

MAKE SOMETHING BESIDES A BABY: RACE, GENDER, AND REPRODUCTIVE
SCIENCE IN 20TH CENTURY BLACK WOMEN'S NOVELS

by

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A DISSERTATION

Presented to the Department of English
and the Graduate School of the University of Oregon
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

June 2019

DISSERTATION APPROVAL PAGE

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Title: Make Something Besides a Baby: Race, Gender, and Reproductive Science in 20th Century Black Women's Novels

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Degree awarded June 2019

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DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

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Doctor of Philosophy

Department of English

June 2019

Title: *Make Something Besides a Baby: Race, Gender, and Reproductive Science in 20th Century Black Women's Novels*

Make Something Besides a Baby: Race, Gender, and Reproductive Science in 20th Century Black Women's Novels challenges the opposition between literature and science that has obscured the ways Black women write science and technology into their fiction. Since Black women have largely been excluded from the mainstream discursive space of medicine and science except as objects of study, turning to fiction has offered a powerful means to evidence, critique, and revise experiences of Black reproduction. In their novels, Black women claim authority over the state of Black reproduction and position themselves as arbiters of reproductive theory. I analyze the fixation on specific, historically contingent representations of reproductive science in Black women's fiction that reveal the inconsistencies and fissures in scientific discourse. I argue that these writers establish a Black feminist theory of reproductive science and technology that prioritizes Black women's reproductive experiences with, for instance, involuntary sterilization or surrogacy. In chapters on Nella Larsen, Gwendolyn Brooks, Fran Ross,

Ntozake Shange, and Octavia Butler, I uncover the work these Black women writers do to theorize Black reproduction alongside and against cutting-edge science and technology. My project demonstrates how this literature resists the unsatisfying and often violent paradigm of scientific objectivity even as it articulates alternative epistemologies of scientific thought.

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Fiction*. Duke UP, 2018. *Women's Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, vol. 47, no. 7,
2018, pp. 761-762.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

A signed and sealed dissertation bearing one name on the cover betrays the countless people who have had a hand in its making. I acknowledge these others first not to undermine my own accomplishments. But intellectual endeavors exist within a community, and I would like to take stock of the many people who have helped me to this achievement.

I must first thank Courtney Thorsson for everything she has done to guide me along this journey. Little did I know that in signing up for my first graduate seminar at the University of Oregon I would not only find the topic of my life's studies but also find a mentor who I deeply admire and who has modeled how to be a rigorous and generous thinker. I would not be the scholar I am without your steadfast mentoring. You've welcomed me to the field of African American studies, taught me how to recognize and attend to my own assumptions, and helped me improve my writing beyond measure. More than that, you've made me feel like a true colleague and a friend. For all of this and more, I will forever be grateful.

I next must thank the members of my dissertation committee, Mary Wood, David Vázquez, and Camisha Russell, for helping me shape this project into its best possible form. I also offer a special thanks to those who have read seminar papers, prospectus drafts, and partial chapters related to this work: Lara Bovilsky, Sharon Luk, Ernesto Martínez, Ed Chang, Kemi Balogun, Shoniqua Roach, Mark Whalan, and Henry Wonham. I extend a special thanks to my friend and colleague, Will Conable, who has commented on several portions of this dissertation and who has spent countless hours discussing with me the ideas within. And to my writing group, Courtney Floyd and Katie Jo LaRiviere, I thank you for your support and for your friendships. Together, we found much more than a writing group.

Additionally, I thank Kathy Furrer, Karen McClain, Julie Anderson, Susan Meyers, and Melissa Bowers for their diligent work making the English Department run smoothly.

I am grateful for a large group of dispersed friends and colleagues. To those who have graced the halls of the PLC: Carmel Ohman, Kate Huber, Tia North, Alex Newsom, Cassie Galentine, Jiesha Stephens, Stephanie Mastrostefano, Megan Reynolds, Celeste Reeb, and Avinnash Tiwari, thank you for your friendships. Likewise, I am grateful to those who propelled me from the MA to the PhD, including Kurtis Hessel, Alex Corey, Dan Larsen, Grace Rexroth, Chris Kelleher, Kyle Bickoff, and Mariana Alcarón, who always supported me even when I felt out of my depth. And to the friends who now are family, Aly and Ozzie Meireles, Justin Harned, Adrien Anderson, Jenna Mandell-Rice, Sista Luna, Courtney Amerin, and Cody Flanagan. Thank you to the community I've found in Eugene: Thea Chroman, Ocean Howell, Carol Stabile, Mark Unger, Tony Unger, and Peter Thorsson. And to Alexis Aiello, Remy Jewell, and Bonnie Sheehey, thank you for having shared a home with me and making my day-to-day exponentially more joyful.

My final thanks are to my family. To my mother Debra Morack and my sister Haley Rovak, both too far away. Your constant and unwavering support and celebration of my accomplishments has always made me believe that anything is possible. And to my father, Ken Rovak, who I wish could have seen this chapter in my life come to a close. Finally, I wish to thank Jeremiah Favara, who has seen me through the trials and the achievements during these years. Your generosity and intellect inspire me, and you have helped me become a better (and a more scheduled) person. And thanks to you, I also have the h*ckin best dog around, Frankie—who diligently oversaw the writing of this dissertation from her perch next to me on the couch.

For my mother, Debra.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

So what about the pill? Does it liberate or does it not? Will it help us forge new relationships or not? Does it make us accomplices in the genocidal plot engineered by the man or does it not? ... Who says the pill means you're never going to have children? Do we need to talk about communes, day-care centers, pregnancy stipends?

Toni Cade Bambara, "The Pill: Genocide or Liberation?" (1970)

I. Black Women's Fiction as Reproductive Theory

In an essay in her landmark Black feminist anthology *The Black Woman* (1970), Toni Cade Bambara poses a series of questions intended to disrupt the polemic debate within the ranks of Black radical activists for or against oral contraceptives. Her questions interrogate the role of reproductive medicine in establishing intragroup relationships, relationships to the state, and relationships to science. When Bambara asks, "who says the pill means you're never going to have children?" she questions the authority of reproductive discourse that filters down from men to women and from practitioner to patient (208). Many Black women writers across the century join Bambara in challenging the place of Black women in reproductive science and medicine. This dissertation excavates Black women's theories of reproductive science, technology, and medicine in fiction of the twentieth century. When the discursive space of medicine and science excludes the voices of Black women, fiction becomes a resource for witnessing, critiquing, and revising the experiences of Black reproduction. Throughout this dissertation, I uncover how Black women writers claim authority over the state of Black reproduction and position themselves as arbiters of reproductive theory. In contrast to the exclusionary discourses that compromise the field of reproductive science—discourses

that span political, judicial, scientific, and activist rhetorics—fiction opens channels for Black women's theorizing.

Over the course of this dissertation, I move across the twentieth century to consider the shifting terrain of perspectives on Black reproduction from within and outside of the Black community in contemporary Black women's fiction. Specifically, I closely read Black women's novels of different periods and genres: *Quicksand* (1928) and *Passing* (1929) by Nella Larsen, *Maud Martha* (1953) by Gwendolyn Brooks, *Oreo* (1974) by Fran Ross, *Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo* (1982) by Ntozake Shange, and *Kindred* (1978) and *Dawn* (1987) by Octavia Butler. In these texts, theories of Black reproduction appear in dialogue, narrative, form, and structure. These authors afford Black mothers and non-mothers alike space to record the reproductive realities in their given era and to articulate theories of reproductive justice from the standpoint of Black womanhood. In my readings, I seek answers to the following critical questions: How have Black women writers responded to controlling narratives and policies of Black reproduction? Do these texts simply resist dominant narratives, or do they provide alternative or hegemonic images of Black maternity? If a text does more than reject or resist dominant narratives, how is that accomplished, and what are its effects? How do these texts build upon one another across the century to form a cohesive theory of reproductive justice?

Make Something Besides a Baby focuses on Black women's novels because they exist as part of the African American literary tradition, yet they share unique characteristics that constitute Black women's literature as a distinct field. Starting with Barbara Christian's *Black Women Novelists: The Development of a Tradition, 1892-1976*

(1980), scholarship in the 1980s establishes Black women's fiction as a discreet genre of African American cultural production distinguished by representations and explorations of gendered experiences such as maternity. For this project, I shift the lens from the social and cultural construction of motherhood to the science, technology, and policy that undergird and support such consistent and race-specific experiences. Fiction offers language, voice, style, and structure particular to the African American tradition that establishes a cohesive, if not always consistent, archive of Black reproductive theory. Fiction straddles the divide between the communal and the individual. It circulates in the tradition and responds to the collective experience of blackness in America, yet it amplifies single voices and subjectivities. In this way, fiction offers Black women imaginative avenues to explore and express their reverberating individual theories on race, gender, and reproduction.

By contextualizing literary fiction in the social, political, and scientific histories of reproduction in America, I follow Dorothy Roberts's lead in *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty* (1997). In this text, Roberts integrates the development and deployment of reproductive science into a critical analysis at the intersection of race and gender. While Roberts's groundbreaking work inspired a proliferation of interdisciplinary scholarship on race and gendered experiences of science and medicine, little attention has been paid to the links between Black women's literature and reproductive justice. *Make Something Besides a Baby* bridges these fields. I locate representations of reproductive science, medicine, and technology that appear explicitly and implicitly in twentieth-century Black women's fiction and argue that such representations evidence the disparate application of scientific resources. Black women's

fiction, therefore, contests the widely held assumption that science is both neutral and objective. It establishes an alternative epistemology of reproductive science that works to revise and resist hegemonic power and controlling narratives about Black motherhood and Black fecundity. Put simply, Black women's fiction of the twentieth century theorizes reproductive justice.

This dissertation takes as a central guiding principle that Black women's literature is critical theory. In "The Race for Theory" (1988) Christian argues that, "people of color have always theorized—but in forms quite different from the Western form of abstract logic. And I am inclined to say that our theorizing (and I intentionally use the verb rather than the noun) is often in narrative forms, in the stories we create, in riddles and proverbs, in the play with language, because dynamic rather than fixed ideas seem more to our liking" (68). The type of theorizing Christian describes rejects the notion of universalizing grand theories and the hierarchy of Western intellectual thought. Scholars, Christian continues, should not follow a top-down model of literary interpretation where theory takes precedence and is applied to interpret texts. Rather, we should begin with the creative work and be open and attentive to their imbedded ideas and philosophies.

In following Christian's assertion that Black women's literature is theory, this project takes an object-oriented approach. The literary works take precedence. This methodology builds on the extensive body of scholarship on Black women's literature and throughout the dissertation I engage with the wealth of critical interventions that have defined Black women's literature as a specific genre and field of study. In drawing insight and inspiration from the work of Michael Awkward, Barbara Christian, Patricia Hill Collins, Angela Davis, bell hooks, Hortense Spillers, Claudia Tate, and Mary Helen

Washington, I trace new connections across the field of Black women's literature that brings together texts that otherwise appear to have little in common, such as Larsen's tragic *Quicksand* and Butler's science fictional *Dawn*. This project reveals a previously unseen chain of signification in Black women's fiction. Likewise, the work of Ruha Benjamin, Alondra Nelson, and Dorothy Roberts inform my considerations of the histories, legacies, and resonances of science, medicine, and technologies in racial and gender formations. When put in conversation, these texts and critical lineages reveal how Black women authors construct theories of reproductive justice.

My textual analysis aims to bring a fresh perspective to canonical texts such as Larsen's *Passing* and Butler's *Kindred* and to emphasize the critical value of understudied texts such as Ross's *Oreo*. I draw on the established scholarship of Black maternity and motherhood to anchor my analysis of Black reproductive science and technology. I argue that analyses of Black maternity that do not account for the science, policy, and discourse of Black reproduction are incomplete and, in doing so, I reveal the mutual dependence of Black reproduction and scientific thought. Considering that a vast majority of fiction by Black women includes discussions of black maternity, this approach could provide fruitful readings across the field. As such, I do not attempt to cover the entirety of possible primary texts. I proceed through representative historical episodes in reproductive policy and technology and focus on pieces of fiction that directly engage the prevalent reproductive topics and approaches of their era. For example, Chapter VI considers Shange's *Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo* as conversant with the expanding market for commercial surrogacy in the 1980s. In doing so I construct a timeline of reproductive discourse and its corresponding textual representations. While the project

proceeds linearly through the twentieth century, this does not intend to imply a progress narrative or a single, uniform, evolution of reproductive ideology. Rather, as the content of each chapter demonstrates, the tides of reproductive justice ebb and flow across the decades in tandem with other major changes in the sociopolitical landscape of America.

Recent scholarship has begun to explore the depth of the relationship between science and African American literature. Britt Rusert's *Fugitive Science: Empiricism and Freedom in Early African American Culture* (2017), for example, revises the pervasive assumption that since natural science from the nineteenth century was used to confirm racial differentiation and the enslavement of Black people, African Americans had little contact with or influence on science in the period. Instead, Rusert demonstrates that African Americans also "mobilized natural science and produced alternative knowledges in the quest for and name of freedom" (4). Social inequities and systemic racism kept African Americans from participating in institutionally recognized productions of scientific thought, but their contributions can be located elsewhere. Rusert asserts that,

literary and cultural critics have a particularly important role to play in uncovering this scientific history since these engagements and experiments often happened, not in the laboratory or the university, but in print, on stage, in the garden, church, parlor, and in other cultural spaces and productions. Routinely excluded from institutions of scientific learning and training, black actors transformed the spaces of the everyday into laboratories of knowledge and experimentation. (4)

Rusert pans away from traditional sites of scientific inquiry to the "spaces of the everyday." This move unravels the assumption that science and literature are oppositional and operate largely independently from one another. As such, Black women's novels are

"laboratories of knowledge and experimentation" for the hypothesis of reproductive justice. Unlike more traditional scientific laboratories, novels are laboratories of the everyday. Their emphasis on narrative, character, and explorations of subjectivity make novels ideal sites for exploring hypotheses of reproductive justice.

The emphasis on the subjective in fiction effectively counters the presumed objectivity of empirical science. Feminist scholars have long disputed the prevailing notion that science is objective, neutral, and outside social and political influence.¹ Lorraine Code proposes a subversive remapping of empiricism that displaces ideals of objectivism and positivism and takes subjective factors into account in the production of knowledge. In "Taking Subjectivity into Account" (1993), Code proposes a position "for which knowledge is always *relative* to (i.e., a perspective *on*, a standpoint *in*) specifiable circumstances" (40, original emphasis). The relative and subjective position of Black women requires a specific epistemology. Patricia Hill Collins's *Black Feminist Thought* (1991) provides a rubric for such an epistemology. Collins responds to the collective scholarship of Black female academics that takes as its basic premise that Black women have a distinct experience of the world that can and should be named and critically interrogated. The formation of an alternative epistemology, particularly one centered around the subjectivity of U.S. Black women, challenges the unquestioned domination of elite white male epistemologies that rule the procedures and institutions of America, including the academy. These epistemologies determine what questions can be asked and

¹ The feminist response to scientific epistemologies was so vehement that Donna Haraway writes a critique of the feminist rejection of objectivity in 1988. She argues that deconstruction of objective fact negates the material realities of marginalized communities. As an alternative, Haraway proposes a form of feminist objectivity as "*situated knowledges*" that recognizes how truth claims exist in a matrix of social, political, and economic realities (581, original emphasis).

what counts as truth. Collins establishes the criteria of a Black feminist epistemology that challenges the assumption of dominant knowledge systems. It consists of a prioritization of lived experience as a method of knowing and gaining wisdom, the use of dialogue in the establishment of a relationship between speaker and active listener, an ethics of caring that values personal experience, emotions, and empathy, and an ethics of personal accountability.

While Collins does not explicitly direct her argument at science and empiricism, her conclusion that "alternative epistemologies challenge all certified knowledge and open up the question of whether what has been taken to be true can stand the test of alternative ways of validating truth" implicitly targets the paradigm of scientific truth (271). A Black feminist epistemology recognizes Black women as producers of knowledge and experts over their own reproductive lives because of the epistemological force of the everyday. Of course, the assumption of reproductive autonomy and authority extends across groups of women and is not unique to Black women's experiences. External, state-sanctioned attempts to control reproductive decisions are one of the few threads that connects otherwise disparate experiences of womanhood in America, impacting all women across lines of race, class, sexuality, and ability. Yet the manifestations, histories, and legacies of reproductive justice for particular groups of women deserves specific approaches and focused analysis. Keeping these intersectional concerns in mind, I focus on a variety of Black women's representations of reproduction with an acute awareness of how all racialized and nonhegemonic motherhoods work together to produce and maintain certain hierarchical arrangements of power. For Black

women, the interplay between reproductive justice and American chattel slavery lays the foundation for reproductive discourse across the twentieth-century.

II. American Slavery and Reproductive (In)Justice

What, though, is reproductive justice? The term was first coined in 1997 when a group of women of color activists identified the inadequacy of dominant frameworks of reproductive rights and reproductive choice. Loretta Ross, one of the founders of the reproductive justice movement, defines reproductive justice as,

both a theoretical paradigm shift and a model for activist organizing centering three interconnected human rights values: the right *not to have children* using safe birth control, abortion, or abstinence; the right *to have children* under the condition we choose; and the right *to parent the children we have* in safe and healthy environments. RJ activism is based on the human right to make personal decisions about one's life, and the obligation of government and society to ensure that the conditions are suitable for implementing one's decisions. (Ross et al. 14, original emphasis)

In mainstream discourse, reproductive rights often strictly mean abortion rights and a polarizing debate between anti-choice and pro-choice factions. Reproductive justice moves beyond this polemic and places reproduction within the matrix of racial and gender power and domination. It expands the field of critique to include considerations such as housing access and police brutality under its human rights framework. In the epigraph to this chapter, Bambara illustrates this expansive stance of reproductive justice when she asks if "we need to talk about communes, day-care centers, pregnancy stipends?" as part of the debate on oral contraceptives (207-8). While the phrase

"reproductive justice" began circulating near the turn of the millennium, as Bambara's query shows the underlying premise of reproductive justice extends backward in time and can be found in the writing of Black women authors over the past two centuries. Through fiction, Black women have insisted on the personal autonomy of reproductive justice—to have children, to not have children, and to raise children in nurturing environments.

Black women's fictional representation of reproductive science and medicine relies upon specific racialized and gendered ways of knowing. This fiction illustrates the inadequacy of mainstream debates over reproductive rights that dampen the nuance of the issues and result in polarized oppositions. Reproductive justice addresses the juxtaposition between *black* and *woman* in the texts studied here and reconciles their contradictions even if they do not always completely synchronize. Keeping in mind that reproductive justice serves the childless as well as those with or desirous of children and serves men as well as women, this dissertation understands reproductive justice as an operating structure of Black community, futurity, history, kinship, and national belonging. With reproductive justice as the organizing principle of the texts examined here, this study privileges confrontational and evasive depictions of Black maternity and non-maternity in Black women's fiction and reads these moments as subversive revisions of dominant narratives of Black reproduction. A reproductive justice reading practice seeks to uncover the theoretical work in Black fiction of constructing and testing forms of scientific discourse that reveal the fissures, gaps, and contradictions in the supposed objective and neutral empiricism.

The consistent attention to and push for reproductive justice responds to a history of reproductive injustice. With specific regard to African American women in the United

States, the predominance of reproductive injustice can be traced to the transatlantic slave trade and the economic system of chattel slavery. In "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book" (1987), Hortense Spillers describes how, during the initial phase of the African slave trade, white captors made little distinction between captured African men and women—both were Other, both were enslaved. Spillers continues to explain that gender differentiation in historical records relates to quantifiable economic value and not to gender ideology. Man and woman were spatial categories that related to how many average male or female bodies could be stowed in the bowels of a slave ship. On the ship, in indeterminate space and time, “one is neither female, nor male, as both subjects are taken into ‘account’ as *quantities*” (Spillers 72). In 1975, Toni Morrison underscores the quantitative approach to early slave imports in an analysis of *The Historical Statistics of the United States* that documented the import and export of rice, tar, turpentine, and "those humans who came to the United States from 1619-1769" ("A Humanist View"). Instead of measuring tonnage or barrel weight, Morrison notes, the ledger could only use headcount to record the number of enslaved people. Her description highlights the absurdity of placing people side by side with rice in an economic index and confirms Spillers's assessment of captive Africans as quantifiable commodities. The commodification of the enslaved African ungendered both men and women in the transatlantic slave trade.

After the 1808 embargo on importing enslaved people, Black women's reproductive bodies became the primary method for maintaining and increasing the enslaved population and, by extension, slaveowners' profits. Enslaved women were now

both workers and breeders.² Not only were enslaved women forced to work at the same pace and volume as enslaved men, their reproductive capacity was now critical to the sustenance of the slave economy. The 1808 embargo is the cornerstone of Black women's reproductive injustice in America, beginning with the paradoxical refiguring of the ideology of motherhood. Along with other slave-owning nations and colonies, the United States adhered to the legal doctrine *partus sequitur ventrem*, or the notion that children born to enslaved mothers were also legally enslaved. This doctrine runs counter to the patrimonial standards of inheritance seen in the dominant white patriarchal class. Enslaved women had no legal rights over their children and no legal recourse against the sexual abuse and rape that too often characterized their reproductive lives. Spillers suggests that "even though the enslaved female reproduced other enslaved persons, we do not read 'birth' in this instance as a reproduction of mothering precisely because the female, like the male, has been robbed of the parental right, the parental function" (77–78). Enslaved men and women who bore children claimed no rights over their offspring. There was no possibility of reproductive justice for the enslaved woman because her position as bearer of enslaved children exists outside the venerable ideology of proper womanhood and maternity.

While slaveowners stripped enslaved women of any rights to motherhood, enslaved women's reproductive health remained of critical concern. In *Medical Bondage: Race, Gender, and the Origins of American Gynecology* (2017), Deirdre Cooper Owens argues that, "reproductive medicine was essential to the maintenance and success of

² In *Women, Race, and Class* (1981), Angela Davis identifies this reconfiguration of the system of chattel slavery as the foundation for the persistent and violent stereotypes and images of Black women that continue to circulate over a century after emancipation. Such stereotypes paradoxically insist that Black women are both ideal domestic laborers and unfit mothers of their own children.

southern slavery" where "doctors formed a cohort of elite white men whose work, especially their gynecological examinations of black women, affected the country's slave market" (4). The nascent field of gynecology impacted the reproductive lives of enslaved women in two ways: first, doctors often examined enslaved women before sale to ensure their reproductive capacity and help determine their individual worth and, second, gynecological researchers practiced experimental surgeries and procedures on Black women before publishing their findings and providing their services to white women. Rather than reproduce the narrative of enslaved women's subjugation, Owens details how enslaved women were frequently both patient and nurse when recruited as gynecological test subjects.

For instance, the presumed "father of American gynecology" Dr. J. Marion Sims sought out and collected enslaved women who suffered from gynecological conditions so that he might research cures that would later be made available to white female patients. Three such women, Anarcha, Lucy, and Betsy, endured countless experimental surgeries on their vesico-vaginal fistulae under Sims's direction.³ While their exploitation and suffering position these women as symbols of reproductive injustice, Owens resists reducing their image to unidimensional victims. When not enduring experimental gynecological procedures, Anarcha, Lucy, and Betsy nursed one another and assisted Sims during procedures. Their work for the burgeoning field of gynecology represents only a portion of the discarded, erased, and forgotten intellectual labor by enslaved women that contributed to this and countless other fields. By identifying the contributions

³ For further details of Sims's career and legacy, see Cynthia Daniels and Janet Golden's "Procreative Compounds," G.J Barker-Benfield's *The Horrors of the Half-Known Life* (1976), and Diana Axelsen's "Women as Victims of Medical Experimentation" (1985). See also Bettina Judd's collection of poetry, *Patient* (2014) which uses speculative tropes to recreate Anarcha, Lucy, and Betsy's narratives.

enslaved women made to the early gynecology, Owens reclaims glimmers of their agency and shows how their knowledge and experience helped serve the enslaved community more broadly. They brought their experience and knowledge back to the enslaved population and helped educate enslaved women and men in reproductive health. What Owen's deftly reveals is that the rise of gynecology and reproductive medicine and the maintenance of the American slave economy were mutually sustaining systems in a type of symbiotic relationship. The success of one depended largely on the success of the other.

The interaction between reproductive science, medicine, and policy and American slavery plays a significant role in how Black reproduction and Black motherhood function in contemporary U.S. culture. After emancipation, the dominance of white heteropatriarchy continued to subjugate and devalue Black women, whose reproductive capacities now took on new possibilities. While free Black women could mother their children in previously unimaginable ways, they were now tasked with the challenge of uplifting the Black community, maintaining and increasing the Black population, and passing on racial identity through progeny. How these obligations are valued changes dramatically from intergroup to intragroup perspectives. The Black woman may be the herald of racial rebirth and regeneration or the embodied threat to white supremacist rule. Racial ideology settles on her body. As the nineteenth century comes to a close, however, philosophies about identity—racial and gendered—begin to shift away from embodiment. This movement from the physical to the abstract and from the biological to the social creates the dissonance in reproductive theory that Black women's fiction seeks to make legible across the century.

III. Turn of the Century Identity Formation

At the turn of the century, with the traces of Victorian tenets of true womanhood lingering, motherhood still characterized the role of women in society and in the family unit. This was true for all women regardless of race, class, or other intersecting identities. The expectations and criteria for proper maternal behavior traversed these lines even when structural disparities guaranteed that only certain women—white, middle-to-upper class, Christian, heterosexual, married, able-bodied women—could possibly fulfill these standards. While Black women performed reproductive labor, such as nannying and housework, for wealthier white women, dominant social codes devalued and degraded their role as mothers to their own children and community. White motherhood demanded protection, support, and encouragement while Black motherhood, less regulated since the end of the Civil War, provoked hostility and overt and covert attempts to curtail its proliferation.

The hallmarks of the valuation of white versus Black reproduction can be seen in Theodore Roosevelt's 1905 speech "On American Motherhood," delivered before the National Congress of Mothers.⁴ Roosevelt begins his speech by identifying urban population growth as one of the "grave dangers" threatening "our modern industrial civilization." No other metric for tracking societal progress—wealth, economic growth, cultural production—truly benefits society "unless the average woman is a good wife, a good mother, able and willing to perform the first and greatest duty of womanhood, able

⁴ In 1908, the National Congress of Mothers changed their name to the National Congress of Mothers and Parent-Teacher Associations and still operates under the heading the National Parent Teacher Association. It was not until 1970 after public school desegregation when the National Congress of Parents and Teachers merged with the National Congress of Colored Parents and Teachers, founded in 1926, to become the largest group of child advocates in the nation.

and willing to bear, and to bring up as they should be brought up, healthy children, sound in body, mind, and character, and numerous enough so that the race shall increase and not decrease." Roosevelt democratizes the ideology of proper domestic femininity for the "average woman," repeating twice that those "able and willing" to be mothers prove to society that they are physically and mentally fit and worthy of praise and respect. Yet, the degree of willingness sets the terms of maternal valuation. It is not enough to bear merely two children, a perspective that Roosevelt vehemently argues against later in his speech, but "able" women should intend to have children "numerous enough so that the race shall increase and not decrease." While the National Congress of Mothers posited a racially inclusive policy, its white female leadership and the reality of public-school segregation assures that Roosevelt's audience would be largely white and that his directive to "the race" would only superficially appear as inclusive of the entire national citizenry. As discussed at more length in Chapter II, calls to "the race" in the early twentieth-century strongly connote the white race.⁵ White women's fecundity is a matter of national concern because a declining white birthrate stirred anxieties over the loss of a white-majority. Roosevelt's speech warning against "race suicide" demonstrates how mainstream social ideology sets unequal values on women's reproductive capacity based on identity categories such as race.

At the turn of the century, however, philosophies of race were in flux. Black intellectual leader W.E.B. Du Bois encapsulates this shift with his bold proclamation that, "the problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color-line" (*Souls* 5). With

⁵ Roosevelt's speech aligns with the inferential eugenic logic found in the National Congress for Mother's original Declaration of Principles that lists as one major aspiration to "make for enlightened parenthood and for a race full of birthrights" (as qtd. in Woyshner 31).

these words, Du Bois ushers in a new and radical way of imagining racial formation that, written and repeated in his 1903 *The Souls of Black Folk*, stands as a prescient assessment of the century ahead. Du Bois revises the dominant query of the so-called "Negro Problem" of the nineteenth century. He points to a question left unvoiced that hovers in the space "between me and the other world" that has plagued him throughout his life: "How does it feel to be a problem?" (*Souls* 7). A national problem roots itself in the Black body but, for Du Bois, the national problem is not the literal Black body as it had been figured for generations previous.⁶ Du Bois recasts the national problem of antiblack racism as systemic and institutional and as a system of ideas and challenges that subsume the Black body. With his definitions of "double-consciousness" and "the veil" in *Souls*, Du Bois critiques arguments of racial embodiment without undermining the lived material reality of being Black in America. In doing so, he shows how the Negro problem transforms into the problem of the color-line.

Du Bois leads a shift in the understanding of race as socially constructed and historically contingent that gains momentum across the twentieth century. Critical race scholars have popularized this perspective on race and racism over the past three decades, spearheaded by Michael Omi and Howard Winant's racial formation theory. In their 1986 text *Racial Formation in the United States*, Omi and Winant reject the widespread and mainstream understanding of race as static and immutable and instead argue that race is a socially constructed category of identity contingent upon social, economic, and political forces. While Omi and Winant concede that "in the early years of this century only a

⁶ Over a century later, Ta-Nehisi Coates evokes Du Bois's "Of Our Spiritual Strivings" in the opening of his text *Between the World and Me* (2015). Coates contends with the same enduring paradox of racial embodiment when he asks, "How do I live free in this black body?" (12).

handful of pioneers, people like W.E.B. Du Bois and Franz Boas, conceived of race in a more social and historical way," they locate the genesis of transformational thinking about race and racialization to the years around World War II ("On the Theoretical Status" 3). Before then, they argue, "race was still largely seen in Europe and North American (and elsewhere as well) as an essence, a natural phenomenon, whose meaning was fixed—constant as a southern star." Their concession to the radical Black intellectual work at the turn of the century forecloses a deeper engagement with how Du Bois and his contemporaries, particularly Anna Julia Cooper, imagined race.

In *A Voice From the South* (1892), Cooper uses emancipation as evidence that race is not a biological fact. She writes that emancipation "at least proves that there is nothing irretrievably wrong in the shape of the black man's skull, and that under given circumstances his development, downward or upward, will be similar to that of other average human beings" (Cooper 26). Here, Cooper evokes the deployment of nineteenth-century biological science as justification for American slavery. In 1854, following the research of craniologist Samuel George Morton, Josiah Nott and George Gliddon published *Types of Mankind* that used skull measurements to imply that Black people are an evolutionary link between the white race and our great ape ancestors. This supposed empirical truth lays the groundwork for the field of phrenology, which bridges the gap between observable biological traits and human social behaviors. Made famous by Cesare Lombroso, phrenology and similar fields presume the veracity of biological determinism

and claim that facial and cranial features can be indicative of a criminal predisposition.⁷ Lombroso's work is a prime example of how scientific racism begins to shroud itself in coded language that distances it from explicit calls for white supremacy. He categorizes physical features such as a flattened nose, a sloping forehead, or large lips as signs of latent criminality. It is no coincidence that these features also conjure stereotypical images of Black individuals particularly as they circulated in exaggerated forms in nineteenth-century racist propaganda and minstrelsy. When Cooper definitively states that "there is nothing irretrievably wrong in the shape of the black man's skull," she discredits science that creates evidence on the Black body to justify large-scale systemic racism. In accordance with Du Bois's declaration of the color-line, Cooper predicts that the twentieth-century will bring a newfound perspective on racial difference defined through "given circumstances."

While Cooper shared many of the same sentiments as Du Bois, she is also attentive to the ways that gender ideologies structure Black women's lives. Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk* lacks complex and nuanced representations of Black women. For Du Bois, Black women become a repository for the detrimental or primitive aspects of Black identity that run counter to his idealized Talented Tenth. To participate in the uplifting of the race, Black women must adhere to a standard of respectability.⁸ While Du Bois

⁷ While debunked as an empirical method, phrenology continues to haunt contemporary science. For example, in 2016 widespread controversy followed the informal online publishing of a research article by engineering researchers Xiaolin Wu and Xi Zhang entitled "Automated Inference on Criminality using Face Images." Wu and Zhang create algorithms supposedly able to distinguish a "criminal" headshot from a non-criminal. This modern-day phrenology takes the same procedure of classifying certain features as indicative of adverse social behavior as Lombroso's project and trains machines to make the distinction.

⁸ In *Searching for the New Black Man: Black Masculinity and Black Women's Bodies* (2013), Ronda C. Henry Anthony claims that the idealized Black masculinity in Du Bois's *Souls* corresponds with "sanitizing the bodies of black woman" (55).

expands his consideration of Black womanhood in his essay "The Damnation of Women" from *Darkwater* (1920), discussed at greater length in Chapter II, his revised Black womanhood remains characterized by a connection to nature and to Africa. Her most venerable role is as the mother to the race who will usher in a new and liberated era.

Black women writers contest the notion that Black women are meant to be mothers and nothing else. Without undermining motherhood, they emphasized the everyday experiences and untapped potential of Black women. Cooper writes that,

The colored woman of to-day occupies, one may say, a unique position in this country. In a period of itself transitional and unsettled, her status seems one of the least ascertainable and definitive of all the forces which make for our civilization. She is confronted by both a woman question and a race problem, and is as yet an unknown or an unacknowledged factor in both. (134)

In addition to naming the "race problem," Cooper includes the "woman question" in her analysis of the social fabric at the turn of the century. Like the nation and the world at large, women are on the precipice of major transformation. She dismisses the times "fifty years ago" when "woman's activity according to orthodox definitions was on a pretty clearly cut 'sphere,' including primarily the kitchen and the nursery" (Cooper 142).

Cooper equates these trappings of domesticity with "prison bars," an image of a barrier that does not simply separate the public and private spheres as it incarcerates women in one physical and ideological space while eradicating any chance of escape. "The woman of to-day," however, "finds herself in the presence of responsibilities which ramify through the profoundest and most varied interests of her country and race." Cooper places women within the folds of all major social, political, and religious institutions as leaders.

"She stands now at the gateway of this new era of American civilization," Cooper writes, "In her hands must be moulded the strength, the wit, the statesmanship, the morality, all the psychic force, the social and economic intercourse of that era. To be alive at such an epoch is a privilege, to be a woman then is sublime" (Cooper 143).

Cooper's iconic woman staring down the possibilities of the new century differs from the recurrent metaphor of a pregnant woman who will birth new beginnings and radical transformations. That said, Cooper does gesture toward this icon when she calls this "movement...pregnant with hope and weighty responsibility" and likens the movement to a gestating form (144).⁹ The image of a pregnant woman standing on the verge of a new era, poised to welcome the coming generations tethers Black women's figurative value to their reproductive capacity. However, in contrast to this image of a pregnant woman that I discuss in more detail in Chapter II, Cooper's sketch of the "woman of to-day" molds the future with her hands. Unlike the passive vessel of Black womanhood in Du Bois's writing that, in Ronda C. Henry Anthony's words, are "feminized raw materials to be shaped and managed to produce social and political capital" (59), Cooper's Black woman is active.¹⁰ To recall the title of this dissertation, she makes something besides a baby. She makes America.

Cooper sets the stage for Black women writers to produce nuanced representations of Black women, mothers and non-mothers alike, across the twentieth-century. She offers an active, non-procreative yet creative Black woman leader standing

⁹ Brittney Cooper discusses this same passage in *Beyond Respectability: The Intellectual Thought of Race Women* (2017) and describes how Anna Julia Cooper "invokes the symbolism of a pregnant female body heavy with the weight of racial responsibility" (6).

¹⁰ Anthony attributes part of her reading of Du Bois's construction of a passive womanhood to Hazel Carby's reading in *Race Men* (1998) of the control over women's sexual beings as an antidote to Black male emasculation.

on the brink of a new era. In doing so, Cooper predicts that Black women will occupy both roles—procreative and creative, public and private, passive and active. Black womanhood can account for multiple expressions simultaneously. This multiplicity starkly opposes the unidimensional image of Black women in white masculinist theories of science, medicine, and technology. Since Black women have largely been excluded from the mainstream discursive space of medicine and science except as objects of study, turning to fiction offers a powerful means to evidence, critique, and revise experiences of Black reproduction. The imaginative possibilities of fiction exceed the structures of the sociopolitical world. Black women's fiction of reproductive justice requires innovative formal strategies to reveal unseen relationships and envision new possibilities. This fiction re-narrates the single story of Black motherhood told and retold in social and political circles, often even within the Black community. Even when the reproductive scenarios seem dire, as they occasionally do in Larsen's and Shange's fiction, the writing of Black women prompts readers to imagine the transformative power of Black women authoring their own reproductive destinies.

IV. Reproductive Justice Readings of 20th Century Fiction

This dissertation traverses the twentieth-century to consider Black women's fiction alongside the social, political, and scientific discourses that shape and set the valuation of racialized reproduction. Chapter II explores the irreconcilable and often contradictory ideologies of Black maternity in Nella Larsen's two published novels *Quicksand* (1928) and *Passing* (1929) as responses to eugenic pressures on and expectations of Black women during the first decades of the century. *Quicksand* and *Passing* formally and discursively reveal the fragmentation of personal subjectivity and

the dissolution of a reproductive futurity as characterized by the tension between racial and gendered claims to maternal identity. When Helga Crane, the protagonist of *Quicksand*—an educated, cosmopolitan Black woman living during the 1920s—boldly asks "Why add any more unwanted, tortured Negroes to America? Why do Negroes have children?," she hears the rationalization that "the race is sterile at the top" (96). Helga confronts the argument that her status and pedigree obligate her to have children for the sake of the race, an argument that synthesizes the most prevalent justifications for eugenic ideologies at the time, much like Roosevelt's rhetoric in "On American Motherhood." Helga's oscillating loyalties to the program of racial uplift and to her own autonomous female body are stifling and result in her ultimate demise through a degenerate image of over-fecundity. Similarly, in *Passing*, both Clare Kendry and Irene Redfield contend with dueling loyalties to their multiple and often unreconcilable identity claims. Since both characters are Black women who are capable of passing for white, their experiences of marriage and maternity reveal how these ideological systems uphold, confer, and even threaten their selfhood. Clare who passes for white in all aspects of her life, for instance, needs to give birth to white children to confirm her own racial identity and to preserve her institutionally recognized relationship with her husband. In both novels, Larsen establishes a gap between the protagonist and narrator that operates outside of the rigid binarism upheld by eugenic ideologies that characterizes the reproductive discourse of the Harlem Renaissance.

