

2012

"To Bend Without Breaking": American Women's Authorship and the New Woman, 1900-1935

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“TO BEND WITHOUT BREAKING”: AMERICAN WOMEN’S AUTHORSHIP AND
THE NEW WOMAN, 1900-1935

by

Amber Harris Leichner

A DISSERTATION

Presented to the Faculty of
The Graduate College at the University of Nebraska
In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements
For the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Major: English
(Women’s and Gender Studies)

Under the Supervision of Professor Maureen Honey

Lincoln, Nebraska

July, 2012

“TO BEND WITHOUT BREAKING”: AMERICAN WOMEN’S AUTHORSHIP
AND THE NEW WOMAN, 1900-1935

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University of Nebraska, 2012

Advisor: Maureen Honey

This dissertation focuses on constructions of female authorship in selected prose narratives of four American women writers in the early twentieth century: Edith Wharton, Willa Cather, Zitkala-Ša, and Gertrude Schalk. Specifically, it examines portraits of women in pieces that appeared in national magazines from 1900-1935 that bracket these writers’ careers and that reflect anxieties about their professional authorial identities complicated by gender and, in the case of Native American Zitkala-Ša (Yankton Sioux) and African American Gertrude Schalk, race as well. In a period characterized by fierce debates over the role of women in a dawning modern age, these writers participated in cultural fascination with the New Woman by fashioning narratives that spoke to that interest but that also reflected conflicts or issues in the writer’s own life impacting her construction of literary authority in the public eye. I see a pattern of interest in the project of authorship across all four of these writers from the beginning of their careers until the end in my study of some of their first published pieces and some of their last.

After a contextual overview, I move chronologically through my four writers. I focus first on Wharton’s novella *The Touchstone* (1900) and its resonance in the story “Pomegranate Seed” (1931), tracing Wharton’s efforts to construct herself as a

professional writer entering a male-dominated public arena. I next explore Cather's "Office Wives" stories (1916-1919) and novel *Lucy Gayheart* (1935), connecting her anxious position as a professional female author with her critical attitudes toward the office and artistic production. Finally, I examine Zitkala-Ša's construction of literary authority and her paradoxical status as a New Woman through themes of domesticity and liberty in her autobiographical sketches (1900) and story "The Widespread Enigma Concerning Blue-Star Woman" (1921). I then identify prominent themes Schalk carries over from her late 1920's urban realism fiction to her 1930's romance formula fiction to reveal her constructions of gender, class, and race as at once fixed and fluid negotiations.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I depended on the goodwill, grace, and enthusiasm of many individuals on my way toward completing this dissertation.

I am especially indebted to my adviser, Maureen Honey, whose extraordinary faith in my scholarship and teaching saw me through my graduate program. I am also grateful to the other members of my graduate committee, Barbara DiBernard, Melissa Homestead, Gwendolyn Foster, and Carole Levin, for their academic support, patience, and invaluable feedback throughout this process. My friends and colleagues, Sabrina Ehmke Sergeant and Tamy Burnett, provided me meaningful feedback on my work, especially during the critical early stages, and taught me much about surviving the dissertation process. Special thanks to Tamy for her phenomenal kindness and wisdom; her friendship has been a lifesaver to me on so many occasions.

To my immediate and extended families, I offer my heartfelt gratitude for their loving encouragement during this journey. I am fortunate to have an amazing sister, Chelsey Harris, who has been a treasured confidante and my biggest fan. Thanks also to my father, Christopher Harris, who has helped fund my travel to more than a few academic conferences around the country and listened in the audience while I presented my papers. I am also appreciative of his sharp proofreading skills in the homestretch. I owe an incalculable debt to Mick Krivec, whose faith in me is unparalleled. Particular thanks to my mother, Cynthia Dedeker Bowen, who encouraged my early love of reading and whose many sacrifices and steadfast support made it possible for me to pursue my

dreams. I would not have made my way to a doctoral program had she not been there at the beginning, encouraging me make the most of every opportunity.

Finally, my ultimate appreciation goes to my husband, Jason Leichner, who sacrificed much while I worked toward this goal. I could not have completed this project without his heroic patience, support, and love.

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CHAPTER ONE

Parallel Lives, Intersecting Art

This dissertation focuses on the construction of female authorship in selected prose narratives of four American women writers in the early twentieth century: Edith Wharton, Willa Cather, Zitkala-Ša, and Gertrude Schalk. Specifically, it looks at portraits of women in pieces that appeared in national magazines from 1900-1935 that bracket these writers' careers and that reflect anxieties about their professional authorial identities complicated by gender and, in the case of Native American Zitkala-Ša (Yankton Sioux) and African American Gertrude Schalk, race as well. In a period characterized by fierce debates over the role of women in a dawning modern age, these writers participated in cultural fascination with the New Woman by fashioning narratives that spoke to that interest but that also reflected conflicts or issues in the writer's own life impacting her construction of a writer profile defining her as professional in the public eye. I see a pattern of interest in the project of authorship across all four of these writers from the very beginning of their careers until the very end in my examination of some of their first published pieces and some of their last.

I first focus on Wharton's novella *The Touchstone* (1900), which was serialized in *Scribner's Magazine*, and its resonance in one of her last stories, "Pomegranate Seed," (1931) published in *The Saturday Evening Post*. These stories revolve around the absent presence of dead women who nevertheless profoundly impact living characters struggling to reconcile their conflicting images of a powerful woman now gone but not forgotten. I link Wharton's effort to construct herself as a professional writer entering a public arena

dominated by men with these early and late fictional representations. Neither of these narratives has garnered much critical attention, but I foreground them as key pieces in Wharton's construction of authorship in an era of sentimental romances created by women for women and in the magazine publishing realm dominated by male editors and literary critics.

Moving chronologically through my four writers, I next look at Willa Cather's 1916-1919 "Office Wives" trilogy—"Ardessa" and "The Bookkeeper's Wife," both published in *The Century Illustrated Monthly Magazine*, and "Her Boss," appearing in *The Smart Set*, as well as her under-studied novel *Lucy Gayheart* (1935), serialized in *Woman's Home Companion*. These narratives from early and later moments in Cather's career center on women's attempts to integrate the public arenas of commerce and art through employment. I connect Cather's anxious position as a professional female author with her critical attitudes toward the office and professionalized artistic production as sites of modernity and continuing sexism.

In my final chapter, I examine two writers from racially marginalized groups, Zitkala-Ša, from a reservation in South Dakota, and Gertrude Schalk, a little-known African American writer from Boston. Zitkala-Ša, née Gertrude Simmons, relied on images of the New Woman to reach a middle-class audience through her publication of autobiographical sketches in *The Atlantic* (1900). In these pieces, I examine how Zitkala-Ša's deployment of themes of domesticity and liberty construct her literary authority and paradoxical status as a New Woman. Turning to a member of the New Negro Movement and the Harlem Renaissance for comparison, I finally take up Gertrude Schalk, who published gritty urban realism fiction in Boston's *The Saturday Evening Quill* in the late

1920's followed by pulp romance formula stories in *Love Story* and *All-Story Love Stories* during the 1930's. First describing how Schalk's narratives of urban realism foreground the experiences of working-class black characters, I then identify some of the prominent themes she carries over from this fiction into her romance formula stories, which center on white or ambiguously racial characters. This discussion of Schalk's fictional motifs reveals her constructions of gender, class, and race as at once fixed and insurmountable and fluid negotiations.

Edith Wharton (1862-1937), Willa Cather (1873-1947), Zitkala-Ša (1876-1938), and Gertrude Schalk (1906-1977), are representative of the diversity of women who accessed an audience through nationally distributed periodicals. Their self-fashioned authorial identities and artistic visions, forged through participation in the literary marketplace, demonstrate the influence of overlapping social changes and historical events. In order to illuminate these parallels and divergences, I discuss each writer and her writing in relation to elements of the New Woman—both a concept embodying a modern woman who transgressed traditional sex roles and a thematic treatment of that idea in cultural productions.¹ In other words, because the New Woman intervenes in modern culture by dramatizing the shifting boundaries of sexual difference, how these women deploy the archetype in their work necessarily informs our understanding of their professional identities as women writers. Therefore, the scope of this dissertation is both literary and biographical, situating each writer in the dominant culture (and in relation to specific communities of readers) and debates about the “woman question”—a shorthand for disputes over women's changing status in American political, economic, and social life—as well as the issues that intersect it. Moreover, these writers contributed in a

literary marketplace in which New Woman themes and formulas were most visible in popular or “middlebrow” women’s fiction, particularly between the years 1915-1930, but also appeared in works across the spectrum of “highbrow” and “lowbrow” literature, including the texts I will discuss in the ensuing chapters.² By studying the narratives of Wharton, Cather, Zitkala-Ša, and Schalk as negotiations of gender and authorship, we can learn much about how and where the “emancipatory vision” (Honey, “Gotham” 26) of New Woman fantasy overlapped with the lived experience of modern women.

This grouping of writers seems on the surface a bit happenstance because my interest in each began at different moments during my graduate education. In the cases of both Gertrude Schalk and Willa Cather, I had the good fortune to be introduced to their fiction through research assistantships. One of my earliest tasks as an RA for Professor Maureen Honey included typing and cataloguing poems and stories Professor Honey had culled from various Harlem Renaissance journals, among them *Opportunity* and the *Saturday Evening Quill*. Though I was only holding photocopies (in some cases, I believe, even a microfilm printout!), it was the first time in my academic life I had experienced the delightful thrill of being surprised and moved by literary texts that had been languishing in obscurity for decades. “The Red Cape” by Gertrude Schalk was one of these stories, and over the years it has come to symbolize my introduction to Harlem Renaissance studies and the significance of literary recovery work’s role in carving out spaces in our current critical, historical, and cultural paradigms for “new” voices from the past that, for multiple reasons, had been silenced and forgotten. Piecing together more of the details of Schalk’s biography while tracking down more of her fiction, an ever more compelling profile of twentieth-century women’s authorship comes into focus. As a

bonus for this researcher, the evolution and endurance of Schalk's literary voice—her keen ear for language and gentle wit—has made studying and writing about her fiction delightful.

In a curious parallel, I stumbled into Cather studies through another RA assignment that involved bringing a print text into a digital medium. I was tasked with scanning, page by page, the first edition of Cather's novel *One of Ours* (1922) for the *Willa Cather Archive*, a digital archive of primary and secondary Cather studies materials at UNL. Working a rather slow scanner in the earlier days of optical character recognition (OCR) software for a novel by an author I had only known through a short story or two, I found myself reading as much of each page on the library computer screen as I could squeeze in between the scanner's efforts to capture and convert them. Needless to say, I soon acquired my own paper copy of the novel, savoring all of the words Cather had intended for every page. It is still one of my favorite novels.

Though the story I tell here lacks the colorful plot twists that characterize Schalk's short fiction, I hope it illustrates how my early experiences as a researcher-reader reveal two important projects in literary studies that have made the work I do in this dissertation possible: recovery work and digital archives. A figure like Schalk, for example, lived and worked in an interconnected web, her life and writing overlapping with other Harlem Renaissance figures, prominent African American journalists and periodicals, to name a few examples. To recover her contributions is to reclaim a wider picture as well. There is no telling what new avenues for research and interpretation may surface. Making recently uncovered as well as familiar or canonical texts available through digitization is crucial to providing scholars and general readers alike access to

the literary landscape at earlier moments of American history. Cather serves as an example of a canonized American writer around whom an especially vibrant scholarly discourse is, in part because of the growing accessibility of primary texts—especially those that are more difficult for scholars scattered around the country and globe to access, namely serialized novels, shorter magazine texts, and Cather’s journalism. Her “Office Wives” fiction, available as digitally searchable text and in the form of high-quality scanned images from the magazines themselves (complete with illustrations), makes engagement with the stories as readers first encountered them more easily possible.

The writers I consider in this study, Edith Wharton, Willa Cather, Zitkala-Ša, and Gertrude Schalk represent a small but diverse sampling of women writers whose primary literary contributions appeared during the first forty years of the twentieth century. Placing them on a timeline beginning in 1862, the year Wharton was born in New York City, and ending in 1977 when Schalk died in Detroit covers a wide literary period. In broad historical terms, this period encompasses the latter half of the nineteenth century and the first three quarters of the twentieth—from the Gilded Age to the Nixon-Ford era. Of special importance to this dissertation are the years in which these writers’ lives overlap: from 1906, when Schalk was born in Boston, through 1937, when Wharton died in Saint-Brice-sous-Forêt, France. These years overlap the Progressive Era, World War I, the postwar twenties, and the Great Depression. It was of course the era of the New Woman, roughly spanning the 1890s through the 1920s, as well as the Harlem Renaissance, defined broadly as the years between WWI and WWII (1919-1945).³ Women’s political activism in the form of second and third generation first wave feminism coalesced around suffrage activism, which paid off with the ratification of the

Nineteenth Amendment in 1920. The period is also known as the Dawes Era (1887-1934) and included the Indian Citizenship Act enacted by Congress in 1924.⁴

At this critical juncture, characterized by the social changes of modernity, these writers' lives were shaped by and are typical of the effects of that transformative milieu on individual women situated throughout the United States. To borrow Elizabeth Ammons's line, "Often tension is the major point of connection" (4). Wharton's birth into Old New York society with its gender stratification and stubborn adherence to tradition despite nascent changes to such systems in the wider culture meant that young Edith Newbold Jones would be educated at home, subject to an early and socially sanctioned marriage at the age of twenty-three, and finally gain the courage to follow the unladylike pursuit of a literary career in her late thirties—publishing her first novella, *The Touchstone*, in 1900.

In contrast, Cather, born in Winchester, Virginia, in 1873, would find considerable freedom to transgress proscribed sex-roles during her childhood and adolescence in Nebraska, where her family relocated in 1883 when she was nine. She earned her college degree at the University of Nebraska and left the state to pursue her career in Pittsburgh, and later, New York. She did not marry but lived with her companion Edith Lewis from 1912 until her death in 1947. Also hailing from the Great Plains, Gertrude Simmons Bonnin—who would one day take the name Zitkala-Ša for her literary productions—was born on the Yankton Sioux Reservation in South Dakota, in 1876, the same year as the Battle of the Greasy Grass (Little Bighorn). Under the care of her mother, young "Gertie" was steeped in Yankton traditions and oral culture. Like Cather, she would make a great cross-country journey as a child, but she would make the

move from west to the east to attend a Quaker missionary school for Native children in Indiana. Unlike Cather, Bonnin's schooling was skewed toward domestic and manual labor, but she too attended college for a period at Indiana's Earlham College. Both women would make the move farther east as they began their young adult lives and careers. Bonnin married in 1902 at the age of twenty-six, and is the only member of this group to have become a mother; she had just one son.

All three of these women had already published books and appeared in nationally distributed periodicals by the time Gertrude Schalk was born. Her upbringing in Boston's black middle-class community seems to have encouraged her creativity. She attended college courses, though, like Bonnin, she did not earn a degree. Similarly to both Cather and Bonnin, who began publishing shorter works as young adults—Cather during her college years and Bonnin at the age of twenty-four when her first *Atlantic Monthly* story appeared—and in contrast to Wharton, who only began her writing career later in life—at the age of thirty-eight—Schalk's first short story appeared in Boston's preeminent journal of African American literature, the *Saturday Evening Quill*, when she was twenty-two. She continued to publish fiction through the late 1920s and into the 1930s when she published romance fiction and began a long career in journalism at the *Pittsburgh Courier*.

All of these women supported themselves, though Bonnin's literary career was shorter and more sporadic than the others. Moreover, Wharton's earnings as an author were supplementing her household's finances until her divorce in 1913 at the age of fifty-one. Perhaps of the group, Schalk's biography most resembles the attributes of the *New (Negro) Woman*, including her thriving career; pursuit of her own creative vision and

voice; and considerable independence as an unmarried woman until 1943, when at the age of thirty-seven she married. In short, these modern American women represent experiences of both Eastern cities and Midwestern rural communities. They are positioned in the American discourse as women but also according to their race and cultural backgrounds and the privilege or lack thereof those identities afford in the dominant culture; and they model the dynamic of literary authority and celebrity as well as the difficulty and personal costs of attaining and sustaining them. To again borrow Elizabeth Ammons's line, "Often tension is the major point of connection" (4).

Through their prose narratives' engagements of New Womanhood, the writers in this study animate the impacts of social change, political and cultural debates, the human experience of work in the new economy, constructions of female authorship in the literary marketplace, and—through correspondences with (or divergences from) their biographies—reflections on their own contributions and legacies as writers. Martha Patterson, describing her own project in *Beyond the Gibson Girl*, provides an apt articulation of my aims in this dissertation:

I focus on women writers because I am interested in the tension between the writer's own professional status (all of these writers would, by definition, be considered New Women) and their construction of New Woman characters. I chose these particular writers because they either used the rhetoric of the New Woman explicitly in their fiction or essays, or because that rhetoric directly informed their construction of particular female protagonists (15).

Though our impetus is the same, unlike Patterson, I do not scrutinize canonical texts, but instead, I bring together two canonical writers and two who have either yet to be included in the canon (Schalk) or whose position is tenuous (Zitkala-Ša). In selecting these identity-conscious narratives, published between 1900, the year Wharton's *The Touchstone* was serialized in *Scribner's* along with Zitkala-Ša's autobiographical essays which appeared in *The Atlantic*, and 1935 when Cather's *Lucy Gayheart* was serialized in *Woman's Home Companion*, I sought narratives that seem to be spaces to "work out" themes broadly connected to gender and modernity. Because the literary productions of Zitkala-Ša and Schalk have garnered less critical attention than that of Wharton and Cather—for whom large bodies of scholarship exist—I parallel them by selecting texts by Wharton and Cather that have received considerably less attention relative to their "masterpieces." Critics, for example, have largely dismissed *Lucy Gayheart* as a less interesting and less impressive rewrite of themes Cather incorporated into earlier stories.⁵ This approach allows me to further scrutinize issues of gender and literary authority, including those relative to the American literary canon. What becomes clear in my readings of these narratives produced under quite dissimilar circumstances is a shared ambivalence about modernity, a persistent question regarding who is "left out" of social "progress" and what the costs of such exclusions are for all of us.

Historian Carroll Smith-Rosenberg presents a landmark analysis of the New Woman in *Disorderly Conduct: Visions of Gender in Victorian America* (1985) that continues to influence discussions of the New Woman. Foregrounding the New Woman's potential power to change American society, Smith-Rosenberg describes the white and middle-class figure who emerged during the 1890s:

Eschewing marriage, she fought for professional visibility, espoused innovative, often radical, economic and social reforms, and wielded real political power. At the same time, as a member of the affluent new bourgeoisie, most frequently a child of small-town America, she felt herself part of the grass roots of her country. Her quintessentially American identity, her economic resources, and her social standing permitted her to defy proprieties, pioneer new roles, and still insist upon a rightful place within the genteel world. (245)

This conception of the New Woman, however, is class- and race-specific and situates agency in the actions of an individual rather than a collective and these are categories I and others expand to include marginalized women, especially women of color. The term New Woman as it was used in American culture just before and well into the twentieth century did not have the specificity of another major term identifying women in modern discourse, suffragist. On one end of the term's continuum of meaning, New Woman communicated women's "new" desire for independence and opportunity. While on the other end, it suggested an immoral and dangerous modern force threatening society's natural order and divisions. Obviously, whether the term might evoke hope, anxiety, skepticism, fear, condemnation or something in between depended on one's viewpoint. While these binary perspectives were perpetuated in forums for public debate, at the same time various iterations of the New Woman emerged in women's narratives of the period with mounting frequency after 1900. Writers of culturally and geographically diverse backgrounds, social positions, and aesthetic aims conveyed a number of common themes and character types by incorporating New Woman representations into their works. The

New Woman's flexibility as a narrative element may explain her wide appeal to writers. This figure could be more than "shorthand for a commitment to changing gender roles," explains Martha H. Patterson, "The phrase could signal a position on evolutionary advancement, progressive reform, ethnic assimilation, sexual mores, socioeconomic development, consumer culture, racial 'uplift,' and imperialist conquest" (2).⁶

For women of color interested in the adaptive potential of the New Woman, the fact that the dominant early image of a white, "affluent new bourgeois" figure was shaped in part by the discourse of early feminism was a barrier, given the hostility of white first-wave feminists toward women of color. For example, white suffragists frequently ignored black women's issues, such as anti-lynching legislation, or barred black women outright from participating in suffrage or feminist organizations. On the issue of suffrage, the flagship issue of first-wave feminism, even prominent, long-standing women's rights leaders Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony (as well as their early twentieth-century successor Carrie Chapman Catt) opted for a strategy of "expedience." By adopting a policy that furthered the cause of white women's enfranchisement over that of women of color, and the movement's effect was to "further, rather than impede, the power of a White ruling class that was fearful of Black and immigrant domination" (Giddings 124). In short, summarizes historian Paula Giddings, "White women simply were willing to let Black women go down the proverbial drain to get the vote for themselves" (162-3).

This study is informed by a handful of comparative critical studies of women writers who participated in the literary marketplace during the period extending from the tail end of the nineteenth century into the early decades of the twentieth century. This was

a key period of cultural and literary transition for women authors, and examining their work can “highlight a transitional moment in the history of female authorship and the literary marketplace in the United States: the uneasy shift from nineteenth-century models of female authorship to some new but as-yet undefined twentieth-century alternative,” as Deborah Lindsay Williams says in *Not in Sisterhood: Edith Wharton, Willa Cather, Zona Gale, and the Politics of Female Authorship* (2001) (2).

The earliest and most inclusive of these critical assessments (in terms of the sheer number of authors and texts discussed) is Elizabeth Ammons’s *Conflicting Stories: American Women Writers at the Turn into the Twentieth Century* (1992), which focuses on the long fiction published between 1892 and 1929 by seventeen different writers. Ammons aims to present an alternative interpretation to the reigning conception of this transitional moment as a “valley” or “slump” between more important and inspired decades of American literary achievement (1). She contends her review of seemingly disparate works of fiction actually reveals a complicated unity through their shared interest in two principle efforts: first, undertaking “radical experimentation with narrative form” as a means of separating short stories from received long forms; and, second, an attention to “a network of recurrent, complicated themes which, though constantly shifting and even conflicting, finally interlock in their shared focus on issues of power” (5). Among these issues of power are the following, all of which resonate with the texts and authors that are the subject of this dissertation: “the will to break silence by exposing the connections among institutionalized violence,” “the sexual exploitation of women, and female muteness,” “preoccupation with the figure of the woman artist,” “the corrosion of racism,” and “the difficulty of dealing with multiple discrimination” (5).

Whether directly or indirectly, these concerns about power in modern American life for women are threads that run throughout the narratives studied here, and the writers' engagement with them echoes Ammons's conclusions about the "artistic triumph or emergence and maturation" (1) of women writers at the turn into the twentieth century but also the ways in which the preoccupations of that early moment carry into the twenties and thirties.

Deborah Williams's study, published almost a decade after Ammons's book, springboards into an examination of Cather, Wharton, and Zona Gale from the familiar premise that Wharton and Cather are "considered hostile to other women writers, an attitude that has come to be seen as an integral aspect of each writer's personality" (1). She argues, as do I, that this hostility is a conscious tactic and a "professional decision that had profound implications for both writers' careers and for their status in literary history" (1). In contrast to Wharton and Cather, Gale's public persona as an author included her ideas about progressive politics and feminism, and she "celebrated community, collaboration, and sisterhood" (4). By including Gale alongside Wharton and Cather, whose respective careers Williams finds to be "quite similar" (5), Williams provides new insight into Wharton's and Cather's "rejection of public literary sisterhood" and their none-too-coincidental "canonical status" while Gale "has been forgotten" (5). My own four-author grouping does not feature a key bridging figure such as Gale, who served as an intriguing link between the two literary stars. (Wharton and Cather, who never met or wrote to one another, each corresponded with Gale for several years.)

Drawing on these three writers' letters and novels, careers, relationships with WWI and suffrage, along with an analysis of canonization and American modernism,

Williams makes two major points about female literary authority. First, Gale's critical and popular achievement during her own day and her feminist embrace of "female literary community" reveal how "literary power and cultural authority could be achieved with strategies very different from those used by Wharton and Cather" (1). Her second major idea has implications for current literary studies: given the continued critical neglect of Gale and the revival of interest in Wharton and Cather, "safe choices for feminist revision" during the early 1970s and 1980s, feminist literary critics have subscribed (even subconsciously) to "Wharton's and Cather's belief that literary authority is at odds with literary sisterhood" (5).

Whereas Gale saw herself as a literary artist and achieved literary celebrity and critical acclaim analogous to her two "literary sisters," she also "merged her moral views with her fiction, hoping that her work would contribute to positive social change" (Williams 6). While also differing from them, Gale's model of professional achievement parallels the careers of the other two writers in my study, Zitkala-Ša and Schalk. Gale, according to Williams, "was not content to be thought of as just a 'good influence,'" an attitude I find in the work of both Zitkala-Ša and Schalk. However, as a white, middle-class woman, Gale was situated differently in the literary marketplace. Her representational authorship—foregrounding her political opinions—shaped her celebrity status and others' views of her work. In contrast, the racism of the literary landscape had further limited Zitkala-Ša's and Schalk's ability to define their own identities independent of a marketplace inclined to pigeonhole them as a "representative Indian" or a "race writer." Furthermore, though Zitkala-Ša did secure temporary national visibility during her *Atlantic Monthly* period (1900-1902), Schalk's celebrity and success as an

author were largely situated in the black periodical press, which appears to have come at some cost to her literary art (once she took on full-time editorial work, little was left for her fiction).

However, as I will discuss in chapter four, Zitkala-Ša and Schalk also developed strategies for cultivating their own literary authority while inside the literary marketplace and its dominant cultural paradigms. For example, Schalk parlayed her interest in short fiction into the mass-market arena of formula romance. Such publications privileged the genre's formula over an author's identity. Magazines that consistently sold well did so not because of celebrity authors' names on their covers, but because of the consistency with which the stories between those covers engaged and entertained their readers. In this relatively anonymous milieu, Schalk's authorial identity was represented almost solely by her stories, and within their formula conventions, she was free to exercise her creative vision in ways more analogous to white female authors for whom gender was most often the primary marker of their "otherness" in the literary market.

As Ammons and Williams demonstrate, the differences between the career trajectories of canonical and non-canonical writers are potentially significant sites of inquiry because they can reveal authors' strategic moves toward literary authority in intersecting and overlapping areas of the literary marketplace, such as national literary publications, middle-class New Negro journals, women's magazines, formula fiction pulps, and traditional book publishing. In examining narratives published in those varied sectors of the literary marketplace, I trace common threads as they tie into constructions of modern womanhood and illuminate related (and opposing) strategies of New Woman authorship.

Adding another dimension to the previously discussed comparative studies of women's authorship, Martha H. Patterson's *Beyond the Gibson Girl: Reimagining the American New Woman, 1895-1915* (2005) examines "webs of New Woman discourse" in relation to women writers during the years 1895-1915. Her analysis centers on seven writers from varied cultural and geographic backgrounds who, not necessarily embracing "radical feminism," nevertheless "deployed versions of the New Woman" (4) in their fiction. Patterson works to "situate the New Woman in a wide range of social, economic, aesthetic, and political discourses," believing that these "ideological threads" defined the New Woman and caused her to evolve (3). As a result of this dialectical analysis, Patterson is able to demonstrate a critical point regarding the New Woman:

[T]he figure becomes, in her dominant form, an anxious and paradoxical icon of modern American power and decline; co-opted by writers deemed Other, the New Woman can signal at once a protest of, anodyne for, and an appeasement to the ideological imperatives of the dominant icon. (3)

Patterson alludes to the fluid possibilities this archetype could offer female authors, which she endeavors to make visible by attending to the ideological and cultural contexts surrounding the authors.

In the works she discusses, Patterson observes an ambivalence about the New Woman, which she interprets "both as a discomfort with the controversial nature of her image and a realization of their more or less tenuous stake in the literary marketplace" (4). These authors either designated themselves or were positioned as public representatives of a bigger group: "[T]hey were 'speaking for' just as they were 'speaking of' and 'speaking to'" (4). This is a useful conception for women's authorship,

given how it encompasses the writers' social locations as well as their ideological and artistic affiliations while also acknowledging the presence of specific audience(s) in the process of constructing literary authority. Moreover, Patterson draws her conclusions from texts that have "become, with a few exceptions, canonical turn-of-the-century American literature" (16). It follows, therefore, that the authors are ambivalent about "[e]mbracing the dominant image of the New Woman," since doing so "could betray the sociopolitical goals of their respective communities but could also relegate their own artistic practice to the even more marginal and generally less lucrative realm of popular political fiction" (4). This ambivalent attitude about the New Woman is related to the strategy employed by Wharton and Cather of constructing their authorship identity in opposition to the "professional" female writers of the nineteenth-century and female peers in the marketplace, since both groups were competitive with their own popularity and they posed a potential threat to their artistic authority by association with a political movement. Yet an important element of the New Woman is her flexibility; she can be at once part of a tradition (like nineteenth-century models of women's authorship) as well as a modern trope formula, or archetype.

Of the four writers I study, Wharton and Cather seem to have been most inclined (and most able, given their class and race privilege) to protect their art from potentially feminizing or trivializing forces in the literary marketplace. Both authors were conscious of the magazine industry's increasing dependence on advertising revenues, the effect of which was double-sided: on one side, there were tremendously lucrative serial rights agreements for celebrity authors (such as themselves), while on the other side, there was pressure to cede authority over their work to editorial and consumer forces regulating

magazine publication. A paradox in Wharton's and Cather's construction of authorship outside of female communities and literary traditions is that they were also composing gender-conscious narratives that—especially as their careers and success progressed—appeared in the boundary-blurring context of women's magazines alongside more conventional genre fiction (including New Women stories), illustrations, and advertising. This paradox came at a critical juncture of their careers when lucrative serial opportunities in women's magazines meant risking the identification of being “nonauthoritative, nonintellectual” (89). “Given the implicit threat in becoming too popular,” explains Williams, “another question faced Cather and Wharton: once they had established themselves as significant literary voices, could they also establish control over their public images so as to retain their literary authority?” (Williams 89).

To return again to Patterson's reading of women writers' ambivalence toward the dominant culture New Woman as indicative of their anxieties about betraying “the sociopolitical goals” of their communities and risking marginalization as writers of political fiction, the former explanation corresponds to Zitkala-Ša's artistic career, which frequently makes the personal political, thus anticipating the identity politics of the latter half of the century. However, as an assumed “assimilated” representative of her race, she used dominant cultural forms such as women's sentimental fiction and opera to bring marginalized and politically subversive narratives to national audiences. Her autobiography expresses ambivalence toward the New Woman by attaching it to the modern, dominant white culture lifestyle she—as the narrative subject as well as its author—accesses and adapts through her childhood immersion in an off-reservation boarding school and coming of age in the larger context of the American assimilationist

paradigm. But the desire to avoid politically polarized themes in order to negotiate a stronger position in the literary marketplace does not appear to have influenced Zitkala-Ša, for whom artistic creation and social change coalesced (financial compensation seems not to have been a primary factor in publishing her stories and essays).

Finally, in Schalk's case, her New Negro stories appeared before a largely middle-class African American audience—certainly “speaking for,” “of,” and “to”—and did not appear to have been financial boons for her; however, she did supplement her income as a journalist by publishing numerous stories in mass-market “pulp” magazines during the 1930s. While formula conventions of those magazines implied white characters and settings—thereby seeming to obscure race as a means of authorial representation or social activism—Schalk was nonetheless able to play with the social codes of race and gender as it suited her romance plots, which included adaptations of dominant culture archetypes like the New Woman. To put it more simply, then, Patterson's reading of author ambivalence toward the New Woman applies to a certain extent to Wharton and Cather; however, it does not seem to apply to writers like Zitkala-Ša and Schalk whose creative vision merged literary and popular forms as well as embracing social criticism.

An important context for my study is the literary marketplace in which rising literacy rates and decreased paper costs converged in a boom time for periodicals and vastly expanded access for diverse writers to national publications and smaller circulation literary magazines. American women writers of this period participated in that marketplace through the proliferating medium of the periodical. Representing diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds, political positions, artistic perspectives, and modes of

authorship, both mainstream and high culture magazines were vibrant public forums for these writers to develop their careers and artistic voices. The widespread popularity of magazines of all types in these decades (partly due to their decreased cost from increased advertising revenue) meant writers could reach more readers, whether through journalism, literary fiction, poetry, or formula-driven genre writing. These circumstances resulted in multiple models of women's authorship.

For example, writers like Edith Wharton and Willa Cather honed their craft and built their literary reputations in the pages of such magazines as *The Century*, *McClure's*, and *Scribner's*. They even continued to serialize their novels in middlebrow women's magazines after their respective critical and popular successes meant they could bypass serialization for more culturally valuable book publication. Likewise, in this milieu even a marginalized young woman such as Zitkala-Ša could place her autobiographical stories in the pages of that venerable conveyor of American culture, the *Atlantic Monthly*. So too did African American Gertrude Schalk, who demonstrates another model of women's authorship by publishing a small body of literary fiction in *The Saturday Evening Quill*, the journal of a Boston-based New Negro literary society, and her short fiction made numerous appearances in pulp romance magazines with titles like *All-Story Love Stories* and *Love Story Magazine* throughout the 1930s and into the 1940s.

Maureen Honey's efforts to identify and define the New Woman in popular fiction, specifically stories published between 1915 and 1930, are also crucial to my analysis. Magazine fiction proliferated during these years, especially that found in women's magazines, which had been circulation leaders early in the century and were also most likely by the mid-1920s to have circulations of a million or more (*Breaking 3-*

4). This fiction, in which the New Woman is a prominent figure, reflects values, issues, and preoccupations of early feminism. Based on her reading of hundreds of stories from the 1920s published in mainstream periodicals such as the *Delineator*, *Ladies Home Journal*, and *Pictorial Review*, she argues, “popular women’s fiction “reveals the concerns of large numbers of women that mirrored in significant ways white middle-class culture in the years after the national suffrage amendment” (“Gotham’s Daughters” 25).

The majority of aspiring women writers in the modern era did not have the time or financial security to publish novels; therefore, the short story became an appealing genre for expression and artistic development. Though women’s short fiction represented a large portion of stories published in black periodicals, the lives of the women who wrote them, like Gertrude Schalk, are still shrouded in a long shadow of neglect. With little biographical information to convey her New Negro Woman experiences to us today for instance, we must look for clues to Schalk’s life in her fiction, most of which has not been recovered. In these narratives, we can find the New Woman theme that dominated magazine short fiction by white women writers of the time, but Schalk revised the theme to fit her own frame of reference as a black woman. Her stories are some of the first depictions of realistic black family life and urban domestic communities. No longer as constrained by social mores of the nineteenth century, Schalk, like many of her peers, felt freer to explore subjects like prostitution, female sexuality, and racial oppression in open or semi-visible ways. Yet, whereas by the 1920s white women’s magazine fiction regularly featured triumphant New Woman heroines who “have it all” by the end of the story, parallel short fiction by black women writers like Schalk was likely to be less optimistic about society’s acceptance of a true New Negro Woman or to interrogate the

middle-class fantasy of modern life the New Woman trope assumed. Schalk's thwarted heroines, therefore, serve to interrogate racist and sexist social frameworks.

The racism that permeated women's magazines during this period is evidenced by the exclusion of most non-white writers and narratives as well as the relegation of ethnic characters when they did appear to secondary positions or outright stereotypes (Honey, *Breaking* 22). As Honey notes, "Women of color were interested in sexism as well as racism . . . but they worked primarily within their own organizations and wrote for their own journals" (*Breaking* 23). African American periodicals like *The Crisis*, *Opportunity*, the *Saturday Evening Quill*, and *The Messenger* sustained artistic networks between black communities, contributed to a national black middle-class culture, and became the primary forum for black writers and visual artists.⁷ While publications like *The Crisis* and *Opportunity* were "not quite analogous to mainstream magazines such as the *Ladies Home Journal* that had circulations in the millions," Honey explains, "these middle-class, African-American journals were among the only places where black women could publish anything like comparable stories about modern life" (*Breaking* 23). In communities across the U.S., African American periodical readership and collaboration among writers and visual artists spawned smaller, shorter-lived publications in cities such as Boston, where *The Saturday Evening Quill* was published annually by the Boston Quill Club, itself an example of intersex collaboration and shared artistic purpose. Organized in 1925, this literary society was "designed to coalesce as many of the city's scattered non-professional Negro writers as it could. Although its membership is composed wholly of Negroes, there is nothing in the Club's constitution against admitting others," states the mission statement (1).⁸

By the late 1920s, a young Gertrude Schalk was writing and publishing stories that dramatized the double-bind of sex and race that belied notions that the vote much impacted urban, working-class women of color. In the pages of the *Saturday Evening Quill*, Schalk's narratives presented bleak portraits of urban poverty. Though at some point each of her black female characters expresses hope for a different life, there appear to be no pathways toward such dreams. For example, Schalk's characters work outside the home—one scrubbing floors of downtown office buildings at night and another in a house of ill repute. Predictably, Schalk presents such labor as dehumanizing and degrading, along with being financially insufficient. Furthermore, these jobs represent sex-segregated work at the foundational level of the modern American economy, although such labor was not new—a fact underscoring how—for all the promises of modernity—the conditions of urban working-class women of color (as well as their male counterparts) during the nineteenth century remained unchanged, even nearly three decades into the new century, especially for those who, out of necessity and circumstance, did the most menial or marginalized work. The world Schalk creates around black female characters is a world apart from the middle-class, consumer-driven quality of life portrayed in the pages of mainstream women's magazines of the same period.

A parallel problem appears in Zitkala-Ša's autobiography, one that existed for Native Americans at the turn-into-the-twentieth century. Her literary contemporaries—among them women writers like Cather—“defined modernity not only through the divided labor of distinct classes but also through the divided labor of women and men, of domesticity and modern professionalism” (Sawaya 1). However, Native Americans like

Zitkala-Ša bound up in the assimilationist project of compulsory education, with the social structure of everyday life in tribal communities during the Dawes Era being disrupted or devastated by federal Indian policies and the reservation system, trained for new professionalized labor opportunities that were also frequently closed to them. Boarding schools such as White's Institution in Wabash, Indiana where Zitkala-Ša learned to speak and read English, and Carlisle Indian School in Pennsylvania where she taught for a short period as a young adult, represented an institutionalized effort to funnel upcoming generations of Native Americans into manual and domestic occupations by foregrounding such training over other.

In her study of New Woman narratives produced by multi-racial contemporaries of Zitkala-Ša, Patterson observes related critiques of modern employment and its attendant problems:

Many New Woman narratives emphasize how economic exigencies forced their female protagonists to gain employment outside the home. For Sui Sin Far, Wharton, and [Pauline] Hopkins, the pursuit of such work is often less a sign of personal fulfillment than economic necessity. Indeed, most of these writers emphasize the hazards in paid employment—be they effects on family life, personal safety, physical health, or emotional well-being. (8).

Patterson draws her conclusions from texts published no later than 1915, which puts them in concordance with Honey's observations of a less triumphant New Woman in popular fiction prior to 1915, a figure unable to settle in the modern arena without "sacrificing human relationships or repressing her creativity" (475). In contrast to the optimism

presented in later comparable stories, early New Woman plots regularly resolve when the characters “return to family values or are fatally alienated by the male world of commerce” (475). Cather’s office fiction, published between 1916 and 1919, corresponds to this pattern by presenting a skeptical view of “pink-collar” work as necessary to modern commerce while also being poorly compensated and generally an unlikely or ethically imprudent stepping stone to more empowering professionalized labor. She populates these stories with a number of working-women whose class status and more limited educational opportunities situate them in a New Woman narrative of narrower scope (both in terms of the characters’ expectations for their own lives and their agency in the male arena). Thus, Cather depicts the New Working-Woman’s struggle to balance the tangible economic benefits of office employment with the patriarchal attitudes of male supervisors. The narratives suggest many women could only gain a modicum of economic self-sufficiency if they stayed competitive in completing ever more fast-paced and impersonal tasks and also adhered to gendered codes of conduct in the workplace wherein a misstep, such as a change in marital status, often meant dismissal.

Rather than exploring her own anxieties about the editorial work she undertook while on the *McClure’s* staff, Cather opts to exclude herself (or a character more closely aligned with her own background and professional experience) from the narrative. Even in Cather’s magazine offices at the *Outcry* (clearly an analogue to *McClure’s*), which she depicts in the story “Ardessa,” there are no women in any position directly connected to the editorial vision or creative content of the magazine. That Cather should so thoroughly disassociate herself and her narrative from the middle-class New Woman desire for professional work in the modern economy is curious given the narrative’s popularity. We

can conclude, however, that her attention to office culture through multiple stories indicates her interest in it as a site of disruptive social change that is closely linked to the modern economy as well as to social codes governing sex-roles. That at one point Cather conceived of a full series of stories on this topic to be called *Office Wives* implies how she framed her thinking on office culture: as a convergence of a modern discourse, the “office,” with a nineteenth-century/domestic discourse, the “wife.”

The following three chapters of this dissertation enter into the ongoing dialogue about women’s literary authorship. This conversation is parallel to and—I believe—entwined with larger questions of identity and community in the period, 1900-1935. As such, each chapter begins by setting up a contextual framework attendant to the biographical, cultural, and publishing circumstances that inform my interpretations of the narratives and their relationship with each author’s claims of literary authority. The texts discussed here evidence the writers’ positions within and on modern discourse through the stories they tell, whether those narratives take the form of autobiographical essay or fiction—including short “genre” forms like the ghost story and formula romance and longer forms such as the novella and novel. Furthermore, I consider these stories in relation to their deployments of major cultural archetypes in this period, namely that of the New Woman and New Negro. Such themes are a way to track the authors’ engagement with discourses of social change through their imaginative and rhetorical moves as writers.

This study heeds Patterson’s call for careful attention to the historical contexts of terms like “New Woman” and “New Negro,” and works to present a wider picture of the cultural and biographical milieus surrounding the primary texts I examine here. At the

same time, I admit that these interpretations are limited by the scope of this project. Nonetheless, my aim in building on previous considerations of female authorship is to suggest more fluid conceptions of “authorship” and “art.” Though only a preliminary effort toward that end, this study highlights four writers’ remarkable maneuvers within the landscape of literary production as they found and engaged audiences through narratives of modern identity in the periodical press both at the beginning and end of their careers.

¹ Honey has undertaken extensive research on New Woman in popular fiction, including *Breaking the Ties that Bind* (1992), a collection of several New Woman mass-market stories from the years 1915-1930. Also see her analysis of 1920s feminism and New Woman literature in “Gotham’s Daughters: Feminism in the 1920s” (1990) and “Feminist New Woman Fiction in Periodicals of the 1920s” (2003). More recently, Martha H. Patterson’s *Beyond the Gibson Girl: Reimagining the American New Woman, 1895-1915* (2005) explores the deployments of the New Woman in mostly canonical works of several authors, paying special attention to the cultural discourses that shaped them (2005). For discussion of minority women writers and the New Woman popular fiction formula, see Honey’s “‘So Far Away from Home’: Minority Women Writers and the New Woman” (1992). Rich’s full-length study *Transcending the New Woman: Multiethnic Narratives in the Progressive Era* (2008) is the first to focus exclusively on non-white women writers from different cultural backgrounds in relation to one another and New Woman themes.

² As Patterson notes, there is some variance in the capitalization of the “New Woman.” “Unless context dictates otherwise,” she explains, “I will generally capitalize the term to emphasize its constructed nature” (187, n. 3). I follow the same logic throughout this dissertation.

³ The Harlem Renaissance, broadly speaking, can best be understood by visualizing it as a “project” that encompassed “the extraordinary variety of the production of the time—which bridges at least two generations of African American intellectuals and artists and several means of expression” (Feith 51). Its unifying purpose is self-representation. Alain Locke famously articulated the philosophical spirit of the Harlem Renaissance in his introductory essay to the 1925 anthology *The New Negro: Voices of the Harlem Renaissance*. According to Locke, “The New Negro” tolls the death knell for the “Old Negro,” a mythic rather than historical figure, a focus of pity or revulsion, and above all else, a concept defined by the dominant culture (3). He ushers in the time of the New Negro, entrusted with the task of lifting the race—on all sides of the globe—to a role of prominence and self-determination. Significantly, Locke asserts that success will come

“in the revaluation by white and black alike of the Negro in terms of his artistic endowments” (6). As literary critic Cheryl Wall has observed, Locke utilizes masculine “imagery drawn from industry, technology, and war,” while relying exclusively on the poetry of men like Langston Hughes and Claude McKay to reinforce his agenda (4). Casting a representational cultural movement in masculine terms poses obvious problems for women conceptualizing their own identities and experiences through art. Furthermore, as Honey describes, “The New Negro Movement was male-dominated, both in terms of access to resources and the kind of writing that garnered the highest praise” (*Shadowed* 31).

⁴ Native American women (and men) did not receive the right to vote until Congress passed the Indian Citizenship Act in 1924.

⁵ See Chown.

⁶ For an historical overview of the New Woman, see Smith-Rosenberg (1885) pages 245-296 and D. Schneider and C. Schneider (1993) pages 16-19.

⁷ The tradition of the African American periodical began in 1838, with the New York-based abolitionist publication *Mirror of Liberty* (R. Lee 565). Other successful magazines would follow, but it was the Harlem Renaissance that brought the New Negro Movement into thousands of homes through the pages of African American literary magazines. The NAACP’s *The Crisis* was founded in 1910 and swiftly became the dominant black magazine, with Du Bois at the helm and Fauset serving as literary editor. Following the model of *The Crisis*, the National Urban League began publishing *Opportunity* in 1923. A slightly more political periodical, the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters’ *The Messenger*, appeared on the Harlem scene from 1917 to 1928, edited by the socialists Chandler Owen and Asa Philip Randolph.

⁸ The inside cover of the June 1930 *Quill* excerpts various reviews the journal, such as the following from the *Boston Herald*: “Their excellent work reminds us that there is no adequate standard to apply to the Negro writer, save that which is applied to American writers in general.” And George S. Schuyler at the *Pittsburgh Courier* was credited with saying, “There ought to be more organizations like the Saturday Evening Quill Club. There is room and need for one in every Negro community.” Although the magazine’s third and final issue had a print run of just three hundred copies that was an increase over previous issues.

CHAPTER TWO

Ambivalent Alliances: The Woman Writer and Her Readers in Edith Wharton's *The Touchstone* and "Pomegranate Seed"

Edith Wharton's complex identity as a woman writer is a familiar subject in Wharton scholarship. Likewise, much has been said of Wharton's fraught relationship with her female readership.¹ But fresh analyses and comparisons of Wharton's works continue to illuminate our understanding of her beliefs about the meaning of writing and publishing as a woman in a female-dominated reading marketplace largely overseen by male editors and critics. To that end, I here introduce two of Wharton's "minor" texts into the conversation: *The Touchstone* (1900), a novella, and "Pomegranate Seed" (1931), a ghost story. In evaluating these texts, I hope to shed some light on Wharton's feelings of vulnerability as a woman writer in the literary marketplace and her attempts to circumvent or at least contain that vulnerability in her fiction.

A number of critical assessments provide crucial groundwork for this chapter by reassessing and at times revising established definitions of modernism, Wharton's contributions to the modernist literary project, Wharton's relationships with women in her own life as well as her art. Susan Goodman in *Edith Wharton's Women: Friends and Rivals* (1990) offers a framework for understanding the correlation between Wharton's life and work. Goodman, counter to many earlier critics, reads Wharton's heroines as neither "primarily competitive" nor "women in isolation"; instead, she suggests Wharton's heroines "struggl[e] to define themselves through connections with other women" (3). More recently, Jennifer Haytock in *Edith Wharton and the Conversations of*

Literary Modernism (2008) presents revisionist analysis of literary modernism by investigating critical exclusion of Wharton's work from traditional, masculine conceptions of modernism and describes how Wharton's writing is deeply invested in major modernist ideas. For Haytock, Wharton particularly diverges from her modern contemporaries on matters concerning "the nature of the artist and the artist's role in society" and such divergences "are the source of her greater unease with the modernist movement" (1). Hildegard Hoeller is likewise focused on standard critical narratives of Wharton's career and canonization. *Edith Wharton's Dialogue with Realism and Sentimental Fiction* (2000) questions a critical bias in favor of Wharton's realist projects— apparent in much recent work on the author as well as foundational feminist studies such as Cynthia Griffin Wolff's biography *A Feast of Words* (1977) and Elizabeth Ammons's *Edith Wharton's Argument with America* (1980). This scholarship persistently favors Wharton's more realist texts, such as *The House of Mirth* (1905), while generally dismissing for their sentimental characteristics Wharton's subsequent, 1920s novels— those following *The Age of Innocence* (1920)—like *The Glimpses of the Moon* (1922). Works published in the mid-1990s such as Dale Bauer's *Edith Wharton's Brave New Politics* (1994) helpfully place Wharton squarely in traditions of realism and naturalism and within the historical context of early twentieth-century political and cultural debates. In a broad sense, Hoeller explains, Wharton criticism, "parallels the debate about American sentimental fiction and the canon" (21). As such, "Wharton's oeuvre was shaped by the critics in terms of the gendered opposition between realism and sentimental fiction, between the former's economy and the latter's excess" (21). The effect of this "critical preference for realism blind[s] critics to Wharton's consistent critique of this

genre” and leads to evaluations of Wharton’s texts that miss their “ironies and complexities” (202). Wharton’s own public assessments assisted in solidifying a realist critical lens on her canonization, as Hoeller notes. By reading Wharton’s writing and career for a “dialogue between realism and sentimental fiction,” contends Hoeller, we acknowledge:

Wharton saw what American realists saw: a world increasingly governed by the principles of the *marketplace*. She saw and described this world in largely realist terms. . . . This part of Wharton’s writing has, of course, been explored extensively. But Wharton wanted to express her critique of such a world also. And for that critique and her belief in counterforces—motherhood, female desire, the voice of the “naked soul,” illegitimacy—Wharton employed the sentimental tradition. (203, emphasis added)

Hoeller’s analysis invites conversations on Wharton’s authorial tactics and engagement with readers through realist as well as other genre strategies. In particular, I take up her imperative to appreciate Wharton’s complex, sometimes contradictory aesthetic ideals at work in her fiction in relation to her professional efforts in the marketplace.

A notable fact of Wharton’s literary career is her relatively late entrance into book publishing. Wharton was thirty-seven in 1899 when Scribner’s and Sons published her first volume of collected stories, *The Greater Inclination*. In her memoir *A Backward Glance* (1933), Wharton recollects how this book imbued her with both a sense of validation and an identity as a bona fide author in the literary marketplace:

I had written short stories that were thought worthy of preservation! Was it the same insignificant I that I had always known? Any one walking along

the streets might go into any bookshop, and say: ‘Please give me Edith Wharton’s book,’ and the clerk, without bursting into incredulous laughter, would produce it, and be paid for it, and the purchaser would walk home with it and read it, and talk of it, and pass it on to other people to read! (113)

In depicting this scenario of a person buying her book, Wharton presents her authorial identity as deeply tied to both the commercial—in the bookshop transaction between clerk and book buyer—and the personal—in the purchaser who reads, discusses, and finally shares her book with others. Undeniably, *A Backward Glance* is a latter-career construction of a writer’s own life and literary legacy for public consumption; nonetheless, it provides a glimpse of how—from the vantage point of much experience as a commercially and critically successful author—Wharton correlates authorship in relation to her sense of self. She is explicit about the centrality of publication to her personal development. In fact, prior to the appearance of *The Greater Inclination* in print, Wharton writes, “I had as yet no real personality of my own, and was not to acquire one till my first volume of short stories was published” (112). Here Wharton links her personality—indeed her very *personhood*—to the emergence of her public voice. Several pages later in the memoir she further elucidates by describing how a newly minted authorial identity provided her access to much-desired conversations and relationships as a respected equal:

My long experimenting had resulted in two or three books which brought me more encouragement than I had ever dreamed of obtaining. . . . The reception of my books gave me the self-confidence I had so long lacked,

and in the company of people who shared my tastes, and treated me as their equal, I ceased to suffer from the agonizing shyness which used to rob such encounters of all pleasure” (133, emphasis added).

Wharton casts herself as a fledgling writer (who was, indeed, a married leisure-class woman) whose unexpected literary success infused her with authority that not only enabled her to speak but also ensured she would be heard as an intellectual and artistic equal by her literary peers. And while *A Backward Glance* is revealing as an expression of Wharton’s self-conscious legacy building and glimpse of her philosophy on art and authorship, to some degree the memoir genre simplifies complexities of identity she encountered as a woman committed to her artistic profession. Wharton’s struggle to unify her identities as a woman and an author is also visible in correspondence with her publishers, as Deborah Williams argues in *Not in Sisterhood: Edith Wharton, Willa Cather, Zona Gale, and the Politics of Female Authorship* (2001). Williams points to a 1922 letter to Scribner’s in which Wharton’s request indicates a struggle to draw public boundaries around her personal life: “Will you please tell your advertising agent once and for all that my name in private life is Mrs. Wharton, and in literature ‘Edith Wharton.’ The coupling of the Mrs and my Christian name is very disagreeable to me” (qtd. in Williams 21).

Wharton’s well-known commitment to what she calls “the discipline of the daily task,” characterized by her mornings devoted to writing, transformed her “from a drifting amateur into a professional” (qtd. in Lewis, *Edith Wharton* 151). This sustained energy for her craft was much admired by Wharton’s editors, especially William Crary Brownell at Scribner’s and Rutger Jewett at D. Appleton and Company.² Wharton’s vigor for and

dedication to her art combined with her growing sense of authorial influence make for a potent model of literary authorship in the modern period. Though Wharton was highly productive as a writer during most periods of her career, the business side of her work could attract considerable attention. Biographer Hermione Lee notes, that while Wharton was at Scribner's, "she was for years her own agent, manager, administrator and negotiator. She kept a beady eye on sales and advertising, layout and design, illustrations (which she increasingly hated), jacket copy and author photos, typos, punctuation and spelling" (422). In correspondence with her publishers, Wharton indicates her careful attention to her representation in the modern literary landscape and the role of advertising in framing and promoting her work to the public. She frequently demanded greater promotion of her work and even as early as 1899 wrote to Brownell at Scribner's to complain about inadequate advertising of *The Greater Inclination*:

I have naturally watched with interest the advertising of the book, & have compared it with the notices given by other prominent publishers of books appearing under the same conditions. I find that Messrs. McMillan, Dodd & Mead, McClure, Harper, etc., advertise almost continuously in the daily papers every new book they publish, for the first few weeks after publication. (*Letters* 38)

Wharton goes on to explain that a poorly reviewed book may deserve little expenditure for advertising; nevertheless, it appears "essentially unjust" for an acclaimed volume such as her own to receive the same treatment. Her closing implies she might seek a different publishing house for future volumes: "Mr. Scribner's methods do not tempt one to offer him one's wares a second time" (*Letters* 38). For a variety of reasons, Wharton would

eventually leave Scribner's.³ While at Appleton she continued to closely monitor promotion and business-related aspects of her writing, though Rutger Jewett also served as her unpaid acting literary agent (Lewis, *Edith Wharton* 38).

In the narrative of Wharton's writing career, periodicals were critical to the cultivation of her literary celebrity, financial earnings, and relationship with readers. Her stories and novels appeared in serial form on the pages of the venerable *Scribner's Magazine* before Scribner's publishing house released them as books. And, eventually, the dominance of mass-market publishing and picture magazines provided Wharton with irresistible economic incentives to place her work in them right alongside advertisements, illustrations, and the words of the day's most popular writers. This was the case for every one of her novels from the 1920s, all serialized in *Pictorial Review*. Correspondingly, Wharton's composition and revision process was manipulated by the demands of mostly male magazine editors and their interpretation of largely female audience desires, particularly later in her career, when popular magazines provided attractive financial compensation relative to her economic needs.⁴ R. W.B. and Nancy Lewis describe the convergence of Wharton's great postwar productivity during the period 1920-1927, when she produced no less than fourteen volumes of fiction, poetry, and prose, with her emergence as an exceptionally high-earning author (418). Magazines, namely the *Pictorial Review*, paid her large sums for her serials in the 1920s, including \$18,000 for *The Age of Innocence*. Between 1920 and 1924, best estimates suggest "Wharton's work brought in \$250,000, not much less than \$3,000,000 before taxes today [1988]" (418).

One tradeoff for a literary offer in the periodical market is greater acquiescence to demands of magazine editors that were often based on making texts fit their publications'

mass readerships. This is Gianfranca Balestra's focus in "“For the Use of the Magazine Morons’: Edith Wharton Rewrites the Tale of the Fantastic,” which exposes the interchange between Wharton and her readers via periodicals. Balestra examines mostly unpublished manuscripts and correspondence and demonstrates how the writer's later ghost stories were subject to rewrites intended to decrease their ambiguity for what Wharton terms “magazine morons” (qtd. in Balestra 21).⁵ The eventual revision of the denouement of “Pomegranate Seed” is indicative. Before the ghost story appeared in *Ladies Home Journal* in 1931, the magazine's editor Loring Schuler wrote to Jewett at Appleton:

Mrs Wharton's new short story “Pomegranate Seed” is one of the most gorgeous pieces of writing I have seen from her or from anyone else. It's in every way a splendid story—up to the end. But I am afraid that the great mass of Journal readers would be lost and indignant because there is no explanation of the situation that has been so interestingly developed. And so I wonder if Mrs. Wharton would be willing to write a new ending for the story in which the reader would learn:

Where the mysterious letters came from,
 What they contained that was so terrifying to Kenneth Ashby,
 Where Ashby has gone and why.

If these points can be cleared up, the story will become understandable to readers of the kind who wondered about the end of Mrs. Wharton's other story, “Mr. Jones.” I hope Mrs. Wharton will be willing to do this.
 (qtd. in Balestra 15)

To remove any ambiguity from the items on Schuler's list would strip the central mysteries and their requisite tensions from the story. Importantly, his request relies on assumptions about his magazine's readers and their interpretive skills, and Wharton did accommodate the request. As she writes to Jewett, "I return herewith a modified ending to 'Pomegranate Seed,' which ending will, I hope, be considered sufficiently explicit. I could hardly make it more so without turning a ghost story into a treatise on the sources of the supernatural" (R. Lewis and N. Lewis 532).

Wharton's persistent problems posed by publishing in magazines were not limited to editorial demands. In the specific case of middlebrow women's magazines, as Edie Thornton shows, Wharton conceded "interpretative authority" in the "conflicts of modernity" playing out in their pages ("Packaging" 29). Thornton's essay "'Innocence' Consumed: Packaging Edith Wharton with Kathleen Norris in *Pictorial Review* magazine, 1920-21" (2005) undertakes comparative analysis of Wharton's *The Age of Innocence* and popular romance novelist Kathleen Norris's *The Beloved Woman*, two novels serialized in overlapping issues of the *Pictorial Review*. Thornton's comparative analysis shows how the magazine's staff—helmed by Arthur Vance—"established an idealized middle ground, a 'middlebrow' that could sustain, and entertain, the widest possible range of readers/buyers" (30). In an earlier essay, "Selling Edith Wharton: Illustration, Advertising, and *Pictorial Review*, 1924-1925" (2001), Thornton focuses on how serialization of Wharton's *The Mother's Recompense* affects interpretation of the novel's mature protagonist Kate Clephane. She finds that "Wharton's textual descriptions of her heroine"—particularly in connection to the character's age and sexuality—"struggle for authority with ads, illustrations and promotion" (30). *Pictorial Review's*

readers accessed Wharton's story "through questions of consumerism, fashion, and visual cues," that lower the heroine's and leave an ironic contradiction, "an image of a youthful sexuality that was disengaged from its magazine counterparts, standardization and narcissism" (30). During its golden age, Thornton reiterates, illustration was a potent means of shaping and standardizing cultural ideals of womanhood (especially feminine physical beauty) and was often tied to commercial interests. For writers like Wharton, "[a]lmost regardless of the text itself, the illustrations accompanying fiction tied the text to the rest of the magazine—whether the text complemented its magazine environment or not" (31). The power to prohibit or limit illustrations was out of Wharton's hands when her work appeared in magazines, though she fought its interpretative influence in her books as well. For example, in a letter from Wharton to Brownell ostensibly dedicated to her objections to a verse from Ecclesiastes on the frontispiece of *The House of Mirth*, her opening complaint reveals a secondary frustration: "I sank to the depth of letting the illustrations be put in the book—& oh, I wish I hadn't now!" (R. Lewis and N. Lewis 94). Wharton's voluminous correspondence with her publishers reveals her efforts to participate in the publication of her books. On the other hand, as both of Thornton's essays suggest, when each of Wharton's texts entered the "consumer-driven market of popular magazines" ("Packaging" 44), no one—not the author or editor or any single magazine professional—had exclusive control over it.

Yet in spite of the modern pressures of the publishing industry, Wharton had a pronounced awareness of and connection to her audience. When considering the implications of a mass-market female readership, a potential sisterhood is possible between this woman writer and her women readers. It is a precarious sisterhood,

however, since the modern literary marketplace defined success through mass audience approval. The woman writer to some degree risks her artistic integrity because she must rely upon the approval of her female readership as accessed through a commercial venue controlled by mostly magazine professionals (including editors, illustrators, and ad buyers). These complexities serve as contextual background for the portraits of women writers in the stories I discuss in the remainder of this chapter's examination of Wharton's attempts as a professional woman writer to circumvent the perils of a female mass-market readership.

As Candace Waid and others have discussed, Wharton's lifelong obsession with the classical Persephone story is central to understanding Wharton's relationship with writing and her self-concept as a woman writer.⁶ To that end, the myth offers rich interpretive possibilities for both *The Touchstone* and "Pomegranate Seed." Wharton provides a summary to Jewett (in response to his report that *Ladies Home Journal* editor Schuler seemed ignorant of the classical myth): "When Persephone left the under-world to revisit her mother, Demeter, her husband, Hades, lord of the infernal regions, gave her a pomegranate seed to eat, because he knew that if he did so she would never be able to remain among the living, but would be drawn back to the company of the dead" (R. Lewis and N. Lewis 532). In *Edith Wharton's Letters from the Underworld: Fictions of Women and Writing* (1991) Waid concentrates on how the Persephone story presents Wharton's "figure for the woman writer who dwells in the underworld savoring the supernatural fruit of letters and books" (199). Wharton of course chose a life of letters for herself, along with its correlative sacrifice of privacy (to her consternation). According to Waid's analysis, Wharton returns to and refashions the Persephone story throughout her

career as a way to find a place for herself as a woman writer, as evidenced by the “paradoxical recurrence throughout Wharton’s work of failed artists, unfinished texts, and anxieties about silence, inarticulateness, and suffocation” (3). *The Touchstone*, published at the commencement of Wharton’s career, and “Pomegranate Seed,” one of her late stories, fit squarely within Waid’s Persephone paradigm and highlight Wharton’s apprehension about her literary legacy. The famous woman writer at the center of *The Touchstone*, Margaret Aubyn, is subjected, posthumously, to the publication of her private love letters to a man who did not love her, the novella’s central consciousness, Stephen Glennard. He betrays Aubyn’s trust by selling her letters for a hefty profit in order to enable his marriage to the beautiful Alexa Trent. Similarly, “Pomegranate Seed” concerns letters from a dead woman that surface posthumously when they are delivered to a married man, but the protagonist this time is the man’s wife, Charlotte Ashby, who becomes obsessed with discovering the content of the letters and the identity of their sender. In both stories, a heterosexual correspondence is interpreted through the eyes of women readers outside the relationships the letters contain. These outsider women readers act out Wharton’s complex alliance with a female audience, an alliance she hopes will circumvent male critics and safeguard her artistic legacy once she is gone. In “Pomegranate Seed” we can more closely analyze the feelings of a female reader, Charlotte Ashby, and her desire to read letters written by another woman. Charlotte desires the “supernatural fruit of letters and books,” but no sisterhood exists between the woman writer and reader to make that transaction a fruitful one.

These stories illustrate Wharton’s theories about writing for an active reader, particularly a female reader, who helped her create tone, mood, meaning, and lasting

impression. She suggests the importance of this association in the preface to her 1937 collection *Ghosts*: “[W]hen I first began to read, and then to write ghost stories, I was conscious of a common medium between myself and my readers, of their meeting me half way among the primeval shadows, and filling in the gaps in my narrative with sensations and divinations akin to my own” (8).⁷ Here Wharton describes invoking her readers during the composition process and implies that they have something to bring to the story, even “meet [her] half way.” These comments are not gender-specific, but, as Waid notes, they privilege reader “sympathy and acts of identification” (176). For Waid, Wharton’s acknowledgement of her ghost story readers stems from her awareness that most of her readers were women responding sympathetically to a woman writer.

Scribner’s serialized *The Touchstone* prior to its publication of the book. The book was Wharton’s first full-length publication, appearing between story collections *The Greater Inclination* (1899) and *Crucial Instances* (1901). At this early stage in her career, several of Wharton’s stories, including this one, explore a woman writer’s success in the literary marketplace with its attendant authorial celebrity.⁸ *The Touchstone* in particular is a revealing meditation on the problematic construction of literary celebrity for a critically and commercially successful female author, Margaret Aubyn. Aubyn is already dead at the start of the novella, but her positioning as an author worth remembering is immediately clear in the text’s opening lines: “Professor Joslin, who, as our readers [of the *Spectator*] are doubtless aware, is engaged in writing the life of Mrs. Aubyn, asks us to state that he will be greatly indebted to any of the famous novelist’s friends who will furnish him with information concerning the period previous to her coming to England” (1). Wharton uses this *Spectator* advertisement to introduce Aubyn, or perhaps more

specifically, a *version* of Aubyn—the celebrated yet private novelist whose personal life is of literary and cultural value. Aubyn’s personal correspondence is explicitly requested in the ad because “[she] had so few intimate friends, and consequently so few regular correspondents” (1). Professor Joslin’s advertisement suggests that there is a market for information, specifically personal information, on Aubyn because her private life remained obscure despite her celebrity. The novella’s plot thereafter centers on Aubyn’s “one intimate friend,” Stephen Glennard, and his decision to anonymously publish hundreds of love letters Aubyn wrote him to gain the financial position he needs to win the woman he really loves, Alexa Trent. In the aspect that a woman is betrayed by a man she loved, the plot of *The Touchstone* resembles many of Wharton’s later works. But unlike, for example, Lily Bart in *The House of Mirth* or Ellen Olenska in *The Age of Innocence*, Wharton does not allow us to study the living Margaret Aubyn’s desires or motivations in any detail, and even Aubyn’s words—her texts—are missing from the story. Instead we are left to look for insights into the vulnerabilities and perhaps even the strengths of being a woman writer by studying the portrayal of an affiliation between Aubyn and her female audience.

Because Wharton offers up only Margaret Aubyn the writer for study rather than her writing, the story focuses attention on how others construct Aubyn, especially in their conflation of her personal and public life in *The Letters of Margaret Aubyn*, heartlessly published by Glennard for profit. It is only through Glennard’s perspective and a handful of other characters and references that we are able to piece together this woman who, “[i]n becoming a personage [. . .] so naturally ceased to be a person that Glennard could almost look back to his explorations of her spirit as on a visit to some famous shrine,

immortalized, but in a sense desecrated, by popular veneration” (24). Glennard’s characterization of Aubyn here as an immortal shrine is emblematic of his feelings toward her throughout the story and echoes the critical and popular treatment of the woman he had been “incapable of loving” (5). The lens of gender is critical to Glennard’s vision of the dead novelist. Despite Aubyn’s accomplishments and literary fame, Glennard’s understanding of her is limited by his inability to see women as real human beings, without the trappings of reverence or awe. For example, Glennard’s reverential language is apparent as he observes the only other woman to dominate his consciousness, his wife Alexa: “the lamplight fell on the deep roll of hair that overhung her brow like the eaves of a temple. *Her face had often the high secluded look of a shrine*; and it was this touch of awe in her beauty that now made him feel himself on the brink of sacrilege” (105-6, emphasis added). For Glennard, Aubyn and Alexa are put on a pedestal where they are kept at a distance, and the reader quickly sees his betrayal of both.

Glennard violates Aubyn’s personal life through publication of her unrequited love letters, even though he knew such public consumption would have been anathema to her. Indeed, Glennard knew how private and shy Aubyn was. Upon finding her gravesite, for example, he is struck by how poorly it reflects the deceased occupant’s personality: “He had forgotten that the dead seldom plan their own houses, and with a pang he discovered the name he sought on the cyclopean base of a granite shaft rearing its aggressive height at the angle of two avenues” (121). Glennard had expected “some low mound with a quiet headstone,” but instead he finds the commemorative monument and recognizes that Aubyn “would have hated it!” (121, 122). Glennard’s experience here echoes earlier passages in the text, such as his reflection upon seeing Aubyn’s name in

print that “[it] had been so long public property that his eye passed it unseeingly, as the crowd in the street hurries without a glance by some familiar *monument*” (3, emphasis added). And later, another character defends the sale of Aubyn’s personal letters with the argument that lost privacy is “the penalty of greatness—one becomes a *monument historique*” (70). Though some characters in the novella feel reading Aubyn’s letters is “like listening at a keyhole” (68, 86), another character quips that “to a [future] generation the book will be a classic” (86). It is this tension between the desire to consume a text (and by extension the private life of its author) and the guilt associated with this intrusive voyeurism that is the central preoccupation of *The Touchstone*. Without allowing us to see Aubyn’s actual texts, Wharton instead offers up Margaret Aubyn the author for study, not as an active character but as a public entity constructed in part by the sensationalistic publication of her private letters.

If we place this fictional dialogue on Margaret Aubyn’s image as a celebrated woman writer within the context of Wharton’s theorization of the topic, we can better understand what she is doing in the tale. An essay Wharton published just three years after *The Touchstone*, “The Vice of Reading,” articulates Wharton’s concept of the relationship between a writer and her audience:

What is reading in the last analysis, but an interchange of thought between writer and reader? If the book enters the reader’s mind just as it left the writer’s -- without any of the additions and modifications inevitably produced by contact with a new body of thought -- it has been read to no purpose (513).

For Wharton, it is essential that the transaction between writer and reader involve the creativity of each. Both a book and the person reading it must be capable of “being modified.” As Wharton elaborates:

The value of books is proportionate to what may be called their plasticity—their quality of being all things to all men, of being diversely moulded by the impact of fresh forms of thought. Where, from one cause or the other, this reciprocal adaptability is lacking, there can be no real intercourse between book and reader. In this sense it may be said that there is no abstract standard of values in literature: the greatest books ever written are worth to each reader only what he can get out of them. The best books are those from which the best readers have been able to extract the greatest amount of thought of the highest quality; but it is generally from these books that the poor reader gets least. (514)

If we examine Glennard’s publication of Aubyn’s letters within this framework, their impact on readers, and ultimately those readers’ conceptions of Margaret Aubyn, the story becomes an object lesson in how Wharton viewed her female audience as potential allies in her struggle to be both a woman and a professional writer. Rather than viewing the letters’ publication as solely a breach of trust, we might also see Glennard’s treacherous act as the means by which the text reaches more sympathetic readers than their original male recipient—perhaps meaningfully modifying those readers, the text, and even the author in the process.

Of course, Aubyn’s authorial intention was for her letters to be read by only one person, Glennard, but their eventual publication allows for an unintended, but possibly

more creative, female readership. It is indeed women readers of *The Letters* who are revealed to be the most capable of bringing Margaret Aubyn, the author, down from her pedestal through a sisterly embrace; in short, they are more capable than Glennard and the novella's other male characters of recognizing the anonymous recipient and publisher of the letters as a cad. In the words of one astute female reader, these are "unloved letters" (68). This tentative bond of sisterhood in *The Touchstone* suggests Wharton saw at least some potential for her female readers to read a woman writer more sympathetically—more perceptively—than their male counterparts. Still, this is not a simple matter of interpretation through gender identification, since Wharton claims to divide all readers into two camps: those who are "born readers" and "those that cannot read creatively [and therefore] read mechanically" (514). As the novella unfolds, *The Letters*' readers do fall into these categories of "born readers" and "mechanical readers." If, as I assert, at least some female readers in the story are more capable of "modifying" Aubyn's epistolary text, they might also offer a way to challenge the salacious book's influence on Aubyn's literary reputation. But can we conclude that these women are "born readers"? Though Wharton clearly maps her dichotomy of readers in "The Vice of Reading," she avoids citing gender as a determinant in how readers commune with a text:

To read is not a virtue; but to read well is an art, and an art that only the born reader can acquire. The gift of reading is no exception to the rule that all natural gifts need to be cultivated by practice and discipline; but unless the innate aptitude exist the training will be wasted. It is the delusion of the mechanical reader to think that intentions may take the place of aptitude. (515)

It is fair to assume that Wharton is aware of and subject to the status of women as writers and literary figures in a male-dominated marketplace and tradition; nonetheless, she avoids any suggestion of gender as the basis of a person's capacity to be either a "mechanical reader" or a "born reader." Rhetorically, no explicit connection here between gender and reading implies its absence as a factor in the production of true art, and thus Wharton stakes out a gender-neutral space for herself as the artist and her text as the art she creates. Nevertheless, if we extend Wharton's own definition of reading to include the "reading" of social rules, which fits her language of acquired skill over innate talent, her theory aptly applies to her own fiction, so widely populated by both male and female characters whose successful navigation of society depends upon a continuously shrewd and dedicated reading of it.⁹

To aid in our understanding of what Aubyn's readers signify and what that symbolism may indicate about Wharton's feelings toward her position as a woman writer, it is instructive to examine Mark A. Eaton's article, "Publicity and Authorship in *The Touchstone*, or A Portrait of the Artist as a Dead Woman" (1997) and Waid's *Edith Wharton's Letters from the Underworld* (1991). Eaton maintains *The Touchstone* clarifies Wharton's relationship with the literary marketplace she was negotiating early in her career. He notes Wharton's agency in shaping her own reputation during a time when a unique gender opposition had emerged in the literary marketplace around genre. On one end was a "high" literary tradition dominated by male writers, on the other a female-dominated sentimental romance tradition (5). Within this institutional context the mass-market success of women writers amounted to "economic capital," as opposed to the "cultural capital" accrued by male authors writing within a tradition of realism.¹⁰

Wharton straddled this gender chasm by enjoying both commercial and critical success, but there are, of course, limits to how much influence a writer ultimately has over her literary reputation. As Eaton explains, “Wharton fashioned her reputation as an important woman novelist neither simply by the force of her will, nor by writing admittedly great novels, but by carefully positioning herself in the literary field” (5). He cites Wharton’s attitudes toward the marketing of her works, noting both her desire for proper promotion and her ambivalence toward the need to cultivate celebrity as an author.

I want to take Eaton’s approach a step farther by exploring what Wharton might have been saying about the construction of an author’s literary reputation when that author’s participation in the process is over. Unlike Wharton, whose long publishing career gave her time to exert considerable control over the construction of her literary reputation, the fictional Margaret Aubyn cannot exert the same control from the grave—it is relinquished to her readers and critics at the abrupt end of her short career. Aubyn’s female readers may best reflect the ambivalence about authorial celebrity that Wharton felt throughout her life. Through the publication of Aubyn’s letters to Glennard, her “tragic outpourings of love, humility, and pardon” (5), we witness the dissolution of Aubyn’s authorial identity as the “famous novelist” of the *Spectator* advertisement and as the woman on the pedestal, the “*monument historique*” (70). Though the popularity of *The Letters of Margaret Aubyn* attracts male and female readers, women are the most conflicted about reading the two-volume collection. In an insightful conversation aboard a yacht, for example, Glennard listens as his friends discuss *The Letters*, which one woman describes as “in the air; one breathes it in like the influenza” (67). Another woman highlights the simultaneous feelings of guilt and desire when trespassing on

Aubyn's privacy, exclaiming, "I'm positively sick of the book and I can't put it down" (67). The women's collective response is softened by their sympathy for Aubyn, whose letters suggest her lover has dishonored her twice, first in failing to reciprocate her love and second by selling her letters for publication, as Mrs. Touchett suggests: "It's the woman's soul, absolutely torn up by the roots—her whole self laid bare; and to a man who evidently didn't care; who couldn't have cared. I don't mean to read another line: it's too much like listening at a keyhole" (68). Needless to say, despite their criticisms, the women are complicit in Glennard's treacherous act; they consume the published letters, along with the rest of the masses. Five thousand copies of the first edition are sold out before leaving the press (56). To return again to Wharton's "born reader/mechanical reader" dichotomy, the successful sales of *The Letters* suggests a large audience of mechanical readers, each of which might be described as "guided by the *vox populi*" rather than by their own initiative (517).

In imagining such a mechanical reader in "The Vice of Reading," Wharton applies the male pronoun, though this rhetorical practice would not necessarily exclude the females aboard the fictional yacht from the mechanical reader category: "He makes straight for the book that is being talked about, and his sense of its importance is in proportion to the number of editions exhausted before publication, since he has no means of distinguishing between the different classes of books talked about, nor between the voices that do the talking" (517). Certainly *The Letters* is "the book that is being talked about," and its popularity does not diminish as the novella proceeds. A scene that appears not long after the yacht party seems to reinforce our view that these readers are "mechanical." Glennard finds many of them assembled in Alexa's drawing-room and

learns that they have just returned from a dramatic reading at the Waldorf. In his confusion Glennard asks, “Who has been reading what?” Mrs. Armiger replies, “That lovely girl from the South—Georgie—Georgie What’s-her-name. . . ! Why, the big ball-room was *packed*, and all the women were crying like idiots—it was the most harrowing thing I ever heard—” (97). Read aloud by an actress, *The Letters* incited such hyperbolic reactions. The response of the men to this news is likewise revealing. Hartly exclaims, “How like you women to raise a shriek over the book and then do all you can to encourage the blatant publicity of the readings!” (97-8). When the men discover that the reading, attended by 500 people, was a fund-raiser for the Home for Friendless Women, one man’s trenchant observation, “It was well chosen,” elicits guffaws: “Hartly buried his mirth in the sofa-cushions” (98). Based on the commentary provided by both the male and female characters in Glennard’s and Alexa’s social circle, we may surmise that they are primarily interested in *The Letters* because the book is a sensation, and Wharton would likely place them in the “mechanical reader” category. Wharton’s characteristic ironic tone is present in the scene, as is a subversion of assumptions about gender and genre.

But sensationalism alone does not explain Alexa’s keen interest in the book. Though it is not until after the yacht conversation that Alexa expresses an interest in reading *The Letters*, it is actually the personal connection Alexa has with Aubyn through her husband that prompts her desire to read the book. As a result of this connection to the author, Alexa provides the most detailed response to *The Letters* as a female reader. Alexa is unique among the story’s women, not only as Glennard’s wife and the co-beneficiary of the financial windfall the sale of the letters brings, but also because one of

Aubyn's books, *Pomegranate Seed*, was the impetus for Glennard and Alexa to meet, as we learn when Alexa asks Glennard to purchase a copy of *The Letters* for her. Recalling this initial encounter, she says to Glennard, "I do read sometimes, you know; and I'm very fond of Margaret Aubyn's books. I was reading *Pomegranate Seed* when we first met. Don't you remember? It was then you told me all about her" (79). Alexa's comment suggests Glennard used his relationship with a well-known author as a pick-up line, a ploy representative of Glennard's exploitative relationship with Aubyn.

Glennard underestimates his wife's skill as a reader, though her characterization makes it clear that she does not have the habits of an avid reader: "She was, in fact, not a great reader, and a new book seldom reached her till it was, so to speak, on the home stretch" (73). But as Alexa's awareness of the nature of Glennard's relationship with Aubyn grows, Alexa's skills as a "creative reader" become more perceptible. Moreover, Glennard does not expect his wife to demonstrate the loyalty she does toward Aubyn once she learns that he sold the letters to a publisher, a fact she discerns when she sees volumes stacked in bookstore windows. Glennard obtusely reflects: "What woman ever retained her abstract sense of justice where another woman was concerned? Possibly the thought that he had profited by Mrs. Aubyn's tenderness was not wholly disagreeable to his wife" (112). Instead, Glennard finds his wife pitying Aubyn where he expected to find pity for himself: "Ah, poor woman, poor woman" (153), laments Alexa when Glennard bemoans the impossibility of making amends to Aubyn. Glennard responds to Alexa's expression of sympathy by further linking his wife with the author: "Don't pity her, pity me! What have I done to her or to you, after all? You're both inaccessible! It was myself I sold" (153). Glennard comes to realize he never really knew Aubyn nor knows his wife.

Glennard ultimately seems to prove himself a “mechanical reader.” Though he was the original owner of the letters, he has failed to discern their true meaning, obscured by both his inability to return Aubyn’s love and his guilt for having betrayed it. This idea appears earlier in the text when a cynical male member of the yacht party, Hartley, posits a theory regarding the person who published *The Letters*: “Perhaps he counted on the public to save him the trouble of reading them” (69).

Just as the other women in the novel experienced discomfort in reading the private letters of another woman—a dead woman—yet could not stop themselves from doing so, Alexa’s bonds of sisterhood too have their limits. It is possible, indeed, that she finally aligns herself with her husband in the controversial and scandalous publication of Aubyn’s letters. Alexa, for example, follows Glennard’s earlier image of Aubyn as a shrine:

Don’t they say . . . that the early Christians, instead of pulling down the heathen temples—the temples of the unclean gods—purified them by turning them to their own uses? I’ve always thought one might do that with one’s actions—the actions one loathes but can’t undo. One can make, I mean, a wrong the door to other wrongs or an impassable wall against them We can’t always tear down the temples we’ve built to the unclean gods, but we can put good spirits in the house of evil—the spirits of mercy and shame and understanding, that might never have come to us if we hadn’t been in such great need (154)

Alexa suggests that Glennard might atone for his wrongs against Aubyn and become the man Aubyn always believed him to be—the man to whom Aubyn composed her letters.

When Glennard asks ruefully what he gave to Aubyn in exchange for her love, Alexa responds, “[t]he happiness of giving” (156). Alexa’s words have added weight here because they are the last of the novella. For all of her potential to be a sympathetic reader or even kindred sisterly spirit, Alexa falls back on the dominant construction of Aubyn as the “famous novelist” who sacrifices her love life for her art. Furthermore, she suggests Aubyn sacrificed personal happiness in order to experience “the happiness of giving” to a selfish man. Alexa’s loyalty to her husband ensures his moral triumph; she brings him back from his “dense fog of humiliation” (149) by asking him to recognize that Aubyn saw the good in him before he became a good man:

Don’t you see . . . that that’s the gift you can’t escape from, the debt you’re pledged to acquit? Don’t you see that you’ve never before been what she thought you, and that now, so wonderfully, she’s made you into the man she loved? *That’s* worth suffering for, worth dying for, to a woman—that’s the gift she would have wished to give! (156)

We can only guess whether Aubyn would have been happy to sacrifice so much of herself for Glennard’s self-betterment.

Alexa’s figurative reference to Aubyn’s “happiness of giving” is also worth noting because it echoes Wharton’s conception of the “gift of reading,” which is given to those who are “born readers” willing to cultivate their skill. According to Alexa, both she and Aubyn believe in Glennard’s capacity to “read” the morality of a woman’s sacrifice as a gift despite his disloyalties to her memory and her literary legacy. Alexa brings her husband into the female realm of superior morality and anoints him a “born reader” even

though he refused to “read” Margaret Aubyn the woman or to let her letters “modify” him.¹¹

Another text instructive in fleshing out Wharton’s lifelong engagement with her female readers is “Pomegranate Seed,” a ghost story first serialized in *The Saturday Evening Post* in 1931 and later collected in *The World Over*, which was published in 1937, only a year prior to her death.¹² “Pomegranate Seed” invites comparison with *The Touchstone* because these texts serve as bookends for Wharton’s long career as a published writer. The texts are further linked by the name of Margaret Aubyn’s only named work in *The Touchstone, Pomegranate Seed*. Placing these works in conversation with each other illuminates a possible trajectory in Wharton’s attitudes toward female authorship as modified by female audiences. As Waid has argued, *The Touchstone* fits squarely among several of Wharton’s ghost stories in which a “living man is consumed by the inescapable presence of a dead woman” and the letters of those dead women “are the seeds of the underworld” (194, 195). It seems significant that Wharton would return decades later to questions that surround female authors and readers in a ghost story under the same title as the one that appeared in her first published novella, thus completing the authorial circle of her own creative identity.¹³

As in *The Touchstone*, “Pomegranate Seed” focuses on the letters of a deceased woman, the first Mrs. Ashby, Elsie Corder, and the desire of others—namely the second Mrs. Ashby, Charlotte Gorse—to access the contents of letters not addressed to her. The story begins with Charlotte pausing on the doorstep of her home, unable to cross the threshold. Despite the “warm blur” she sees through the door’s window panes and the “veiled sanctuary” her home provides from the “soulless roar of New York, its devouring

blaze of lights, the oppression of its congested traffic,” Charlotte’s pleasure in entering the home she shares with her husband, Kenneth, has been erased by the sudden delivery of letters to her husband from a dead woman. Months pass in which she “always wavered on the doorstep and had to force herself to enter” (763). Charlotte’s trepidation results from her obsession with the mysterious correspondence: “the letter she might or might not find on the hall table. Until she had made sure whether or not it was there, her mind had no room for anything else” (764). Charlotte’s preoccupation with her husband’s mail stems from his marked interest in and dramatic reaction to the letters. From the first letter’s arrival, Charlotte has observed Kenneth’s desire to read the letters alone. Each time Kenneth emerged from his private reading session, “he looked years older, looked emptied of life and courage, and hardly conscious of her presence” (765). Occasionally after these episodes, he would not speak for the rest of the evening, though if he did speak, “it was usually to hint some criticism of her [Charlotte’s] household arrangements, suggest some change in the domestic administration” (765). In addition to “his nervous tentative faultfinding,” Charlotte notices Kenneth has “the look of a man who had been so far away from ordinary events that when he returns to familiar things they seem strange,” an observation she finds more unsettling than his criticism (765).

Charlotte knows little of the letters beyond their identical appearance, each always “a square grayish envelope with ‘Kenneth Ashby, Esquire,’ [sic] written on it in bold but faint characters” (764). She remembers seeing the first envelope and thinking, “‘Why, I’ve seen that writing before’; but where she could not recall” (764). Indeed, Charlotte realizes the most unique thing about the letters is the feminine script on the envelopes, characterized by its “bold but faint characters”:

From the first it had struck Charlotte as peculiar that anyone who wrote such a firm hand should trace the letters so lightly; the address was always written as though there were not enough ink in the pen, or the writer's wrist were too weak to bear upon it. Another curious thing was that, in spite of its masculine curves, the writing was so visibly feminine. Some hands are sexless, some masculine, at first glance; the writing on the gray envelope, for all its strength and assurance, was without a doubt a woman's. (764)

Despite the intriguing nature of the script found on each of the mysterious letters' envelopes, and the fact that she recognizes it as familiar, Charlotte is unable to discern anything more about the writer than her gender.

The practice and domestic culture around reading is paramount to Wharton's story, engrained in the world the Ashbys share. While reflecting on their home as it was before the first letter appeared, Charlotte describes "her husband's long shabby library, full of books and pipes and worn armchairs inviting to meditation. How she had loved that room!" (763). Charlotte's own drawing room has been cheaply made over by "adding more books, another lamp, a table for the new reviews" (763). Much of the story takes place in these two rooms, and it is clear that the reading of books, reviews of books, or correspondence occupies nearly all the couple's time. Both Kenneth and Charlotte appear to fit the profile for Wharton's "born reader," based on the complete integration of reading into their lives and home. So central is shared reading to the marriage, that the presence of hidden texts—unidentified letters read only by Kenneth—threatens to rupture the Ashbys' domestic bliss. Charlotte sees that though the letters produce a strain on her

husband, Kenneth insists on reading them alone anyway: “[he] knew from whom the letter came and what was in it; he was prepared beforehand for whatever he had to deal with, and master of the situation, however bad; whereas she was shut out in the dark with her conjectures” (768). In short, Kenneth is armed with a knowledge he chooses not to share with Charlotte and which therefore becomes threatening to her status as an equal reading partner and wife. The mysterious letters are a “blurred business” that leaves her feeling as if she is “fighting her way through a stifling fog that she must at all cost get out of” (768, 769). The obfuscation Charlotte describes here echoes her earlier descriptions of the interior of her home as a “warm blur” and a “veiled sanctuary” (763). For Charlotte Ashby, her exclusion from reading the letters of another woman is as threatening as an actual affair. We see here the importance Wharton placed on reading and on private correspondence, particularly between lovers or ex-lovers.

Echoing the furor over *The Letters of Margaret Aubyn*, but in a much narrower, domestic sphere, Charlotte ultimately asserts herself as a reader of private correspondence and illuminates the story’s title. Looking at the reader side of the sisterhood equation in “Pomegranate Seed,” Charlotte is compelled to gain access to epistolary texts as a reader, but the letter writer refuses to grant it. In this story we have not a professional author, but in her place a woman writer whose written communications have a powerful hold over her male and female readers. The first Mrs. Ashby, Elsie Corder, is dead, but it is she who sustains communication with her husband through the letters that disrupt the new marriage between Kenneth and Charlotte. As Charlotte becomes more intent on knowing the letter writer’s identity, she falls more and more under the letters’ power. As Charlotte asserts to her husband, “Someone is trying to

separate us, and I don't care what it costs me to find out who it is" (773). Charlotte's obsessive need to read the letters is prompted by a double exclusion. Kenneth enforced the first prohibition with his refusal to divulge the writer's identity out of what he calls, "[p]rofessional secrecy" (770). Kenneth's silence leaves Charlotte feeling "excluded, ignored, blotted out of his life"; she is in a perpetual state of "darkness" (772, 775). Charlotte is barred a second time by Elsie's indecipherably faint handwriting, for when she finally, without Kenneth's permission, opens the last of the letters, it is nearly illegible; she can only make out a couple words, "'mine'—oh, and 'come'" (786). Charlotte even enlists the help of her mother-in-law, a woman with whom she shares a "tacit bond." Charlotte values the older woman's "astringent bluntness of speech which responded to the forthright and simple in Charlotte's own nature" (775), all characteristics opposite those of the letter writer Elsie. Together the two women attempt to decipher the last of Elsie's letters in the wake of Kenneth's sudden disappearance. But their bond as would-be readers cannot decode Elsie's powerful but faint script. Proving their "born reader" status, Charlotte and her mother come to the illogical but nonetheless compelling belief that Elsie is somehow composing letters to Kenneth beyond the grave and has summoned him to join her. As they gaze up at the empty space in Kenneth's library where Elsie's picture used to hang, Charlotte exclaims:

What difference does it make if her letters are illegible to you and me? If even you can see her [Elsie's] face on that blank wall, why shouldn't he [Kenneth] read her writing on this blank paper? Don't you see that she's everywhere in this house, and the closer to him because to everyone else she's become invisible? (787)

The story concludes without Kenneth's fate being known and the reader is left to ponder a dual mystery: where have the letters come from and what have they compelled Kenneth to do in response to the entreaties "mine" and "come"? Charlotte is able to discern that her predecessor has torn Kenneth from her side, but she cannot make out the words that he alone can read. Though she is an avid and astute reader of texts, Charlotte is helpless against the indecipherable texts by a dead woman writer so powerful that she destroys their conjugal bliss.

Here we might read Elsie Corder's dramatic impact on a male reader who can decipher her texts as Wharton's way of subverting the demands of "mechanical readers" who lack the necessary imagination to fill in the ambiguity and gaps in a text (as it appears many of Wharton's magazine readers could not do, especially when it came to her late ghost stories). But Charlotte Ashby is no mechanical reader. She wants to understand Elsie's words as much as her intent and goes a long way toward doing so, even when deciphering only a few of Elsie's words. Judy Hale Young sheds light on this matter by interpreting "Pomegranate Seed" as a reflection of Wharton's fraught relationship with her female readers and male editors by revising the Persephone myth: "Persephone's progress—the woman writer's progress—beyond the social state of other women, non-writing women, may lead her to forsake those sisters as well as her own femaleness in the blind struggle to increase her power by conforming to male-sanctioned standards of authorship" (3). Put simply, Young reads Elsie Corder's choice to write expressly to her former husband as a power move and a repudiation of sisterhood with his new wife. Kenneth's familiarity with Elsie's writing leads him to decipher her posthumous letters with a skill only he possesses (and even he must hold the letter very

close to his eyes to make out the words). Moreover, Kenneth is unwilling to grant Charlotte access to Elsie's letters by sharing their contents and takes on the role of literary gatekeeper. Young reads female disloyalty in Elsie's letters because they are addressed to Kenneth, wanting her criticisms to be heard only through him, even though they concern both his and Charlotte's parenting and household management. If the letters amount to a power struggle for Kenneth's devotion, and we take into account his unexplained disappearance, Elsie appears to win him in the end. She achieves her goals as a writer and preserves her place as the most important and powerful woman in Kenneth's life.

As we have seen, Wharton valued her ghost story readers' role in the production of narrative, and she creates a partially sympathetic readership in *The Touchstone*. The tentative sisterhood Wharton signals in her early novella has some parallels with her own career and the tentative sisterhood she forged in correspondence with another woman, also a writer, Zona Gale. In her study *Not in Sisterhood: Edith Wharton, Willa Cather, Zona Gale, and the Politics of Female Authorship*, Deborah Lindsay Williams examines letters Gale exchanged with both Wharton and Willa Cather. Her central argument debates earlier critics' assessments of these authors, among them Elizabeth Ammons' assertion in *Conflicting Stories* (1991) that Wharton and Cather were "influenced by both the era's intense emphasis on individualism" and aspired for "the particular model of the artist . . . which by definition implied solitary struggle" (Ammons 192). In contrast, Williams argues that as authors both Wharton and Cather did desire a sisterhood, though it was a private rather than public literary sisterhood, one sustained through letters and "not as a public affiliation" (12). At opposite ends of her literary career, Wharton's

rumination on a woman writer's legacy and potential communion with her female readers in *The Touchstone* and her portrayal of the power struggle created by Elsie Corder's letters in "Pomegranate Seed" provide worthwhile counterpoints to her correspondence with Gale. According to Williams's interpretation,

These letters illustrate Gale's worth as a sounding board, as a sympathetic audience with whom Wharton shares an essential understanding not only about contemporary fiction but also about the literary world in which they have made their careers. Gale is an artist, Wharton's highest accolade for a writer, but she is also a woman who understands the domestic rituals of housekeeping: their shared experiences with the difficulties of both writing and housekeeping help to establish the "community of spirit." (29)

It seems Wharton found in Gale a sister literary artist whose sympathies as a reader included an understanding of the intersections (and unique incongruences) of authorship with a woman's private life. Through correspondence with Gale, she found a way to reconcile being woman and author; yet, as Williams makes clear, Wharton struggled to bring that unity to the public realm of authorship. Furthermore, "the silence between Wharton and Cather testifies to the difficulty of forming a community of literary women" (12).

By the time Wharton writes "Pomegranate Seed," the communication between female writer and would-be female readers has disintegrated, though the woman writer has become more powerful, capable of compelling her readers to act (possibly even commit suicide, in Kenneth's case). I would like to believe, as Young does, that "Pomegranate Seed" is "Wharton's anti-manifesto of female writing," in which Wharton

presents “her notion of just what the woman who writes must not do” (10). I believe it is more accurate to think of this late-life meditation on women *not* writing for other women as evidence of Wharton’s discomfort with her failure, decades after the publication of *The Touchstone*, to definitively carve out more than a tentative sisterhood between herself and her female readers, even those who also write or those who were “born” for the job. Despite at times validating the insights of her female readers and even sympathizing with them (as she seems to do with the character of Charlotte Ashby), Wharton is unable to create a female character who can write specifically to and for other women. Whether doing so would have empowered Wharton is unclear, just as it must have been unclear to her whether seeking sisterhood with a female audience or female authors would have jeopardized her literary legacy.

The nearly four decades of Wharton’s literary career overlapped with the gender crisis and the increasing political, economic, and consumer power of women in America. Since it was the era of the mass-market periodical, as her celebrity increased, her writing—so often stories about women’s lives—found a direct path in the pages of popular women’s magazines to huge readerships of women. As discussed above, the degree of Wharton’s ambivalence over publicly allying herself with a sentimental literary tradition, her female readers, or other women writers waxed and waned over the course of her life. Above all, she was committed to her art and forging an approach to authorship that enabled her the largest possible audience while protecting her artistic vision from what Wharton biographer R. W. B. Lewis termed the “puritanical philistinism” (436) of mass-market magazines and their editors. She was likely sympathetic with Jewett when in 1927 he discouraged her from accepting a \$42,000 advance payment from Loren

Palmer at the *Delineator* for *The Children*, the novel for which Arthur Vance at *Pictorial Review* had already offered \$35,000. Summarizing Jewett's concerns, R. W. B. Lewis writes, "Jewett was skeptical on the grounds that the *Delineator* was even less worthy of Edith Wharton's fiction than its rival" (472). "Work of high literary quality," Jewett wrote to Wharton, "is not so good for these popular magazines as the typical lowbrow serial publication You write novels without a thought for the magazine" (qtd. in R. Lewis 472). Wharton may not have imagined a specific magazine while she was writing, but surely she had a vivid sense of her primary audience after years of placing her work in middlebrow women's magazines. As a result of Jewett's and Wharton's negotiations with the editors, the "typical lowbrow serial publication" ultimately lost *The Children* to *Pictorial Review*, and Wharton gained from the competition. She received a payment of \$40,000 from Vance, while Palmer secured her next novel (which eventually became *Hudson River Bracketed*) for a sum of \$42,000 (R. Lewis 473).

By the early 1930s, Wharton often accommodated the demands of the literary marketplace, as when, "[e]yeing the public as shrewdly as she could, [she] wrote several light-fingered tales, and they were accepted at once" (R. Lewis 507). Concurrently, her frustration with editors' requests for rewrites and their occasional rejections made her doubt the wisdom of periodical publishing. After one particularly frustrating experience with the *Ladies Home Journal*, she asserted to Jewett, "I am afraid that I cannot write down to the present standards of the American picture magazines" (R. Lewis 507). Just a few years later she composed "Pomegranate Seed." From the vantage point of that story, perhaps we can see what Wharton saw in a long "backward glance" on her professional life: a prolific and successful woman author who could only look ambivalently on her

female readers as sisters in her struggle for a significant and lasting place in the male-dominated literary world.

¹ Biographies illuminating Wharton's negotiation of career and identity as a woman writer include R. W. B. Lewis (1975); Wolff (1977); Benstock (2004); and H. Lee (2007). Full-length studies published in the last decade that reexamine and expand persistent narratives about Wharton, her writing, and her readers include texts by Haytock (2008), Hoeller (2000), and Williams (2001). Haytock investigates Wharton's participation in conversations of literary Modernism. Hoeller discusses Wharton as a writer whose works engaged and critiqued both realist and sentimental literary traditions. Williams places Wharton alongside two of her female contemporaries, Willa Cather and Zona Gale, in order to understand the social and political forces that shaped their careers and legacies as women writers.

² See Lewis's *Edith Wharton: A Biography* (133) and R. W. B. Lewis and Nancy Lewis's Introduction to "The Costs of Energy: 1919-1927" in *Letters of Edith Wharton* (418).

³ Hermione Lee summarizes the break with Scribner's as stemming from "three overlapping problems, each with arguments to be made on both sides" (422). These problems included Wharton's "increasing dissatisfaction with the appearance, promotion and sales of her books (422). The other two problems included Scribner's apprehensiveness over Wharton's efforts to complete three novels simultaneously (*The Custom of the Country*, *The Reef*, and *Hudson River Bracketed*) and complications in book and serial publishing rights for the publishing house and *Scribner's Magazine*.

⁴ For discussion of Wharton's later-life economic circumstances, see Lewis (506-508) and Benstock (396-444).

⁵ Balestra quotes from Wharton's 11 March 1937 letter to her literary agent, Eric S. Pinker.

⁶ Lewis (18, 495) and H. Lee (721-22) briefly touch on Wharton's attraction to mythological tales and the Persephone myth in particular. See Waid for an extended discussion of the Persephone theme in relation to Wharton's work.

⁷ Since first appearing in *Ghosts*, this preface has since been included in the collection *The Ghost Stories of Edith Wharton* (1973) and its subsequent reprint.

⁸ Two early examples of Wharton's stories about female authors and their negotiation of literary success and fame are "'Copy': A Dialogue" (1901) and "Expiation" (1904).

⁹ Familiar examples of Wharton's characters known for exceptional navigations of societal rules are May Welland in *The Age of Innocence*, Gus and Judy Trenor in *The House of Mirth*, and Undine Spragg in *The Custom of the Country*.

¹⁰ Hoeller complicates this paradigm, noting that Wharton's "selective canonization as a realist has blurred, even erased, the line of revisions and renegotiations of both literary genres that pervade her work and link her 'minor' and 'major' writings" (202). For example, Wharton's later-life ghost stories, including "Pomegranate Seed" show evidence of this revision for editors and their magazine audience. Balestra offers a close analysis of manuscript evidence relating to these revisions.

¹¹ Goodman's take on this denouement is more cynical: "Although Margaret Aubyn's own life and work become the means of rehabilitation, the touchstone, for the Glennard's marriage, her greatest work of art ironically is a weak man" (128).

¹² Despite the magazine market's increasingly unfavorable economic circumstances, Wharton was very well compensated for her serialized fiction in this late period of her publishing career. Benstock notes that in 1931, "Pomegranate Seed" and another story, "Diagnosis," sold for \$3,000 each, the "highest prices [Wharton] had yet received for her short fiction" (425). By way of comparison, Wharton received only \$750 for *The Touchstone's* serialization in *Scribner's Magazine*. Scribner's paid her an advance of \$500 and a fifteen percent royalty on the novella's book version (R. Lewis 95).

¹³ Another fictional female novelist has a book by this name in Wharton's story "Copy," published in 1901, a year after *The Touchstone*. "Pomegranate Seed" is also the title of an uncollected dramatic poem (1901) and a verse-play (1912), both published by *Scribner's Magazine*. The novella *Bunner Sisters* (1900) an early rendering of the Persephone and Demeter myth, and H. Lee notes that it serves as an image for Wharton's "early fascination with words" in her autobiographical fragment, "Life and I" (721). Other notable literary connections are Henry James's 1888 novella, *The Aspern Papers*, loosely based on a man's attempts to acquire letters written by the poet Percy Bysshe Shelley, and Robert Browning's *Bells and Pomegranates*, a series of plays and dramatic lyrics composed from 1841-1846.

CHAPTER THREE

“City of Feeling,” “City of Fact”: Cather’s New Women at Work in the City¹

In July 1927 on the occasion of the publication of Willa Cather’s ninth novel *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, *Vanity Fair* magazine published a one-page promotion of the new novel and its author. “Since the publication in 1915 of *The Song of the Lark*,” begins the article, “each new story by Willa Cather has won an increasing recognition as a picture and an evaluation of the American landscape. Today, after twenty-four years of scrupulous craftsmanship she is the heir apparent to Edith Wharton’s lonely eminence among America’s women novelists” (“An American Pioneer” 30). Rather than identifying these authors as two of the most highly acclaimed and popular current American writers, Cather and Wharton are marked by gender as much as their purportedly rare literary genius. With typical rhetorical excess, the *Vanity Fair* blurb implies the authors’ literary achievements are so extraordinary only the one somewhat younger author (Cather) is really in the running to replace the elder author (Wharton) in her “lonely eminence” above the presumably indistinct rabble of current “women novelists.” Given the space Cather and Wharton shared in the American literary marketplace over the decades of their fruitful careers, comparisons are inevitable, as both women were surely aware. When on rare occasions one of these authors acknowledged the other, the reference often showed a grudging professional respect predicated on artistic difference. An example of this grudging respect is evident in Cather’s essay “My First Novels (There Were Two)” (1931), in which she reflects on the failures of her first published novel *Alexander’s Bridge*, including the book’s “very shallow” if nonetheless

honest perceptions of London drawing-room action “follow[ing] the most conventional pattern” (91). As routinely complimentary as she is subtly dismissive, Cather identifies “Henry James and Mrs. Wharton” as the two authors who most influenced the unsuccessful characteristics of her first novel, explaining, “[they] were our most interesting novelists, and most of the younger writers followed their manner, without having their qualifications” (93). According to these assessments, Cather did not find her authentic voice until beginning *O Pioneers!* (1913), a book grounded in her experiences growing up among Bohemian immigrants in rural Nebraska. Thus Cather discourages younger writers from imitating even the greatest artists of their day, in this case James and Wharton, because doing so creates books “unnecessary and superficial” as well as (at least by implication) passé.

Wharton’s praise for Cather also had an edge, visible in a letter dated just three years after Cather’s essay. Wharton writes to Gaillard Lapsley after receiving a copy of Cather’s *A Lost Lady* (1923): “[I] agree with you in thinking the book much better than any other by the lady with the blurry name. But I find all her books blurry—like the name! She had a splendid *donnée* this time, but, oh, how much more she might have made of it! Nothing has any edge—” (qtd. in Haytock 11). Despite both writers assuming strategic public distance from one another and traditions of female writing more generally, in much of their fiction Cather and Wharton created female protagonists whose narratives exhibit the writers’ profound concerns for modern womanhood and the junctures of identity with gender, work, and art. As I discussed in Chapter Two, an important feature of Wharton’s conception of the New Woman can be found in her fashioning of a new kind of female authorship and her evolving understanding of female

readers as collaborators in the production and persistence of her art. In this chapter I will discuss Cather's engagement of New Woman themes and identities, which were informed by (but not necessarily patterned on) her professional experience on the publishing side of the literary marketplace where she honed her public identity as a woman writer.

An early instance of Cather's clear position as a modern workingwoman, indeed a New Woman, appears in an 1897 interview with the up-and-coming young editor: "Miss Willa Cather, the editor of the *Home Monthly*, is . . . such a thoroughly up-to-date woman she certainly should be mentioned among the pioneers in woman's advancement" (2). Jeanette Barbour's short interview appeared in the *Pittsburgh Press* and placed Cather's profile alongside those of other notably employed women, including architects, an embalmer, a dentist, and a real estate dealer (Bohlke 1). Less than a year into her position at the *Home Monthly*, Cather's editorial work was already celebrated as a predictor of her future professional success: "Miss Cather is just beginning her career, but she is doing it with the true progressive western spirit, that fears neither responsibility nor work, and it will be a career worth watching. To go off, when one is but twenty-one, into an entirely new part of the country and undertake to establish and edit a new magazine requires plenty of 'grit'—a quality as valuable in a business woman as in a business man" (2-3).

Barbour's brief profile documents how Cather's early success fit into a wider context of female achievement and highlights her outsider persona as a Westerner in the urban East. Notions of Cather's "western spirit" and "grit" would become staples of her public persona as an American writer. In addition to forecasting Cather's professional success, Barbour's article also provoked its subject to undertake her own editorial revision of the article, a revision that reveals how Cather understood herself in relation to

the wider advancement of women. Rather than clipping the entire article from the newspaper to send to her family in Red Cloud, Cather removed its accompanying Gibson Girl-style caricature of a woman editor, as well as the introductory two and a half sentences. The omitted lines contain a brief history of the young editor's Virginia roots, her childhood relocation to Nebraska, and her father's foreclosure on their town's only newspaper (Bohlke 2).²

Cather may have purposefully clipped the article so as to omit fictionalized claims about her and her family's past. Nonetheless, it is significant that, so early in her life and career, Cather's edited clipping also eliminates a description of herself as "a thoroughly up-to-date woman" who ought to be cited with other "pioneers in woman's advancement" (Barbour 2). Like Wharton, in public Cather tended to avoid overt discussion of feminist or political agendas. Her life-long reluctance to construct her own accomplishments in relation to her gender—to point toward her career as exceptional at a time when critically acclaimed and financially successful women writers *were* exceptional—has become an easy justification for ignoring how her work directly engages issues associated with the turn of the century feminist movement. In recent decades feminist scholarship has contended with Cather's complex relationship to her own gender and the larger "woman question." As part of that feminist project, I will now specifically address three of Cather's early-career short stories, "The Bookkeeper's Wife" (1916), "Ardessa" (1918), and "Her Boss" (1919), and her penultimate novel *Lucy Gayheart* (1935)—all portraying New Women figures—and situate them within Cather's career to illuminate her skepticism about such women "having it all." Specifically, by juxtaposing how these texts portray the gendered dynamics of modern workplaces wherein women's

contributions are increasingly necessary, I show where Cather was most apprehensive and most hopeful about the transformational power of modernity for women.

Cather's small body of office fiction dramatizes the tensions and ironies of a modernizing workplace in need of women to undertake low-paying clerical work. The contested territory of the urban office provided Cather ample enough material to pitch a series of stories titled *Office Wives* to *The Century*. Ultimately, however, Cather's expectations for this series and its subsequent collection into a book yielded just three published magazine stories never collected by the author: "The Bookkeeper's Wife" and "Ardessa" appeared in *The Century* in 1916 and 1918 respectively, and "Her Boss" appeared in *The Smart Set* in 1919.³ No other fictional representations of Cather's office "bohemia"⁴ are currently known to exist in either print or manuscript form.

Cather's three extant office stories do at times mirror her professional experiences in newspaper and magazine offices, but they also pointedly depart from her perspective as a middle-class, university-educated woman from the Midwest to focus instead on women with working-class, "business school" backgrounds, whose goals are generally more practical than artistic. These stories resist autobiographical narrative and its attendant authorial perspective(s), instead engaging more directly with issues pertinent to common workingwomen of Cather's day and participating in a contemporaneous discussion about women's place in America's modernizing labor market. Specifically, they grapple with sex-specific workplace standards shaping the modern office.

In contrast to most of Cather's early short fiction, her office stories have garnered little critical attention.⁵ Francesca Sawaya and Ellen Gruber Garvey have analyzed Cather's office fiction as part of their (re)examinations of Cather's work as an editor and

journalist. Their analyses map the larger cultural forces that shaped not only Cather's journalism and editing, but also her sense of professionalism in those fields. I build on Sawaya's and Garvey's efforts by looking beyond what the stories suggest about Cather's editing work to explore instead how they undermine optimism about female secretarial employment at a time of rapid growth in women's participation in the labor force. I argue Cather's office fiction is an experimental space in which Cather tests a variety of models for women workers who are very unlike herself, and, in so doing, exposes the depersonalized and morally perilous position these women occupy in the modern American workplace.

At the turn into the twentieth century, Cather's urban, working-class "copyists" (a term she uses to encompass stenographers and typists) are relatively atypical, since manual factory labor or retail work were the two principle types of positions available to urban women (Goldin 82). Secretarial service was still a relatively novel vocation for women during the years Cather published her office fiction, although women rapidly filled new clerical positions as jobs evolved. In fact, by 1930, women held 95% of all typist and stenographer positions (Brown 96). For publishing houses, as well as other office spaces in sectors such as insurance and banking, modern business and its attendant paperwork necessitated a large clerical staff. Despite the influx of females into the labor market, women workers were not replacing men; instead, women filled newly created positions as stenographers and typists—jobs that rarely offered promotion or advancement or a guarantee of economic independence or stability. Companies staffed these pink-collar positions at offices like those in Cather's stories mostly with single young women, many of them trained in business "colleges" (not baccalaureate degree

granting institutions) or technical high schools. Employers' patriarchal beliefs about the social conditions and economic value of women's work led them to view individual clerical workers as temporary and replaceable, expected to leave their positions as they married.⁶ Despite these conditions, pink-collar jobs were preferable to factory or retail employment for women. In the big picture of women's employment, even a clerical worker with little job security represented "the elite of working-class women" (Schneider and Schneider 74).

Employment in magazine offices in particular meant a connection to literary production, which had real cultural value. The special enticement of jobs connected to publishing stems from a long-standing cultural belief that editorial work was closely aligned to reading, and women were well suited for it. As Garvey explains, "the earlier gentlemanly aura of magazine editing evidently seemed congruent with sheltered, ladylike work" (182). Consequently, middle-class, university-educated women like Cather found editing work a suitable alternative to that traditional staple of middle-class female employment, teaching. Certainly Cather's career complies with this model, though she and many literary scholars alike have customarily designated her editorial work as an inferior, if necessary, career stage. However, as Garvey has shown, Cather used her time as a single woman employed in the modern editorial office to advance her writing skills and career. While at *McClure's* she earned enough to live comfortably as well as save for her future as a full-time writer. She also developed her narrative technique by editing others' writing, learned the value and practice of literary research, created a national literary reputation, and forged connections with other writers (Garvey 190-191). These accomplishments are integral to Cather's development as a novelist. It is

hardly surprising, therefore, that Cather situates the plot of her best-known office story, “Ardessa,” in a magazine office, but she did not confine herself to this particular office workspace in her other two office stories.

Though Cather experienced office culture at the *Home Monthly*, the *Pittsburgh Leader*, and *McClure's*, this setting did not appear in her fiction while she was at work in these communities. In fact, she had already transitioned from managing editor of *McClure's* to full-time novelist when, in 1916, *The Century* published her first story featuring modern American office workers, “The Bookkeeper’s Wife.” The story’s title, like the titles of Cather’s other two office stories, suggests a focus on a central female character; however, the story is unique among Cather’s office fiction because it largely unfolds outside office walls and focuses substantially on a male office worker, the titular bookkeeper. Through the portrayal of an unsuccessful marriage between protagonist Stella Bixby and her husband Percy, the story dramatizes the clash of competing ideals for women’s personal and work lives. Stella’s husband loves his desk, the books he keeps, and the regularity of his job (51). Despite his affection for these things, he risks them in wanting to marry Stella, a woman with tastes beyond his means whose exceptional beauty means she “could scarcely be expected to do poorly” in marriage (52). Favorable marriage prospects aside, Stella Brown already makes “good money” as a “capable New York stenographer” (52, 54). “[L]ike all girls,” Stella has no desire to marry anyone whose projected income will not exceed her own, and, as the narrator explains, “[she] was the sort of girl who had to be well dressed” (54). The narrative revolves around Percy’s choices—principally, his two-fold deception, first in misrepresenting his salary to Stella and second in embezzling the money he needs to win

her hand. As such, Cather reveals little of Stella's motivations; nonetheless, she imbues Stella with a great deal of agency. Stella is in many ways the most New Woman-like character to appear in any of Cather's office fiction.

Stella's independence is evident, for example, in her decision to marry Percy rather than his more affluent rival, Charley Greengay, who has better business prospects: "She knew that Charley would go further in the world. Indeed, [Stella] had often coolly told herself that Percy would never go very far" (54). Here Stella's matrimonial decision-making process demonstrates self-confidence. Her accurate predictions confirm Stella's shrewd ability to assess men's marketplace value. Her decision to marry Percy despite his lesser earning capacity indicates an internal tension between the calculating businesswoman in Stella and the impractical romantic. On the other hand, Stella is described as cold, materialistic, and emotionally remote, indicating Cather's ambivalence toward her strong New Woman heroine: "[Stella] would have been a little too remote and languid even for the fastidious Percy had it not been for her hard, practical mouth," states the narrator (54). Cather reinforces this characterization of Stella by following it with a similar assessment: "[Stella's] employers, who at first might be struck by her indifference, understood that anybody with that sort of mouth would get through the work" (54). In fusing Stella's shrewd indifference with one of her physical attributes, Cather positions Stella as unsympathetic even as she emphasizes how others objectify her. Similarly, when Stella and Percy encounter his employer Mr. Remsen and his wife in a theater lobby, Mrs. Remsen observes, "[Stella's] very pretty of her kind . . . but rather chilling" (55). Mr. Remsen and his wife have the same opinion of Stella. When seeing his bookkeeper at the office bent over his desk, Mr. Remsen frequently "remembered Mrs.

Bixby, with her cold pale eyes and long lashes, and her expression that was something between indifference and discontent” (55-56). Cather uses these accounts of Stella’s personality to call attention to the very qualities—perceived by others as calculating and unladylike—that make Stella successful in the working world. Cather creates a character who is ambiguous and compromised; her desire for finery and calculating views of what men are willing to pay for her favors compete with her softer side, “something left that belonged to another kind of woman” (54).

On the other hand, Cather imbues Stella with positive qualities as well. For instance, she exhibits traits of a born businesswoman who is confidently aware of her own capabilities and value in the modern urban landscape. Stella wants her own income and resists becoming the domestic helpmate Percy wants her to be. When Stella marries, she already intends to restart her career if Percy does not get a raise by the end of their first year together, and later, when he tells her his true salary and that he embezzled from his employer five years earlier, Stella resolves to get a job. In a gesture of support, Stella declares her income will expedite Percy’s restoration of the seven hundred dollars he still owes, but the idea affronts Percy’s manhood: “I won’t have you grinding in any office. That’s flat,” he protests (58). Ironically, it is Stella’s desire to work rather than Percy’s own dishonesty that elicits his feelings of emasculation and failure. Once Stella knows her husband’s actual salary and the reason he has never spent a day away from the office in all the years of their marriage, she responds clear-mindedly without self-pity, regret, or resentment: “You ought n’t [sic] to have married a business woman; you need somebody domestic. There’s nothing in this sort of life for either of us” (59). We can see in her stance the idea that female ambition and business sense are incompatible with a woman’s

traditional role as a wife. This conflict is driven home when Stella declares Percy's old-fashioned ways to be as tiresome as his meager earning power. I contend that by rebelling, Stella also undermines Percy's traditional patriarchal need for an appropriately dependent trophy wife. Percy feels the pressure of this cultural expectation strongly enough that he is willing to marry a woman whose expensive tastes are more than he can afford, while, simultaneously, he is unable to accept her capacity and willingness to help satisfy those expensive tastes with her own income. Moreover, Stella's attraction to qualities "in Percy that were not good business assets" (54) demonstrates a romantic side of her that is not cold and calculating. In other words, even if she is emotionally aloof and has expensive tastes, Stella still marries Percy primarily because of a romantic inclination, not because she calculates to gain financially and materially by the union.

Cather's story concludes six months after the pivotal scene of Percy's ultimatum; the couple is separated and Stella works for a ready-to-wear firm headed by Charley Greengay. In Stella, Cather creates a woman who, like many women workers of her day, leaves her job when she marries, reminding readers that marriage regulates most women's movement between the public and private spheres. But when Stella returns to work against her husband's wishes, effectively ending the marriage, Stella creates a new space for herself outside the moral codes of domesticity vs. work. She and Charley would seem to be equals—he, too, is a person "who is out for things that come high and who is going to get them" (52). With Stella and Charley as characters, Cather draws a contrast between a new, less gender-defined business attitude and its attendant threat to traditional marital roles and the patriarchal attitudes Percy embodies.

Cather interrogates the traditional rules of gender in the workplace. Consider, for example, that when Percy is at last honest with Mr. Remsen about his embezzlement, Percy's relief is tangible. He happily returns to his professional routine, free of a bored wife and her elegant tastes. It is unlikely Percy will ever again take a personal or professional risk of the sort necessary to marry an ambitious woman like Stella. As a working man, Percy lacks the qualities of a determined risk-taker that define Charley Greengay's success as the true "man of business." As one 1914 women's employment manual, *Vocations for the Trained Woman*, described it, "the man engaged in business or a profession needs to be relieved of detail [by women office workers] in order that he may give his time and energy to matters of larger moment and broader reach" (Martin and Post 111). In other words, Percy is more like a woman office worker than a "man of business." Indeed, Percy is just like an expert female stenographer in Cather's final "Office Wives" story, "Her Boss": he shows "a strong feeling for office organization" (104). Percy relishes the routine of bookkeeping. His role in the office is as obligatory and marginal as that of the stenographers and copyists whose work enables successful magazines and law firms. The essential difference, of course, between Percy's professional situation and that of women employed in correspondingly subsidiary jobs is his professional resilience. Privileged by his gender, Percy retains his position even after his embezzlement comes to light. Cather's subsequent "Office Wives" stories evidence her recognition of women's vulnerability in offices where they are evaluated more stringently than the men who outrank them. By first depicting how Percy Bixby professionally bounces back from his act of workplace fraud, and then following his story

with later stories portraying women's vulnerable positioning in the office, Cather underscores the hypocrisy of a gendered moral double standard.

Similarly, Cather's characterization of Charley Greengay as the urbane new American businessman early in "The Bookkeeper's Wife" enables her to draw Stella Bixby as a variation on the new businessman—the New Businesswoman. Stella's sporty tastes, cool calculations, and assertiveness are traits more often associated with masculine success in modern American business. Indeed, Stella exhibits the sort of occupational courage and "grit" that the *Pittsburgh Press* profile of Cather deems "as valuable in a business woman as in a business man" (Barbour 3). Cather only limits Stella's achievement by assigning her to a job with so little room for advancement, and even this tactic highlights the absurdity of restricting women's full access to modern professions. To do this, Cather uses the seemingly competing aspects of Stella's personality—the businesswoman and the woman who marries (and relinquishes her job) for love—to call attention to Stella's feminine subjectivity, whether she is at work in her (male) employer's office or her husband's home. In both settings, Stella's agency is limited by her gender. Beauty and business sense are key to Stella's success, and yet neither can sustain her marriage. Nor does Cather imply that Stella's career—successful though it may be when she returns to the office—is unlikely to progress beyond stenography into a position truly equal to that of a businessman like Charley Greengay.

Finally, in outlining how Stella moves back and forth across professional and domestic spaces—the office and home—Cather dramatizes a modern working-woman's predicament. Whether Stella fulfills her husband's desire for a beautiful but inexpensive domestic helpmate or funds her extravagant tastes by going to work in Charley

Greengay's office, she must choose between the domains of two men. The story's inherent conflict between old and new gender roles is finally resolved through a separation. Stella and Percy end their marital partnership when it becomes clear that each "partner" deeply values work—and for parallel reasons. For Percy, bookkeeping is simultaneously a source of pleasure and the means by which he can afford (or not) the domestic life he desires, and yet he fails to comprehend that Stella views her own career in much the same way. Through her work she can satisfy her stylish tastes and fondness for excitement; she gains reentry into the lifestyle she cultivated before assuming the ill-fitting role of Percy's wife. Percy is firmly grounded in the past, and Stella is pushing toward the future. In this way Cather juxtaposes old and new ways of thinking about gender and work, just as she does in all of her office fiction. Like the other two office stories Cather published in the following years, "The Bookkeeper's Wife" ambivalently responds to the problems it outlines. Cather slyly conveys through Percy's closing words in the story that the conditions of his marriage and its breakup are not unique: "I'm very comfortable. I live in a boarding-house and have my own furniture. There are several fellows there who are fixed the same way. Their wives went back into business, and they drifted apart" (59). Cather's ironic touch appears in Percy's reference to multiple men who prefer a boardinghouse (where, presumably, women who are paid for their work handle the domestic duties) to sharing a home with a happily employed wife.

In 1918, the next of Cather's office stories, "Ardessa," was published in *The Century*. The story features the staff of a muckraking magazine, *The Outcry*, the rising reputation of which parallels the early trajectory of *McClure's*. In addition, the character of the young new editor, Marcus O'Mally—a Western transplant to the American East

with an Irish surname and origins—resembles S.S. McClure. Despite these commonalities with Cather’s professional experience at *McClure’s*, the story is not a *roman à clef*. Cather situates her story in the magazine industry’s great transitional period, when growing advertising revenues drove down subscription costs and enabled wider access and distribution to readers. Consequently, members of *The Outcry’s* office staff labor with mixed results in the undefined spaces between art and commerce. At greatest disadvantage in this new environment is Ardessa Devine, who is the editor’s senior stenographer. Her employment at the publication predates O’Mally’s arrival and his subsequent reinvention of the magazine that was previously edited by “a conservative, scholarly gentleman of the old school” (107). Over the course of the story Ardessa undertakes little clerical work, especially when O’Mally is out of the office. However, since the editor is a relatively recent Western transplant, he relies upon Ardessa’s institutional knowledge of the magazine to provide him “a background” on matters such as “editorial traditions of the eighties and nineties . . . antiquated as they now were” (107). She also helps him network with essential literary and business contacts, acting as “the card catalogue of his ever-changing personal relations” (107).

In this way, Ardessa’s office comes to serve as gateway to the editor’s desk, and under O’Mally she acts as an office hostess graciously mollifying the passé writers who linger, hoping to once again see their work in *The Outcry*. Though her familiarity with the magazine’s history and the attentions of “people with whom O’Mally was quite through” (108) may seek to make Ardessa resemble an assistant editor more than a senior stenographer, vanity, rather than interest in the magazine, motivates her interactions with “ardent young writers and reformers” (108). When not hosting hopeful authors, Ardessa

spends her time critiquing the office boy or young stenographers in her charge or working at the “ladylike tasks” of reading and embroidering (107). And although Ardessa is neither young nor pretty, when she is cloistered in her private office she imagines herself “a graceful contrast to the crude girls in the advertising and circulation departments across the hall” (107). She conspicuously fashions herself as “insinuatingly feminine” in response to the “cold candor of the new business woman” (105). Deluded by a sense of privilege acquired under her former boss, the previous editor, Ardessa is blind to her reputation for indolence in an office populated by “competent girls, trained in the exacting methods of modern business,” who acutely feel pressure to exhibit speed and efficiency (107).

Cather draws a direct contrast to Ardessa in young Becky Tietelbaum, who is fresh out of a commercial high school with dreams of lucrative stenography work. In addition to chastising Becky for her gum-chewing habit and inappropriate office attire, Ardessa foists her own work on the younger employee. When Becky covers for Ardessa, her proficiency starkly contrasts with Ardessa’s inefficiency. O’Mally observes to his business manager that after working with Ardessa, working with Becky is “like riding a good modern bicycle after pumping along on an old hard tire” (114). With this stunning analogy, Cather highlights O’Mally’s objectification of his female employees, who are only tools for their (male) boss’s use. Additionally, O’Mally’s metaphor suggests Ardessa’s lady-like qualities are outmoded (like an old-style nineteenth-century bicycle), even detrimental, in the fast-paced twentieth-century offices of *The Outcry*. Ardessa may write more elegant letters responding to authors’ queries than Becky can, but this skill is

increasingly superfluous at a modern sensational magazine driven by a revolving door of celebrity authors.

Eventually, Ardessa's approach proves too antiquated for O'Mally's taste, and her condescending attitude in the office brings her little sympathy. Near the story's conclusion, O'Mally endeavors to cure Ardessa of her complacency by transferring her into the business department across the "Rubicon" (112) from his editorial office.⁷ In spite of Ardessa's faults, however, the story is not a ringing endorsement of the women who *do* succeed at the office, Becky and the business stenographer Rena Kalski. For instance, even though Becky is realistically motivated by the financial needs of her struggling parents and nine siblings, the exaggerated pace of her increasingly skilled work performance seems untenable in the long-term. Further, Cather marks Becky's and Rena's otherness in the office through ethnic coding. For example, the third-person narrator uses Jewish stereotypes to describe Becky: "[she is] a thin, tense-faced Hebrew girl of eighteen or nineteen . . . gaunt as a plucked spring chicken . . . [in] her cheap, gaudy clothes" (109). Ardessa's reflections on the young woman's early days at *The Outcry* indicate her otherness as an immigrant "ignorant as a young savage" who knew little English and "fairly wore the dictionary out" (110). Drawing on similar anti-Semitic stereotypes, the narrator highlights Rena's materialism, as exemplified by her first appearance in the story polishing her diamond rings in the wash-room during her lunch break. Rena, who, at one point, "serpented" from a room, is also referred to as a "young Hebrew" (112).

And yet, despite Cather's use of these stock stereotypes, Becky and Rena are nuanced characters to whom she assigns both positive and negative traits. Becky's

impressive work ethic, for example, parallels Rena's success as "the right bower of the business manager" (112). Rena's aptitude has earned her a place in the bookkeeper's office for half of her workdays—presumably a promotion for the stenographer. Both women also exhibit admirable qualities specific to their membership in *The Outcry* office community. Becky is grateful rather than gloating in response to praise for her accomplishments, while Rena is conciliatory toward Ardessa after her unceremonious transfer to the business office. O'Mally and the business manager Henderson expect Rena to be unfriendly to Ardessa, but instead she demonstrates a collegiality visible nowhere else in the office. Henderson's surprise at Rena's munificence is apparent: "What interested and amused him was that Rena Kalski, whom he had always thought as cold-blooded as an adding-machine, seemed to be making a hair-mattress of herself to break Ardessa's fall" (116). Becky and Rena's friendship with one another and, particularly in Rena's case, compassion toward an unsympathetic coworker make them the most admirable characters in the story. Despite the stock Jewish stereotypes Cather deploys, she also creates in Becky and Rena two sympathetic women clerical workers who navigate the patriarchal minefield of the office with their humanity intact.

It is instructive here to turn to Francesca Sawaya's astute reading of this story. By exploiting "anti-Semitic descriptions of mercenary Jews to describe the modernized business offices" (89), Sawaya argues, Cather precludes Becky and Rena from signifying acceptable approaches to professionalism—especially professional journalism—just as Ardessa's femininity and privilege describe the editorial offices (and preclude her from being a viable model for the New Woman). Sawaya argues that because none of these female characters employed at a magazine known for its new journalism can embody

Cather's ideal, the third person narrator does so by offering a "normatively white and male" journalistic objectivity to avoid "gendered or racialized interestedness" and thus "compromised commercialism" (91). Sawaya links Ardessa's workplace behavior to an "obsolescent femininity" (90) indicative of traditional separate spheres and the Victorian gender boundaries they imply. Ardessa's private office resembles a home where she serves as hostess, and "[h]er femininity is inextricable from her obsolete, personalized, elitist work habits" (Sawaya 90). The magazine's division of labor between business (public sphere) and editorial (private sphere) work is an imagined one, and the characters that move between them are visible reminders that all employees—whether tethered to the business or editorial side—are dependent on advertising revenue.

As fruitful as Sawaya's interpretation is to understanding the story's setting at a magazine of the sort Cather knew so well, the disembodied (and thus ungendered) narrator fails to resolve issues the story raises regarding models of women's work. The fact remains that Ardessa, Becky, and Rena (and every other woman character in the story, named or unnamed) have negligible influence on *The Outcry's* new brand of journalism because they are clerical workers, working-class women who could work in any kind of office, not college-educated editors or writers with professional expertise tied to the magazine industry. For Cather's working-class women in "Ardessa," *The Outcry* office is a public workspace, and they cannot fully escape the gendered expectations of others—namely male managers and editors who control professional access, promotion, transfer, etc. This is the attitude toward female labor plainly visible, for example, when O'Mally calls Ardessa—his former stenographer—"the bartered bride" (116); and, in the larger context of Cather's other office fiction, the message resonates in her proposed

book title: *Office Wives*. Ultimately “Ardessa,” the one story of the three set in an office space like the one Cather worked in at *McClure’s*, resists suggesting to its contemporary readers that there is meaningful professional work for women in office spaces—including those connected to publishing—in spite of the author’s own distinguished editorial work at a premier American magazine. Instead, the story illustrates how some women trained in vocational schools for clerical work, like Becky and Rena, can thrive by staying within the gendered bounds of the clerical side of the office space and acting as tools that ensure the productivity of the male managers and editors. Cather subtly refers to this system to emphasize its ubiquity, as when Henderson the business manager casually notes Rena at her desk, “where [her] lightning eye was skimming over the printing-house bills that he was supposed to verify himself” (114). Such a detail reinforces Rena’s suitability for attending to the tasks on her manager’s desk and, combined with her increasing bookkeeping responsibilities, suggests a full realization of her potential to move into a professional position is inhibited by her employer’s expectations for her sex. By juxtaposing the career paths of both an upwardly mobile stenographer and a discerning assistant to the business manager with the idle and outdated workplace femininity that costs Ardessa her job, Cather exposes the ways that office work could both empower and exploit women.

Becky and Rena may represent Cather’s conscious revision of the popular New Woman story to more accurately reflect the female staff she saw everyday during her many years in the office. By rewriting a popular fictional genre without a Cather-esque female editor—an unequivocal New Woman heroine—Cather “[wrote] herself out of a place at the magazine office” (Garvey 188).

In the 1919 story “Her Boss,” Cather also mines her editorial work experience,⁸ but she locates her female clerical workers in a law office and diverges as well in her representation of them. “Her Boss” illustrates how a combination of economic need, increasing demand for clerical staff, and cultural trends toward women’s independence conflict with the patriarchal American business culture that regulates women’s work through a gendered moral code. Annie Wooley, a young law office stenographer, has an easy and unassuming nature that makes her ill-prepared to navigate the moral perils of her office. Annie’s story actually begins with her boss, prosperous lawyer Paul Wanning, who has been recently diagnosed with a terminal illness. The indifference of Wanning’s family and law partners provokes him to compose a solace-seeking letter to an old college friend in the West. So dependent on stenographers that he feels unable to write down his own narrative using a pen and well aware that his own “expert legal stenographer,” Miss Doane, is loathe to stay after hours to take his personal dictation, Wanning asks a new office stenographer, “little Annie Wooley,” to stay late and take down his letter, as she “had always been good-natured” on the “several times” he had already detained her to take his private letters in exchange for “a dollar to get her dinner”(101).

On this particular occasion, Wanning waxes nostalgic on his life, eventually observing that “Little Annie” has been “carried away by his eloquence, . . . fairly panting to make dots and dashes fast enough, and . . . sopping her eyes with an unpresentable, end-of-the-day handkerchief” (101). Wanning clearly perceives Annie in a way that is self-serving, but the scene is nonetheless telling in its depiction of Annie as a generous and even empathetic listener moved by Wanning’s storytelling. The invigorating

experience of narrating his life for an interested audience—Annie—spurs Wanning to embark on the project of his autobiography. Annie’s kindhearted and unguarded disposition may make her ideally suited for taking down Wanning’s autobiography, but this disposition will not advance her professionally. Cather signals early in the narrative that Wanning’s own legal secretary would deem taking the autobiographical dictation of her boss a breach of proper professional conduct: Miss Doane is “scrupulous in professional etiquette, and Wanning felt that their relations, though pleasant, were scarcely cordial” (101). Here Cather implies “a strong feeling for office organization” rather than the practice of workplace cordiality has earned Miss Doane both her seniority and “furs of the newest cut” (104, 101).

Lacking Miss Doane’s appreciation for strict professional boundaries, Annie consents to work as Wanning’s personal secretary and “sort of companion” during the summer months (105). Even though Annie is uninterested in earning money for either present enjoyment or future security, in payment for her assistance, Wanning gives her an immediate pay raise and promises “a little present” in his will(105). The extra income from the raise enables Annie’s exhausted sister to quit her job for a period. Like Becky in “Ardessa,” Annie is in her late teens, but unlike Becky, Annie lacks ambition to advance in the workplace. Her carefree approach to money and work is reinforced through other characters’ impressions of her. For example, Wanning infantilizes Annie by referring to her condescendingly as “Little Annie,” and throughout the story emphasizes her child-like enjoyment of the moment regardless of future consequences. Cather defines Annie’s character by tracing her relationship with money and work, including her difficult background as one of four children to reach adulthood out of the eight her parents had.

“Girls like Annie,” the narrator explains, “know that the future is a very uncertain thing, and they feel no responsibility about it” (105). Having this mindset, it never occurs to Annie that working alone after-hours with her boss could have negative consequences for her future.

When Wanning dies, his law partners and son simply assume Annie’s relationship with him had been inappropriate and are thus free to ignore Wanning’s codicil requesting a payment to Annie of one thousand dollars. They punish her for her perceived immorality by blocking her inheritance and dismissing her from her job. Annie’s inexperience with office protocols is most apparent when one of Wanning’s law partners, Mr. McQuiston, fires her. “[Y]ou should have known what a girl in your station can do and what she cannot do,” McQuiston declares (107). Although McQuiston assumes Annie knows exactly how she has transgressed the moral boundaries of her entry-level secretarial job, she cannot identify her mistake and struggles to defend herself against the reprimand. Explaining her arrangement with Wanning, Annie underscores her solicitous naïveté: “Of course he was sick, poor man! . . . I wouldn’t have given up my half-holidays for anybody if they hadn’t been sick, no matter what they paid me” (104). Though Annie is the kind of person who “had the gift of thinking well of everything, and wishing well” (104), Cather shows how the law office converts such a positive human quality into a liability for the female clerical worker. Conveniently, they place all culpability on her, not the dead man they believe to have been her partner in immorality, and by so doing, they enrich themselves while impoverishing her.

For working-class women like Annie or Becky, the office is a desirable employment option; it can offer both a measure of personal independence and a way to

contribute to their families' incomes. Cather's depiction of a handful of women employed at the lower rungs of the clerical ladder, however, exposes the underside of early twentieth century women's office work. Both "Ardesa" and "Her Boss" demonstrate how easily secretarial workers like Ardesa or Annie, whose personal attributes or abilities become more inconvenient than useful to her employer, can lose their positions after committing real or perceived infractions. In this way, Cather's office stories shrewdly expose the inhumane and exploitive conditions of the modern American office for the very women workers who enabled its growing influence on the broader culture.

Cather's critique of the oppressive conditions, especially for women, in clerical spaces has resonance with some of her fictional studies of women pursuing more overtly artistic careers at the turn into the twentieth century in American urban centers like Chicago. Though her journalism and editorial work acquainted her with emerging office culture early in her professional life after leaving Nebraska, Cather's fictional portrayals of young women seeking their artistic careers in major American cities more strongly aligns with the biographical narrative she used to frame her own life. The experiences of her "Office Wives" women were representative of a more realistic and accessible brand of New Womanhood for increasing numbers of young, urban "pink-collar" workers. If, for Cather, the New Woman "offers a performative model for intervening in the sociopolitical concerns of her era" (155), as Martha Patterson articulates in *Beyond the Gibson Girl*, it is necessary to also examine one of her artist-heroines. Patterson and others have discussed how Thea Kronberg, the heroine of Cather's 1915 novel *The Song of the Lark*, is probably the author's most fully-realized New Woman figure; Thea's struggle for artistic and professional achievement traces a number of central New Woman

themes. Another of Cather's artist-heroines, Lucy Gayheart, appears in an eponymous novel serialized by *Woman's Home Companion* in 1935, almost two decades after *The Song of the Lark*. Like Thea before her, Lucy Gayheart has exceptional artistic ability, a ticket out of her little Midwestern hometown to the big city—Chicago—where she studies music in preparation for a career. Though biographer Hermione Lee sees Cather recycling her own fictive material in *Lucy Gayheart* as a “falling off in inventive power” (337), I prefer giving Cather credit for her artistic choices in this late novel by reading its young protagonist as a New Woman whose failure to fully realize her artistic vision represents Cather's indictment of aspects of both modern and Victorian culture.

By locating her protagonist in the past (the central action of the story happens over the course of 1902), Cather plants Lucy firmly in the historical-cultural ground of the New Woman. She is young (twenty at the start of the story's main action), musically talented, independent (though she does not support herself financially), and driven to lead a self-fashioned life. These character traits and their correspondence with the basic arc of Lucy's story—going off to a distant modern city to find her own way in the world—are characteristic of the New Woman figure in fiction.⁹ By ascribing to Lucy the New Woman artist character type and setting her story at a time when the term and the debate it evoked were flashpoints in American culture, Cather infuses the novel with a gendered modern context and complicates it with the retrospective story frame. The narrative voice looks backward, mostly on action that unfolds in 1902, which concludes with the brief Book III section set in 1927. I argue that the novel conveys Cather's anxiety about the role of the artist and her art despite modern forces opening new space for women artists to develop and trust their own visions. We see Cather depicting gendered structures in the

novel regulating and inhibiting female behavior and denying the woman artist the physical and emotional independence necessary for her development and survival.

Cather was deeply opposed to the “manufacture of stories for which there is a market demand—a business as safe and commendable as making soap or breakfast foods” (103), as she writes in “On the Art of Fiction” (1920). Instead, she committed herself to the alternative approach, believing writing “should be an art, which is always a search for something for which there is no market demand, something new and untried, where the values are intrinsic and have nothing to do with standardized values” (103). Cather’s aesthetic vision is to an extent a condemnation of mass and consumer cultures (including the modern periodical as the primary market-driven literary vehicle). Given this conception of her art, Cather’s depiction of New Woman artist Lucy Gayheart is both a self-conscious indictment of the literary marketplace and the larger culture that gives women the impossible task of procuring the necessary worldliness for survival as autonomous individuals while holding them to a decidedly *un*-modern moral standard.

The story pivots on Lucy’s third year in Chicago, where, since the age of eighteen, she has been studying music at no small expense to her family in Haverford, Nebraska. She begins working as an accompanist for the middle-aged opera star Clement Sebastian while his regular accompanist, James Mockford, recuperates from surgery. This work proves transformative for Lucy. She falls in love with Sebastian and the world of artistic feeling he represents to her, while rejecting a marriage proposal from her old Haverford friend, the prosperous Harry Gordon. When Sebastian drowns while in Europe, in her grief Lucy swears off Chicago and a musical career to return home. Over the course of several disconsolate months, she eventually recovers her sense of artistic

purpose only to die tragically by slipping through a sudden crack in the ice as she skates on the river. The novel presents its New Woman heroine's seemingly senseless death just as she appears to have recovered her determination to live and settled the terms on which she wants to live.

Through Cather's portrayal of Lucy's working life, she showcases the promise and peril of chasing an artistic career in the early twentieth century. As a young woman branded not by artistic genius but rather by her capacity to feel things greatly, Lucy symbolizes a potentially transformative cultural force as a working/studying New Woman figure; her heightened ability to feel makes her an ideal conduit for art at the intersection of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Lucy's work as a pianist enables her to develop her own aesthetic vision and claim artistic agency, although that same ability to feel eventually derails her.

Lucy's artistic ambition does not resemble the kind of "aggressive careerism" of Thea Kronberg.¹⁰ Lucy doesn't imagine herself into any fantasy of modern life, romantic or professional (we do not see her daydreaming about weddings or playing piano on stage, for instance). As "a mercurial, vacillating person" (22), Lucy envisions that "years from now . . . she would probably be teaching piano to the neighbours' children in Haverford" (64). It is Jacob Gayheart's idea that his daughter go to Chicago to study music, not her own. She departs for the city at eighteen, "talented, but too careless and light-hearted to take herself very seriously." In fact, the narrative continues, "She never dreamed of a 'career.' She thought of music as a natural form of pleasure, and as a means of earning money to help her father when she came home" (5). Though clearly Lucy has no qualms about one day contributing her income to her family's needs, her inexperience

with and inattentiveness to financial responsibilities helps to explain her nonchalance toward her current or future earning power. As her elder sister Pauline thinks, “[Lucy] never seemed to think about money” (172). Lucy’s seeming reluctance to push her music from the realm of art into the realm of economics, to see her playing for its “market demand—a business as safe and commendable as making soap or breakfast foods” (“On The Art of Fiction” 103)—aligns the character’s artistic philosophy with Cather’s own. In underscoring Lucy’s inattention to economic realities and her seeming lack of motivation for economic self-sufficiency (traits she shares with Annie Wooley), the text hints at a potential barrier to Lucy’s subsistence in the modern working world. Furthermore, Lucy’s disinterest in material wealth for its own sake is integral to her orientation toward education (and by extension her musical career, since one is the foundation for the other). Since Lucy desires to be an active participant in the creation of art purely for art’s sake—and only in the capacity of an accompanist—she creates self-imposed boundaries on her own artistic development. This may be where Lucy’s artistic vision is most vulnerable: she sacrifices her creative autonomy to what she sees as Sebastian’s far greater talent. There are no daydreams of future musical fame and fortune for Lucy Gayheart, only artistically pure inspiration from her employer, the supremely gifted and cosmopolitan opera singer. Indeed Lucy has some Victorian impulses. At one point she “almost wishes” she could be Giuseppe, Sebastian’s loyal and meticulous valet. “After all,” she rationalizes, “it was people like that who counted with artists—more than their admirers” (44). The attitude Lucy expresses here, the desire to serve the artist rather than *be* the artist, is more akin to the “angel of the hearth” ideal than that of the New Woman. But Lucy’s outlook also implies she is not fully closed off to the potential of her own artistic

agency; she recognizes implicitly that she is in a period of tutelage and must learn as much as possible while she can. She admits only to wanting what Sebastian has to teach her, which he intuits. He reads in her eyes “devotion” “and the fire of imagination; but no invitation, no appeal. In her companionship there was never the shadow of a claim. On the contrary, there was a spirit which disdained advantage” (80). Lucy strikes a fragile balance between her distinctly old-fashioned feminine purity of purpose and thoroughly modern love of an independent city life. This precarious equilibrium is analogous to Cather’s own position “as a writer of transition” who “straddled the late-Victorian and modernist eras” and whose fiction “mediates on the transition into the modern” (Homestead and Reynolds xix).

Lucy’s admirable, if un-modern unwillingness to take “advantage” parallels her self-doubt over participating in the making of the very art that has transformed her relationship with the world. Lucy’s crisis of confidence appears throughout her working period in Chicago. She wonders if her work with Sebastian is only an “accidental relationship, between someone who had everything and someone who had nothing at all” and thinks perhaps “her playing for him was nothing but make-believe . . . there was nothing real about it,—except,” she resolves, “her own feeling. That was real” (61). If Lucy cannot trust that her work at the piano is “real,” she cannot value her artistic contributions—they’re not “real” either. Her tangible reality is a landscape of feeling, and she guards it jealously from reminders of her former identity as Lucy from Haverford who did not know Sebastian or his world. The intensity of this dynamic is revealed in her anxious contemplation of Harry Gordon’s impending visit to Chicago: “[S]he didn’t want to see him,” to “be reminded of Haverford or of anything that lay behind her. . . . Her life

was exactly as she wanted it, and Harry would . . . manage to prove to her that she had been living in a dream, that she was Lucy Gayheart and had been fooling herself all this while” (96) A “possible accident,” a bit of “make-believe,” a “dream” to be spoiled; this language communicates Lucy’s intense anxiety about modern life in the city for a good and pure woman. She feels unworthy as a collaborator in Sebastian’s high art and fears her new life is so tenuous it could be undone in an instant by those (like Harry) who represent Haverford.

Even though Lucy doesn’t yet acknowledge her creative power (and its potential to sustain her “make-believe” life through its economic value), Cather nonetheless signals it in the novel when Lucy channels her passion outward to the city. Early in the novel Lucy envisions “a very individual map of Chicago” in which buildings and places she associates with Sebastian are in sharper focus than their surroundings. Cather writes, “This city of feeling rose out of the city of fact like a definite composition,—beautiful because the rest was blotted out” (24.) Lucy’s mental composition of “the city of feeling” figures as a metaphorical map of her innermost self while also drawing on the language of painting. In so doing, Cather offers a subtle reconciliation of Lucy’s identification with feeling and the need for full awareness of the “facts,” of the real, teeming modern world around her. If Lucy can bring her passionate creative vision in line with the urban concrete world outside herself, she stands a better chance of surmounting the inevitable barriers that still exist for a woman making her way.

Correlations between Lucy’s artistic and personal growth—at least in the formative stages of that developmental process—and the city in which it takes place abound in the novel. More than just the location where she meets Sebastian and spends

hours rehearsing, Chicago also provides both the individual anonymity and collective vitality that Lucy requires in equal share to have a safe space for coming to know and create art. Only when in Chicago can she feel far enough from the constraints of the Haverford construction of Lucy Gayheart to determine her own identity. A key scene illustrating this point follows Lucy's return to Chicago after Christmas, where she revels in "her own things and her own will," acknowledging that only after "she had shut the door upon the baggage man" could she "find herself again. Out there in Haverford she had scarcely been herself at all" (27).

Lucy's need for her own physical and emotional space has her lodging not in a student boarding house but a room above a German bakery and restaurant where "there were no table companions or table jokes. Everyone had his own little table, attended to his own business, and read his paper. Lucy had taken a room here at once, and for the first time in her life she could come and go *like a boy*; no one fussing about, no one hovering over her" (26, emphasis added). Here we see Lucy's awareness of society's gendered independence codes that mark autonomy as male. As she moves into the period of her time with Sebastian, Lucy recognizes that her relative freedom as a young woman in the city enables her to have the life she wants: "She had never loved the city so much; the city which gave one the freedom to spend one's youth as one pleased, to have one's secret, to choose one's master and serve him in one's own way" (86).

Moreover, privacy and individual choice aren't all the city gives a young woman like Lucy (who doesn't have to worry about her next meal or submit to daily oversight by a parent or guardian). The city's collective humanity draws her back periodically to the "city of fact," the real people who populate it, their feelings and the cautionary tales they

symbolize. The value of connection—even to strangers on the street—gives Lucy a momentary self-awareness. Feeling low, at one point she comprehends the multitudes around her rather than simply passing by “many sad and discouraged people. [They] seemed like companions, and she felt a kind of humble affection for them” (62). To Lucy’s mind, in the city a person is not alone in having troubles, “if you were burning yourself up, so was everyone else; you weren’t smouldering alone on the edge of the prairie” (62). In recognizing herself in this collective context, as part of a vibrant city where one can be private without being alone, at least for the moment the “city of feeling” is one with “the city of fact.”

Lucy’s sudden consciousness of other individuals in circumstances far more dire than her own—“tramps, wet as the horses,” “an old man steaming himself in the vapour that rose from an iron grating in the sidewalk” (62)—is a reminder to the reader that the city Lucy loves can be a harsh place, whether or not she comprehends it as such. With this street scene Cather emphasizes how Lucy’s compassionate outward vision could also give her the practical awareness needed to make a living as an artist. However, the scene takes on additional meaning when put alongside an extended passage in *The Song of the Lark* drawing on remarkably similar language and imagery to convey Thea Kronborg’s awakening to the city around her:

The streets were full of cold, hurrying, angry people, running for street-cars and barking at each other. . . . For almost the first time Thea was conscious of the city itself, of the congestion of life all about her, of the brutality and power of those streams that flowed in the streets, threatening to drive one under. . . . All these things and people were no longer remote

and negligible; they had to be met, they were lined up against her, they were there to take something from her. Very well; they should never have it. They might trample her to death, but they should never have it. (201)

The threat Thea feels from the city is a notable difference between Cather's two descriptions of her small-town heroines' awakenings to Chicago's impact on their art. Where Lucy feels a part of the collective and draws strength from it, Thea desires to protect her artistic dream. Using Thea and Lucy as counterpoints, Cather evades generalizations of the city as the always ideal setting for Cather's artist-heroines. Despite the dangers Thea catalogs in Chicago, another major city, New York, is the site of her ultimate triumph at the Metropolitan Opera. And, ironically, Lucy's sleepy Nebraska hometown and not Chicago is the setting of her fatal accident.

The transformation Lucy begins in Chicago isn't completely evident until she returns grief-stricken to Haverford after having abandoned her artistic vision forever. She only reawakens to art when she attends the performance of an older traveling singer. Lucy wonders why the singer performs with a passion belying the inconsequential small-town stage and the obvious passing of her glory days:

Singing this humdrum music to humdrum people, why was it worth while? This poor little singer had lost everything: youth, good looks, position, the high notes of her voice. And yet she sang so well! Lucy wanted to be up there on the stage with her, helping her do it. A wild kind of excitement flared up in her. She felt she must run away tonight, by any train, back to a world that strove after excellence—the world out of which this woman must have fallen. . . . The wandering singer had struck something in her

that went on vibrating; something that was like a purpose forming, and she could not stop it. (181)

For the first time in the narrative, Lucy fully comprehends her artistic purpose and its logistical implications. She arranges to resume her studies and a teaching position in Chicago in “a world that strove after excellence.”

In the days that follow Lucy’s reawakening, her rekindled artistic vision “kept up in her. . . . She felt as if she were standing on the edge of something, about to take some plunge or departure.” (181-182). These lines of course foreshadow Lucy’s death in the icy river, though they also signal she has fundamentally changed course. With her newfound single-minded and self-determined will, Lucy is a consummate New Woman artist figure, which Cather makes all the more conspicuous by giving Lucy a tragic end instead of the triumphal one she gave Thea.

Though the conclusion is pessimistic, Lucy’s journey is not pointless. Her artistic apprenticeship ends once she fully realizes her artistic potential and purpose. Her true calling as a pianist is still as an accompanist, but she sees the inherent value of her contributions in this capacity; she longs to return to the work of accompanying other artists—performers such as the traveling singer. Significantly, Lucy is stirred back to life through the performance of another artist, this time a woman who is not a worldly celebrity but a middle-aged woman in charge of her art. At first, Lucy doubts this artistic epiphany, admitting to herself “[s]he wanted flowers and music and enchantment and love,—all the things she had first known with Sebastian. What did it mean,—that she wanted to go on living again? How could she go on, alone?” (184). What Lucy comes to understand is that her love for Sebastian was as much about the artistic vision they shared

as it was about him as a person. She can carry on with her music, Lucy realizes, and life itself may be the “sweetheart,” “like a lover waiting for her in distant cities—across the sea” (184). Cather’s artist-heroine learns to trust in her artistic vision unmoored from a man or a gendered tradition of feminine sacrifice to masculine artistic genius. In fact, for Lucy, gender is now beside the point. Art is her only goal: “She . . . stretched out her arms to the storm, to whatever might lie behind it. Let it come! Let it all come back to her again! Let it betray her and mock her and break her heart, she must have it!” (185). With Lucy’s emphatic declaration, Cather once again recalls Thea Kronborg, particularly Thea’s own affirmation of creative (and professional) purpose:

As long as she lived that ecstasy was going to be hers. She would live for it, work for it, die for it; but she was going to have it, time after time, height after height. She could hear the crash of the orchestra again, and she rose on the brasses. She would have it, what the trumpets were singing! She would have it, have it,—it! Under the old cape she pressed her hands upon her heaving bosom, that was a little girl’s no longer. (201)

Like Lucy, Thea’s declaration marks her transition into full autonomy as a woman. And yet, for Thea it will one day be reality and bring with it artistic fulfillment as well as fame and economic rewards. In contrast, Lucy’s dream lasts only a matter of days before her death. Cather duly mitigates Lucy’s achievements: she experiences a brief though transformational musical career and finally finds (and acts on) her own artistic vision. To borrow a metaphor from Cather, the novel itself is like a tuning fork “trembling with unimaginable possibilities” (24) for women and art. Its vibrations are hopeful about women’s continued opportunities in the modern era to pursue their dreams, as well as

fearful for the survival of pure art in an environment of fierce competition and consumer-driven ideals.

In much of Cather's fiction—whether set in small western towns or wide swaths of prairie, Sebastian Clement's studio high above the streets of Chicago, or the fast-paced modern workspaces of her "Office Wives" stories—men's and women's work is often necessarily collaborative. This gender cooperation is rather unlike the imaginative spaces of Wharton's work, of which Susan Goodman observes, "male and female worlds seldom intersect, but women strain to bridge the gulf" (Goodman 154). Hardly free of gendered conflict, these modern public spaces where women work and sometimes as equals alongside men (as well as other women) are potential sites for meaningful labor—including the labor of genuine artistic creation.

Taken together, Cather's "Office Wives" fiction and novel *Lucy Gayheart* present overlapping but also opposing models of New Womanhood, thereby testing the limits of women's opportunities to craft self-determined (and fulfilling) lives in the city. Cather's office workers, most notably Becky and Rena at *The Outcry*, are defined by their undertaking of increasingly standardized labor with marked efficiency. As New Women these office workers model pragmatic but potentially soulless labor. Stella and Annie, who are also skilled clerical employees, transgress unstated rules for women workers, compromising Stella's marriage and Annie's stenography position (though both offenses are really about the *appearance* of impropriety, Annie's is complicated by her working-class, unmarried status). With both characters' New Woman storylines, Cather traces the persistent Victorian double standard and social-economic penalties regulating modern office work. Finally, Lucy's narrative of New Womanhood relies on the less workaday,

more idealistic New Woman artistic journey. Though Lucy's transformative journey ends abruptly before she achieves her full professional independence, she begins to symbolize an artistic vision that transcends gender.

Though Cather composed *Lucy Gayheart* long after having solidified her own success as an author and its corresponding validation of her artistic vision, the sad demise of her artist-heroine shows her recognition of the exceptional nature of her own self-fashioned New Womanhood. By combining the lessons offered by her office stories and 1935 novel, Cather proposes a balanced middle ground, a place to situate a viable prototype for New Womanhood by blending the old with the new, the highly emotional inspiration to create with the pragmatic drive to economic self-sufficiency. This is the balance Cather struck in developing and supporting her art. She wanted to treat the novel "as a form of art" rather than "a form of amusement," and declared, "The novel manufactured to entertain great multitudes of people must be considered exactly like a cheap soap or a cheap perfume, or cheap furniture" ("The Novel D meubl " 35, 36). That Cather would serialize *Lucy Gayheart* in the pages of a popular women's magazine, *Woman's Home Companion*, where readers might find the story entertaining as well as edifying, demonstrates how Cather's actual approach to authorship does accommodate both the modern mass market and a timeless devotion to literary art.

¹ Cather, *Lucy Gayheart* (24)

² Barbour's article explains that Cather took over the paper as editor and business manager (earning salaries for both positions) over the course of three months. In his preface to Barbour's article in *Willa Cather in Person*, Brent Bohlke suggests inaccuracies and embellishments are likely the work of "Cather's talent for fiction." He explains, "There is no other record of her father's foreclosure or of her three months of newspaper work. Her active work on the *Nebraska State Journal* and the *Lincoln Courier* was considerably less involved than is implied" (1). The previously cited *Vanity Fair* article, "An American Pioneer—Willa Cather," also relies on questionable biographical

information about a stint farming in Nevada and exaggerated impression of growing up on a Nebraska farm rather than primarily in the heart of the town of Red Cloud to paint a portrait of an iconoclastic woman of letters: “Her contradictory avocations include landlord-farming in Nevada and a one-time editorship on *McClure’s Magazine*. Daughter of pioneers, graduate of a prairie farm and the University of Nebraska” (30).

³ As biographer James Woodress explains, *The Century’s* editor, Douglas Doty, only published one of the two stories included with Cather’s original “Office Wives” series proposal. Accepting “Ardesa,” Doty rejected “Her Boss” (then titled “Little Annie”) because it “was too sad to run in wartime” (286). Cather’s agent, Paul Reynolds, then sent Doty the draft of another story, “Explosives,” which was never published and for which no manuscript survives (286).

⁴ This is a reference to a 13 December letter from Sarah Orne Jewett to Cather, in which Jewett encourages Cather to leave “the Bohemia of newspaper and magazine-office life” (248) in order to concentrate on her own writing.

⁵ One possible explanation for the relative neglect of the “Office Wives” stories in comparison to those included in *The Troll Garden* (1905), *Youth and the Bright Medusa* (1920), and *Obscure Destinies* (1932), is that they remained uncollected during Cather’s lifetime. To date, the handful of critics to study one or more of Cather’s office stories have been interested primarily in their relationship to her creative and professional development while at *McClure’s*.

⁶ The marital status of women is significant in discussions of female labor in the Progressive Era. For example, in her study of economic and census data from the period, Claudia Goldin notes that in terms of U.S. women’s labor market history, “the half-century from about 1870 to 1920 was the era of single women” (81). By 1930, however, even as single women comprised 82% of the clerical workforce, the number of married women in the field had doubled (Brown 96).

⁷ The Rubicon is the Italian river over which Julius Caesar led his army when invading Ancient Rome. Caesar’s military action was a point of no return, ensuring civil war. Cather’s figuring of the hall between *The Outcry’s* editorial and business departments as the Rubicon River both implies Ardesa cannot return to her former position outside the editor’s office and underscores the irreversibility of the publishing industry’s new advertising-dependent business model.

⁸ See Thacker for a reading of this story in relation to Cather’s relationship with S. S. McClure and her collaboration with him on his autobiography.

⁹ For sources describing New Woman literary themes and texts, refer to note 1 on page 30 of this dissertation.

¹⁰ This is a reference to a phrase in a 1915 letter from Cather to Ferris Greenslet at Houghton Mifflin: “How about advertising at women’s colleges? Girls will like the aggressive careerism.”

CHAPTER FOUR

“Marvelous Endurance”: The Adaptive Aesthetics of Zitkala-Ša and Gertrude Schalk¹

As women who wrote from the margins of American dominant culture in the modern era, the careers of both Zitkala-Ša² and Gertrude Schalk illustrate resolve to maintain public voices despite racist practices at many of the day’s major journals and publishing houses. Their texts exhibit dynamic and adaptive strategies designed to engage distinct readerships through genre, narrative and rhetorical strategies. Like Wharton and Cather, the stories of Zitkala-Ša and Schalk participate in ongoing political and cultural debates about modern life. However, as white women—Wharton, economically and socially privileged, and Cather by middle-class and university educated experience—they had greater economic stability and access to the mainstream literary marketplace. (In other words, at fairly early points in both women’s writing careers, they had the privilege of some choice in terms of the journals and publishers that carried their work.) As all four of these writers developed public voices, each had to account for how being a woman shaped where readers encountered and understood their stories. In order for Zitkala-Ša and Schalk in particular to present their voices and stories in the public sphere, race, like gender, shaped their professionalization as authors and the creative directions of their art. Yet at the risk of collapsing the very real distinctions between these women writers’ social and cultural locations, a comparison of them points toward fruitful lines of inquiry. For example, in the dominant cultural paradigm in which men’s cultural productions tend to be valued while women’s are trivialized, Wharton and Cather were highly invested in the strategy of downplaying their status as “lady novelists,” thereby positioning

themselves as serious authors and their art as worth taking seriously. Though arguably this proved a problematic if somewhat successful tactic for both authors, it also demanded they publicly curtail their identification as women or as part of female literary communities and traditions. In contrast, as women of color who often desired to foreground both race and gender in their writing, Zitkala-Ša and Schalk did not reject recognition of their “exceptional” status as talented young representatives of their race. They instead used their notoriety to tell an interested audience stories with often anti-sexist and anti-racist messages. And although for over a decade Schalk also ventured into a more anonymous, if economically rewarding, area of the literary marketplace by composing mass-market romance stories, Zitkala-Ša’s career as a writer reflects a nearly unwavering commitment to authoring texts centered on social and political change.

Scholarship on Zitkala-Ša’s relatively small body of published writings, editorial work at *The American Indian Magazine*, and lifelong activism has proliferated since the 1979 publication of Alice Poindexter Fisher’s article “Zitkala-Ša: Evolution of a Writer” and successive pieces by William Willard and others during the 1980s. That renewed critical interest spurred a steadily expanding body of criticism and helped carve a shaky foothold for Zitkala-Ša in the American literary canon.³ Her current literary reputation hinges mostly on a handful of early stories and essays published in three national periodicals: *The Atlantic Monthly* (1900-1902), *Harper’s Magazine* (1901), and *Everybody’s Magazine* (1902).⁴ In contrast, Schalk remains an obscure figure despite having published four stories in Boston’s New Negro journal *Saturday Evening Quill*: “Black Madness” (1928), “The Red Cape” (1929), “Saviour” (1930), and “Flower of the South” (1930). This literary fiction has garnered only a modicum of critical attention,

even when scholars began to publish in the mid-1990s several revisionist anthologies of Harlem Renaissance literature intended to challenge long-standing historical and critical privileging of men's New Negro cultural productions over those of women.⁵ To date, only Schalk's "Flower of the South," a story about a lynching, has been reprinted in one of these anthologies, appearing with a brief biographical note on Schalk in Ruth Elizabeth Randolph and Lorraine Elena Roses's *Harlem's Glory: Black Women Writing 1900-1950* (1996). The *Encyclopedia of the Harlem Renaissance* (2006) by Lois Brown also contains individual entries on "Flower of the South" and its author. However, the only substantial discussion of Schalk's life is found in a dissertation, "'A Lack of Acquiescence': The Women Writers and Uncanonized Texts of the Harlem Renaissance" (2004), in which Christine M. Rudisel recovers and studies "discarded and celebrated" (32) women writers of the Harlem Renaissance period.

As young women, Zitkala-Ša and Schalk both actively sought readers and recognition for their writing by entering and winning contests: Zitkala-Ša in 1896 winning first-place in Earlham College's oratorical contest and second-place in the subsequent state-wide competition, and Schalk taking two first-place wins as well as numerous second-place prizes and honorable mentions in the *Boston Post's* short story contests (Rudisel 151). These prizes helped each woman establish herself as an exceptional young representative of her race and garner interest in her written work. For example, in 1900 *Harper's Bazaar* identified Zitkala-Ša "as one of the 'Persons Who Interest Us,' who 'until her ninth year . . . was a veritable little savage, running wild over the prairie and speaking no language but her own'" (qtd. in Bernadin 214). Early in Schalk's career *Saturday Evening Quill* editor Eugene Gordon listed her as one of eleven

“youthful newcomers,” New Negro artists with names familiar to us today, including Zora Neale Hurston, Jean Toomer, Langston Hughes, and Dorothy West (Rudisel 150). During later periods in their careers Zitkala-Ša and Schalk continued their contributions to public discourse with positions in journalism and editing—Zitkala-Ša at the *American Indian Magazine* and Schalk at the *Pittsburgh Courier*—where they had platforms to speak with authority on race and gender, among many other issues.

The Two Gertrudes:

Gertrude Bonnin was born in 1876 near the Yankton Indian Agency at Greenwood, South Dakota and given the name Gertrude Simmons. Her mother was Ellen Simmons, whose Yankton-Nakota name was Táte I Yóhin Win (Reaches for the Wind). She had already given birth to eight children when Gertrude arrived in winter 1876. Bonnin’s father was a white trader named Felker, “a worthless fellow,” according to Ellen Simmons (qtd. in Dominguez viii), who deserted the family before Gertrude’s birth. As a response to the disappointments of this third marriage, Ellen “erased Felker’s presence and replaced it with the memory of her second husband of sixteen years, John Simmons” (Dominguez viii-ix).⁶ At the age of eight Bonnin left the reservation to be educated at White’s Institution in Wabash, Indiana, where she was immersed in the processes of assimilation that characterized the Indian boarding school experience, such as the silencing of her native language in favor of English, instruction in Christianity and manual labor, and the cutting of her long hair. As a result of this socialization far from home and without the rites of passage she would have experienced as a young Yankton⁷ woman, Bonnin’s trips home during her school years were uneasy. In addition to her time

at White's (1891-95), Bonnin also spent time at Santee Agency School (1889-90) and Earlham College, a Quaker-run school in Indiana (1895-97) (Hafen, "Introduction," *Dreams* xv-xvi). An illness prevented Bonnin from staying at Earlham and finishing her degree, and not long after leaving college she began a short tenure (1897-1899) as a teacher at Carlisle Indian School, founded in 1879 by Richard Henry Pratt. Her disagreements with Pratt over his educational policies prompted her departure from teaching in 1900 and brief attendance at the New England Conservatory of Music to study violin; during the same year her stories began to appear in the *Atlantic Monthly*, followed shortly thereafter by the a collection of Sioux accounts, *Old Indian Legends* (1901). Despite plans for a second book, after this flurry of publishing activity, "[Zitkala-Ša] appeared to lose interest in her literary career. She disappeared from the public eye for fifteen years, emerging in 1916 as a political activist in her own right" (Hafen, *Iktomi* xii).

Gertrude Ruth Von Schalk was born in Boston to Theodore and Mary Wilkerson Schalk in 1906.⁸ She attended Girls' High School and took classes at Boston University, Suffolk University, and Harvard. Before she was twenty, Schalk was actively submitting her short fiction to literary contests at the *Boston Post*, an African American newspaper distributed nationally. Between 1924 and 1928 the paper published twelve of Schalk's stories. Her contest success and growing list of publications earned her the notice of *Post* journalist and President of the Saturday Evening Quill Club, Eugene Gordon. By 1928 Schalk was a member of Gordon's literary club and contributing her fiction to its *Saturday Evening Quill* journal between 1928 and 1930. The story "Black Madness" was selected for the collection *The Best Short Stories* of 1928 (1928) edited by Edward J.

O'Brien. Despite this positive attention to Schalk's work, excepting "Flower of the South," even recent inclusive, revisionist studies of the Harlem Renaissance have ignored her literary New Negro fiction. The early years of the 1930s were especially significant to Schalk's professional development: she sold her first manuscript, began what would be a long career at the *Pittsburgh Courier*, and was busy writing short fiction, including: "Lady Greatheart" (1 Feb. 1933) and "Divorce You? Never!" (1 May 1933) published in *All-Story Love* and "The Adorable Infant" (15 Aug. 1931) published in *Love Story*. From this time until she moved to Pittsburgh in 1943 to take over as women's editor at the *Courier*, Schalk's stories appeared in an impressive twenty-five different magazines. She later looks back on her thirteen-year period of productivity while an unmarried, professional author and writes, "I made my living in the writing field. During those years I went to Europe twice, cruised the Caribbean, and lived a charmed life" ("Faith Came" 17). As a young woman making her way in a modern American city, Schalk shares many attributes with the New Woman heroine of popular fiction. That she was a woman of color employed by the nation's widest-circulating African American newspaper and also writing formula romance stories for mass-market pulp magazines suggests she was fashioning her own brand of New Negro Womanhood and professional authorship. In 1946, while in Pittsburgh, Schalk met and married John V. Johnson who worked in the *Courier's* advertising department. Other than Rudisel's study, extant references to Schalk's biography indicate she "seems to have slipped into obscurity following her marriage" (L. Brown 470). But such claims were based on an incomplete record, and we now know Schalk remained in the public eye even after the publishing opportunities of the Harlem Renaissance (and more generally) dried up during the Great Depression. She

was a sought-after public speaker and a popular voice with her long-running “Toki’s Types” column at the *Courier*.

In the previous two chapters on Wharton and Cather, I used a comparative framework to bracket early and later moments in each author’s career. At the heart of this project is women’s changing status in modern culture, and my methodology identifies and demystifies themes in the texts associated with (or counter to) New Woman heroines so as to understand the authors’ interpretations of the “emancipatory vision” for themselves and/or other women. In applying my methodology in this chapter on Zitkala-Ša and Schalk—two women separated by their differing cultural and linguistic backgrounds and a 30-year age gap—I look to describe each author’s feminism and further our evolving vision of the New Woman heroine as the subject of multi-ethnic narratives.⁹ In Schalk’s case, the texts discussed here do not bracket the span of her career, though they do bracket an important creative shift. To situate these authors in the context of the previous chapters, consider Wharton’s major debut as a long-form fiction author through her 1900 serialization of *The Touchstone* in a popular American periodical. The novella presented Wharton’s self-aware examination of female literary authority and alignments between a female author and her readers. That same year, Zitkala-Ša grappled with issues analogous to Wharton’s in her autobiographical series published in another popular American periodical. In contrast, Schalk placed her fiction in a Boston literary journal with a circulation in the hundreds, and her stories corresponded less to her own experiences as an middle-class African American woman and more directly to those of working-class African Americans. Cather parallels Schalk’s interest in fictionalizing the experiences of working-class women by centering

her office fiction on “pink-collar” workers rather than depictions of women more like herself who secured higher-paying, professional positions in the modern office.

Complicating these overlapping issues and approaches, Zitkala-Ša and Schalk also present valuable case studies in early twentieth-century literary authority because of their efforts to respond to the injustices they saw and felt in their lives and communities by unifying art and activism in new models of authorship.

Written in Plain Language: The Autobiography of Zitkala-Sa

To understand Zitkala-Ša’s activist stance toward her art, consider the example of the speech with which she won the Earlham College oratorical contest in 1896: “The Progress of Women” was a successful argument in support of women’s suffrage. Nevertheless, in moving on to the statewide round of the contest, she rewrote her speech as a case for Native American rights and retitled it “Side by Side.” She thus used these two formal, public opportunities to present her opinions to her peers on the two issues close to her heart. Women did not get the vote until 1920 and Native Americans were barred from the privileges of American citizenship (unless they assimilated into the dominant American culture and renounced their “Indianness”) until the passage of the Indian Citizenship Act in 1924. That Zitkala-Ša was empowered in 1896 to put herself in the vanguard of support for two of the more contested social issues of the Progressive Era is evidence of her conviction and confidence in her own ability to use language to influence an audience for positive change.

True to this characterization of Zitkala-Ša as a writer-activist, just four years after her oratorical debut, she penned a series of autobiographical stories published by a

national vehicle of American literary culture, *The Atlantic Monthly*: “Impressions of an Indian Childhood,” (Jan. 1900) “The School Days of an Indian Girl,” (Feb. 1900) and “An Indian Teacher Among Indians” (Mar. 1900). These essays rely on a rather perilous insider/outsider construct of foregrounding and deconstructing her marginalized identity as a Native woman by narrativizing her early Yankton life in the care of her mother; her childhood at an Eastern boarding school for Indian children and later time as a college student at Earlham; and finally at another boarding school, this time in the role of a teacher. The autobiography is, as Susan Bernardin describes, “the exemplary genre of early marginalized writing in the United States” (217), and Zitkala-Ša employs and revises the form to portray how her vocational education in a mission-run school robbed her of an authentic voice, even a physical sense of self, and put her outside both white and Yankton communities. Importantly, Zitkala-Ša scrutinizes the Indian policies of her era and the cruel practices of compulsory boarding school education using the very language she acquired at the cost of her native tongue. Thus, because Zitkala-Ša is the stories’ author and their subject, she resists her role as “a model boarding school graduate” (Bernardin 215) even as she uses it to gain access to a national audience.

Zitkala-Ša published her second book, twenty-one years after her stories appeared in *The Atlantic*, and just two years after she served as editor of *American Indian Magazine* (1918-1919), a publication of the Society of American Indians (SAI). This collection, *American Indian Stories* (1921) contains seven texts from the years 1900-1902 published in mainstream periodicals and three previously unpublished pieces: a dream story, an essay, and an allegory, “The Widespread Enigma Concerning Blue-Star Woman.” The two new stories use unconventional narrative structures to introduce

themes connected to Dakota cultural traditions, U.S. federal policies toward Native Americans, and the potential political power of women as a united group. The new essay addresses the source of the problem identified by its title, “America’s Indian Problem,” and appeared concurrently in the monthly publication of the Illinois Federation of Women’s Clubs *Edict Magazine* (Dec. 1921), which had a readership of fifty-thousand women (Dominguez xxi). Despite a woman-centered perspective across the text of *American Indian Stories* and its author’s enduring feminism, Zitkala-Ša’s connection to the idea of the New Woman and the way that relationship plays out in her stories has not been explored. To begin such case study, I first discuss Zitkala-Ša’s autobiographical essays and then build on my reading of this foundational memoir by examining the later allegorical story, “The Widespread Enigma Concerning Blue-Star Woman,” and its use of multiple genres and abstract or symbolic imagery in its treatment of issues of political and cultural immediacy at the time of *American Indian Stories*’ 1921 printing. Taken together, these works reflect a politically minded author distinctly conscious of the potential power of women as a constituency capable of addressing the day’s most vital social and political problems. In order to reach the hearts and minds of those female readers, Zitkala-Ša crafted stories in a remarkably effective spare but emotionally resonant “plain language” of personal experience.

Bonnin chose to publish her literary productions under her Lakota pen name, “Zitkala-Ša,” meaning “Red Bird,” a name representing her Indian identity as much as it does her self-determined public identity as an author. In a commonly cited anecdote from her 1901 letter to the Apache doctor Carlos Montezuma, Bonnin explains her self-naming by first noting her mother’s resentment of her father, Felker, and his name, continuing:

So as I grew I was called by my brother's name—Simmons. I bore it a long time till my brother's wife—angry with me because I insisted upon getting an education said I had deserted home and I might give up my brother's name “Simmons” too. Well—you can guess how queer I felt away from my own people—home-less—penniless—and even without a name! Then, I chose to make a name for myself—& I guess I have made ‘Zitkala-Ša’ known—for even Italy writes it in her language! (qtd. in Hafen, *Dreams* xvii-xviii)

In 1900, the same year Edith Wharton saw her first full-length work of fiction into print, Zitkala-Ša also took a major step toward making her name “known” by publishing her first autobiographical essay in *The Atlantic Monthly*.

The subtitled sketches in each of the three essays represent a native, modernist way of looking at things, most notably of the maternal bond, domesticity, education, and the transmission and construction of cultural and individual identity. The most developed story of the series, “Impressions of an Indian Childhood,” sets up a woman-centered framework through a series of seven vignettes of Ihanktonwan (Yankton Sioux) life that simultaneously celebrate the domestic culture embodied by Ellen Simmons while also challenging lingering ideals of Victorian womanhood and racist imperatives of the Anglo-American culture from which they sprang. “My Mother” is the subtitle of the first sketch, and it opens on a scene of Ellen Simmons drawing water from the Missouri River, a vital task she performs every “morning, noon, and evening,” with her young daughter at her side (7). Through the perspective of Gertrude's seven-year-old eyes, we learn her mother is frequently “sad and silent,” but what Ellen most values and encourages in her

daughter is just the opposite: “These were my mother’s pride,—my wild freedom and overflowing sprits. She taught me no fear save that of intruding myself upon others” (8). Zitkala-Ša develops these autobiographical figures throughout “Impressions” and the two ensuing installments, “The School Days of an Indian Girl” and “An Indian Teacher Among Indians.” In the first, Zitkala-Ša’s mother educates her young daughter in Dakota domestic duties and traditions—beadwork and hospitality—even as she encourages the girl’s growing physical self-awareness on the prairie in Dakota Territory. Piecing together a series of vignettes from her early girlhood, Zitkala-Ša lays the foundation for the drastic changes that unsettle the matriarchal paradigm and mother-daughter relationship that is the central force of her early years. Indeed, it is women’s voices and teachings that permeate “Indian childhood,” and they are cast as survivors of years of violence against their tribe and community.

In this account of her life, Zitkala-Ša’s father, uncle, and sister are dead, and she and her mother live alone in their wigwam. The complex relationship between the facts of Zitkala-Ša’s life and her published autobiographical writing is illustrated in her decision to omit her white biological father as a character. Absent as a presence in these stories, we learn only that the author’s father is “buried in a hill nearer the rising sun” (10), a seeming reference to John Simmons, Ellen’s second husband. Zitkala-Ša crafts her ethos as full-blooded Yankton Sioux by omitting any reference to her father’s racial identity in this brief explanation of her father’s absence. Susan Bernardin argues that this narrative substitution works on two rhetorical levels, by heightening sentimental impact with a parental loss and avoiding attributions of Zitkala-Ša’s achievements to her “white blood” (221). Zitkala-Ša’s authorial choices, here exemplified in a paternal narrative

substitution, are integral to understanding how she wanted to construct her identity as a uniquely positioned Native writer in a time of transition for her race and gender. These autobiographical vignettes read as “representative” moments of the writer’s early years. Singly they utilize tropes common to women’s nineteenth-century sentimental (or domestic) fiction to humanize Zitkala-Ša and her community, principally for an audience of white, middle-class women. Taken together, the sketches of “Impressions of an Indian Childhood” portray a girl whose life is marked by the strong influence of her mother, imbuing the girl with a sense of security as a result of that maternal, stabilizing guidance. This plot sets up a common sentimental subject—a young girl who has a life of happy security only to be unmoored from it at some point (often by a death or similar separation from parents or guardians) and must make her way alone, at least temporarily, in a morally perilous world. In adapting to her biography the conventions of a popular nineteenth-century literary formula branded as feminine and generally expected to attract female readers, she frames her Yankton girlhood as days of innocence prior to her departure from home and immersion in Anglo-American culture at boarding school.

Provoking reader sympathy for the unjust suffering of the figures in her story is an important rhetorical component of Zitkala-Ša’s autobiographical writing, and the liminal status of her people creeps in at the corners of this narrative through her mother’s perspective. By including Ellen Simmons’s description of the death of her first daughter during their tribe’s forced removal to a new Western location, Zitkala-Ša makes the suffering of her people personal. In a passage exemplifying the ways Zitkala-Ša enacts an oral tradition of storytelling as well as the heightened emotional language of sentimental

fiction, Ellen uses painful detail to describe her first daughter's suffering during their tribe's forced relocation by the U.S. Government:

We traveled many days and nights; not in the grand, happy way that we moved camp when I was a little girl, but we were driven, my child, driven like a herd of buffalo. With every step, your sister, who was not as large as you are now, shrieked with the painful jar until she was hoarse with crying. She grew more and more feverish. Her little hands and cheeks were burning hot. Her little lips were parched and dry, but she would not drink the water I gave her. Then I discovered that her throat was swollen and red. My poor child, how I cried with her because the Great Spirit had forgotten us! (10)

Ellen's intensely poignant recollection of her experience as a mother losing her child to violent forces beyond her control underscores the bonds between a mother and both of her daughters. This bond is another common attribute of women's sentimental fiction. Bernardin suggests Zitkala-Ša's use of techniques such as this one drawn from sentimental and autobiographical genres places her in a tradition begun by other Native American women writers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, such as S. Alice Callahan, Pauline Johnson, and Mourning Dove, all of whom strategically revised those genres for a mostly non-Indian readership (213). By putting the account of her family's tragedy in her mother's voice, Zitkala-Ša's narrative thus deliberately conveys her family's misery without any ambiguity regarding *who* is responsible for their pain. Ellen asserts, "We were once very happy. But the paleface has stolen our lands and driven us hither. Having defrauded us of our land, the paleface forced us away" (10). By

including her mother's testimony here, Zitkala-Ša makes it clear that the "paleface"—U.S. governmental policy of tribal relocation—is to blame for the untimely deaths of her sister as well as her uncle, which left behind a widow and "orphan daughter" (11).

The only living men Zitkala-Ša describes in this story are the aged visitors to her mother's wigwam, a "crazy man" who roams the hills (25), and her older brother, Dawée, who appears late in the story after three years away at an Eastern boarding school. By selectively piecing together these characters, "Impressions" ultimately suggests that it is the Sioux women and children who suffer most visibly from white settlement of the West and disastrous U.S. Indian policy; even as their legal status on matters of citizenship, matrimony, and property rights is in a state of flux, women are left to struggle for their own survival and that of their children. This message of simultaneous oppression and survival—both in terms of their lives and the perseverance of their tribal cultures — disrupts stereotyped and narrowly defined images of Indian women as either obedient "squaws" or exotic "princesses" being disseminated through literary Westerns in such places as *Atlantic Monthly*, and helps to cultivate a new image of the woman writer that upsets simplified notions of cultural, racial, and linguistic identity. Building on the tradition begun by earlier Native American women writers like Callahan and Johnson, Zitkala-Ša's work enters the public sphere in *Atlantic Monthly* with a new independence—without the filter of an interpreter or editor—and offers affirming images of Sioux culture in opposition to those images constructed by the dominant culture.¹⁰

Throughout Zitkala-Ša's descriptive snapshots of childhood, women's domestic responsibilities are important to the observations and growing self-awareness of young Gertrude. From joining her mother on trips to the river for water and envying her "grown-

up cousin, Warca-Ziwin (Sunflower), who was then seventeen” who “always went to the river alone for water for her mother” (8-9), the responsibilities of the women in Zitkala-Ša’s world define her growth toward maturity and independence. In another chapter, “The Coffee-Making,” the author describes her first attempts at performing the role of hostess by serving an elderly visitor refreshments in her mother’s wigwam, a well-intentioned effort in “insipid hospitality” (28). In “Beadwork,” Zitkala-Ša describes learning the creative skill of beadwork. Sitting side by side, the girl watches her mother work on a pair of buckskin moccasins: “In imagination I saw myself walking in a new pair of snugly fitting moccasins. I felt the envious eyes of my playmates upon the pretty red beads decorating my feet” (19). The girl’s pride in her mother’s artistry is clear here, as is her budding desire to create. She summarizes, “Close beside my mother I sat on a rug, with a scrap of buckskin in one hand and an awl in the other. This was the beginning of my practical observation lessons in the art of beadwork” (19). In a slow process of many trials, Zitkala-Ša explains how she acquires and cultivates her own artistic creativity through beadwork because her mother required she undertake only original beading designs and complete every pattern, no matter how complex. So seriously does she follow these rules that she refrains from complex patterns and their “self-inflicted punishment” (19) working to draw merely crosses and squares, which try Ellen’s patience because they are not always “symmetrical nor sufficiently characteristic” (20). Ellen encourages her daughter to develop her own independent thinking and creative vision through her silent oversight of the child, a tactic that makes Zitkala-Ša feel “strongly responsible and dependent upon my own judgment” (20). Her beadwork lessons continue to increase in sophistication and required skill as she recalls learning to use color in

pleasing patterns and the difficult sewing using porcupine quills with their sharp and poisonous points.

This tale of education in the quiet craft of beadwork culminates in the expression of a second developmental stage Ellen cultivates in her daughter: a desire for freedom of physical expression. As much a part of her girlhood on the reservation as lessons in domestic skills is the girl's need to break out of restrained spaces: "Always after these confining [beadwork] lessons I was wild with surplus spirits, and found joyous relief in running loose in the open again" (21). Roaming the hills with her playmates, Zitkala-Ša describes the heady sensuality of gathering and consuming sweet plants and roots and making a game of imitating their mothers' manners and conversations. Zitkala-Ša's narration of her and her girlfriends' active social freedom outside of home and hearth is not a challenge to that domestic space but a validation of it: "In the lap of the prairie we seated ourselves upon our feet, and leaning our painted cheeks in the palms of our hands, we rested our elbows on our knees, and bent forward as old women were most accustomed to do" (22). Here Zitkala-Ša shows the girls' desire to play the roles of the adult women around them. The metaphor of the "lap of the prairie" echoes earlier maternal language in the story when Zitkala-Ša recalls how she "pillowed [her] head in [her] mother's lap" (15) to listen to tribal elders tell the stories and legends she loved (and thereby linking her mother to the act of storytelling and its vital role in the transmission of tribal cultural history). With these scenes the author presents an approach to "girls' education" that respects their future roles as women in the community as well as their immediate needs to find individual identities and modes of expression. Moreover, these early scenes provide the foundation for later moments in the memoir, such as a sequence

in the third installment, “An Indian Teacher Among Indians,” in which Zitkala-Ša describes watching the scenery pass on a westbound train: “The great high buildings, whose towers overlooked the dense woodlands, and whose gigantic clusters formed large cities, diminished, together with the groves, until only little log cabins lay snugly in the bosom of the vast prairie” (86). More than an observation of geography, Zitkala-Ša’s descriptions also trace her movement across an emotional landscape, from the Eastern landscape where she has been teaching to the Western one of her birth, and in so doing, she reaffirms the importance of her mother in the location of her own identity. In the span of a few paragraphs her descriptions shift from the enclosed spaces of her room and office with its “desk heaped up with work” (85) to the “bosom of the vast prairie” holding “little log cabins” like the one inhabited by her mother (86). Zitkala-Ša prepares her readers to recognize the oppressiveness of the physical constraints she eventually comes to know at boarding school—“stiff shoes and closely clinging dresses,” “sleeved aprons and shingled hair” (52)—by first establishing the importance of opportunities for unrestrained physical expression.

As if to reiterate the importance of a girl’s self-awareness through physical freedom, Zitkala-Ša narrates an episode in which she decides to catch her own shadow. After gliding, then sprinting, and finally halting and sitting, all in an effort to catch her shadow, and becoming quite vexed during the activity, she explains its significance: “Before this peculiar experience I have no distinct memory of having recognized any vital bond between myself and my own shadow. I never gave it an afterthought” (24). Within the context of “Impressions,” the shadow-chasing episode provides a metaphor for the writer’s emerging self-awareness. That she also alludes to this shadow episode

during her homecoming journey in “An Indian Teacher Among Indians” further emphasizes its importance as an identity metaphor: “The cloud shadows which drifted about on the waving yellow of long-dried grasses thrilled me like the meeting of old friends” (86). In the larger framework of her autobiographical *Atlantic Monthly* series and Zitkala-Ša’s writing career, the chasing of her shadow can be read as the perpetual search for her identity that is not easily reconciled by her formative Yankton and boarding school educations.

The concluding vignette of “Impressions,” “The Big Red Apples,” introduces an allusion to Christian legend by setting up a metaphorical fall from grace and innocence, which marks the end of the little girl’s “Garden of Eden”—her idyllic matriarchal life on the Yankton reservation and her close connection to her mother. This transition is clear: “The first turning away from the easy, natural flow of my life occurred in an early spring. It was in my eighth year; in the month of March, I afterward learned. At this age I knew but one language, and that was my mother’s native tongue” (39). There is no doubt here that Zitkala-Ša’s cultural identity and language (her mother tongue) spring from her mother, and that all-encompassing bond is broken by the daughter’s desire to leave their prairie home. The growing self-confidence that Zitkala-Ša writes into the character of her childhood self becomes particularly significant when “two paleface missionaries” visit their Yankton village looking for Indian children to take East for school (39). Impressed by the stories her playmates share about the missionaries’ “Wonderland” in the East, Zitkala-Ša is filled with a desire to go there. When the missionaries and an interpreter appear at the home of Ellen and her daughter, Zitkala-Ša conveys the visitors’ maneuvers in the language of conquest, emphatically stating, “They came, they saw, and they

conquered!” (41). At first Ellen resists pressure to permit her daughter to go away, and distrusts the missionaries and their intentions. She expresses this opposition in the following response to her daughter’s pleading:

There! I knew you were wishing to go, because [your friend] Judéwin has filled your ears with the white man’s lies. Don’t believe a word they say! Their words are sweet, but, my child, their deeds are bitter. You will cry for me, but they will not even soothe you. Stay with me, my little one! Your brother Dawée says that going East, away from your mother, is too hard an experience for his baby sister. (41)

In this argument against allowing her eight year-old daughter to leave her home, family, and culture for a world the girl has no real knowledge or experience of, Zitkala-Ša encourages her readers to reflect on what she had at stake in giving up the life she shared with her mother to start a new one alone at a mission-run school. The domestic and cultural education that Zitkala-Ša develops over the course of the seven chapters of “Impressions” halts in favor of an education defined by standards of an entirely different cultural community.

The missionaries make their pitch with enticing stories of things Zitkala-Ša has never experienced, such as picking and eating beautiful red apples and riding east on a train. She is enticed by the forbidden fruit the missionaries describe, and the author juxtaposes her naïve yearning for them with her refusal to heed her mother’s advice: “This was the first time I had ever been so unwilling to give up my own desire that I refused to hearken to my mother’s voice” (43). In no other place in “Impressions” does the author depict herself defying her mother’s wishes. Zitkala-Ša describes how, with the

force of her girlhood will, she effectively silences her mother's reservations as a literal "solemn silence" permeates their home the night of the missionaries' visit. The next day, the slow process of assimilation already at work in the lives of Ellen and her daughter—first begun by replacing the buffalo skin on their wigwam with canvas and then continued by replacing their wigwam with a log cabin—finally brings about Ellen's acquiescence to her daughter's wish to go to school. In explaining her decision, she acknowledges the pressures the white world is putting on their community and what it will mean for her daughter's future. When her son arrives to hear her verdict on Zitkala-Ša's education, Ellen ostensibly addresses him, though her words seem to hold more meaning for his young sister:

Yes, Dawée, my daughter, though she does not understand what it all means, is anxious to go. She will need an education when she is grown, for then there will be fewer real Dakotas, and many more palefaces. This tearing her away, so young, from her mother is necessary, if I would have her an educated woman. The palefaces, who owe us a large debt for stolen lands, have begun to pay a tardy justice in offering some education to our children. But I know my daughter must suffer keenly in this experiment. For her sake, I dread to tell you my reply to the missionaries. Go, tell them that they may take my little daughter, and that the Great Spirit shall not fail to reward them according to their hearts. (44)

The ironies in Ellen Simmons's words are clear here. Zitkala-Ša's stories focus on her own impressions, and do not take into account the experiences of her brother, who himself spent three years at an Eastern boarding school. Nonetheless, the reader knows

that Ellen has already permitted at least one child to go away, and upon his return, she feels enough assimilation pressure to adopt new living conditions—the log cabin. The reader must assume, then, that Ellen has witnessed the effects of the white missionaries' brand of education on her son. When considering the value of such schooling for her young daughter—whom she recognizes will suffer greatly under it—she cites the inevitable and increasing presence of “palefaces” in the world her daughter will inhabit as an adult. Ellen's ambiguous rationale for agreeing to send her daughter to school is in keeping with the writer's own career-spanning position on the topic, as Bernardin explains,

Zitkala-Ša was invested in the goals and methods of educating Indians. She carried this focus throughout her abbreviated period of mainstream literary production (1900-1902) and throughout her subsequent career as member and officer of the first secular pan-Indian organization, the Society of American Indians (SAI); as editor of the SAI journal; as independent lobbyist for education reform and self-determination; and as founder of the National Council of American Indians. (214)

In order for Zitkala-Ša to be an “educated” woman by the standards of the rapidly expanding white culture, she must be torn away from her mother, and, we might infer, at least temporarily relinquish the lessons she has learned about being a Yankton woman in order to learn the tools for surviving an encroaching white American culture.

Significantly, the author is clear about her own agency in leaving her mother's side: for the first time in her young life she defies her mother's wishes to seek an education she cannot receive on the prairie. In so doing, Zitkala-Ša sets draws a further connection to

Eve in the Garden of Eden who, in desiring the knowledge the snake promised her, accepts the forbidden fruit by taking a bite of a big red apple. The familiar Christian symbolism is an appeal to the religious values of the audience and an encouragement to seek further correlations with the legend in future installments of the story. Accepting the missionaries' red apples and going to the white man's school to acquire his knowledge signal the girl's fall from the matriarchal world of her mother as well as the beginning of the time of lonely navigation so common to heroines of sentimental fiction.

Bringing this series of vignettes full circle, Zitkala-Ša once again draws her reader's focus to the Missouri River as the small party of children and missionaries cross it on a ferryboat. This crossing of a geographical border can be read as a metaphor for Zitkala-Ša's feelings at a transformative moment in her story. With a sense of regret, she realizes, "I was in the hands of strangers whom my mother did not fully trust. I no longer felt free to be myself, or to voice my own feelings" (45). With the essay's final image of an eight year-old girl who has lost both her voice—her mother's tongue—and her ability to be herself, she embarks on a journey of identity revision and recovery that seems as futile as a child chasing her shadow across the plains. This troubled negotiation of identity must be considered within the context in which it originally appears: a publication that at this time was "rife with the discourse of Anglo-Saxon nativism," as Charles Hannon observes (181). He points out that even Native Americans could be designated "foreign" because their ancestors were not considered active participants in construction of the official narrative of American history, the pioneer story. With her subsequent autobiographical stories, "The School Days of an Indian Girl" and "An Indian Teacher among Indians," both located largely outside of the Yankton community

described in “Impressions,” Zitkala-Ša illustrates how her vocational education in a mission-run school robs her—at least temporarily—of her voice and physical sense of self by making her an outsider in both white and Yankton communities by loosening the bond with her mother, replacing her mother’s domestic teachings with the domesticity of Anglo-American culture, and shifting from a matriarchal paradigm centered in the natural landscape to a patriarchal one embodied by Christian teachings and a standardized modernity.

The second and third autobiographical installments continue Zitkala-Ša’s narrative through her relocation in the white world. According to Bernardin, “Zitkala-Ša presents an ethnographic view of Euro-American culture—under the guise of sentimental autobiography—that forces non-Indian readers to view themselves from an outsider’s oppositional perspective” (218). Furthermore, Bernardin notes, the narrative complies with expectations for a “secular conversion narrative” by portraying a “triumphant trajectory” of a young child moving from the uncivilized western plains east to Christian schools to finally conclude with the young subject now a woman making her way in an Eastern city (218). But the reader’s expectations, Bernardin correctly argues, are undermined by Zitkala-Ša’s attention to the “brutality and hypocrisy of Euro-American culture as embodied by its social institutions” (218). So too are they undermined by Zitkala-Ša’s more subtle efforts to situate herself as both the subject of the autobiography and an emerging author as a Native New Woman of sorts whose identity foregrounds a gendered experience of the “civilizing machine” (“School Days” 66) while recasting the still emerging figure of the New Woman in literature.

As a Native American woman, Zitkala-Ša occupied an outsider position in any dialogue of American citizenship—women would not be enfranchised until the Nineteenth Amendment’s ratification in 1920; Indian Citizenship was not enacted by Congress until 1924. Her engagement of the personal, gendered implications of her experiences as a girl born into Yankton Sioux life during this time brings a wider perspective to “America’s Indian Problem.” By 1902, a couple years after these stories first appeared in print, Bonnin had returned to the Yankton Reservation where she met and married another Yankton, Raymond Telehouse Bonnin. A married woman, Bonnin continued to write and advocate for Pan-Indian and tribal community causes. One of the aspirations of modern New Womanhood was to form a love relationship of equal partnership, and it seems the Bonnins’ marriage embodied this vision. Although their marriage may have fit a modern model appropriate to New Woman narratives, it was probably influenced by the couple’s shared Yankton background of “culturally specific expressions of gender complementarity” (Hafen, “Writings”).¹¹ The couple worked tirelessly for Native American people while living in Duchesne, Utah on the Uinta Ouray Ute Agency and later in Washington, D.C. While in Utah Bonnin gave birth to her only child, a son named Raymond Ohiya, and also co-composed *The Sun Dance Opera* with William F. Hanson, which premiered in 1913. She became involved with the first exclusively Indian-managed organization, the Society of American Indians (SAI) after its founding in 1911. On behalf of SAI, Bonnin taught, clerked, and did public speaking and community service while in Utah. She was elected secretary of the organization in 1916, necessitating the family’s relocation to Washington, D.C. Bonnin then edited the SAI journal, *American Indian Magazine*, from 1918 through 1919 while serving as SAI

President. This editorial position gave Bonnin a powerful public voice in the editorials she wrote on topics such as the campaign against peyote use, Native rights through U.S. citizenship, and tribal self-determination (Batker 24-25).¹²

Zitkala-Ša's 1921 return to the world of literary publishing with *American Indian Stories* is an instructive statement on her sense of literary authority and artistic legacy. It brings together a number of the different narrative approaches she employed during her literary career—among them autobiographical essay, fictional retellings of her own or others' experiences, a heroine story, a dream story, and an allegory. The last of these figures in "Blue-Star Woman," which uses multiple perspectives in fictionalizing "a 1920 land claim by Ellen Bluestone, a mixed-blood Yankton who grew up on the Standing Rock Reservation" (Dominguez xviii). The first half of the narrative introduces Blue-Star Woman, who, just short of her fifty-fourth year, is "[I]onely but unmolested," barely subsisting on the generosity of neighbors in her log hut "like the ground squirrel that took its abode nearby,—both through the easy tolerance of the land owner" (159). Through her thoughts we learn that one question—"Who am I?"—"has become the obsessing riddle of her life" (159). Her predicament largely rests on the fact that, orphaned as a child, and lacking any of the government-required documentation of her parentage, she cannot prove her tribal membership and therefore has no claim to her own allotment. Soon two "would-be white men" arrive at Blue-Star Woman's door wearing "faded civilian clothes . . . [and] their white man's shoes were rusty and unpolished" (165). Taking advantage of Blue-Star's faith in cultural traditions, "In one voice and by an assumed relationship the two Indian men addressed her. 'Aunt, I shake hands with you'" (166). She shares her much-valued fry bread and coffee with them and "rehearse[s] her many hardships" as

they devour her food (167). However, the narrative voice makes the men's true intentions apparent: "Masking their real errand with long-drawn faces, they feigned a concern for her welfare" (165). Only Blue-Star Woman's destitution leads her to accept their offer of help, which will come at the cost of half her land allotment. The story's omniscient narrative voice colludes with the reader to pull back the curtain on the corruption of the allotment system and expose people like the "nephews" who benefit from graft and proudly admit they "fight crooks with crooks" by working with "clever white lawyers" (169). With this scene in Blue-Star's home, Zitkala-Ša's story exposes the corruption of on damaging federal Indian policies as they unsettle individuals and tribal communities.

The second half of the narrative focuses on Chief High Flier, through whose perspective Zitkala-Ša represents another side of the allotment problem and its impacts. When he learns, much to his dismay, that Blue-Star Woman had been added to the Sioux tribal rolls, it is the culmination of his mounting frustration with "The Indian's guardian" (172). Blue Star Woman is presumably from the area, but High Flier does not know her. However, in the new "papers [that] were made by two young Indian men who have learned the white man's ways" (175), Blue-Star's mother is identified as Small Voice Woman, his own relative. He later laments, "Small Voice Woman lived in my house until her death. She had only one child and it was a *boy!*" (175). His first course of action is to dictate a letter addressed to "a prominent American woman" (173), which his young granddaughter transcribes for him. In his letter, High Flier relates the problem of Blue Star's addition to the tribal rolls, a particular injustice because, "We cannot even give to our own little children. Washington is very rich. Washington now owns our country. If he wants to help this poor Indian woman, Blue-Star, let him give her some of his land and

his money” (172-73). This entreaty to the “prominent American woman”—who, in her anonymity, stands in for any interested American woman reading the text—gives voice to the “voiceless man of America” (178). Furthermore, the inclusion of the letter in the story, Dominguez suggests, “[F]oreshadows contemporary, multi-genre Native American literature” (xix).

High Flier rides nearly ten miles to deliver his letter to the post office, but as the reservation’s government buildings come into view, he makes a sudden decision to deliver it another way: “His quavering voice chanted a bravery song as he gathered dry grasses and the dead stalks of last year’s sunflowers. He built a fire, and crying aloud, for his sorrow was greater than he could bear, he cast the letter into the flames” (177). Following closely after this scene, tribal police acting on the orders of the government superintendent arrest High Flier for being “one of the bad Indians, singing war songs and opposing the government all the time” (177). He is imprisoned alone in a dingy and foul-aired cell, where he does not sleep, eat, or drink, and is burdened by “his utter helplessness to defend his own or his people’s human rights” (178). Yet even in his weary state, “he refused to surrender faith in good people” (179).

“Blue-Star Woman” culminates with a vision High Flier has while in jail: “Lo, good friend, the American woman to whom he had sent his messages by fire, now stood there a legion. A vast multitude of women . . . gazed upon a huge stone image” (179). Zitkala-Ša’s imagery evokes women’s collective power and then ties it directly to the personification of the American brand of liberty:

The great stone figure was that of a woman upon the brink of the Great Waters, facing eastward. . . . She smiled down upon this great galaxy of

American women. She was the Statue of Liberty! It was she, who, though representing human liberty, formerly turned her back upon the American aborigine. Her face was aglow with compassion . . . her torch flamed brighter and whiter till . . . [h]er light of liberty penetrated Indian reservations. A loud shout of joy rose up from the Indians of the earth, everywhere! (179-80)

On its surface, this vision is an affirmation of women's power to create change through the united purpose of liberty. However, Zitkala-Ša evokes this American icon late in a narrative that conveys the experiences of older Sioux characters not yet recognized as U.S. citizens who are struggling to assert their individual and cultural identities against corrupting and oppressive forces from both inside and outside their tribal community. Given this context, Lady Liberty may inspire both hope and anxiety in her readers. Additionally, the language of High Flier's vision calls attention to Lady Liberty's uneasy symbolism. For example, her supposed embodiment of "human liberty," she has previously "turned her back upon the American aborigine"; moreover, as her torchlight spreads from her position in the East "brighter and *whiter*" across the continent it evokes the westward expansion of Euro-American culture across the lands inhabited by indigenous people (180, emphasis added).

Zitkala-Ša's paradoxical vision demands each of her readers interpret it through the lens of their own compassion and concern for the people—the Americans Indians Blue Star Woman and Chief High Flier represent—she imbues with humanity and hope. In the case of High Flier, his interpretation of the vision is unequivocal: "In his heart lay the secret vision of hope born in the midnight of his sorrows"; it carries him through

the remainder of his sentence “with a mute dignity” (180). On the day of his release, the chief emerges from jail to jubilant crowds and “rejoicing over all the land” (180). Nonetheless, Zitkala-Ša bypasses a happy ending when the nephews greet High Flier in the crowd and explain the following to him: “We have great influence with the Indian Bureau in Washington, D.C. When you need help, let us know. Here press your thumb in this pad” (182). The story’s final image is that of High Flier signing the land deed with his thumbprint before driving toward home with his son. This conclusion, which seems at first to backpedal from High Flier’s empowering vision of female activism, is not, I contend, a vision of the inevitable future. Instead, it serves as a warning of the price of inaction. The alliance forged by the nephews and their white associates to carry out their “grafting business” (168) illustrates the corrupting forces conspiring in tribal communities, the dominant culture, and the federal government to profit by dividing and impoverishing Native American people. However, the inclusion of this first pessimistic example of intercultural alliance in conjunction with High Flier’s hopeful vision of Lady Liberty and her “eager and very earnest” (179) legion of women, implies an alternative alliance is possible between American women and American Indians.

Because it demonstrates a concerted belief in the power of storytelling to move—emotionally and intellectually—an audience into action, authoring “Blue-Star Woman” is an act of hope. As such, Zitkala-Ša asks her audience to join her in addressing the systemic conditions that create contradictory experiences of liberty for different groups of people. Additionally, the story proposes a challenge to readers by suggesting they might rehabilitate Lady Liberty by making her over as a New Woman icon—a representation of genuine human liberty for the modern era. As is true of the essay “America’s Indian

Problem,” which makes appeals to clubwomen, “Blue-Star Woman” foregrounds its appeals to the same basic audience of politically motivated and socially conscious “American women, fresh from the successful fight to win suffrage, . . . ready for their next challenge” (Dominguez xxi). Of the four authors in this study, perhaps Zitkala-Ša is the most enthusiastic about the New Woman because, as her memoir and “The Widespread Enigma of Blue-Star Woman” demonstrate, it aligns her with women in the dominant culture, potential sisters in the struggle for change.

Following the publication of *American Indian Stories*, “Zitkala-Ša’s attention turned from storytelling to expository writing and political activism, to speech-giving and congressional testifying,” as P. Jane Hafin summarizes. (Introduction vii-viii). The span of Zitkala-Ša’s adult life reflects wide-ranging intellectual and creative talents and varied approaches to community service, political activism, and artistic production. She and Raymond continued their activism after Native enfranchisement in 1924 by forming the National Council of American Indians in 1926 and serving, respectively, as its president and secretary. Though poverty and ill health played a role in Bonnin’s later years, Hafin also notes, “She lived an active life in Washington, D.C., working directly on behalf of Indian peoples” (Introduction viii). Bonnin died at the age of sixty-one on January 26, 1938, followed in death by that of her husband in 1942. They are buried in Arlington Cemetery. According to Hafin, Bonnin has no living descendants (*Dreams* xxiv). It is Bonnin’s legacy as a life-long reformer for the American Indian cause that survives and continues to provide vital insights into how diverse women writers strategically entered national discourse through the periodical to offer new perspectives on gender, race, and American identity.

“Race Tales” and “Yarns”: Schalk’s New Negro and Pulp Stories¹³

In marked contrast to Zitkala-Ša’s entrance into professional authorship via a mainstream periodical, *The Atlantic Monthly*, Schalk’s first published stories appeared in periodicals with mostly African American readerships. This is the case for what are perhaps her strongest works of fiction, all published by annual Boston New Negro periodical *The Saturday Evening Quill*, edited by Eugene Gordon during its three-year run from 1928 to 1930: “Black Madness” (1928), “The Red Cape” (1929), “Flower of the South” (1930), and “Saviour” (1930). Excluding “Flower,” which centers on white characters in a Southern community, Schalk’s *Quill* stories feature urban, working-class black characters hemmed in by their economic circumstances or otherwise find themselves in situations from which there is no escape. As is typical of later New Woman heroines of the 1920s and early 1930s, her female protagonists yearn for the freedom of financial security and desire stable, supportive relationships with their male partners. However, when racism excluded women of color from most employment other than low-paying domestic and service labor, the solution of simply running away from an unsupportive or oppressive home is a dubious option, as is a “fulfilling merger in the male arena” (Honey, ““So Far From Home”” 473). In short, Schalk’s fiction portrays a reality that makes many themes of the New Woman fantasy look like unobtainable luxuries.

In addition to the literary pieces that appear in *The Saturday Evening Quill*, Schalk also published several stories in some of the most widely circulated women’s romance “pulp” fiction magazines of the 1930’s, such as *All-Story Love Stories* and *Love Story Magazine*. With at least forty or more such stories in existence, published between

1930 and 1943, it is clear Schalk supported herself as a professional writer of fiction while also a Boston-based journalist for the *Pittsburgh Courier*.¹⁴ In assessing her formula together with Schalk's Harlem Renaissance *Quill* stories, a more complete picture of Schalk as a modernist writer emerges. Her use of a white protagonist in "Flower," for instance, forecasts her imaginative construction of identities in her romance stories, which depict white or aracial characters and reached a primarily white female audience through magazines with contents limited by subject and genre. Even a cursory perusal of an issue of *All-Story Love*, one such publication from this period, underscores the reliable rhetoric and style of the romance pulp genre: light-skinned, fresh-faced young women and clean-cut young men grace cover after cover and appear throughout the magazines' pages in the uncolored line illustrations accompanying fictional chronicles of unlikely love matches forged by the heroine's and hero's triumph over obstacles—sometimes simplistic or absurd—on the way to a happy ending and the promise of wedded bliss.

Given that Schalk's New Negro fiction and her career in general are nearly absent in Harlem Renaissance literary studies until Christine Rudisel included her and one of her contemporaries in a chapter titled, "Unearthing New Negro Women and Their Texts: Blanche Taylor Dickinson and Gertrude ('Toki') Schalk," Rudisel's work is a useful point of departure. She frames Schalk and Dickinson as "forgotten writers" and "determined and uncommon women who refused to be deterred from writing or constrained by social codes" (148). Her efforts to outline Schalk's authorial identity as a short story writer by fleshing out Schalk's concurrent work as a newspaper columnist and editor at the *Pittsburgh Courier* provide a solid foundation for additional assessments of

Schalk's work. This chapter builds on Rudisel by analyzing Schalk's stories—including her as yet to be discussed formula romance—according to their portrayal of modern concerns and themes, including the New Woman popular fiction formula.

Because Schalk's New Negro stories tend to follow a character's "down on his or her luck" scenario while showing how social institutions influence an individual's "luck"; Schalk's stories use the localized perspective of an individual character or couple to illuminate systemic problems of poverty, racism, and sexism. Themes of dehumanizing work, strained personal relationships, ill health, and sexual double-standards exemplify what Judith Musser calls the "fiction of everydayness" (30). This is the thematic background of Schalk's first *Quill* publication, "Black Madness": the story's gritty setting, language, and use of tension create a realistic feeling of urban claustrophobia. We are introduced to the protagonist, Angy, "once a nice-looking girl, [. . .] now just another colored scrubber" (58).¹⁵ When she returns from her nightshift job scrubbing the marble floors of downtown office buildings to her "dingy street and tall tenement house with its iron steps leading up into darkness" (58), Angy is overcome by exhaustion and a nagging pain in her side that causes her difficulty breathing. She has not "lost all her self-respect, even though she was married to a good-for-nothing nigger and had to support him." As she straightens the house and cooks the morning meal for her "ugly, rusty, kinky-haired, and lazy" (58) husband, Jim, Angy twice "wondered why she had married this man" (58). The language Angy uses to describe her husband is as brutally direct as possible. Schalk uses rhetorical techniques particular to the tradition of African American women's literature such as employing slang and urban dialect in her dialogue and putting her readers in Angy's consciousness to experience her uncensored thoughts—harsh as they

may be—when they come to her. In addition, this “adherence to the actual words and dialect of [. . .] speakers,” according to Musser, “reflects the writer’s awareness of how people actually spoke at various class levels” (31). In Angy’s case, her dialect is Southern-inflected, showing each of the attributes Musser attaches to Southern dialect: phonetic spellings, ellipses, and vernacular (31). By utilizing vernacular dialect, Schalk gives her characters a specific social and class background: Angy and her husband likely migrated to the North at some point.¹⁶

The story’s tone becomes ominous after Angy goes to bed and later awakens to find herself alone in the darkness. She quickly realizes that she already should be at work and “her side ached dully” (58). Soon after, Jim returns home with a group of friends in tow, including women. Listening to the exploits in the parlor, “minute after minute she lay seemingly powerless to move,” undetected by the newcomers (59). When Jim and a woman, Lou, enter the darkened room, Angy listens as he says to the other woman, “Ah got to tell you that Angy’s too good to lose? You wouldn’t let me have no ruckus every night like this. She’s a good woman. A good providin’ woman” (59). In short order Jim and Lou’s dialogue confirms their sexual relationship, a fact worsened by Jim’s obvious disrespect for Angy. He flaunts his extramarital affair in front of his friends and goes so far as to bring his lover into the bed he shares with Angy. Upon these revelations, “wave after wave of rage submerged” Angy as she considers her next move: “To get up and confront them with their guilt. . . . Jim would merely laugh and say the game was up and go and live with that woman. Shoot them both? They wouldn’t suffer enough; one pain and it would all be over. Cut them? Disfigure them? Better, but she had no knife” (59). She settles at last on the equally macabre idea of extracting her revenge by willing her

own death and leaving her “superstitious” husband and lover with a corpse (59). “She stretched out softly and lay rigid,” and before long Jim and Lou are sharing the bed with a “body paled to a dull yellow with eyes wide and staring” (59). Angy’s strategy—to die of a heart attack—has the desired effect: After mistakenly touching Angy’s cold corpse in the darkness, Lou shudders at the sight of her own hand; she then exchanges a look of “[h]orror and loathing with Jim” before fleeing the apartment (60). In a parallel to the story’s opening scene of Angy treading downtrodden toward home, the tale concludes with Jim’s lonely departure as he “stumbled down the stairs and into the icy darkness of the street” (60).

Angy’s death punishes her unfaithful, lying, freeloading husband—hardly an imaginative fantasy for mass consumption. Perhaps if Angy’s husband had equally shared their burdens, she might have recovered. Nevertheless, Angy’s death can still be understood as an emancipatory act in which she selects the time and place of her death, secures her release from worsening physical pain, and leaves her husband to fend for himself. The characterization of Jim is hardly glowing, and the marital relationship at the heart of the story “shines an unflattering light on marriage, revealing the unfortunate consequences of an ill-considered union,” as Rudisel suggests (160). Additionally, Schalk implicates the unfair labor practices of the larger economic sphere in which Angy toils in “huge office buildings” downtown with their “miles and miles of dirty marble” (58), symbolic of America’s budding modern economy. That her work should be so physically and emotionally costly while paying so little is of no small consequence.

The heroine of “The Red Cape,” Mamie, also finds her marriage in peril though she has only been married ten months, the last six of them spent alone while her husband,

Peter, was at sea. Peter makes his way from the docks toward home, accompanied by Shorty, a fellow sailor. Their conversation and Peter's unspoken thoughts slowly reveal his character and his preconceptions about women—namely their inherent licentiousness. He totes a gift for Mamie, a pair of red shoes, which he fantasizes about her wearing with her matching red cape. When Shorty exclaims at Peter's foolishness for having left a new bride alone for so long when "[t]hey git lonesome-like" (47), Peter's thoughts echo his buddy's sentiment: "How could Shorty know that Peter himself had worried about the same thing?—leaving a four month's bride for six months, alone" (46). Given his preconceptions, it takes very little "evidence" to convince him that while he was away, Mamie began spending time on Sea Street in a brothel, the yellow house backed up to the Baptist burying ground. After he parts from Shorty, Peter bumps into an acquaintance. During this brief conversation the acquaintance struggles to recollect a bit of gossip he heard about "somebody near" Peter (47). When the memory finally dawns on him, the man abruptly becomes evasive. Only moments after the two men part ways, Peter sees a flash of red in the cemetery and recognizes it as Mamie in her red cape. Combined with the acquaintance's cryptic allusions, Peter leaps to the conclusion that Mamie has been at the yellow house, convincing himself "that he had known all along that something like this would happen. Six months was too long to leave a bride Rage filled him—rage at Mamie and rage at himself for leaving her" (47).

When Peter finally arrives home, he does not confront Mamie with his suspicions; he instead believes he can read her guilt in her demeanor, as if it hangs about her like her red cape. Unfortunately, as the reader only learns later, what Peter interprets as Mamie's guilt for having prostituted herself is actually her remorse for the death of their son, Peter

Jr., who was born during Peter's absence and died just fifteen days later. Her primary concern is for her husband's feelings, and she wants only to withhold her unbearable secret until "after he had et" (48) the dinner she carefully prepares for him. When Peter can stand it no more, he tells Mamie he saw her earlier "comin out Sea Street," a fact he believes to be so loaded with meaning it is an accusation. Mamie deflates, "her eyes seeming to shrink into themselves," and she responds: "Then . . . then yo . . . know? (48).¹⁷ Of course, Peter construes her question as an admission, and his anger rises until Mamie is cowering on the floor while he "beat her down with harsh and bitter words" (48). The irony here is that for all his expression of verbal rage at Mamie—which he ceases when "[t]here was nothing more to say"—Peter is unable to really communicate about either Mamie's experiences while he was away; nor is she able to tell him about Peter Jr. or respond to his unfair assumptions about her behavior and his abusive verbal attack on her. Schalk closes her tale with Peter embarking on a two-year tour at sea, never knowing that his wife was not only faithful to him, but also racked with the guilt and pain of losing her young son. Mamie's story is a sobering example of the implications of pervasive assumptions in American culture about black women's licentiousness, which it seems likely Peter has internalized. Moreover, Schalk provides a another portrait of marriage among working-class African Americans to put alongside that of Angy and Jim from "Black Madness." These deeply troubled unions suggest a skepticism about the institution of marriage and the particular harm it causes women who have made a poor marital match.

The story "Savior" also hinges on an assumption, in this case the heroine's desperate belief that the first man to take a seeming genuine interest in her situation is a

hero—her savior—come to rescue her from her degrading and depressing reality as a prostitute. Schalk introduces Minnie, the story’s protagonist, during weary and bitter reflections on the news that a ship that just docked—a harbinger of the impending arrival of “rough sailors and stokers all rarin’ to go” (14). Her first bit of spoken dialogue is a complaint: “I’m so sick of this mess!” (14). The “mess,” as the reader soon learns, includes working with a number of other girls in “Madame’s” house, who “took good care that none of her girls got change enough with which to do much of anything” (14). Minnie’s impulse to escape this world is foremost in her thoughts, having manifested a claustrophobia ever since “Madame got [her] out of that orphans’ home” (15). The detail of Minnie’s origins—that she was essentially kidnapped by the proprietor of a brothel and thrust into work there—is a moral pardon of sorts for Schalk’s heroine, who had little or no input regarding the life she would lead or the work she would do. In recollecting Minnie’s direct transfer from orphanage to brothel, Schalk again presents a heroine at society’s extreme margins, discarded and disposable, with no apparent means of starting anew. Socially tainted in her community and too poor to travel to another place, Minnie reflects, “As if there were ever enough money to go anywhere. Madame took good care that none of her girls got change enough with which to do much of anything” (14). She finally sees a way out when she meets a man who appears different than all the others. He takes her aside and asks, “Who are you and what are you doing here?” His trite question is presumably the most interest anyone has shown Minnie. She hungers for human connection, as evidenced by the following dialogue between her and her would-be savior:

“I’m Minnie—jes one er the girls, that’s all.”

“Like it?”

She wanted to shout, to scream, “No!” But Madame might hear.

“Well—” She looked up and met his eyes. “Ain’t crazy ‘bout it.”

“He sighed suddenly. “I thought you wasn’t. You don’t look like them.”

He nodded toward the front. “I knowed you was different the first minute.”

A warm glow spread through Minnie (15).

He easily convinces Minnie to gather her things and leave with him, even as she wonders at the attention: “He liked her, and she just a common buffet woman?” (15). Later, settled on the train alone and carrying the ticket, a note for the man’s “family,” and a folded bill, Minnie anticipates the difficult path ahead with hope. When she finally starts to open the note she has been carrying, she gushes, “Her savior! Like an old time saint in modern dress” (15). Then, abruptly comprehending, his note gives up the game: his “family” is none other than the very Susie Jackson of Lowsville, whom another of Madame’s girls had earlier disparaged as far worse than their current employer. “Baby,” the girl had told Minnie, “after Susie, Madame is a angel er mercy” (14).

After having established the hard boundaries of Minnie’s existence, Schalk suggests the heroine’s near-realization of a whole new life only to have it snatched away, and her bright future replaced by an even worse reality than the one she has known. It is all too much for Minnie. Schalk’s denouement is poignant but stark: “There was no sound—not even a splash, though no one would have heard it if there had been. . . . There was nothing to show whether the girl on the platform had slipped or jumped. That is, nothing but a cheap envelope that had wedged itself under an iron bolt” (16). Like Angy, Minnie’s last act is the taking of her own life in defiance of those who would use her

body and its earning power for their own profit. The story's mysterious "hero" who negotiates a transaction with Susie Jackson for the unknowing Minnie, as well as the other "johns" and the two madams, are all part of a dehumanizing system in which black women of little means and no connections are among society's most vulnerable to exploitation for others' profit. With the tragic and unflinching drama of characters like Minnie and Angy, Schalk illuminates the real conditions of many working-class women of color in the early decades of the twentieth century, women who still lagged behind both black men and white women in income and representation in all but the most menial labor sectors.

In contrast to mainstream New Woman narratives as well as those by women of color such as Jessie Fauset and Mourning Dove, which Honey describes in "'So Far Away from Home': Minority Women Writers and the New Woman," each of Schalk's urban heroines cannot flee from home "to a large metropolis in order to escape restrictions on her creativity" (477). For Schalk's urban New Woman, there is no "metaphorical movement from margin to center," nor do they follow the circular path of migration Honey observes in earlier works about New Woman ethnic heroines (477). Schalk's working-class black heroines are already caught in the clutches of a modern urban space, a dark underworld functioning in tandem with the optimistic modernity of the later mainstream New Woman fiction—a male arena of business and culture penetrated (and at times even modified by) middle-class white women characters. Because Schalk's characters, already independent and largely self-supporting, are so hindered by the harsh circumstances of their work and family lives, their daily needs supersede any fantasies of an alternate life in which they are able to pursue creative

expression. Consider that both Angy and Minnie are dead by the conclusions of their respective stories. Schalk's heroines provide a pointed critique of the modern metropolis and its associated fantasies of changing sex-roles in the public space; she shows that the triple-bind of race, gender, and class utterly bars them from upward mobility and suggests even their current living situations are unsustainable. Furthermore, Schalk's candor in depicting this urban world in all its stark detail and relentless injustice indicates a proto-urban realism that would be melded with deep psychological studies of similar African American characters in important mid-twentieth-century novels like Richard Wright's *Native Son* (1940) and Ann Petry's *The Street* (1946).

Far from Schalk's urban settings in "Black Madness," "The Red Cape," and "Saviour," "Flower of the South" depicts a rural Southern community characterized by its inherent contradiction: "That a people so charming, so beautiful, seemingly, in spirit, should have such ugly black pages in their history, seemed incredible" (32). The narrative illuminates examples of miscegenation and the most virulent racism behind modern white culture in the South. The horrific lynch Schalk depicts in "Flower" was not unique to the South during the postwar period, but by using her outsider protagonist, the white British tourist "Hon. Hugh Stanhope Wiltshire of the Sussex Wiltshires" (32), she illustrates the ways in which even well-intentioned whites participate in the discourses, hierarchies, and violent situations racism enacts. For example, much like white Americans who might consider themselves more socially progressive than their Southern counterparts, Hugh is not offended by the sentiment behind the Senator's use of the word "nigger" so much as he is unsettled by the Senator's particular word choice: "The Senator's bald wording often bothered his sensitive ear. In England one didn't call a spade a spade quite so

glibly” (34). Hugh’s punning on a common phrase for speaking plainly—“call a spade a spade”—and a racial epithet—“spade,” betrays his racism. Schalk creates a metaphor here for the racism embedded in Hugh’s worldview: although less overt than a lynch mob or the Senator’s “bald wording,” Hugh’s racist thinking is just as pervasive. Schalk skewers this hypocrisy throughout “Flower.”

The South of “Flower of the South” comes alive through Shalk’s use of dialect and a setting shaped by its “hidden” histories entwined with generations of racial subjugation. She subtly leads her readers to question the concept of racial “purity” and the racist social institutions such a concept enables, when Hugh learns from “one of the old mammies in the town of Dixville” (33) that the area has a long history of rape, and of raising as white the resulting children who can “pass.” Shortly after this revelation, we are reminded of Betty’s “dark beauty” (34), implying her own mixed-race ancestry. Hugh is in love with this captivating woman who seems immune to the cruelty of her environment. But to his horror, he witnesses a “maddened mob” of “poah white trash” stirred into a frenzy in response to claims made by a “whore” white woman, as the Senator calls her, of being assaulted by a young black man (35-36). Hugh’s fantasy construction of Betty is shattered forever when he witnesses her dousing the young man with gasoline as she hollers above the din, “Lynch the nigger! . . . Burn the nigger!” (36) before the mob burns him alive. The horror Hugh feels as a tourist resonates with the reader, who is also a tourist in this world. The story represents a fervent indictment of naively complicit racism, embodied by Hugh, and overtly hypocritical conceptions of interracial relations, embodied by the Senator who asserts: “It ain’t the *gentleman* who lynches; it’s them poah white trash” (35). Schalk uses these narrative details to point out

absurdities in the prevailing definitions of racial identity in America. In “Flower of the South,” the entire premise of a genteel, cultured Southern “aristocracy” is undercut by its own hypocrisy, while the Senator and his racist daughter are “othered” by a visiting Englishman. In such stories we see the pointed revision of what constitutes American and “white” history, an unmistakably modernist strategy.

Schalk’s urban *Quill* stories, and their open discussion of the personal and systemic oppressions in modern life via portraits of working-class characters’ struggles operate within traditional realist narrative forms and therefore subvert assumptions about African Americans in modern city culture by exposing the crumbling moral foundation of the society that subjugates marginalized persons. On the other hand, Schalk’s romance formula fiction displays a rather strikingly different narrative framework dictated by the conventions of the popular romance formula and the surrounding context of the pulp periodical. For purposes of this analysis, I discuss three of Schalk’s romance stories of roughly the same period as her *Quill* publications: “The Adorable Infant” (15 August 1931) from *Love Story* and “Divorce You? Never!” (1 May 1933) and “Lady Greatheart”¹⁸ (1 Feb. 1933), both from *All-Story Love*. Rather than chronological “bookends” within Schalk’s career, these stories represent genre and creative bookends, particularly given that she published numerous formula stories throughout the 1930s and early 1940s but seems to have abandoned race as a prominent theme as well as the gritty realism that characterizes her *Quill* stories. Each of the three romance stories conforms to the conventional formula of this genre as established during the late 1920s in weekly, biweekly, and monthly pulps, generally priced around fifteen cents each. The formula consists of a young heroine often inexperienced about the ways of men. Frequently she is

a member of the middle- or working-class who desires greater security in her life, whether it is anticipated in the form of marriage and the “fulfillment of years of wishing and waiting,” as is Nita’s case in “Divorce,” or a more independent security embodied by Beth’s dreams of “a little place of my own somewhere in the country” in “Lady” (5). For each of Schalk’s romance heroines, her union with the hero of the story, a handsome but easily misunderstood stranger, means climbing up several rungs on the social ladder. For example, in “Divorce,” Nita’s marriage to Mr. Channing means merging with “the original Mayflower Carterets and all that hokum,” a family of the “bluest blood” (326, 314). These heroines’ up-jumps in social class also come with a corresponding boost in economic status. (Of course, this is still a popular fantasy today: obtaining both love and money in one happy match.) The action and suspense of these plots centers on a caper or accident of some kind, which often causes one of the characters—usually the hero—serious injury or illness and thus necessitates the caring attentions of the heroine, after which he recovers and a happy ending of marriage or engagement ensues. Kisses may abound, especially at a tale’s dénouement, though beyond that these stories are notably chaste. Although the formula is presumably white, Schalk’s stories demonstrate its fluid possibilities and complex dynamics within a simplified plot structure.¹⁹ As Janice Radford argues:

The repressions and repetitions in [this] textual system cannot be construed merely as artistic flaws, but are representations of the always existing conflicts in our inner and outer worlds; a desire for submission may coexist with a desire for domination; a female reader may identify with the powerful, active lover as well as with the passive, innocent

heroine; transracial and cross-gender identifications take place all the time.

(Radford 14)

The full title of the preeminent weekly pulp distributed during this period, *All-Story Love Stories of the Modern Girl*, seems to suggest modernist conceptions of womanhood, and in particular the New Woman. When that mass-market imaginative paradigm is adapted in the romance genre, however, there is little space for a New Woman romance heroine's development; her primary purpose is to fall in love with the hero.

The question in examining these stories, then, is how the author plays with the formula and the narrative space surrounding it. The genre is naturally plot-driven, and the attention to a character's psychological makeup, such as we see in Schalk's treatment of Angy in "Black Madness," is far less visible in her romance stories. For Schalk's romance heroines, the careers or daily circumstances of their lives are mostly secondary, unless those circumstances provide the set-up for her romance with the hero. For example, in "Lady Greatheart" Beth is the housekeeper of a large manor house, a job she needs though it wearies her. On the other hand, in "Divorce," Nita has devoted her later teen years and early adulthood to helping support her fiancé, Harvey, through medical school in "hundreds of small ways, even to doing all his typing lessons, slipping him fare from time to time, making up nice lunches—in every way she had put an aiding hand to Harvey's wheel of progress" (214). Least like the others is Betty in "The Adorable Infant" who, only eighteen, appears to live at home with her father and two older sisters. Without narrative space to undertake greater development of these characters and their motivations because of length and genre boundaries, Schalk has some freedom instead to play within the fantasy's plot points, using almost any fathomable backdrop for the action

and the “types” her heroine and hero represent within that setting. As fluid models, symbols, and—yes—entertaining fantasy figures, the pulp romance formula provides a modern New Negro woman writer a decent venue to stretch her creative muscles and hone her craft. Furthermore, a number of factors may have influenced Schalk and other Harlem Renaissance women writers to experiment with less representational literary production, as Rudisel suggests:

Some chose to create stories using white characters because they appealed to larger audiences. Some chose to devote their texts to concerns other than race, writing about matters such as the economics of sex and marriage, professional and personal autonomy, and socially sanctioned gender roles. And some refused to limit their creativity, opting to write about whatever inspired them (171).

The conventions scaffolding formula romance might have appealed to Schalk as a means of exploring or or satirizing “concerns other than race,” such as socio-economic class and prescribed sex-roles.

For instance, each of Schalk’s romance heroines is positioned financially in ways more privileged than that of Angy, Mamie, or Minnie. Beth is also limited in her opportunities to escape her current situation, which, like Angy, has a negative impact on her health. Meanwhile, Betty Ann, youngest of these heroines, has yet to face “adult” problems, though she chafes at the same irritants most teenagers do—her family’s limiting vision of her. Nita’s role as a helpmeet seems to have been little more than a holding pattern until her anticipated marriage—which, one surmises, would be more of

the same. Her story in particular demonstrates how Schalk can, within this formula, problematize modern social codes, in this case feminine virtue.

During the climactic action of “Lady Greatheart,” Beth’s wealthy employer, Starr, shoots Hartley in an attempt to keep her illegitimate claim on his estate. Starr and the police falsely accuse Beth of the attempted murder. In “Divorce,” Nita’s scoundrel fiancé, Harvey, sets her up to be discovered in a compromising situation—alone in an isolated cabin with another man—thereby tarnishing her virtue and giving Harvey an easy excuse to break their engagement. Both of these heroines must be “saved” by their respective “heroes.” The near-fatally wounded Hartley is the only witness who can clear Beth of the allegations against her. In Nita’s case, she learns at the last moment she is the intended victim of her fiancé’s plot, leaving her with only two options: allow herself to be the victim of Harvey’s scheme or go along with Channing’s plan to convince the authorities he and Nita are waiting at the cabin for a justice of the peace to arrive and marry them. Nita, furious at the situation, nevertheless plays along with Channing’s story at the critical moment, and the Sherriff marries them. Intricate plot contrivances aside, this patriarchal “hero saves the lady” trope can be interpreted in ways that suggest an awareness on the author’s part of the larger socio-cultural context, as Jean Radford asserts:

The hero’s ability to take care of the heroine, while it reflects patriarchal assumptions, actually runs counter to many women’s experience. For women whose primary daytime role, in the family or the workplace, is to nurture others, this convention may represent their desire to be the beloved, the child, the center of love and attention. This experience, while

it contains or substitutes for demands made in the real world, may equally empower or support any demands made in that world. (14).

An intriguing dimension of this desire for a fantasy of being “saved” is the ways in which Schalk mitigates it. For example, Channing also betrays Nita by failing to disclose that he has in own motivations for the sham marriage; he has desired her since their first meeting just two hours before, when he “stepped into that office and saw you so sweet and dear and altogether lovable. I knew then I’d never have any other woman but you” (325). In order to get to know Nita, Channing encourages her misperception that he is the driver of the car scheduled to arrive and take her to the cabin. In “Lady,” Hartley saves Beth from a murder charge, but she in turn saves him through her quick aid of his wounds following Starr’s attempt on his life. Thus, Schalk plays with the conventions of the rescued woman plot, supplying the fantasy of a “[t]he hero’s ability to take care of the heroine” (14) as Radford puts it, while also giving those rescued heroines agency to do a little rescuing themselves—a move that might serve to validate both the fantasies and the daily realities of her readers’ lives.

To turn back to Schalk’s New Negro stories, she imbues her heroines with the strength to mitigate their unfair fates. They do not triumph over their circumstances, but they do not acquiesce to them either. Angy’s suicide, for instance, is the ultimate revenge on her unfaithful husband and a way of restoring the dignity Jim affronted by regularly bringing another woman into their home while she earned their rent. In a related example, Minnie’s suicide is an escape from what she expects would be an even more degrading life at Susie Jackson’s house on High Street in Lowesville. The final scene in “The Red Cape” is that of Mamie standing in solitary vigil over her son’s grave, her attitude

embodied by the red cape that flutters “defiantly” in the breeze (49). Schalk leaves Mamie’s fate ambiguous. Abandoned by Jim, it is possible she will build her life anew as an independent woman. This is a mitigated attitude of defiance, an unwillingness to easily bend to patriarchal forces most often represented in Schalk’s fiction by the marriage institution and its appraisal of women according to their perceived virtue. A significant correspondence between the three *Quill* stories and the romance stories I discuss here is this refusal on the heroines’ parts to meekly acquiesce. As such, Schalk adapts and deploys a New Woman attitude in both sets of stories. Schalk’s romance heroines desire physical power that would allow them to fight back against the men who have insulted, abused, or wronged them. For instance, in “Adorable Infant,” Betty Ann reflects at one point after Jerry has made her feel inferior, “If she could just slap that grin off his face maybe she’d feel better” (27). When eventually she begins to soften toward Jerry—who clearly likes her—she hardens again when he implies she needs someone to look after her: “‘I am not a child,’ she said stiffly, ‘and you had no right to follow me’” (28). After standing up for herself, Betty Ann abandons Jerry, who, as it turns out, is the one who actually needs looking after. (The reader, like Betty Ann, only discovers later that a fall from his canoe has left him wearing sopping clothing in the middle of the woods on a chilly evening.) An especially vivid example of the romance heroine’s defiance happens in “Divorce”: Once Nita’s new husband has locked her in a room, she uses her “last wave of strength” which “made her fight free of his arms. Standing erect, hating to show the weakness that filled her, Nita defied him once more” (323). A significant distinction to make about Schalk’s romance heroines’ attitudes of defiance is they are situated in plots that must resolve in the happy union of heroine and hero. In

effect, both figures “triumph” through their mutual contentment. Whatever contrivances the world may put in their way, in the end the couple circumnavigates them together, in stark contrast to “Black Madness,” “The Red Cape,” and “Saviour,” in which the heroines’ defiance cannot mitigate the larger contingencies of class and race. I suggest these parallel themes across the genres of Schalk’s short fiction are a way for Schalk to explore the power dynamics of gendered social structures like marriage, which tend to privilege men in general and Schalk’s male characters in particular. She utilizes the very modernist concept of binary positions—hero/heroine, victim/victimizer, New Woman/True Woman—to position her romance characters according to conventional expectations and then subvert those expectations through role reversals and contradictory emotional responses. In this way, melodramatic as they may be, Schalk’s romance stories reflect the fluid and paradoxical forces at work in modern culture and the lives of her female readers.

Ultimately, this preliminary study of Schalk’s New Negro and romance fiction suggests further directions for recovery work. As an author, Schalk forged fruitful connections with other writers, participated in the later years of the Harlem Renaissance literary project, earned her own living as a journalist, editor, and romance fiction writer, and sustained a public voice in an array of newspapers and magazines over the course of three and a half decades by the time she retired from the Pittsburgh Courier in 1974, just three years before her death in 1977 (Rudisel 152).²⁰ What is apparent here is that Schalk participated in both the discourses of the New Negro and the New Woman in ways that allowed for her to develop her own modernist voice in both a literary, African American periodical and publish successfully for over a decade within genre periodicals that were

white-owned, intended to reach an almost exclusively female white female readership, and at least superficially inclusive of only white characters and narratives. In this decade before her *Courier* promotion and marriage, Schalk seemed to need and enjoy the short story as a medium through which she could reflect her experiences, fears, and desires as an African American woman. Her alternative portraits contrast with the New Woman of middle-class white and ethnic women's popular fiction who proves to be wholly dependent on her originating social and financial circumstances, particularly if she is situated on society's margins as a woman of color. To uncover and situate Schalk is to more completely understand the traditions and trajectories of African American women's writing in the twentieth century.

¹ Zitkala-Ša, "An Indian Teacher Among Indians" (85)

² Throughout Zitkala-Ša's life, a clearly powerful connection exists between her name and her identity. Changes signal shifting relationships and allegiances with her family and culture. Zitkala-Ša ("Red Bird") is the author's self-selected penname. She grew up as Gertrude Simmons, only taking Gertrude Bonnin when her decision to pursue an education in the east provoked her sister-in-law: "[M]y brother's wife—angry with me because I insisted upon getting an education said I had deserted home and I might give up my brother's name 'Simmons' too" (Hafen, *Dreams* xvii). After her marriage to Raymond Bonnin in 1902, she went by Gertrude Simmons Bonnin or simply Gertrude Bonnin. Following Hafen, in this essay I refer to "Zitkala-Ša" when discussing her artistic productions and constructions of authorship and use "Bonnin" or "Simmons" in general reference. Because there is no standard Lakota orthography, in the scholarship about Bonnin her penname appears in some publications as "Zitkala-Ša" and in others as "Zitkala-Sä." For clarity and consistency, here I have regularized these variant spellings.

³ Recent studies of Zitkala-Ša's stories and essays published between 1900 and 1902 in *Atlantic Monthly*, *Harper's Magazine*, and *Everybody's Magazine* include Bernardin, Chiarello, and Hannon. Batker focuses on contributions by Zitkala-Ša and other Native women writers to *American Indian Magazine*, which she reads as "analysis and appropriation of reform politics in the Dawes Era" [1887-1934] (16). Cox examines Zitkala-Ša's editorial work and involvement with the Society of American Indians (S.A.I.) and also offers extended discussion of Zitkala-Ša's career as a writer and activist.

⁴ In her case study of Zitkala-Ša, Okker grapples with the process and problems of canonizing the works of Native American writers according to Euroamerican literary

traditions such as regionalism and realism. “Neither fully admitted to the canon nor completely excluded from it,” Okker explains, “Zitkala-Ša’s work demonstrates that, for most Native American texts, entrance into the canon of literary anthologies is a difficult and problematic process” (89).

⁵ Revisionist anthologies include Maureen Honey’s *Shadowed Dreams* (1989), Marcy Knopf’s *The Sleeper Wakes* (1993), Ruth Elizabeth Randolph and Lorraine Elena Roses’s *Harlem’s Glory* (1996), Patton and Honey’s *Double-Take* (2001), and Craig Gable’s *Ebony Rising* (2004). The following are especially instructive feminist revisionist studies: Hazel V. Carby’s *Reconstructing Womanhood* (1987), Gloria T. Hull’s *Color Sex and Poetry* (1987), and Cheryl A. Wall’s *Women of the Harlem Renaissance* (1995).

⁶ Also see Hafen’s Introduction to *Dreams* (xiii).

⁷ For a brief overview of Bonnin’s tribal nationality and linguistic affiliations (namely, the three dialects spoken by Sioux peoples: Nakota, Dakota, and Lakota) and critical approaches to resolving questions of terminology, see Hafen (*Dreams* xiv). Like Hafen, I use “Yankton” in describing Bonnin’s specific cultural location and “Sioux” in common reference.

⁸ As Rudisel summarizes, “[Schalk] used her nickname, ‘Toki,’ when writing for the *Pittsburgh Courier*, used Gertrude when writing short stories, and dropped Ruth and Von” (148). After she married John Wesley Johnson III in 1946, she appears most frequently in the public record (including her bylines) under “Toki Schalk Johnson.” Rudisel has greatly expanded previous biographical sketches, particularly concerning Schalk’s post-marriage years, including the later period of her career in the early 1970s. Rudisel’s primary sources for this later period are Schalk’s “Smart Talk” and “Toki Types” columns as well as Hazel Garland’s “Things to Talk About” column, all from the *Pittsburgh Courier*. New details added in this study are culled from the following: “About Our Contributors”; LuTour; Shelton; Schalk, “Faith Came”; and “Toki Johnson Succumbs.”

⁹ The following sources examine of ethnic women authors and the New Woman: Honey, “‘So Far Away from Home’: Minority Women Writers and the New Woman” (1992) discusses middle-class New Woman narratives by women of color, comparing them to themes found in popular women’s fiction of the time. Batker (2000) examines literary authors as well as political activists. Patterson’s study (2005) includes a chapter on Sui Sin Far as well as a chapter on Pauline Hopkins and Margaret Murray Washington in relation to the New Negro Woman. Finally, Rich’s full-length study (2008) is the first to focus exclusively the New Women and on non-white women writers from different cultural backgrounds.

¹⁰ See, for example, Linderman’s *Pretty-Shield: Medicine Woman of the Crows* (1932), Pretty-Shield’s autobiography as she told it through an interpreter to Linderman, a white man. *Cogewea: The Half-Blood* (1927) by Mourning Dove represents one of the first published novels by a Native American woman. Just how heavy-handed her editor Lucullus Virgil McWhortor, also a white man, was in editing Mourning Dove’s manuscript is unclear.

¹¹ See Hafen, *Dreams* (xxi-xxii) for a discussion of the Bonnins’ collaborative activist work, which suggests their shared cultural, intellectual and political commitments.

¹² In addition to Batker (2000), recent studies by Hannon (2001) and Cox (2004) shed light on Zitkala-Ša's activism, editorial work, and journalism while involved with S.A.I. the *American Indian Magazine*.

¹³ The first quotation in this subtitle references an article from the 10 November 1928 issue of *The Afro American*, "Four Race Stories in 1928," announcing the publication of *The Best Short Stories of 1928* edited by Edward J. O'Brien, which contains four stories by three black writers: Schalk ("Black Madness"), Dorothy West ("Unimportant Man"), and Eugene Gordon ("Cold Blooded" and "Alien"). I am grateful to Melissa Homestead for the lead on the second source referenced in my subtitle: a letter from "Toki" Schalk to "Darling" dated January 2, 1931: "Sold another yarn. Found the check waiting for me when I got home. Oh, dear, I'm beginning to feel like a bloated plutocrat!"

¹⁴ This number represents the stories I have been able to verify through such varied sources as the online *FictionMags Index* edited by William G. Contento, *Ebay.com*, and other web sellers of vintage pulps. Unfortunately, these early twentieth-century romance pulps were largely seen as disposable ephemera rather than collectable during their heyday, and those that have survived eight decades are in poor condition. There are currently no complete collections or archives of any series of these magazines, and indexes are incomplete, frequently subject to typographical errors. Locating publisher and editorial information on defunct mass-market periodicals also proves difficult, though digital projects like *The Pulp Magazines Project: An Archive of All-Fiction Pulpwood Magazines from 1896-1946* edited by David M. Earle, Patrick S. Belk, and Matt Vaughn are beginning to make pulps and their history substantially more accessible by scanning and posting them online.

¹⁵ The contrast between the working woman's longings and the actual realities of her life would be echoed a year later in Alice Dunbar-Nelson's poem, "The Proletariat Speaks": I love beautiful things: / . . . Fountains sparkling in white marble basins, / And so I sleep / In a hot hall-room whose half-opened window." Dunbar-Nelson's speaker longs for a life of comfort, but the fine world she imagines is a stark contrast to the suffocating reality she describes. The poem concludes with the speaker lamenting realities of her existence as she describes her bedroom that "admits no air, only insects, and hot choking gasps / That make me writhe, nun-like, in sackcloth sheets and lumps of straw (75-6).

¹⁶ By imbuing her characters with a South to Northeast migration history, Schalk places them in a larger cultural narrative in African American history. Five hundred thousand black Americans flocked to the Northern cities between the years 1915 and 1920, according to Paula Giddings's estimate (141), though David Levering Lewis puts the number of migrants at three hundred thousand before the year 1920 (20). These migrants sought higher wages and a reprieve from increasing racial violence in the South that included a revived Ku Klux Klan (D. Lewis 23).

¹⁷ Throughout the story a characteristic of Schalk's rendering of speech is dropped letters at the ends of certain words, notably, as in the instance of Mamie's question, "yo" in place of "you."

¹⁸ The title of this story appears to be a reference to the 1918 bestselling romance novel *Greatheart* by British author Ethel M. Dell (1881-1939). In Schalk's story, the hero, Hartley, mocks the heroine, Beth, by equating her to a "noble heroine" (82). His opinion about romance novels is not an appreciative one: "You talk like Lady Greatheart from

one of grandmother's novels. . . . And if I should run true to form, being at present the wayward hero—or am I the villain?" (82). Later in the story an unnamed male character quips, "This looks like one of those dramatic scenes between heroine and villain in a dime thriller!" (87). These references seem to be Schalk's "inside jokes" with her readers; perhaps they also illustrate Schalk's sense of humor about stereotypes in the larger culture toward readers of women's formula romance fiction.

¹⁹ Race is never overtly discussed in these romance stories, and there are no named people of color portrayed in them. Schalk frequently refers to skin color throughout her fiction, and these seems especially true of her romance stories. For example, in the seventeen-page story "Lady Greatheart," Schalk references the skin color of her characters as either "white," "sallow," or "pale" sixteen times, often to indicate ill-health.

²⁰ "Schalk did not go quietly into retirement," explains Rudisel, "instead she wrote even while convalescing at the Law Den Nursing Home in Detroit, mailing her columns to Pittsburgh over the course of an entire year" (153). In previous biographical sketches, Schalk's death is listed as either unknown or, erroneously, 1980. According to a *Pittsburgh Courier* article about her life and work that ran a week after her death, she died on April 23, 1977 at Law Den ("Toki Schalk Succumbs").

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