BLACK WOMEN'S CONTRIBUTION TO THE LITTLE
MAGAZINES OF THE 1920S AND 1930S

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ABSTRACT:

BLACK WOMEN'S CONTRIBUTION TO THE LITTLE MAGAZINES OF THE 1920S AND 1930S: PRESERVING CULTURAL HISTORY

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This study of female participation in the little magazines such as The Crisis, Opportunity, Fire!!, and Challenge, attempts to expand the voices of the New Negro to include a variety of black women’s social, political, and literary concerns during the 1920s and 1930s. The leadership roles and promotional strategies of black female writers are also traced, revealing a previously ignored connection between patroness and artist, and often a discrepancy between propaganda and literature.
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Section I

The voices of the New Negro resounded during the early part of the Twentieth Century, and men like W.E.B. DuBois, James Weldon Johnson, Langston Hughes, and Alain Locke found outlets for their art and political views. This male dominated movement attempted to elevate the position of the New Negro in a society that devalued black Americans. Although modern scholars tend to study male writers, female voices of the 1920s and 1930s also deserve examination. In The Sleeper Wakes, Marcy Knopf explains why this scholarship is important and necessary represent a culture’s literature: Though there are many historical studies of the period, they focus primarily on the accomplishments of the male writers [. . .] women’s accomplishments have been marginalized, devalued, and ignored in many of the historical texts”(xvi). Knopf agrees that women’s voices were not as widely heard or loudly praised; nevertheless, black women wrote and published important works of prose and poetry during the 1920s and 1930s. In “Black Women as Cultural Conservators,” Sandra Govan contends that women of the Harlem Renaissance were “doing what they could to further the arts and careers of different artists, helping foster the idea of cultural continuity, indeed reporting upon, forming, as well as preserving African-American social and cultural history” (9). With this in mind,
examining women's literary contribution in the 1920s and 1930s becomes imperative when constructing the history of a race, and perhaps more importantly, when constructing one of the most eventful eras in American history.

Many female writers of the 1920s and 1930s published in one of the only forums that were available to them: the little magazines. These magazines usually had a small readership of fewer than one thousand, but they were supportive journals in which black women could publish their historical and literary works. In *The Sleeper Wakes*, Nellie McKay's forward establishes the importance of the little black magazines: "These journals represented diaries of a race—a running group history recorded as events unfolded" (x). McKay contends that black writers had license to voice their honest appraisals of contemporary life among a supportive group of editors and publishers. Although little magazines had some success in the early part of the twentieth century, the 1920s launched a new attitude of black writing and publishing found in the little magazines.

Most important, the little magazines provide a historical context in which to examine the common themes and trends in black women's fiction during the 1920s and 1930s. In *Women of the Harlem Renaissance*, Cheryl Wall urges scholars to study works of this period and to "identify common themes and metaphors in their writings, to determine who they were and where and how they lived, and to study the level of interaction among them" (9). Women's roles as writers and patronesses during the 1920s and 1930s help to illuminate the spirit and vitality of black communities during an extraordinary time in American
history. Because little magazines like *Crisis, Opportunity, Fire!!* and *Challenge* include women's writing, the voices of the New Negro must also include their contribution to the formation of a literary tradition. In many studies of this period, women's leadership roles in the little magazines are ignored, omitting an important connection between patroness and artist. Issues that dominated black women's lives can be examined by studying their own writing in the context of these often propagandistic, yet literary publications. A study of the little magazines uncovers black women's effective and influential leadership roles as editors; however, while the writers themselves convey historical and social issues that concerned black females, some fail in their mission to produce meaningful artistic works.
Section II

Although men held the majority of leadership positions for the little magazines, women also played a crucial role in the development and editorship of the journals. Prior to the Harlem Renaissance, from 1902-1904, Pauline Hopkins, an outspoken Bostonian, set a high standard for female editors while working at the Colored American Magazine (Wintz 4). Her work and reputation paved the way for future women to assume editorial positions at major journals. For example, Hopkins recruited new authors, wrote biographies of distinguished black Americans, and spoke out against racism (Wintz 4). When a white woman wrote to the Colored American Magazine expressing her dissatisfaction with many of the stories written about interracial couples, Hopkins responded scathingly: “My stories are definitely planned to show the obstacles persistently placed in our paths by a dominant race to subjugate us spiritually. I am glad to receive this criticism for it shows more clearly than ever that white people don’t understand what pleases Negroes” (Johnson and Johnson 8). When Booker T. Washington supporters took over the magazine, however, Hopkins lost her position as editor because “the new management found her embarrassingly outspoken” (Johnson and Johnson 8).

Many women during the 1920s and 1930s, becoming successful editors of little magazines, followed in the footsteps of Pauline Hopkins. Because of their
shared leadership roles, women were able to support each other, publishing works submitted by other women. Pauline Hopkins initiative and courage in the publishing business bridged the gap between the sexes, and her leadership role encouraged other females to break into the typically male dominated field of publishing, contribute to the race journals, and support fellow females in their literary endeavors.

One of the most influential women of the Harlem Renaissance, Jessie Fauset, worked closely with W.E.B. DuBois as literary editor of *The Crisis*. She not only edited the monthly journal, but also fostered the careers of many up-and-coming writers. In *Propaganda & Aesthetics: The Literary Politics of Afro-American Magazines in the 20th Century*, Abby and Ronald Johnson draw a comparison between Fauset and Hopkins: “In several respects Fauset recalls Pauline Hopkins. Both women had a similar understanding of Afro-American literature. And thus they helped create a climate conducive to the most contemporary writers” (42). Fauset faithfully reviewed new fiction and poetry written by black writers, using her position at *The Crisis* to showcase female talents like Nella Larsen, Anne Spencer, and Georgia Douglas Johnson (Wall 36). *The Crisis*, perhaps the most influential magazine of the 1920s and 1930s, had a wide sphere of influence during its peak publication period. Unlike most “little” magazines, *The Crisis* reached over ten thousand readers who were anxious for social change. Created and managed by W.E.B. DuBois, the magazine was usually an unbalanced mix of social protest and literature. Subsidized by the NAACP, *The Crisis* welcomed literary works that contained
elements of political unrest. Fauset's alliance with such a powerful publication allowed her to promote and foster the careers of many female writers. Cheryl Wall claims that Fauset "was particularly supportive of women, both literary and visual artists. Indeed, she was at the center of a network of black women cultural workers" (36). Fauset's work in the black literary movement remains obscured by more famous male names of the Harlem Renaissance (even in 1980, Deborah McDowell attributes Fauset's relative obscurity to a white male critic's "partisan and superficial" reading of her novels). McDowell goes on to say that "When Black women writers are neither ignored altogether nor merely given honorable mention, they are critically misunderstood and summarily dismissed" (168). Current assessment of her longer fiction aside, her unique ability to promote female writers and her commitment to the black arts make Fauset an important figure of this era.

Gwendolyn Bennett also contributed to the administrative duties of the black little magazines by sharing editorial duties with Charles S. Johnson at the little magazine Opportunity. Like The Crisis, Opportunity was also funded by a political organization, the National Urban League, and was the first black little magazine to offer literary contests to encourage new works of fiction. Opportunity "began sponsoring its own literary contests to encourage the creative talents of a younger generation of black Americans. The first prize was given to Langston Hughes in 1926 for 'The Weary Blues'" (Kellner 273). The same literary contests also made it possible for many female contributors to gain access to the little magazines. In Harlem's Glory: Black Women Writing 1900-
1950, editors Lorraine Roses and Ruth Randolph contend that “Often the only avenues for literary expression were the ‘race magazines,’ especially Opportunity and The Crisis; well over a hundred women answered the call to submit work to these journals” (5). Playing a primary role at this journal, Bennett wrote a monthly column called “The Ebony Flute” in which she critiqued theatre presentations, reviewed books, congratulated winners of literary contests, and encouraged readers to purchase new works written by black authors. In the January 1927 issue of Opportunity, Bennett comments on a new poetess:

“Helene Johnson has just sold Bottled, a poem, to Vanity Fair Magazine. We think it is very interesting that Miss Johnson is only eighteen years old and has written so many lovely poems” (29). Bennett’s “gossip” column kept tabs on who was attending what party and what special events were happening around the world. In one issue, Bennett exclaims,

Negroes in other parts of the world are throwing their literary caps into the reading public’s ring. . .a new magazine has been published in Paris, France, by Negroes from the French Colonies[. . .] the editors of the magazine are proclaiming that Negroes are proud to be Negroes. This is in direct line with the new race consciousness among colored people of intelligence in America.

(90)

Although Bennett is reporting the news from other countries, she is also echoing the mission of black people in America. Indeed, while providing her readers with
a “gossip” column of who’s who in black society, she used her writing and editorship to comment on cultural advancement.

Perhaps the most interesting and controversial little magazine that encouraged women’s leadership was Fire!!. Produced in 1926 by an influential sphere of young writers, including Zora Neale Hurston and Gwendolyn Bennett, Fire!! succeeded in agitating black people who had become apathetic in the fight against racism: “Fire!! with two exclamation marks in the full title, sounded an alarm that the old way would be destroyed in the preparation for a new world” (Johnson and Johnson 34). With sparse funding for this controversial magazine, the general editor Wallace Thurman relied on contributions from outside sources. On the inside cover, a list of ten patrons are thanked for making the magazine’s first issue possible—five out of the ten names are women. The contributors to Fire!! wrote about real issues that faced the black community and scraped at the veneer of glamorous Harlem life. Even the forward of Fire!! offended some black readers with its incisive opening:

FIRE . . . flaming, burning, searing, and penetrating far beneath the superficial items of the flesh to boil the sluggish blood.

FIRE . . . a cry of conquest in the night, warning those who sleep and revitalizing those who linger in the quiet places dozing.

FIRE . . . melting steel and iron bars, poking livid tongues between stone apertures and burning wooden opposition with a cackling chuckle of contempt.

FIRE . . . weaving vivid, hot designs upon an ebon bordered loom and satisfying pagan thirst for beauty unadorned. . . the flesh is sweet and real. . . the soul an inward flush of fire. . . Beauty? . . . flesh on fire—on fire in the furnace of life blazing. . .
The magazine inflamed some of its readers and "deeply offended and shocked the more conservative black literary critics, who were extremely sensitive about any writing that depicted blacks in a less than favorable light" (Wintz 85). After one release, Fire!! collapsed from financial ruin and a tragic accident; ironically, most of the copies burned in a basement fire. Although Zora Neale Hurston admits that Fire!! failed from lack of management and Gwendolyn Bennett barely acknowledged her involvement to the magazine (Johnson and Johnson 84), Fire!! preserves a record of social and political activists during the height of the Harlem Renaissance.