It is important to start this project by deconstructing American eugenic thought because it serves as a platform for the later approaches to more concrete reproductive medicine and policy. While a century later eugenics is often dismissed as a

pseudoscience, retroactively degrading historical scientific thought to pseudoscience erases how an ideology like eugenics once operated as hard scientific fact and influenced the development of more recent legitimized scientific fields. Rusert writes that naming a field pseudoscience "obscures the emergence of scientific fields out of nonscientific contexts as well as the processes by which those fields are legitimated as science...the deployment of *pseudoscience* tries to imagine a scientific present unencumbered by an embarrassing scientific past" (6). It also undermines the ways that eugenic ideology retreats from the mainstream circulation of reproductive discourse and instead settles into the structural background of reproductive ideology. An increasingly covert eugenics takes on a more insidious and pernicious role in the structuring of reproductive control and freedom to disparate groups of women throughout the twentieth century.

American eugenic thought retreats to the background of reproductive ideology largely in response to the atrocities of World War II. The genocide regime of Nazi Germany was consistent with, if not outright inspired by, American eugenic thought. Narratives of American exceptionalism and moral superiority require a distancing from eugenic rhetoric even while efforts to curb undesirable procreation persists under new guises. Chapter III travels to the wake of World War II and considers Gwendolyn Brooks's poem "the mother" (1945) alongside her novella *Maud Martha* (1953). This chapter considers Brooks's writing alongside increased surveillance of Black women's reproduction as seen in the uptick in abortion regulation and nonmedical involuntary sterilizations. The chapter begins with "the mother," Brooks's abortion poem from her first published collection *A Street in Bronzeville*. This poem is an unexamined and vital precursor to Brooks's later examinations of maternity and reproduction. In "the mother,"

an unnamed speaker grieves her aborted children while conceding that the state also bears responsibility for her decisions to abort her pregnancies. The speaker creates a private space to mourn where her contradictory stances—to regret her decisions yet repeat them, to desire her children yet dread their lives under the systems of American racism—can exist together through repetition with difference. These formal techniques reappear in *Maud Martha* when the title character contemplates her control over life and death. While the poem and novella differ in terms of genre, style, and tone, the use of repetition with difference in each reveals how Brooks establishes a space for Black women's reproductive privacy in her writing. The formally rendered private space protects her characters from an external invasive, surveilling gaze.

Chapter IV marks a turn in the types of reproductive science considered from the restrictive—eugenics, abortion, sterilization—to the expansive. This chapter outlines the scientific and commercial history of artificial insemination with frozen sperm. While first invented for the cattle industry, freezing human sperm became a reality in the 1950s. One novel and, to many, disturbing possibility of this new technology gripped the public's imagination: postmortem paternity. If sperm could be frozen, then men could bear children long after their death. This condition of artificial insemination frames my analysis of Fran Ross's novel *Oreo* (1974). In the text, Christine "Oreo" Schwartz reenacts a modern and satirical version of the Greek Theseus myth as she follows a series of clues left by her estranged father to discover the secret of her birth. Near the conclusion, Oreo learns that her parents conceived her using artificial insemination. In the imaginative retelling of this moment, Oreo's mother Helen fades away from consideration as the narrative focuses on her father. This structure formally mimics the way that new

reproductive science in the late twentieth-century focuses on men often at the expense of women even though women's bodies still perform most of the procreative labor. Upon learning her secret, Oreo obtains her now deceased father's remaining frozen sperm deposits with the intention to use them to bargain for her lost inheritance. As I demonstrate in the chapter, the advent of artificial insemination with frozen sperm both threatens to replicate the marginalization of women, particularly women of color and also offers new and unprecedented opportunities for Black women to harness control over and author their own reproductive destinies.

Chapter V expands the scale of reproductive technologies from the individual subject to the collective community. Ntozake Shange's novel *Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo* (1982) contains a speculative, dystopic dream sequence where one of the title characters, Cypress, imagines an all-female isolationist community in post-apocalyptic England. This seemingly feminist utopia quickly becomes a nightmare when Cypress realizes that women of color endure procreative punishment as a means of maintaining the community's population. Since men are taboo, the "bearers" conceive via artificial insemination. Like artificial insemination in *Oreo*, this procedure in *Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo* highlights the potential threat to women of color's reproductive autonomy in the new age of reproductive science. Shange's novel, however, considers these implications on a communal scale instead of an individual one. Shange considers artificial insemination alongside third-party surrogacy to interrogate the role of reproductive science for the wider Black community. This multigeneric and multivocal novel emphasizes the approach to community over individuality, and Shange uses the speculative mode of the dream sequence to collapse women of color across time and

space into one cohesive unit. In her analysis, Shange remains attuned to the inclusion of men and of other women of color, a move that reveals the rippling effect of reproductive policy and science beyond the primary focus of Black women.

Chapter VI continues the interrogation of cyclical temporality and speculation from Chapter V in focusing on Octavia Butler's speculative fiction. This chapter begins with an examination of Butler's contemporary narrative of slavery, *Kindred* (1978). In *Kindred*, Dana, a Black woman, travels from 1976 to antebellum Maryland whenever her white slaveowner ancestor Rufus is in mortal danger. While many scholars have written on both the time travel and the role of maternal ancestors in *Kindred*, these readings are impoverished without a consideration of genetic science. Dana uses genetic logic to rationalize her time travel experience, an organizing structure that works against the text's skepticism of biological determinism and historical reconstruction. Butler's use of speculative fiction tropes such as time travel undermines the growing certainty in mainstream scientific belief that genes are static pieces of reproductive data. The genetic theorization in *Kindred* becomes clearer when contextualized against Butler's alien-encounter novel *Dawn* (1987). In *Dawn*, the alien Oankali save the remnants of humanity from global apocalypse. In return, humans must crossbreed with the Oankali to create a new hybrid species that combines their individual genetic assets. Not only does this novel confront the notion of the inviolable human species, but the Oankali theory of genetics refutes, again, the growing belief in genetics as fixed and interpretable. By placing *Kindred* and *Dawn* in conversation, this final chapter argues that Butler's genomic theory harnesses the narrative potential of genetics without conceding to genetic essentialism or determinism.

The complexities of the challenges, concession, and progressions in Butler's genomic theory construct a critical framework with which to critique the advances in genetic science into the new millennium. Genomics characterizes both the temporal future of this project and the horizon of reproductive possibilities in the twenty-first century. Chapter VII, the Conclusion to *Make Something Besides a Baby* lingers on the notion of a Black reproductive futurity. What is the role of the future in light of continuing racial and gender inequities made most visible in the contemporary disparities of maternal health and outcomes? The Conclusion draws out the connections between the theories of reproductive justice established through Black women's twentieth century fiction and the perpetuation of reproductive injustice in contemporary America.

In the era of genomics, racial identity resettles onto the bodies of Black people. This threatens a resurgence of a myriad of injustices and inequities that have been raised throughout this dissertation such as eugenics and other race sciences. Genomics also, as Alondra Nelson observes in *The Social Life of DNA* (2016), sets the stage for personal and communal reconciliation projects. DNA and genetics seem to unlock hidden histories that, due to the strategic destruction of records both physical and discursive by the white ruling class, Black people in America have little if any access to through other means. Claiming an ancestral past through DNA analysis can heal some wounds. Reading the reproductive theory of twentieth-century Black women writers offers a lens through which to understand the changing tides of genomics. Their articulations of reproductive justice reject unidimensional solutions that reduce the complexity of Black women's experiences and claim them under rigid binaries for or against childbearing. The directive, then, to make something besides a baby is not so much a rejection of

procreativity as it is a reprioritization of gendered reproductive obligations and a renegotiation between science and the Black community. Scenes of self-definition, creation, and confrontation come together in the texts addressed in this dissertation in order to show how Black women envision reproductive justice through fiction.

CHAPTER II

THE EUGENICS PARADOX IN NELLA LARSEN'S NOVELS

American Negroes have been a race more in name than in fact, or to be exact, more in sentiment than in experience. The chief bond between them has been that of a common condition rather than a common consciousness; a problem in common rather than a life in common.

Alain Locke, *The New Negro* (1925)

I. Masculinist Calls for Racial Unity

In 1925, the anthology *The New Negro* articulated a new communal social, political, and artistic identity for Black people in America. The growth of the Black community in Harlem, diverse in background and nationality, manifests the "common consciousness" that Alain Locke identifies in his introductory essay to the collection, also titled "The New Negro" (7). Houston Baker writes that, "the world of *The New Negro* represents a unified community of national interests set in direct opposition to the general economic, political, and theological tenets of a racist land. The work is, in itself, a *communal project*" (77, original emphasis). The question of collective, racial identity preoccupies much of the creative production of the period known as the Harlem Renaissance.

Locke describes the "new" aspect of the New Negro as the "development of a more positive self-respect and self-reliance" (10). This revised notion of racial identity, Cheryl Wall writes, "produced a renewed race consciousness and pride" seen in the veneration of craft and the mastery of artistic forms (1). George Hutchinson reads the focus on "realist fiction, poetry, and drama" by many Harlem Renaissance writers as "opening a space for the re-creation and expression of diversely 'American' selves" (42). The assertion of a collective racial consciousness, however, claims women without

considering differentiated gendered experience. Wall argues that Locke's "The New Negro" essay "takes on a masculinist cast" (4). She writes that, "the paradigm set forth in 'The New Negro' overstates the case for male writers, but it contradicts the experience of many women" (5). Other essays in *The New Negro* confirm Wall's critique of the anthology. For instance, Albert Barnes writes that "our civilization has done practically nothing to help the Negro create *his* art but that our unjust oppression has been powerless to prevent the black *man* from realizing in a rich measure the expression of *his* own rare gifts" (24, my emphasis). Walter White asks, "What does race prejudice do to the inner *man* of *him* who is the victim of that prejudice...of those whose kind receive them as artists but refuse to accept them as *men*?" (362, my emphasis). While Black women writers such as Elise Johnson McDougald and Jessie Fauset pen essays for the collection, only McDougald's attends to gender (Fauset writes of how "the black man" brings "the gift of laughter, to the American stage" (161)). While the essays in *The New Negro* do not necessarily represent the diverse approaches to projects of racial uplift or consciousness raising from this era, the anthology's continued cultural and academic relevance positions it as a key summation of definitional ideas from the Harlem Renaissance. The preponderance of attention to male writers and concerns over masculinity renders gender differentiation secondary and postpones the dismantling of sexist hierarchies until after the resolution of racial inequalities.

To presume the primacy of race in calls for collective consciousness assumes that masculinist appeals are universal appeals. Attending first and foremost to race ignores how such calls are already gendered male. To request that Black women adhere to these parameters is to ask for a dampening of their distinct concerns over gender stereotypes

and sexual obligations for the sake of the universal, collective (i.e. male) race. While scholars such as Wall revise the account of the Harlem Renaissance by focusing on female writers and concerns of sexism and gender disparities, these discussions are incomplete without an account of the pervasive reproductive discourse of the time that also subsumes women without accounting for their experiences: eugenics.

Eugenics assumes that the human race could be improved through the active intervention in reproductive pairings based on rational, logical, and widespread beliefs about desirable and undesirable characteristics. In practice, these characteristics readily map onto ideologies of race, class, and ability that extend beyond the physical biological body and attempt to control the expression of social qualities as well. Disability scholar Rosemarie Garland-Thomson defines eugenic logic as "a utopian effort to improve the social order, a practical health program, or a social justice initiative that is simply common sense to most people and is supported by the logic of modernity itself" (340). It appears as "simply common sense" to reduce undesirable characteristics in the human population, but Garland-Thomson posits a "counter-eugenic logic" that "does not rely on the assumption that disability should be eliminated" (340 ft. 1). To apply a similar "counter-eugenic logic" to race and racial identity would value the preservation and reproduction of physical, social, and cultural markers associated with blackness. While such a proposition appears to undo the racist underpinnings of eugenic ideology, in many ways, a race-based counter-eugenic logic still seeks control over Black women's biological labor. The counter-eugenic logic mimics the troubling implications of eugenic programs aimed at the elimination of undesirable characteristics.

Eugenics maintains a long-standing reputation as a program of white supremacy but turn-of-the-century eugenics logics proliferate beyond white supremacist agendas. Several groups committed to Black racial uplift, at least nominally, also promote eugenics ideology. In *Unnatural Selections: Eugenics in American Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance* (2004), Daylanne English argues that, "uplift in this period often participates in, and partakes of, not only evolutionary theory...but genetic theory as well. And in the 1920s and 1930s at least, genetics and eugenics were inseparable" (38). Racial uplift and eugenics both value community fitness. Both intend to lift the population to new standards of excellence. English writes that "because eugenics focuses simultaneously on the quality of the individual 'breeder' and the quality of the collective body (variously constructed as the race, an elite within the race, the nation, a class within the nation), it effectively bridges the theoretical distance between the individual and the collective modern subject" (40). Locke's intervention in *The New Negro* to establish a "common consciousness" and "life in common" for the Black community also "bridges the theoretical distance," to use English's phrase, between the individual Black subject and the unified Black community. In this formulation, the "collective body" is nominally inclusive of the entire race, but in practice it operates more as the "elite within the race" as governed by the male authority. To reproduce the qualities of the New Negro means to literally reproduce the Black community that best reflects Black elitist values.

Because eugenics relies on the mechanisms of human reproduction, the dictates of these programs disproportionately affect women's biological labor. The New Negro collective race consciousness expects Black women's reproductive labor without addressing the gendered repercussions of its very calls for inclusion as alienating Black

women from their own reproductive experiences. Black women become vulnerable to violent identity fragmentation as the concomitant aspects of their self are carved up and isolated for use. This fragmentation and irreconcilability of competing pressures on Black women's reproductive lives appears as a counter narrative to collective race consciousness in Black women's fiction.¹¹

The female protagonists of Nella Larsen's novels *Quicksand* (1928) and *Passing* (1929) cannot escape eugenics-motivated obligations. The semi-omniscient narration and dissolution of the protagonist's selfhood result in an irreconcilable fragmentation—even to the point of death—as the foreclosed conclusion of both novels. The characters believe they can evade eugenic agendas and reconcile their individual experience in the collective race consciousness, but a close examination of voice, temporality, and point of view undermines their optimism. The epistemological unrest, narrative unreliability, and dissolution of rational cause and effect in Larsen's novels expose the fragmentation of Black women's identity by the competing reproductive pressures, all motivated by strains of eugenic logic. After contextualizing the eugenics paradigm in modern American thought, this chapter outlines the formal and thematic strategies *Quicksand* and *Passing* employ that expose eugenic logics in programs of racial uplift. The directions and impact of eugenics are multiple and pervasive. The novels' unresolved endings of death and demise evidence eugenics' ideological hold on Black women's identity.

¹¹ The experience of isolation and alienation characterizes this broader period of American modernism, which scholarship often considers distinct from the Harlem Renaissance. Several important studies have worked toward bridging the false divide between American modernism and the Harlem Renaissance. For example, see George Hutchinson's *The Harlem Renaissance in Black and White* (1995).

II. Eugenics, Racial Uplift, and Birth Control

In 1883, British statistician Francis Galton, cousin to Charles Darwin, coined the term "eugenics." He defined eugenics as the purposeful increase in fitness for those of good stock by improving the chances that individuals with desirable bloodlines and ancestry procreate. For evolutionary biology, fitness describes reproductive success through the passing down of genetic material. Herbert Spencer coined the expression "survival of the fittest" in his 1864 manuscript *Principles of Biology* to describe the transference of genetic expressions from generation to generation. The more a trait appears down the genetic lineage, indicating the most successful reproductive events, the greater the fitness. Through studying British families, Galton determined that most observable physical and mental traits are passed from parent to offspring. He also observed, anxiously, that families with the most desirable traits have the lowest fertility rates and fitness. His fear inspired the division of a "positive eugenics," where certain worthy individuals are encouraged to have children, and a "negative eugenics," where less worthy groups are discouraged from procreating. Galton's fractured definition of eugenics exemplifies that there has never been a single clear consensus on what eugenics actually is. Many competing iterations of eugenics proliferated across cultural, political, and historical contexts, ranging from the circulation of birth control, to policies of racial uplift, to programs of genocide.

The unstable definition of eugenics resulted in Galton's theory gaining little traction in the scientific community until the early twentieth century when, as Wendy Kline writes, Gregor Mendel's laws of segregation and independent assortment establish the foundation for genetic science. Kline writes,

Working with peas in 1865, Mendel had found that hereditary material is transferred from parent to child. His contemporaries, however, were not impressed, and not until 1900 did scientists appreciate the significance of his findings. Though eugenicists had been arguing for the importance of heredity in their quest for "race betterment" since the 1870s, they had lacked scientific evidence for the transmission of characteristics to offspring. Mendel's laws established genetics as a serious science and lent legitimacy to the eugenic claim that social undesirables—including alcoholics, prostitutes, and even unwed mothers—would produce more of their kind by passing down their supposed genetic flaw to their children. (20)

With renewed vigor, scientists and politicians began promoting eugenics-based theories of race and class supremacy, but its ideal deployment remained unclear. What all visions of eugenics had in common, writes Kline, "was a vision of the future in which reproductive decisions were made in the name of building a better race, though they may have disagreed on how to go about achieving this goal. Indeed, one of the strengths of the eugenics movement was its widespread popular appeal to a diverse audience, which was due in large part to its decidedly vague definition" (14). It is with this same sentiment that English writes, "in the United States of the 1910s and 1920s, eugenics became so widely accepted that it might be considered the paradigmatic modern American discourse" (2). As such, an examination of the politics, art, activism, science, medicine, or public policy of American modernism and the Harlem Renaissance must consider the pervasive influence of eugenic logics.

One place to begin such an examination is with the recognizable leaders of early twentieth-century Black intellectual thought. In essays published in the *Birth Control Review* in June 1932, for instance, W.E.B. Du Bois and George Schuyler both promoted "positive eugenics" programs to increase the fecundity of the Black upper class while rejecting the "fallacy of numbers."¹² In contrast to the notion that political, social, and economic power could be attained by increasing the overall number of African Americans, Du Bois and Schuyler both conclude that a blanket increase in population, largely stemming from the fecund lower-class, would perpetuate undesirable characteristics in the Black community. To claim that only certain Black women should be having children, Du Bois described "a new model of the True Woman" that accounts for conventional features of white femininity while also highlighting "the unique qualities black women have developed while surviving in a hostile environment" (Stavney 537). Black women, then, exhibit the characteristics of the Victorian-era ideal of True Womanhood—piety, submissiveness, purity, and domesticity—but they deserve even greater regard because of the historical conditions of racial terror in America.

Du Bois's chapter "The Damnation of Women" in *Darkwater* (1920) sketches an eternal and venerated Black motherhood, resonances of which can be seen throughout the writings of other Black men in the Harlem Renaissance.¹³ Black women, excluded from the ranks of True Womanhood, suffer: "Yet the world must heed these daughters of

¹² Jamie Hart cites both George Schuyler's "Quantity or Quality" and Du Bois's "Black Folk and Birth Control."

¹³ Anne Stavney points to Claude McKay's 1922 poem "Exhortation" as an example of the mother ideal in Black men's Harlem Renaissance literature. The poem describes a "pregnant universe" that, Stavney writes, "turns the black-woman-in-labor into a literary figure, using this image as its primary and organizing metaphor. Her body giving birth becomes a trope by which to express a self-conscious awareness of a new style and direction to black life. And her birthing of a child also implies the rebirthing of a centuries-old Africa" (544).

sorrow, from the primal black All-Mother of men down through the ghostly throng of mighty womanhood...the land of the mother is and was Africa" (Du Bois "Damnation," 79). Following the lead of Darwin's *Descent of Man* (1871), Du Bois locates the genesis of humankind and of the "mother-idea" in Africa and claims it was imported to the New World when slave traders stole Africans from their homeland.¹⁴ For Du Bois, all generations of motherhood harken back to Africa. Yet, because of systemic racism and the institution of slavery which, he argues, creates the myth of Black women's promiscuity, uncleanness, and degradation, Black women have been denied their rightful place within this veneration. Instead, Black women are the "ghostly throng" that haunts the ideology of motherhood, unseen but ever present in their multitudes. Du Bois argues that it is because of these challenges, not in spite of them, that Black women are exceptional: "I most sincerely doubt if any other race of women could have brought its fineness up through so devilish a fire" ("Damnation" 82). Du Bois's proto-feminist argument for the equality and enfranchisement of women in "The Damnation of Women" extends only so far. Anne Stavney calls this image the "moral mother," a glorified stereotype of Black motherhood that relegates women to the domestic sphere. She writes that, "the defining characteristic of ideal womanhood became motherhood, and on this point many white and black men agreed" (538). As the ideology of True Womanhood systematically excluded all Black women, the moral mother denounced poor, uneducated, and rural Black women.

¹⁴ In *Descent of Man*, Darwin posits that humans and the great apes of Africa have a common ancestor. In accordance with his theory of evolution, this would result in the first humans arising in Africa, a view shared by anatomist Thomas Huxley. Du Bois applies this biological theory to his argument of racial uplift.

The desire to control the fecundity of the Black working and lower class made curious bedfellows out of the proponents of racial uplift and the advocates of birth control. Although Congress had outlawed the dissemination of contraceptives or information about contraceptives under the anti-obscenity Comstock Act of 1873, by the 1920s birth control advocates were arguing for the value of birth control to maintain ideal versions of marriage and motherhood.¹⁵ They believed that access to contraceptives would improve the health of individual women, their children, and their communities. While not explicitly eugenics motivated, advocates of birth control saw the reduction of the overall fertility rate of the lower-class as a secondary—although desirable—consequence. The veneer of class politics hides the covert racist implication of birth control advocacy. Readers of the periodical the *Birth Control Review*, Layne Parish Craig writes, "would be treated not to a tirade against Black reproduction, but to a paternalistic social welfare version of birth control politics, in which white birth control advocates figure themselves as saviors of African American mothers" (76).

Through such visions of charity, birth control advocates find allies in eugenicists. Beth Windmaier Capo argues that the birth control movement even "employed eugenic language for its veneer of scientific validity" (112). Using eugenic logic, birth control advocates link poverty with undesirable traits such as licentiousness and promiscuity to promote their agenda of distributing contraceptives to minority and marginalized populations. It is no coincidence that these undesirable characteristics correspond with the traits deemed dangerous to the project of racial uplift. The politics of race, class, and

¹⁵ Beth Windmaier Capo writes, "The birth control movement in the United States, roughly from 1914 to 1940, was a time of social upheaval as the public acceptance of contraception tangled with World War I, the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment and changing roles for women, the growing power of the medical profession, the economic crisis of the Depression, and controversy over immigration" (4).

gender converge to delimit uncompromising expectations of proper Black womanhood. It is more than just "significant that the resulting discourse on sexuality and childbirth tends to be male-dominated," as Hart claims (71). The omission of Black women and Black female perspectives is vital to preserving ideologies of sex, gender, science, and race during the height of eugenics.

The exclusion of Black women from these public spaces and discourses does not mean that they remained entirely silent. Rather, as I argue, Black women's fiction represents the fracturing of Black women's identity due to the competing, paradoxical, and unyielding claims to their reproductive bodies. For the remainder of this chapter, I turn to Nella Larsen's novels *Quicksand* and *Passing* and expose the epistemological unrest built into the opaque narration that shields the reader, and characters, from directly confronting the clandestine paradigm of eugenic logic that traps the protagonists in an irreconcilable state of fragmentation. Any hope of integrating their individual subjectivities into the collective race consciousness is merely illusion.

III. Helga Crane's Irreconcilable Kinlessness

Nella Larsen's first novel *Quicksand* travels with Helga Crane as she attempts to escape the stifling expectations of proper Black womanhood in search of permanent fulfillment and happiness. At each juncture, however, Helga is dissatisfied with her options. She moves between the lifestyles available to some middle-to-upper class Black women in the 1920s: an educator, a librarian, a socialite, an expatriate, and a mother. Scholars read Helga's frequent geographic movement and dissatisfaction with her location as an expression of her sexual frustration. In an introduction to Larsen's novels, Deborah McDowell urges analysis of *Quicksand* "through the prism of black female

sexuality" ("Introduction" xii). Hazel V. Carby argues that Helga is "the first explicitly sexual black heroine in black women's fiction" (471). The interrogation of desire, sexuality, and heteronormativity remain central to scholarship on the text, but little has been done to supplement these considerations of sexuality with those of reproduction. While feminist theory necessarily divorces sexuality from procreation, it remains the case that sex meant impending motherhood for women during the time *Quicksand* was published. In *Textual Contraception* (2007), Capo writes that marriage is "the only sanctioned outlet for female desire" in the early twentieth century, which results in marriage being synonymous with maternity (76). Craig notes that "it is not marriage, however, but parenthood that Larsen makes the focus of nearly every romantic scene in *Quicksand*" (84). In such scenes, romance matters less than the reproductive burden Black women bear.

In the following analysis, I focus on four key moments from *Quicksand* that reveal the links between Helga's oscillating identity and questions of reproductive obligation. Together these scenes demonstrate how competing demands on Black women's reproduction lead to Helga's fragmentation that culminates in her irreconcilable state. First, in conversation with Dr. Robert Anderson, head of the prominent Black school Naxos and Helga's employer, Helga rejects the discourse of racial uplift as tied to genetic and familial inheritance and characterizes Naxos's form of uplift as pathological. After leaving Naxos, Helga moves to Copenhagen to live with relatives. In the second scene, Helga internally muses about the benefits of marriage and maternity as she is physically and spiritually distanced from America. Returned to New York, Helga can no longer maintain an abstracted position from questions of marriage and maternity.

Reunited with her former fiancé James Vayle in the third scene, Helga must confront the implications of wedding Vayle and producing children for the good of the race. She denounces Vayle's version of racial uplift as well since it relies upon Black women's reproductive labor. Helga's fluctuating stance on marriage and maternity from Copenhagen to New York characterizes the irreconcilability of her fragmented identity. Distraught by the limitations of her life's options, Helga seeks spiritual and sexual comfort with the Reverend Mr. Pleasant Green. They marry and settle in rural Alabama where Helga bears three children in rapid succession. The fourth and final scene considered here attends to Helga's presumed final pregnancy and childbirth. The sickly infant dies and while Helga begrudgingly recovers, it is as though she wishes she had not. The novel closes with Helga pregnant again and the foreboding sense that this child will be her last.

Eugenic logics permeate Helga's negotiation of her standing within the Black community. She resists the conscription of her body into the dictates of racial uplift. Her resistance, however, is in vain. Although Larsen focalizes the third person narration through Helga, I read the novel's point of view and Helga's point of view as distinct. This distinction appears as sentence fragments and ambiguous verb tenses to deny Helga a future outside of the paradigm of eugenics. Her demise at the end of the novel reveals the truly immobilizing hold eugenics logics exert over Black women's autonomy, even as Helga maintains hope of escape. While Helga undermines the positive eugenics project of uplift by bearing children in a poor, rural setting, her maternal body betrays her. Her final incarnation fulfills a negative eugenic logic that would harness her image as evidence for the fallacy of numbers. This external image and stereotype cannot replicate her inner

fragmentation and dissolution. When no iteration of her identity allows for full inclusion of the many, competing, nuanced aspects of her interior, Helga dissolves from the page.

Helga's journey begins as she quits her job at Naxos, a school that McDowell argues is modeled after two historical Black colleges, the Tuskegee Institute and Fisk University ("Introduction" xvii n23).¹⁶ Naxos prizes social pedigree and participates in a form of racial uplift rooted in social mobility. Helga opposes this ideology, understanding this form of racial uplift to be exclusionary, classist, and unsustainable. Characterizing herself as kinless, Helga associates her dissatisfaction with Naxos as rooted in her family history. As a disowned daughter of a white mother and an absent Black father, Helga does not represent the traditional kin network prioritized in models of racial uplift. In a conversation with the head of the school, Dr. Robert Anderson, Helga characterizes uplift as pathological, "like some loathsome, venomous disease" (*Quicksand* 18). While racial uplift and medicine both claim to advance the health and fitness of individuals and communities, Helga reverses these associations to claim that uplift is an epidemic of violent ideologies. Helga rejects Anderson's implication that she participates in the maintenance of this "disease" by recounting her sordid family history. She asserts that her kinlessness makes her immune to racial uplift, but Anderson persists: "Financial, economic circumstances can't destroy tendencies inherited from good stock. You yourself prove that!" (18). In trying to compliment Helga, Anderson reinforces the ideology of a

¹⁶ Booker T. Washington founded the Tuskegee Institute in 1881 as a center for "industrial education" toward the promotion of hard labor, cleanliness, and trade skills. Washington's racial uplift philosophy was one of gradualism: the gradual inclusion and ascension of the Black community in mainstream America post-slavery, believing common labor and personal industry were the most viable and sustainable ways to overcome racial prejudice and disadvantage. His perspective is distinct from other philosophies of racial uplift, such as that proposed by W.E.B. Du Bois who advocated for liberal arts education and believed the college-educated "Talented Tenth" would lead the Black community toward cultural and economic advancements. McDowell also notes that "Naxos" is an anagram of "Saxon" and suggests "the school's worship of everything Anglo-Saxon" ("Introduction" xvii).

positive eugenics where desirable "tendencies" remain biologically inscribed on a person regardless of external sociocultural conditions. Class and economic circumstances do not determine a person's worth; value accrues through "breeding" and "inherited" traits from "good stock." Here, Helga realizes how easily someone can implicate her in the "loathsome, venomous disease" of racial uplift.

After Helga departs Naxos, she travels in search of an elusive community where she can be consistently free from obligations of her body. Across her travels in the text, Helga fluctuates between desire and revulsion at the thought of marriage and motherhood. Often, her positive opinion of the subject relates to the fleeting moments of happiness when she first arrives at a new location. Soon, however, Helga becomes restless and strained in her environment and her opinions about marriage and maternity change. Helga understands marriage as metonymous to racial inclusion. Matrimony is one type of relationship that adequately sanctions racial kinship claims. Helga's oscillating opinion of marriage corresponds with her fluctuating understanding of her own racial inclusion or exclusion. Often, as Craig notes, Helga's musings on marriage presume the presence of future children. As she settles into Harlem, for example, Helga considers marriage for its promises of stability: "Helga Crane meant, now, to have a home and perhaps laughing, appealing dark-eyed children in Harlem" (42). While resonant with Helga's own thoughts, this third-person narration undermines Helga's sentiment with the inclusion of "now." Helga may desire a home and children through the unmentioned institution of marriage, but the narrator casts doubt that what she desires will remain consistent.

Once her infatuation with the city wanes, as it inevitably does in each location, Helga no longer wants to establish herself as a race woman who, through the building of a proper family in Harlem, would implicitly participate in the project of racial uplift. Helga shifts location—both geographically and ideologically—as an attempt at escaping the pressure of racial uplift and eugenic obligations. Her kinlessness affords her the illusion that she can excuse herself from belonging to the race. "She didn't, in spite of her racial markings, belong to these dark segregated people," Helga reasons as she plans her escape (51). "It wasn't merely a matter of color," she continues, "It was something broader, deeper, that made folk kin." To Helga, parentage or phenotype do not establish kinship networks. Her "markings" or "color" do not bind her to the Black community. Even so, she discovers in Copenhagen, away from the constant company of other Black people, that the "something broader" that makes "folk kin" is still race but defined as social and cultural heritage instead of a biological essentialism.

While living in Copenhagen, Helga gains the distance necessary to reflect on the disgraceful state of racial subjugation in America. In Harlem, Helga's feeling of belonging and kinship afford her the opportunity to imagine herself as a future wife and mother, a participant in the collective racial family. In the third person narration, the text refutes this idea:

How stupid she had been ever to have thought that she could marry and perhaps have children in a land where every dark child was handicapped at the start by the shroud of color! She saw, suddenly, the giving of birth to little, helpless, unprotesting Negro children as a sin, an unforgivable outrage. More black folk to suffer indignities. More dark bodies for mobs to lynch. (68-69)

The past tense narration indicates a change of state from what Helga "had been" to what she "suddenly" is in the narrative present. Helga grasps the culpability of procreative Black individuals. The collapse of the narrative past and present in the voice of the unnamed narrator denies a potential future for Helga or for the Black community.

The parallel sentence fragments, "More black folk to suffer indignities. More dark bodies for mobs to lynch" (69), erase the future tense from the passage and, by extension, forecloses a Black reproductive futurity. The weight and power of American racism negates any potential happiness Helga may attain through marriage and motherhood. Instead of imagining the "appealing dark-eyed children" she may have, all Black children collapse into a mass of "black folk" and "dark bodies" without recourse against the system of racist violence and lynching. The noun phrases "more black folk" and "more dark bodies" masquerade as the grammatical subjects of these sentence fragments. The infinitive verbs "to suffer" and "to lynch" appear to be acting on these initial, repetitive, noun phrases, but antecedent of *who* these Black individuals are is missing: the "little, helpless, unprotesting Negro children." These figures only exist in the unspoken future tense. The children would be the folk that suffer and the bodies that are lynched. Helga's Black children, and all future Black children, would be the targets of systemic and overt racist violence.

By hiding the subject and verb phrase that would account for hypothetical Black children, these two fragments formally revoke a future where Helga marries and has children. In doing so, the narration grammatically objectifies the presumed subject of the fragments, Black people, and turns the infinitive verbs into adjectival descriptions. "To suffer" and "to lynch" are not simply racially distinct acts of violence, they describe the

very condition of being Black. The atrocities exist as a certainty and this perpetual status of the race spurs Helga to denounce marriage and maternity.

At the end of this paragraph, Helga remembers a line from Alfred Tennyson's poem "In Memoriam A.H.H." (1850), "a line that had impressed her in her lonely school-days, "The far-off interest of tears"" (69). This single line from Tennyson's long elegiac poem describes Helga's feelings of "recompense" through "a law of compensation." Helga has reached a desirable conclusion to her journey of suffering and loneliness. What once seemed "far-off" now surrounds her. But Helga's memory of the poetic line, related through the semi-omniscience of the narrator, revises its form and context. In the original poem, the line is a question: "But who shall so forecast the years / And find in loss a gain to match? / Or reach a hand thro' time to catch / The far-off interest of tears?" (1:7-8). Tennyson's poem lingers in immediate grief and questions whether anyone can gaze beyond their present mourning into the future to envision a compensatory happiness. As a question, the line presents an unknown and unsettled future. The revision in *Quicksand* of Tennyson's verse from question to statement ends the search for "a gain to match" the suffering of Helga's past. Without need to "reach a hand thro' time," Helga settles into her current position and relinquishes her future.

IV. Reproductive Futurity or Fatality

The Copenhagen passage, told through the voice of an indirect narrator, is in tension with Helga's own speech later in the novel. Grown weary of the ornamental role she plays in Copenhagen, Helga longs to return to America. She admits that she is "homesick, not for America, but for Negroes" (86). Her desire to return to the community in which she felt a sense of belonging, a shared tradition of culture, propels her back to

Harlem and into another manifestation of eugenic obligations. Helga encounters her former fiancé James Vayle at a party. During their brief interaction, Vayle asserts that both he and Helga have a responsibility to the race to marry. To Helga, however, "marriage—that means children, to me" (96). Her response to Vayle's intrusion into her personal and romantic decisions mirrors the content of the Copenhagen passage but formally opens the possibility of a future free from marriage and maternity. Helga contradicts the earlier diatribe. The quoted dialogue reveals the gap between Helga's and the novel's point of view and shows how the seemingly unified narrative perspective is itself fragmentary. Meditations of reproduction and marriage emphasize the space between Helga and the narration. Helga's speech confirms that she still seeks a future and a potential reconciliation of her identity even as the narration has already foreclosed this possibility.

In response to Vayle's sweeping claim over Helga's reproductive capacity and the reproductive capacity of all educated, upper-middle class Black women, she asks:

Why add any more unwanted, tortured Negroes to America? Why do Negroes have children? Surely it must be sinful. Think of the awfulness of being responsible for the giving of life to creatures doomed to endure such wounds of the flesh, such wounds of the spirit, as Negroes have to endure. (96)

As in to the Copenhagen passage, the "creatures" or unborn Black children are objects vulnerable to systemic racial violence. The passive construction of Helga's statement hides reproductive Black couples as an active agent in the perpetuation of such violence. She highlights the culpability of individuals who choose to reproduce the Black population in a system that ensures they will suffer "wounds of the flesh" and "wounds of

the spirit" (96). Children of upper-class, educated Black people are not exempt from systemic racism in America. They do not uplift the race through the replication of positive attributes; rather, all Black children contribute to the cycle of pain, violence, and oppression that characterizes America's racist history. Yet, Helga argues for alternative futures with her directive to "think of" this causal relationship, even though under the paradigm of eugenic logic, the alternative of not having children at all itself would enact a form of eugenics. Bound by these rigid confines, Helga cannot articulate a viable alternative future. Through omission and narrative foreclosure, Larsen advocates for the third, and as yet unattainable, condition of reproductive justice that claims the right to raise children in a nurturing and sustainable environment free from external threat or state-sanctioned violence. *Quicksand* assumes that racism continues uninhibited into the future and this condition precludes a true vision of reproductive futurity and reproductive justice.

Vayle, however, cannot understand Helga's objection. He continues to endorse the racial uplift discourse that requires the sacrifice of Helga's body. They both understand marriage and children to be inextricably linked, but while Helga rejects marriage because of its links to procreation, Vayle advocates marriage as the means of reproducing valuable characteristics in the Black population. He believes that he and Helga have a moral responsibility to procreate and to counteract the uncontrolled fecundity of the lower classes. "Don't you see," Vayle replies,

that if we—I mean people like us—don't have children, the others will still have.

That's one of the things that's the matter with us. The race is sterile at the top.

Few, very few Negroes of the better class have children, and each generation has

to wrestle again with the obstacle of the preceding ones, lack of money, education, and background. I feel very strongly about this. We're the ones who must have the children if the race is to get anywhere. (96)

Vayle oscillates between identifying himself and Helga within the exclusive ranks of the Black intelligentsia of the Harlem Renaissance and with a broader "we" of the entire Black race. While never named explicitly, these "others" exist in opposition to those "of the better class." Vayle's objection that "the race is sterile at the top" implicates Black women into the solution of racial uplift and labels their voluntary childlessness as pathological, echoing Helga and Anderson's conversation from the start of the novel. Their procreative bodies must provide biological and social labor "if the race is to get anywhere." Vayle is wrong to include himself in the "we" who "must have the children," when he is really saying that women like Helga are the ones who must bear the physical burden.

Helga rejects Vayle's argument: "I for one, don't intend to contribute any to the cause" (96). In highlighting her intent, Helga asserts her belief in alternatives to the biological labor required by "the cause" of racial uplift. She grasps at a theoretical future that the narration continuously rejects. After this conversation with Vayle and a failed romantic escapade with Dr. Anderson, Helga discovers that she cannot escape the confines of Black women's stifling obligations. "She had made a fool of herself" with Anderson and now "she felt alone, isolated from all other human beings, separated even from her own anterior existence" (101). Helga senses the fragmentation wrought by the paradigm of eugenic logic as she now feels alienated from "all other human beings," from

her racial community, and even from past versions of herself. The immutability of her own body is not enough to hold together the disparate fragments of Helga's identity.

In Alabama, married to Reverend Mr. Pleasant Green, Helga first regains a "zest for the uplifting of her fellow men" in the rural, poor town in Alabama (110). She internalizes her husband's claim that the community is "primitive" and requires her assistance. Her religious awakening and marriage have Helga "anxious to be a true helpmate" to her husband. In the confines of marriage, she aims to be pious, submissive, and a model for the women around her. When she enters the ranks of motherhood, however, Helga sheds these unrealistic standards of uplift ideology. Quickly, she is "too sick to carry out any of the things for which she had made such enthusiastic plans" and "always she felt extraordinarily and annoyingly ill" (113). Helga's experience pathologizes gestation and the ill-feeling of pregnancy plagues her through the end of the novel. In the space of only a few sentences Helga gives birth to three children.

Both Helga and her children become increasingly weak and sickly until Helga fails to react properly upon the birth of her fourth child: "There was from her no pleased, proud smile, no loving possessive gesture, no manifestation of interest in the important matters of sex and weight" (117). Instead, the trauma of unrestrained motherhood jettisons Helga into a catatonic state. When she begrudgingly recovers from her malaise, Helga "was determined to get herself out of this bog into which she had strayed. Or—she would have to die" (124). It is unclear whether the long dash in the narration is Helga's or the narrator's pause at the consideration of death. The indirect structure of "would have to" unsettles the direction and certainty of Helga's fate, simultaneously presenting it as hypothetical and as prophesy. Helga's only options are escape or death.

Helga's children hamper her ability to escape. Ironically, in birthing her own family she creates the kinship she has sought throughout the novel: "They were all black together" (124). Helga's final acknowledgement of racial inclusion, forged through indestructible bonds of kinship with her Black children, immobilizes her. Because of her children, Helga wonders "How, then, was she to escape from the oppression, the degradation, that her life had become?" (125). She cannot. In the end she remembers that "she had experienced [this despair] before. In Naxos. In New York. In Copenhagen. This differed only in degree" (124). Helga's shifting location throughout the text cycles through relief at her temporary escape and then a sharp realization that she remains stuck, confined, and bound by the pervasive and violent obligations of Black womanhood. Still hopeful that a change would alleviate her sorrows, Helga fantasizes about her freedom while postponing her departure. Her plans are futile. The narration has already disclosed the impossibility of a future. The only option, then, is "she would have to die" (124).

The final line of the novel, offset as its own paragraph, operates as a coda by breaking this narrative structure of cyclical repetition. Helga recovers from her postpartum illness and while it appears that she falls back into the rhythm of her abject life, the final series of verbs definitively denies her future. The narrator states, "And hardly had she left her bed and become able to walk again without pain, hardly had the children returned from the homes of the neighbors, when she began to have her fifth child" (125). The sentence begins with the conjunction "and," marking the following narration as additional and appended to the preceding text. The first two clauses of the passage use the past perfect tense—"had she left" and "had the children returned"—to situate the actions firmly in a series of events that may be ongoing or incomplete. The

final verb phrase, "she began," shifts to the simple past tense. The lack of parallel structure, particularly when the preceding clauses mirror one another's syntax, further emphasizes the difference of this final clause. The simple past describes a closed end. While the final announcement of Helga's pregnancy appears to describe a new beginning and forecasts into the future where Helga has a fifth child, the action ends before it begins, twisting the finality of "began." The text makes clear that another pregnancy will further damage Helga's body and ultimately kill her, but Larsen does not provide that final image. Instead, the text allows the reader to extrapolate Helga's future, or lack of future, based on the consistent cues leading up to this moment.

It is not maternity or marriage, however, that defeats Helga. Systemic racism and sexism catalyze Helga's tragic demise. Ann duCille writes, "it is the irreconcilable social, psychosexual, and racial contradictions that become her quicksand" (96). This ending of the novel directly confronts the dominant strains of racial uplift and reveals their eugenics-motivated agendas. Helga's deteriorating reproductive body is the antithesis of the imagery of the liberated and liberating Black mother in Black men's writing of the Harlem Renaissance. Stavney describes how, "with remarkable regularity, the black mother is used in male-authored texts as a verbal symbol for primacy and rebirth. Her image signifies the past in terms of racial and geographical origins as well as the future in terms of the birth of coming generations" (543–44). Helga's overwhelming and fatal fecundity counters the masculinized agenda of racial uplift and the moral mother. Helga's procreative body refuses to be a symbol of progress or rebirth.

Instead of symbolizing progress, Helga represents the isolation, fragmentation, and deterioration of Black womanhood in the face of reproductive dictates of racial

uplift.¹⁷ The dominant version of uplift ideology is incompatible with Black women's freedom. Even as Helga clings to the hope of a free future, the narrator's consistent elision of the future tense consigns Helga's fleeting hope to naïve fantasy. Even when the individual rejects the appropriation of their reproductive lives by programs of racial uplift, the paradigm of eugenics still claims and classifies Black women's reproduction under the rubric of positive or negative contributions to the collective race. It renders two paradoxical options for Black women to assume full bodily and reproductive autonomy: escape or death. And *Quicksand* proves there is no escape.

V. Irene Redfield's Antiempirical Epistemology

The women of Larsen's second novel, *Passing*, may appear to have more available options than Helga Crane does in *Quicksand*, but they are subject to the same intersecting and often paradoxical eugenic logics. *Passing* narrates the color line, where dueling loyalties to the race or to oneself leave individuals frozen, dangerously straddling the divide and constantly risking exposure. Clare Kendry, a Black woman passing for white, dares to reintegrate herself into the Black community even at the risk of losing her life, figuratively and literally. Her childhood friend through whom the third person narration flows, Irene Redfield, becomes increasingly anxious over Clare's presence and views Clare as hazardous to the nearly picturesque life Irene has created for herself and her family. While the trope of racial passing is the central concern of the novel, *Passing*

¹⁷ Helga's demise also counters the prevailing birth control rhetoric of the Harlem Renaissance. Capo argues that Helga's "ignorance of contraception" forecasts her demise and supports an argument for contraception within marriage (76). Capo's conclusion would be ironic, however, since it assumes Helga is "a woman unaware of contraceptive options who herself embodies the rhetorical tropes of birth control advocacy" (Craig 84). While *Quicksand's* ending does not argue against the importance "for contraception within marriage" (Capo 76), it does deny that reproductive control would solve the displacement of the Black female body in the racial and gendered hierarchy of America. Contraception may have given Helga "more agency in her fraught experiences with sexual activity" as Craig writes (81), but it would not guarantee that she could find consistent happiness in a world designed to her disadvantage.

is also about the precarity of motherhood for the passing woman. Accordingly, it tells a tragic story through the formula of women's marital obligations pitted against the desire for personal and social liberation. For the passing woman, marriage to a white man means security and social mobility.¹⁸ It also, however, means childbearing, which threatens her racial status. If passing requires Black women to heighten their risk of exposure by securing their relationships through children, can passing be a strategy for survival or a subversion to the rigid binarism of race, as scholarship about *Passing* suggests?

Addressing this question highlights the instability of the term "passing." While the novel's title initially appears to reference Clare who passes for white, McDowell was the first scholar to argue that the title suggests an alternative form of passing. In her Introduction to the 1986 reprint of *Quicksand* and *Passing*, McDowell claims that the text flirts with the idea of a lesbian relationship and suggests that the characters are passing as heterosexual. McDowell's argument allows the formula of passing to be translated across identity categories. This methodology opens up numerous lines of investigation into Larsen's and other authors' texts and underscores the passing narrative's motif of instability. Clare's racial passing destabilizes the correlation between appearance and race. If a person can become white, then arguments that race is biological and static lose power. Catherine Rottenberg describes how the trope of passing "interrogates and problematizes the ontology of identity categories and their construction" (435). For Gabrielle McIntire, the trope of passing undermines any definite reading of a text. She

¹⁸ Jessie Fauset's *Plum Bun: A Novel Without a Moral* also proposes that marriage to a white man secures the position of the passing woman. Although Fauset's protagonist Angela Murray eventually reclaims her Black identity and her place in the Black community, when preoccupied with attaining her dream lifestyle she considers that before meeting her white fiancé, "she had not thought much about the institution except as an adventure in romance or as a means to an end; in her case the method of achieving the kind of existence which once had been her ideal" (Fauset 276). In both *Plum Bun* and *Passing*, marriage operates as a tool for Black women to pursue their personal goals.

writes that "these polyvalent concerns co-exist in a matrix of meaning" characterized by indecipherability (McIntire 778). Clare's as well as Irene's ability to move between identity categories challenges the Linean-esque taxonomic division of race, a system of classification that feeds eugenics ideology.¹⁹

Three scenes elucidate how the novel undermines empirical definitions of race and identity, emphasizes their incompatibility with discourses on motherhood, and ultimately results in Irene's dissolution and internal fragmentation. This begins in the first section of the novel, "Encounter", which uses a flashback in which Irene revisits her chance meeting with Clare in Chicago one year prior to the narrative present. Exhausted and faint from the heat of a Chicago summer, Irene retreats to the cool breeze of the rooftop restaurant at the Drayton Hotel. When a white woman sitting in her line of vision catches and keeps her gaze, Irene fears that she has been caught passing because the Drayton is segregated. To Irene's surprise, the woman sitting across from her is a childhood friend who herself is passing for white. With this early scene, the novel establishes Irene's narrative perspective to be limited and unreliable. As Helga's perspective is distinct from the narration in *Quicksand*, Irene similarly influences but remains separate from the narration of *Passing*. Irene muddies the narration, amplifying moments of ambiguity and uncertainty that produce an antiempirical point of view. This chance encounter at the Drayton radically alters everything Irene thought she knew about her own life. Her perspective on marriage and motherhood are tested when Clare and a second acquaintance, Gertrude, discuss the precarity of maternity for the passing woman. As Clare's presence in her life continually increases over the course of the novel, Irene's

¹⁹ Sami Schalk expands this argument through an analysis of Clare's characterization in "Transing: Resistance to Eugenic Ideology in Nella Larsen's *Passing*" (2015).

hold on reality falters. While Irene searches for truth and facts, the narrative refuses to establish an easy association between what is observed, what is true, and what is narratable. The narrative of racial uplift and race consciousness clash with Irene's experiences of self and community, causing the distance between her voice and the narration to widen and ultimately culminates in Clare's unnarrated and sudden death.

At the start of her flashback that opens *Passing*, Irene's commitment to motherhood manifests as the sacrifice of her comfort and health as she searches in the scorching heat for unique gifts for her young sons. Not only does she initially position herself as the ideal moral mother, Irene's dedication to her children and their desires catalyzes her chance meeting with Clare. Had she not exhausted herself to near collapse, Irene may never have found herself on the Drayton rooftop and in the company of Clare Kendry. Irene's maternal sacrifice, in a sense, ushers in the destruction of her well-tended life and family. On the rooftop, passing as white for convenience, Irene questions whether an outside observer could deduce her identity: "Did that woman, could that woman, somehow know that here before her very eyes on the roof of the Drayton sat a Negro?" (*Passing* 10). Moments before she recognizes Clare, Irene establishes the tension between empirical observation and racial identity that runs through the novel. The third person narration blends with Irene's thoughts and observations. The revision from "did" to "could," changes the framing question from one of fact to one of possibility or interpretation. The procedure "that woman" may use to deduce Irene's race remains unspecified as "somehow," an ambiguous term that forecasts the vague diction of evidentiary facts found throughout *Passing*. Irene's rhetorical question casts suspicion upon all observable reality, on what is "before her very eyes."

Irene dismisses the possibility that this stranger could know her race. "Absurd! Impossible!" the narration continues (10). Irene silently berates white people who believe they can identify a Black person at a glance. "White people were so stupid about such things," Irene thinks,

for all that they usually asserted they were able to tell; and by the most ridiculous means, fingernails, palms of hands, shapes of ears, teeth, and other equally silly rot. They always took her for an Italian, a Spaniard, a Mexican, or a gipsy. Never, when she was alone, had they even remotely seemed to suspect that she was a Negro. (10-11)

Irene denounces the likening of racialized physical traits and social identity and sets up a stark division between Black and white communal knowledge. Regardless of their belief in their own powers of observation, white people are incapable of adequately mapping physical reality onto their systems of racial difference. They draw false conclusions from faulty evidence.

"Once there is an assumption of whiteness," Rottenberg argues, "pigmentation does not signify in the same way. Melanin, it seems, is not the manifest truth of race, although it has played a crucial part in the construction of racial thinking in the United States" (439).²⁰ Irene's deception and her confidence that she will be assumed white only works when she is by herself. If "never, when she was alone, had [white people] even remotely seemed to suspect that she was a Negro," the inverse is also likely true (*Passing* 11). When contextualized against her family, friends, and community, Irene would not

²⁰ Melanin, or the "fingernails, palms of hands, shapes of ears" and "teeth" that Irene identifies, do not signal race. Rather, they reveal how white supremacy depends on and is upheld by supposed empirical observations of racial biological difference even in the face of compounding contradictory evidence.

successfully pass as white. Race is not physical marks like "fingernails, palms of hands, shapes of ears, teeth" but a network of social relationships (10). Irene concludes that even if "the woman did know or suspect her race," her knowledge would be insufficient. "She couldn't prove it" (11). Suspicions and interpretations take the place of proof and facts. Even Irene falls victim to the "assumption of whiteness" cast by the Drayton rooftop lounge. While denouncing white people's capacity to identify race through visual observation, Irene fails to recognize the woman across from her as another Black woman, let alone as her childhood friend.

When Clare recognizes, confronts, and identifies Irene, "Irene felt that she was just about to remember her. For about the woman was some quality, an intangible something, too vague to define, too remote to seize, but which was, to Irene Redfield, very familiar" (12). The ambiguity of the descriptive clauses—"some quality," "intangible something," "too vague," "too remote"—reinforce the instability of identity categories. The syntax and diction mimic Irene's deductive unreliability. Irene believes that, as a Black woman, she has greater access to truth than her supposed white counterpart. She can see, to invoke Du Bois's theory of double-consciousness, from both behind and in front of the veil. Yet her vision fails. Larsen creates a gap between Irene and the narrator in this scene by lingering on Irene's moments of uncertainty and withholding the revelation of Clare's identity even though, in retrospect of the flashback, Irene already knows that this is Clare. The presumed association between observable reality and social identity, or the notion that race is observable, biological, and inheritable, falls into this unnarratable, inaccessible, and unstable gap.

After their encounter on the Drayton roof, Irene intends to never see Clare again. Against her better judgment, however, Irene finds herself obligated to see her one final time for tea in Chicago several days later. When she arrives, Irene finds another old acquaintance, Gertrude, already seated. While all three women can pass for white, they each do so to different degrees. Clare passes in all aspects of her life, Gertrude does socially and in public (her husband and in-laws know her race), and Irene only occasionally for convenience. The success and sustainability of passing hinges on the strategic withholding of information so as to not contradict the presumption of their whiteness.²¹

For Gertrude and Clare, who enter the social world as white women, their survival necessitates marriage to a white man for safety and mobility.²² To maintain the expectations of matrimony, Clare and Gertrude must have white children with their white husbands. Of the two, Clare assumes the greater risk by marrying and having children with the racist John Bellew and hiding her racial identity entirely because children jeopardize the mother's racial concealment. Social convention asserts that parents impart racial identity to their children.²³ An additional connotation of the title emerges from this

²¹ Rottenberg confirms that "Nella Larsen makes very clear in her text the visible markings or lack thereof are not enough to tell the 'truth' of race. After all, the three women at the tea party are not 'white' but 'black'" (439).

²² Marita O. Bonner's 1925 essay, "On Being Young—a Woman—and Colored" describes the shared immobility of women across the color line in the early twentieth century. Bonner writes, "You hear that up at New York this is to be seen; that, to be heard. You decide the next train will take you there. You decide the next second that the train will not take you, nor the next—nor the next for some time to come. For you know that—being a woman—you cannot twice a month or twice a year, for that matter, break away to see or hear anything in a city that is supposed to see and hear too much. That's being a woman. A woman of any color" (170). Women's movements were restricted under strict paradigms of proper gendered behavior that could be partially overcome through the conditions of matrimony.

²³ As discussed in the Introduction regarding the antebellum policy of *partus sequitur ventrem*, blackness is presumed to pass from mother to child.

notion of inheritable identity: passing on racial membership and physical markers to one's children. Childbearing symbolizes this antiempirical point of view in the novel. The pregnant body appears to be reproducing the mother's whiteness, yet the unobservable interior carries the potential to betray the passing woman through a resurgence of atavistic characteristics. Once born, the child either confirms or refutes the version of reality built and maintained by the passing woman.

Clare and Gertrude detail their fear of atavism based on racially specific knowledge of genetic inheritance. When asked if she has a son, Clare replies,

No, I have no boys and I don't think I'll ever have any. I'm afraid. I nearly died of terror the whole nine months before Margery was born for fear that she might be dark. Thank goodness, she turned out all right. But I'll never risk it again. Never!

The strain is simply too—too hellish. (26)

Clare's pregnancy intensified the threat of her racial reveal. The period of gestation propels the passing woman into an additional liminal state. The long dash in Clare's final sentiment, that "the strain is simply too—too hellish," emphasizes a lingering pause, as though replicating the space of unknowability and inarticulability of her pregnancy. The repeated amplifier "too" surrounds the pause and highlights the elusive line between tolerable and intolerable events, encouraging the reader to wonder when the tension is too much. At the end of the pregnancy, will she be revealed, or won't she? Clare was "afraid" to the point that she "nearly died of terror" over the "fear that [Margery] might be dark." Her child's skin color operates as an unknowable threat to her racial passing. Clare emphatically confirms that she will "Never!" risk the threat of reveal through childbearing again, the stand-alone exclamation punctuating the conversation with

dramatic emotion and appeal.²⁴ As a self-styled "deserter" of her race, she has "to be afraid of freaks of nature" (27). A child indelibly marked by an obscured racial heritage would be both a "freak" and a punishment for its mother's transgression.

The term "freak" engenders early disability rhetoric as it names and marginalizes individuals that deviate from the presumed social and biological normal. Angela Smith describes how in the early-twentieth century, "eugenics developed a particular pathological interpretation of visible or diagnosed impairments, casting disability as a matter of organic deviance requiring a medical or scientific fix, and extending this pathologization of other minority groups" in order to "construct a normalizing narrative, repeatedly iterating and describing imperfection, debility, and deviance in order to envisage and validate the 'happy ending' of racial and species perfection" (6-7).²⁵ In other words, the distinction "freak" sustains eugenic logics. Clare calls on this relationship when she describes a dark child born to a light-skinned woman as a "freak." Rachel Adams's recasting of the term "freak" helps illuminate the stakes of Clare's statement in the particular context of racial passing. Adams resists the "sideshow's own logic" that

²⁴ George Schuyler satirizes the eugenic-motivated preference for lighter skin in his 1931 novel *Black No More*. Schuyler's novel poses a speculative not-so-distant future where a scientific procedure, Black-No-More, eliminates racially coded physical features including dark skin pigmentation. Masses of Black individuals pass for white almost overnight, resulting in a heightened fear of miscegenation and the genocide of the white race. Children of these unions, however, would betray the racial heritage of one or both parents. Headlines such as "WEALTHY WHITE GIRL HAS NEGRO BABY" sweep the nation (Schuyler 122). Black-No-More establishes birthing centers to harbor concerned women and transform their children upon birth.

²⁵ The equivalency of freakishness and disability in eugenics rhetoric had far reaching consequences on the reproductive freedoms of many marginalized communities. Eugenicists readily sought to eliminate the reproduction of undesirable physical impairments and extended the definition of disability to include social characteristics like criminality, feeble-mindedness, and licentiousness. The 1927 Supreme Court decision *Buck v. Bell* sanctioned states to involuntarily sterilize individuals deemed unfit for reproduction either physically, intellectually, or socially. This decision legitimized eugenic laws across the United States and has never officially been overturned.

being a freak is an "irreversible quality" or "essence" and argues that "*freak* is not an inherent quality but an identity realized through gesture, costume, and staging" (6). The qualities Adams describes mirror themes of performance and transgression characteristic of passing narratives. As a performative act, freaks arise through looking relationships. The spectator certifies their own normalcy in relation to the freak's abnormality. This relationship "evacuates [the freak's] humanity" (Adams 10).

When seen as a performative act and not a natural quality, freaks reveal and destabilize the binary of the self/other and normal/abnormal. Adams claims, "it is a concept that refuses the logic of identity politics, and the irreconcilable problems of inclusion and exclusion that necessarily accompany identitarian categories" (10). While the radical potential to disrupt binary thinking productively recasts the role and assignation of the term freak, Adams's assessment does not fully account for the fluidity and fixity of race. The very disruption of the freak operates as a threat to the passing woman. Her security relies on the sustenance of identity categories to mask her transgression. Clare's statement in *Passing* reveals the depths of ambiguity manifested within the pregnant passing woman. Her gestating body interrupts the mutual recognition required by the spectator and spectacle to confirm both of their racial positions. For months, the pregnant woman worries over her unborn child's appearance and how their physical features will bear on their mother's status. The uncertainty and fear intensify because the freak is "of nature," produced naturally and through the laws of genetics (*Passing* 27). Unlike the looking relationship of the freakshow Adams describes where mutual recognition confirms identity, Clare's disturbance arises from a fear of reproducing and seeing the self. To bear a dark-skinned child, one "of nature" due to

Clare's own racial heritage, would create a dissonance of the self. She is comforted and confirmed through the reproduction of the other in bearing a presumably white child. Reproducing the other distorts the binaries of identity and inclusion and simultaneously preserves Clare's deception.

Gertrude shares Clare's fear of atavism and the belief that a newly born infant can destroy the illusion of a parent's life.²⁶ She defends herself to Clare, stating how "maybe you don't think I wasn't scared to death too," because her family knows her racial background (26). While Gertrude does not risk a violent reaction from her family, she risks social ostracization. The desire to maintain the appearance of a white family operates on both a personal kinship level and on the level of community. Gertrude concludes that "they," her white husband and his relatives, "don't know like we do." Black people, in contrast, understand "how it might go way back, and turn out dark no matter what colour the father and mother are" (26). At first, the subject "it" of Gertrude's statement appears to reference the supposed atavistic characteristic of darker skin; however, it is the child that might "turn out dark" in comparison to their parents, rendering the hypothetical offspring a dehumanized and undesirable "it." Her designation of a dark-skinned child responds to Clare's rhetoric of the "freak." Both women reject the Black child as unwanted, unnatural, and outside of proper order, even while conceding that the emergence of recessive traits follows the laws of nature.

²⁶ In *The Blacker the Berry* (1929), Wallace Thurman describes the fear of atavism realized. Thurman's novel critiques the colorism of the Black community through the experiences of the dark-skinned protagonist, Emma Lou. Upon her birth, Emma Lou's mother "was abysmally stunned by the color of her child...she hadn't reckoned with nature's perversity nor had she taken under consideration the inescapable fact that some of her ancestors, too, had been black and that some of their color chromosomes were still embedded within her" (8). Thurman's description mimics the fears spoken by Gertrude and Clare in Larsen's *Passing*.

Gertrude's understanding of genetic inheritance, that traits can reappear down the genetic line, relies on Mendelian genetics. Race, as inscribed as genetic code for skin pigmentation, may lie dormant as a recessive (subordinate) trait for generations, only to resurface in future generations. Gertrude restates her horror of this possibility and the undesirability of dark skin, the primary optic of race, concluding that, "of course, nobody wants a dark child" (26). While Gertrude's statement clearly reflects a eugenic belief in the superiority of lighter skin and the parallel undesirability of darker skin, it additionally reveals the intersecting social forces that respond to a culture of white supremacy. Gertrude's "nobody" initially refers to women who pass for white who worry over having a dark baby. Yet, her statement extends to the wider Black community—those that do and do not pass—and acknowledges the prevalent system of colorism. The interplay of eugenicist thinking and internalized racism builds on decades of social conditioning under white supremacy. Gertrude presents this idea as though it "of course" is common sense and so deeply ingrained that she cannot fathom an alternative. In a broader sense, Gertrude is correct. The condition of American racism nearly guarantees that a child with darker skin will face increased discrimination and prejudice. Systemic racism seems to prove that "nobody" wants the dark children that already exist in the world, let alone wants to increase their numbers and multiply the total amount of suffering. As shown above, Helga in *Quicksand* responds to these same conditions by initially vowing to not bring any children into the world to be tortured or lynched. In *Passing*, where childbearing ensures a woman's survival, childlessness is not an option. Instead, Gertrude speaks aloud the concessionary wish that any Black child be protected as much as possible. Skin color may operate as a shield.

Gertrude's off-hand remark reveals the depth of antiblack racism and the way eugenic logic may operate to contradict its effects. If race is understood as merely physical or biological, to eliminate dark skin could lead to the elimination of racism. Yet, Gertrude's statement can also be read ironically. The flippancy of Gertrude's "of course" probes the reader to contradict the notion that "nobody wants a dark child." Irene, the third-party privy to this conversation, provides a robust counter example to Gertrude's declaration. Irene's performance of thoughtful and sacrificial maternal care throughout the novel and her marriage to a dark-skinned man demonstrate her desire for and devotion to her children regardless of their pigmentation. As Gertrude and Clare discuss their assessment of atavism, Irene struggles against a "flood of feelings, resentment, anger and contempt" (26). Irene and the narrator read and respond to this scenario separately. Unable to fully grasp the source of her emotions, it was only "later," the narrator informs the reader, "when she examined her feeling of annoyance, Irene admitted, a shade reluctantly, that it arose from a feeling of being outnumbered, a sense of aloneness, in her adherence to her own class and kind; not merely in the great thing of marriage, but in the whole pattern of her life as well" (25). Initially, Irene cannot grasp her paradoxical position as "aloneness" due to her "adherence to her own class and kind." The women's conversation about childbearing reveals the conflict in her own complex position in the matrix of moral motherhood and racial uplift where she is both a member of the collective and a lone, isolated individual. It is from within this tension and contradiction, spurred by considerations of marriage and maternity, that Irene's subjectivity begins to deteriorate as she can no longer reconcile her own reactions and observations with her worldview.

Near the end of the novel, Irene begins to suspect that Clare and her husband, Brian, are engaged in an affair. Irene strives to keep her suspicions secret while admitting that her conclusions have little to do with observable reality. "She had no facts or proofs" to support her allegations and admits to herself that it is an "unfounded suspicion" and that "she had no real knowledge" (67-8). Irene may question the very logic of her conclusion, but her feelings validate her fears: "But she did not look the future in the face. She wanted to feel nothing, to think nothing; simply to believe that it was all silly invention on her part. Yet she could not. Not quite" (68). Irene knows that her suspicions run counter to the paradigm of empirical fact, but she refuses to discount her feelings. Torn between two kinds of knowledge, she can perceive the external point of view but cannot abandon her own intuition. Irene's clashing devotions to fact and to feeling reveal the insufficiency of the epistemological paradigm of objectivity. Scientific logic cannot account for the individual and intersecting knowledges of Black women.

This paradox of knowledge arrests Irene. Larsen shows throughout *Passing* that the needs of the individual and the obligations of the collective are often at odds: "She was caught between two allegiances, different, yet the same. Herself. Her race" (69). Revealing Clare would be treasonous. Allegiance to the race requires some sacrifice of the self, but "for the first time" Irene cannot wholly disregard the "same" allegiance she feels toward herself. She finally regards race as a "burden," particularly for women. "It was," Irene laments, "enough to suffer as a woman, an individual, on one's own account, without having to suffer for the race as well. It was a brutality, and undeserved" (69). The three item list correlates gender identity with the individual and distinguishes it from the separate collective racial identity. The dissonant experience of Black womanhood—

simultaneously individual/gendered and collective/racial—shows the fissures within eugenics logics. Eugenics intends to monitor and control the individual for the purpose of changing the population, but Irene feels that any action is a betrayal of one aspect of herself. She straddles a bridge that links the individual and collective subject, unable to cross entirely to one side or the other. Eugenics is only one truss that holds the bridge together; the shared history and culture of the Black community, collective values, experiences of antiblack racism, also support the connections between the individual and collective. Yet, eugenics isolates Black women within the group and instructs them to take a narrower and more predetermined path to ensure their full inclusion. The knowledge of her restricted access to her full or authentic self immobilizes Irene and the knowledge of her position makes her suffer.

She obsesses over how to rid her life of Clare's presence. The very next day, her wish manifests while she is out shopping. Irene literally collides with Bellew on the sidewalk while she is arm-in-arm with another Black woman, Felise Freeland. His expression implies that she has been found out, and Irene wonders if he will now suspect Clare's true identity, a revelation that would erase Clare's future. The evening after Irene's encounter with Bellew, she attends a party at Felise's sixth floor apartment with Clare and Brian as though nothing is amiss. Irene sulks, consumed with suspicion about Clare and Brian's relationship. Suddenly, Bellew appears at the door and confronts Clare about her racial identity. Irene rushes to Clare's side. In an unnarrated moment, Clare falls through the open window to her death in the snow-covered garden below.

For decades, critics have debated the details of Clare's death at the close of *Passing*. Did Irene push Clare? Did Bellew? Did she faint and fall, or did she jump?

McIntire reads the indecipherable ending as only one example of the misrecognitions, mistakes, and misreadings that characterize the novel and its construction of race. If race cannot be definitively named and classified, if empirical truth is a fiction, then the transmission of race through reproduction loses explanatory power. As McIntire suggests, "Larsen seems to want to affirm that the ostensible objectivity of facts remains dependent on the limits of interpretation...while the text also asserts that facts are always subjective" (789). In *Quicksand*, Helga's movement into and out of the racial collective marks her negotiation with pervasive eugenics frames. But in *Passing*, Irene and Clare never fully occupy one side of the racial binary. Their ability to pass as white places them on the threshold between racial categories. Even while the instability of facts and empiricism undermine eugenics logic, its ideological hold on Black womanhood revokes any open, autonomous, and desirable future for Larsen's characters.

The final image of Irene in *Passing* describes her sinking to the ground, weakened as the full realization of Clare's death washes over her. A "great heaviness" overcomes her body, it "submerged and drowned her" (*Passing* 82). Like the weight of race allegiance that "suffocated" her, Irene physically and psychologically crumbles under the knowledge of Clare's death. Her final word, "I—" ends unfinished as Irene faints. The claim of her own autonomy fades on her breath as her subjectivity disintegrates along with Clare's.²⁷ Barely conscious, Irene feels "strong arms lifting her up," and as if this act of uplift seals her fate, "everything was dark" (*Passing* 82).

²⁷ Nell Sullivan argues that Clare's dead body "is not exclusively Clare's, but a shared, idealized image of self; so its mutilation represents disintegration for both women. Thus Irene replicates Clare's death in a fainting spell" (382).

VI. Fragmentation from Eugenic Pressures

Helga Crane, Clare Kendry, and Irene Redfield all succumb to death, destruction, or deterioration at the end of their narratives. *Quicksand* establishes the inadequacy of calls for collective race consciousness that foreclose Helga's self-actualization, happiness, and even her survival. When the protagonists of *Passing* presume to transgress and transcend the binary of race, they appear poised to fully dismantle the identitarian system that limits the expression of Black womanhood. The interlocking pressures of gender, sexuality, and reproduction, however, intervene in their quest for freedom or choice. The porousness of racial identity does not extend to gender in Larsen's novel. Rather, as Clare's negotiation with motherhood reveals, the more fluid the experience of race, the more rigid and binding the requirements of gender. *Passing* refutes the doctrine of racial uplift that prioritizes racial justice and assumes that gender justice will, by necessity, follow. By establishing a narrative gap between the protagonists and the unnamed narrators, Larsen prevents a reconciliation between racial inclusion and womanhood. Like two magnets that repel one another yet exert a powerful pull on objects in their path, race and gender compete for control over Larsen's characters. The forces hold them in an inescapable tension, trapping them in the space between either pole of fully articulated identity. This is the space of precarity for the Black woman, a space Larsen makes ever present but obscured in her novels. Larsen's narrative opacity, what McIntire names indecipherability, mimics how racial uplift claims and categorizes Black women without integrating, or even acknowledging, their lived experiences.

Larsen's characters are not silent even though by the close of these novels they are silenced. In dialogue and in action they fight against the restrictive, racist, and

misogynistic platforms that seek control over their bodies and minds. Their protest, of course, is powerful on its own terms. They denounce the control of the white heteropatriarchy over their bodies, even when the proponents of such control are Black men and women. They speak out and against systems that bind and suffocate them, even if their contestations and testimonies are in vain. But protest alone would merely reinforce the ubiquity of the eugenics frame by placing all actions as either advancing or resisting this paradigm. Instead, as this chapter shows, Larsen's novels unravel the very logic that supports eugenic thinking by maintaining the gap between the narration and the protagonists. This gap destabilizes eugenic logics and reveals scientific deduction to be neither value-neutral nor universally applicable. Under this system, Black women face fragmentation between their drive for selfhood and their drive for collective racial consciousness and community uplift.

The relationship between the individual and the collective is one distinct characteristic of African American literature and the role of eugenics in this negotiation remains an underexplored manifestation of this concern, particularly as it appears in Black women's fiction. As this chapter demonstrates, eugenics is an operating principle that structures calls for a collective racial identity and consciousness during the Harlem Renaissance.²⁸ English argues that,

²⁸ While beyond the scope of this chapter, I foresee many fruitful readings at the intersection of reproduction and eugenics of other Harlem Renaissance era literature that contend with the relationship between the individual and the collective. Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), which reveals the unsuitability of racial uplift doctrine for some Black women, can be read as resistance to the intragroup pressure to properly marry. Janie rejects the class-based regulations of upward mobility that would reproduce eugenic logic. However, Tea Cake's ultimate demise and Janie's return to her former community as an outsider may reveal, again, the pervasiveness of eugenic ideology. In addition, the opening section of Jean Toomer's *Cane* (1923) lays bare the conflict between personal desire and social expectations for poor Black women in the rural South. The convergence of race, class, gender, reproduction, and sexuality in several of the sketches would complement the analysis in this chapter.

Eugenic ideology was "salient" for so many modern thinkers across political and racial lines because, unlike more general discourses of race, it eased the conflict between individual and collective forms of identity—a conflict fundamental to the modern liberal-democratic state. Both black and white intellectuals were able to negotiate intraracial class tensions via eugenic thinking: to improve the collective (race or nation), they simply had to determine which individuals should breed (based on class or race or both). (2)

The consideration of reproduction, of "which individuals should breed," elicits stark and often uncompromising positions: to have or to not have children. Larsen's novels demonstrate that this configuration is both reductive and incompatible with the matrix of social, political, and scientific pressures faced by Black women. What might at first appear a binary opposition becomes two sides of the same coin. Both bearing children and purposefully remaining childless enacts forms of eugenic logic. The pervasiveness of this paradigm of scientific thought can claim Black women's reproductive decisions for any number of purposes.

Larsen's narrative gap between protagonist and narrator begins the series of formal techniques twentieth-century Black women authors employ to articulate alternative discursive fields in which to consider reproductive science and technology in their fiction. The unnarrated dimension is a liminal space outside of the rigid binarism that characterizes other forms of debate on reproduction. In the following chapter, I show how Gwendolyn Brooks confronts mid-century sentiments on abortion and involuntary sterilization, two forms of reproductive science that continue to disproportionately impact

Black women's reproductive freedoms. In the wake of World War II, American eugenicists distanced themselves from the horrors enacted in Nazi Germany by revising their language and approach to population control. The discussions represented in Larsen's novels that explicitly track eugenic debates no longer circulate publicly in such blatant forms. Instead, the same motivation for curbing Black fertility becomes covertly linked to dramatic increases in abortion regulation and the state sanctioning of nonmedical sterilizations. Both of these forms of reproductive control assume Black women's bodies are available for public supervision and intervention. As the next chapter demonstrates, Brooks uses narrative voice and repetition to grant her characters privacy so regularly denied in medicine, science, and reproductive politics.

CHAPTER III

GWENDOLYN BROOKS'S REPRODUCTIVE PRIVACY

Though why should I whine,
Whine that the crime was other than mine?
Since anyhow you are dead.
Or rather, or instead,
You were never made.
But that too, I am afraid,
Is faulty: oh, what shall I say, how is the truth to be said?

Gwendolyn Brooks, "the mother" (1945)

I. Motherhood as Repetition with Difference

From the very start of her long and productive literary career, Gwendolyn Brooks weaves complex expressions of race and gender into the portraits of her poetic characters. Her first published book of poetry, *A Street in Bronzeville* (1945), memorializes the daily scenes and activities of ordinary Black people on Chicago's South Side. Brooks's content and lyric form demand a recognition of the full humanity and nuanced subjectivity of the Black community in an era of intense social and political racial disparities. When Brooks turns her attention to Black female experience, she does not avoid the representation of maternity even though the "notion that motherhood and poetry are fundamentally at odds has become a critical given in discussions of twentieth-century women poets" (Erkkila 196). Brooks neither venerates nor disparages Black mothers in her writing. Rather, Brooks strives to express Black mothers' precarity as the state and state sanctioned institutions threaten their reproductive autonomy. Her writing accomplishes this task through repetition with difference that weakens the easy association between representation and meaning. This chapter begins with a formal analysis of Brooks's poem "the mother" (1945) from her debut collection *A Street in Bronzeville* to establish this poem as a vital yet unidentified precursor to Brooks's novel *Maud Martha* (1953). The

poem's use of formal repetition to encrypt expressions of motherhood resurface in the novel's intimate portraiture of one Black woman character, Maud. Only through contextualizing *Maud Martha* with "the mother" can the depth of Brooks's strategy of repetition toward the protection of Black women's private reproductive lives fully emerge.

The formal use of repetition with difference connects "the mother" and *Maud Martha* when they would otherwise seem to have little in common. The lyric form of the poem and the vignette prose of the novella distinguish the pieces by genre, and the unnamed speaker of the poem strongly contrasts with the extensive and personal sketching of the title character Maud. Their depiction of maternity would at first seem also to differentiate the two as the poem directly confronts abortion while *Maud Martha* depicts a more traditional narrative of marriage and maternity. However, both pieces use repetition with difference to render false the binary between not having and having children. The question of reproductive privacy pertains to all conditions of motherhood—childless or not—and together "the mother" and *Maud Martha* articulate a nuanced theory of reproductive justice that considers the intrusion of state and medical institutions on Black women's liberty. Brooks's obfuscation of her characters' interiority through repetition with difference staunchly rejects the external, surveilling, and invasive gaze and preserves their right to privacy.

In Brooks's work, repetition elicits greater resonance than mere emphasis. By requiring a reinterpretation of the original, repetition also operates to distance the written word from the elusive signified and to disrupt the movement between representation and meaning. In "On Repetition in Black Culture" (1981), James Snead rejects the notion that

repetition in cultural artifacts is merely a return to the same signifier. For Black culture, Snead argues, repetition indicates the circulation of ideas and connects a community across space and time. "Whenever we encounter repetition in cultural forms," Snead writes, "we indeed are not viewing 'the same thing,' but its transformation, not just a formal ploy, but often the willed grafting onto culture of an essentially philosophical insight about the shape of time and history" (146). He claims that repetition is "often in homage to an original generative instance or act" (149). The use of repetition in descriptions of Black maternity in Brooks's writing evokes the "original generative instance or act" of human reproduction and the creation of life. The strategies of difference in her repetitions assumes a progression or regression of Black maternity in the narrative present, but the signification of the repeated forms withholds a direct resolution or a fully representable figure. The repetition creates space for privacy and thwarts a voyeuristic invasive gaze.

Such doubling to preserve privacy is necessary because Brooks constructs an oscillating literary perspective that shifts between what Deborah McDowell names "public and private narrative fiction" that either "seem to imply a public readership (or one outside the black cultural community)...[or] those that imply a private readership or one within the cultural matrix" ("The Changing Same" 36).¹ While the poem "the mother" is not narrative fiction, McDowell's distinction between the directionality of perspective, character, and point of view in Black women's writing as public or private

¹ McDowell's essay revises Susan Lanser's argument in *The Narrative Act* (1981) that distinguishes between public and private point of view to make Lanser's analysis more widely applicable to other narrative structures, forms, and generic elements.

pertains to "the mother" and *Maud Martha*.² In order for there to be a need for privacy, first the public must threaten an invasion. In both texts, Brooks fluctuates between a public and a private scope to contextualize the repetition as a radical call for reproductive privacy. This is accomplished in "the mother" by moving between the private inner monologue and the public apostrophe and in *Maud Martha* by moving between a limited omniscient narration dedicated to Maud and a broader omniscience that moves away from her psychic and physical presence.

Brooks's intervention in the operating binary of public and private through the formal strategies of her poem and novel undermine the racial and gender assumptions of reproductive privacy and autonomy. This binary rarely reflects Black women's experiences. Betsy Erkkila writes that, "within the black community historically, black women have never had the leisure to conceive of motherhood as a privatized activity that takes place apart from labor" (196–97). The traditional notion that mothering is bound to the home and private sphere is a social construction of white femininity that ignores the historical, economic, and political conditions of Black motherhood. Brooks's use of repetition in her writing functions as a doubling, where private and public manifestations of Black maternity exist simultaneously and in tension. She constructs a theory of reproductive justice that accounts both for Black women's right to not bear children and the right to bear them in sociopolitical environments that are conducive to unimpeded life and liberty. These conditions starkly contrast the historical reality that Black women's reproductive lives in America have never been wholly private or nonpolitical. But

² While McDowell's rhetoric does set up the public and private narrative as oppositional, she is careful to avoid oversimplifying the complexity of the tradition of Black women's writing and concedes that "there is overlap between the public and private modes, sometimes within a single text" ("The Changing Same" 36 n8).

neither, Brooks's writing insists, are they entirely publicly available for representation and consumption.

II. Reproductive Privacy, Abortion, and Sterilization

The discourse of reproductive autonomy often centers around the condition of privacy. The privacy doctrine, however, is historically and culturally contingent and applies unequally to marginalized groups across race, class, ability, and other identity markers. Human rights lawyer Rhonda Copelon argues that, "privacy is not a neutral doctrine" and that it is "inadequate as a theory for reproduction and sexual self-determination because it perpetuates the myth that the right to choose is inherent in the individual, a given of private life, rather than acknowledging that choices are shaped, facilitated, or denied by social conditions" (36, 38). Privacy's liberty of self-determination, Copelon claims, relies on the notion of equal personhood. In postwar America, social and political conditions deny equal personhood to women and to racial minorities. Since 1890, the first published definition of a right to privacy in the American legal tradition aligns "white subjectivity with the very notion of self-possessive interiority" and, as literary and legal scholar Eden Osucha describes, operates "as the natural basis of the privacy rights claim" (78). The "signification of whiteness," Osucha continues,

depends greatly on the practices regularly enrolled in picturing other bodies, consolidating their status as supposedly natural objects of visual consumption. By this positioning, people of color are constitutively unviolable (defined as always already available) in the terms of the privacy rights project. Privacy is a form of

property and legal personhood only available to those subjects whose entitlement to this rights claim is recognized by dominant cultural norms. (79)

The privacy doctrine assumes a consumable and violable woman of color to stand in opposition to the privacy rights of white women, "those subjects whose entitlement to this rights claim is recognized by dominant cultural norms." If women of color are definitionally excluded from the privacy doctrine, then it cannot adequately serve as the cornerstone for an intersectional reproductive rights argument, even though privacy becomes the primary defense of mainstream reproductive rights across the twentieth century.

The privacy doctrine in relation to reproductive rights fixes abortion as the principal concern of women's reproductive autonomy. This relationship is most visible in the 1973 Supreme Court decision of *Roe v. Wade*, where "the Court chose privacy as the vehicle for protecting abortion" (Copelon 33). In doing so, the mainstream abortion debate fails to address disparities in power or access to reproductive autonomy. While American history centers *Roe v. Wade* as the critical moment in the fight for gender and reproductive equality, the relationship between abortion and privacy solidifies much earlier in the century and reproductive privacy rights should be contextualized within early abortion activism, state-sanctioned sterilizations, and their correlated racial disparities.

Before anti-abortion legislation swept the U.S., abortion before "quickening," or when the pregnant woman physically felt the fetus move, was common law until 1867. Quickening, in popular consensus, marked the moment life begins. Before quickening, procedures we now call abortion meant to reestablish women's menstruation rather than

to terminate a pregnancy. Early gestation disrupted the natural cycle and health of a woman and until fetal movement these procedures operated outside of questions about life and death. Even when illegal, abortion providers worked largely unimpeded until the 1940s. In *Pregnancy and Power* (2005), reproductive policy historian Rickie Solinger describes the change in public and political opinion about abortion post-WWII "in the context of women's massive reproductive disobedience and rights claims" (154). Valerie Frazier writes that after the war, "the US patriarchy mandates that all women of all ethnic identities symbolize domesticity and concentrate their energies on the home" (134).³ The intensification of women's domestication set the stage for American medical institutions to embolden doctors to act as the final authority over women's reproductive decisions. Around 1940, many hospitals establish therapeutic abortion committees to determine who would and who would not qualify for an abortion. With these committees, "the medical profession and its institutions acted as an arm of the state," Leslie Reagan writes (3). Doctors, not women, now "claimed scientific authority to define life and death" (Reagan 14).

The distribution of abortion access then and now privileges the most powerful. Reagan writes that "with the new repression of abortion," in 1940 "a discretionary and discriminatory system developed in which class and racial privilege came to the forefront. Those few who received safe, legal, therapeutic abortions in hospitals were

³ Cathy Davidson expands this history in "Preface: No More Separate Spheres!" and claims the post-WWII encouragement for women to return to domestic roles alongside the republication of Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* (1840), "a survey of distinctive features of American culture, including the situation of women, based on Tocqueville's visit to the country in the 1830s" (445). Tocqueville's text became one of the few, if not the only, text read by students of American history that tackled women's place in society and reaffirmed the ideology of separate spheres in the 1940s and 1950s.

almost all white women with private health insurance" (193). Often turned away by abortion committees, Black women were more likely to self-induce abortions, but Reagan insists that this practice "had less to do with cultural differences than with lack of access to doctors and midwives, for reasons of poverty and discrimination" (43). Systemic oppression and marginalization characterize abortion practices, both personal and institutional. The rhetorical effort to subsume the abortion debate under the privacy doctrine, then, fails to acknowledge these hierarchies of power and access. Used in this way, the right to privacy "not only dissociates the individual from the broader context; it also exempts the state from responsibility for contributing to material conditions and social relations that facilitate autonomous decision making" (Copelon 38).

In tandem with shifting protocols for medical abortions, programs of forced sterilizations proliferated across the nation. Following the rationale of eugenicists bent on building a better race and nation discussed at length in Chapter II, medical services backed by state and federal law dramatically increased the frequency of sterilizations during the first half of the twentieth-century.⁴ In 1927, the Supreme Court ruled that compulsory sterilization for the unfit and feebleminded did not violate the Fourteenth Amendment, upholding the decision in *Buck v. Bell*. Carrie Buck, an 18-year-old unwed mother, was forcibly sterilized after a medical board, under the petition of Dr. Albert Sidney Priddy, found her a genetic threat to society.⁵ The Supreme Court's decision

⁴ As Dorothy Roberts writes, "For several decades, peaking in the 1970s, government-sponsored family-planning programs not only encouraged Black women to use birth control but coerced them into being sterilized. While slave masters forced Black women to bear children for profit, more recent policies have sought to reduce Black women's fertility. Both share a common theme—that Black women's childbearing should be regulated to achieve social objectives" (56).

⁵ *Buck v. Bell* has never been officially overturned, although the 1942 case *Skinner v. Oklahoma* affirmed the right of all U.S. citizens to have children. In theory this case supersedes *Buck v. Bell* but in practice medical establishments continued to involuntarily sterilize patients largely unimpeded until the 1970s.

validated sterilization laws already in place in many states and catalyzed the institution of many others. Sociologist Nicole Rousseau confirms that by 1935 thirty-three states had "eugenics-based sterilization statutes" (106). While the beginnings of sterilization laws targeted poor, uneducated, white women who threatened the purity and supremacy of the white ruling class, these laws quickly became fodder for racist medical practices. Across the next several decades, "sterilization laws and policies...came to be used against a variety of women of color, including Mexican-origin, black, and Native American women" (Russell 48). State programs sterilized over 60,000 people by the 1970s, disproportionately Black Americans and women (Severson). While eugenic laws stripped groups of women their right to privacy and bodily autonomy based on legal designations of unfitness, doctors also routinely sterilized other communities of women without their knowledge or consent. These procedures were frequently performed alongside childbirth, cesarean operations, or as a disingenuous prerequisite for other medical services. Women often went years or even their entire lives without knowing that they had been sterilized. Involuntary hysterectomies and tubal ligations on Black female patients were common enough in the South to give rise to the colloquialism "Mississippi appendectomy."⁶

The laws, policies, and procedures surrounding the practices of abortion and sterilization assumed control over women's bodies and reproductive lives, literally invaded a women's interior, and dismissed the notion that reproduction was or should be a private and highly personal experience. This reality of women of color's reproductive

⁶ Sterilization abuse sanctioned by the U.S. government extended into Puerto Rico, where medical techniques were practiced and perfected on unwitting Puerto Rican women. Camisha Russell writes that, "over 34 percent of Puerto Rican mothers aged 20-49 had been sterilized by 1965, and by 1980, the county had the highest rate of female sterilizations in the world" (48). This legacy and the links of reproductive science and policy across communities of women of color is discussed further in Chapter V.

experiences clashes with mainstream discourse on reproductive autonomy and privacy. In her poetry and prose, Brooks uses formal repetition to reveal this contradiction of reproductive privacy rights as applied across communities of women. The similarities of the repetition only operate superficially. Underneath what at first appears the same exist depths of difference withheld and obscured by the ambiguity of subtle revisions. These repetitions with difference claim a Black woman's right to privacy by making private her very declaration.

III. Revision in "the mother"

In 1944, at the height of the changing tide in abortion sentiment, Brooks submitted her first book of poetry *A Street in Bronzeville*. Her editor promptly forwarded the manuscript to Richard Wright, fellow Chicago author of best-selling novel *Native Son* (1940).⁷ In a 1961 interview with Studs Terkel, Brooks discusses Wright's review of her poetry, recalling his general enthusiasm for the collection with one exception: her abortion poem "the mother." Brooks says that Wright "felt that a proper poem could not be written about abortions" (*Conversations* 5). As the poet she "felt otherwise" and was pleased that her publisher agreed to include "the mother" in the collection against Wright's advice.

Even though Brooks claims abortion as proper poetic material, literary scholars have done little to advance the conversation of "the mother" beyond attempts to

⁷ *Native Son* exemplifies the characteristics of literary realism, social protest, and environmental determinism that now dominate understandings of 1940s African American literature. Wright's novel, along with others such as Ann Petry's *The Street* (1946), argues that environmental, economic, and social circumstances determine the lives and opportunities of individuals. Gwendolyn Brooks's concurrent poetry and fiction does not easily fit alongside these contemporary examples, but to read her work as a counter to Wright and others—as Kevin Quashie, Megan Ahern, and other scholars do—threatens to undermine Brooks's critique of the social and political environment's impact on Black women's reproductive choices and experiences.

incorporate it into the moral debate for or against abortion. In the poem, the speaker grieves for her aborted children and laments the sociopolitical situation that motivated her decision to pursue abortions. In one of the few extended examinations of "the mother," Barbara Johnson writes that, "readers of Brooks's poem have often read it as an argument against abortion. And it is certainly clear that the poem is not saying that abortion is a good thing" (33). The reduction of "the mother" into an endorsement for abortion, Johnson continues, vastly oversimplifies the complexity of the poem and the nuance of its formal and thematic strategies. She argues,

to see ["the mother"] as making a simple case for the embryo's right to life is to assume that a woman who has chosen abortion does not have the right to mourn. It is to assume that no case *for* abortion can take the woman's feelings of guilt and loss into consideration, that to take those feelings into account is to deny the right to choose the act that produced them. Yet the poem makes no such claim: it attempts the impossible task of humanizing both the mother and the aborted children while presenting the inadequacy of language to resolve the dilemma without violence. (33)

Brooks uses the formal strategy of doubling in "the mother" to highlight and bridge the divide between the oppositional positions of for or against abortion, an opposition that reimagines the private/public divide. By presenting the same information twice in slightly altered forms, "the mother" asserts that the speaker can simultaneously hold two conflicting positions regarding her reproductive choices. The poem never fully resolves the gap between these two ideological positions because systemic inequalities foreclose a reconciliation. Any resolution would disregard the power differentials that influence the

freedom of choice women have over their reproductive lives. Beyond highlighting the inadequacy of polarizing debates over reproductive choice and privacy in the 1940s, "the mother" establishes a reproductive justice framework that recognizes the intersecting marginalizations of Black women.⁸

The opening couplet of Brooks's poem "the mother" establishes the disorienting shifts in point of view and the oscillating verb tense that characterize the entire poem. It reads, "Abortions will not let you forget / You remember the children you got that you did not get" (ln 1-2). The first line of the poem places "abortions" as the subject of the sentence that performs a negative action: they "will not let you forget" (ln 1). Abortions act external to the ambiguous "you" of the second person address and prevent the process of forgetting. The second line of the poem is nearly synonymous in content with the first line but inverts the terms to shift the direction of action inward to the second person "you." Instead of abortions hindering the task of forgetting a memory, "You remember" (ln 2). The shift to the second person subject turns the focus from the external to the internal, collapsing the public/private narrative focus as described by McDowell. While these two actions have nearly synonymous meaning, they move in opposite directions. To remember is positive and accumulative while to not forget is negative and burdensome.

The end rhyme of the couplet severs "forget" into the component part "get" (a move repeated in the following two lines of the poem with the rhyme between "hair" and "air"). "Get" exists as a piece of the whole "forget," an internal element that can exist externally. This rhyme reflects the imagery of childbearing where a mother contains

⁸ While Brooks never directly identifies the female speaker of "the mother" as Black, her dedication to representing the average life of the Black community and her intentions to create Black portraits through her poetry and fiction support the assumption that the speaker of "the mother" is a Black woman.

multiple elements within one discrete body, yet those elements are poised to divide. The opening couplet of "the mother" sets up the relationship between subject/object, speaker/audience, and external/internal that will define the tenuous relationship between public/private women's reproductive autonomy in the poem. With shifting verb tense, direct address as apostrophe, and repetition, the poem unbalances and disorients the reader.

The speaker of the poem simultaneously speaks outward toward the reader in a public narrative voice with the second person direct address "you" and self-reflexively speaks to herself in a private inner monologue. The "you remember," "you got," and "you did not get" of the second line collapse the speaker and reader and force them to cohabitate life after abortion. The second stanza complicates the direct address by shifting into the first-person as the speaker addresses her aborted children. In "Apostrophe, Animation, and Abortion," Johnson defines apostrophe as,

both direct and indirect: based etymologically on the notion of turning aside, of digressing from straight speech, it manipulates the I/Thou structure of *direct* address in an indirect, fictionalized way. The absent, dead, or inanimate entity addressed is thereby made present, animate, and anthropomorphic. Apostrophe is a form of ventriloquism through which the speaker throws voice, life, and human form into the addressee, turning its silence into mute responsiveness. (30)

Johnson argues that by apostrophizing her aborted children, the speaker animates the dead into a half-life that qualifies the speaker's title as a "mother." This apostrophe to the deceased "Sweets" proceeds as a series of possessive "your" attributes and events that may have marked the children's lives if they had been born. But in considering the "luck,"

"lives," "names," and "births" that may have belonged to the aborted, the speaker moves from the certainty of the earlier future tense into an unsettled series of claims of "if" (ln 14-20). As the poem shifts the perspective, complicating the antecedent of "you" throughout the lines, the speaker also fluctuates between the predictable and unpredictable effects of an abortion.

After contemplating the possible objects and actions the speaker may have "seized" or "stolen" from the aborted (ln 14), she pleads with their lingering presence: "Believe that even in my deliberateness I was not deliberate" (ln 21). The repetition of "deliberate" forces the reader to consider if the speaker could be "not deliberate" while acting with "deliberateness." While the two phrases of the line employ the same root word, which initially suggests that they share an associative feeling or action, the repetition and slight revision to the conjugation of "deliberate" delineates the stark division between passive and active intent. The speaker actively pursues abortions with "deliberateness," but insists that external circumstances that restrict her choices make her "not deliberate." State sanctioned racial and gender violence constrict the speaker's available reproductive options. When choices are contingent, they cannot be made freely or with full deliberateness. Johnson paraphrases this line: "believe that the agent is not entirely autonomous, believe that I can be subject and object of violence at the same time, believe that I have not chosen the conditions under which I must choose" (33). In the construction of this dilemma, the poem positions the racist hierarchy as the absent subject that deliberately shapes Black women's reproductive lives. The speaker may deliberately choose to abort her children, but the moral responsibility lies with the construction and maintenance of American racism.

A poem about pregnancy and abortion already crosses the boundary between personal experience and public declaration. Kate Falvey writes that, "the mother" exposes the hard reality of many women's lives by breaking the silence and making the private, often shameful act of abortion dramatically public, while confronting the taboo subject of women's sexuality and lack of reproductive control" (124). She calls the first line of the poem "an unnervingly confessional statement, aggressive in its shocking matter-of-factness. The mother gives voice to what is still considered by many to be publicly unspeakable" (124). While it is true that many would find the topic of abortion to be "publicly unspeakable" at the time of publication and at many times after, Falvey's analysis simplifies the nuance between public and private in Brooks's poem. The inadequacy of language to fully articulate the truth of the speaker's position, both as the voice in the poem and as an almost-mother, interrupts the task of making public the private act of abortion. As the portion of "the mother" quoted in this chapter's epigraph concludes, truth eludes the speaker as she laments, "oh, what shall I say, how is the truth to be said?" Johnson writes that, "Brooks's speaker is attempting to fight her way out of a state of confusion between self and other" (33), which leaves the reader confused and disoriented at the poem's close. But this confusion and lack of full representation articulated through revision preserves the speaker's privacy and interiority from external consumption and appropriation. The reader serves as proxy for the governing state and medical establishment. If the reader cannot fully grasp the experience or emotion of the speaker, then pieces of her interiority remain wholly private and intimately guarded from forces that seek reproductive control.

IV. Maud Martha's Power of Creation

In her autobiography, *Report from Part One* (1972), Brooks describes speaker of "the mother" as "hardly your crowned and praised and 'customary' Mother; but a mother not unfamiliar, who decides that *she*, rather than her World, will kill her children. The decision is not nice, not simple, and the emotional consequences are neither nice nor simple" (184).⁹ By describing the motivating action of "the mother" as a mother who would rather "kill her children," Brooks avoids reducing the complexity of reproductive decisions to the polemical abortion debate. She expands the discourse of reproductive justice beyond abortion to account for other forms of violence inflicted upon Black mothers. Reproductive justice, according to founder of the movement Loretta Ross and discussed at length in the Introduction, insists on the rights of women to have and to not have children as well as the right to raise children in a healthy and advantageous environment. Brooks's sentiment in "the mother" encapsulates the complexity of a robust reproductive justice stance.¹⁰ The strategies Brooks employs in the poem of repetitious doubling and a tension between public and private perspective reach full articulation in the narrative voice and form of *Maud Martha*, Brooks's only known prose piece.

⁹ Infanticide appears in Black women's writing across the twentieth century. Laura Dawkins argues that Angeline Weld Grimké's short story "The Closing Door" (1919), Georgia Douglas Johnson's one-act drama *Safe* (1929), and Shirley Graham's play *It's Morning* (1940) are "neglected precursors" to Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), all which present the trauma of Black women choosing to end their infant's life. Koritha Mitchell's *Living with Lynching: African American Lynching Plays, Performance, and Citizenship, 1890-1930* (2011) draws a connection between literary representations of infanticide and lynching plays to show how infanticide operates as a response to the persistent racial violence in America.

¹⁰ Ann Petry's *The Street* (1946) is an important contemporary to Brooks's writing in this regard. Petry's novel narrates the detrimental and deterministic effects of a destitute environment on a Black mother's capacity to properly care for and nurture her child. In this way, *The Street* can also be read as a response to the reality of reproductive injustice.

The short novel is episodic and while the plot is chronological, the self-contained vignettes jump space and time as the seemingly small incidents of Maud Martha's life build into a landscape of a Black woman's experience. As a child and young woman, Maud encounters racism and colorism, experiences jealousy toward her sister, and falls in love. The novel follows her as she marries, moves into a kitchenette in Chicago with her husband, and attempts to curate domestic happiness, which includes having children. Maud's life, in its everydayness and occasional mundanity, could be many individuals' lives. Yet, the subtlety of Maud's influence on the third person narration and the glimpses at her interior life paint a detailed portrait of this young Black woman. Brooks accomplishes the dual task of representing average Black American life and experience while also insisting that such a life is inherently complex. Maud's interiority is most on display, and most in need of privacy, in the moments she contemplates her own power over the life and death of others. Like "the mother," the chapters "Maud Martha spares the mouse" and "a birth" use repetition with difference to strain the relationship between representing a Black woman's interiority with the formal insistence on privacy. Brooks further highlights this tension by shifting the narrative perspective—from the limited omniscience entirely focused on Maud in "Maud Martha spares the mouse" to the multi-perspectival view in "a birth"—that moves between the public and private narrative form. This analysis concludes with a reading of the last chapter of *Maud Martha*, "back from the wars!" This ending, like the ambiguous and disorienting ending of "the mother," engages repetition and doubling of both form and character in the highly public context of the resolution of World War II, dislocating the boundary between the personal and the political and obstructing a reconciled or resolved conclusion.

Literary scholarship on *Maud Martha* repeatedly returns to the silences, pauses, and omissions of the novel. Mary Helen Washington writes that "this autobiographical novel is about silences" and that the "vignette chapters enact Maud Martha's silence" (453-54). Barbara Christian refers to *Maud Martha*'s "smallness," and its "virtual dismissal of the grand or heroic" ("Nuance" 131). Kelly Norman Ellis focuses these arguments to claim Maud faces an "external silence" with an inner voice shown through the omniscient narration (148), and Kevin Quashie revises this approach, instead naming *Maud Martha* "a novel of quiet" where Maud's interior life takes precedence over action (48). Quashie continues to argue that the novel "refuses to tell, to try to tell, the whole story of a black woman's life in one swoop of significance. After all, it is not possible to illustrate fully any person's life in any representation" (53). He identifies the collapse of Maud's interior monologue into the omniscient voice of the narrator as one strategy of revealing her inner life. This collapse or doubling of voice and perspective, simultaneously distinct and separable yet one and together, mark the strategic "refusal," to use Quashie's term, that preserves Black women's privacy. Maud's life is present, often bare on the page, yet the novel thwarts the full revelation or invasion of Maud's privacy. Patricia and Vernon Lattin identify Maud's "dual vision" in the novel and argue that it "allows her to see simultaneously beauty in ugliness, life in death, and a positive way of living by which one can maintain one's self-respect and creativity in the face of overwhelmingly negative forces" (137). Maud's strategy of doubling and repetition, however, is an active survival strategy that preserves her personal internal life and her reproductive autonomy. What scholars have named "silence," "smallness," and "quiet," is

a radical reclamation of Black women's privacy through a purposeful doubling that obscures the full articulation of a Black female interiority.

The first paragraph of the short chapter, "Maud Martha spares the mouse," focuses the attention away from Maud Martha and centers the narrative perspective on a mouse caught in a trap in Maud's home. The trap transforms to an executioner's block where the mouse has "no appeal" or opportunity to defend its innocence, "no hope of reprieve or postponement" (Brooks, *Blacks* 212). Maud transforms into the mouse's "eternal enemy" in whose hands the fate of the "little creature" rests. The mouse resigns to its fate and prepares to die with "a fine small dignity" in Maud Martha's kitchenette. Maud's home, her private domestic space, becomes the mouse's courtroom and prison, a spatial manifestation of the public, social, and political state.

In contrast to the descriptive and straightforward opening paragraph, the second paragraph enters Maud's imagination as she "wondered what else [the mouse] was thinking" (212). Her considerations unfold in a syntactic symmetry that uses repetition of opening phrases to methodically reveal the perspective of the mouse. "Perhaps," the mouse was thinking, "that there was not enough food in its larder. Perhaps that little Betty, a puny child from the start, would not, now, be getting fed. Perhaps that, now, the family's seasonal house-cleaning, for lack of expert direction, would be left undone" (212). While the subject of each sentence vanishes, the repeated "perhaps" situates the statement firmly in Maud Martha's point of view. She imagines the domestic life of the mouse with a focus on food, the home, and children; she even names the hypothetical child-mice. In considering this scene, Courtney Thorsson writes that, "with remarkable generosity, [Maud] imagines a mouse as having its own complex life with much to be lost

if she should exterminate the rodent. The mouse acts in its own domestic space with the same female interiority that Brooks insists the reader attribute to Maud" ("Gwendolyn Brooks's Black Aesthetic" 157). The peril of leaving the private sphere, as the mouse must do to provide sustenance for its family, may lead to a destruction of the home itself. The shift between safety and destruction, home and public, is imminent as it all occurs "now," a term repeated in three consecutive sentences.

The final two sentences of this paragraph slip into the mouse's point of view: "No more the mysterious shadows of the kitchenette, the uncharted twists, the unguessed halls. No more the sweet delights of the chase, the charms of being unsuccessfully hounded, thrown at" (Brooks, *Blacks* 212). These sentences characterize the mouse's life up to this point and the repetition of "no more" implies that the mouse recognizes the severity of its predicament. To the mouse, the kitchenette is "mysterious" and the adventure of entering Maud's home a delight. While these sentences could be an extension of Maud's own musing on the mouse, without a direct subject the point of view is ambiguous. Rather, Maud is the subordinated active agent that hounds the mouse, "unsuccessfully hounded," and that throws at the mouse, "thrown at." The perspective of these sentences is both Maud and the mouse; the repetition of syntax parallels their two positions, in tandem but distinct. As Maud and the mouse occupy the same physical and psychological space, she finds herself unable to "bear the little look" let alone to kill it (212).

The collapse between Maud and the mouse strains the boundaries of binary oppositions including those between human and animal and between male and female. Letting the mouse free, Maud instructs it to return home to its children and "to your wife

or husband." Malin Lavon Walther argues that, "[w]hile Brooks deliberately leaves the gender of the mouse open by allowing it either a wife or husband, its role in the family (as imagined by Maud Martha) emphasizes traditionally female tasks" (143). The affiliation between Maud and the mouse, as well as the context of the mouse trapped outside of its domestic space complicates Walther's conclusion of the mouse's gender role. The mouse, as constructed through Maud's dialogue, is ungendered, neither traditionally male or female. Evoking the history of Black women in the labor market, the mouse must leave the domestic space in search of sustenance. Black women's historical need to work outside of the home results in a blurring between the public and the private sphere. The mouse enters its public space of Maud Martha's private home. Once Maud recognizes herself in the mouse and in its ability to transgress boundaries, "She opened the trap," which literally frees the mouse and figuratively frees something within Maud. "The mouse vanished" from the room but also symbolically enters Maud as "she was conscious of a new cleanness in her" (Brooks, *Blacks* 212). The physical and spiritual boundaries between Maud and her former captive dissolve. "She created a piece of life" by releasing the mouse, by seeing the possible likeness of herself in the mouse, and by considering a wholly alien perspective (213).

"Why," Maud reflects to herself, "I'm good! I am *good*" (213, original emphasis). The repetition of "good" reinforces the doubling in the scene (Maud even feels as though "her height doubled"). The first claim, "I'm good!", celebrates Maud's decision with the more casual contraction and the emphatic exclamation mark. The second phrase, while nearly identical to the first in definition and meaning, slows down Maud's consideration. The contraction expands to "I am" as a reiteration of Maud's subjectivity. No longer an

exclamation, "good" appears in italics to stress the word, as though Maud lingers on its implications. The creation of life extends beyond a single good action and comes to characterize the individual.

Maud's "privileging [of] creation, generosity, and interiority," Thorsson argues, "is a form of resistance" ("Gwendolyn Brooks's Black Aesthetic" 160). Political change, Thorsson continues, is possible through "daily affairs and black female interiority." The daily and domestic task of rodent removal begins Maud's consideration of her power to create. Her later experience in childbirth, described in the chapter "a birth," provides an additional episode of creation where Black domesticity opens up to reveal complex Black female interiority. Her experience of childbirth extends beyond her personal individual interior. This scene is "a birth," the indefinite article placing Maud's experience in a network of births across time and space. As Maud's mother Belva reminds her as she labors through intense pain, "You're just going to have a baby, like millions of other women" (Brooks, *Blacks* 287). As she did with the mouse, Maud doubles herself in the image of her daughter, Paulette. Yet in this most intimate setting, the narration shifts away from Maud. At the moment when her reproductive body is most on display, Maud's reproductive privacy remains intact.

V. A Public Birth, a Private Gaze

The chapter "a birth" begins as Maud and her husband Paul prepare to retire for the night. Paul "got in bed" and Maud left the kitchenette and "went down the long public hall to the bathroom" (231). In this moment, the text reiterates the liminal quality of the kitchenette as Maud must travel through the "public hall" that connects the private space

of her home to the bathroom.¹¹ While in this threshold between the public and private Maud goes into labor. Like a womb, the hall contracts as the "squeezing dark" surrounds Maud and she felt "something softly separate in her" (231). The sibilance of the repeated "s" sound hisses through the sentence. It sets a mildly foreboding atmosphere as Maud splits apart, alone and in the dark, caught between two locations. The tension immobilizes Maud: "she couldn't move" (232). Paul must lift her into bed and undress her before "all of a sudden motion came to her" (232). Maud's riven interior battles for control over her external body, dramatically thrusting her from one condition to its extreme opposite. Concerned, Paul prepares to go downstairs and call the doctor, but Maud voices her displeasure at his desire to leave her alone. She swears at him, "Damn. DAMN!" and demands "Don't you sneak out! Don't you *sneak* out!" (234). Her repetition of the same word and phrase continues the pattern from "Maud Martha spares the mouse," yet while that repetition and revision occurs internally as thought ("I'm good. I am *good!*"), now Maud shouts out loud. B.J. Bolden identifies this scene as the novel's "emotional and rhetorical peak" when "Maud abruptly, but briefly, screams out all of the repressed emotions of her life" (100).

The outburst of verbal energy does more than emphasize the "repressed emotions" of Maud's life. Formally, the repetition alone would add emphasis to her words. With each exclamation, however, Brooks revises the first instance with punctuation or a textual emphasis of capitalization or italicization to intensify Maud's dialogue. While other

¹¹ One solution to the housing crisis in Chicago as an increasing number of Black families moved to the South Side on and around State Street in the first half of the twentieth century was to chop existing houses and apartments into smaller and smaller units called "kitchenettes." Such accommodations housed multiple families in a series of small rooms, all of which usually shared a central bathroom and perhaps even shared a kitchen.

characters use exact repetition in this chapter—including Paul who later says "All right. All right" and "It's coming! It's coming!"—Maud has the opportunity to amend her words. Maud's seemingly "repressed emotions," as Bolden names, are under her full control and available for revision. Maud labors to find adequate expression for the inexpressible and carefully attempts to accurately reflect her intentions in her speech.

Maud's ability to revise her statements allows her a level of control over her public representation denied to other characters and gives the reader more access to her interiority. Ellis writes that "it is the role of mother and more precisely, the act of childbirth that allows Maud Martha to experience her own agency" (147). At this critical moment, though, as Maud cleaves internally and endeavors to fully illustrate her thoughts, the narration shifts for the first time away from Maud. While the third person narrator follows Maud in each scene up to this point, the story now leaves with Paul as he defies Maud's declarations and scrambles to call a doctor. Paul's movements in and out of the home are a reconfiguration of the narrator's omniscience. As Paul moves away from the intimacy of the bedroom, of Maud's naked body, and of the birth of his child, the narration forecloses the possibility of clearly observing this private event. This sudden perspective shift confronts the legacies of surveillance and spectatorship directed at Black women's reproductive organs and events.

As Paul locates a doctor, others enter and exit the bedroom to assist Maud including Maud's mother Belva and a neighbor, Mrs. Cray. The threshold of the home ceases to mark the boundary between public and private space during a birth. As though desperate to maintain a degree of privacy, Belva and Mrs. Cray "stood, one on each side of the bed, purposelessly holding a sheet over Maud Martha, under which they peeped as

seldom as they felt was safe" (Brooks, *Blacks* 238). The two women flank Maud and literally veil her nakedness with a suspended sheet. Their attempts to preserve privacy and modesty, however, are useless in the scene—the women fail at shielding Maud's publicly available gestating body and even they cannot help but "peep" underneath, stealing a glance.

Five minutes after the baby is born, Paul returns to the scene with a doctor. The strategic timing and pacing of this entrance allow for an all-female environment during the actual birth that quickly fades with the arrival of two men who represent patriarchal authority, a husband and a doctor. The stranger symbolically ushers the medical establishment into Maud's bedroom at a most intimate moment. He is "a large silent man, who came in swiftly, threw the sheet aside without saying a word, cut the cord" (238). The doctor's stature asserts his dominance in the room, an authority further emphasized by his silence and speed. He neither offers nor takes direction. He reveals the purposelessness of the sheet that Belva and Mrs. Cray carefully hold over Maud by casting it aside. The doctor's maneuvers and anonymity reveal his lack of concern for the intrusion on Maud's privacy. She, as the object of his actions, is absent from the list of his activities. The doctor executes a series of tasks that center Maud's own body without acknowledging her humanity or personhood. In the sterility of medical efficiency, the doctor "cuts the cord" and severs the physical externalization of Maud's doubleness in the form of her new child. Unlike Belva's and Mrs. Cray's secret glimpses at Maud's nude form, the doctor unabashedly surveys Maud's body. While the medical gaze appears sterile, desexualized, and impersonal, it nevertheless puts Maud's body on display.

In *Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness* (2015), Simone Browne asserts that "surveillance in and of black life as a fact of blackness" (6). The surveillance of Maud's reproductive body expands Browne's concept of "racializing surveillance" that "signals those moments where enactments of surveillance reify boundaries, borders, and bodies along racial lines, and where the outcome is often discriminatory treatment of those who are negatively racialized by such surveillance" (Browne 16). The doctor's treatment of Maud reinforces the boundaries of race by situating her firmly in the legacy of visually unassailable and consumable Black female bodies, a history Sander Gilman details through the life of Sarah Bartmann. In her life and after her death, researchers and scientists displayed Bartmann's body to determine if her sexual organs "could be shown to be inherently different" thereby confirming that "the black were a separate (and, needless to say, lower) race" (Gilman 216). The omnipresence of surveillance that Bartmann and Maud share also reveals the leverage of medical discourse on the construction and maintenance of race and gender. Bartmann's body fulfilled the need for a valid medical model to declare a biological difference between the races. This attitude persisted through the nineteenth century with the rise of medicine, including gynecological advancements. As discussed in the Introduction, Deirdre Cooper Owens argues in *Medical Bondage* that, "white men's ideas about black women's reproduction proved foundational for accepting broader and more damaging ideas about black people generally. If black women recovered from childbirth more quickly, experienced surgeries without pain, and had oversized genitalia, perhaps America was right to keep the entire 'race' enslaved" (111). The persistent sentiment of the Black female superbody, impervious to pain and without shame or deserving of modesty, reaches from and beyond

American chattel slavery.¹² With the brief but stark intrusion of the medical doctor into Maud's bedroom immediately after she births Paulette, Brooks ushers in the repeated and reinforced history of racializing, gendering, and medicalizing surveillance that not only rejects the humanity of Black women, but perpetuates their continued dehumanization.

While the external world focuses on her body, Maud's thoughts turn to her sensations as she "preferred to think, now, about how well she felt" (Brooks, *Blacks* 240). Although she initially reflects on her returned singularity, Maud's doubleness reemerges:

Shortly before she had heard it in the kitchen—a bright delight had flooded through her upon first hearing that part of Maud Martha Brown Phillips expressing itself with a voice of its own. But now the baby was quiet and returned its mother's stare with one that seemed equally curious and mystified but perfectly cool and undisturbed. (241)

The chapter "Maud Martha spares the mouse" foreshadows this scene between mother and child. Like the mouse, the child exists as an ungendered, even dehumanized "it."¹³ Maud experiences a comparable shift in perspective and a doubling when she gazes upon the creature and her gaze is returned. As the mouse had "looked at Maud Martha" (212), the baby "returned it's mother's stare" (241). The passage's imagery establishes a

¹² Toni Morrison's first novel, *The Bluest Eye* (1970) describes the conditions of a hospital maternity ward in the 1930s with a flashback narrated through Pauline Breedlove's point of view. Pauline, Pecola's mother, describes how the experienced doctors told the trainees that "you don't have any trouble with" Black women, "They deliver right away and with no pain. Just like horses" (124–25, original emphasis). Determined to contradict the myth of the Black women's superbodily, Pauline "moaned something awful. The pains wasn't as bad as I let on, but I had to let them people know having a baby was more than a bowel movement. I hurt just like them white women" (125, original emphasis).

¹³ Maud's use of the neuter pronoun recalls Gertrude's use of "it" in Larsen's *Passing* when describing dark-skinned children as discussed in Chapter II. Rather than denying the desirability and humanity of the child, as Chapter II argues about Gertrude's statement, Maud's use of the "it" pronoun contributes to Brooks's destabilization of binary oppositions (in this case, between she/he and between self/other). The reproduction of Maud's self is not limited to a repetition of gender or identity.

reciprocal, and private, gaze between mother and child that operates as a self-sustaining recognition of women's multiplicity.

The long dash at the start of the passage reaches across the scene as a tether that draws together Maud and the child. Before visual contact, Maud hears the child's voice. The rhyme of "bright delight" reinforces the aural experience of Maud "first hearing" the child as external from herself. The sound of the child, while unspecified in timbre or tone, "flooded through" and permeated Maud's body. The boundaries between Maud and her child are porous. Even though they now exist separately, the child is a "part of Maud Martha Brown Phillips" (241). While the narration routinely refers to Maud as the alliterative Maud Martha, here her full name including her maiden name appears to represent the totality of her identity both past and present. The child is a piece of the whole and, to Maud's wonderment, expresses "itself with a voice of its own" (241). The child is simultaneously part of Maud and a distinct entity with its own voice, but that other voice works to multiply Maud's own and establish the multivocality of a maternal lineage.

When Maud finally lays eyes on the child, she sparks a feedback loop of self-recognition. Now "quiet," the child ceases the sound that allows its voice and selfhood to travel indiscriminately. Maud looks and the child looks back; it "returned its mother's stare with one that seemed equally curious and mystified" (241). Unlike the external gazes earlier in the scene that claim the power of looking at Maud, she now looks while being looked upon. Mother and child are both subject and object, spectator and spectacle. The narration cautiously describes the interaction between mother and child from a distanced standpoint, able to comment only on how the look "seemed." The interiorities

of Maud and the child are absent from the page. But the narrator does describe a final repetition with difference of Maud's childbearing. Maud and the child both appear "curious and mystified," which emphasizes their sameness; "but," the text continues, the child's stare is also "perfectly cool and undisturbed" (241). The shift in focus and scope from the unifying characteristics of Maud and the child to the unique elements of the child's gaze through the coordinating conjunction "but" identifies the child, Paulette, as a "part of Maud Martha Brown Phillips" with a difference.

In "'Taming All That Anger Down': Rage and Silence in Gwendolyn Brooks' *Maud Martha*," Washington writes that, "however powerful the reproductive act is, it is not the same as the creative process: a child is a separate, independent human being, not a sample of one's creative work" (459). The closed loop of reciprocal and oppositional gazing between Maud and her child complicate Washington's definitive claim that "a child is separate." While Paulette is distinct, she maintains a link to her mother's interiority through looking. Paulette fulfills Maud's earlier wishes to "to donate to the world a good Maud Martha. That was the offering, the bit of art, that could not come from any other" (Brooks, *Blacks* 164). Childbirth allows Maud to create life—her ultimate definition of "good"—and allows Maud to create art. Her daughter is not a mere replication but an invention, a difference, a change of herself.

The chapter "a birth" ends with the external narrator observing the first eye-to-eye contact between mother and child yet unable, or unwilling, to delve further into the intimacy of the scene. Ellis argues that "this child is part of Maud Martha, yet has a voice that is uniquely hers: a voice Maud must teach her to use, and so, Maud must speak" (155). Yet the chapter ends not with voice but with sight. Maud Martha and Paulette,

instead, teach one another to look and see, to recognize one another outside of the restrictions of language and representation, to exist on a plane inaccessible to the reader or viewer. In "The Oppositional Gaze," bell hooks affirms, "there is power in looking" (107).¹⁴ Even while subject to the forces of racism and sexism, "the ability to manipulate one's gaze in the face of structures of domination that would contain it," hooks writes, "opens up the possibility of agency" (107). The reciprocal gaze between Maud Martha and Paulette is a private act that affirms both of their individual agency and their mutual connection.¹⁵

By locking eyes, Maud and Paulette become both spectator and spectacle. For hooks, this gesture forms a resistance to hegemonic power, that "in resistance struggle, the power of the dominated to assert agency by claiming 'awareness' politicizes 'looking' relations—one learns to look a certain way in order to resist" (116). The oppositional gaze arises through action and intent and hooks is careful to acknowledge that Black women's critical spectatorship can do more than simply resist but also revise, interrogate, and invent. Maud and Paulette see, invent, and actualize one another, all while simultaneously resisting the proprietary gaze of the external world symbolized by the

¹⁴ hooks's essay is primarily concerned with cinematic spectatorship, but her theory of the oppositional gaze travels across genres and contexts. A further investigation of Maud's oppositional gaze would also consider her patterns of looking as spectatorship in the chapters "at the Regal," "we're the only colored people here," and "an encounter."

¹⁵ Maud Martha's claiming of a closed, private gaze destabilizes the association between white womanhood and the domestic/private and refutes the corresponding idea of Black womanhood as public and consumable. In "The Whiteness of Privacy," Eden Osucha describes how the right to privacy arose in tandem with specific media technologies and practices that increased the circulation of private images of white women. Osucha writes that, "bourgeois women's exemplary status for the negative depiction of media publicity reflects a double and contradictory symbolic function of the white female body—its positioning both as a naturalized object of visual consumption and as the privileged signifier of domesticity in the traditional public/private distinction" (70-1).

doctor and the public invasion of Maud's domestic space. "Critical black female spectatorship," hooks writes, "emerges as a site of resistance only when individual black women actively resist the imposition of dominant ways of knowing and looking" (128). Brooks's use of repetition with difference and the retreat from Maud's influence on the semi-omniscient narration are techniques of resistance to "dominant ways of knowing and looking."

Although loaded with several concessions, it is important to not confine the complexity of Brooks's strategy to a declaration of resistance. Interpretations of African American literature and culture often result in claims of representation or resistance and while *Maud Martha* represents the full personhood of the title character, which serves as a form of resistance to antiblack racism, Brooks's novel breaks this model. In *The Sovereignty of Quiet: Beyond Resistance in Black Culture* (2012), Quashie establishes quiet as an alternative central principle of African American literature. "The politics of representation," Quashie writes, is "where black subjectivity exists for its social and political meaningfulness rather than as a marker of the human individuality of the person who is black. As an identity, blackness is always supposed to tell us something about race or racism, or about America, or violence and struggle and triumph or poverty and hopefulness" (4). These two frames limit "blackness as a concept" (5). He suggests quiet as a replacement or as an additional condition through which to conceptualize blackness, writing that it "is the inexpressible expressiveness of this interior, an expressiveness that can appear publicly, have and affect social and political meaning, challenge or counter social discourse, yet none of this is its aim or essence" (22). Quashie's application of his

theory to Brooks's *Maud Martha* is compelling, but it has limitations when cast alongside the interrogation of reproductive politics.

Quashie argues that "the aesthetic of quiet is watcherless" (22). When contextualized with the history of the right to privacy and the legacy of Black women's experiences with medicalized reproduction, the condition of "watcherless" is insufficient if not fundamentally at odds with the visually consumable and physically violable reproductive body. In establishing a space of privacy, Brooks does not deny the public's preoccupation with the reproductive form or disregard the history of Black women's bodies displayed for spectacle. Rather, Brooks uses the subtlety of repetition with difference to destabilize the position of the spectator and draw attention to the invasiveness and violence of their gaze. When the doctor strips the sheet away from Maud's nude form, the reader desires to turn away their eyes to protect her privacy even though her vulnerable body does not appear literally or discursively on the page. When Belva and Mrs. Cray sneak glances at Maud's nakedness, their intrusiveness feels illicit and invasive. The reader becomes aware of the power relations of looking and the right to preserve Maud's privacy.

VI. Liminal Life and Death

The establishment of private interiority runs counter to one of the primary objectives of African American literature and theory: evidencing Black humanity. Writers have long laid bare the physical and emotional trauma of antiblack racism in America as evidence in the fight for equity and justice. Slave narratives supported abolitionist goals by transforming the figure of the dehumanized (or even non-human) enslaved person into a relatable, empathetic, individual. In his 1845 *Narrative*, Frederick

Douglass declares that, "you have seen how a man was made a slave; you shall see how a slave was made a man" (47). His statement summarizes a goal and intention of the slave narrative to humanize the enslaved and emphasizes visual witnessing with the repetitious "seen" and "see." Nineteenth-century Black women writers often used the common condition of motherhood to reach their readership of middle-class white women. Frances Harper's poetry such as "Eliza Harris" and "The Slave Mother" and Harriet Jacobs's 1861 *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* all explore the emotional burden and trauma Black mothers experienced during slavery. These works of literature served to enrich and correct a white public perception about the status of Black people in America and the trend of using creative writing to represent and humanize the Black community extends into the twentieth century.¹⁶ But where is the line between representing a full and nuanced person, with depths of emotion and experience, and intruding on their right to privacy?

The need to carve out space for privacy exposes the false dichotomy between public and private. These spaces are not discrete nor equitably distributed across groups of people. Privacy is a luxury granted only when an individual or a group are recognized as fully autonomous. In her writing, Brooks builds space for Black women's privacy. In establishing a screen to block the viewer at key moments, most often associated with women's procreativity, Brooks asserts that condition of blackness does not foreclose the right to a private interiority. She balances the public and private readership and creates space for ambiguity and misdirection, never allowing her characters to settle into one

¹⁶ Of course, this technique transcends the limits of literature and is also found in politics, law, and activism. The role of personal testimony and rehearsing individual injustices, often in chorus with others, is a common formula used to achieve equity and recognition. This can be seen from Truth and Reconciliation programs, to Anita Hill's Congressional tribunal, and countless Black feminist writings.

rigid characterization. This is how she builds a theory of reproductive justice that takes into account the right to have and to not have children. The speaker of Brooks's poem "the mother" contends with the loss of her aborted children, but her plight for reproductive autonomy and privacy is not detached from Maud's preoccupation with the creation of life. The boundaries between life and death and public and private are porous.

The final chapter of *Maud Martha*, "back from the wars!," approaches the boundary between the personal and the political with repetition unlike that seen elsewhere in the novel. The radio transmits the public world into the domestic space of Maud's private home. The second world war is over and, joyous at the shining sun and the glory of life, Maud opens her window shade and whispers: "What, *what*, am I to do with all of this life?" (Brooks, *Blacks* 320). Christian links Maud's statement to the collective call of the Black community across the midcentury that "insists on the value of their 'little' lives," a call that coalesces in the "social and literary black movements of the 1960s and 1970s" (135). The repeated "what, *what*" voices both Maud's call and the larger communal call (or response) in quick succession as she stands inside but gazes outside of her home through the open window. In this moment, Maud reflects again on the slippage between life and death, "that life was good and death would be good too" (Brooks, *Blacks* 320). The chapter endeavors to emphasize the small pleasures of the day against the mass violence and destruction of war.

The boundaries between the public and the private continue to blur as Maud "got out-of-doors" with Paulette, a hyphenated phrasing that distinguishes the domestic from the public but also emphasizes "doors" as the liminal space that connects the two. To return to McDowell's theory of public and private narrative forms, this final chapter of

Maud Martha pulls together the public narrative form with robust references to the outside world and Maud's act of leaving the kitchenette associated with her private internal perspective. In the sunshine, Maud imagines soldiers "with two arms off and two legs off, the men with the parts of faces" when something within her separates: "her guts divided" (320-21). The riving of her insides, the material components of her "guts," at first alludes to a queasiness and discomfort at the thought of bodies torn apart by battle. But the chapter ends with the revelation of a second possible catalyst for Maud's division: "she was going to have another baby" (322). The public and private exist simultaneously within the same physical space, but a final act of repetition reinforces the ambiguity and illusiveness characteristic of Brooks's reproductive privacy.

As Maud's reproductive cycle begins anew, the final line of the chapter repeats an earlier line exactly: "The weather was bidding her bon voyage" (319, 322). Unlike a formal revision of emphasis by capitalization or italicization, as seen elsewhere in the novel, the difference in this instance is contextual. The sentence does not adjoin its repetition. They straddle the chapter, as though the content between the two occasions exists within the act of repetition. Snead confirms that repetition does not merely restate the initial signifier, but that "given the 'quality of difference,' compared to what has come before, it has become not exactly a 'repetition,' but rather a 'progression,' if positive, or a 'regression,' if negative" (146). Life, death, war, and the home all exist between the otherwise exact repetitions. As Maud notes earlier, both life and death are "good" and so she withholds any valuation of the repetition. The importance is the movement, the fluctuation between the seemingly concurrent parts that contain and preserve the nuance

and complexity of inner lives; lives that resist full representation and therefore maintain a degree of privacy.

The relationship between private and public reproduction radically transforms in the second half of the twentieth century. The space Gwendolyn Brooks meticulously carves out of her fiction and poetry for Black women to linger in protected solitude becomes less available as reproductive medicine and fertility treatments enter the national and, soon after, global market. In the following chapter, I move into the latter half of the century to consider the rise of commercial sperm banks and the proliferation of available medical interventions for human conception and gestation.

CHAPTER IV

FRAN ROSS'S SPERM SECRET

A "she" cannot, therefore, qualify for bastard, or "natural son" status, and that she cannot provides further insight into the coils and recoils of patriarchal wealth and fortune.

Hortense Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe" (1988)

I. From Privacy to Presence

This chapter marks a turn in the consideration of reproductive science from the restrictive (eugenics policy, abortion, involuntary sterilization) to the expansive. Technological advancements in fertility treatments and procedures offered unprecedented access to childbearing in the second half of the twentieth century. In common periodization, this era also marks a radical shift in the aesthetic and political goals of Black literature. The Black Arts Movement seemingly operated as the creative extension of the radical Black politics of Black Power and Black Nationalism. In his 1966 essay, "The Black Arts Movement," arts editor and leader of the Black Arts Movement Larry Neal defined "Black Art" as "the aesthetic and spiritual sister of the Black Power concept," claiming that "both relate broadly to the Afro-American's desire for self-determination and nationhood" (272). Both Black Power and Black Art prioritized the articulation and preservation of an authentic, unified Black identity. In rejecting cultural and social norms as markers of white domination, literature and visual artists experimented with radical new forms and styles. The results were daring and loud. The quiet work of Gwendolyn Brooks's reproductive privacy as discussed in Chapter III, for instance, would seem to have no place in this new literary landscape.

Identifying a sharp break between Black cultural production of first and second half of the twentieth century, however, neglects the critical and discursive continuity

across the decades and reduces the variety of creative endeavors from the period known as the Black Arts Movement, but that I will refer to as the Black Arts era.¹ Brooks, for instance, continued to publish poetry throughout the era and carried many of her poetic and political goals into her later work.² In *Renegade Poetics: Black Aesthetics and Formal Innovation in African American Poetry* (2011), literary critic and poet Evie Shockley writes that,

Despite the complex debates about and transformations of the concept of black aesthetics during and immediately following the [Black Arts] Movement, at a certain level of generality, a picture—a caricature, in many respects—of a BAM-era black aesthetic has taken shape in which, as frequently happens with caricatures, several of its features are exaggerated and other qualities some of us know to be present are rendered invisible. (2)

Shockley identifies some of the "reductive" characteristics of the BAM caricature as a "militant, revolutionary politics and angry, incisive criticism of white supremacy and

¹ I take the cue of GerShun Avilez by using the designation "Black Arts era" to indicate that the "focus here extends beyond the traditional terrain of Black Arts material and Black nationalist thinkers" (3). Avilez's stance is particularly relevant for my chapter that extends the aesthetic concerns of Black Arts to previously unassociated text *Oreo* by obscured author Fran Ross, as well as to expand the historical boundaries of the era. Avilez works with the traditional periodization of Black Arts Movement as characterizing Black creative production from 1965 to 1975. However, the Black Arts Movement can be periodized differently. James Edward Smethurst, for instance, includes the entire 1960s and 1970s and "its legacies" (302). In *'After Mecca': Women Poets and the Black Arts Movement*, Cheryl Clarke does not correlate the demise "of the radical/revolutionary shape-shifters" with the end of the Black Arts Movement by 1973 but strengthens the lineage between Black Arts aesthetics and the rise of Black feminist art that was gaining stride during the years Black Arts is presumed to end. In light of these considerations, this chapter aims to continue this work of disrupting the assumed periodization and aesthetic characterization of the Black Arts era.

² In line with the general understanding of the Black Arts Movement as a radical break from prior literary and cultural production, scholarship on Gwendolyn Brooks often divides her career into before and after she attended the 1967 Fisk University Second Black Writers' Conference. Recent scholarship on Brooks has worked to complicate this narrative. See Jeni Rinner's "From Bronzeville to the Mecca and After: Gwendolyn Brooks and the Location of Black Identity" and Courtney Thorsson's "Gwendolyn Brooks's Black Aesthetic of the Domestic" for examples of scholarship that trouble the demarcation of Brooks's literary career.

racial oppression" (2-3). One quality of Black Arts era literature "present" but "rendered invisible," I argue, is a critical interrogation of reproductive politics.

Not only are ideas about reproductive politics and science underexamined in scholarly writing about Black Arts era literature, but one key novel that bridges Black Arts experimental aesthetics and the burgeoning market of reproductive technologies remains largely obscure: Fran Ross's *Oreo* (1974). Ross's narrative revolves around a scene of artificial insemination by frozen sperm, a newly available fertility treatment in the 1970s. *Oreo* is an example of Black women's fiction that questions the role of Black reproduction in the rhetoric of Black Arts and Black Power in the technologically reformed era of reproductive science. GerShun Avilez argues that "the paradigm of reproduction becomes an important node of nationalist analysis because it is overinvested with conflicted meanings: reproduction is a trope of community, but it has functioned as a historical means of racialized control and manipulation" (23). The masculinist and nationalist aesthetic and political priorities of the Black Arts era granted men nearly-exclusive say over the means of reproduction. This resulted in a reduction of Black women's public and political value to their biology, trapping them again in the narrow image of idolized mother and progenitor of the race. This chapter highlights how the rhetoric of the Black Arts aesthetic and its concomitant political affiliation—Black Power and Black Nationalism—limits the analytical approach to Black women's fiction from this period.

The dispute about women's reproductive responsibility within the ranks of Black Arts and Black Power focused on use of oral contraceptives with one side calling the pill a tool of Black genocide and the other advocating for women's reproductive and sexual

freedom. Avilez writes that "during the Black Arts era, there were significant public disagreements about how Black communities should understand birth control and its place in the public sphere, and these debates became the focus of discussions of reproduction and helped to shape the larger theoretical terrain of Modern Black Nationalism" (95-6). While the importance and centrality of the birth control debate should not be undervalued in considerations of Black Arts literature, the reproductive discourse of the era is overdetermined by this public debate about oral contraceptives. This has resulted in a lacuna of scholarship into other contemporary changes in reproductive technology and science that transformed the terrain of human reproduction.³

Black women did not wait idly by as others determined their reproductive destinies. Significantly, Black women spoke against the "Babies for the Revolution" position of radical Black politics and Black Nationalism. Nowhere is this more clear than in *The Black Woman* (1970), an anthology of Black feminist writers edited by Toni Cade Bambara. The collection contains essays that set the tone for the nascent Black feminist movement, such as "Double Jeopardy: To Be Black and Female" by Frances Beal, "On the Issue of Roles" and "The Pill: Genocide or Liberation?" by Bambara, and "Is the Black Male Castrated?" by Jean Carey Bond and Patricia Perry. In her essay, Beal observes how women's contribution "to the black nation is children" (344). Michele Wallace reiterates Beal's position in *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman*

³ Even productive and radical revisions of the reproductive discourse of the Black Arts era, such as Avilez's chapter "The Demands of Reproduction: Worrying the Limits of Gender Identity," begin with the assumption that debate about oral contraceptives anchors the conversation. Avilez inadvertently bolsters the pill debate by examining artistic works that reject the undergirding reproductive logic of the dialectic, works that "question the overriding investment in reproduction that makes both understanding (liberation and confinement) flourish" (98). The disruption Avilez traces occurs outside of or counter to the reproductive discourse of the Black Arts era.

(1978), writing that Black women's "only officially designated revolutionary responsibility was to have babies" (162).

While Black women fought against reproductive rhetoric from within the Black community, other dominant public discourses made similarly proscriptive claims over their bodies. The Women's Liberation appeal for sexual freedom bolstered those Black women advocating for the use of oral contraceptives, yet the second wave feminist movement often discursively erased racial difference to present a united group of women. The fight for women's equal rights and the push to legalize abortion disregarded the specific history of Black women in the United States and took for granted the assumption all women shared the same experience of oppression under patriarchy. This comes at a time when the federal government also made claims about Black women's reproductive and familial identities. In 1965, Daniel Patrick Moynihan delivered his report *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action* on the deterioration of the Black family. Moynihan identified slavery, unemployment, and poverty as the root causes of an unviable Black matriarchal society. Female-headed households, Moynihan argues, produce the Black community's welfare dependency and illegitimate birthrate. If the Black family structure converted to a patriarchal model and established men in their rightful place as leader of the family, the Black community could recover from decades of marginalization.

The assumption that Black fecundity is only dangerous outside of a patriarchal kinship structure resurfaces in important documents of the Black Arts era. For instance, Neal's essay "The Black Arts Movement" describes the Black aesthetic as a reassertion of Black masculinity after generations of emasculation by white supremacist culture. Neal, however, also names Black women as perpetrators of this violence against Black men.

Since Black women historically worked outside the home to compensate, in part, for Black men's exclusion from economic opportunities—a condition that also blocked Black women from white-centered ideologies of proper femininity—Neal claims that she "despises his weakness, tearing into him at every opportunity until very often, there is nothing left but a shell" (288). The emasculation of the Black community and of Black men was so severe and damaging, according to Neal, that "the only way out of this dilemma is through revolution." By Neal's description, this revolution unseats Black women from any position of social or economic power and affirms their gender subordination.

While several scholars have connected these reproductive rhetorics of the Black Arts era to document the exclusion of Black women's voices from the dominant record and to illuminate the ways Black women sought to engage and resist the prescriptions of obligatory motherhood, this scholarship stops short of interrogating newly available reproductive technologies.⁴ Technological intervention in human procreation challenges the boundaries of reproductive labor. The legalization of hormonal oral contraceptives and of abortion grant women unprecedented access to voluntary childlessness, but these procedures that restrict access to motherhood have an unexamined counterpart. Reproductive technologies promised new avenues to pregnancy and motherhood. The 1970s claim the first live human birth by in vitro fertilization and see the founding of the first commercial sperm bank, two achievements that sought to help involuntarily childless

⁴ In addition to Avilez's *Radical Aesthetic and Modern Black Nationalism* discussed above, see Cherise Pollard's and Lisa Gail Collin's contributions to *New Thoughts on the Black Arts Movement* (2006), and Cheryl Clarke's *'After Mecca': Women Poets and the Black Arts Movement* (2005).

couples and individuals have children.⁵ In vitro fertilization, surrogacy, and more recent technologies such as ooplasmic or mitochondrial gene transfer, discursively divide what Erica Haines refers to as the "complete mother" into the component parts of "the genetic mother, the carrying mother, and the nurturing mother" (120). From this point forward, analyses of the political or aesthetic representations of motherhood must contend with radically new formations of human reproduction.⁶

My concern in the remainder of this chapter is with how new reproductive technology—specifically artificial insemination with frozen sperm—grants Black women access to reproductive authority and patrimonial inheritance, access otherwise denied in the social schemata of Black Power and Black Nationalism as well as hegemonic patterns of inheritance. As the epigraph to this chapter alludes, Black daughters have no place in longstanding tradition of patrimonial inheritance, not even to qualify as a "bastard" (Spillers "Mama's Baby," 65). Artificial insemination disrupts this pattern and offers women the opportunity to control the lineage. Fran Ross's *Oreo* uses artificial

⁵ In vitro fertilization ("IVF") was the primary focus of these debates in the 1970s, particularly after the birth of Louise Browne in 1978, the first child born via IVF. IVF and its resultant "test-tube babies" grew in the popular imagination as either miraculous or disastrous. Sociologist Meg Stacey writes in *Changing Human Reproduction* (1992) that, "in this context it is astonishing that no call was made for adequate and thorough social science research before widespread application of the new techniques was proceeded with" (8). For further information on the rise of the fertility industry, see Rene Almeling's *Sex Cells: The Medical Marked for Eggs and Sperm* (2011).

⁶ While reproductive technologies provide a scientific grounding for such ideological revisions, it is important to consider that the notions of a complete mother or father operate in a white heteropatriarchal social order. In "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book" (1987), Hortense Spillers outlines how the violence of chattel slavery ruptures kinship relations. In reference to the "the antebellum legal doctrine *partus sequitur ventrem*, or that children born to enslaved women followed the condition of their mother," Spillers claims that "under conditions of captivity, the offspring of the female does not 'belong' to the Mother, nor is s/he 'related' to the 'owner,' though the latter 'possesses' it, and in the African-American instance, often fathered it, and, as often, without whatever benefit of patrimony" (74, 79). If kinship patterns rely on paternal inheritance, the naming of enslaved women as mothers and enslaved culture as matriarchal falsely suggests that motherhood replaces fatherhood as the organizing and legitimizing social principle. The system of chattel slavery denies enslaved women who bear children claim to the position of the complete mother.

insemination with frozen sperm as a narrative catalyst that jumpstarts her hero's journey and replaces the normative male hero with a young, biracial woman. The hero of her own quest, Oreo transgresses boundaries of race and gender in a satirical novel that upholds the aesthetic project of the Black Arts era while denouncing its political conscriptions.

Black women authors often recognize the necessity of mapping a reproductive futurity that accounts for the specific experiences and histories of Black women, as the discussion of Nella Larsen and Gwendolyn Brooks in the previous chapters show. The aesthetic turn of the Black Arts era and the political movements for social justice, however, open new avenues for Black women writers in the second half of the twentieth century. The theorization of reproductive justice is no longer unidirectional, arguing against the confinement and restriction of Black women's fertility. Black women now must also contend with how the ideologies of reproduction shift, expand, and widen. With the dissolution of the complete mother and the rise of technological interventions in human reproduction, Black women authors speculate about how a reproductively liberated future may or may not promise freedom and justice for Black women.

Ross accomplishes this by satirizing what Paul Taylor identifies as the "soul-era politics of respectability and black power" that structure traditional meanings of blackness from this period (626). In opposition to a conservative and sexist respectability politics, Ross constructs a multigeneric, experimental, revisionist myth that parallels the multiplicity and fluidity of her philosophy of identity. Artificial insemination motivates and structures Ross's intervention in several ways: first, it actualizes a temporal disruption through the reality of postmortem paternity that allows for her revisionist myth-making; second, it configures new routes for personal identity formation outside of

normative reproductive (and ideological) channels.

Artificial insemination structures and supports the multiple approaches to formal and theoretical boundary crossing found in *Oreo*. Several scenes toward the end of the novel directly engage artificial insemination when the protagonist Christine "Oreo" Schwartz reconstructs of the circumstances of her conception and visits a sperm bank. By undermining linear temporality to revise the past and exploiting dominant stereotypical imagery of Black womanhood, Oreo inverts the power dynamic of reproductive medicine and kinship relations from prioritizing whiteness and maleness to prioritizing her distinct Black femininity. She manipulates the system to gain control of the means of reproduction. While artificial insemination is instrumental in the structure and theory of *Oreo*, Ross does not uncritically adopt this technology as a panacea for Black women's reproductive concerns. As shown in this chapter, Ross's description of artificial insemination formally erases the Black woman's participation in the system, paralleling how Black women have been historically excluded from the discourse on reproduction. Rather than rebel against the new technology due to this history, as might be expected, *Oreo* rejects the either/or reductionist and polarizing debate on the topic. Instead, Oreo finds opportunities to manipulate social and medical institutions to open avenues for her own personal intervention and liberation. She is a product of artificial insemination and, therefore, positioned to transgress boundaries and categories even if she cannot dismantle

the larger systemic structures entirely.

II. The Genres of Feminist Revision

Fran Ross produced a novel during the Black Arts era that received little popular or critical attention.⁷ Ross is an important inclusion in this discussion not in spite of her relative obscurity but, rather, because of it. Her novel *Oreo* embraces many of the aesthetic principles of the Black Arts era while rejecting reductive notions of authentic Black identity. In this section, I argue that Ross's obfuscation resulted from the political project of the novel, primarily telling a self-affirming story of a biracial woman, that made it unsuitable for the dominant Black political objectives of her era. To evidence this point, I detail the interplay of gender and race in the novel that expands the notion of authentic Black identity, read Ross's choice of the Greek Theseus myth as source material for her revisionist mythology from the vantage point of newly available reproductive technologies, and argue that the novel's non-linear structure corresponds with its displacement in literary history. I include this level of historicizing and contextualizing before moving on to specific passages from the novel as an act of recovery. First, teasing out the points of contact and divergence between *Oreo* and the Black Arts era restores the novel in the network of its contemporaries. Second, my reading of *Oreo* uncovers the novel's depth of engagement with new and expansive forms of reproductive technology and continues this dissertation's central claim that Black women authors theorize reproductive science in their fiction. Lastly, in bringing these two concerns together, I aim to recover the complex, contradictory, and often shifting positions on reproductive science in the Black Arts era, both by its artists and authors and by the larger Black

⁷ After the original printing in 1974, *Oreo* fell into obscurity until recovered and reprinted in 2000. Most mainstream and scholarly attention for the novel arises after the most recent reprinting in 2015.

community. As described above, debates over procreation during this time often devolve into polarized and vehement oppositions. Ross's novel articulates a more nuanced approach that accepts science and technology for its revolutionary potential while cognizant of its embattled history and legacies for Black women. Artificial insemination with frozen sperm allows women to seize control of the full reproductive process, which displaces men as the authority over conception and grants women unprecedented access to inheritances in multiple forms. When that is accomplished, new forms of liberated and transgressive identity can be realized.

The transgression of demarcated boundaries in *Oreo* begins with the protagonist's racial identity and naming. As the protagonist's tongue-in-cheek epithet suggests, Oreo is biracial.⁸ Harryette Mullen argues that the title of the novel and the protagonist's name speaks back to the Black Arts concern with defining a distinctive Black cultural identity and "does not claim to represent any singularly authentic black experience. More eccentric than Afrocentric, Ross's novel calls attention to the hybridity rather than the racial or cultural purity of African Americans" ("Afterword" 214-15). This hybridity allows Oreo to move within two minority communities—Black and Jewish—while maintaining access to the dominant culture as well. Tru Leverette writes that "Ross's novel was not well received since it both literally and figuratively plays with the ideologies of race and gender that were being debated at the time" (80). Oreo stands as an amalgamation of revered characteristics by both movements for racial and gender justice.

⁸ Tru Leverette writes that Oreo's parentage "acknowledges a history in which mixed-race individuals were conceived through the sexual liaisons of white men and black women" (84). Leverette's argument adds an additional layer of consideration to my own by recalling the historical sexual coercion and white men's sexual violence against Black women, a history that resonates in the discourse of reproductive technologies.

Leverette claims that Oreo "is completely active and never passive; she is mobile rather than static, multiple rather than singular" (80). She names Oreo a feminist model of the 1970s while also arguing that "the personal utopia sought [by Oreo] also connects to the longing for a national utopia that would rectify the racial discord of the period in which it was written—during the Black Nationalism Movement of the 1970s" (80). The feminist and antiracist politics of *Oreo* position the novel as an important interlocutor during its era.

The protagonist's nickname also establishes the satirical tone of the novel. In the front matter of *Oreo*, Ross writes: "Oreo defined: Someone who is black on the outside and white on the inside." The inclusion of this definition before the start of the narrative and even before the parodical epigraphs positions this definition of "Oreo" as the novel's main target for critique. Oreo's nickname comes from a misunderstanding and mistranslation of her grandmother's notoriously mumbled language. When trying to say "oriole," others understood her to be calling her granddaughter "Oreo." When "they looked at Christine's rich brown color and her wide smile full of sugar-white baby teeth," they concluded that she reminded them of the cookie sandwich, "side view" (Ross 39).⁹ Rather than a top view of the cookie, where the chocolate wafer obscures the internal white cream, a side view includes both elements of the cookie's composition. As I will return to later in the chapter, references to Oreo's "cookie smile" pepper the novel, especially in moments where she harnesses her hybridity to transgress boundaries. The slippage of language and misnaming in the origin story of Oreo's nickname works to

⁹ Of course, this image of Oreo's starkly contrasted smile also calls to mind the visual legacy of minstrelsy that emphasizes large, brightly white teeth against a coal-black pigmentation.

undermine the authority and authenticity of language itself and to satirize the Black Art Movement's call for single-axis racial unity.

Oreo's name uses humor to repeatedly call attention to her biraciality, which destabilizes the notion of a single authentic black identity and positions Ross as one of the "spiritual and often biological older brothers and sisters" to post-soul satirists as described by Touré in *Who's Afraid of Post-Blackness?* (2011). He writes that "novelists Ishmael Reed, Clarence Major, Toni Morrison, and John Edgar Wideman...all helped forge our current aesthetic. Stripping themselves of both white envy and self-hate they produced super sophisticated black art that either expanded or exploded the old definitions of blackness, showing us as the intricate, uncategorizable folks we had always known ourselves to be" (237). Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo* (1972) may be the most obvious contemporary comparison to Ross's *Oreo*. Like *Oreo*, *Mumbo Jumbo* interweaves parody, humor, and a revision of myth and legend. Reed's narrative juxtaposes two stories, one in the past and one in the present. Alondra Nelson claims that *Mumbo Jumbo* prophesizes a future that is "the distillation of African diasporic experience, rooted in the past but not weighed down by it, continuous yet continually transformed" ("Future Texts" 8). Reed's eclectic and experimental novel, however, embodies many of the political principles of the Black Arts era that Ross resists or outright rejects. While *Oreo* and *Mumbo Jumbo* share many formal elements, Ross's replaces the African-centric model of Black freedom with a Black feminist imaginary of racial and gender justice. While Ross belongs in this collection of "avant-garde artists" who experimented with literary form and dominant aesthetic trends of the 1970s, as Touré names them, her radical stance on identity

formation and the privileging of women's experience and feminist concerns obscures her from this lineage.

Oreo defies classification or inclusion in traditional generic or aesthetic periods and lineages. In a radio broadcast "Oreo: A Comeback Story" celebrating the 2015 reprint of *Oreo* on WNYC's program *On the Media*, Harryette Mullen describes *Oreo* as "a novel that seemed to have projected so far into the future that people were really not ready for it," and concedes that "I don't know that I would have appreciated it as much in the '70s because I too was being swept along with the whole Black Arts Movement." In the same program, Mark Anthony Neal claims that, "in some ways, if you had the chance to read *Oreo*, President Obama's presidency makes much more sense." Mullen and Neal identify the contemporary twenty-first century as a more fruitful social and political context for *Oreo*. In a review of the novel, Marlon James similarly argues that, "because, more than ever, with the real world skidding off into madness, absurdity and chaos, this crazy, sexy, cool novel now makes perfect sense." Danzy Senna takes it one step further. In the foreword to the 2015 edition of *Oreo*, Senna writes that, "Ross feels to me like part of some future that still has yet to arrive" (xv).

Senna's claim that the novel is before its time is a response to the structure of the novel as much as its content. Ross constructs a circular narrative that reaches beyond the confines of the material book and unsettles its own periodization. Notably, the plot of the novel distorts mythic origins and historic time by reimagining the Greek Theseus myth. In the classical myth, Theseus has dual paternity by both King Aegeus of Athens and the god Poseidon. Aegeus deserts Theseus's mother Aethra while pregnant and leaves behind tokens that would reveal Theseus's royal heritage once he grows up and proves his heroic

nature. With this central allusion, *Oreo* claims the authority to rewrite narratives of origin specifically for a biracial, American girl. Unlike the Africa-centric model of Black liberty that locates Black nationalist mythos on the African continent, *Oreo* lays claim to white-centric aesthetic traditions and demonstrates that these also belong to Black communities. Ross's revision makes the myth and the hero unquestionably Black and female in modern America.

Oreo's revisionist mythology satirizes the normative associations of personal and cultural mythology by rendering ancient legend into a coming-of-age plot for Oreo. Jeanne Rosier Smith argues that "writing a contemporary mythic novel involves not only recalling stories but also revising them and even creating new ones, a strategy often associated with women's writing" (5). This strategy, Smith continues, is often associated with contemporary writing by women of color who "not only question gender roles but also revise the traditional myths both of their ancestral backgrounds and of the dominant culture, to suit the needs of life in modern America" (5). Ross's selection of the Theseus myth as her primary text suits the needs of her representation of modern American as fundamentally altered by the advancements of reproductive technologies. This new American landscape Ross constructs calls on multiple cultural and aesthetic histories and challenges the notion of unified or singular claims of identity.

Ross retells the Theseus myth because this story supports her engagement with the contemporary fertility market and the founding of commercial sperm banks. *Oreo's* engagement with cutting-edge science marks the novel as unique among its contemporaries. With few prominent examples of Black Arts era literary and cultural production that engage with science or technology, it is easy to assume that Black writers

in this period were disinterested or dismissive of points of contact between art and science. The history of scientific exploitation, manipulation, and experimentation on black individuals and communities in America reasonably results in a disavowal of modern science, particularly as some of these histories came to light in the 1970s. For instance, in 1972 the *New York Times* broke the story on the four-decade long Tuskegee Study of Untreated Syphilis in the Negro Male. Since 1932, clinicians had misled Black men into believing they were receiving treatment for syphilis when they were truly serving as test subjects for scientists to observe the full progression of the disease. This revelation strengthens the Black community's skepticism toward the biosciences and supports the aesthetic distancing from these types of subjects.

One counterexample, however, is Amiri Baraka's 1966 play *A Black Mass* that dramatizes the story of Yakub from the Nation of Islam's cosmology. Yakub, a Black scientist in the original Black Nation, uses the properties of Mendelian genetics to engineer the white race. Michael Lieb argues that the Yakub story as told by Elijah Muhammad rewrites Genesis:

As the father of that race, Yakub the black scientist is thereby ultimately the figure the Bible refers to as Adam. To realize his goals, he engaged in an experiment in human hybridization through a complex process of breeding and cross-breeding. Overturning the law of nature by means of genetic engineering, Yakub established his own law of genetics, one in which the line resulting from his experiments would become not only progressively lighter but also more wicked and corrupt. He was also aware that it would take him several changes in color to get from pure black to bleached-out white. (142)

According to Alondra Nelson, early Nation of Islam cosmology frequently engaged with biosciences, "including anthropology, genetics, and molecular biology, as well as a current of 'scientism'—the application of analytical approaches of the sciences to other spheres of life" ("*A Black Mass*" 138). Yet, several decades after the initial circulation of this cosmology, Black cultural engagement with the biosciences turns increasingly hostile and critical. Baraka's play, while engaged with bioscience and therefore presumably outside of the central aesthetic principles of the Black Arts era, still garnered significant attention in the literary community as demonstrated by the amount of time and space Neal spends analyzing Baraka's play in his essay "The Black Arts Movement." In this essay, Neal describes *A Black Mass* as "a deeply weighted play, a colloquy on the nature of man, and the relationship between legitimate spiritual knowledge and scientific knowledge. It is LeRoi Jones' most important play mainly because it is informed by a mythology that is wholly the creation of the Afro-American sensibility" (284). While Neal praises Baraka's work, his reading denounces Yakub's investment in scientific knowledge and the pursuit of unfettered scientific authority as it catalyzes destruction and the fall of the mythic Black community.

In response to this reading, Nelson argues that the Yakub story as told in *A Black Mass* "is less a disavowal of scientific experimentation run amok than a warning about how the noble pursuit of science, left in the wrong hands, can produce deleterious social aftereffects" ("*A Black Mass*" 138). Nelson's argument could similarly describe *Oreo* and other Black feminist writings that engage reproductive science, which neither formally disavow or endorse new technologies but rather assert the need for Black women's participation and power over their invention and deployment. In this way, Yakub could

be a fruitful resource for Ross and other authors invested in asking questions about the role of science in literature; however, the myth relies on eugenics through the uncritical use of birth control and infanticide to generate whiteness. As described in earlier chapters of this dissertation, eugenics and other restrictive forms of reproductive medicine disproportionately target Black women and other marginalized communities. While *A Black Mass* includes these references as part of its commentary on the violent and unnatural process of creating whiteness, the use of eugenics and coercive contraceptive tactics also reveal the masculinist nature of the play and its inattention to Black women's experience with reproductive autonomy. While *Oreo* takes an approach similar to that of *Black Mass* and the Yakub story of warning against possible "deleterious social aftereffects" of reproductive science, the novel instead uses the Theseus myth to create opportunities for Black women's interaction with reproductive science beyond a reiteration of historical injustices. The novel's engagement with, and satire of, the Black Arts era concern with authentic identity and a rejection of hybridity filters through an equally strong engagement with gender and the principles of feminism.

The cyclical structure of *Oreo* undermines the temporality of scientific "aftereffects" and reorients the legacies of racial and gendered injustices. It disrupts assumptions of linear or coherent time or narrative. Before the story begins, the narrator sets in place a circuitous temporality that gestures toward the end of the novel without revealing its resolution. Speaking in the past tense, the self-aware narrator makes clear that they hold knowledge of the novel's end but then refuses to divulge it. This strategy forces the reader to encounter the story in a linear unfolding even while the structure and content of the novel disrupts notions of linear time. Under the subsection, "Birth of the

heroine," the narrator states that a "secret cauled Christine's birth" (Ross 8). Traditionally a caul, or an intact amniotic membrane that covers a newborn's face, signifies a child's spiritual connection or supernatural abilities. In 1903, W.E.B. Du Bois evokes the image of the caul in his definition of double-consciousness, stating, "the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world" (*Souls* 9). In Du Bois's conception, Black people can see and interpret the world from a critical distance within the veil, as only Black people can, while also maintaining the ability to see the world as those outside the veil see it. In this sense, Du Bois's metaphor of the veil recalls African American folklore beliefs of the caul as a sign of preternatural abilities. Anthropologist Wendy Phillips describes the cultural power attributed to the caul in African American communities as it denotes powerful individuals who can see beyond the physical world.

Du Bois's definition attributes superior characteristics to Black individuals as does *Oreo's* caul on the protagonist; "Christine was no ordinary child" (37). In *Oreo's* case, her caul is both physical and metaphorical. The secret of her conception via artificial insemination endows her with special abilities. "She was born with a caul," the narrator confirms, "which her first lusty cries rent in eight." Christine's caul becomes eight cauls, multiplying their symbolic meaning and distinguishing the child from Du Bois's "seven" sons. The additional piece of caul represents the enigmatic secret of Christine's birth and connects the Black folkloric symbol with the Greek Theseus myth. Ross identifies eight as "the magic number" of the Theseus legend (211). After the seven sons, *Oreo* creates space for the eighth child, a daughter, to claim and revise history and forge a new future.

The cross-cultural symbolism imbued in Oreó's birth ensures that she is not an "ordinary child," (37) but it also sets her up as a trickster figure. Tricksters appear in folklore across cultural and historical contexts as messengers and as sources of instability and chaos able to outsmart any opponent. In *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism* (1988), Henry Louis Gates Jr. identifies Esu-Elegbara and the Signifying Monkey as the origins of the trickster figure in African American literature and culture, locating the roots of his theory of signfyin(g) in the indecipherability and displacement of semiotic meaning with these tricksters. Satire uses the trickster's coded language and adversarial stance for cultural and social critique. In discussing the relationship between the trickster figure and satire, Aimee Zygmanski writes that, "tricksters straddle the boundaries between one world and another in a liminal existence, always at the threshold of something new, keeping one eye focused on the past while looking straight into the future" (201). Oreó's mixed heritage positions her as straddling and crossing boundaries of identity and her narrative journey tethers her personal and cultural past to her future. Jeanne Rosier Smith argues that trickster texts work against the assumption that "a western, linear, empirical worldview is 'normal'" (6) and that "elements of the sacred, of myth and fantasy, mix with history and 'fact' in...trickster novels to create an altered sense of the real that challenged perceived, western ways of knowing" (17). *Oreó* blurs the lines between narrator and author, audience and character, fiction and reality that "western ways of knowing" and conceptions of narrative remain deeply committed to.

For instance, the narrator introduces the secret of Oreó's birth at the beginning of the novel but withholds its revelation. Chastising the reader, the narrator asserts that "this

is her story—let her discover it" (Ross 8). The narrator uses second-person address to hinder the reader's desire to have access to this knowledge. The directive to "let her discover it" implicates the reader in the construction of the narrative. If the reader knows the secret, then Oreo would not be able to discover it. Our knowledge impacts the story as though the reader's thoughts can invade the seemingly impervious page.¹⁰ The reader's participation in the construction of the novel is not only an exaggerated form of a key characteristic of African American literature as defined by Toni Morrison in "Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation," but is also a disruption of assumptions about time and temporality.¹¹ By having the reader participate in the construction of the story, the novel is created anew with each reading. To return to Smith's discussion of a trickster novels,

The reader...is anything but a passive, detached observer—a fact that takes on special importance in contemporary American trickster novels, which confront multicultural issues and address a multicultural audience. By becoming involved in the interpretive work, the reader becomes more sensitive to cultural boundaries and better equipped to cross them. A multiplicity of voices and perspectives such as those present in a trickster novel can effect change in the reader; by engaging in dialogue with a text, readers open their own thoughts to change. (J. Smith 24)

This formal move displaces the novel in history, making it seemingly atemporal yet deeply connected to the era of its narrative present. When reader involvement acts as a

¹⁰ The narrator's second person address elsewhere in the exposition of the novel supports the participatory role of the reader. For instance, the narrator gives the reader creative control over the weather and season of the story in the section "A word about weather": "There is no weather per se in this book...Assume whatever season you like throughout" (Ross 5).

¹¹ Morrison writes that "to have the reader work *with* the author in the construction of the book—is what's important" ("Rootedness" 1068-69).

form of authorship over the details of the text, the narrative moves outside of prescriptive time. It can be created in any moment with any reader. Conversely, though, the form of the trickster novel and the use of satire, experimentation, and persistent '70s cultural, sartorial, and linguistic cues in *Oreo* keep the novel conversant with the time of its publication and the aesthetic principles of the Black Arts era. From this tension, the most traditional yet radically revisionist narrative unfolds as Oreo embarks on a hero's journey.

III. Oreo's Reproductive Claim

The story unfolds as Oreo travels away from home and follows clues left by her father to discover her birth's secret. Oreo's parents divorce when she is a young child. She grows up in Philadelphia with her maternal grandparents and for most of Oreo's childhood her mother Helen tours with a theatre troupe. As Oreo reaches puberty, marked with a celebration of her first menstrual cycle, Helen sets her on this journey. Oreo learns that her father Sam Schwartz left a series of clues for her to follow when she comes of age that, when solved, will reveal the secret of her birth. Oreo leaves home on a quest to locate her father in New York. Upon her arrival in the city, Oreo discovers the sheer number of S. Schwartzes in the phonebook, any of whom may be her estranged father. She embarks on numerous adventures, meeting strange, villainous, and charming people along the way as she works through the remaining clues that will lead her to the correct Sam Schwartz and to the secret of her birth. Near the end of the novel, Oreo uncovers the secret that her parents conceived her via artificial insemination with frozen sperm. She realizes there are two versions of her father: "Samuel at room temperature and Samuel

frozen" (206).¹² This discovery leads her to a sperm bank where she makes a withdrawal of her father's remaining deposits. The novel closes as Oreo seeks out her grandfather to propose a trade—her father's sperm for her lost inheritance.

Oreo's comical cleaving of her father into "room temperature" and "frozen" alludes to the mechanics of freezing human sperm for future insemination. This process ignited the public imagination after the founding of the first commercial sperm bank in the early 1970s because freezing human sperm enabled the previously unthinkable: postmortem paternity. In 1971, science writer Lucy Kavalier penned an article in the *New York Times* describing the advent of "frozen sperm banks" (33). Grabbing readers' attention with the subhead, "if animals can be improved, why not selected humans," Kavalier's short piece begins with a scenario of animal husbandry:

At this very moment somewhere in America a calf is being born. The mother cow has never been mounted by the father bull; she has never watched him come charging across the fields, not heard his bellow. In fact, the bull has been dead for three years. Selected to serve as father because of his good health and great strength, his semen was taken, frozen and stored in liquid nitrogen. (33)

This imaginary scene of cattle breeding introduces several germane facets of the commercialization of human sperm banking. First, it accurately positions the cattle industry as the antecedent to freezing human sperm for commercial use. It also foregrounds postmortem paternity, the aspect of freezing sperm that most captured the public's imagination. Free from the limits of sexual reproduction, males could now

¹² Oreo's humorous division of her father into component parts reveals how technologies such as artificial insemination with frozen sperm similarly divide the complete father as Haimés argues they divide the complete mother.

propagate their lineage even after death. Artificial insemination displaces time as a mitigating factor in human reproductive affairs. "Time has lost its significance," writes one British scientist in 1953 after his team successfully used previously frozen sperm to produce a calf (qtd. in Swanson 252). The first human births via successful artificial insemination with frozen sperm occurred in Iowa in 1954 soon after the technique was perfected on livestock. Kara Swanson, science historian, identifies this accomplishment as "transforming the sperm bank from fantastic dream into a viable part of reproductive medicine" (242). Swanson quotes a 1954 headline of the *Cedar Rapids Gazette* that announced, "Fatherhood After Death Has Now Been Proved Possible" (241). However, Americans would not embrace this new technology for several decades.

Even though artificial insemination with frozen sperm did not effortlessly integrate into the reality of the fertility industry or become a readily available reproductive procedure in the 1950s, it maintained a strong presence in the genre of science fiction.¹³ The "fantastic dream" that Swanson identifies frequently appears in early examples of science fiction as a means of reproducing future societies. George Orwell's *1984* (1949), for example, positions artificial insemination—or *artsem* in Newspeak—as the ideal mechanism for Ingsoc social and biological reproduction (58). The first chapter of Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932) ushers the reader into the Fertilization Room of the Central London Hatchery and Conditioning Centre where

¹³ Throughout this section I will use "speculative fiction" and "science fiction" nearly synonymously. In the entry on speculative fiction in *The Oxford Companion to African American Literature*, Sandra Govan writes that authors and critics often use the term "speculative fiction" as a "more 'respectable' designation" for "science fiction" (683). In this chapter, I refer to speculation and speculative fiction not to reinforce a hierarchy of respectability or literary value for given texts; rather, I refer to speculative fiction as the "umbrella genre," to return to Govan's definition, "that shelters the subgenres of fantasy, science fiction, utopian and dystopian fiction, supernatural fiction, and what has come to be called fabulative fiction or fabulation" (683).

samples of sperm are prepared to artificially inseminate ova in vitro that will grow and replicate into ninety-six identical persons (3-6). Both of these classic science fiction novels incorporate modes of artificial insemination without attending to the ideological conditions of gender as tied to human reproduction.

The wave of feminist science fiction of the 1960s and 1970s tackles both the male-orientation of science fiction and the patriarchal thrust of speculation on human reproduction. As Sarah Lefanu claims, the major point of contact between feminist discourse and science fiction is "the insistence of that central question, 'who looks after the children in our brave new world?'" (57). Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976) is one example of feminist science fiction that engages this question. Piercy's utopic future liberates women from the biological necessity of gestating children, establishes a three-person social mothering collective, and endows males with the ability to breastfeed. Piercy's novel fictionalizes the radical claims of Shulamith Firestone's *The Dialectics of Sex* (1970). In this text, Firestone argues against natural biological reproduction and motherhood and identifies artificial reproduction and communal childcare as viable options to correct the imbalance of sex-based reproductive labor. Harryette Mullen argues that Black women writers "implicitly or explicitly responded to the provocative proposals of Firestone and other radical white feminists" ("Artistic Expression" 234). Black women authors also respond to this history of speculative and science fiction, including the injunction of radical white feminist ideas into the genre, by attending to the experiences and histories of racialized reproduction. In this way, these authors construct experimental narratives that draw together reproductive futures with the tradition of Black speculative fiction.

The revelation of the secret of Oreó's birth places Ross's novel in this lineage of speculative fiction. Oreó's discovery of her own conception via artificial insemination is a form of revisionist history that speculates radical changes in the past to confirm a reinterpretation of the present circumstance. Through aesthetic and cultural cues, as well as extrapolation from the narrative's timeline, it is clear that Oreó's narrative present is within the late 1960s to the early 1970s.¹⁴ She is sixteen and a half at the time of her journey, placing her conception in the 1950s. While these details would align Oreó's conception with the discovery of the technology of freezing human sperm, her birth predates the founding of the first commercial sperm bank by about two decades. The first sperm banks opened for business in New York in 1971 and began widely advertising their services in 1972. When Oreó imagines the circumstances that led to her conception, she further disrupts historical time by narrating it as a dream sequence. The act of speculative revision emphasizes the temporal distortion made possible by artificial insemination with frozen sperm which, in turn, provides the opportunity for Oreó to claim rights over her own history and identity in previously unavailable ways. That is, her history of artificial insemination with frozen sperm allows Oreó to author the narrative of her conception and assume authority over her own self-definition. Speculative thought becomes a powerful tool for Oreó's self-empowerment as she composes "The story of Helen and Samuel, Oreó's version":

Piecing together all she had learned from Hap, Marvin, and Edgar, what she had known and now knew, Oreó's scenario went like this: Helen and Samuel meet in college, lust after each other, make out like minks, get married, and make out like

¹⁴ The temporal details of *Oreó* indicate that Oreó's mother, Helen, was born in 1932 and gave birth to Oreó sometime after starting college (Ross 5).

minks. In a moment of calm (while the sheets are being changed), they determine to give the world human evidence of their endearment. Jacob would *shep* such *naches* from his first grandchild, he would forgive, forget, and make a new will. "At the rate we're going, it's a wonder I'm not pregnant already," Helen says. 'It's understandable, sweetheart,' Samuel says, 'up to now, we've been taking precautions.' 'Of course,' says Helen, 'what are you using, honey?' 'What am I using? I thought *you* were using something.' Gravid pause. They decide to have checkups. "Low sperm count," says the doctor. "Sorry about that." Samuel is desolate. Then he sees an ad for New York City's first research center for artificial insemination. Samuel fills vial after vial with semen. GI [Generation Incorporated] centrifuges, concentrates, and freezes the issue in liquid nitrogen at minus 321 degrees Fahrenheit. *Superimpositions of symbolic swiving and sets of vials being defrosted*. Nine months later: "It's a girl!" (204-5)

This story imaginatively recreates how Oreo's parents, Helen and Samuel, may have learned of their infertility and selected artificial insemination to rectify their problems. The scenario breaks with the past tense narration of the majority of the novel and shifts to the present tense as the scene unfolds in real time in Oreo's mind. In other words, the narrative present is in the past tense while the speculative narrative past is in the present tense. This effectively forces the past and the present to occupy the same discursive space, narrowing or even eliminating any temporal distinction.

The scene's pace slows as the couple reflects on exactly why Helen has yet to get pregnant, and the tension elongates further with the shortest sentence in the passage: "Gravid pause." Unlike Helen, the silence is "pregnant, heavy with young" ("gravid").

The news of his diminished fertility leaves Samuel "desolate"—not only barren but without companionship as Helen fades from the scene. Luckily, Samuel stumbles upon an advertisement for a fertility clinic. The initial tension dissipates thanks to Generation Incorporated, "New York's first research center for artificial insemination." A list of facts and details about freezing sperm follows this shift and advertises GI as the miracle service available to unfortunate men like Samuel. The scientific jargon of "centrifuges," "concentrates," "liquid nitrogen," "vial," and "minus 321 degrees Fahrenheit" combine as the complex solution to solve infertility. After a deposit of both semen and money into the sperm bank, the center will provide a child to the patron "nine months later." The entire passage transforms into an advertisement for the corporation—and new medical technology more broadly—and perhaps channels the very ad Samuel read that promised his salvation.

An example of such an advertisement for the "first research center for artificial insemination" in New York exhibits the rhetorical veracity of the account of artificial insemination found in *Oreo*. In 1971, New York's first commercial sperm bank opened its doors. "Announcing a new kind of bank for the New York area," begins a 1972 *New York Times* advertisement for Genetic Laboratories, Inc., "the 'SPERM BANK'" ("Display Ad 66"). The text of the advertisement dispels common fears of any new technology by confirming that "research on the frozen storage of human sperm began more than 100 years ago."¹⁵ Genetic Laboratories, Inc., identifies their potential clients as men looking

¹⁵ In the 1860s, the father of modern gynecology Dr. J. Marion Sims experimented with intrauterine insemination on six women. While Sims may be the first known medical doctor to attempt artificially inseminating human patients, his legacy is built on the exploitation of enslaved Black women. As described in the Introduction, Sims perfected his revolutionary technique of suturing vesico-vaginal fistulae by experimenting on three women, Anarcha, Lucy, and Betsy.

to preserve their fertility after a vasectomy or men anxious about any unforeseen loss of fertility. They also identify "couples working with their doctors seeking to solve infertility problems."¹⁶ The speculative rhetoric of this ad—bridging a hypothetical reproductive future with the present—focuses the conversation of reproductive science on men and male fertility. A parallel focus on the gendered anxieties of reproductive technologies similarly exists in "The story of Helen and Samuel, Oreo's version."

At the beginning of the passage, Helen and Samuel exist as one unit identified as "they" and as the plural personal pronoun "we" in their dialogue with one another. They maintain their coupling until Helen raises the question of birth control and contraceptive techniques with her husband. In asking "what are you using," Helen rhetorically distances herself from Samuel. His frantic reaction further separates the couple: "What am *I* using? I thought *you* were using something" (Ross 204, original emphasis). The italics in Samuel's speech emphasize the pronouns and relegates them to a binaric opposition. Samuel's "*I*" is now diametrically opposed to Helen's "*you*". The first half of the passage, then, touches on the contemporary debates regarding oral contraceptives discussed above. While the assumption of contraceptive use freed the couple, and Helen specifically, from concerns over unplanned pregnancy and allowed her to enjoy a robust sex life with her partner, it is also introduced their diminished fecundity and potential loss of fertility. But, unlike much of the reproductive discourse of the Black Arts era, the passage moves beyond the debate over contraceptives to integrate and interrogate the other rising forms

¹⁶ While this advertisement does not outline the process of freezing and banking sperm, as does Oreo's imaginative recollection of the ad her father encounters, other articles run in *The New York Times* between 1971 and 1972 outline the same technical details. See Boyce Rensberger's "From the Day of Deposit -A Lien on The Future: Sperm Banks," "2 Banks for Freezing Human Sperm Planned in Midtown, With Services Available to Public," and "CITY'S FIRST BANK FOR SPERM OPENS: Prospective Clients Calling from Across Country."

of reproductive medicine and technology. After Samuel emphasizes the subjective distance between Helen and himself, the hopeful mother-to-be disappears for the remainder of the passage as the focus shifts from the couple, "they," to Samuel, "he." "The Story of Helen and Samuel" continues to narrate Samuel's individual experience as he discovers his low sperm count and, soon after, the solution to his fertility issue.

The potential for artificial reproduction to dismantle patriarchal institutions remains reliant on women's biological labor and status as second-class citizens. A deposit of frozen sperm alone cannot create a child. Yet, the female body that presumably carries the fetus for nine months disappears in Oreó's equation of artificial reproduction. Even the final clue to the secret of Oreó's birth prioritizes her father at the expense of her mother; Samuel left his last clue for Oreó to discover in a book titled *The Egg and I*. While Samuel maintains his autonomous "I," Helen's role in Oreó's conception boils down to her biology. She becomes a gamete. Helen retreats as Samuel and the scientific mechanisms merge to form a fetus. This arrangement explicates how "women had been pushed out of the picture in the accounts of [new reproductive technologies]" and illuminates the way even reproductive medicine focuses on men at the expense of women (McNeil 72). With the shifting perspective shown through the movement of pronouns in "The story of Helen and Samuel," the passage structurally recreates the act of silencing or diminishing women and the female role in reproduction.

Even Oreó's own version of her conception displaces women of color from the center of reproductive medicine. In response to her newfound understanding of her birth, Oreó resolves to use her circumstance to rupture and enter dominant patterns of patrimonial inheritance. To do so requires some manipulation and deception. Highly self-

aware, Oreo veils herself in caricatures of subordinate Black femininity to trick those around her into perceiving her as unthreatening and easily dismissed. Her performance of alternative iterations of Black femininity emphasize her capacity to transgress social boundaries and to exploit her transgressions for personal gain. In the last stages of her quest, Oreo locates an article she read about the sperm bank Generation, Inc. at the local New York library and uses the information she learns to withdrawal Samuel's frozen sperm deposits. After forging a doctor's note authorizing her access to her father's account, Oreo performs as a naïve, uninformed, errand girl to trick the GI worker into granting her request. When the front desk worker insists on calling the doctor to verify her note, Oreo's response employs a phonetic representation of speech that uses "Hap's economical sentence structure and Louis's down-home accent" (203).¹⁷ "He jus' gib me de 'scription. Say fill it," Oreo informs the GI worker. Testing her, the worker asks for the name on the account. After hemming and hawing to maintain her persona, Oreo confirms that she is withdrawing from the Schwartz account. This final piece of information convinces the worker and, her rouse successful, Oreo smiled "her cookie smile" (204).

This closing reference to "her cookie smile" revives the satirical deployment of Oreo's name and draws together the prevalent social critique of the novel and Oreo's skill as a trickster figure. Her transformation into an unthreatening caricature allows her to manipulate the medical establishment as represented by the sperm bank, GI. Oreo senses how others are prone to perceive her based on dominant stereotypes of race, gender, and

¹⁷ Miss Hap, Samuel's housekeeper, exhibits qualities of the traditional Mammy figure. When Oreo meets her at the Schwartz's apartment, Hap is cooking while looking after the children. She is described as "wearing a starched white uniform and apron," is compared to "Aunt Jemima," and has the rotund physique of the stereotypical Mammy with "generous breasts, transformed by her uniform into giant marshmallows" (Ross 196, 199). Louise, Oreo's grandmother, also embodies many of these stereotypical qualities, contrasted with her indecipherable language patterns.

age. She knows that her assumed speech patterns will be read through the dominant, mainstream lens as subordinate and unintelligent. Yet, the novel itself offers an alternative reading of phonetic representations of speech based on Oreo's grandmother, Louise.

In a section, "Aside on Louise's speech," the narrator informs the reader that "from time to time, her dialogue will be rendered in ordinary English, which Louise does not speak. To do full justice to her speech would require a ladder of footnotes and glosses, a tic of apostrophes (aphaeresis, hyphaeresis, apocope) and a Louise-ese/English dictionary of phonetic spellings" (Ross 12). Rather than positioning phonetic representation of speech as a deviation from or adulteration of standard English, *Oreo* elevates Louise-ese and considers the representation and interpretation of her speech patterns an academic pursuit requiring notes, glosses, and dictionaries.¹⁸ When Oreo patterns her speech in similar ways, she evokes this philosophy of language to layer meaning on her dialogue and strategically deploy it toward misdirection. She uses this self-awareness to invert the power dynamic of cultural stereotyping. This emphasis on Black vernacular speech and experimentation with sound, spelling, and grammar connects *Oreo* to the aesthetic principles of the Black Arts era but Ross repurposes them for a specifically young, Black female voice. By cloaking herself in the mannerisms and behaviors of stereotypical images, Oreo participates in a form of masking, a trope that Zygmanski argues "is an element of trickster existence that is particularly apparent in

¹⁸ In 1984, June Jordan taught a course, "In Search of the Invisible Black Woman," to a predominantly Black group of students. Jordan reflects on the student's adverse reaction to reading phonetic representation of speech in Black literature and their subsequent dedication to defining, learning, and writing in Black English for the remainder of the term. Jordan and her students' Rules and Guidelines for Black English, as described in Jordan's essay "Nobody Mean More to Me Than You and the Future Life of Willie Jordan" (1988) actualizes the type of speculative project of cataloguing Louise-ese as proposed by Ross.

African American folktales, as masking constitutes survival, figuratively and literally, for tellers of tales" (203). Originating from the caul of her birth, Oreo's capacity to mask or otherwise transform her outward expression allows her to navigate a world hostile to her inclusion. In this way, Oreo recognizes and then exploits the compounding effects of Black women's multiple marginalization that renders them invisible, excluded, and peripheral to the social order, such as that seen in the reconstruction of her mother's impregnation.

IV. An Inheritance of Sperm

Oreo's trickster strategy of masking liberates her and supports her efforts toward autonomy and self-transformation. After successfully outwitting GI, she leaves carrying "a special shipping container about the size of a breadbox" that contained "sixty vials of frozen sperm" (Ross 204). As she walks down the street she basks in her own dual heritage, singing "Hatikvah" and "Lift Ev'ry Voice and Sing".¹⁹ Her celebration of her biracial identity is a direct contestation to the racist actions of her paternal grandfather. Samuel's father Jacob disinherits his son because Samuel married a Black woman. Oreo is the manifestation of Helen and Samuel's endeavor to "to give the world human evidence of their endearment" (204) and, therefore, the living proof of Samuel's disavowal of his father's wishes.²⁰ As Mullen writes, "Helen's artificial insemination with [Samuel's] banked sperm is proof of their determination to have children together"

¹⁹ "Hatikvah" is a Jewish poem and the national anthem of Israel; "Lift Ev'ry Voice and Sing" is a poem composed by James Weldon Johnson and adopted as the Black American National Anthem. See Imani Perry's *May We Forever Stand: A History of the Black National Anthem* (2018) for additional context of "Lift Every Voice and Sing."

²⁰ Gayl Jones's novel *Corregidora* (1975) also interrogates "evidence" of Black women's heritage and claims to kinship through a matrilineal oral history that keeps alive the histories of sexual and reproductive violence. In Jones's novel, evidence operates both as extant documents and as orally transmitted history passed down a maternal line.

("Apple Pie" 125). The couple hoped that the birth of their child would inspire Jacob to change his will to include his son and grandchild. Their optimism, however, was in vain.

By claiming her father's remaining sperm, Oreo gains access to patrimonial inheritance patterns. She refuses to merely inherit the erasure of her mother's subordinate condition. Her conception makes it possible for Oreo to inherit her father's presence and power. Oreo's access to patterns of inheritance also responds to the popularization of kinship rhetoric—"brother" and "sister"—in the Black Arts era. As Pollard explains, "within the patriarchal structure of the Western family, 'brothers' inherit the father's power and 'sisters' the mother's disempowerment. Yet, despite these confines, it is possible to imagine a radical politics that enabled black women poets to invert this power dynamic" (174-5). In *Oreo*, Pollard's call to imagine a possible politics that invert the patterns of gender inheritance comes to fruition. Through the mechanism of her conception, Oreo inherits more than her mother's disempowerment. She claims a position of power that transgresses gendered lineages of inheritance and expands the possibilities for Black women's participation in kinship structures. Oreo alone controls the future of Jacob's lineage. Instead of destroying the vials, she decides to give her paternal grandfather Jacob "an opportunity for what she was pleased to call a Judeo-Négro concordat" (Ross 207). If Jacob is kind, "she might give him the vials as a present," but if he is not kind she would pour "the last of his strain down the drain" and erase his genetic lineage. He will act, and Oreo will react; she even "would cut him some slack. But, for all that," Oreo confirms, "she would not forget herself completely" (207).

Oreo's imaginative recreation of her own conception via artificial insemination distorts historical time, acknowledges and critiques the androcentrism of reproductive

science, and encourages female authorship over historical narratives and personal identity. The story releases Oreo from a single representation and throughout she defies classification. Her transgression of discursive and identarian boundaries begins with her conception. Artificial insemination allows her at once to expand her parentage to three—Samuel frozen, Samuel thawed, and Helen—and retract her progenitors to the single autonomous "I" of her father. These revisions to traditional parentage unravel the "complete" mother and father ideologies that long controlled but did not apply to Black women's experiences with kinship.

Artificial insemination with frozen sperm and the commercialization of the fertility industry through corporate sperm banks contribute to the expanding field of reproductive medicine in the latter half of the century, beginning in this post-Civil Rights era. This directional shift in the current of reproductive science and reproductive ideology—bolstered by the rising mainstream feminist movements—ushers in unprecedented opportunities for women to access reproduction. Conception is no longer bound by the confines of heteronormative couplings or limited by physical or medical barriers, including paternal death. *Oreo* responds to this new reproductive order attuned to the particular vulnerabilities of and opportunities for Black women. The novel does not shy away from or dismiss the likelihood that Black women will be erased in the narrative of new reproductive technologies in order to prioritize a white androcentric perspective. Helen fades away but her daughter refuses to. Because of the novelty of her conception, Oreo is unique. Her individuality propels her through her journey. A hero's journey, after all, is a narrative of one. While *Oreo* revises a Western mythology to replace a white male hero with a biracial female heroine, it remains a story of one.

In this way, the Western mythos remains largely intact in *Oreo*. As an alternative heroine, Oreo controls and manipulates much of the world around her and the language used to describe and construct that world, but at large the ideological frames that structure society remain unchanged. She finds a pathway through the scaffolding otherwise designed to keep her firmly locked in her place in a social hierarchy. Her entry into patrimonial inheritance patterns requires control over progeny as symbolized in her father's frozen sperm. Sperm banking and artificial insemination grant her the opportunity to fulfil the role of purveyor of genetic material, but the patriarchal structure remains that prioritizes maleness and male lineage. Of course, Oreo's individual success and her ability to transgress boundaries and borders and remove barriers and obstacles is powerful on its own terms. Her narrative challenges the call for an authentically Black community and flies in the face of the political principles of the Black Arts era. While *Oreo* owes an aesthetic debt to the Black Arts era, the novel challenges the assumption that Black Arts aesthetics and politics go hand-in-hand and renders a Black Arts radical aesthetics purposeful for a revolutionary Black feminist project. Oreo creates her own liberation in a patriarchal system. But what if there was no recognizable patriarchy in the world of artificial reproduction?

The foundations of Black feminist thought were just beginning to circulate in 1974 when *Oreo* was first released to limited fanfare. The accumulative critique of the compounding experiences of race and gender by Black women and their denouncement of patriarchy and white supremacy gains traction over the next decade, shifting the focus from the personal liberation of individual Black women to a broader understanding of racialized gender justice. In the following chapter, I turn to Black feminist Ntozake

Shange's 1982 novel *Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo* to consider the limitations of a single-issue feminist objective of female empowerment or gender equality. Such a prerogative, Shange demonstrates, neglects the collective and historical intersections of reproductive identity that cross boundaries of time, space, race, and nation.

CHAPTER V

SURROGATE SOLIDARITY IN NTOZAKE SHANGE'S FICTION

I am not free while any woman is unfree, even when her shackles are
very different from my own.

Audre Lorde, "Uses of Anger " (1981)

I. Surrogacy as Reproductive Community

In many ways, Ntozake Shange's novel *Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo* (1982) is in conversation with the dominant aesthetic and political principles of Black literature from the previous decade. While Fran Ross's *Oreo* (1974) formally exhibits the characteristics of the Black Arts era while forwarding a politics counter to the masculinist nationalism associated with its contemporaries, *Sassafrass* benefits from nearly a decade of Black feminist theorizing and activism to undergird its political critique.¹ Part of why *Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo* troubles the notion of discrete periodization is because portions of Shange's narrative were previously published as the novella *Sassafrass* by Shameless Hussy Press in 1970. In this chapter, I unearth the multiple contestations of race, gender, and reproductive science present in Shange's work that draws *Sassafrass* from its position adjacent to Toni Cade Bambara's foundational anthology *The Black Woman* (1970) through the 1970s and into the early 1980s when the expanded novel was first published. I argue that the search for individual empowerment or liberation through reproductive medicine as described in the previous chapter transforms across this decade into an acute awareness of the threat of reproductive objectification and a deep

¹ As Courtney Thorsson argues in *Women's Work: Nationalism and Contemporary African American Women's Novels* (2013), "though published in the early 1980s, *Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo* is in many ways a 1970s novel, engaged in the same work of claiming diversity and power for African American women done by Toni Cade Bambara's *The Black Woman*" (82-83).

skepticism toward the expansion of reproductive services at a pace that far outstrips the evolution of social and political thought.

Recognizing Shange's dedication to amplifying Black women and Black femininity in a myriad of expressions in all of her writing, scholarship on *Sassafrass*, *Cypress & Indigo* attends to the ideological constructions of Black womanhood, sexuality, and maternity. Critics such as Harryette Mullen, Anissa Wardi, and Carol Marsh-Lockett, establish a foundation for reading *Sassafrass* as a Black feminist text that celebrates the multiplicity of Black womanhood as rooted in spirituality, nature, beauty, and agency. Rather than retread this territory, this chapter focuses on a largely unexamined scene that complicates and expands the critical approach to maternity and reproduction in the novel, a passage subtitled "CYPRESS' DREAM." In this dream, the middle sister Cypress enters a futurist post-apocalyptic feminist utopia where women of color reenact the historical legacies of American chattel slavery's breeding objectives through forced gestation. Before turning to a close examination of this passage, this chapter first outlines two of the major changes in reproductive medicine and policy from this historical moment: the landmark 1973 Supreme court decision *Roe v. Wade* that legalized abortion in the United States and the rise of commercial surrogacy in the 1980s.² These two radical changes in American reproduction make plausible the conditions of Cypress's dream and serve as cornerstones of Shange's critical intervention.

² The following conversation on the changes in reproductive policy and medicine in the 1970s and 80s should not lose sight of the ways reproductive science and science in general prioritizes men and reinforces patriarchal order, as discussed regarding the secret of Oreo's birth in Chapter IV. Meg Stacey's *Changing Human Reproduction* argues that what "made IVF possible is a male-dominated science; it is not neutral as to the problems it selects for research or its mode of handling them" (33). Maureen McNeil's *Feminist Cultural Studies of Science and Technology* mirrors this sentiment, stating that science is "a world in which men dominate and which is often coded as 'masculine'" (6).

As discussed in Chapter III, the precedent for *Roe v. Wade* rests on the right to privacy under the Due Process Clause of the 14th Amendment. This right to privacy balances the rights of individual women against the state's interests in protecting a woman's and a fetus's health. Historically, privacy rights distribute unevenly across communities and apply less to those from marginalized communities. Even so, the right to privacy intends to protect individuals and individualism. In this way, the structure of *Roe v. Wade* expands a woman's right to choose and make autonomous choices about her reproductive life. Yet, as this dissertation demonstrates, Black women's theory of reproductive justice negotiates the relationship between the individual and the community. In the wake of *Roe*, a Black feminist theory of reproduction interrogates the foundation of abortion rights as rooted in the individual right to choose. Shange and other Black feminist theorists ask how, or if, the right of the individual reverberates into the rights and objectives of the collective.

Shange begins her decades long response to this question in her choreopoem *for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow was enuf*, which was largely composed in 1974 and first performed on Broadway in 1976. *for colored girls* begins with a lament for "somebody/anybody / sing a black girl's song" (18). The seven women who comprise the cast respond in turn, first identifying themselves as "outside" certain geographic locations in America. They are dispersed in space, ranging from San Francisco to Baltimore, but come together on stage. In this way, they are both individuals and a collective. Their names reiterate this relationship as they are each titled the "Lady" of a color—red, brown, blue, yellow, purple, green, orange—that marks them as discrete yet part of a uniform rainbow or spectrum. The choreopoem weaves each of their

individual stories together into one tapestry of Black women's experiences. Within these threads is a poem on abortion. "abortion cycle #1" follows directly after "latent rapist," a series that brings multiple women on stage to speak against the popular narrative of the sick, deluded, stranger as rapist. This communal testimony ends with the Lady in Blue and the Lady in Purple both uttering the final word, "nobody" before the Lady in Purple exits the stage (35). Alone, the Lady in Blue performs "abortion cycle #1."

The scene opens with the Lady in Blue at a medical office, "legs spread" while a practitioner performs an abortion. The other people in the room are not rendered as subjects, but merely described as "eyes" with a penetrating and consuming gaze. This construction of the medical personnel recalls the doctor's objectifying stare in Gwendolyn Brooks's *Maud Martha* as discussed in Chapter III. The relationship between the medicalized gaze and Black women's reproduction remains largely consistent across this two-decade gap and serves to isolate and surveil individual women. Even though the "eyes" accompany her, the Lady in Blue is alone during her abortion because "nobody came / cuz nobody knew / once i waz pregnant & shamed of myself" (37). Even when legal, the precedent of privacy inherent in abortion legislation sustains this cycle of shame and isolation as women such as the Lady in Blue pursue their reproductive freedom without a robust support network. After the poem, the Lady in Blue exits the stage.

By including "abortion cycle #1" in *for colored girls*, Shange simultaneously emphasizes the violence of abortion to an individual woman and undermines the isolationist motif by integrating the story into the communal tapestry of the choreopoem. In this way, *for colored girls* begins Shange's project of considering reproductive

medicine and policy as a communal and networked concern for Black women, and the Black community at large, in contrast to the more prevalent focus of reproductive rights as individual rights. A decade later, in her first published novel *Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo*, Shange continues to interrogate the resonating impact of reproductive medicine and policy on communities of color by turning a critical eye toward the developing market for commercial surrogacy.

Stories of traditional surrogacy, where a man impregnates a woman other than his wife with the intention that the child be raised by the married couple, appear at least as early as the Bible. In Genesis, Sarah instructs her servant Hagar to procreate with Abraham to compensate for Sarah's own infertility. The power differentiation inherent in the story of Hagar exemplifies many of the enduring social and political objections to contemporary surrogacy practices, to which I will return to below. Yet, while examples of surrogacy exist across millennia, several interlocking events coupled with the culture wars of 1980s U.S. politics propelled this topic into the public eye. In *Surrogate Motherhood and the Politics of Reproduction* (2007), Susan Markens seeks to answer the question, "What accounts for the emergence of surrogate motherhood as a social problem worthy of public and legislative attention in the 1980s?" (2). Markens points to two major events that anchor this period, the birth of the first "test-tube baby" that marks the successful implementation of in vitro fertilization in 1978 and the 1987 custodial dispute over Baby M. While in vitro fertilization (hereafter, "IVF") allows for a new type of surrogacy where the surrogate carries a genetically unrelated fetus, also known as gestational surrogacy, in between 1978 and 1987 most surrogates were genetically related to their charge after being artificially inseminated with sperm from the intended father or

a donor.³ In the Baby M case, the surrogate mother Mary Beth Whitehead was genetically related to the child in question and was a traditional surrogate for William and Elizabeth Stern. After giving birth to the baby, Whitehead desired to keep the child. Several trials later with decisions made and overturned, a judge ultimately decreed surrogacy contracts unlawful and upheld Whitehead's parental claim. With the valence of contractual labor removed, the case became a custody battle between the genetic parents. While the judge determined Whitehead could not be forced to part with her child based on a surrogacy contract, it was considered in "the best interest of the child" to grant custody of Baby M to the Sterns (Markens 4).

The Baby M case gripped the nation, stirring already growing anxieties over the state of the American family. Throughout the 1980s, increase in divorce rates, single-mother households, and a perceived decrease in fertility rates fueled both the desire for reproductive alternatives such as surrogacy and the fear of the dissolution of traditional marriage and kinship structures.⁴ Markens argues that the combination of these forces explain why surrogacy emerges in public, political, and legislative discourse in the 1980s. Rampant debate ensued over the moral and social implications of surrogacy. Surprisingly, as Markens outlines, both sides of the debate rely on the rhetoric of reproductive choice: "Supporters of surrogate motherhood *and* its opponents cast their

³ See my discussion of the rise of the commercial sperm bank and artificial insemination with donor sperm in Chapter IV.

⁴ Markens explains that the public alarm at the increase in infertility across the population of childbearing-age citizens misrepresents the data. When Baby Boomers begin procreating, there is a proportional increase in the total number of cases of infertility that matches the increase in population, but the percentage of instances of infertility remain consistent with other eras. Markens writes, "Objective evidence of an upturn in infertility rates during the past thirty years is lacking, and most experts concluded that there was no new 'epidemic.' But the fact that infertility rates had remained fairly stable in the United States for the last half of the century did not dispel the *perception* of an alarming climb in infertility" (14, original emphasis).

arguments in terms of a 'woman's right to choose'" (50, original emphasis). This approach calls on the right to privacy precedent of *Roe v. Wade* and, consistent with the justification for abortion rights, surrogacy debates reduces the scope of consideration to the level of the individual. What a "right to choose" framework does not consider, however, is how choice is disproportionately distributed across populations and that available choices are invariably dictated by sociopolitical constrictions.⁵

Who chooses to become a surrogate? Many scholars such as Markens, Heather Jacobson, and Laura Harrison answer this question with their sociological and ethnographic research. Consistent with other forms of reproductive medicine and technology, the predominant client base for commercial surrogacy tends to be affluent white heterosexual couples. Surrogates and other individuals who market their reproductive resources (which might also include egg and sperm donors) on the fertility market are generally lower in socioeconomic class and, particularly with the advancements in gestational surrogacy where the surrogate's phenotype matters less to the intended parents, are more likely to be members of marginalized communities.⁶ Gena Corea, feminist writer, predicted in her 1985 text *The Mother Machine: Reproductive*

⁵ There is a similar flattening of the nuance and complexity in reproductive debates regarding birth control and pre-*Roe v. Wade* abortion access, as discussed in Chapters II and III respectively.

⁶ In *Brown Bodies, White Babies* (2016), Laura Harrison describes the rise of cross-racial gestational surrogacy in the new millennium, where the surrogate identifies with a different ethnic or racial group than do the intended parents. While there are examples of women from more traditionally privileged groups serving as surrogates for couples from more marginalized communities, such as white surrogates for African American couples, Harrison's evidence confirms that women of color are far more likely to perform the reproductive labor for white couples and individuals. In a global context, power differentiations between consumers of surrogate labor and surrogates themselves cross national boundaries. India, for instance, is a popular destination for reproductive tourism and many rural and poor women perform such reproductive labor even at the risk of social ostracization. See France Winddance Twine's *Outsourcing the Womb: Race, Class, and Gestational Surrogacy in a Global Market* (2011) and Daisy Deomampo's *Transnational Reproduction: Race, Kinship, and Commercial Surrogacy in India* (2016) for further information.

Technologies from Artificial Insemination to Artificial Wombs that the trajectory of reproductive medicine would result in a market where white women would hire women of color for reproductive labor. Corea even imagines that such surrogates would reside in a sort of reproductive brothel, reducing the distance between sex labor and reproductive labor. Shange imagines something strikingly similar to Corea's cautionary tale. The threat of a violently disproportionate power dynamic between white women and women of color in the fertility market comes to fruition in Shange's representation of surrogacy in *Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo*.

While Shange writes about exploitative surrogacy in 1982, the most cited example of a literary response to surrogacy and to how the 1980s were "obsessively preoccupied with women and fetuses," as Valerie Hartouni claims (32), is Margaret Atwood's 1985 novel *The Handmaid's Tale*. Atwood imagines a dystopic near-future where exposure to toxic chemicals, sexually transmitted diseases, and other environmental factors have left most of the population sterile. A fascist government order, Gilead, collects fertile women and forces them into a form of reproductive slavery justified by the Biblical precedent of Sarah and Hagar. These indentured women, the Handmaids, serve as traditional surrogates for wealthy and powerful couples. Significantly, all the surrogate Handmaids are white. Women of color labor in the toxic colonies, literally and figuratively on the margin and a present absence within the narrative at large.⁷ Dorothy Roberts writes that, "In the 1980s, Margaret Atwood...and other feminists imagined

⁷ Atwood's novel, therefore, is not just a gender and reproductive dystopia, as routinely characterized in both mainstream and academic conversations. It is also a manifestation of white supremacy and the desire to reproduce and sustain the white population at all cost. The popular 2017 television adaptation of Atwood's novel misses this important aspect of Gilead. In the television show, actresses from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds play the Handmaids, yet the adaptation does not adjust Atwood's original world to account for the racialized reproductive histories the imagery of Handmaids of color evoke in the viewer.

dystopias in which white women's reproduction was valued and privileged and the reproduction of women of color was devalued and exploited" ("Race, Gender, and Genetic Technologies" 783). In this way, Atwood connects programs of white supremacy to reproductive control and reveals how attempts to dictate reproductive freedoms exacerbate disparities of race and class.

While *The Handmaid's Tale* has become ubiquitous in conversations about late-twentieth century reproductive issues generally and about surrogacy specifically, Shange's earlier novel widens the critical approach to surrogacy and reproductive choice. Cypress's dream confronts and dismantles the polarizing debates for or against surrogacy. In this speculative dream sequence, Shange narrows in on the element of surrogacy often neglected in other critical approaches to the topic: the burgeoning possibilities of third-person reproduction. Surrogates rupture the sacrosanct pairing of reproductive couples and force a turn away from private and individualized concerns and toward the broader community of women (and men) that constitute a reproducible population. In other words, the surrogate demands an approach to reproduction from a communal perspective. For Black feminists, the communal perspective requires a consideration of all marginalized communities and the redistribution of access to power, liberty, and autonomy.

The epigraph to this chapter illustrates this Black feminist tenet. In 1981, in a speech to the National Women's Association, Audre Lorde declared that "I am not free as long as any woman is unfree, even when her shackles are very different from my own" (132–33). Addressing a room filled with self-identified feminists, Lorde names and denounces the prevalent separatism within the feminist movement. Divisions of race,

class, and sexuality marginalize women within their ranks, and Lorde responds with anger. Her resounding sentiment that "I am not free as long as any woman is unfree" demands a unified front of feminist actors who take seriously the liberation of other women, even when conditions of oppression—"her shackles"—manifest in unfamiliar ways. Lorde draws together the community of feminists without erasing intragroup difference. This basic philosophy for feminist theory structures Shange's *Sassafrass*. The polyvocal and multigeneric novel finds a communal voice that enfolds the experiences and legacies of women of color across time and space.

II. Cypress's Non-Maternity

The three daughters of Hilda Effania give Ntozake Shange's novel its title: Sassafrass, Cypress, and Indigo. The novel opens with the point of view of the youngest sister, Indigo, as she lingers on the threshold between adolescence and adulthood. Soon into the novel, Indigo begins menstruating. Indigo celebrates her fertile body with a ritual where she communes with the flowers in a garden. Ritual characterizes this first section of *Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo* with spells and recipes supplementing the narrative. Hilda Effania and her daughters all gather for Christmas celebrations as Indigo's elder sisters travel from school back home to Charleston, South Carolina. The novel next follows Sassafrass, grown and living in Los Angeles with her jazz musician partner, Mitch. Their relationship is volatile and stifles Sassafrass's creative spirit and she eventually leaves L.A. and Mitch to stay with her sister Cypress in San Francisco. Cypress is a dancer and fills her life with art and music. After Sassafrass returns to L.A., Cypress moves to New York to pursue her dance career.

The narrative stays with Cypress in New York as she connects with a community of women with whom she lives, loves, and dances. Heartbroken after ending her relationship with fellow dancer Idrina, Cypress reunites with her former musician acquaintance, Leroy. They begin a relationship, sustained through the turbulence of long absences as Leroy tours in Europe and Cypress joins a traveling dance company. Leroy asks Cypress to marry him and as they prepare to visit Charleston, the narrative shifts back to Sassafrass who has achieved her goal of joining an artist commune, The New World Found Collective in New Orleans. Pregnant and initiated into santería, Sassafrass must exorcise Mitch's polluting influence before returning home to have her first child. At the conclusion, the novel returns to Indigo who has trained on the Sea Islands to become a midwife. In the final scene, all four women—Hilda Effania, Sassafrass, Cypress, and Indigo—gather for the delivery of Sassafrass's child. Together, they bring "a free child" into the world (Shange 207).

The linear progression of the plot and the gesture toward free reproductive futurity at the novel's conclusion betrays the novel's deep interest in tracing the legacies and resonances of the past within the narrative present. For instance, the refrain "the slaves who were ourselves" echoes throughout the novel. Uncle John, a local "junk man" who lives in his wagon first introduces the phrase to a young Indigo. Uncle John gifts a fiddle to Indigo and teaches her how music freed the voices of their enslaved ancestors "in times blacker than these...when them slaves was ourselves & we couldn't talk free, or walk free" (22). The narrative voice repeatedly recast's Uncle John's phonetic "them slaves was ourselves" through the remainder of the scene. "Like the slaves who were ourselves had so much to say," the narrator notes, "they all went on at once in the voices

of the children: this child, Indigo" (23). While the slaves "were" in the past tense, seemingly locked in history, the narrator's and Uncle John's plural identification of "ourselves" draws them into the present. They exist "at once" in the children, a symbol of time's unceasing march toward the future. As this syntax reveals the separation of time to be a false division, the phrase "the slaves who were ourselves" acts as an incantation that summons the spirits of the past into the narrative present. As Indigo plays the fiddle to communicate with her dolls, "the slaves who were ourselves made a chorus round the fire, till Indigo was satisfied she wasn't silenced" (23). When compared to her sisters, Indigo's relationship with the ancestors and the mythical past is strongest throughout the novel, with this refrain appearing again in Indigo's final solo scene (206). Even so, the dissolution of linear time established by the phrase "the slaves who were ourselves" also characterizes other aspects of the novel where the chronological and the mythical sense of time exist simultaneously.

Scholarship on *Sassafrass*, *Cypress & Indigo* often characterizes the novel's non-linear elements as circular or cyclical. Carol Marsh-Lockett, for instance, argues that the structure of all three sisters' quests "are linked through the return structure of the mother-daughter relationship" and privilege a return to maternal origins and the fertile female body (48). In *The Mother/Daughter Plot* (1989), Marianne Hirsch argues that such texts can "create the conditions in which mother and daughter would each be able to speak for themselves as well as for and with one another" (16).⁸ The intimacy between the women of *Sassafrass*'s female-centric family support Hirsch's claim. The tight kinship bond

⁸ Hirsch investigates mother/daughter relationships in fiction and pays particular attention to the revision of normative patterns of familial narratives in women of color's writing in the 1970s and 1980s.

between the primary characters emphasizes traditional constructions of motherhood.⁹ Arlene Elder and Marsh-Lockett read the return of the three sisters to their mother's home as a positive cycling back to maternal origins. The final line of the novel underscores the importance of mothering in the novel: "Mama was there" (Shange 207). Hilda Effania and Sassafrass are both single mothers, one by choice and the other by circumstance. The other two women, Cypress and Indigo, remain childless throughout the novel. Indigo exists in a liminal space of Black maternity; while she is childless, she is closely associated with "natural" images of womanhood and fertility. As a young girl, she cares for her dolls with the intensity of a mother and she later trains to be a midwife and brings new life into the world. Indigo also has a close relationship with the spiritual foremother Blue Sunday. Both Indigo and Blue Sunday have the power to move the sea and access natural, earth-based knowledges that house female power. The legend of Blue Sunday is reproduced by each generation when her name "is intoned by women in labor seeking relief" (Wardi 139). Blue Sunday's presence survives through the women on Daufuskie Island where Indigo learns the skills of midwifery. Conclusions that the text uniformly privileges "natural" femininity, maternal origins, and matrilineality, however, do not fully account for Cypress.

When Leroy was away on tour, Cypress found it difficult to remain content in New York City. One afternoon, she encounters an old colleague and mentor, Ariel, on the street corner. He appears emaciated, beaten, and downtrodden. Cypress is stunned at her friend's dramatic decline. She heads to dance class and attempts to work out the distress

⁹ Anissa Wardi similarly argues that *Sassafrass* presents and praises natural Black female maternity and fertility when she describes Indigo's first menstruation as "grounded in the fecundity of the natural world" (136).

she feels after meeting Ariel by pushing her body to its limits. Wrapped up in her own warm-ups, Cypress fails to notice that her former lover Idrina is teaching the class. Afterwards, Idrina comforts Cypress and invites her back home. When asleep, "Cypress encountered her other worlds" in a section cordoned off from the rest of the narrative, subtitled "CYPRESS' DREAM" (184). Her dream interrogates a speculative projection of reproductive politics into the near future.

Cypress's temporary reconciliation with Idrina opens the discursive space for such an interrogation. Cheryl Clarke argues that the Black Arts era "marked the first time black women poets opened a public discourse on sexuality" in contrast to the widespread attempt to relegate Black women to sexually submissive, heterosexual, and procreative roles (71).¹⁰ Part of the feminist challenge was to liberate female sexuality from the "middle-class Victorian morés of premarital propriety and the relegation of sex to a private, unnameable sphere" (Clarke 71). If a liberated female sexuality remains within the boundaries of heterosexuality and—by extension—patriarchy, then the movement of sexuality from private to public threatens a reification of motherhood for public, state-controlled purposes. With Idrina, however, Cypress can manifest a critique of conventional reproductive roles consistent with the "lesbian-feminist critiques of motherhood" from the seventies that Clarke identifies as "the struggle to separate sex from procreation" (130). The freedom for Cypress to interrogate reproductive mandates arises from the domestic space of Idrina's home and within the intimacy of two women. In this narrative moment, Cypress can move freely outside the heteropatriarchal norms

¹⁰ While Clarke specifically speaks of poets here, Shange's multigeneric oeuvre allows slippage between any rigid formal or generic classification.

that aim to govern her public existence. Here, the discourse of sexuality can be free from the heterosex model of reproductive futurity.

While the elements of reproductive futurity might shift given Cypress's encounter with Idrina, any speculative future assumes some form of reproducing the population. Cypress's dream is no exception. Her movement through the dream space maps her discovery of the specific reproductive arrangements of this future. In her dream, Cypress first notices that, "this was obviously England after a nuclear holocaust," in the year "2014, at least" (184). Only the occasional, brightly dressed and scurrying woman disrupts the unfamiliar landscape in front of her. Cypress is alone "in the sense that she didn't 'belong,' like the rest, to whatever manner of civilization she'd come upon" (184). She hides in the shadows until someone finds her and brings her to the "leader, the queen, the reigning glory of this community" (184). The ruler promises that Cypress will be safe with them. Cypress learns that after the nuclear bombs "laid waste to the planet, somehow the men and the women of earth had been separated" (184). All women now live in this cove, defending themselves against male attackers who seek to regain "their rights to pillage and wreak havoc" (185). Cypress accepts this new reality and is welcomed into the all-female colony:

Cypress was initiated into the new world – not quite as herself. All vestiges of male-dominated culture were to be "rehabilitated" out of her psyche; the true matriarch, who is the woman-powerful, was to be nurtured. The population wanted for nothing: food, clothing, shelter, or art. These were a woman's work, even in the old world. But here there were no patriarchs, ordering and demanding. Here there were only Mothers and Daughters. "Mothers" were supreme; there was

no higher honor than to be deemed "Mother," yet this had nothing to do with biological offspring. (185-86)

This feminist future emphasizes the "true" female identity devoid of cultural influences and prescriptions. This "woman-powerful" vestige of Cypress's subjectivity resembles the essential and eternal female epitomized elsewhere in the novel by both Blue Sunday and Cypress's younger sister, Indigo. In this "new world," all social roles are integrated under the mother-daughter framework. The honorific "Mother" distinguishes women of power, "yet this had nothing to do with biological offspring." Motherhood no longer exclusively signifies an experience of gestation and birth. The term becomes entirely social and takes on new political resonances. The nominal redefinition of "mother," however, does not necessarily correlate with a disruption of power and control that governs women's bodies, and Cypress soon realizes the idyllic setting conceals coercive and exploitative policies.

III. The Bearers Who Were Ourselves

In addition to the mothers and daughters, in the colony of "CYPRESS' DREAM" there are also the "bearers." These women were "never seen in public assemblies, nor were they allowed to wear bright colors, because they might bear sons" (186). The potential for the female body to produce a male body is enough to relegate the bearers to second class status in the female colony. The Mothers punish any association with maleness, including exposure to Cypress's memories of the past.¹¹ Right after the female guards—representatives of state power—scold some young girls for asking Cypress to describe the old-world order, "some other brown figure in yellow took her through a passage that became smaller and smaller, until finally Cypress and this woman, Gisa, had

¹¹ Cypress's past, in this instance, being the narrative present of the novel. Her ability to think backward in time within her dream to her narrative present is one strategy of collapsing a linear temporality.

to crawl on their stomachs" (186). Cypress's dream quickly devolves into a dystopic nightmare when she first hears, then sees, numerous women in labor at the end of passageway. Gisa confirms that, "these are the bearers, our real mothers" (186).

The roles associated with the "complete mother," as defined by Erica Haimes as the composite of the genetic mother, the gestational mother, and the social mother, distribute across several women in the colony. Motherhood has multiplied into several iterations as the "Mothers" embody matriarchal power, the "Daughters" perform the social labor of raising children, and the "bearers" execute gestational and biological labor. Gisa's claim that the bearers are the "real mothers," however, returns motherhood to expression of biological labor. This reconstitutes motherhood as a natural state of womanhood in contrast to the denaturalizing rhetoric of the colony and its social order. Gisa explains that it is a punishment to be classified as a bearer, that "to become a bearer, a woman must do something bad: not follow rules; steal; behave strangely" (186). The judicial system forces women to be reproductive machines when they do "something bad," a vague reference to a code of ethics and rules that manage and discipline the colony.¹² The following list—"not follow rules; steal; behave strangely"—provides examples of such "bad" things, but the list appears incomplete. Semicolons distinguish the punishable acts and place them on equal footing. Behaving strangely becomes equivalent to stealing. Gisa's statement withholds from naming the system of power and hierarchy that maintain this punitive system. It is not just that women "become" bearers,

¹² While the image of a "reproductive machine" alludes to the exploitation of chattel slavery, it also recalls uncertainties about surrogacy as the transmutation of the female body into a reproductive technology itself. Third-party reproductive services such as surrogacy mean that one female body can be the treatment for another woman's involuntary childlessness. This blurs the distinction between who receives treatment and who is the treatment. For further discussion see Charis Thompson's second chapter in *Making Parents: The Ontological Choreography of Reproductive Technologies* (2005).

they are categorized as such by those in power—the Mothers. The surveillance of proper behavior establishes and enforces the social hierarchy based on reproductive labor. In essence, the bearers are traditional surrogates for the state. If childbearing wasn't ordered as punishment, Gisa wonders, "why else would anyone do it?" (186). When childbearing loses any positive connotation or association with socially legible motherhood, intervention and surveillance by state powers is inevitable.

Cypress considers the contrast of the undesirability of maternity in her dream with the intensification of maternal longing in her own time: "Cypress thought of the fertility pills, the test-tube babies implanted in women's wombs, the invention of surrogate mothers, all the things people of her time did in order to have a baby. Yet, why else would you do it was beyond Gisa's comprehension" (186).¹³ Cypress's recollection of reproductive interventions in her own era assumes that childbearing is an individual act motivated by personal desires. Once motherhood becomes mandated to sustain and perpetuate a population, reproductive technologies cease being a tool for individual wish fulfillment and become a weapon for state control. Gisa reveals that the female colony can only reproduce by using reproductive technology. They capture rogue men and raise "boy babies" in order to harvest sperm. "The Mothers have it frozen," Gisa confirms, "so no one has to worry about touching them" (186). As Cypress contemplates whether or not she is willing to "jeopardize her position in the colony" by sneaking off to view the captive men, she is arrested by one final revelation (186). A "curtain opened" and Cypress sees her mother, Hilda Effania, in labor as female guards walk by, "carrying

¹³ See Chapter IV on the history of freezing sperm for subsequent insemination.

small Sassafrasses and Indigoes" (186). Cypress quickly realizes that the colony only exists because of racialized reproductive labor.

Not only are Cypress's female relatives present, but she observes that "most of the 'bearers' were black and Latin" (187).¹⁴ This revelation demonstrates that the mechanisms of surveillance not only establish a power hierarchy based on reproductive labor but also reify racial categories. Simone Browne interrogates the relationship between surveillance and race in *Dark Matters*, writing that racializing surveillance "signals those moments when enactments of surveillance reify boundaries, borders, and bodies along racial lines, and where the outcome is often discriminatory treatment of those who are negatively racialized by such surveillance" (16). The connection between the punitive measures against women who "do something bad" in the colony and the racialization of the bearer underclass is an example of Browne's racializing surveillance.¹⁵ Disobedient behavior becomes code for race and further marks reproductive labor as racialized labor. The Mothers exile the bearers from the center of the colony and restrict their freedom of expression through sartorial codes. Cypress's dream makes clear that a world with "no patriarchs" does not automatically result in a world without power and hierarchy.

Historically prevailing modes of gendered and racial domination continue to operate in this future society and are regulated through forms of surveillance.

¹⁴ Shange's inclusion of Latinas in her dystopic nightmare widens her critique of the contemporary exploitation of female bodies of color and is consistent with the overarching concerns of her writings, such as in the poem "now i love somebody more than" that oscillates between English and Spanish in *for colored girls* (1976). In particular, the inclusion of Latina women evokes the historical legacy of state exploitation and reproductive violence against Latina women such as programs of coerced sterilization in Puerto Rico and in the state of California.

¹⁵ The colony holds the captive men in even more restrictive conditions of surveillance. The following section of this chapter describes how Cypress observes the men in a multistory glass structure designed for the mechanical collection of semen. The all-glass façade invites constant surveillance even though the members of colony are forbidden from actually viewing the men.

Appalled and faint, Cypress exclaims "Oh god, not again" and finds "all of slavery gushing from her stomach" as though she harbors all the historical trauma within her (187). Her very body bridges the connection between past forms of racial oppression and subjugation with the scene she witnesses in her dream. The "gushing" of history from Cypress's body ushers the enslaved past into the speculative future. Browne insists on contextualizing modern forms of surveillance with the "archive of transatlantic slavery" in ways that neither "replicate the racial schema it spawned" or "erase its violence" (13). The colony of Cypress's dream systematically erases the violence of the past by insisting that "all vestiges of male-dominated culture were to be 'rehabilitated' out of [Cypress's] psyche" and by punishing adolescence for inquiring about the past (Shange *Sassafrass*, 185). They have lost access to the archive of slavery and of patriarchy, resulting in the replication of historical injustices and violence.

Cypress literally "couldn't explain that her people had done this before, filled wombs over and over until they collapsed, or the body let go" (187).¹⁶ Contrary to the dominant symbolic of the womb as a generative, nurturing space, here "wombs" lead to destruction. Earlier in the passage, Cypress calls the cave that holds the bearers a womb, and questions why they are restricted to such a space when "we are the womb" (204). Across the repetition of this term, "womb" sheds its cultural meaning and becomes symbolic of the confinement of women of color's reproduction. If the womb collapses, then the cave and the collective spirit Cypress identifies as the "we" also collapses. The

¹⁶ This moment recalls the breeding conditions of American chattel slavery after the Act Prohibiting the Importation of Slaves of 1807, as described in the Introduction. These historical conditions appear elsewhere in speculative and science fiction. Contemporary with Shange's work, Octavia Butler's also confronts the historical lineage of chattel slavery and Black women's reproductive responsibilities, particularly in her Xenogenesis trilogy, published as *Dawn* (1987), *Adulthood Rites* (1988), and *Imago* (1989). I discuss Octavia Butler's speculative fiction, including *Dawn*, at length in Chapter VI.

rearticulation of past reproductive order spells destruction for the future community. Cypress's desire to warn, condemn, or alter the future is a recognition of the ideological link between the surveillance, control, and manipulation of women's reproductive labor with the enslavement of women of color. Yet she remains stunned into silence; even her "thought was impossible, here" (204). Cypress's knows this history but cannot speak as though the signified concepts behind her words and thoughts cease to exist. Instead, she must only bear witness.

IV. Cogs in the Reproductive Machine

The bearers are captives of the womb, but they cannot conceive on their own. Parthenogenesis is not a part of this world. While banished and violently excluded from the colony, men still have use value. The two elements of human reproduction, eggs and sperm, exist in separate spheres in Cypress's dream.¹⁷ Gisa leads her away from the football-field sized "womb" that contained the bearers and "into a black tunnel that opened onto a moat" (187). Accentuating the inversion of symbolic meaning of "womb" from generative to destructive, the "black tunnel" as birth canal and "moat" filled with water—a traditional symbol of fertility—become ominous and foreboding. Rather than signifying rebirth, expansion, and life, the womb, tunnel, and moat imply confinement and regulation. After witnessing the horror of the women's reproductive enslavement, Cypress emerges from the tunnel and beholds the men's:

¹⁷ Jayne Cortez's 1969 poem "Race" tackles the reciprocal reproductive image of Black men as studs. The poem opens by directly addressing "Black Men" and calling them "breeders—" "of the great race" and examines the role of homosexuality in the revolution. GerShun Avilez writes that "the subject of the poem is rendered a 'non functioning product' because his sexual actions do not fulfill a procreative function" (145). Cortez critiques the Black Arts era discourse of sexuality as permissible only in the confines of potentially reproductive partners. Shange's scene of imprisoned men for reproductive purposes recalls Black Arts era concerns over sexuality and reproductive futurity as investigated in Cortez's poem.

Then she saw them. Boys on the lower levels; young men in the middle levels; old men on the top floors. There was a loud buzz. The men came toward the glass walls that enclosed them, to inject their sperm into individual tubes running the length of the prison. (188)

Contrary to the laws forbidding members of the colony to view the men, they reside in a glass building that puts them quite literally on display. Maleness and masculinity require an intensification of surveillance and regulation. While Cypress never confirms that all of the incarcerated men are Black or other men of color, inside the prison structure she sees her friend Ariel and, to her astonishment, her father. In focusing on these figures, Cypress links the status of incarcerated men in her dream to the close kin and community members of her waking life. The panoptic prison contains Black male virility or, as Michele Wallace writes in *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman* (1978), it contains "the myth of the black man as sexual monster" (23). The glass structure betrays the rigid and impenetrable boundaries that restrict Black masculinity and falsely promises porousness or escape.

In a structure parallel to how Cypress "thought of the fertility pills" and other means of expanding reproduction in her own time after realizing the truth of the bearers, upon seeing the captive men forced to ejaculate on command,

Cypress thought of all the porno shows she had ever seen or heard of; women masturbating on the stage in front of three hundred men; women hung from trapezes so anyone could eat their pussies for the admission price; women passed around from man to man to be sodomized, cut, beaten. This spectacle belonged

with those. Even though no one touched the men, or watched them "perform," the threat of violence, the humiliation, was inherent. (188)

Cypress compares what she sees to the most obscene pornographic performances she can imagine and calls the sight of hundreds of men masturbating into tubes a "spectacle" of perversion.¹⁸ The conditions of monitored and exploited sexuality connect the men and women of Cypress's dream and evidences that stereotypes of Black hypersexuality cross lines of gender. All of the points of comparison in Cypress's "thought" imagine women at the center of the pornographic display: "women masturbating," "women hung from trapezes," "women passed around." Yet, the "spectacle" of imprisoned, masturbating men "belonged with those" scenarios, linked through comparable experiences of "violence" and "humiliation." The "threat" against the sexually exploited exists through the relationship between the spectacle and spectator in the space of performance.

In setting off the word "perform" in quotation marks, Cypress highlights the limitations of this term to describe what she observes. Her own position as viewer and the glass façade of the building imply a type of spectator or viewer of this performance of sperm gathering, but the laws and regulations of the colony intend to keep this display hidden from sight. The quotation marks around "perform" emphasize the slippage between literal and figurative manifestations of Black sexuality as spectacle and objectified action available for external consumption and mediation. In *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (1992), bell hooks describes the "phallogocentric politics of

¹⁸ The surveillance of Black male virility and sexuality also evokes the Tuskegee Study of Untreated Syphilis in the Negro Male, a clinical trial that misled Black men living with syphilis into believing they were receiving treatment. Instead, doctors used their bodies as testing grounds to observe the progression of the disease. This form of medical surveillance lasted from 1932 to 1972 when the *New York Times* broke the story. This revelation reignited the longstanding skepticism of biomedicine within the Black community and fueled concern over sexual and reproductive surveillance.

spectatorship" that presumes an active, white male gaze cast upon a passive female image. The relationship is one of power. While hooks concedes that Black men access the patriarchal position of spectator in the "private realm of television screens or dark theaters" where they can "unleash the repressed gaze" that in a public space could lead to physical violence or death (118), Cypress's dream implies that reproductive images equally subsume men and women of color into the position of the spectacle as the Other and the exploitable object.

By drawing a parallel between gendered experiences of reproductive control, Shange expands the scope of reproductive justice to account for men as well as women. Her dedication to a collective iteration of liberatory Black futurity transcends the gender divide without losing the nuance of gendered experience. In uniting women and men together in the debate over reproductive technologies and medicine, Shange responds to many of her public detractors that criticized her work, particularly *for colored girls*, as detrimental to Black men. Jean Young describes the sheer amount of backlash against Shange's portrayal of Black men in *for colored girls* as "a virtual avalanche of criticism" that ranged from accusing Shange of maligning to caricaturing Black men (309 n2). Other Black feminist writers also faced this type of attention, particularly Wallace for her text *Black Macho*. In drawing together Shange and Wallace, Robert Staples characterizes Black feminists as antagonistic against black men in his 1979 *Black Scholar* editorial, "The Myth of Black Macho: A Response to Angry Black Feminists." On the occasion of the second reprinting of *for colored girls*, Shange recalls the initial hostility surrounding her choreopoem: "The uproar about how I portrayed black men was insidious and venal. I was said to hate men, especially black men" (10). She reiterates that *for colored girls* was

and remains a text directed at young Black women and that this simple fact felt like an attack on Black men who, traditionally, would be granted the center and authority through patriarchal norms.

In Cypress's dream, the man-hating, overbearing angry feminist trope that critics accused Shange of promoting comes to fruition with the Mothers, and Cypress rejects it outright. While the reproductive bodies of women of color become repositories for displaced reproductive labor, Black men's bodies serve as vessels for the most extreme, undesirable, and threatening forms of sexual and reproductive power. Black masculinity must be regulated and constrained since it threatens both the matriarchy and the white supremacy of the female colony. Curator and scholar of visual art, Thelma Golden writes that, "one of the greatest inventions of the twentieth century is the African-American male—'invented' because black masculinity represents an amalgam of fears and projections in the American psyche which rarely conveys or contains the trope of truth about the black male's existence" (19). Ronda C. Henry Anthony describes Black male bodies as "ideological bogeymen standing in for the extremes of brutality and bestiality and the general threat of the breakdown of civil order" (5).¹⁹ In Cypress's dream, the glass prison both contains and emphasizes the fear of such "bogeymen." The sheer act of imprisoning these men evidences their threat to society and their proximity to "brutality and bestiality." To the Mothers, Black men's incarceration diminishes the danger of Black sexuality. Yet, Cypress witnesses the brutality not of the incarcerated but of the incarcerators. Heavily armed guards regulate the donors, watch over their actions, and

¹⁹ In addition to Golden's and Anthony's discussion of Black masculinity, see Mark Neal's *New Black Man* (2005), Jeffrey Leak's *Racial Myths and Masculinity in African American Literature* (2005), and Athena Mutua's edited collection *Progressive Black Masculinities* (2006).

threaten physical brutality in response to any resistance. The final image Cypress witnesses of the prison is her father's passive resistance when ordered to ejaculate on command. He stands firm and still while the guards warn him repeatedly to submit. Unable to persuade him with verbal threats, the guards electroshock him through the floors and walls of his prison cell. He falls to the ground, convulsing, as Cypress screams and runs away, fleeing the image of her incapacitated father and the dream space.

V. Bearing Witness to the Future

The psychic experience of the dream manifests as a physical strain when Cypress awakens. She "woke up running; at least, it looked as if she'd been running" (189). In shock, Cypress weeps and trembles. She assures herself, "No, that wasn't real, there was no such place; that was a dream, everything's all right, now." Nevertheless, the question lingers: how long will the "now" of the present last before giving way to the dystopic future? Looking around her room, Cypress "saw her mother in the cave, giving birth over and over." Even so, Cypress rises from the horrors of her memory and "vowed on the voices of her dreams...vowed to avenge her kin...that white folks would not make her ugly, helpless, and lost." Awake and no longer afraid, yet still haunted by the faces from her nightmare,

Cypress laid waste to the tunnels, caverns, and shadows of the other world...her presences would be a mortal threat to those who wounded, maimed, her ancestors, her lovers, Leroy. Like those women before her who loaded bundles on their heads and marched off to fields that were not their own, like the 'bearers' of her dreams swamped with births of infants they would never rear, Cypress clung to her body...and the will to simply change the world. (190)

Violent images of past and future reproductive exploitation linger in Cypress's narrative present. Her dream pulls together "those women before her" who in the past "loaded bundles" and "marched off," and "the 'bearers' of her dreams" who are denied a future with children "they would never rear." The trace from the past to the present and future ceases to signify progressive movement forward. New technologies may not be advancements at all, but reversions. The collapse of time threatens to restage past violence against women of color in the present and future. Cypress's body exists as a link in the matrilineal chain connecting her enslaved ancestors and the bearers of her dream. Holding tight to her physical self, Cypress understands that her present struggle resonates both backward and forward in time.²⁰ The persistence of Black female exploitation from the history of slavery into the speculative future leaves Cypress acutely aware of and protective of "her body" in the present.

The proliferation of reproductive technologies and fertility treatments characterize Cypress's present reproductive world. Since reproductive technologies make possible the exploitative reproduction in the dystopia, the dream raises ethical concerns about the rise of medical technologies. While Cypress's dream may be read as a full and unequivocal rejection of reproductive technologies such as surrogacy and freezing and banking sperm for future dissemination, the mode of speculative fiction, writes feminist scholar Marleen Barr, "uses both positive and negative images of motherhood to denounce patriarchal control of birth...each choice emphasizes the need to alter patriarchy's penchant for

²⁰ Cypress's action of clinging to her body resonates with the Black Arts era's political concern with the body. GerShun Avilez writes that "Black political liberation was expressed in terms of bodily freedom" (24). Reproduction "functioned as a conduit for the bodily consciousness" of the Black Arts ideology, Avilez continues. Cypress's physical cradling of her body claims a Black woman's autonomous "bodily consciousness" in the light of proscriptive reproductive discourses.

transforming women into powerless birth machines" (128). Cypress's dream deepens Barr's analysis of the speculative power of feminist imagining to "denounce patriarchal control of birth" by insisting on concurrent antiracist imagining. To understand the radical potential of Black speculative fiction, it is useful to quote at length Sandra Govan's entry on speculative fiction in *The Oxford Companion to African American Literature*:

[S]cience fiction is the literature of change, the literature that deliberately evokes a sense of wonder, the literature that illustrates the response of humanity to discoveries in the sciences and advances in technology. Science fiction extrapolates or projects from known data or experience and seeks to convince the reader that the alternate world presented, be it past, present, or future, is possible. This changed yet familiar world has at its base a rational scientific explanation for its imagined fantastic events. (683)

The first Black speculative fiction writers, Govan continues, "were those whose speculative vision transformed world, a social revolution, or a radical change in the depiction of an altered reality" (683). Surrogacy and other forms of reproductive technology operates as the "known data," in Govan's terms, or what Sandra Jackson and Julie Moody-Freeman describe as a "current reality," that supports the conditions of the speculative future and make it "plausible in the suspension of disbelief" (2-3). Surrogate reproductive labor in its present and past articulations allows Shange to critique current manifestations of systemic and biological oppression.²¹

²¹ In *The Afterlife of Reproductive Slavery: Biocapitalism and Black Feminism's Philosophy of History* (2019), Alys Eve Weinbaum identifies Western chattel slavery and the contemporary commercial surrogacy market as the two major historical periods where human reproductive labor circulated as commodity in a capitalist market. I discuss Weinbaum's text at greater length in the Conclusion.

In *Sassafrass*, the bearers literally become the "powerless birth machines" Barr warns against as their flesh serves as a tool for the perpetuation of the all-female colony. This is part of the threat of continually advancing reproductive technology: it commodifies and objectifies the procreative body and divorces physiological capabilities from the subjective person. The "negative image" of reproduction seen in *Sassafrass*, to reframe Barr's claim, is more than just an undesirable representation of surrogacy and other forms of reproductive medicine. It is an image that negates Black women's reproductive autonomy. The bearers are stripped of their freedom. If, however, the negative image of reproductive control operates to "denounce patriarchal control of birth," the cautionary portrayal of reproductive technology in texts such as *Sassafrass* may not directly condemn practices such as surrogacy. Rather, the critical intervention of Cypress's dream is the demand for Black women's leadership within the discourse of reproductive technology. It calls for acceptance and integration of new forms of reproductive technologies without dismissing or devaluing the past all while acknowledging that there cannot be a just or liberatory future that threatens the freedom of women of color. If, as Robin Kelley argues in *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination* (2002), "the most radical art is not protest art but works that take us to another place, envision a different way of seeing, perhaps a different way of feeling" (11), these moments of artificial reproduction in speculative modes create the possibility for new forms of Black femininity and Black reproductive futurity. "The map to the new world is in the imagination," Kelley writes. Using imagination, speculation, and dreams, Shange maps a new reproductive world as a reckoning of past and present reproductive injustices.

The final pages of *Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo* gesture toward such new beginnings. Cypress returns home to South Carolina with Leroy, intent on marriage, and joins her female relatives as her older sister Sassafrass goes into labor. The baby exists in the liminal space of birth, caught between the interior womb and the exterior world, between here and there, between living and not. Before turning home to have her child, Sassafrass joins a new age commune, learning the traditions of santería. Pregnant and free from her destructive relationship with her partner Mitch, Sassafrass thinks to herself: "*I'm going to carry these spirits right on home. I guess I live in looms after all. Making things: some cloth and one child, just one*" (200, original emphasis). Not only do Sassafrass, Indigo, and Cypress make the return journey to the maternal home, they bring with them the networks and experiences of the larger, Black diasporic community. Sassafrass brings the spirits, Cypress brings Leroy, and Indigo brings the folk. Together they form the tapestry of a collective Black community, or, as Sassafrass declares, they "live in looms" where individual threads weave together to form a cohesive, malleable, cloth, evoking the fiber arts that Sassafrass and Hilda Effania practice and for which the daughters are named. While earlier in the narrative Sassafrass celebrates that "all the women in her family could make something besides a baby" (81), juxtaposing procreativity against creativity, at the close of the novel Sassafrass no longer positions these types of creation as oppositional. She is "*making things*" in the plural, drawing together "*cloth and one child*" in an active, continual process of "*making*" (200).

As the novel closes, the characters still await the child:

"Now, Sassafrass. This ain't nothin' but a baby. You think you the only one ever did this?" Indigo coached. "Push I say, don't act a fool!"

"Mama did this three times. God is asking you for one time. One time make a free child." Cypress massaged.

"Yes, darlin'. I'm here. Was there ever one time when you couldn't come home? Yes, darlin', I know this isn't the way you wanted. But, sweetheart, whoever you are is all we have & I swear for Jesus, you my child."

Mama was there. (207)

Sassafrass's female kin await the birth of her child and speak to and nurture her in this moment of transformation as she remains silent. As an experienced midwife, Indigo connects Sassafrass's labor to the multitudes of other women who have come before her.²² Cypress draws the connections closer to their immediate family, bridging Sassafrass and their mother and imploring Sassafrass to "make a free child." They stand on the threshold of new life and a new beginning. Sassafrass's "free child" ushers in the future, a future that will also be "free."

Unlike the other messages in the final passage of the novel, the concluding line "Mama was there" appears in straight narration and not as dialogue (207). As such, its meaning multiplies across and beyond the figures of the scene. Initially, given that the three sisters Sassafrass, Cypress, and Indigo occupy the space with their mother, Hilda Effania, "Mama" may reasonably refer to her. In Hilda's own words she tells Sassafrass that "I'm here," prompting the response that "Mama was there." Yet, motherhood comes to signify so much more across the *Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo* that attributing "Mama" to just Hilda Effania neglects the expansive conceptualization of motherhood seen

²² Indigo's coaching recalls Maud Martha's birth scene in Gwendolyn Brooks's *Maud Martha*, as discussed in Chapter III. In that scene, Maud's mother reminds her, "You're just going to have a baby, like millions of other women" (Brooks, *Blacks* 287).

elsewhere. "Mama" may be Oschun, who *Sassafrass* calls "her Mother" before returning home (197). "Mama" may be Blue Sunday, the foremother of all Black women who birth free children. She may be the bearers, the Mothers, or the Daughters of Cypress's dream. The final declaration that "Mama was there" confirms the presence and subjectivity of the mother figure through the conjugation of "to be," a firm, simple assertion of existence and being. She is part of the past yet resides in the narrative present. She exists in a specific, yet indeterminate location "there," which defies rigid classification. "There" could be anywhere at any time. At any given moment "Mama" is each of these figures, and more, as the novel imagines motherhood and reproduction to extend beyond the individual and forge a matrix of representation that crosses boundaries of time and space.

While debates over reproductive access, freedom, and choice operate under a uniform binary of gender where women, structurally subordinate, claim the right to equal access and full possession over their bodies, Shange expands the field of consideration. To reduce the critical lens to consider only gender differentiation neglects the compounding factors of race, class, and nationality that equally structure the field of reproductive science and medicine. In *Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo*, Shange insists that these intersecting forms of social positioning operate concurrently. Cypress's dream crosses the Atlantic, literally traversing geographic boundaries to show how the legacies of reproductive control of women of color also take root outside of the U.S. The bearers are both "black and Latin," a concession to the shared conditions of reproductive exploitation, control, and the vulnerability to future oppressive systems of reproductive medicine between these two racialized populations. The punitive system of the female colony imprisons both women and men and exploits their captive bodies for reproductive

objectives.²³ Instead of inverting the power dynamics of reproductive medicine entirely—exchanging a focus on white men for one on Black women, for instance—Shange argues that the means of reproduction and questions of reproductive futurity concern all members of marginalized communities, including men. In this way, *Sassafrass* establishes a communal theory of reproductive justice.

Works of fiction such as *Sassafrass* by Black feminist writers carve out space for visions of freedom and future liberation for Black women. Shange contests the myriad of ways Black women's reproductive autonomy operates as rhetorical and political capital for groups other than Black women, and she achieves this goal by interrogating images of artificial reproduction. These images reveal the myopic debate over reproductive freedom as rehearsing decades-old questions rooted in the control of women's bodies: is women's destiny to be mothers? The answer—yes or no—structures systems of power and control that have regulated Black women's reproductive lives for generations. Instead, by widening the discursive field to account for the ideological disruption of new formations such as surrogacy, Shange's novel asks us instead to imagine radical new configurations between the terms "woman," "mother," and "reproduction."

Third-party reproductive techniques such as traditional and gestational surrogacy gaze toward a future where procreation escapes the configuration of two-parent reproductive pairings. The heterosexual imperative and the individualism inherent in normative conception ceases to operate as the predominant method of making children.

²³ The 1980s also saw the first surge in the decades-long trend of mass incarceration in the United States, which disproportionately impacts communities of color. The use of judicial protocol and the imprisonment of people of color in Cypress's dream should also be considered through this historical lens, particularly as the era of mass incarceration of Black people is likened to a new form of American slavery. See Ava DuVernay's documentary *13th* (2016) for more information on these points of contact.

In looking toward this potential, Shange utilizes the collective implications of surrogacy to draw attention to the risks but also the rewards of expanding human reproduction to be more communal. Imagining reproductive futures should extend beyond considerations of the self or the individual. In connecting the historical past of reproductive injustice to the imagined future of perpetuated injustice, Shange cautions against charging full force into a technological future with little consideration of the past. The way to avoid historical amnesia surrounding reproductive violence during American slavery is to integrate it into any understanding of the future. In doing so, *Sassafrass* asserts that reproductive futurity does not necessarily equate to reproductive destiny. Through critical interrogations of the resounding structures of race, gender, class, and sexuality, technologically mediated reproductive futures can support liberated communities.

Shange's speculative dream sequence turns outward to focus on the multiple implicated bodies and communities in a reproductive past and future. During the 1970s and 1980s, however, a concurrent interest in the reproductive data on the most interior, microscopic level provokes a separate interrogation of human reproduction. Genetic science and genetic engineering may not at first appear to be reproductive medicine or technology, but the decoding of human DNA and the search for ancestral roots embedded in our genes assume a reproductive lineage and inheritance. In the following chapter, I turn to Octavia Butler's speculative fiction that engages genetic science. An individual genetic code, Butler shows, carries within it the legacy of the ancestor.

CHAPTER VI

OCTAVIA BUTLER'S SPECULATIVE GENOMICS

What good is science fiction's thinking about the present, the future, and the past? What good is its tendency to warn or to consider alternative ways of thinking and doing? What good is its examination of the possible effects of science and technology, or social organization and political direction?

Octavia E. Butler, "Positive Obsession" (1995)

I. Thinking Genetics

Octavia E. Butler was a meticulous researcher. As preserved in her archived papers, she kept library records, research portfolios, newspaper clippings, and notebooks from the variety of college courses she enrolled in throughout her life.¹ Butler was determined that her speculative worlds would be grounded in available knowledge and real-world events. The rising popular and scientific interest in human genetics sparked Butler's imagination in the 1970s and 1980s. In 1984, while thinking through the scientific context of the manuscript that would later become the *Xenogenesis* trilogy, Butler wrote down the following consideration in one of her heavily annotated notebooks: "The possible kinds of human beings exceed the number of human beings who have ever lived. # consider this for the Oankali. # <gen. comb>" (Butler "OEB 3228," 1984). The Population Reference Bureau estimates that in all of human history, over 100 billion individuals have been born.² Instead of imagining humans as unique or

¹ The Octavia E. Butler Papers are housed at the Huntington Library, Art Collections, and Botanical Gardens in San Marino, California. After Butler's death in 2006, her papers were collected and sent to the Huntington in 2008. The papers were opened for research in 2014 and the first exhibit celebrating her work, "Octavia E. Butler: Telling My Stories" ran throughout 2017. I studied the archival material presented in this chapter during August 2017 with the support of a research grant from the Center for the Study of Women in Society at the University of Oregon.

² When the Population Reference Bureau (PRB) of Washington, DC, first collected data in 1995, the estimate of the total number of humans ever born was 105,472,380,171. As of 2017, that number was updated to 108,470,690,115. See the 2017 World Population Data Sheet available on the PRB's website for additional information, www.prb.org/2017-world-population-data-sheet/.

exceptional as a species, Butler implies that humans could have taken over 100 billion shapes and configurations. After using the number symbol "#" to remind her future self to "consider this for the Oankali," the alien species of the *Xenogenesis* trilogy, Butler ends the consideration with the abbreviation "gen. comb" contained in angle brackets. Based on her interest and exploration of genetic science, I interpret Butler's abbreviation to mean genetic combinations. There could be 100 billion different kinds of human beings because she imagines there could be 100 billion different genetic combinations that could produce human beings.

I begin with this example to show how Butler pondered the expansive possibilities of genetic sciences. The evidence of her genetic theorizing exists in her collected papers. Genetic science or genomics writ large may not at first appear as a science of reproduction, but the advancement of the field has profound effects on the ideology, policy, and medicine of human reproduction. Considered from a macro level, genetic science narrates the reproduction of human populations across centuries and harnesses the potential to predict the future of the species as well. The unique mutations of DNA show us when humans became a distinct species. On a micro level, prenatal genetic testing has become the norm for expecting mothers and the information garnered from such tests can be used to make decisions regarding selective abortion.³ The motivations behind these practices—such as aborting a fetus that may have a specific birth defect—can be understood as what Troy Duster calls "backdoor eugenics" and defines as the

³ Since the advent of prenatal genetic testing, disability rights activists and scholars have drawn attention to the potential eugenics implications of selective abortion based on genetic markers. See *Prenatal Testing and Disability Rights* (2000), edited by Erik Parens and Adrienne Asch, for a robust introduction to the topic. In addition, Dorothy Roberts explores the shifting terrain of racial and class politics with the rise of prenatal genetic testing in "Race, Gender, and Genetic Technologies: A New Reproductive Dystopia?" (2009).

incipient ways modern reproductive technology relies on eugenics logics of building a better person while staunchly denying such motivations. Fertility clinics now use genetic testing to predict with increasing accuracy not just the sex of an embryo but also other physical characteristics such as height and eye color. The benefits and threats of genetic science loom large.

This chapter examines two of Butler's projects that are linked through a shared interest in genetics: her antebellum time-travel novel *Kindred* (1979, and adapted in graphic novel form by Damian Duffy and John Jennings in 2017) and her post-apocalyptic alien encounter novel *Dawn*, first of the *Xenogenesis* (published as *Dawn* (1987), *Adulthood Rites* (1988), and *Imago* (1989), and later collected under the alternative title *Lilith's Brood* (2000)). As early as 1975, Butler began earnestly researching the field of genetics. As reference for her manuscript drafting, she clipped articles from the *Los Angeles Times* with titles such as "Rules Set to Explore Potential, Peril of Genetic Manipulation" and "DNA: Is the Genie Under Adequate Control?" (Butler "OEB 276(1)," 1977). Her rising interest in genetic science matches a popular fascination with the field and anticipates the dramatic and widespread ideological shift in how the mainstream public thought of human identity and science. In 2001 Barbara Katz Rothman, sociologist of science, technology, and bioethics, writes:

Genetics isn't just a science. It's becoming more than that. It's a way of thinking, an ideology. We're coming to see life through a "prism of heritability," a "discourse of gene action," a genetics frame. Genetics is the single best explanation, the most comprehensive theory since God. Whatever the question is, genetics is the answer. Every possible issue of our time—race and racism,

addictions, war, cancer, sexuality—all of it has been placed in the genetics frame.

(13)

I argue that Butler constructs her speculative novels through this same "genetics frame" as she seeks to present and interrogate the "deep logic of genetics, the frame or prism of understanding that genetics gives us" that Rothman identifies as the belief that "genes are *causes*" (15, original emphasis). In both *Kindred* and *Dawn*, Butler argues that genes are causes and that events can be traced back to genetic predispositions. In other words, the novels adhere to genetic determinism. Yet Butler's stories resist the deep ideology and logic of a genetic frame as well, never leaving these assumptions unquestioned. In this way, both *Kindred* and *Dawn* reveal the inadequacy of the genetics frame as a totalizing explanatory ideology and, in turn, caution the reader against wholly submitting to a line of reasoning that relies solely on scientific epistemologies. For Butler, genetic determinism is a metaphor for the inescapability of a racial past and the enduring legacies of racial trauma. Social and scientific explanations of genetic inheritance are not contradictory but mutually constitutive. Butler's novels bring the social understanding of genetics to bear on the scientific and the scientific to bear on the social. She shifts genetics into the purview of fiction, transforming DNA and genes from empirical pieces of reproductive data into narratable touchstones of personal and collective identity.

Kindred and *Dawn* present the genetic frame from two different vantage points, what Rothman identifies as "genetic thinking" versus "genetic practice" (173). For Rothman, "genetic thinking is a way of understanding the world, but genetic practice is, above all, a way of imagining the future" (173). *Kindred* is bound by genetic thinking as a way to present the contemporary world—the novel's narrative present of 1976—as

caused by a rigid and static lineage of genetic inheritances. Set 250 years later, *Dawn* considers how human genetics might cause changes in the future through a frame of genetic practice. The temporal directionality of their queries is distinct and even oppositional, one novel looking backward in time while the other looks forward. Both narratives test the adequacy of their genetic frames. When read together, *Kindred* and *Dawn* expose the gaps and fissures in all forms of rigid genetic framing.

II. Genealogical Determinism

Kindred is a contemporary narrative of slavery that makes literal the legacies and influence of the antebellum past on the modern world that most other novels of the genre treat metaphorically.⁴ Unlike other texts that treat the impact of slavery as figurative or psychic, *Kindred* uses the trope of time travel to literally move the protagonist Dana Franklin from 1976 California to Maryland of 1815.⁵ While unpacking boxes with her husband Kevin as they settle into their new home, Dana feels dizzy and opens her eyes to find herself inexplicably outdoors near a river in which a small boy appears to be drowning. Acting on instinct, Dana dives in and saves the boy only to be confronted with his panicked mother and, soon after, his armed father. With a rifle pointed at her face, Dana finds herself returned home. Her husband witnesses her temporary disappearance and together they start to reconcile this strange occurrence. Throughout the novel Dana will return to this setting, both its time and place, whenever the young boy Rufus's life

⁴ In using the phrase "contemporary narrative of slavery", I am referring to Arlene Keizer's definition of the genre in *Black Subjects: Identity Formation in the Contemporary Narrative of Slavery* (2004). Keizer identifies several categories of the contemporary narrative of slavery including historical novels of slavery, novels set in the present that connect contemporary life with slavery, and "hybrid worlds" that juxtapose scenes of the past with those of the present (2). *Kindred* falls within the hybrid category.

⁵ Gayl Jones's *Corregidora* (1975), David Bradley's *The Chaneysville Incident* (1981), and Phyllis Alesia Perry's *Stigmata* (1998) are all examples of contemporary narratives of slavery that figuratively reveal the resonances of slavery in the present through social and psychic violence.

appears to be in danger. She will continue saving him even after learning that she travels into American chattel slavery and that Rufus grows up to be a slaveowner. Dana unfailingly lends her assistance in Rufus's moments of need because she believes him to be her ancestor. Preserving his life means preserving her own.

The following analysis focuses on two scenes in the novel: when Dana deduces her genetic tie to Rufus during one of her first trips to the past and the epilogue where Dana and Kevin search the extant historical records in 1976 in hopes of finding empirical evidence of her repeat time travels. The form of Dana's inquiry in both of these scenes reveal the cause-and-effect logic that defines the structure of *Kindred's* narrative. In attributing the cause-and-effect logic to genetics, Butler narratively manifests the pervasiveness of genetic thinking that uniformly asserts that genes are causes. Dana—and *Kindred* more generally in form and structure—reproduces the logic of genetic thinking. I argue, however, that Butler simultaneously lays bare the gaps in Dana's genetic thinking. The steps of her deduction do not logically follow from one to the next and the search for concrete proof in historical records undermines her personal genetic knowledge. The conclusions Dana draws from the evidence around her are faulty. Genetic thinking becomes, then, a logical fallacy.

On her second trip to antebellum Maryland, Dana begins to piece together the mystery of her time travel. Her attempts at rationalizing her dissonant empirical experiences reveal the epistemological grip of genetic determinism that guides Dana's behavior throughout the novel. Her internal monologue opens with a rhetorical question—"Yes, maybe what?"—and moves through a series of self-directed questions and proposed answers to unravel the connection that tethers together Rufus and Dana.

Her first response is laden with uncertainty and doubt: "Well, maybe, if I wasn't completely out of my mind, if I wasn't in the middle of the most perfect hallucination I'd ever heard of, if the child before me was real and was telling the truth, maybe he was one of my ancestors" (*Kindred* 28). Each clause of Dana's explanation contingently rests on "if" certain conditions prove true, conditions such as her own capacity to perceive reality and the reliability of a strange child from 1819. Dana must assume the veracity of her own perception and reason even while the repetition of "if" and "maybe" leave open the possibility of other rational deductions besides that Rufus is her "ancestor." Dana's line of thinking continues, however, as though she's integrated and reconciled the above conditions without issue.

"Maybe," Dana further posits, "he was my several times great grandfather, but still vaguely alive in the memory of my family because his daughter had bought a large Bible in an ornately carved, wooden chest and had begun keeping family records in it. My uncle still had it" (*Kindred* 28). Dana's confirmation of her current situation rests on the family tree inscribed in a Bible that had been passed on through generations. Rufus could be real and could be her ancestor, Dana's logic implies, because his name exists as discursive proof in the family Bible. Only through the act of writing and recording his name and his progeny has Rufus been kept "vaguely alive in the memory of my family," a collective memory rooted in the family record. Rufus's future daughter (Dana's great-great-grandmother) Hagar performed the initial work of what Carolyn J. Rosenthal terms

"kinkeeping," the act of maintaining and recording familial relationships.⁶ Kinkeeping, according to Rosenthal, is a gendered form of labor. In *The Social Life of DNA* (2016), Alondra Nelson claims that "with genealogical practices of prior times and of today, kinkeeping involved the work of connecting past and present kin with purposeful narrative" (71). Dana's family Bible connects her with her past kin by outlining the family's genealogy. The narrative, however, is incomplete since it does not mention Rufus by name or give any indication that he is white. The story of Dana's family tree, then, is a mediated or revisionary narrative. The "purposeful" aspect of the narrative connecting "past and present kin" may not be objectively accurate or empirically true. Rather, what gives the narrative purpose is the act of authorship by the lineage of women kinkeepers.

Even though her ancestors recorded an alternative formation of family inheritance, one that strategically withholds the identity of Rufus, Dana's experience of time travel requires her to restore Rufus in the family tree. Because Rufus must now be included, Dana must respond to the paradox of her time travel as an individual deeply assimilated to genetic thinking and bound by genetic determinism. Genetic determinism locks individuals into rigid conceptions of the self, inscribes experiences of identity onto biology, and falsely upholds genetics as an unassailable master narrative of personal and collective history. To organize the world, past or present, through a narrative of genetics allows for race and racial stratification to be explained by biology. The marginalization of

⁶ As discussed regarding the history of surrogacy narratives in Chapter V, the name Hagar refers to the Biblical story where Sarah, Abraham's wife who is unable to bear him a child, orders her handmaid Hagar to bear a child with Abraham. In naming Dana's maternal ancestor Hagar, Butler calls on this history of nonnormative reproductive arrangements. Beyond the commentary on reproductive exploitation, Hagar also symbolizes escape and freedom because she fled from her servitude and mistreatment. In naming her daughter Hagar, Alice hopes to instill this spirit for freedom in her daughter.

racial groups becomes inevitable and natural, a result of inherent genetic defaults instead of a product of long standing white heteropatriarchal capitalist rule. Rothman confirms that "in a racist society, in a world in which race is a system of power and oppression, genetic thinking is going to be used to support that oppression" (107). Genetic determinism becomes a cover for the social dimensions of race. Such genetic thinking may not condone the historical violence and trauma that led to the present moment, but it accepts them as necessary links in the chain.

While genetic thinking characterizes the dominant epistemology of inheritance and genealogy in *Kindred*, Butler does not leave these scientific assumptions unquestioned. As Dana overloads her own reason with "ifs" and "maybes," walking back on her own conclusions and using increasingly vague and ambiguous language to reconcile her experiences, Butler offers space for alternative interpretations of Dana's narrative. Dana admits that much of the narrative of her relatives is lost to time and that "no doubt most of the information about her [grandmother Hagar's] life had died with her. At least it had died before it filtered down to me. There was only the Bible left" (*Kindred* 28). Gaps exist in the family narrative even though the genealogical record in the family Bible constructs a complete progression from Rufus and Hagar to Dana.⁷ Lisa Long writes that, "In *Kindred* Dana turns to the family Bible to make sense of her time travels...Here family history is just forgettable names listed in a book. The conventional landmark events of one's life—birth, marriage, and death—convey little useful

⁷ Ashraf Rushdy describes *Kindred* as "a story about how to reconstruct a family according to the history [Dana] relives. It is significant, of course, that Hagar is the one who wrote the family records in the family Bible—and yet her own story requires her granddaughter's reconstructive touch" (153). The "reconstructive touch" Rushdy posits, I argue, is shaped within the confines of a genetically deterministic framework of understanding the past according to genealogical veracity.

information. Indeed, Dana had read Rufus's name in the Bible many times without ever knowing that he was a white slaveholder" (476). Only before Dana's attempt "to make sense of her time travels" does Long's observation that the Bible genealogy "convey[s] little useful information" ring true. Once Dana tries to reconstruct the genetic lineage from Rufus onward, the names in her family Bible convey highly useful information. They reveal moments of conception as additional "landmark events" in a family's history. The Bible is limited, however, and to reconcile the gaps in knowledge and history, to fill in the lines that connect the family tree with a purposeful narrative, Dana deduces a seemingly logical explanation for her time travel that takes for granted the authority of her genealogy. Her time travel only makes sense if her genealogy is as much scripture as the religious text that physically encases it. Yet Dana struggles to fully accept this version of reality:

Was that why I was here? Not only to insure the survival of one accident-prone small boy, but to insure my family's survival, my own birth.

Again, what would have happened if the boy had drowned? Would he have drowned without me? Or would his mother have saved him somehow? Would his father have arrived in time to save him? It must be that one of them would have saved him somehow. His life could not depend on the actions of his unconceived descendant. No matter what I did, he would have to survive to father Hagar, or I could not exist. That made sense. (*Kindred* 29)

Dana again interrogates her current experience and her rationalization of that experience with a series of internal rhetorical questions that she answers to the best of her ability. Dana's own life evidences Rufus's survival. If Dana exists, logic follows that all of her

ancestors also existed. The means of his survival then become irrelevant. "Somehow," Dana repeatedly imagines, he would survive. She was evidence of that. Dana's firm conviction that Rufus survives to father Hagar renders the interrogative possibilities of the series of questions inconsequential. Dana assumes answers to the questions before they are posed, answers that confirm a reality of genetic determinism through the grandfather paradox. Dana concludes: "If I was to live, if others were to live, he must live" (*Kindred* 29). In this statement, Dana evokes the continuity concern of theoretical time travel. In the grandfather paradox, we are asked to consider the disruption to time and history if a person were to travel back in time and kill their grandfather. The act would surely, through the laws of genetic inheritance and determinism, preclude the possibility of the murderer's own life. This continuity concern implies that the past must unfold in an exact series of events in order for the present to be organized in the way we observe it. Dana's conclusion summarizes this central concern of time travel and her actions throughout the rest of the novel correspond with her resolution to not "dare test the paradox" (*Kindred* 29).

Yet, while Dana ostensibly rejects any firm explanation for her time travel—thinking her involvement in Rufus's survival "makes sense" but it "didn't make enough sense" and confirming that she truly did not think "a blood relationship could explain the way I had been twice drawn to him" (*Kindred* 29)—her decision to not "dare test the paradox" demonstrates that a genetically deterministic explanation is powerful enough to dictate her behavior. Dana operates as though the reason behind her time travel is self-evident. Even if it wasn't a "blood relationship" that causes her and Rufus's connection across space and time, whatever "matching strangeness" is reason enough for Dana to be

"glad [she] had been able to save him" (29). Butler rejects blood and bloodlines as the prevailing metaphor for ancestral ties, opting instead for the ambiguity of "some matching strangeness."

Examining blood as the organizing metaphor of kinship relations reveals the easy slippage between social constructions of identity, family, and community and qualifying narratives of biological inheritance and determinism. The imagery of blood evokes a long-standing cultural and social preoccupation with biological relationships. Families speak of blood relatives and blood lines (a phrase used by eugenicists as well). Common cultural scripts tell of children solidifying their personal friendships by cutting themselves to swap blood as an act of validating the relationship. Blood operates as a metaphor for life, humanity, and family as we do not literally inherit the very blood of our parents or ancestors. Rather, blood stands in for DNA and genetics and translates what can be observed as similarities between familial groups into a biological fact. For instance, Ashraf Rushdy writes of *Kindred* that, "no matter how much narratives of memory help construct a sense of family, we cannot escape the obvious fact that family, as the saying goes, is not something you choose. Generally, we believe that family is something we inherit" (142). Dana's recorded family tree serves, in its small revisionist way, as an example of the family we choose. Hagar chose to not include details of her paternity. Upon time travelling, however, Dana grasps how family is also something she inherits. Yet, the construction of kinship, blood, and genetic inheritance is more complex than Rushdy's opposition between choice and non-choice. Dana's inexplicable link to Rufus confirms that, to Butler, genetics do matter as important cultural and social signifiers. How genetics comes to stand as stark, objective, biological data, rather, runs

counter to Butler's intervention. Genes tell stories as much as they reveal empirical information.⁸

This is not to deny that genetics can be illustrative of the biological legacies of the past in the present. Rather, this critique intends to reveal the danger in narrating historical inheritances as written on genes through either explanations of biological determinism or through figurative constructions that still prioritize biology and assume and subsume genetic explanations within their rhetorical strategy, such as patrimony. This is where Dana stands, in the tension between biological and social understandings of inheritance, where both rely on an immutable genetic predestination. Her decision to not "test the paradox" of her time travel reveals the pervasiveness of the paradigm of genetic thinking. Even though she rejects the conclusion that her time travel attests to a blood relationship, her reasoning remains invested in genetic explanations of inheritance. She chooses her family Bible to account for her circumstances, believing the written record to be more reliable than a hypothetical biological relationship between her and Rufus.

The narrative power of her family genealogy as recorded in the Bible does not release Dana from biological explanations of her time travel; rather, it confirms them. The Bible's family tree, much like the symbolism of bloodlines, metaphorizes genetic inheritance. The rhetorical structure and familial narrative of a written genealogy veils its biological assumptions. The names inscribed on that page represent more than the social construction and record of her family, they now also represent an unassailable genetic

⁸ This conflation between biology and social position takes an even more dangerous and violent form when considering the institution of American chattel slavery. Long writes that "bloodlines were linked irrevocably to the mother's state during slavery" (474). As described in the Introduction, the legal doctrine of *partus sequitur ventrem* assured that the children born to enslaved women would follow the condition of the mother and enter into the ranks of the enslaved, regardless of paternity. In these instances, the biological relationship between parent and child become legible social demarcations.

contract between each member of the reproductive line. In this way, Butler excavates the biological metaphor of discursive genealogies that otherwise are understood as socially constructed and contingent. She reveals that discursive genealogies rely on and contribute to the creation and maintenance of scientific theory. For Butler, it is not enough to just tell a story about the past, and it is not enough to trace a genealogy. They must work in tandem.

III. Historical Reconstruction as Genetic Thinking

Dana concludes there can only be one reason she travels to the antebellum South, Rufus's survival, but the reader is left to imagine "what would have happened if the boy had drowned?" (*Kindred* 28). While the narrative does not pursue that story, in posing the question *Kindred* leaves open the possibility of alternative timelines and actions guided outside of the certainty of genetic determinism. The genetic determinism is a confrontation of the past in the present, a point that Dana appears to miss. So concerned with preserving historical accuracy, Dana perpetuates and participates in the violation of her female ancestors. To guarantee the birth of Hagar and knowing that "Rufus and Alice's children are the products of rape makes Dana complicit in Alice's sexual slavery as well. Dana's dark skin may make her a slave like Alice, but Rufus, not Alice, is Dana's true kindred spirit" (Long 469). The question of consent, rape, and complicity relies on a framework of choice and autonomy. As an enslaved woman and a pseudo-enslaved women, Alice and Dana have little to no choice in their own or one another's sexual abuse. Dana's dedication to genetic determinism, moreover, restricts her visible plane of options even more. David LaCroix describes Dana's responsibility for the past as neither culpability or complicity, but rather as "implicity" which describes the "two sides of our

entanglement with prior versions of the world: our habit of according a privilege to the present and the misrecognitions of the past that may follow from that habit" (109).

LaCroix's nuanced interpretation of *Kindred* corresponds with an analysis of the novel as guided by genetic determinism.

By affording the present authority because it must exist through a series of genetic contacts, the past is locked in a static and intractable form. But Dana experiences antebellum Maryland in her lived present. The series of events in the supposed past are not preordained and Dana's concession to the grandfather paradox critically misrecognizes the past as it becomes her narrative present. The novel's climax ironically fulfills the grandfather paradox, as Dana murders Rufus to save herself from sexual violation and to sever the "matching strangeness" that keeps pulling her across space and time. While she enacts the very event that would challenge the continuity concern of time travel, her act of parricide occurs after Rufus fathers Hagar. With the reproductive lineage intact, Dana can kill Rufus without truly testing the paradox.

In affording the genealogical record in her family's Bible the privilege of recording and reproducing the past along genetic lines of inheritance, Dana attributes authority to extant historical records and the ways they shape and outline a historical narrative. The gaps may need to be filled, but the inscriptions stand firm on their own. The work of filling the gaps with reasonable and logical narrative is an act of speculation. As the above analysis shows, Dana's speculation is confined by the assumption of a genetic determinism. At the end of the novel, returned to 1976 in the epilogue, Dana and her husband Kevin journey to Maryland to fill in the gaps and confirm their travels to the antebellum South. Unsurprisingly, the record is scant and unfulfilling: "The only clue we

found—more than a clue, really—was an old newspaper article—a notice that Mr. Rufus Weylin had been killed when his house caught fire and was partially destroyed" (*Kindred* 263). By initially referring to the newspaper article she finds as a "clue," Dana confirms that her trip to contemporary Maryland is investigative, as though she believes herself and Kevin to be modern detectives tasked with discovering a historical truth. Offset in the dashes, however, Dana repositions the newspaper article as "more than a clue, really" to elevate it from mere speculation or hypothesis to something more akin to objective truth. The article does not just allude to the truth—it is the truth.

Dana takes narrative as presented in the newspaper records and reconciles it with her lived experience:

I thought about that, put together as many pieces as I could. The fire, for instance. Nigel had probably set it to cover what I had done—and he had covered. Rufus was assumed to have burned to death. I could find nothing in the incomplete newspaper records to suggest that he had been murdered, or even that the fire had been arson. Nigel must have done a good job. He must also have managed to get Margaret Weylin out of the house alive. There was no mention of her dying. And Margaret had relatives in Baltimore. Also, Hagar's home had been in Baltimore. (*Kindred* 263)

Reminiscent of how she pieces together the record of her family tree alongside her experiences of time travel, in this passage Dana uses deductive logic to fill in the gaps of the "incomplete newspaper records." She presumes that Nigel set the fire to hide the truth of Rufus's death at Dana's hand and concludes that "he had covered" it thoroughly because no evidence of the murder remains in the official record. Her reconstruction of

Nigel's actions moves from the deductive to the speculative. At first, Dana concludes that "Nigel had probably set" the fire and "had covered" Dana's involvement. While she softens the rigidity of the verb "had" in the first instance with a concession to probability, the narration of these actions express the obligation Dana presumes of Nigel to cover up her crime. In Dana's reconstruction of the events following the fire, events that have even less extant evidence, her use of the past tense shifts from "had" to "must have": Nigel "must have done a good job" and "he must also have managed" to save Margaret from the flames. This subtle shift in describing the past moves from a position of certainty to one of opinion and speculation based on probability. Dana implies that she feels these events to be true through her personal perspective about their likelihood through a reverse cause-and-effect. Since there was no evidence that Margaret also died in the fire, Nigel "must...have" removed her from the house.

This shift into the speculative pushes Dana into making increasingly unsupportable claims. She remembers that "Margaret had relatives in Baltimore" and that "Hagar's home had been in Baltimore" (*Kindred* 263). These statements of fact in and of themselves do not imply any relationship besides a geographical overlap. Yet at this point in Dana's deduction, these statements become evidence enough of a firm connection:

Kevin and I went back to Baltimore to skim newspapers, legal records, anything we could find that might tie Margaret and Hagar together or mention them at all. Margaret might have taken both children. Perhaps with Alice dead she had accepted them. They were her grandchildren, after all, the son and daughter of her only child. She might have cared for them. She might also have held them as

slaves. But even if she had, Hagar, at least, lived long enough for the Fourteenth Amendment to free her. (*Kindred* 263)

Dana and Kevin find nothing conclusive to support any one version of this story. Unlike the confident probability of what Nigel "must have" done after the fire, here the prospect of any one event is less certain. Instead of declaring what Margaret must have done, Dana considers what actions she "might have" taken: she "might have" kept the children with her, she "might have" treated them as her rightful family, or she "might have held them as slaves." None of these possible narratives appears as more likely than another, which reveals Dana's capacity to deduce the likelihood of the past narrative to be inconsistent and unstable.

Such instability threatens Dana's attempts to order the world through dominant paradigms of scientific empiricism and logic. By covering up the crime, Nigel also erases any trace of Dana from the scene, making the extant record and Dana's lived experience irreconcilable. Her attempts to generate a logical and scientifically sound cause-and-effect narrative fall short. The relationship between the past and present—and by extension the future—is ambiguous and beyond simple reconstruction or reconciliation. But it is not beyond narration. The structure of genetic thinking outlines a historical story that Dana develops through strategies outside of dominant epistemologies. Her family's records, her own lived experiences, and her capacity to speculate on the links that draw together a coherent narrative all assist Dana in making sense of her life through narration. Speculation is, after all, a logical project of drawing alternative conclusions to a set of given circumstances. It requires imagination and radical departures from the assumed objectivity and inevitability of the world as it is currently organized. Dana struggles to

overcome her entrenchment in genetic thinking, but she still relies on speculation to clarify her logical deductions. In *Kindred*, the "what ifs" of the past give way to the known effect—the present day. Dana lives. The narrative of the past, whatever version, leads to her life. The structure of the novel itself prioritizes the known ending. *Kindred* opens with the narrative's conclusion as Dana waits in a hospital, her arm amputated from her last journey through time and space. The story following this opening scene drives toward this conclusion and assures the reader of Dana's survival in the present no matter the details and chain of events from the past. This cyclical structure suits the speculative project of reconstructing or rewriting the past with a known and verifiable present. When Butler turns her attention to a speculative future instead of the past, she frees her narrative of this recursive return and leaves her endings open and unknowable.

IV. From Genetic Thinking to Genetic Practice

Throughout *Kindred*, the logic of genetics as the cause of an array of human affairs and conditions structures how Dana recreates her narrative of personal and ancestral history. Butler's next major book project, the *Xenogenesis* trilogy, moves from genetic thinking to genetic practice, or what Rothman defines as extrapolating genetic logic as "a way of imagining the future" (173). In the speculative future of *Dawn*, a nuclear war has left the Earth devastated and uninhabitable. A roving alien species just happens to be passing by and takes pity on the surviving humans and removes them from the planet. For centuries, the alien Oankali study humans; they cure our diseases, learn our languages, and revive our home planet in anticipation of our eventual return. But their assistance comes at a price. The Oankali are gene traders. Since time immemorial they have travelled the stars in search of new life that they can learn from and trade with—

diversifying and disseminating their genetic forms across the universe. Humans offer them a rare and valuable gift: cancer. The propensity of human cells to have uncontrollable growth, which often leads to human death, can be harnessed and controlled by the Oankali for use in regeneration and longevity. But the Oankali do not simply take, they trade. Their intervention into human affairs also spells the end of humanity as we know it. Humans will only reproduce and rebuild the species as genetic hybrids, or "constructs," that are mixtures of human and Oankali DNA. Lilith, the protagonist of the first novel of the series, *Dawn*, must convince her fellow humans to accept this new world.

Butler thought of her *Xenogenesis* series as her sociobiology novels, narratives that explored how genetics and biology dictated social behavior or what she often simply called "instincts." In her notes from December 30, 1982, Butler writes that,

sociobiology is a valid study. It is ridiculous to assume that humans are the only animals on earth uninfluenced by genetically transmitted behavioral traits <"instincts">. And since we are so influenced, we should know how, when, and why. People who know what to expect are not surprised and controlled by their instincts when they should not be. We do not fight or flee automatically when the impulse comes to us. We examine the situation and in spite of pounding hearts, we decide what to do. ("OEB 3219," 1979).

The genetic thinking of her speculative future in *Dawn* considers the implications of sociobiology and "genetically transmitted" instincts in imagining a new world.

Conditions and behaviors not routinely thought of as genetic come to impact how such a future unfolds. Rather than revising the past to complicate genetic thinking as in *Kindred*,

in *Dawn* Butler expands her theory of sociobiology to destabilize the dictum that genes are causes. In the following analysis, I focus on two specific concepts presented in *Dawn* that show how Butler imagined a genetically deterministic future aligned with sociobiology. First, I will examine what the novels name the "human contradiction," a lethal genetic combination of intelligence and a drive for hierarchy that, according to the Oankali, assures humanity's destruction. Second, I will turn to the Oankali "prints," a name they call stored communal memories of organic life that can be used as a blueprint to construct genetic clones. In both of these instances, genetics appears as a master narrative of species and personal destiny. The surviving humans understand the Oankali genetic project as reliant on biological determinism and come to resist and resent their captivity. The Oankali, however, do not so rigidly define genetics as it at first might seem. The human contradiction and the Oankali prints balance genetic determinism with a rationale of probability. What these scenes reveal is that the humans, not the aliens as scholars have repeatedly argued, steadfastly adhere to genetic thinking that threatens the survival of both species.

Near the start of the novel, when Lilith cautiously begins to accept the alien world around her, she learns why the Oankali are so preoccupied and fascinated with humans as a trade species. Lilith asks the first Oankali she meets, Jdahya, why a scar appeared on her abdomen during one of her stints in suspended animation. