portray it? Brooks, on the other hand, dedicates the bulk of her short essay towards fleshing out her vision of what good writing should be, not in explicit direction but in masterful execution. Her metaphor comparing raw political discourse to uncooked "dough," unfit for mass consumption (Brooks 312), demonstrates her vision for Black writing far more effectively than pages of description ever could.

Thus the inherent differences between these two visions of African American writing become known. Wright's is a clear platform, with subheadings and instructions; Brooks's is a shimmering image of what the outcome of such craftsmanship might be. It is more productive, however, to consider the two essays as continuum rather than contrast. Despite his desire for Black writers to capture the "magic wonder" of their experience, Wright's concern is clearly on content over form. It had to be. Barbara Foley comments on the role of Marxism and Black Nationalism in Wright's early work: "Entry into the domain of the folk, according to Wright, entails neither a conflation of race with class nor an escape from confronting their interrelation, but instead a means of investing writers with revolutionary consciousness" (189). Wright was critical of writers who did not give explicit attention to the social and political hardships of everyday Black life in their work. Brooks, working over a decade later, had the luxury of considering the nuance and craftsmanship of writing because of the groundwork laid by Wright and others. Still she, too, has political implications within her message. When she insists that "[the Negro's] body itself is an eloquence. His quiet walk down the street is a speech to the

people. Is a rebuke, is a plea, is a school,” these actions are more than aesthetic; they are inherently political, as is Black writing.

Both Wright and Brooks agree on one central point: there *must* be unity within a community of writers to achieve any larger goal. Under the sub-heading “The Necessity for Collective Work,” Wright states the following: “It goes without saying that these things cannot be gained by Negro writers if their present mode of isolated writing and living continues” (106).

Writing must be created within a community, springing from an ecology like the one created by *Negro Story*, but it also must speak to this same community; Black artists need to write for each other, not just for whites. Brooks’ dough metaphor implies the same need for communal consumption over a decade later. In the intervening years, *Negro Story* emerges as an exemplar for what this forum of production and consumption might look like. Wright’s and Brooks’s complementary pathways to developing Black writing also offer readers two lenses through which to view the contents of *Negro Story* magazine: artistry and realism.

Within the pages of *Negro Story*, women use the voice of male characters to attempt both, taking a perspective different from their own to reveal a deeper truth about race *and* gender as they intersect. These authors reveal something about themselves through their relationship to their male characters as well as through their perspective on “male” struggles and flaws. In his work *The Dialogic Imagination*, M.M. Bakhtin describes what he calls a “double-voiced discourse,” one which contains two speakers, the character and the author, with two distinct intentions, in conversation with one another (324). This kind of dialogue emerges in this subset of texts from *Negro Story* with perhaps an additional layer of complexity: the female authors engage in discourse with their male protagonists, but the secondary female characters

often play another distinct role in these conversations, exemplifying the inherent lack of power women possess in the face of male anger. What results is a complex investigation of conflict and violence that emerges through the coalescence of multiple female voices and perspectives within the magazine. The four stories “Hal,” “The Rock Heart,” “Private Jeff Johnson,” and “Achievement” come together to create a clear trajectory from impotence to power, investigating the emergence of oppression and how it manifests itself as violence among and by men within the Black community.

In the very first edition of *Negro Story*, readers encounter Lucille Miller’s “Hal,” a story which depicts a boy much older than his peers struggling to assimilate to the expectations of his teacher and classmates within a fourth-grade classroom. This subject matter is ideal for underscoring the confluence of externally imposed and internally enforced expectations of male behavior in creating division and violence. Miller’s sympathetic portrayal of the protagonist, Hal, is immediately obvious through her use of third-person limited narration to reveal his inner thoughts, which clearly with contrast his antagonistic outward behavior. First, she makes clear to the audience how Hal’s misbehavior and anger stem from a clear sense of fear and impotence, rather than innate aggression. As Hal vainly attempts to settle into his schoolwork, “He look[s] around again at the children, most of them doing arithmetic. Why couldn’t he work like that? Shucks, he was tired of jus’ writing and writing. He liked to write better than anything, but he was just tired-sho nuff tired” (NS 1.1, 15). Here, the boy’s desire to succeed appears wholly at odds with his environment, suggesting that Hal acts out to avoid revealing his sense of inadequacy. Miller’s use of dialect enforces Hal’s perspective, and his internal contradictions show a boy who is at war with himself.

As the story progresses the teacher, Mrs. Williams, makes good on multiple threats to report to the principal Hal's misbehavior, which includes continuously disrupting the class by flinging pins at his younger classmates. This meeting with Mr. Johnson results in a plan to remove Hal from the school. When Mrs. Williams presents the other school, a reform school, as a fresh start, he pleads, "'How can I be a good boy when ah'm going' to that school for bad boys?' Hal's eyes were full of tears and he turned his head away" (*NS* 1.1, 17). Hal's inability to admit his academic limitations is the initial source of his bad behavior, which only escalates as he attempts to establish his own authority to act in the face of his teacher's threats. The narration following Hal's question further reveals the internal conflict with which the boy is attempting to deal and suggests a greater struggle faced by Black men in general: the need to suppress emotion in order to appear strong and the ways in which this suppression often manifests itself as violence.

Hal, child though he is, recognizes how difficult it is to escape from the expectations of masculinity and their corrosive effects. He "foolishly" tells Mrs. Williams, "Naw, its [sic] too late now, you done sent it. ... I've got a start now, I can't stop," (*NS* 1.1, 18). Bakhtin's double-voiced discourse is clearly present in this small moment. Hal's dialogue insists on a cycle of violence that is inescapable. He believes that his life is set on a course that is beyond his control. Miller subtly underscores that this narrative is false, insisting that Hal's belief is "foolish." In one word she re-imagines a story that men have told themselves for generations and shows that their entrapment is, in large part, a result of their compliance to the pressure to remain caught up in a cycle of poor decisions, never recognizing that there is always a choice to be made. This kind of thinking is especially toxic within the Black community, where so many individual

choices have already been stripped away, making the little self-determination left especially crucial.

Equally important is Hal's perception of his teacher, who Miller initially presents as adversarial. Early in the narrative the rigid demands of classroom decorum frustrate Hal and he begins to provoke his classmates by flinging pins at them. He protests his innocence, but his teacher responds with thinly veiled hostility: "'That's just the trouble—you ain't doin' nothin' mimicked the teacher sarcastically'" (NS 1.1, 15). This description quickly reveals Hal's own sense that he is isolated, struggling alone without the champion whom he so desperately needs.

Later in the story, as the conflict grows to a climax, Hal lashes out in frustration at his sense of inadequacy by throwing and kicking his textbook; the teacher responds to violence with violence by pulling him up by the hair, dragging him to the front of the room by the ear, and slapping both cheeks (NS 1.1, 18). Significantly, this is the most violent action occurring in the story to this point, and the perpetrator is a woman. More importantly, it is a person of authority wielding physical force against a child, thus validating Hal's belief that his teacher is his enemy rather than his advocate.

The relationship between Mrs. Williams and her student isn't always so easy to understand, and Miller does not depict the teacher as a simple textbook villain despite Hal's own image of her. Early in the story, it is made clear that Mrs. Williams has warned Hal about his behavior multiple times; she reprimands him twice within the story's diegesis before taking him to the principal. She also expresses what she sees as a legitimate fear that Hal threatens the other children in her care. After the meeting with the principal in which Hal is expelled, Mrs. Williams attempts to give the boy a sort of pep talk about the opportunity of reform school, countering in

some way Hal's impression that she is an antagonistic force in his life. She consoles him, "No, dear, now don't feel that way—it will help you—you'll be happy—they are good to boys like you"; "Now, Hal, haven't I always been nice to you?... I've tried to be patient with you—tell me why do you get into so much trouble—why?" (*NS* 1.1, 17). On its surface, this explanation for her actions towards Hal seems reasonable. His punishment was not arbitrary, her actions not whimsical but a natural extension of her attempts to reach him. In light of Hal's already established perspective on his teacher, something about Mrs. Williams's speech registers as disingenuous. It seems self-serving, as she tries to distance herself from the outcome of the meeting with the principal. Readers see, of course, that Hal's own pattern of misbehavior is directly responsible for the consequences that he faces, but the teacher's flimsy excuses and lies—"they are good to boys like you"—work against her credibility in the eyes of the boy and the reader. She attempts to backpedal, saying placatingly, "[P]erhaps if you work hard, we may not send it.... if you try you might have another chance" (*NS* 1.1, 18). Readers, like Hal himself, immediately recognize that it is too late for redemption; the punishment is set, the paperwork sent. This contradictory view of the teacher makes her actions difficult to read. That both Hal and Miller seem to feel ambivalent towards her, unsure if she could be or ever was a trusted ally, legitimizes, on some level, the sense of futility that Hal expresses throughout the story.

Even while revealing these inconsistencies, Miller's narration allows readers to sympathize with Mrs. Williams, specifically as a woman if not as a figure of authority or protection. While she is the one to escalate the violence in the story, Hal's response to that rough treatment takes on a much darker nature. In the end, he strikes out at her, "hitting something soft.... She was clutching the front of her blouse. Her face looked red and queer" (*NS* 1.1, 18).

The narration is imprecise, implying that Hal is no longer fully in control of his actions and lacks a clear understanding of what he has done. Mrs. Williams' reactions—clutching her blouse, turning red, and later crying—draw parallels between Hal's actions and sexual assault.

While his intentions seem defensive rather than predatory, the teacher's response highlights the special kind of fear that women experience and that men cannot truly understand. She is a fourth-grade teacher, but Hal is much older and bigger than his classmates are. In light of the physical threat that he could prove to be, Mrs. Williams's behavior throughout the story can easily be read as a natural defense to what she believes to be a potentially dangerous, sexually violent situation. By presenting both Hal's and Mrs. Williams's reactions to this climactic contact, Miller highlights the conflicting concerns of men and women regarding self-defense, the former being more concerned with perceived emotional weakness and the latter with more immediate physical vulnerability. These serve as an invisible and perhaps insurmountable barrier between them. The story effectively depicts men hiding their struggles at an early age, as well as the difficulty women face in being shut out as a result, leaving them unable offer meaningful support. While Mrs. Williams often appears cold and ineffective, she is never given the opportunity to truly help Hal due in part to the boy's own actions and, more importantly, due to the societal expectations imposed upon the two of them. Over time individuals internalize these gender norms and begin to reinforce them, as Miller makes clear through the assumptions both Mrs. William and Hal make about each other. Each character is, therefore, responsible for perpetuating the misunderstandings that arise from perceived gender difference. As a story by women about men, "Hal" works effectively to show the early age at which men internalize their

gender roles and disempower women in their lives and communities, adding gender tension to an already volatile racial atmosphere.

In the final issue of *Negro Story* in 1946, Martha Parks offers a complementary depiction of the frustration faced by young Black men from a female perspective. Parks, who is noted as both white and southern in her biography, contributed “The Rock Heart,” a story of a troubled relationship between two young brothers. The author’s status as a white woman complicates her position in writing from the perspective of a Black adolescent. Like the other female authors mentioned here, she is writing against her gender, highlighting how women view men rather than offering a revelation of male perspective or values. Parks’s racial identity adds another layer of complexity; providing readers an opportunity to see the experience of Black men from a true outsider perspective both offers the potential benefit of distance between author and subject and the likely disadvantage of a lack of shared experience linking Parks to her characters and audience.

While “Hal” concerns itself mainly with forces of aggression and conflict within a racial group, “The Rock Heart” considers how violence from outside a community can corrode even the most essential relationships within it. Again, the central point of tension for the audience concerns sympathy. In this case, the reader is caught between the focal character, George, and his naive younger brother, Bill. From the start, it is easy to sympathize with Bill’s sweet innocence in the face of his brother’s brusque attempts to evade him. Parks’s narrative begins as Bill follows behind the clearly disgruntled George, who is off for a walk: “Bill came right up beside him and looked up into his face with those big, round Black eyes and asked, like he couldn’t believe it, ‘Didn’t you want me to come with you, George?’”(NS II.iii, 15). When

allowed to tag along, “he grinned happily” (*NS II.iii*, 16). Bill’s responses are simple and pure, which makes him loveable and the violence that befalls him all the more horrifying. The boys encounter a rabbit, at which George immediately throws rocks, much to Bill’s dismay. George, disgusted in equal parts by his brother’s tenderness toward the animal and his inability to defy George by protecting the creature, lashes out in a premeditated act of violence by bashing his brother’s head with a large rock, seriously injuring him. Bill *is* the rabbit, weak, perhaps, but mostly defenseless against his aggressor. As George comes towards him, “A smile flickered across Bill’s face and died. His eyes grew wide with disbelief... . He raised no fist of opposition” (*NS II.iii*, 17). Bill maintains his characteristically open reactions until the end. His refusal to participate in violence appears to be the trait that disgusts his brother, leading to his near destruction, but it is also the central trait that renders him likeable to the reader.

Bill’s authentic and straightforward emotional reactions are in direct contrast to his brother’s moody internalization of conflict. Much like Miller in “Hal,” Parks takes advantage of a third-person limited perspective to create a connection between her audience and her protagonist. This point of view allows Parks to give a clear voice to George’s feelings about Bill while also painting a clearer image of the everyday brotherly conflict that somehow leads to George’s murderous act. George sees Bill as a terrible tag-along: “For days now, it had been more than he could stand. Every minute, it seemed like, Bill was there.” (*NS II.iii*, 15).

George’s tense response to his brother’s presence is the result of many instances of unsought company, building frustration within the older boy. This building tension mirrors the repeated encounters between Black and white boys within the community to which George alludes:

“‘Why didn’t you fight,’ George asked [Bill] bitterly, ‘when that white boy called you a yellow

coon and took your books away from you? ... They hit you first. They're gonna kill you someday, if you can't hit them back'" (*NS II.iii*, 16). George is disgusted by Bill's refusal to defend himself, but in reality both boys remain powerless in these interracial conflicts. White boys can fight back, but Black boys cannot; aside from the immediate consequence of physical violence, the lack of legal protection for African Americans makes retaliation impossible. George attacks Bill because he cannot inflict this kind of damage on their white assailants. By striking out at Bill, George can release the resulting tension without the harsh consequences of interracial conflict.

These encounters also represent a deeper source of conflict between the brothers. His brother's reactions upset George: "the way Bill did—the way he never took up for himself, the way he made himself a blame Black coward... And Bill his own brother too. It made him so mad that—. He kicked a pebble viciously, unable to finish the thought" (*NS II.iii*, 15). Here is the underlying source of the conflict between the boys, and it is a complicated one. On one level, George appears to be protective of his brother, wanting to help him: "If he could just once make Bill fight back, like a white boy would, just once, he would never have to be faced with that long suffering, yes-yes, pleading gentleness again. If he could fight, really fight, it couldn't matter about being Black and having a Black brother then" (*NS II.iii*, 15). In George's eyes, Bill needs to respond to brutality in kind to protect himself; the older boy believes he is teaching the younger one to survive with dignity. Parks presents Bill's belief that violence must be met with violence as warped, but George holds this belief so firmly that it casts a redemptive light on his behavior. His other motivations, however, seem much less altruistic. George clearly considers Bill's aversion to conflict to be a blight upon his own reputation. He continuously references the

relationship between the two boys, implying that Bill's shortcomings are his own as well.

Perhaps this fear is the same kind seen in "Hal": raw emotion is equated with weakness and this undermines one's masculinity. Bill's passivity implicates George in his cowardice.

Essentially, "The Rock Heart" is the story of George's internal conflict, not of the physical altercation between the two brothers. This conflict is only made manifest through the narration, as George cannot seem to understand it himself, much less express it to others: "He didn't know what it was now about Bill's following him everywhere that made him so mad. Maybe granddaddy had been right when he said, 'You Black scum, you're like me. You got nothin but a hunk o' rock in your chest where other folks got hearts.' ... George didn't want to be hard that way. He didn't want to be hard, but how could he help it?" (NS II.iii, 15). George never makes the source of this hard-heartedness clear, but the events of the story suggest that it results from external pressures facing him as a young Black man and the way in which he internalizes them. The grandfather's assertion that both he and his grandson are "black scum" is a disturbing one; the older man represents society and imposes his assumptions about George on the boy, who lacks the confidence and authority to question this claim.

George's dialogue reveals his concern through displacement, as his concern for Bill is better understood as his fear for himself. He desperately insists to Bill, "'They're gonna kill you someday, if you can't hit em back.... You got to fight, so they'll be scared of you. You're just a Black coward unless you fight 'em back. You can't be no coward, you hear? You gotta fight back, like hell, I tell you'" (NS II.iii, 16, emphasis original). Through repetition, Park creates an increasingly urgent tone in George's plea, revealing his sense of desperation. While Bill sees alternatives to violent conflict, George is trapped in the belief that aggression is the only way to

claim individual power. Park is able to give a nuanced look at the desperation felt by young Black men from an outsider's perspective. While George's emotions are raw, Parks as an author are not; as a white woman, she has likely never found herself a direct participant in interracial violence and views questions of race from a position of privilege. Her familiarity with another kind of disempowerment as a result of her gender perhaps makes her depiction of Bill so compelling; her position makes it possible for her to imagine an alternative to the cycle of violence that is entirely outside of male expectations of behavior. This perspective also leads to a self-aware conclusion on the part of the protagonist, who comes to the surprising epiphany that in destroying his brother he has destroyed himself: "Once more, he kicked the mute form, in dull anger at himself. As he stood there looking down at it, the horror of what he had done grew like a Black cloud within his brain and the knowledge of his own defeat" (*NS* II.iii,18). This sense of "defeat" is the final thread that draws the parallel between George and Bill, making the story about an internal conflict rather than an external one. George is at war with himself, with the expectations that he has accepted about manhood, and with the threats that he sees to himself because he is Black.

In keeping with Bakhtin's dialectic, Park also incorporates a secondary female perspective that runs beneath the dominant voice of George. The character Ma serves to illuminate the misguided behavior of both boys and show positive and negative ways in which women might interact with the narrative of masculinity and violence. She is first invoked as a source for Bill's submissive behavior. George tells his brother, "I don't care what Ma says about leavin white boys alone. You got to turn round and sock em back. I told you I'd help you. Why did you have to run away like that? It's yellow!" (*NS* II.iii, 16). George decries Ma's doctrine of

disengagement, seeing it as an effeminizing force on his younger brother. Here, female influence attempts to undermine the power of violence, yet later in the story, when George insists that he purposefully attempted to kill his younger brother, his mother transforms into an enabler of his violent behavior: “‘No you didn’t [try to kill him],’ ma begged. ‘You were just playing. You didn’t mean nothing. It was just an accident, wasn’t it, George?’” (NS II.iii, 19).

Characterized as questioning and “begging,” Ma sanctions male violence as expected, going so far as to characterize the interaction between her sons as innocent play gone wrong. Bill *did* survive his brother’s attack, so his mother turns her attention to normalizing the situation. Her desperation to maintain the facade of her sons’ healthy relationship fosters a corrosive relationship between actual power and the use of force in her elder son. Ma’s desire to normalize her sons’ interactions also parallels George’s own rationalizations of his behavior toward Bill, as both characters attempt to displace their fears that the boys might be killed at white hands.

In this final issue of *Negro Story*, Parks brings readers full circle from Miller’s story in the first issue, returning to the question of what role women should play in mediating the violence of men. Both stories take advantage of the authors’ position as women, seen as outside of the brutality that consumes young Black men, in order to comment on how male conflict does indeed impact the women whom it touches as well as the men. Parks’s story characterizes Ma by her passivity, which contrasts with the active role that George takes in perpetuating the cycle of violence. In the face of threats to her family, both from the white community and from within her own home, she can only react to events which are outside of her control, highlighting her powerlessness.

Negro Story also includes positive accounts of how conflicts can be effectively de-escalated. Margaret Goss provides one of the earliest examples within the periodical of a female take on male problem solving in the second issue of the magazine. In her contribution, “Private Jeff Johnson,” internal conflict regarding racial tension is overcome to prevent violent disputes. The title character is in the midst of his medical examination for the military draft as the story opens. Goss, like Miller and Park, takes advantage from the start of the third-person limited narration to reveal Jeff’s deep distrust of the white community:

He hated white folks. The hate burned in him now as he warily eyed the white army doctor who was examining him at the induction center. He eyed him distrustfully. . . . Jefferson was Black and all of the experiences of his twenty-five years had taught him that white people had no earthly use for Black folks, so he resigned himself to his fate there in the induction center. He knew that he was headed straight for the army. (*NS* I.ii, 28)

While his outward actions are consistently polite, Jeff’s internal “hate” and “distrust” are immediately evident to the reader, setting up a sense of foreboding regarding both his involvement with the army and future interactions with white soldiers.

Jeff’s distaste for the army stems from racial concerns rather than from a lack of patriotism. Because of the Jim Crow experiences of his southern childhood, Jeff dreads returning to that part of the country for his training: “No, his knees would never rattle for fear of anybody except perhaps if it were a solid wall of white-robed, steel-faced men armed with shotguns and blow torches” (*NS* I.ii, 28). The clear reference to the Ku Klux Klan represents the systematic, sanctioned violence of Southern life for Black Americans. Again, Goss reveals the

internal conflict brewing within her protagonist that he himself never reveals in word or action.

This fear brings the dual concern facing Black soldiers sharply into focus, the precarious balance between these men's racial and national identities. Both are related to self-preservation: to shirk wartime duty would risk being denigrated as a coward and a traitor, but to give up the fight for racial equality would betray one's race and oneself. Jeff acknowledges, "Sure, he loved his country, only country he ever knew, but yet, things went on and he was called to fight" (*NS* I.ii, 28). This rationalization echoes the dual struggle of Black Americans that the Double V campaign sought to address.

The white doctor providing the exam insists the war will be good for Negroes, saying "Your folks will have a better chance if we win this war all together," but Jefferson insists that "There's only one thing that's bothering me—and that's the Hitlers right here" (*NS* I.ii, 28). Jeff rightly equates the eugenics-based policies of the Nazi party to the racist ideology rampant in the United States, and he insists upon prioritizing the threat at home. Immediately the specter of racism overpowers the more ideological threat of the Axis powers. Goss, as a woman, brings an interesting perspective to this specifically African American wartime crisis. In some ways she can sympathize with the doctor; he, free from racial concerns, is wholly invested in the war itself while she, not subject to active duty through the draft, might choose to focus solely on efforts to end segregation. Yet Black women like Goss were not truly exempt from the concerns of war, nor were they able to escape the issue of racism like their white counterparts could; it touched their daily lives in a multitude of ways. Women suffered emotionally as the men in their lives entered the military conflict. Domestic wartime measures, including rationing of food and raw materials, changed the way they managed their households. Women also participated in wartime

civil defense, worked in factories, and ran local branches of the Red Cross. Unlike Black men, women could not take an active role in the military conflict. Black men and women are linked, however, in the concern that their wartime efforts will do nothing to advance the cause of racial equality or, worse, that the war might lead to regressions in the fight against segregation. Goss draws from this sense of impotence as she narrates the experiences of her male protagonist, highlighting Jeff's sense of powerlessness.

Goss blends internal monologue with broader narrative strokes to link Jeff's internal conflict to a wider Black male experience. When he receives news that he will, in fact, be sent South,

Fears and doubts arose in his mind. What he felt was akin to the same uneasiness that the other fellows, Black, brown, and yellow colored boys expressed. They all gave off sullen looks. They bristled inwardly. They had heard and read the stories of how the colored fellows were treated and they declared that they would try to make good soldiers, but they wouldn't take nothing off of anybody. They carried the chips on their shoulders. (*NS* I.ii, 29)

Here, Jeff's personal experience becomes communal. The tension between proving themselves as soldiers and protecting themselves as African Americans is common to all Black soldiers, and Goss highlights this strain as her own narrative voice emerges within Jeff's consciousness, layering her authorial voice upon her character's. The larger Black fighting community shields its vulnerability behind a steely exterior, just as Jeff himself masks his fear with his determination to fight.

In the end Goss herself similarly cloaks a racial message beneath a patriotic one. At the climax of the story, a white military policeman continually and “accidentally” knocks Jeff’s cap to the floor, inviting a brawl: “The others began to catch on and they moved in closer, grimly intent. Twenty Negro soldiers and one White M.P. This was it. The colored boys looked at Jeff waiting for a sign” (*NS* I.ii, 29-30). All of Jeff’s fears become manifest in this moment, and Goss’s foreshadowing of it leads the reader to a state of heightened attention similar to that of the soldiers aching to respond. Jeff and Goss each upset the expectation of retaliation when the protagonist insists, “Listen, fellow, go on about your business, you ain’t starting no riot here” (*NS* I.ii, 30). This decision repulses his compatriots. “‘Jefferson Johnson, you’re a coward and a damn fool.’ This came from one of the colored boys. They were disgusted” (*NS* I.ii, 30). Like George in “The Rock Heart,” the Black soldiers equate conflict avoidance with timidity and emasculation. Despite the appearance of cowardice, this de-escalation is soon revealed to be a wise choice as a group of white M.P.s and townspeople arrive to support the instigator of the quarrel. What initially appeared to be a spontaneous conflict reveals itself as a carefully pre-meditated plan to incite a riot. This coordinated effort exemplifies the virulence of racism that Jeff so feared encountering in the Southern camp. This encounter is a simple lesson in conflict resolution: keep your head, don’t be rash, avoid instigation. The story plays off of other texts by female authors in *Negro Story*, revealing the role of miscommunication in exacerbating conflict, a lesson that can be applied to military and social strife alike.

Goss moves beyond the basic moral of self-regulation in a subtle way. She chooses to end her story on a note of patriotism, seeming to foreground nationalism over racial tension. When Jeff considers how to respond to the M.P.’s provocation he thinks, “[T]here was

something about the friendly smile of that white army doctor. To win this war, Black and white ought to be fighting Hitler, not each other” (*NS* I.ii, 29, 30). This reflection puts his response to the dispute into a noble context, where the concerns of the group are elevated over the ego of the individual. This sentiment is echoed in the closing lines, delivered by one of the other Black soldiers: “Sorry Jeff, you ain’t no coward, and you ain’t no fool. You’re just a clear-thinking man and a real soldier. A riot here today would have been just what Hitler wanted. The guy we want is Hitler” (*NS* I.ii, 30). Both of these comments cast an external enemy as the more pertinent threat, despite the immediacy of the racial antagonism at hand. While this decision might initially appear to de-emphasize the importance of civil rights, it is actually a shrewd move by Goss. Her ending paints the Black men as honorable and ethical in clear contrast to the scheming and predatory white soldiers, whose concern is not the fight against fascism but provoking petty disputes that subvert the larger cause of a noble war. Goss suggests that taking the so-called high road is not just a means to avoid conflict, but a strategy for defeating your enemies on the battlefield of everyday life.

For women, day-to-day victories do not require a wartime setting and succeed just as well within a professional space as on a battlefield, highlighting the ways in which the war for equality was fought on a far larger scale than that of military conflict. A piece from the penultimate issue of *Negro Story*, “Achievement” by Rebecca Lange, highlights the problem of racism beyond the immediate context of the war. While Goss’s story focuses on the need for careful action and communication within a Black community, Lange looks to interactions between Blacks and whites to examine prejudice at work. Her *Negro Story* biographical note describes Lange as “vital and deeply interested in the problems of minority groups everywhere

-- and progress can come only thru [sic] some sort of understanding, she believes”(NS II.ii, 66).

In “Achievement,” she explores the relationship between white laboratory technicians and a Black doctor within a hospital in order to make a point about how and when confrontation might be an effective means of addressing oppression.

The head technician, Miss Porter, follows the pattern of a somewhat sympathetic but ultimately dislikeable female character seen in so many of the texts from *Negro Story* that deal with male protagonists. She is described as a “frustrated old maid” (NS II.ii, 31) with an “imperious, demanding old woman” for a mother (NS II.ii, 32) and seems trapped by her limited life. This constraint in itself serves as an important commentary on the lives of women, who despite professional success are ultimately defined by their relationships to others in ways that men are not. This restrictive existence is what allows female writers a keen awareness of the repressed feelings expressed by the male characters in these stories. When Miss Porter overhears one of her technicians laughing with Dr. Archer, her

face had a set look. In Kentucky, thought Martha, an attractive young white girl doesn't engage in merry conversation with an attractive Negro doctor. And Martha remembered Miss Porter telling her a long time ago, “There was no other job open. I knew that colored folk worked here. I promised myself that if anything happened between me and them it could be considered my fault. I promised myself to let nothing happen, and I think I've kept that promise. (NS II.ii, 32)

Miss Porter's heightened sense of responsibility and self-awareness is reminiscent of Goss's protagonist, as both characters internalize societal expectations and create a moral code in

response. Lange balances a sense of entrapment and bigotry through Miss Porter's clear sense of responsibility, bred by her belief in her own moral superiority.

The necessity of calculated behavior and self-control ties the antagonistic Miss Porter to the very object of her scorn—Dr. Archer. In considering the relationship between her co-workers

Martha remembered that she had never seen [Dr. Archer] look directly at Miss Porter. "I must be very careful," he had once said to Martha in a rare, confidential moment. "I'm here on probation—a sort of token that the McDonald Hospital does not discriminate. So they chose one or two of us. And I must always be on my best behavior. So very often I can not speak up—say what I think." And Martha had said he was too careful. There are times for talking she told him. He had shaken his head. "Yes, only one must be sure to choose only the right time."

(NS II.ii, 32-3)

Like the stories discussed above, Lange's is presented through third-person limited narration, but significantly she does *not* write from a male perspective, nor does the narrative voice link to either of the characters active within the conflict. Instead, Lange allows Martha to present the events of the narrative from a sort of outsider perspective, limiting her involvement in the story to relating the thoughts and actions of those around her. In this way, Martha mirrors the author herself, an observer with no immediately clear stake in the action at hand. Martha recounts interactions with both Miss Porter and Dr. Archer, allowing each of the characters to voice for themselves their approach to conflict. Like Miss Porter, Archer expresses the desire to limit dissention by avoidance, and his motivation is, in some ways, remarkably similar to that of the laboratory technician. Both see themselves as representatives of their race; both place

themselves in positions of responsibility for representing that race in a positive light and of moral superiority to those of the same race who do not follow their example. Still, Dr. Archer is positioned defensively in his need to counteract the low societal expectations of him, while Miss Parks aims to maintain the status quo. The doctor's underdog status mirrors Lange's role as a Black, female author as well as the role of *Negro Story* itself. Each has to demonstrate merit and defy assumptions of inferiority while their white counterparts are presumed to be competent from the start.

Lange satisfies Martha's implied desire for Dr. Archer to be less "careful" by presenting him with a situation in which the cost of his silent acquiescence is too much for him to bear.

Miss Porter attempts to leverage her position as head laboratory technician—and, implicitly, as a white person—to establish her dominance over Archer when he insists that a pivotal test be completed for a fellow physician within an hour. Dr. Archer asserts his superior position over Miss Porter, not simply by calling upon his professional position as a doctor, but physically as well. During the argument, "Dr. Archer's usual slouch had disappeared. He stood up straight and tall, his face composed as ever;" in response, Miss Porter's "tone was freezing but her cheeks were a dark, mottled red" (*NS* II.ii, 33). Lange's description of the two figures creates a physical representation of their power struggle and conveys the moral high ground that the doctor occupies. The decision that this is the right time to "speak up" draws parallels between Dr. Archer and Goss's Private Johnson. Each man evaluates the particulars of his situation and discerns what the larger implications of his involvement might be. There is clearly both an appropriate time to engage in confrontation as well as suitable means to do so successfully.

Paired together, the two stories paint a vivid picture of the restraint required of Black men, the same restraint practiced by the women who authored their tales.

In choosing to write about conflict from a male perspective, the women of *Negro Story* take on a careful balancing act: to inhabit their male subjects in a realistic way while subtly maintaining a female perspective. Looking at these four stories as a unit highlights the ways in which they come together to create a larger narrative arc from childhood to manhood, setting the foibles of youth against the wisdom of maturity. Age, therefore, becomes metaphorical rather than literal, and represents the potential of a mature, measured response to conflict. The authors collectively criticize the particular propensity of men to repress emotion and embrace violence as a condition within their communities, attitudes that compound the challenges faced from outside oppression and instigation. In doing so, these women carefully blend artistry with realism, bridging the space between the Black urban Renaissance and the Civil Rights Movement.

Chapter 4: Women at Work: Redefining Black Femininity in the Face of War

“But he didn’t like it. In all those foxholes in Italy he had thought of her strictly as the clinging-vine type that will shy from a shadow, sweet and demure and soft as drugstore cotton, and to say he was disappointed in finding her so industrialized and athletic and self-realized was an understatement.”

Chester Hines, “Make with the Shape” (NS 2.1, 3)

The women of *Negro Story* were not just writing and thinking about men’s issues, but inherited a whole new set of challenges themselves. As writers, these women were working in an emergent field that met with little critical validation; indeed, Bill Mullen explains that female authors of short stories were met with “intentional ignorance and inadvertent erasure” for more than 140 years (Mullen, “Revolutionary” 192). This erasure is especially problematic when looking at the work of Black women in the mid-20th century because of the central role these stories played in

reconstitut[ing] the image of African American women ... [They] challenged racial taboos like miscegenation as well as racial stereotypes of post-bellum Black females ... by placing Black women for the first time in contemporary urban settings, writing explicitly about female sexual attitudes and desire, and by excavating southern Black folklore and idiom for inspiration in both subject matter and literary style. (198-99)

Pieces like those in *Negro Story* were opportunities for women to accomplish two complementary goals: to prove their skill as craftspeople and to put forward a more realistic and complex image of themselves and their lives for public consumption. The often purposeful act of overlooking the influence of the writing of such women makes the excavation of a publication like *Negro Story* all the more important.

While women’s representations and responses to male conflict offer insight into Black female anxiety, it is imperative to look at how female authors saw themselves (directly). A

common thread that runs throughout *Negro Story* is the Second World War. War had a clear effect on the lives of Black men, who struggled directly with enlistment, the draft, training, and combat; however, it affected the daily life of women just as dramatically. As wives, mothers, sisters, and friends, women encountered the violence of war through their fear of losing the men close to them. They also actively worked for the war effort, sometimes overseas, but more often through Red Cross and USO efforts. Perhaps, most significantly, women were introduced to the workforce in large numbers over the course of U.S. involvement in the war, filling the places left vacant by a generation of men fighting overseas.

This move to industrialize the fairer sex was especially significant for working-class Black women, who were afforded unprecedented upward mobility when they joined the workforce. Many such women found themselves making more money than their own husbands had in the years before the war. At times this caused conflict regarding gender roles, as women of all races became providers for their families and their male counterparts often felt displaced. The war not only created industrial opportunities for Black women, but opened up professional positions as well. Both kinds of work often took place in integrated facilities, at least in the North, which led to racial conflict that paralleled the confrontations between men discussed in the previous chapter. For Black women the kind of work the war afforded brought up internal conflict as well, as women considered how to best balance their patriotic duty with the goals of racial progress and solidarity. Again, this puts them in a very similar position to their male counterparts.

Clearly Black and white women faced different sets of struggles during World War II, just as they did in times of peace. The reliance on the belief in a single, coherent gender identity

is inadequate and even dangerous for feminists; recognizing individuality and the varying intersecting elements of “femininity” is imperative to avoiding the same pitfalls put into place by a patriarchal gender binary in the first place. Lauren Berlant writes about the possibility for a truly populist feminist movement in her essay “The Female Complaint.” In exploring the multiplicity of female identity, Berlant insists that “feminist populism will emerge from the engagement of the female culture industry with the patriarchal public sphere, the place where significant or momentous exchanges of power *are perceived* to take place” (240, emphasis in original). Berlant insists on the need for women to move beyond creating their own spaces by asserting themselves within the existing forums of discourse and power; only then will society begin to truly hear them. The Second World War created such a space for women and African Americans alike, as the simple need for labor allowed for groups who had formerly been sidelined to emerge into very public roles. While this transformation is marked by its impermanence—Black and female citizens alike were expected to meekly retreat when white men returned from the battlefield—it is a significant one. The shifting domestic and industrial landscapes created by military conflict allowed Blacks and women to begin the work of self-definition that would come more fully to fruition twenty years later in the emergent civil rights movements. The pieces published in *Negro Story* are directly involved in this effort, and many of the female authors within its pages took advantage of the war as a chance to use fiction to consider what Berlant describes as the deployment of gender versus inherent or imagined meaning (239).

Clearly the war presented both opportunities and challenges to Black women, and the authors of *Negro Story* dealt directly with the military struggle throughout the three years of the

magazine's publication. One story that demonstrates this tension in a domestic setting is Esta Diamond's "Something for the War." Diamond was a white author, which only serves to underscore the effectiveness of her racial commentary because, despite featuring a Black protagonist, the story is truly focused on exposing the hypocrisy of the white employer.

"Something for the War" is a brief story highlighting the relationship between a young African American maid named Lily and her employer, Mrs. Lloyd. The story begins on a positive note with the first line: "It was a good day" (*NS* 1.4, 23). Diamond makes it clear that Lily is a model worker who takes pride in what she does. She "work[s] quickly," "arrang[es sandwiches] prettily," and "stand[s] politely" (*NS* 1.4, 23-24). More importantly, Mrs. Lloyd is consistently impressed by the quality of Lily's work. She "smile[s] approvingly at Lily" and is "pleasant and always let[s] Lily know when a dinner [is] well executed, a new cake particularly good, or a flower arrangement attractively done," all of which results in the narrator's explicit claim that Lily likes her job (*NS* 1.4, 23). The narration goes on to describe how "Mrs. Lloyd was showing [Lily] off" in front of her guests. Lily's efficiency and attractiveness could not be more clearly indicated.

As positive as Diamond's characterization of Lily is, the depiction of a Black maid by a middle-class white woman is innately problematic. Inherent in the obvious problem of a white perspective and angle of representation is the risk, as Lauren Berlant describes it, of reducing women to a single, cohesive subject (238). While such a positive depiction of a Black worker may not seem like a point for complaint, it lacks complexity and authenticity due to the outsider status of a white woman attempting to represent Black life. Worse, it falls into the trend of depicting Black domestic subservience as a positive character trait rather than a necessary

adaptation to years of oppression and previous enslavement. In light of these concerns, it is even more important to keep Diamond's story in context as a piece in the larger publication, *Negro Story*. Here, the limited perspective of one white woman on racial conflict and Black identity becomes an asset rather than a liability, as "Something for the War" joins a chorus of Black and white voices in presenting a multidimensional image of African American wartime experience.

Diamond's story also holds value in its sympathetic portrayal of a Black character by a white writer. While the choral effect of blending Diamond's voice with so many others in *Negro Story* demonstrates the ecology of writing that Browning and Gayden constructed in action, the true value of Diamond's perspective lies in the white insider perspective on the myopic reactions of the employer. Because this critical representation comes from a white writer, it carries a different kind of weight than a similar appraisal from a Black writer might.

The body of the story pits the war efforts of white and Black women against each other, as Mrs. Lloyd wants to hold a Red Cross event on Lily's day off, a day on which the young woman and her own patriotic group had arranged to donate blood. Lily politely refuses, and Mrs. Lloyd's inability to accept this noncompliance reveals a clear sense of ownership only minimally removed from the attitudes of slaveholders a century earlier. Overtly there is nothing but politeness between the employer and her maid; Mrs. Lloyd seems, on the surface, to be quite understanding as she "smile[s] tolerantly" and "sweet[ly]" and speaks "kindly" (NS 1.4, 24).

Both Lily's dialogue and Diamond's narration indicate the maid's desire to be respectful to her employer. She refers to Mrs. Lloyd as "ma'am" four times in the span of half a page and apologizes several times while internally remarking that she "hated to refuse" and "hated to explain before the whole committee" (NS 1.4, 24). Despite her courtesy, she is firm in her

refusal, even in the face of Mrs. Lloyd's subtle pressure to submit. The employer assumes that Lily will adapt her plans, stating, "'I'm sure we can find a way of managing it, and,' she said, turning to the other three, 'I'll call you tonight and let you know what Lily and I have arranged'"(NS 1.4, 24). She clearly demonstrates her belief that it will be a quick matter for the girl to alter her plans to suit. But Lily remains resolute, insisting, "Really, ma'am, I can't do it" (NS 1.4, 24). This comment earns Lily a quick dismissal from the room, suggesting to readers that she has also risked dismissal of a more permanent kind. In light of Lily's consistent response, Mrs. Lloyd's seemingly gentle behavior seems sinister, revealing an expectation of absolute submission rather than a genuine respect or affection for her maid.

The dramatic end of the story moves beyond the power dynamic between the women present and represents a greater conflict between the white and Black communities by invoking the question of racial "contamination." After applauding Lily's desire to aid the war effort, one of the Red Cross women named Mrs. Doodall comments, "There was so much talk about it, but I just can't remember. They wouldn't give Negro blood to our boys, would they?" (NS 1.4, 24).

The "us versus them" mentality inherent in this comment is in direct opposition to the function that the story itself serves within the larger magazine of building a community of women, Black and white, whose shared experiences might pave the way for racial progress. It illustrates the belief that there are inherent differences between Black and white people, and magnifies a deeper fear about the supposed danger that integration might pose to the white community. In his work *Desegregating Desire*, Tyler Schmidt comments on how integration itself was seen as a contaminant and how both miscegenation and mixed-race individuals often served a symbolic purpose in white literature as a representation of the danger that racial mixing could have.

Diamond reveals the absurdity of both the literal fear of mixing blood and the broader anxieties surrounding an integrated society. After Mrs. Doodall's comment is made, "the kitchen door stop[s] swinging and remain[s] shut, at is [is] very quiet in the clean white kitchen" (*NS* 1.4, 25). The timing is central, and the swinging door makes obvious to the reader, if not to the white characters, that Lily has overheard the ignorant question from the next room. In the face of the earnest efforts that Lily has made to negotiate her place as both a maid and a citizen, the comment rings both hollow and absurd. Diamond's story helps to highlight the utter waste wrought by pitting the war efforts of white and Black women against one another. Ventures that are seemingly compatible are instead in competition, undermining the effectiveness of each group. The construction of *Negro Story* by Gayden and Browning represents a small step in the other direction, where the considered decision to include white and Black authors united in a single goal—that of telling an honest story of race in America—allows for a stronger final product.

Another story from the magazine which highlights the absurdity of attempting to privilege one group's war experience over another's is found in the very first issue, where Margaret Rodriguez's "I Had a Colored Maid" was first published. Like "Something for the War," Rodriguez's story considers the work environment of a young Black woman during World War II; however, in this case a professional rather than a domestic setting is used. The central character is the antagonistic Miss Merryweather, whose sharp behavior starkly contrasts with her sunny name. Miss Merryweather's bigoted attitudes are made clear early in the story in her response to her Black co-worker, Miss Connie Foster. Introducing Connie from Miss Merryweather's perspective, the narrator states, "Although Connie was a colored girl, she

seemed honest, and to Miss Merryweather's never-ending abashment Connie was no different in many ways than Miss Merryweather herself" (*NS* 1.1, 5). The terms "seemed" and "never-ending abashment" call Miss Merryweather's reliability into question and immediately establish a jealous tone from the white office worker, creating a lack of sympathy for her speculations from the start.

Miss Merryweather's venom is not reserved for Connie alone; she is also dismissive of her other co-worker Mrs. Martin, who "was a little stupid, which could likely be traced to the bad illness she had a few years ago" (*NS* 1.1 p6). While Miss Merryweather clearly sees herself as superior to both co-workers, she allies herself with Mrs. Martin. Connie, however, appears to be her equal aside from her race; Mrs. Martin is only equal because of her race. The prioritization of this arbitrary trait highlights its should-be irrelevance and calls into question Miss Merryweather's clearly skewed value system. As she seeks to assign blame for a very important missing secret file, Miss Merryweather tries to ensnare Mrs. Martin in her way of thinking. She works discreetly at first, simply asking "What do you think of Miss Foster?" and subtly leading up to the topic of the missing file: "My dear ... I know *you* don't know where the report is."

When this careful indictment of Connie doesn't work with the baffled Mrs. Martin, "Miss Merryweather's face lo[ses] its patience and harden[s] as she [thinks] of Connie Foster. 'You know, Mrs. Martin ... I don't understand the Government hiring all these colored people to do confidential work'" (*NS* 1.1, 6). Even this backhanded accusation doesn't appear to work, as Mrs. Martin steadfastly defends Connie's work and character, undermining Miss Merryweather's previous assessment of her co-worker as "stupid." Miss Merryweather's final attempt at calling Connie's character into question comes through the story of a colored maid the white woman

once had, named Lily, who took money from her. From this single experience Miss Merryweather has extrapolated a belief that “[c]olored people just naturally steal. I guess they can’t help it” (*NS* 1.1, 6). Like her earlier comment about the government hiring “all these colored people,” this conclusion demonstrates Miss Merryweather’s dangerous propensity to color all Negroes with the same brush, again highlighting her inherent prejudice and lack of reasoned judgement.

Rodriguez’s criticism of Miss Merryweather is highlighted when Connie enters the room in a clear state of agitation immediately after this statement is made. Her tears are seen as a sign of her guilt by Miss Merryweather, who immediately demands, “‘Why did you do it, Miss Foster?’ ... in the voice of a judge addressing a criminal”(*NS* 1.1, 7). Her tone demonstrates her belief that she is in a position of moral authority and can judge the actions of her co-worker. As the confrontation unfolds, Connie remains composed, so that her accuser “[thinks] with abashment that the girl [is] splendidly poised, as if she kn[ows] some hidden reason for poise that Miss Merryweather could not fathom in a colored girl” (*NS* 1.1, 7). Throughout the scene, Miss Merryweather thinks of Connie as a “girl,” a diminishment that Rodriguez reinforces by referring to Connie by her first name throughout the third-person-limited narration while the other two characters are always referred to by their title and last name. Miss Merryweather’s speech is “sharp and contemptuous” while Connie tends to speak “without emotion” (*NS* 1.1, 7). The direct contrast between the Black woman’s dignity and her white colleague’s aggression continues to build sympathy for the former and contempt for the latter.

The conflict comes to a head as Connie loses some of her composure, “[h]iss[ing]” at her colleague that her tears are unrelated to the lost report. “‘Why, you dirty, lying nigger!’ Miss

Merryweather scream[s]” in response (*NS* 1.1, 7), and simultaneously their supervisor arrives to explain that the report was never lost at all; it was simply a mistake. The hysterical delivery of the racial slur paired with this revelation simply formalizes what the reader has known all along: the true transgression here is Miss Merryweather’s effort to maintain racial superiority at the cost of finding the truth. Like “Something for the War,” “I Had a Colored Maid” reveals the absurdity and waste that results when women, despite their shared experiences based on gender, sacrifice opportunities for true collaboration and solidarity to erect artificial racial barriers. The position of Black women is particularly precarious here, as the workplace opportunities afforded by the war appear to require the sacrifice of personal dignity.

This story ends with hope, however, that not all attempts at gender-based cooperation are in vain. The competing pain and opportunity that *all* women encounter in the face of war coalesce in a moment between Connie and Mrs. Martin. Connie reveals that the reason for her tears was a call from her mother informing her that her brother had died in the South Pacific.

Upon hearing this news, Mrs. Martin unhesitatingly embraces Connie, sharing her own story of the loss of her own sons. Readers are left with the image of “[t]he old woman’s grief mingl[ing] with the girl’s as they [cling] together, comforting each other” (*NS* 1.1, 8), another, more positive example of the interplay between cost and opportunity that the war brings. The experience of loss, so acute and individual, is also one of the most universal, thus providing a compelling opportunity for unity. The solidarity of grief destroys the illusion of difference, even for Miss Merryweather who is “suddenly assailed by a thousand emotions, too baffling and too tremendous for her austere self to grasp at one time”(*NS* 1.1, 6). Rodriguez ends her story with

the suggestion that these moments of shared humanity are an effective means to challenge even the most firmly held convictions about racism.

Human interactions figure importantly in Black women's commentary on the struggles and opportunities of the wartime experience in *Negro Story*, but there is also a group of stories that take a greater interest in the relationship between the worker and the place of employment itself. Women across the United States underwent the transformation from housewife to working woman, whether it stemmed from patriotism, boredom, or financial necessity. For the African American female writer, this shift was more than literal; it was symbolic. As Mullen explains in *Popular Fronts*, the "rendering of the common Black female wartime 'conversion' from domestic to industrial worker embodied the short story's reincarnation in *Negro Story's* pages as a synecdoche of the African American wartime experience" (Mullen 118). Like their characters, who are transformed by their new work, these authors found that the war presented opportunities to transition from homemakers, teachers, and students to published authors.

Shirley Graham's story "Tar" focuses on one woman who finds the opportunity to be involved in the war effort by working in a factory. Her clear motivation and initial connection to the war itself is her boyfriend, Tom. As the story opens, Mary is physically present downtown amidst the celebratory atmosphere of the Savoy and USO entertainment scene, but her thoughts are trapped in the past. Graham uses Mary's memories to characterize Tom himself, setting the groundwork for Mary's connection to the war through her relationship with him. One of the most striking traits that permeates Mary's memories of her beau is his supreme confidence. She recalls that, "He was so sure of himself. He knew so well what he was going to do—had everything figured out" (NS 1.5, 9). Before the war this confidence led him to plan to be an

engineer, but after the Pearl Harbor bombing—“Lord, Tom was mad!” (NS 1.5, 9) -- he decided to put these same skills to work in the army as a commissioned officer.

As Mary continues to immerse herself in the past, it becomes clear that Tom’s certainty about his future is in direct contrast to the reality of the world around him. He is rejected for his commission and forced to enlist as an infantryman instead. This disappointment sets up the first clear parallel between Tom and Mary, as her reaction mirrors his despair: “Mary’s heart ached. She recognized *the look*. She’d seen it on the face of a child who had been slapped *hard*. She even remembered it in the eyes of a kitten, which had been kicked. You see, Tom had been so *sure*” (NS 1.5, 10, emphasis original). Graham’s narration emphasizes Mary’s internalization of Tom’s rejection; she feels his pain as if it were her own. The young man’s trademark confidence, which had served as a positive force up until this point, is the main reason for the couple’s intense disappointment. Yet while Mary “ache[s]” for Tom’s pain, Graham removes her from the source of it as well. The young woman recognizes Tom’s disappointment, but only from an outside perspective. Mary compares Tom to a child and a kitten, defenseless, innocent creatures who, in this context especially, take on a connotation of naivete. The implication is that Mary was aware of the possibility of rejection all along, unlike her idealistic boyfriend.

This difference is significant as Graham continues to parallel Mary’s and Tom’s relationships to the war through the rest of the story. Like Tom, Mary has high expectations for civilian life. She is a skilled seamstress with impeccable taste. Her roommate, Cleo, insists that Mary is different from other working-class girls: “Mary ha[s] talent!” (NS 1.5, 11). Despite these prospects, Mary, like Tom, changes direction enthusiastically when she sees the opportunity to involve herself in the war effort. Rather than pursue sewing work, she takes several defense

courses, where she excels, and applies to work in a plane factory: “But Mary didn’t get into that factory. Nothing daunted, she tried another and another and another. She stood in long lines day after day, clutching her certificate” (*NS* 1.5, 12). While Mary does not demonstrate Tom’s assuredness, she does share his tenacity. Each refuses to accept rejection and insists on finding another avenue to pursue the opportunity each seeks. Tom insists “he’d soon get to officers’ training camp... He’d build bridges yet!” (*NS* 1.5, 10). Mary’s perseverance leads her to finally accept a job filling barrels with tar. The work is messy and exhausting and Mary is never given an opportunity for advancement, but she never returns to seamstress work or demonstrates any negativity about her job.

Ostensibly, Mary’s relentless positivity is tied to Tom. At the end of the story, Cleo returns from spending the winter working in Texas to find Mary thin, tar-covered, and shining-eyed. Tom had written about an incident in which he was caught in machine gun fire but was saved when an armored tank broke open, covering him with tar which protected him from the gunfire. The letter validates Mary’s decision to work in the factory and elevates her work with tar to a true defensive measure. Her ability to interact with Tom and shield him overseas recalls her protective instinct when he was rejected from the officer’s academy and reinvigorates her as she continues her menial work with the tar. After all, Mary’s initial interest in getting involved in the war effort was directly linked to Tom’s enlistment. Early in the story, when she hears the advertisement targeting women for wartime jobs, she feels that the radio is “telling her what she could do—how she could join up with Tom and help get this war over—quickly” (*NS* 1.5, 11). The idea of supporting and collaborating with her beau is the impetus for Mary joining up in the first place.

Despite its origins, Mary's wartime job also seems to open up an opportunity for self-empowerment that has a resonance of its own. The civilian work that Mary and Cleo undertake, sewing and cooking, are clear manifestations of stereotypical gendered employment of the era. Like the other women of the time who joined the war effort, Mary rejects, at least temporarily, the supposed limits of her femininity to take on dirty, physical work. In turn, this work seems to empower her and bring her very tangible fulfillment. Her success in her defense courses may not have been met with results on the job market, but do clearly demonstrate that her skills are not limited to a domestic setting. While this transformation may only be a temporary one—Graham's short piece does not take readers to a post-war setting--it is still powerful in blurring the lines between the so-called separate spheres of gendered work and identity.

The concept of gendered space becomes much more complicated in wartime, especially when compounded by the issue of racial segregation. Michel Foucault describes heterotopias in his work "Of Other Spaces" as

real places—places that do exist and that are formed in the very founding of society— which are something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted. Places of this kind are outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality. (3-4)

I argue that the industrial workplace for women during World War II is a type of heterotopia, especially for Black women. The factory is a physical space but is marked by temporality; when the war is over, the opportunities it created will vanish. This space's impermanence means that it

operates outside of the bounds of most physical places and, as such, is a more of a moment than a physical location. As seen in *Negro Story*, the heterotopia of wartime America for Black women was fraught with many of the difficulties of Negro life before the war, but it offered a unique set of opportunities as well. The tension between the opportunity that the war offered for advancement, regardless of race and gender, and the ways in which it also served to reinforce societal boundaries, constructed via color and sex, manifest themselves throughout the magazine's brief history. *Negro Story* was a magazine envisioned and edited by two women who needed a male advisory staff to legitimize their work, a collection of powerful everyday and emergent voices who needed the presence of stories by Ellison and Wright to endorse them.

Despite these obstacles of public validation, Mullen argues that, "The magazine represented for female radicals an autonomous space for public voicing unavailable in male-dominated mass media or other left circles" (*Popular* 114). In this sense, *Negro Story* itself is a heterotopic space, fleeting in its physical existence but permanently re-framing the narrative of Black and female authorship in ways that are only now beginning to be uncovered.

Chapter 5: The Specificity of Oppression: Intersecting Class and Race in *Negro Story*

"Keep a-climbing up / The hill, black man. / Keep a-goin' / Though the ill-winds / Keep a-roaring at you. / Climb like an angry river / Surging over its levee, / When the tide comes in. / Soar high like a plane / Way above the city giants, / But never come down. / Just keep a-going on and on, /

Because your hopes, / Your strivings / And all you have / Been fighting for, / Depends on your reaching / The top of the steep / Weary hill.

Ricardo Weeks, "The Weary Hill" (NS 1.2, 43)

The convergence of gender and race in the writing of both Black and white women for *Negro Story* has been the core of this analysis, but the multivalence of identity stretches far beyond these two elements. Among the many variables that complicate the myth of a singular group identity, class emerges as a divisive force that complicates efforts for equality on other fronts.

Class tension and the conflicting experiences of Black Americans of different economic backgrounds were a very real problem for *Negro Story* and its mission. According to Bill Mullen, a huge class differential emerged in 1930s Bronzeville, dividing the *nouveau riche*, middle class, and working poor (*Popular* 11,12). While these divisions within the Black community presented a challenge, Browning and Gayden used them to their advantage and the magazine became a part of a larger movement to assert the power and promise of the short story in this context. Mullen writes that

by exploiting the short story's distinctive generic conventions such as its spatial economy, its accessibility to "amateurs," its comparability to popular forms like newspaper articles, and its untapped potential for both creating and shaping "mass" literary markets of Black writers and readers, the genre helped to forge a new (Black) market for the production and consumption of periodic protest culture. (*Popular* 131)

Negro Story's earnest efforts at mass appeal can be seen in the editorial content of the magazine, from the friendly and conversational tone of letters to the readers, to the gossipy pop-culture columns and crossword puzzles sprinkled across the issues. Beyond this, the authors published

within the periodical embodied the goal for diverse and relatable contributors. Mullen characterizes many of the authors in *Negro Story* as “worker-writers”, noting that “Browning and Gayden’s commitment to publishing work by both Black and white working-class and novice writers constituted one of the first commercial proletarianizations of African American literature in the city’s—and country’s—history” (*Popular* 117).

In crafting this broad appeal and in including varied authorial perspectives, the editors created a space in which their sociopolitical message could thrive. To represent lived Black experience, the discussion of race was not enough. The pieces within *Negro Story* also actively comment on the intersection between class and race, especially as it concerns women. While male and female authors alike discussed the issues of conflict resolution and the impact of the war on the Black community, the specific role that class plays in interactions both between Blacks and whites and within the Black community itself seems to be the special purview of women writers. This is due, in part, to the type of work available to Black women as seen in the stories previously discussed. White and Black women from different social classes developed stilted intimacy in domestic settings where African American women found work as seamstresses and cooks, as seen in “Tar” by Shirley Graham, or as maids in “Something for the War” by Esta Diamond. On those occasions when education and income should have provided a sort of social equivalency between white and Black individuals working together, the stories often depict a white character actively trying to assert herself over a Black colleague, as depicted in Margaret Rodriguez’s “Colored Maid” or Rebecca Lange’s “Achievement.” In addition to class complications between individuals of different races, social inequality might stem from real or perceived differences in education, income, or class between individuals within the Black

community. Often these differences manifested themselves in “colorism,” when African Americans with lighter skin or “whiter” features would assert themselves over their darker neighbors. To consider the complications of class on racial tension within the pages of *Negro Story* requires consideration of both inter- and intra-racial class tension, their sources, and their impact.

These class issues can exacerbate or complicate interracial interactions. In his work *Desegregating Desire*, Tyler Schmidt makes a distinction between integration and desegregation. In his introduction, he notes that

If integration is, in part, an act of moving in, inhabiting previously prohibited workplaces, educational institutions, and public spaces, then desegregation might be reconceived of as an act of moving outward, most obviously away from discriminatory habits and communities of comfort but also a willed trample, motivated often by desires self-serving and often seemly, across color lines and social prohibitions. (Schmidt 3)

this definition makes integration appear as a careful, considered process that works slowly within the existing societal constraints to create incremental change. It is also characterized as a movement into spaces already claimed by others. Desegregation, on the other hand, is presented as an active takeover rather than an accommodation, an act of claiming space and making it one’s own. As a publication, *Negro Story* walks the line between these distinctions Schmidt makes: joining those previously established Black publications in entering a marketplace controlled by white editors and publishers seeking white contributors but on the magazine’s terms and aggressively working to expand its readership into white and Black communities alike.

In addition, the stories within the magazine exhibit elements of both integration and desegregation, not simply depicting white and Black interactions in idealistic conditions but showing the reality of Black life and interracial conflict in often stark terms.

The physical spaces in which both Black and white individuals lived literalize Schmidt's definition of both integration and desegregation as acts of movement. Published in the mid-1940s in Chicago, *Negro Story* reflects a time and place in which housing discrimination was quickly intensifying. Neighborhood redlining and restrictive housing covenants, made famous by Lorraine Hansberry's 1959 drama *A Raisin in the Sun*, formalized the already clear boundary lines between white and Black communities. While the Bronzeville neighborhood in which the magazine was published was home to individuals from a range of socioeconomic groups, it was still clearly a Black neighborhood. In cities like Chicago, purchasing a desirable home in such a neighborhood was difficult due to both cost and availability, leading some more affluent African American families to look at options in "white" neighborhoods. The issues of race, class, and living situation provide the central tension in two of Alice Browning's own stories. "Sticks and Stones," published under the pen name Lila Marshall, and "Old Mis' Cane," published under the pseudonym Richard Bentley, provide an interesting counterpoint to one another, as the first considers a Black protagonist living in a white neighborhood and the second depicts the converse.

"Sticks and Stones" gives readers an immediate sense of the upward mobility of the Black family in the first lines: "Mary was a whitish little colored girl with long shiny Black braids and dark eyes. She had lived in this new all-white neighborhood for a couple of weeks, and she was lonely" (*NS* 1.3, 17). This seemingly simple opening reveals several key pieces of

information from the start. First, the text highlights both Mary's "whitish" skin and Black identity. Her light complexion works together with her family's financial success, further underscored as the story continues, to put her in a potential position of privilege above other African Americans and thus distancing her from other members of her own race. The opening lines also call attention to her physical isolation, which seems to stem directly from her race. The titular white protagonist in "Old Mis' Cane" mirrors this sense of loneliness. This narrative begins with dialogue between nameless individuals, neighbors gossiping about the title character and revealing that she is out of place in the neighborhood: "'Old white bitch—she make me sick.' / 'Sho do—all time hollerin' an' raisin' cain.' / 'An' chasin' children off her lawn.' / 'White folks always like that.' / 'Think they own the world.' / 'She got her nerve—livin' round here and married to a colored man too.'" (NS 1.6, 43). Readers quickly register the fact that Mis' Cane is an outsider in the neighborhood because of both her race and her behavior, two factors that are irrevocably connected in the eyes of those living around her. It also is clear from the start of the story that Mis' Cane would be considered an outlier to members of her own race as she is a white woman married to a Black man. Both of Browning's characters are strikingly alone from the outset of the stories, struggling to navigate race and class identities that seem to be add odds within the larger commentary.

The two characters manage this isolation very differently. Young Mary, in "Sticks and Stones," desires connections to her white peers in the neighborhood and eventually finds a connection with the redheaded Jane. It becomes immediately clear that there is a class difference between the two friends, one that runs counter to the usual power dynamic of their respective

races. The descriptions of each girl's home provides a strong visual contrast between their families' financial situations:

Mary wondered why the prettiest girl in the neighborhood lived in the poorest house. It was frame, and the side-wall shingles were shedding their paint. Great whelps of paint remained, showing the bare wood underneath, and they made Mary's flesh crawl. They reminded her of her skin when she was peeling from scarlet fever. Boards were missing, leaving ugly gaps in the steps, and at the dirt-streaked windows, hung frayed curtains and crazy shades. The back yard was full of old cars and wagons. ... The other houses rose high in arrogance and splendor, sneering down at the poor little house. Mary's was the most imposing; it was three stories high. (*NS* 1.3, 17)

Browning's powerful imagery and figurative language paint a striking picture of the shabby disrepair of the white family's home, carrying connotations of disease. The other homes, Mary's most of all, are personified as both literally and figuratively looking down on the "poor little house," demonstrating a clear class distinction between the rest of the neighborhood and Jane's family. In this social divide, Mary's family is grouped with those who have power, yet their skin color prevents them from claiming the privilege that their financial status ordinarily would confer. While the girls do not seem consciously aware of the restrictions of their race and class, it seems to be an underlying element that allows them to become friends; both are disempowered, though in different ways, and this difference separates them from the rest of the neighborhood and bonds them to each other.

Mis' Cane, on the other hand, embraces and cultivates her isolation. She sees the distance between herself and her neighbors as a sign of her own elevated status: "Upon moving to this city from Cincinnati she had not tried to make friends. After all, she was white, and they were colored. She spoke pleasantly enough to neighbors, but she knew that they were her inferior" (*NS* 1.6, 45). Browning's continued use of "she" and "them" emphasizes that not only Mis' Cane's behavior, but her very thoughts, create a hierarchy between herself and her neighbors. Despite her active efforts to separate herself from the Black residents around her, Mis' Cane is also upset by their easy acceptance of her withdrawal. "They disliked her, and that hurt. She desired no close contact with them, but wanted them to look up to her. Didn't they realize that she was white? ... She didn't want to be mistaken for one of them, even if she was married to a Negro" (*NS* 1.6, 46). She clearly needs her Black neighbors to legitimize her perceived superiority over them by recognizing it, as no real class difference exists between them. In making clear that Mis' Cane's racial identity, and therefore her privilege, cannot exist without acknowledgment within the community, Browning calls attention to the fact that whiteness itself is a construct that requires Blackness to validate its existence. Mis' Cane's insistence that her neighbors take note of her race is also somewhat ironic, as she takes a sort of colorblind approach to her own marriage. While she intellectually recognizes her husband's race, "She never thought of Phil as belonging to these people" (*NS* 1.6, 47). This mindset about her husband, the object of her complete devotion, further highlights the arbitrary nature of racial hierarchy. His skin color does not seem to

be a real factor in her evaluation of his social status, while it is the only characteristic she seems to take notice of in those living on her street.

Mis' Cane's insistence on asserting her white privilege takes on a greater urgency as other characters express doubt about her race. In another bout of neighborly gossip, some of the women on the street call her whiteness into question: "You know these white women—is she really white?" / "Can't you tell 'em—can always tell 'em no matter how white a Negro is and vice versey." / "Well she looks white, but she so dark, she could pass for colored—she look colored to me, Miss Young'" (*NS* 1.6, 44). This quick exchange contains several important points about racial constructs. First, there is an implied belief, which mirrors Mis' Cane's, that race is more than skin deep, that you "can always tell" if someone is white or Black regardless of the color of their skin. This belief seems to echo the "scientific" precepts that sought to legitimize segregation and racial oppression on the grounds that white and Black people were inherently different, even distinct species from one another. By placing these words in the mouths of African American speakers, however, Browning subverts their connotation. The implication of the dialogue, especially when combined with the earlier conversation among the neighbors about Mis' Cane's behavior, is that her inherent whiteness is a negative trait. Throughout these gossipy exchanges the woman's white identity is linked to stingy and antisocial behavior that is branded as inherently "white." It is made clear here, as well as in narration throughout the story, that Mis' Cane is, in fact, very dark complected. Her white identity is neither a matter of actual skin color nor of inborn traits, but of a perceived racial difference. Because this status is at the core of Mis' Cane's closely held

sense of superiority, her contested race calls all of her privilege into question. If she is seen as Black, there is no true difference between her and her neighbors; in fact, some of them are more successful and more educated than she, potentially granting them a higher social status. Furthermore, one of her neighbors comments that Mis' Cane "could pass for colored," Conventionally the concept of "passing" is applied to light skinned Blacks who allow society to see them as white and therefore gain access to the privileges that entails.

In the sense that passing allows for greater opportunity and social status, it can be seen as positive, although within the Black community, it can often constitute a betrayal of race and identity. For readers of "Old Mis' Cane," the value of embracing a "white" label is ambiguous; while she insists that it grants her superiority, her community does not recognize that status, thus passing for Black might actually bring social advantages.

Questions of racial identity are also raised between the two young girls in "Sticks and Stones," which "Old Mis' Cane" portrays as much less definite than a Black/white dichotomy would imply. At the beginning of the story, Mary is identified as both "whitish" and "colored"; later it is made apparent that this complexion is likely due to having a light-skinned mother. "Is your mother white, Mary?" Jane asked. 'No, she's colored—like me.' / 'I don't see how you can be so colored, and your mother is so white.' / Mary had no answer for this. In fact, she was not sure she understood it herself" (*NS* 1.3, 18). Browning uses the confusion of the two children to call attention to the often arbitrary nature of racial identification. While the terms for identifying race are supposedly based on skin color, it is clear from both stories that outward appearance is a very small element in determining whether an individual is white or Black. While financial

success allows the family to buy a home in a nice, white neighborhood, Mary's mother's light skin enables them to live there without conflict, at least, for a time.

Their relatively peaceful relationship with their neighbors ends as Mary's family comes under siege in their home during the 1919 Chicago riots. Clear class tension emerges as neighbors turn on the Black family in their midst: "'We ought to kill all the damn niggers!' / 'Killing white men!' / 'Black sons of bitches, taking white men's jobs!' / 'God damn niggers!'" (NS 1.3, 21). The white men's threats bring the image of the African Americans' home towering above the rest on their street sharply back to mind; clearly the violence is more complicated than the general mass hysteria incited by the riot. The very thought that a Black man could not only equal, but eclipse, his white neighbors is incomprehensible. Rather than accepting that Mary's family might have a legitimate claim to their social standing, the men insist that it has somehow been come by dishonestly, at the cost of the white families who have a right to it. The house itself is the symbol of this supposed injustice, a physical structure that has been taken from white ownership by its new Black inhabitants. The attempted destruction of the house is the culmination of white anxiety about their threatened class status.

In response, Mary's father shoots at the assailants from his position inside the house as he shouts "'Dirty cowards!' / 'That got em!' / 'We'll die fighting!'/ 'The dirty white trash!'/ [Mary] couldn't believe it was her daddy's voice. She had never heard him say such a thing before. She shivered. What were niggers? What was white trash? Her father stood motionless—waiting. Mary cowered. She didn't want to be a nigger. She didn't want to die. She began to cry.'" (NS 1.3, 21). The father's response mirrors the reasons for the neighbors' assault in using perceived class differences to justify physical violence. While society has

labeled him racially inferior, he perceives his attackers as socially inferior, calling them “dirty white trash.” Mary’s innocent response best captures Browning’s intentions. While she does not understand the actual meanings of the epithets being hurled around her, their connotation is all too clear. Browning’s use of parallel structure insinuates that the fear of being seen as a “nigger” is equivalent to the fear of death itself. Despite the potential power in being educated and well to do, even if you are Black, both “nigger” and “white trash” carry class connotations undermining the social capital that Mary’s family has managed to acquire.

This ramification can be seen when the riot is over; Mary assumes all has returned to normal, but when she greets Jane, “Jane [is] frowning at her. Her small red tongue dart[s] out. ‘Dirty nigger,’ she sp[its], ‘my mother says I don’t play with you no more—cuz you ain’t nothin, but an ol’ dirty nigger—you ol’ nigger girl’” (*NS* 1.3, 22). It is Jane’s family who is “dirty” based on previous descriptions of the family and their home. They embody the slur “dirty white trash” which Mary’s father flung at the rioters outside his home, yet their racial identity allows them to assert themselves over Mary’s family. Stripped of the limited privilege granted by their socioeconomic status, Mary and her family are branded with the name “nigger.” Browning destroys the reader’s innocence along with young Mary’s, challenging the hope that upward mobility is enough to counteract the social consequences of racism. The family’s move into the white neighborhood best matches Schmidt’s definition of “integration”; however, the family’s attempt at uniting Black and white community members seems futile in the face of the more extreme measures pro-segregationists are willing to take.

Mis’ Cane has a less violent climactic interaction with her neighbors, but it is contentious nonetheless. A group pays her a call, asking her to join the local home improvement league, but

despite sharing their distaste for the rundown buildings in the area, she refuses their attempts at outreach. Her reasons disconnect her from the group's aims and are completely defined by her perception of both class and race. "She disliked these [well-to-do] Negroes even more than the others. They were always trying to act like white people. Their homes were as good as hers; better, in some instances. They had cars, servants. She didn't like feeling inferior to them. She had less education than most of them, only having completed high school" (*NS* 1.6, 46). Mis' Cane cannot separate the race of her neighbors from her expectations for their class status.

When confronted with the reality that her neighbors were much like her -- they share similar concerns and values, and perhaps even have other advantages, such as an education, that she lacked, she lashes out rather than comes to terms with this reality. "She explode[s] suddenly.

'No I should say not—I'll not sign a petition against Jack Moore [the would-be tavern owner] —...He protects me, He's respectful; courteous—He's a fine man. He'—' She wanted to say he's the only one who treats me as if I am white, but she stopped herself" (*NS* 1.6, 46). Her internal "as if" is telling. Her racial identity is not absolute; it relies on external validation.

Their refusal to behave as she believes Black people should becomes a personal affront because their actions call into question her own racial status and superiority.

These neighbors' individual efforts to elevate their status through home-ownership and education represent Schmidt's definition of "integration," which seems to fail in the face of Mis' Cane's rejection, yet their action of banding together as a group elevates their efforts towards "desegregation." In response to Mis' Cane's refusal,

Ann spoke in a fiery manner. "Very well, Mrs. Cane; you'll be sorry later if Mr.

Moore's tavern gets in and the racket interferes with your sleep at nights—but let

me tell you one thing, if you so much as breathe to Jack Moore one word of our plans, I cannot vouch for what might happen to you or your home. Good day, Mrs. Cane.” They tramped out like a pack of dogs. (NS 1.6, 47)

This interaction reverses the climax of “Sticks and Stones” now the Black neighbors are the ones who present a united front and seem to hold the balance of the power. The implied potential violence of Ann’s “fiery” speech, the thinly veiled threats, and the comparison of the group to “a pack of dogs,” call to mind Schmidt’s “willed trample” of desegregation and invites the reader to speculate that such dramatic action may serve to be more effective than the relatively passive and slow efforts of “integration.” In either case, the interplay between class and race serves to complicate attempts to create a functional, heterogeneous community.

Housing integration is certainly not the only issue with which authors in *Negro Story* complicate the intertwining of class and race. The efforts to restrict African Americans from living in certain areas are echoed by attempts to segregate commercial areas as well. Grace Tompkins’s story “Justice Wears Dark Glasses,” demonstrates the use of race to create and enforce class boundaries. The systematic racism embraced not simply by private businesses but also by the criminal “justice” system leaves Blacks with no legal recourse to unfair and racist treatment. Tompkins first wrote for the *Chicago Defender*, penning music reviews with no political content, and Mullen notes that “Tompkins used the magazine [*Negro Story*] as an annex in which to display responses to social conditions that her publisher and format wouldn’t allow. Indeed, Tompkins shed the conventional politesse of her *Defender* music column in favor of a polemical form of address often identified with male Left writers of her era” (*Popular* 116). Tompkins’s critical tone in her short stories calls into question the validity of the basic power

structures that most white Americans believe exist in order to protect the innocent, demonstrating that, in fact, they are often simply a means of perpetuating a system that protects white privilege.

The story begins as the protagonist, Mamie, has been brought up on charges of shoplifting dresses and pleads her case before a judge. She claims she was denied service in the clothing store: “‘She wouldn’t let me try them on. I asked her and she...’ The grey haired man held up his hand for silence.... [Mamie thought] you’re just trying to scare me. She didn’t want to wait on me. I didn’t steal... you know I didn’t steal... she didn’t want to wait on me... The sentences chased each other around and around in Mamie’s mind, but her throat was dry and not a word came out” (*NS* 1.2, 10). Mamie’s fear, as well as interruptions by the judge, silences her; she cannot articulate her version of events. This literal silencing represents a larger erasure within the justice system, in which she is the true victim but is denied access to protection because no one with power will hear her. Mamie is assumed to be less reliable due to her race; in this courtroom and in the larger world, whiteness lends credibility and respectability. When she attempts to give her version of events, the judge is unwilling to listen, instead relying on the testimony of the white witnesses: “‘A likely story!’ The man behind the desk no longer looked kind and gentle. ‘You’re not only a thief but a liar too. Here are three witnesses who saw you take them. We’re going to teach you... you folks to stay out of Manson’s and there’s just one way to do it’” (*NS* 1.2, 10). The clear position—“We’re going to teach you”—demonstrates the lack of impartiality by the judge, who unmistakably sees the case as a racial issue and thus plants himself firmly on the “white” side of the issue. He also explicitly sees this case as an opportunity to “teach” African Americans on a broader scale to embrace a standard of behavior

that the white community sets for them. In this way, the judge uses concepts of whiteness and Blackness to reinforce a class divide and promote segregationist attitudes.

The violence and fear of Mamie's incarceration following the hearing reinforces others' perception of Mamie as low class, worthless, and suspicious. Tompkins reveals systematic oppression so pervasive that even expected allies side with injustice. At one point "a colored policeman stop[s] to talk to the bondsman. A hopeful gleam light[s] Mamie's pain-dulled eyes but die[s] quickly as the man laugh[s] and saunter[s] away" (NS 1.2, 12). She is kept in jail overnight before being released on a ten-dollar bond. On the way home, "she found that she didn't have carfare" and "did not have the courage to ask anyone for eight cents"; "Passers-by thought she was drunk. A man flung a coarse remark at her." (NS 1.2, 12). She is degraded by her treatment under the legal system, causing her outward appearance to correspond to the degraded image of her that her accusers wished to create.

Tompkins uses Mamie's interactions with other characters to further highlight this degradation and how it slowly corrodes her sense of self-worth. Early in the story the author sets up a clear contrast between Mamie and her roommate, Lena, who immediately recognizes that Mamie's innocence will be irrelevant in deciding the outcome of her case: "They had you arrested, didn't they?" She demands. "It's a lousy frame! They framed you 'cause they don't want colored people in their damn store. It shoulda been me! You just ain't no fighter!" (NS 1.2, 12). Lena recognizes the truth of the situation and directly characterizes Mamie as incapable of dealing with it effectively, reiterating once more Schmidt's call for dramatic and even violent action to achieve desegregation. It is Lena who insists on hiring a lawyer, Mr. Clark, to take the case in an attempt to fight the injustice of the accusation. The lawyer's interactions with Mamie

further demonstrate the woman's depleted sense of self; he infantilizes her, then defends her on the basis of respectability and buying power while initially glossing over the racial issue at hand:

As Mr. Clark began to talk, Mamie felt a surge of relief. "Your honor, this woman had no need to steal. She entered the store with a ten dollar bill to buy two of the dresses advertised at \$3.99 in the basement sale. She was treated with discourtesy, denied the privilege of trying on her selection, roughly handled by the store detective and the floor walker, and called a liar and a thief by the manager. This woman is respectable. Her reputation is unimpeachable as these three witnesses will affirm." (NS 1.2, 13)

The lawyer attempts to re-establish Mamie's class status through her supposed respectability, but to the reader this line of argument is evidently futile, as her race alone has established her as unreliable and unworthy of respect in the eyes of the white authorities.

Mamie places a great deal of trust in her lawyer, just as she has in previous authority figures like the judge and policeman, yet again, this trust is violated. Mr. Clark continues, "It is quite obvious that Manson's is trying to intimidate Negroes who insist on trading in the store when their publicized policy is not to wait on colored people.' The last statement brought a quick reprimand and a warning from the judge" (NS 1.2, 13). While the reader applauds this honest and direct approach to the problem, which calls to mind Lena's realistic take on Mamie's arrest, it is not well received by the judge himself. His rebuke is the first foreshadowing of a bleak ending to the case and to the story, an early suggestion that the racist power structure is so highly

systematic and ingrained that resistance is futile. The judge's ruling only further makes this point clear. He addresses Mamie directly:

I do not believe you are an habitual thief. You work. That is to your credit. Your friends are here in defense of your character as they know it. That is also in your favor. The morale of the working staff must be preserved. I cannot believe that three witnesses have lied under oath. In light of the facts as presented, I have no alternative but to find you guilty and sentence you to thirty days in jail. (NS 1.2, 14)

While the ruling begins positively, it quickly becomes clear that this judge differs little from the last and that the justice *system*, rather than any individual judge, is corrupt. The judge acknowledges her work as to her credit, but that fact in and of itself is problematic as it relies on class-based stereotypes about African Americans as shiftless and dishonest. Despite referencing her character witnesses in his ruling, the judge doesn't even hear testimony from them. These three witnesses match those presented by the prosecution, yet they carry none of the weight of their white counterparts. He references her character "as they know it," which implies ignorance on their part of the full spectrum of said character and of what Mamie is capable. Finally, his claim that his decision is based on the "facts" of the case seems incredibly facetious to readers, who know that Mamie is, in fact, the victim and not the perpetrator of the crime.

While the ruling itself is a blow to readers anticipating an optimistic or uplifting outcome, Tompkins ends the story with another layer of sharp criticism: "In the ante-room, Abe Clark was saying, 'My fee is thirty-five dollars. I have a note here for the amount. Will you sign it, please?' Mamie signed" (NS 1.2, 14) This required payment following the jailing of an innocent

woman represents another layer of punishment, this time inflicted by someone who was supposed to be an ally, her lawyer. The way in which Tompkins writes this scene evokes Mamie's mental absence or out-of-body experience as she attempts to distance herself from the reality of the situation. Readers are not granted this same distance, however, and are left with a rather bleak presentation of the realities of racial injustice. In a system in which whiteness is equated with power, the ability of African Americans to elevate their class status is increasingly dangerous to the status quo; therefore, it becomes a necessity to suppress class mobility through systematic means to maintain white superiority. Clearly it is not possible to work within such a system to uproot it, meaning that the only option left for Black Americans is to attempt to restructure it from the ground up.

In addition to white concerns regarding the integration of public space and how it threatens white supremacy, a much more intimate sort of mixing that manifests itself in the fears of white Americans throughout history. Miscegenation is a racial concern, and the fear of the so-called "contamination" of white bloodlines represents a threat to class superiority as well as to constructs of racial purity. In "Rare Blood" by Garnet Owen, the daughter of a well-to-do judge marries a Black French musician, then attempts to bring him home to meet her family. The parental reaction is somewhat mixed, but clearly represents anxiety over social status. The story opens with the parents contemplating the reality of their daughter's marriage: "Judge Hammond sighed and heaved forward in his chair. The stately woman opposite did not unbend" (*NS* 1.6, 10). These initial postures serve as perfect symbols for the reaction of these two individuals to their daughter's offense. Her mother, Florence, is immediately dismissive of her husband, horrified by her daughter's actions, and concerned with her own image. She begins by

attempting to shame her husband for what she considers to be a lack of severity in his reaction. A proliferation of exclamation points mark her commentary as she disparages what she sees as weak-willed behavior: “You sound like an idiot, Charles,” “Until he comes! ... Preposterous!,” “We’ll be ruined, I tell you!” (NS, 1.6, 10). Her husband Charles, on the other hand, is more reasonable. He tells his wife, “I can do nothing until he comes.... Calm yourself, Florence. It is only fair to Dubris that we see him... my dear, she *is* married to him”(NS 1.6, 10, emphasis in original). He seems much more aware of the reality of the situation that they are facing and takes a measured response.

Despite his attempts to remain open-minded to his daughter’s husband, Charles demonstrates a clear concern for class status and public image when it comes to his son-in-law. He defends Dubris as a musician and a captain in the French army, attempting to assert the match as acceptable on the grounds that these traits elevate Dubris’s status and might make him acceptable in their circle of acquaintances. Florence takes no such care in assessing the consequences of the marriage: “See him! ...If Bettina allows the man to come here, the whole town will know. Are you mad? ... It is an outrage, this thing. It will mean scandal, disgrace. We shall be utterly disgraced. When our friends hear—”(NS 1.6, 10). Despite any other traits the man might have, the one defining factor in the decision that he is an unacceptable match for her daughter is his impact on the family’s reputation. She prompts her husband, “You don’t seem to understand, Charles. That man must not come into my house. Think of your position” (NS 1.6 p11). Her fear is very real; this alliance will endanger the family’s social stock and financial situation. Florence struggles to believe that her daughter would enter into such an arrangement by choice, insinuating that the marriage was forced upon her. It is ironic to consider

that a Black man, traditionally disempowered by American social and economic structures, might be able to levy this sort of power over a wealthy white woman; however, it fits perfectly into the white narrative of an animalistic, physically dominant Black man that Florence embraces. Her husband undermines this attempt to levy the blame on the new husband, insisting, “I don’t believe Bettie would have married him if she hadn’t wanted to.... No, she wouldn’t. He didn’t inveigle her into it. Not Bettina” (*NS* 1.6, 11). His refusal to buy into his wife’s vision of the marriage supports a view that his daughter is headstrong and opinionated, a powerful force in her own right.

Florence’s class concerns are inextricably caught up in her fear of miscegenation, a danger that she tries to impress upon her husband: “My child. Your child. Blood of the Wards in her. I can’t conceive this thing. I’d rather see her dead” (*NS* 1.6, 11). The stark finality of this statement sets up a conflict with little chance for resolution. Owen’s word choice is deliberate, evoking the idea of the literal conception of a child between Bettina and Dubris and insinuating that their offspring would be more “thing” than human. The thought of her own blood being combined with that of a Black man is so repulsive to Florence that she would prefer the death of her only child to such social and racial contamination. This attitude carries into the confrontation between mother and daughter, a conversation during which Charles speaks only once. As Bettina enters the room,

Florence Hammond dr[aws] herself to her full tallness. And her daughter, as tall as she, walk[s] steadily towards her.... Florence watche[s] her and s[ees] in the girl’s face that delicate chiseled beauty which had characterized four generations of Ward women. Blood of an old Carolina stock. Behind that grey ensemble [is]

the body of a Ward woman. The mother look[s] frantically at the silkgold hair of Bettina, down the poised neck, over high breasts rounding out the sheer blouse.

(*NS* 1.6, 11)

Owen creates a parallel between the mother and daughter through their physical similarities that heighten the contrast in their attitudes towards race. When Florence looks at her daughter all she takes in is her physical beauty, which is tied to her ancestry and her whiteness. The loss of this bloodline troubles her more than an impassable rift between herself and her daughter.

Bettina's attitude toward her marriage is much more progressive than either of her parents, and her interactions with them demonstrate the willful spirit that Judge Hammond describes in his daughter. Florence presents the issue of the family's stock, both social and genetic, in an attempt to appeal to her daughter's judgement, but Bettina rebuffs her completely: "“Oh God. Our blood, Bettina, our blood.’ / ‘The blood of Alfon Dubris is as rich and red as the blood of the Hammonds and the Wards, Mother’” (*NS* 1.6, 12). This dialogue demonstrates Bettina's quick intellect as she plays upon her mother's words and reverses their intent. Her refusal to see her relationship through the traditional lenses of power and privilege infuriates her mother, but endears her to readers and suggests a future in which race will be far less relevant to the formation of relationships than genuine connection stemming from everyday social interactions. When it becomes apparent that Bettina's husband will not be accepted into her family home, “[t]he girl face[s] them and sp[eaks] more coldly. ‘I thought you would understand. I thought I could depend upon your good sense and fairness’ / ‘Understand what?’ / ‘That it is right. That I am happy. That prejudice has no place.’ / Florence gasped. ‘You are mad, mad. This thing will ruin us. Can’t you see?’ / ‘No. The only thing I see is that I was

wrong to tell you anything about it” (NS 1.6, 11). The confrontation makes apparent that mother and daughter operate on completely different premises. Idealism marks Bettina’s speech as she envisions a world without prejudice; her mother relies on the system that maintains white authority and depends entirely on external validation to proliferate. Owen’s story illuminates the time has not arrived in which readers can rely upon Bettina’s belief in the “good sense and fairness” of white people, especially within the United States. Despite the time period, there is a sense of hope that individual relationships may begin to undermine the existing expectations of race and class, slowly subverting a power structure that seems entrenched in both this story and in Tompkins’s.

The most significant commentary on the intersection between race and class comes at the end of the story, as the janitor and ticket agent at the train station gossip about Bettina’s departure and whom she is with. They are characterized as Black by their speech, thereby offering a counter-perspective to the white, high-society views of Florence Hammond. Despite the immense racial and socioeconomic gap between them and Florence, the men share her inability to believe that a young white woman like Bettina would be paired with a Black man. Dubris’s very presence with his wife implies his whiteness to these working-class men. Her race and class status transfer to him, at least in the eyes of outsiders. Thus the reality of his race is far less significant than the perception of it. Instead of undermining Florence’s fear of external reaction to the marriage, however, this misconception only exacerbates it, as the confusion could go both ways. Their upper-class acquaintances will see Dubris’s blackness as the contagion rather than the Hammonds’s whiteness. The final line of the story reads: “Jim [the janitor] chewed and talked to himself. ‘Derned if that feller didn’t look like a nigger t’me” (NS 1.6, 13).

Like in “Sticks and Stones,” the loaded word “nigger” carries with it connotations of both class and race, but in this case it is employed by a Black man rather than as a slur from an outsider.

By referring to Dubris as “a nigger,” Jim both recognizes the other man’s race and downgrades his class. Despite his affiliation with Bettina and his own personal wealth and education, his social status and race are inextricably linked, even by those who share this identity. As the ending of “Rare Blood” make clear, concern over racial purity and social status is not simply an issue between whites and Blacks, but within the African American community itself.

In “Queer Duck,” written by Alice Browning under the name Lila Marshall, hierarchical gradations of blackness are constructed and protected by a subset of African Americans in order to assert social dominance within the race. The story concerns a Black man who falls in love with and marries a Black Creole girl with disastrous consequences. The appearances of the two lovers are contrasted from the moment they are introduced: “[Joe Walton] was a small brown Negro with keen features and close tight hair, and a way of wrinkling up his forehead into about six rounded furrows” (*NS* 1.4, 51). Joe’s features are stereotypically African American, from his brown skin to his kinky hair. On the other hand, his love interest, Amelie Poree, is immediately set apart from even the other Creole girls with whom she is seen. She

had been standing at the corner with some other girls when he stepped off the train, at New Orleans—a grey eyed, red-haired creature, her long braids hanging below her waist. He and the other pullman porters and waiters started at the beauty of these creole girls. He had heard of the creoles, who were a mixture of Negro, French, and Spanish bloods. Their women, like the white creoles, were supposed to be the loveliest of all

American women. All of them were olive-skinned with dusky hair and Black eyes—except Amelie. (*NS* 1.4, 51-52)

Amelie's light eyes and hair are much more commonly associated with white ancestry than the traits seen in Joe or in her other Creole companions. This visual contrast immediately creates a perceived difference between the two young people that foreshadows the difficulties that will emerge from their relationship. This difference also sets Amelie apart and elevates her status, despite her apparent lack of schooling: "She spoke in the utterly charming patois of the half-educated Creole" (*NS* 1.4, 52).

Joe's superior education, as indicated by his own speech, does not translate to a higher class status and the difference between their social positions emerges very quickly when he is finally brought to meet Amelie's family after the two are married. The same visual contrast initially seen between Amelie and Joe parallels the disparity between him and her family, but with much more negative results:

All about the room, in straight chairs, people were seated—about twenty people whose faces gleamed white and cream and ivory before him.... "Mais, il est noir." "But, he's Black," the voices said. "He's Black" It was all that he could hear. All evening it was to ring in his ears. Joe was brown, a dark hindu brown. But he realized that to these Creoles, these New Orleans aristocrats, he was Black and it was an unpardonable sin for a Black man to have broken into their circle—their clique. (*NS* 1.4, 53)

Browning takes readers inside Joe's thoughts as he processes his reception by the family, highlighting his own intense focus on his appearance, one that appears to mirror the family's

obsession with intra-racial distinctions. “All that he [can] hear” is the commentary on his skin color. From this interaction it appears that the Porees operate beyond the Black/white distinction of the outside world. Joe’s color is not a simple matter of genetics, as to the average white person the Creoles would be just as “tainted” as Joe by the presence of “black blood” in their veins. It is also clearly not an issue of actual skin color. Amelie’s mother is “swarthy like an Italian” and her father is “olive-skinned, with oily Black hair” (*NS* 1.4, 53), both clearly darker than their daughter and less likely to be mistaken for white. Joe’s own skin is, of course, actually brown in color. The term “black,” therefore, takes on an even more loaded connotation in the story. To be Black is a matter of status, not of traditional concepts of race, and Joe’s skin tone marks him as lower in class than the lighter-skinned Creoles.

Identification with a given race is also presented as a sort of choice, though it is one that individual cannot make but rather societal norms and expectations confers. Joe logically understands that he and the Porees are of the same stock: “He reason[s] defiantly, ‘They are Negroes—just like me.’ But in his heart he knew they were not like him. He could never be one of them. They hated him. His sensitive nature recoiled before this hatred. His mother and sister at home were yellow while he and his father were dark. But these people in spite of Negro blood, were white, and they preserved their white heritage” (*NS* 1.4, 53). Again the color distinctions explicitly stem from social status; Joe’s light-skinned family members are considered “yellow” while even the darker members of the Porees are “white.” Because their whiteness enables them to retain an aristocratic position within their community, they must protect their whiteness. While Joe comments that the family shares his “Negro blood,” they clearly see their own heritage as separate from his; therefore, to welcome him into their family

was to risk tainting that ancestry in a manner as dangerous as a true interracial marriage might be.

Joe's growing awareness of how the Poree family perceives him leads to an internalized sense of inadequacy which mirrors the mindset that entrenched power dynamics create within minority groups; the self-policing of those deemed inferior helps to keep them in a subservient position and maintain the status quo. This poisonous mindset can be seen as Joe blames himself for the family's rejection of him and his marriage:

Now, as Joe looked back he realized that his morbid sensitiveness perhaps estranged him the more. If only he could have forgotten himself and talked naturally and tried to be a good mixer, they probably would have welcomed him as Amelie's husband and, in time, liked him for himself. But he could not. The sense of inferiority that had followed him from childhood clung relentlessly [sic] to him and kept him prisoner behind a wall of timidity. (*NS* 1.4, 53)

The language of entrapment and the sense of the longevity of these feelings of inferiority connect the judgment Joe faces from the family to the larger societal oppression of Blacks by whites. In this sense, the Porees have established themselves as "white," in part by acting as the oppressor of other people of color whom they deem to be socially inferior. Joe's belief that his own behavior is at fault for the rift between himself and his wife's family is belied by the way in which Amelie kept him carefully hidden from her family for so long and how she eventually "had prepared the way for him, skillfully, at least so that they wouldn't murder him at night, but he knew they detested him" (*NS* 1.4, 53). The need for this kind of subterfuge indicates that she,

at least, was aware from the start of how difficult it would be to find acceptance from her kin for her new husband.

Married life for the pair exists in name only; as he travels for work she remains with her family and he only periodically visits. In these brief encounters, he is not denied access to his wife or her home, but “he felt their veiled contempt, a contempt he knew now was based only on the superficial difference in color. He considered them an ignorant foolish lot, and at times he showed this by an arrogant distress” (*NS* 1.4, 54). By contrasting the Porees’ ignorance and Joe’s arrogance, Browning again calls into question the assumptions being made about class. Joe possesses awareness and true understanding as opposed to the Porees’ lack of education, yet his intellectual superiority is not relevant to his social position. This social disadvantage carries over into his marriage, for even when he takes a job that takes him off the road and allows for a permanent residence, Amelie won’t leave home. Despite her clear affection for her husband, her connection to her family is more visceral than her union with Joe and their marriage is all but dissolved.

Amelie comes for a visit five years later and the pair seems to make some progress in their relationship, which seems to stem from the fact that Joe feels better able to demonstrate his own social merit via his family: “It pleased him for Amelie to see his family. He had told her about his sister being light in color [sic], and she could now see that some of his family were as good looking as hers” (*NS* 1.4, 55). Joe has capitulated to the standards of his oppressor, believing that the ability of his family to meet white standards of beauty defines the narrative of his own self-worth. The self-loathing that this concession demonstrates also prevents him from reconciling with his wife and acquiescing to her pleas that she be able to join him in the

North: “He tried to make up his mind, but her family and his hurt feelings kept getting in the way. After all, she was their daughter—the Poree’s daughter; she had their blood in her veins” (NS 1.4, 56). Again the question of blood is raised, but in this case Browning turns it on itself. Now it is Joe who holds fast to the belief that blood is a more powerful indicator of value than the exterior traits or behavior of the person in which it flows. His fear that Amelie might mirror the negative traits of her family and thus “contaminate” his life is specious as it parallels the Porees’ superficial fear of him. In the end, Joe’s rejection of Amelie drives her into the arms of another, lighter-skinned man, and when her husband learns of this he takes his own life. The harrowing ending is intensified when, through a haze of pills, Joe discovers that Amelie is calling in an attempt to reconcile—but it is too late. The poor timing of this final effort is simply one more in a series of miscommunications between the pair, which stems from Joe’s internalized self-loathing. The tragedy, according to Browning, is that this hatred may have its roots in interracial power dynamics, but it is exacerbated by the Black community’s use of these same standards to create an internal hierarchy, elevating some while condemning others to greater oppression.

The insidious way in which white-enforced conflation of race and social status manifest themselves within the Black community is not always presented with such melodrama but is a tragedy nonetheless. Another story that illuminates the reinforcement of white values within and by African Americans themselves is Melissa Lin’s “All That Hair.” Found in the final issue of *Negro Story*, Lin’s piece echoes concerns introduced in the very first issue in Gwendolyn Brooks’s story “Chicago Portraits.” Brooks’s short piece focuses on Oberta, a man whose beautiful wife Marie is guilty of any number of domestic sins. She is a neglectful homemaker,

failing to cook or clean with shocking regularity; what is more, she is widely recognized for her frequent extramarital affairs and is even rumored to have had multiple abortions performed as a result of these liaisons. “But Oberta was happy. The happiest man, he argued, in his neighborhood” (NS 1.1, 49). The reason for this happiness, Brooks reveals, lies solely in the attractiveness of his wife relative to the other women in the neighborhood, largely predicated on her insistent adherence to largely white beauty standards. Oberta’s complaints against other women include that they are “boisterous,” “big,” and unpleasantly odorous. “His dainty little Marie,” whose Biblical name and physical appearance bely her promiscuous behavior, “sp[eaks] in modulated tones... always bathe[s] once and sometimes twice a day... powder[s] her face, that [is] reddish brown (like an Indian’s!) with powder that the movie stars preferred... and dresse[s] her white folks hair in a smart upsweep” (NS 1.1, 50). Her physical assets, enhanced by the products of rampant consumerism, are both explicitly and implicitly connected to white behavior and beauty standards. By maintaining these exterior elements, Marie is able to extract approval and admiration, and not just from her husband. Aside from Oberta’s claims that other men are jealous of his attractive wife, the responses readers of *Negro Story* submitted seem to validate Marie’s behavior. A housewife writes, “After I read your story about Oberto [sic] and Marie, I threw my old nightgown in the trash and bought myself some nightgowns and house dresses and put on some perfume and powder for my husband” (NS 1.2, 52). This response shows a lack of awareness of Brooks’s perhaps too subtle commentary, but it also reminds readers of the powerful reach of white consumer culture in imposing unreachable standards of beauty for Black individuals, especially women.

Lin takes a less tongue-in-cheek approach than Brooks to criticizing Black acceptance of these externally imposed standards. “All That Hair” centers on a childhood desire to be more “white” in order to gain social acceptance. The main character is a little Black girl in an all-white class at school who feels isolated from her peers:

Minnie Mae knew why [the other little girls] ignored her. She wasn't like them. She didn't have the right kind of hair. More than anything else in this world Minnie Mae wanted pretty curly hair crowned by a stiff pink butterfly bow. All the little girls in her room at school had soft, silken, flexible locks.... They were just simply beautiful.... [and] she must have these kinky stiff naps that made her cry every time her mother washed them. If only a fairy would come and change her like she did Cinderella! (NS 2.3, 3)

Lin infuses her young protagonist with a childlike innocence regarding the complicated nature of her seemingly simple desire to represent all African American individuals who become susceptible to the belief that embracing white standards of beauty can actually elevate them to white levels of privilege. This belief is as naive as the hope that a fairy godmother might swoop in and intercede on one's behalf and that physical transformation can elevate social class from maid to princess. Minnie Mae feels so certain that having different hair would present an opportunity for a different life that she steals the curly, golden-haired wig belonging to her mother's employer while the white woman naps and takes it to school:

She looked into the mirror and saw [sic] a transformed creature. The inch-long stubborn, greasy kinks were gone, and silk curls tumbled profusely in their place. Oh, if only she could wear it to school! The kids would like her then.... She ran

all the way to school, holding the wig on with one hand, and thinking all the time. Now maybe Mary Lou, that pretty little fat girl would play with her at recess. Maybe all the girls.... Carried away by her realistic dream, her heart bounded in delightful anticipation, and she reached the school, ran up the steps, and into her room. (NS 2.3, 4)

Minnie Mae's internal monologue references a "transformed creature," a clear commentary on the shallow nature of this supposed change. "Creature," which calls to mind a being that is inhuman and unreal, paired with the fantasy language of Minnie Mae's "realistic dream," makes clear the insufficiency of this physical transformation in accomplishing any kind of real social mobility well before readers see the reaction of the girl's peers. Lin's description reinforces Brooks's more subtle message that changing only one's exterior truly is superficial.

Both writers' commentary on Black female identity complements Julia Kristeva's work on the abject in her famous book *Powers of Horror*. The most famous example of abjection at play is viewing a corpse, an encounter that blurs the lines between ourselves as objects and as subjects and which explicitly calls attention to our own mortality. For Black women, abjection is at play in racial identity itself. These women are pressured to mold their appearance to that of white women in order to meet the standards of beauty accepted by their own society, yet even as they lighten their skin or relax their hair there is an explicit, often visual, reminder that they are not, in fact, white. Like little Minnie Mae, what they see in the mirror is "[n]ot me. Not that. But not nothing, either. A 'something' that I do not recognize as a thing. A weight of meaninglessness, about which there is nothing insignificant, and which crushes me. On the edge of nonexistence and hallucination, of a reality that, if I acknowledge it, annihilates me" (Kristeva

2). Minnie Mae's implied objective is not simply to look white, but to *be* white, which readers recognize as an impossibility. In the face of this paradoxical desire, her identity dissolves into a sort of nothingness, not white or Black.

Minnie Mae's desire stems from her attempt to gain social acceptance, which parallels an adult desire to gain social mobility and socioeconomic power. Lin underscores the futility of imitating whiteness to achieve privilege through the reactions of the girl's peers and teacher when she returns in the wig: "At first the teacher didn't see her. Then, as a surreptitious tittering arose and gradually grew to open snickering and suppressed laughter, she looked up frowningly.... And then, the little brown girl, whom class and teacher alike had ignored all year, was suddenly the amused and contemptuous center of attention" (NS 2.3, 4). While Minnie Mae has succeeded in eliciting the attention that she desired, the effect is not at all what she imagined. Rather than granting her upward social mobility, her imitation of whiteness only reinforces her status as Black:

Minnie Mae felt the whole sea of white faces staring, mocking, burning her.

Laughing at her. Suddenly, everything became blurred, and a greater panic seized upon her, for she felt a wet scalding run down her legs, and to her horror and shame saw a puddle grow as big as a river under her feet, and start rolling down the aisle, under the seats, a long, wide condemning river. They would never like her now! (NS 2.3, 5).

The intense humiliation of the encounter, reflected in her hyperbolic revelation of the fact that she has wet herself in public, underscores the futility of the child's actions to gain the acceptance of her white peers.

Her efforts are not met with sympathy or understanding within her community either, as she is scolded, not comforted, when she rushes back home. After replacing the wig and “shaking the child violently, [her mother] whisper[s] fiercely, ‘*Hush!* Do you want to wake Mrs. Whitham and have her find out you’ve had her wig so I’ll lose my job? Where would we be then?’ ... She [goes on to] mutter, ‘Children sure are more bother than they are worth, always doing something to upset folks’” (NS 2.3, 5). Again, the worth of Minnie Mae’s actions are measured by what the white reaction to them will be. While the girl’s mother seems unconcerned with standards of beauty, she still capitulates to a societal construct that elevates white opinion and subjugates Black behavior to those expectations. When Minnie Mae retreats home at the end of the story, Lin implies that she has learned a lesson from her experience. The question readers must take up is whether this lesson is inherently valuable: “By the time she had finished the long walk home the sighs had stopped, but a new wisdom and sadness was buried deep in her child’s heart”(NS 2.3, 5). Implicitly, Minnie Mae has come to understand what her mother already knows: that survival in a white-dominated society requires that Black individuals accept their place in the social hierarchy rather than try to change it. Lin’s lesson, however, is more complex, as she asks readers to internalize Minnie Mae’s “sadness” and consider the limitations that this acceptance locks into place.

Some stories move beyond critiquing the Black internalization of white standards of behavior and beauty and instead represent the conflict inherent in attempting to embrace a Black label despite the challenges such a racial designation brings. Rebecca Lange’s story “White Man”, narrated by a white woman who works with a Black woman in the office of a light-skinned Black doctor, exemplifies this intra-racial struggle. Lange uses the white narrator to

provide an outside perspective on racial issues, allowing the tension between the two Black characters to emerge from a relatively neutral viewpoint. Early in the story, Dr. Wilson reveals that his deferment has been revoked and he is being called to the army.

“You sure hate that army, don’t you?” Marjorie’s tone was frosty.

“Regimentation, all regimentation. I want no part of it, saying ‘sir’ to this one, salutin’ that one.” His blue eyes were angry, and bloodshot.

“Don’t hand me that stuff, Dr. John Montgomery Wilson, Jr. You’re just afraid,” said Marjorie. (*NS* 1.4, 51)

After this exchange, Dr Wilson reveals that he had tried to enlist as an officer just after Pearl Harbor.

“Why’d they turn you down?” I asked innocently.

“On account of one word in my application. There’s one thing wrong with me, according to their idea, and you can’t tell by lookin’.”

“I guess I know,” said Marge in a small voice. She and Dr. Wilson gazed at each other understandingly.

“Well, is it a secret?” I said impatiently.

“No, not exactly,” said Marjorie. “He had one wrong word—Negro.”

Now it was my turn to be hot and uncomfortable. It was I who felt all ashamed and squirmy inside.... I wanted to apologize for the stupidity and ignorance of the whole white race of which I was a member. I was covered with an immense sorrow to which I must not give words. For of what use would they be? (*NS* 1.4, 51)

This encounter is complicated and layered. First, there is the thinly veiled hostility of the Black characters: Dr. Wilson's for the army and Marjorie's for the doctor himself, whom she sees as shirking a duty that many other Black men have fulfilled. The two are able to find understanding through their shared experience as Black individuals living in a white society when Wilson reveals that he was rejected from a commission due to his race.

At this point the narrator finds herself on the outside and the narration shifts from dialogue to her own reflection. She insists that her discomfort stems from her feelings of guilt for the behavior of her race, but Lange also uses the positioning of the characters to recreate a conventional power structure. This time, the white character is the one at a loss, perhaps experiencing for the first time what it is like to be in the minority and to be excluded from a certain experience or sense of understanding. The narrator attempts to express solidarity as a member of another oppressed minority, but Lange expressly notes that the forms of oppression faced by the two women are inherently unequal. The narrator observes,

I thought, as I had often done, of my race and Marjorie's, how deep it goes, how hard it hits to be among the stepped on, the down-trodden. Hers has a harder burden in our country. It twists people, it sears them forever. How could I even talk of a war for democracy? How could I repeat the fine patriotic speeches that fill our radio and movies? Empty words for our darker brother. (*NS* 1.4, 52)

In the context of a war against Nazism, the narrator's Jewish heritage might represent a threat that parallels the fraught experience of Black Americans during the war, yet she herself recognizes that within the United States, racial oppression feels far more immediate.

In her essay “La Guerra,” Cherrie Moraga deals directly with the different types of oppression faced by minorities. She writes, “In this country, lesbianism is a poverty—as is being brown, as is being a woman, as is being just plain poor. The danger lies in ranking the oppressions. *The danger lies in failing to acknowledge the specificity of oppression.* The danger lies in attempting to deal with oppression purely from a theoretical base” (29, italics original).

This argument validates the reflections of Lange’s narrator regarding the different types of oppression that exist, often simultaneously, as a part of individual identities. At the same time, Moraga would take issue with the narrator’s attempt to “rank the oppressions.” The narrator of Lange’s story manifests an unproductive white guilt; it does nothing to serve her colleagues and only seems to be an attempt to assuage her own feelings of being complicit in the persecution of other minority groups. What *is* important to note is the “specificity of oppression” faced by each character in the story, whether it be due to race, ethnicity, religion, gender, or some confluence of the above. In this sense, each character is limited in a distinctly different way, but this difference does not have to inhibit the ability to work together with others to overthrow the hierarchical systems under which they are oppressed.

Moraga also notes that certain subsets of oppressed groups have more privilege than others, which enables them to “forget,” to a certain degree, the level of persecution others face.

Black members of the middle class and white gay men are specifically noted as such “privileged” minority groups. Moraga insists, “To remember [what it is like to be a victim] may mean giving up whatever privileges we have managed to squeeze out of this society by virtue of our gender, race, class, or sexuality” (30). This complicated intersection of privilege and limitation comes to a head in “White Man” because Dr. Wilson has been able to live a relatively

privileged existence as a highly educated, light-skinned Black man. The tenuous nature of the relationship between him and Marjorie that results from this fact is lost on the narrator, who asks her co-worker, “‘Don’t you feel kind of sorry for Johnny?’ / ‘I feel lots of things about him, and sorry isn’t one of them. He’s a white colored man.’ / ‘It’s tough on him being pulled both ways.’ / ‘I don’t know. It’s settled for me. I’m a brown skinned girl’” (NS 1.4, 52). As in so many examples from *Negro Story*, perceived race is a marker of status more than of an inherent identity. Marjorie characterizes herself as “brown skinned” while insisting that Dr. Wilson is a “white colored man,” a seeming paradox. Marjorie understands what the narrator cannot; Dr. Wilson straddles two worlds and is able to use this liminality to his advantage. Whatever the personal costs of navigating this identity, it grants him a social privilege that Marjorie and other dark-skinned Blacks can never have.

When Dr. Wilson returns from the enlistment office, both women assume that he has listed his race correctly on his paperwork. Marjorie responds to his seeming regret with an illuminating speech on race, class, and privilege:

I’m going to tell you what I think. And it’s none of my business. Only it might help you to hear it, and me to say it. You’ve always had an easy time, Dr. Wilson. You always went to white schools up here in the North. Nobody even thought to ask you anything. In this town, in New York, you go to any restaurant, or show or night club—as long as the money your dad sends you holds out. You’ve been a lucky guy, like any other rich young man. In fact, up until the day the army came along, you’ve been a white man. ...I hope you have the guts to start being a negro, not to run away any more. My brother, my sweetheart, both

of them are in one of those rotten camps in the South. They have to take it. It'll be better for you as an officer. But you'll be a Negro and you're going to be treated the way the rest of us have all our lives.... It'll do you good to learn how it feels, how it hurts. Then you'll never be able to forget your people. You can help them a lot. You're a good doctor and a good guy. You've got the best training.

Think what it would mean to every fella in the army that you help. (*NS* 1.4, 53)

Marjorie offers a rebuke, but also attempts to motivate Dr. Wilson to join the army as a Black man. She calls upon him to acknowledge his privilege and, as Moraga asserts, to sacrifice some of it for the betterment of those around him. Her prior characterization of him as “a white colored man” becomes more clear: he has had the social and economic advantages of being perceived as white. In many ways he cannot relate to the experience of other Black men, and she sees the enlistment as his opportunity to do so.

Marjorie's assumptions turn out to be completely backward. The doctor's reticence does not stem from fear or even regret, but from guilt. He has decided to “pass”:

He turned on her, all fury and hate. “You ask me why. You can't tell me I ought to suffer insults and humiliation,” he shouted. “You can't help it. But me, I don't have to. I won't be a little tin Jesus for my people. I'm going into a white outfit. I'm not going to put up with that stuff.

There's only one life for little Johnny Wilson and he doesn't want it to be hell on earth. I've got only yours truly to worry about, not the rest of the Black men in the USA. I'm tired of thinkin' and frettin' and stewin' about

it. For me it can be easy, and that's the way I'm doin' it. I'm passin', Miss Marjorie Dale, and what do you think of that?"

Now Marjorie was soft-voiced again, slow and even. "I think you're a coward, Dr. Wilson. You're throwing away your birthright. An honest man stands up and fights. A real man should have pride in his race, not fear and shame. You'll never be a big man now, Dr. Johnny Wilson, Jr. You're small-sized."

He tried to talk. He spluttered with rage.

"Never mind the excuses. They're no good. You've made your choice and deep in your heart you know you're wrong. Maybe someday you'll find it out. And me, I feel bad—so bad I don't want to talk anymore. Good afternoon, Dr. Wilson." She left the room. (NS 1.4, 53-54)

Dr. Wilson embraces the privilege he has been granted by virtue of his light skin and extends it as far as it can go. His response shows that he sees himself as different from Marjorie and other dark-skinned Blacks, who have no choice but to suffer the pain of discrimination. His reaction is a very human one, rooted in self-preservation, but even before Marjorie's cutting response, readers can see that it is ignoble. She calls attention to the loathing that Wilson's rant only thinly veils. His rejection of his racial heritage is a rejection of a core element of himself as well as of his community and this isolation will only exacerbate a lack of selfhood resulting from the embrace of an external locus of identity.

Lange's story does not make the claim that rejecting white cultural expectations will make life easier; in most tangible ways it will only serve to make it more complicated. Yet embracing a racial identity that does not obscure expectations based on skin color with lived experience of race does allow individuals to forge a clear sense of selfhood. This rejection of externally imposed expectations emerges as a common thread throughout *Negro Story* as a means to truly work towards desegregation, escape abjection, and dismantle oppression and privilege from the ground up.

Chapter 6: The Legacy of the Women of *Negro Story*

“So it is the adult we must attack [to end prejudice], the young, impressionable adult who will parent the next generation. And I feel that the best weapon for the attack is the pen...”

Helen Herbert, “The Masterpiece” (NS 1.2, 35)

In considering the work of American women short story writers as a whole, Julie Brown comments on Susan Koopelman’s argument that “‘the creation of a literary genre is not the work of a single individual; it is an antiphonal and collaborative work.’ Therefore, we may view American women’s short stories as springing from the pens of a community of women who shared and read each other’s works” (xxii). *Negro Story* represents one such community in which authors, editors, and readers are in constant conversation with one another. Readers must view the individual stories of female writers within the magazine as a collective whole in order to better understand their influence. After all, despite Browning’s best efforts, *Negro Story* only lasted two short years. During that time the magazine published some of the best known names in Black fiction, including Langston Hughes, Chester Himes, and Richard Wright, yet to date only minimal scholarship exists on the role that the magazine played in the development of Black literature. *Negro Story* also gave a voice to dozens of amateur writers, many of them women, who had limited opportunities to practice their craft. Bill Mullen argues that the magazine helped give birth to “a newly political African American literature” and also served as an “important precursor to the explosion of Black women’s literature in the immediate post-war period” (“NS Magazine” 12). This explosion included the work of Gwendolyn Brooks, who got an early start in the pages of *Negro Story*, as well as Ann Petry and, later, Lorraine Hansberry, Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, and many more.

While the individual writers who benefitted from the magazine's influence are worthy of note, the collective effect of the works taken together best exemplifies the success of *Negro Story*. This dialogue exists not only between the works within the magazine, but extends into the past of African American literature and reaches far into the future. The voices within the magazine both inform and are informed by these other works, and thus are open to constant interpretation and application across eras and locations. The antiphonal nature of short fiction is central to understanding its place in literary scholarship. In the introduction to her anthology, *American Women Short Story Writers*, Brown poses "a series of questions that will lead to a theory of the women's short story" (xxvi). In excavating the work of women within *Negro Story*, I have worked to address several of Brown's questions, including: "How do women's histories, cultures, and physiologies affect the way they write short stories?"; "What topics do women short story writers choose to write about?"; and, most simply, "Why do women write short stories?" (xxvi). Recognizing the differences that female writers bring to their work helps to illuminate the fact that Black and female identity is not singular or uniform. This variety is what leaned strength to the magazine as its editors sought to authentically represent the richness of "the Negro story."

More specifically, I consider these questions in light of how the contributions by women to *Negro Story* help to elucidate the experiences and concerns of Black women specifically. As Kimberlee Crenshaw explains in "Mapping the Margins," "because women of color experience racism in ways not always the same as those experienced by men of color and sexism in ways not always the same as experiences of white women, antiracism and feminism are limited, even on their own terms" (1252). The experiences of these women is distinct from that of Black men

or white women, and the stories collected by the magazine exemplify this singularity. Crenshaw also argues that “the intersection of racism and sexism factors into Black women’s lives in ways that cannot be captured wholly by looking at the race or gender dimensions of those experiences separately” (1244). The stories that focus on the experiences of African American women highlight this intersection and the particular oppression that it brings. *Negro Story* is notable because it brings together a chorus of female voices from across races, classes, and experiences to comment on the complicated experience of Black women in the mid-1940’s. Though the context has changed, these experiences resonate today because of the variety with which they are presented and the clear humanity of the subjects within each story.

Uncovering the work of these writers is important because the experiences of Black women are important. Calling attention to this specific group does not have to undermine the efforts of either Black Americans or of women as a whole; instead, it should only strengthen the efforts of other minority groups. In *This Bridge Called My Back*, the Combahee River Collective addresses the concern that Black feminism divides the Black struggle: “We might use our position at the bottom, however, to make a clear leap into revolutionary action. If Black women were free, it would mean that everyone else would have to be free since our freedom would necessitate the destruction of all the systems of oppression” (215). Under this premise, the writing in *Negro Story* and works like it are absolutely essential. Using their pens, these authors and editors strive to share their experiences in a way that would resonate with their readers. These stories come together as a political call to recognition and to action. *Negro Story* echoes over the decades as a demand that Black women be heard and seen, not simply as part of other

minority groups based on race or gender, but as individuals with specific challenges and desires who are empowered to do something about them.

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