After the resurgence of black culture gradually subsided, Dorothy West attempted to revive the Harlem Renaissance with Challenge magazine. As sole editor before her alliance with Richard Wright in 1937, West explained the motivation for publishing a magazine that focused on literary works: "This magazine is primarily an organ for the new voice. It is our plan to bring out the prose and poetry of the newer Negroes. We who were the New Negroes challenge them to better our achievements. For we did not altogether live up to our fine promise" (39). Like West, many critics of the Harlem Renaissance contended that the literature of the age was clouded by a political agenda. Nevertheless, West's magazine encouraged an approach to writing that valued art over propaganda.

The female editors and promoters of the literary movement recorded and shaped an informed history of the black women's perspective. To establish the realism of the writing produced by black women authors of the period, one must
first examine the environment in which writers like Jessie Fauset, Gwendolyn Bennett, and Zora Neale Hurston lived, worked, and subsequently recorded. Black women were ranked the lowest in the social hierarchy, and found it almost impossible to advance their position in society. Elise Johnson McDougald, one of the few female contributors to Locke’s *The New Negro*, studied the role of women during the Harlem Renaissance. In her essay “The Task of Negro Womanhood,” McDougald catalogues the social ranking of the modern black female during the 1920s. Qualified as social investigator and educator, McDougald asserts that a small percentage of black women lived in leisure with their entrepreneur husbands (370). For these women, the problems of daily life ranged from raising the children to finding “competent household help” (370). Next, she describes women who are professionals in the business world, while also acknowledging the many women in labor and trades jobs (370). These women, McDougald asserts, “are wives and mothers whose husbands are insufficiently paid, or who have succumbed to social maladjustment and have abandoned their families” (371). Finally, she admits that the majority of black women workers are “struggling in domestic service [. . .] and the Negro woman is sought after for this unpopular work, largely because her honesty, loyalty and cleanliness have stood the test of time” (379). This description of social and working classes reflects the immeasurable difficulties that many black women faced in daily life.

Paralleling these concerns, Marion Cuthbert wrote an essay for *Opportunity* in 1935 entitled: “Problems Facing Negro Young Women” in which
she depicts slices of life for a black woman in America. After painting a rather grim picture, Cuthbert asserts, “There is no need to elaborate here upon the fact that the Negro woman suffers from the double discrimination of sex and race” (48). Because racial progress was more important to most black leaders than elevating the position of the black woman, feminist issues were subordinate to the all-encompassing fight for racial equality. In *The Sleeper Wakes*, Marcy Knopf explores the conditions black women faced: “Women were oppressed because of their race, class, and sex. Aside from the discrimination they encountered in the white world, African-American women artists were also oppressed by their male counterparts” (xxix). But this did not keep black women from rebelling against the established male-dominated society and writing about feminist issues.

With this oppression stifling artistic expression, the balance between art and propaganda was not easily achieved. Many women writers, finding themselves burdened by racism and classism, wrote from a restricted view. This view crippled the ability of these writers to create artistic prose, and in many cases, works published in the little magazines are riddled with underdeveloped story lines, one-dimensional characters, and flat dialogue. However, not all works published by black women in the black little magazines failed aesthetically. Many works of prose and poetry provide unique insights into black cultural history, while revitalizing the literature of a race.

One significant theme that surfaces in the little magazines centers on men’s mistreatment of their wives. As early as 1926, Marita Bonner explored the
oppression of women in her short story “The Prison-Bound,” published in *The Crisis*. Comparing domestic life to incarceration, Bonner invites the reader to share one moment in the lonely life of her character Maggie. Maggie is married to Charlie, who is “fat and greasy” (225) and constantly ignores his wife. Toward the end of the story, Maggie prays that Charlie will acknowledge her existence: “Maybe he would talk to her now. Tell her something someone said. What they had said and what they had done. Where they had been” (226). But no, Charlie only calls out to her “‘Guess I go ‘long out. Least till you can stop cryin’”(226).

Maggie never physically rebels against Charlie, but her meditations reflect dissatisfaction with married life: “Might not be so bad tomorrow. Tomorrow------” (226). But the tomorrow that Maggie clings to seems contrary to feminist ideals. She hopes that Charlie will tell her bits and scraps of his life outside the dirty walls of the tenement house. Maggie has to stay imprisoned while Charlie experiences life. Even after Maggie hears Charlie laughing with the woman in the next-door apartment “She’d never go over the hall into her house. He was a man and she, a woman” (226). Bonner ends the story with a prayer heard in a country church: “*God help the prison-bound—Them within the four iron walls this evening!*” (226). Instead of empowering her protagonist to break from captivity, she concedes that Maggie has no chance of improving her situation or standing up to her bully husband. Bonner exposes the domination of cruel husbands in a heavy-handed style, with a simple country prayer as a woman’s only comfort within the four iron walls.
Unlike Bonner's Maggie, Zora Neale Hurston's protagonist takes an active role in the ruin of her husband. Included in the controversial issue of *Fire!!*, Zora Neale Hurston chronicles in "Sweat" the pathetic life of Delia Jones. A washwoman married to a bully husband Sykes, Delia tiptoes around the house to avoid upsetting him. Hurston portrays the life of her poor washwoman: "Delia's habitual meekness seemed to slip from her shoulders like a blown scarf. She was on her feet; her poor body, her bare knuckley hands bravely defying the strapping hulk before her" (40). One day, Sykes brings home something horrible in a cardboard box—a giant rattlesnake to terrorize his wife. Sykes leaves the snake in Delia's laundry basket, hoping that the creature will kill his wife. Stumbling on the snake in her basket, Delia flees, trapping it inside the house. When Sykes returns home from a night of gin drinking, Delia does not warn him, but becomes a silent observer in the events to follow. Sykes strikes a match in the dark and hears the rattles of the snake. Before long, the rattlesnake strikes, filling Sykes with poison. In the closing scene, Hurston writes,

As she approached the door she heard him call out hopefully, "Delia, is dat you Ah heah?" She saw him on his hands and knees as soon as she reached the door. He crept an inch or two toward her—all that he was able, and she saw his horribly swollen neck and his one open eye shining with hope. (45)

Finally, Delia turns and walks away, knowing full well that she has played a rather large role in the death of her husband. Ironically, Sykes' own evil deeds turned on him, leaving Delia free from his oppression forever. Silenced for too
long, Delia must be liberated from her domineering husband. Hurston's protest against male domination was groundbreaking to women’s fiction. Indeed, William Andrew's *Classic Fiction of the Harlem Renaissance* places “Sweat” in a unique category:

Ultimately it is Hurston’s determination to represent the sustaining character of African American community in a working-class black woman, in her dialect speech, her beliefs and values, and her heroic reclamation of herself that makes “Sweat” such a breakthrough for black women’s fiction. (76)

Unlike Bonner, Hurston creates a protagonist that changes her own destiny. During a time in history when black women had little power over their male counterparts, Hurston creates a story in which a soft-spoken slight washerwoman can reclaim her dignity from a brutish domineering husband. Because of Hurston’s unique folk-story style and Delia’s strong willed triumph, “Sweat” finds its way into many anthologies of black fiction.

The effects of poverty in the Harlem ghettoes and other black communities also surfaced in the literature of female writers, recording the tragedies of a disenfranchised race. Broken-down tenement housing was the setting for many dramas and short stories. The great migration North led to overcrowding and unsanitary living conditions, a topic that Gilbert Osofsky examines in *Harlem: The Making of a Ghetto*. Osofsky describes the state of the tenement living quarters: “Halls were left dark and dirty, broken pipes were permitted to rot, steam heat was cut off as heating apparatus wore out, dumb waiters broke down
and were boarded up, homes became vermin-infested" (140). Although Osofsky fails to explore the reasons for the existence of poverty, his scholarship gives a unique perspective to the formation of Harlem. Infant mortality rates were higher in the black community, mothers died in labor more frequently than white women, and children contracted diseases like rickets from malnutrition—these were the realities for most black families living in the cities. Female writers touched on these themes in their works, lamenting children who would die in their arms because of poverty. Ultimately, they uncovered the damage that a combination of racism and classism caused the black community.

Georgia Douglas Johnson’s “Plumes,” published in a 1927 edition of *Opportunity*, attempts to chronicle the effects of poverty. In this emotional drama, Charity Brown has to choose between spending her savings on an operation that may or may not save her daughter’s life, or keeping the money for a proper burial when the child eventually dies. Charity’s best friend Tildy comforts her on this difficult decision: “Do Hush, sister Charity. You done the best you could. Poor folks have to make the best of it. The Lord understands” (34). Johnson fails, however, to create any characters that the reader can relate to. The central theme of poverty and destitution dominates the story line, leaving no room for depth of character. The sick child occasionally moans from the back room while Charity and her friend attempt to finish the day’s laundry; neither of the characters is described past the surface level. Johnson sacrifices style for social commentary, inventing a family that never seems real.
Dorothy West, however, illuminates a slice of lower class life with brilliance and clarity in “The Typewriter,” published in **Opportunity**. Unlike Johnson, West creates a character whom the audience can almost envision—walking into his run-down townhouse after a long day of janitorial duties and dodging the woman on the second floor who complains that the heat is out. West captures her protagonist's agony in a few short descriptions: “He began to wish passionately that he had never been born,” and “He shuffled down the street, an abject man of fifty-odd years, in an ageless overcoat that flapped in the wind” (220). West even neglects to give this man a name. To his wife and children he is Poppa, a steadfast fixture in an uneventful, unfulfilled life. One day, however, this man’s life changes with the arrival of his daughter’s typewriter. When she asks him to dictate a message so that she can practice her typing speed, something remarkable happens:

> A light crept into his dull eyes. Vigor through his thin blood. In a brief moment the weight of years fell from him like a cloak. Tired, bent, little old man that he was, he smiled, straightened, tapped impressively against his teeth with a toil-stained finger, and became that enviable emblem of American life: a business man. (222)

He is no longer Poppa; he calls himself J. Lucius Jones. He finds new stamina in his daily life and eagerly awaits the moment that his daughter will ask him to dictate a letter. J. Lucius Jones, “dealer of stocks and bonds” (233), now makes business decisions that influence Rockefeller Vanderbilt, and Morgan. West does not use melodramatic scenes or tragic deathbed settings in order to arouse
the sympathy of her readers; she simply develops her character more completely. By the end of the story, when the typewriter is gone, the tragedy seems almost as poignant as the loss of Charity Brown’s child. Although West does not emphasize a woman’s point of view, her depiction of poverty seems more realistic than Bonner’s, drawing on universal images like a broken furnace or an economical meal of beans and frankfurters. Perhaps this style accounts for the story’s popularity, initially winning a literary prize in *Opportunity*, and still being anthologized in modern collections of black fiction. Because West pays attention to literary form, this story develops beyond social rhetoric, achieving artistic distinction.

Much like West, Alice Dunbar Nelson pays critical attention to literary form in her commentary on poverty. In “The Proletariat Speaks,” printed in a 1929 issue of *The Crisis*, Alice Dunbar Nelson creates a comparison of what she loves, versus what she has:

I love beautiful things:
Soft linen sheets and silken coverlet,
Sweet coolth of chamber opened wide to fragrant breeze;
Rose shaded lamps and golden atomizers,
Spraying Parisian fragrance over my relaxed limbs.
Fresh from a white marble bath, and sweet cool spray.

And so I sleep
In a hot hall-room whose half opened window,
Unscreened, refuses to budge another inch; Admits no air, only insects, and hot choking gasps,
That make me writhe, nun-like in sack-cloth sheets
and lumps of straw. And then I rise
To fight my way to a dubious tub,
Whose tiny, tepid stream threatens to make me late;
And hurrying out, dab my unrefreshed face
With bits of toiletry from the ten cent store. (44)
In this poem, Nelson's style is subtle, juxtaposing riches and luxuries with the harsh realities of everyday life. The poetic language and imagery creates wonderful comparisons between white marble baths and dubious tubs. As a skilled writer, Nelson artistically renders a scene in which a poor working class citizen yearns for what she does not have.

Although female writers recorded the details of domestic life and the trials of living in poverty, they also investigated political and cultural issues that many of the male writers explored in fiction. They moved away from the typical sphere of women's issues and wrote about racism and colorism. In her essay "On Being Young-A Woman- And Colored," written in a 1925 issue of The Crisis, Marita Bonner explains how racism affects black women:

Every part of you becomes bitter. But—In Heaven's name do not grow bitter. Be bigger than they are, exhort white friends who have never had to draw breath in a Jim-Crow train. Who have never had a petty putrid insult dragged over them—drawing blood—like a pebbled sand on your body where the skin is tenderest. (64)

Bonner's bitterness stems from racial injustices that women endured on a daily basis. But perhaps one of the greatest evils of racism that women chronicled was the crime of lynching.

Black women's exploration of lynching in their literature provides a lasting imprint on a culture's history. With vivid and haunting descriptions, they used their art as a forum for social protest. Judith L. Stephens records the instances of black women writing about lynching in her essay, "Lynching Dramas and
Women: History and Critical Context.” She contends that black women had a tradition of anti-lynching crusades that began in the late 19th century:

Ida B. Well’s first annual report and public speech on lynching in 1892, Mary Church Terrell’s 1904 essay, “Lynching from a Negro’s Point of View,” Mary B. Talbert’s Anti-Lynching Crusade in 1922, and Mary McLeod Bethun’s 1930 statement urging southern white women to assume responsibility for halting the rise in racial violence all testify to the leadership of black women in the fight against lynching. (5)

The tradition of anti-lynching protests was supported by such groups as The National Federation of Afro-American Women, The Colored Woman’s League of Washington D.C., and the National Association of Colored Women (Perkins 16). In “The Impact of Lynching on the Art of African American Women,” Kathy Perkins explains how reports of lynching surfaced as a public outcry: “Well into the 1950s, lynching remained one of the most pressing issues within the African American community [... ] African American women have maintained a consistent tradition in expressing their sentiments on lynching through the arts” (15). Women were terrified that their families could be sacrificed at any moment and these themes played out in their writing. Indeed, the terror of lynching, especially in the South, gripped black communities and emerges as political protest in the writing of black women.

Most lynchings in the 1920s and 1930s were inflicted as a punishment for interracial relationships (Stephens 5). In some instances, only a rumor of
interaction between a white woman and black man was needed to send the black man to his execution. White men and women sent a message to the black community, stressing that interracial mingling resulted in death. *In Exorcising Blackness: Historical and Literary Lynching and Burning Rituals*, Trudier Harris explains how a lynching could run its devastating course: “An accusation of rape could lead not only to the accused black man being lynched and burned, but to the burning of black homes and the whipping or lynching of other black individuals as well” (19). The violent effects of lynching on the black community surface in the writing of black women, echoing the sorrow of helpless family members and preserving a record of hate crimes during a violent point in America’s history.

Because keeping a detached tone on the theme of lynching was difficult, many women writers were overpowered by their need to lash out against these hate crimes. Particularly in the short stories and dramas, plot and dialogue were sometimes heavy-handed, but purposeful. For example, Myrtle A. Smith Livingston won first prize in the literary contest for her play *For Unborn Children* in a 1925 issue of *The Crisis*. Livingston’s drama takes place in a Southern racist community. In this town, a black family consisting of Grandma Carlson and her two grandchildren, Leroy and Marion, live in fear. Grandma Carlson constantly worries about Leroy, who is secretly dating a white girl from the community. Although Leroy and Selma plan to elope and move North, an angry mob determines a different destiny for the two lovers. The awkward dialogue of the play, however, is the commentary from the female characters. Angry at her
brother’s affair, Marion cries: “I wouldn’t go a step with you and your white
citizen if I was going to be killed for it! If you’ve lost your self-respect, I still have
mine! I wouldn’t spit on a woman like her!” (56). Marion’s outburst is racist in
tone and exactly what black people were fighting against. She acts as if Leroy’s
white girlfriend is less than human, but this tone seems counterproductive.
Grandma Carlson then explains the harsh realities of interracial marriage to her
grandson: “We have the right to be happy, child, only when our happiness
doesn’t hurt anybody else; and when a colored man marries a white woman, he
hurts every member of the Negro race” (56). When Leroy looks perplexed at
these words of caution, Grandma Carlson explains the offense a black man
commits when he marries a white woman: “He adds another link to the chain that
binds them; before we can gain that perfect Freedom to which we have every
right, we’ve got to prove that we’re better than they! And we can’t do it when our
men place white women above their own” (56). Again, this diatribe seems full of
propaganda with phrases like “perfect freedom” and “we’re better than they.” The conversations between family members sound like rehearsed anti-lynching
platforms rather than honest dialogue. Even though Livingston fails to create
meaningful dialogue, she does succeed in recording a history of violent race
crimes from a woman’s perspective.

By publishing in The Crisis, Livingston could join the campaign that
DuBois was waging on crimes against blacks. In Harlem Renaissance, Nathan
Irvin Huggins explains how dedicated DuBois’ magazine was to this subject. He
asserts that the “Crisis” focused on lynching, a public and national scandal. Every
issue carried a statistical breakdown of violence against blacks. When the magazine would report an NAACP investigation of a lynching, its pages almost smelled of burned flesh" (28). Livingston’s drama stays true, then, to modern history with a realistic and tragic ending. Although Leroy realizes the harsh realities of a racist South and vows to leave Selma, Livingston does not allow the Carlsons a happy ending. An angry mob approaches the family home, and in the final scene, Livingston’s stage directions describe the ruthless mob: “The rumble grows louder as it nears the house; cries of ‘Lynch him!’ ‘The dirty nigger’ ‘We’ll show him how to fool around a white woman!’”(58). In 1925 Myrtle A. Smith Livingston had the courage to expose the horrors of lynching, and The Crisis had the ability to circulate this drama to thousands of readers engaged in anti-lynching campaigns. The political agenda at The Crisis supported writing like Livingston’s, allowing women a voice in the fight for racial justice.

Like Livingston, Thelma Rea Thurston revealed the horrors of lynching in her short story “The Coon Hunt,” written in a late 1930s edition of The Crisis. Even though “The Coon Hunt” was published later than the Harlem Renaissance, the issue of lynching was still paramount in the writings of women. Thurston’s short story records the experiences of Joel, a young Northerner visiting his family in Arkansas. Joel, roused in the middle of the night to witness a “coon hunt,” immediately suspects that something is wrong. After trying to catch the hunters and dogs that have been after the “prey” for hours, the boys finally arrive at a disturbing scene: “above the leaping flames of the bonfire, two black feet dangled grotesquely from the legs of a pair of blue denim overalls (109).
Thurston continues to describe a scene in which drunken white men carrying heavy clubs and shotguns scream with frenzy over their accomplishment: "Half a dozen smaller knife blades flashed in the light of the fire, and the men took up the cry in a swelling refrain: 'Cut his living guts out!'" (120). Thurston's short story not only exposes the immorality of lynching, but also describes the participants as drunken fools, stumbling and swearing around a campfire. She characterizes white men as barbarous idiots, and her supportive audience will not condemn her.

But perhaps the most confusing element of this story is the women's reaction to the lynching. If Thurston's aim is to impart a message, especially one in alignment with the anti-lynching movement, her conclusion fails to capture the ability of women to speak out against these crimes. The two female characters in the play skulk around the kitchen on the morning after the lynching, preparing breakfast for the men. Instead of showing compassion or shielding the children from further lynchings, the women's conversation turns to a debate over what souvenir should have been taken from the body: "Ef I'd a-been thar, though, I'd a-got a piece o' his pants. It would-a make a right nice quilt patch, don't you think?" (120). Perhaps Thurston's story would have been more powerful if the female characters had rebelled against the violent lynching. If black and white women were united in the fight against lynching, a revised ending would still retain historical truths.

Although both short stories employ propaganda in their plots and dialogues, these shortcomings should not detract from the literature's value—
women were actively and publicly engaging in social protest. In fact, propaganda intensifies the political messages found in Livingston and Thurston's fiction, and their courage to speak out against lynching deserves recognition.

In direct contrast with the short story writers, female poets writing about lynching adopted a much more veiled tone. For example, Mae Cowdery's poem "A Prayer," published in a 1928 issue of *The Crisis*, is the elusive story of a black boy's death:

The mist rolled by  
And the sun shone fair,  
Fair and golden  
On a dark boy . . . cold and still  
High on a bare bleak tree. (300)

This poem's subject matter parallels the short stories, but the language is murky and full of voids. In *Fire!!*, Helene Johnson's poem "A Southern Road" hints of a lynching in this same veiled and shadowy language:

Yolk-colored tongue  
Parched beneath a burning sky,  
A lazy little tune  
Hummed up the crest of some  
Soft sloping hill.  
A blue-fruited black gum,  
Like a tall predella,  
Bears a dangling figure,—  
Sacrificial dower to the raff,  
Swinging alone,  
A solemn, tortured shadow in the air. (17)

This poem's language and imagery reads like a dark eulogy to an unknown victim, and Johnson mourns the social realities of the South. With their poetry, Johnson and Cowdery subtly criticize the crimes of lynching, successfully using
their art to entertain while revolting against the number of lynchings reported in the South.

Perhaps the most common theme among female writers in all of the little black magazines was the problem of the color line. *The Crisis, Opportunity, Challenge,* and *Fire!!,* all have some work of fiction that describes the tension among black people regarding skin color. Because some individuals were light skinned enough to “pass,” in order to secure better jobs, travel in different social circles, and obtain a better education, those black members of society were hated by some, envied by others, and excluded from black and white communities. In 1967, a collection of essays from the Federal Writers Project entitled *The Negro In New York* was edited by Roi Ottley and William Weatherby. Within this text is a striking record of history, illuminating how important color was to the black community:

There are a scattering of Negro clubs whose membership consists entirely of fair-skinned or mulatto types, and where the black-ball is rigorously employed against the application of any potential member whose coloring is not ‘high yaller.’ These color distinctions do not usually extend to the men, for their eligibility is based solely on the extent of their formal training, their vocations and their incomes. (242)

What this statement contends is disturbing, bearing witness to the women who agonized over the color of their skin. Women were judged on appearance alone, discriminated against by their own community. By far the most prevalent theme
in the writing of black women during the 1920s and 1930s, colorism was viewed as an imperfection on the face of blackness, or as a blessing to those who rose above the chains of oppression with each bleaching of their skin.

How women address the issue of colorism is contradictory. Some embrace their dark skin, while others reject it as a sign of ugliness. All women pass judgment, however, proving that the issue of colorism was paramount in the black community. For example, Zora Neale Hurston's play *ColorStruck*, included in *Fire!!*, explores the conflict between characters with varying degrees of blackness. Emma, the main character, struggles the entire play to overcome her jealousy of a light-skinned black woman. In the final scene, Emma's lover John leaves in a fit of rage, screaming: "So this is the woman I've been wearing over my heart like a rose for twenty years! She so despises her own skin that she can't believe that any one else could love it!" (14). Hurston's play portrays the insecure black woman in an unsympathetic light, condemning her to a life of loneliness. The theme ultimately stresses that to find happiness, Emma must accept and love the color of her skin. This play is on the cusp of a period of history in which some glorified blackness and embraced their heritage, while others hated the darkness of their race. The theme of *Colorstruck* mirrors Hurston's perception of blackness and foreshadows her interest in cultural folktales. Raised in the all black town of Eatonville, Florida, Hurston claimed her color gladly (Wall 25), but not all female writers felt as comfortable about their skin color as Hurston. Although Chidi Ikonne agrees that Hurston's play is important, he contends that the issue of colorism was not to be "seriously treated
until Wallace Thurman in 1929" (186). In this statement, Ikonne fails to recognize women's treatment of colorism in the little magazines. For many black women writers chronicling the history of their race, intra-racial prejudice tore at the fabric of their culture.

In *The Crisis*, Eunice K. Biddle explores the differences between skin color in her poem "Color Blind," and lashes out against lighter skinned blacks:

> Black!
> This skin is black. Not from a choice of mine
> But through a quirk, A crazy chance of fortune.
> Yet daily they scourge me
> As though I were to blame;
> Lash me with their scorn,
> Mock me with their tongues,
> Scuff me with their feet
> Those lighter ones,
> Whom fate in kinder mood
> Took time to bleach.
> Nor do they stop to think,
> That underneath this skin
> A heart beats and a soul struggles for life,
> Bruised by every smirk, bleeding from their words.
> They cannot see—the color blinds them. (232)

This poem echoes the tension between light and dark skinned blacks and chronicles a fierce intra-racial division. Biddle not only laments the color of her skin, but also associates blackness with a grievous twist of fate. On one side of the division, jealousy and anger fueled a passion in which poems like this were written; on the other hand, women embraced their blackness and praised the beauty of darker skin.
Gwendolyn Bennett writes a poem that provides a sharp contrast to Biddle's mournful tone. In "To A Dark Girl," published in a 1927 issue of *Opportunity*, Bennett glorifies black skin:

I love you for your brownness, And rounded darkness of your breast; I love you for the breaking sadness in your voice And shadows where your wayward eyelids rest [. . .] Oh, little brown girl, born for sorrow's mate, Keep all you have of queenliness, Forgetting that you once were slave, And let your full lips laugh at Fate! (229)

Bennett's love of brownness is equal to Biddle's hatred of blackness, each expressing with poetic imagery their reflections on race.

Another reflection on race that was equally problematic for the black community was the issue of passing. For instance, Edwina Streeter Dixon writes a short story about passing entitled "Call It Social Security" in which a black woman passes for a white debutante. On the first page of this story, the editor of *The Crisis* writes a short remark on the topic of Dixon's work: "A story of a happy crossing of the color line" (141). Perhaps the most telling element of this byline is that the editor and author assume that crossing the color line and renouncing one's race could ever be a happy event. Unfortunately, during the 1920s and 1930s, crossing the colorline was sometimes a joyous event, opening doors and providing opportunities for those with lighter skin. What this story fails to do, however, is develop a serious and complex narrative instead of one that solves the problem of racism with simple scenes and trite dialogue. In one
particularly shallow scene, the author describes black people through the eyes of a white, aristocratic Englishman: “They were simply Americans of different ancestral background; but having the same hopes for a brighter future; the same interests in politics, economics, entertainment [. . .] he secretly felt them far more entertaining and naturally vivacious than other folk” (Dixon 141). This list of black people’s characteristics seems one-dimensional and patronizing. Because this short story relies on over simplified situations, the theme of a perfect union of races collapses, ultimately confirming that the characters have no identity.

Dixon’s main character Elaine, a light skinned black woman, marries an Englishman who assumes that she is white. Elaine then moves to England with her new husband and brings her father along to pose as a butler. In the end, everything is tidied up with Dixon’s reassurance that Elaine would make the adjustment successfully: “She had been born for this, white Negro that she was. He [her father] had been born for it—keen sense of humor, adventurous mind, connoisseur of bizarre situations” (157). The inconceivable element of this story to a modern reader might be that the black characters would eagerly reject their own race and identity and merge with white society, but put in its historical context, Dixon’s story echoes the realities of an era. Although Dixon concludes that adopting whiteness to advance socially is acceptable, many more authors believed differently.

Helen Faw Mull addresses the same theme that Dixon grapples with in “White Only: A Short Story of the Color Line.” Published in a 1935 edition of Opportunity, this story takes a different approach to passing, showing the bitter
disappointment that went along with adopting a new way of life. In this story, Callie Peters tries to secure a job in her small town but realizes very quickly that white people will not hire her. When she walks down the street, men jeer at her with, “Swell looking coon, ain’t she?” or “Gee! She a nigger?” (335). When Callie’s friend visits from the big city and tries to convince her to “go white,” a bitter argument ensues. Callie says, “I hate white people! I despise ‘em! I wouldn’t mind working with them in an office. But I couldn’t stand not knowing anybody else the rest of my life” (336). Callie’s response to abandoning her race provides an alternative attitude to Elaine’s image of happiness. In the end, however, Callie yields to the relentless acts of racism, accepting her friend’s invitation to pass as white. Barbara Christian explores the theme of passing. Although some may see Callie’s decision to renounce her race as a sign that white skin is better than black skin, Barbara Christian in Black Women Novelists: The Development of a Tradition disagrees: “In actuality, the theme, as it was presented in the twenties, heightened the white audience’s awareness of the restrictions imposed upon talented blacks who then found it necessary to become white to fulfill themselves” (44). The difference between these short stories is Dixon’s treatment of the passing. Glossed over and glorified, Dixon’s characters seem to fit into white society without any difficulties, while Mull maintains that with the benefits of passing comes a painful sacrifice. Both stories, however, are grounded in social reality; Mull and Dixon accept that black people did pass for whites in order to advance their position in society.
Even the younger generations of black women were exploring the implications of passing. Hazel Washington, a senior at the University of Kansas, won the ten-dollar monthly prize in a 1935 issue of *Opportunity* for her essay “Imitations: Life, Color and Pancakes.” In this essay, Washington responds to a review of the motion picture “Imitations of Life.” Within this response, Washington voices her own opinions on why people attempt to pass as white: “I believe that Negroes, who are light enough to pass for white, do so for economic security [. . .] Negroes pass in order to obtain the cultural advantages which are denied a black man in these United States of America. If there were no prejudices, no discrimination, why shouldn’t one just as soon be black as white?” (214). This innocent commentary confirms that many women, youth and adults, struggled with a psychological oppression that divided a community.
The little magazines of the 1920s and 1930s provided a safe forum in which writers and artists, men and women alike, could share their views on political, social, and literary issues. Abby and Ronald Johnson's *Propaganda and the Aesthetic*, contends that

The little magazines represented a new stage in the evolution of Afro-American culture. After World War I the emerging generation sensed opportunities never seriously considered by earlier generations, partly because of the groundwork done by the NAACP and the NUL. (77)

Because new social and political organizations like the National Association of the Advancement for Colored People and the National Urban League were in place to support the black community, a new sense of racial pride inspired artists and writers to submit their works to the black little magazines. Because black women had so few opportunities to express themselves and their social and political beliefs, the little magazines provided one of the only forums for such a discussion. The pioneering spirit of female editors like Pauline Hopkins confirms that “the strategic nurturing of writers was vital if black society was to redesign itself by undoing the psychocultural injury caused by racism” (Napier 1). In some cases this psychocultural injury hindered the artistic contributions of black writers; but nevertheless, what emerges in the pages of the black little magazines
is the unexamined reality of a sex disenfranchised from most mainstream publications. Thus in their leadership roles, and literary contributions, black women reflect the social and cultural issues vital to the revisionary voice of the New Negro.
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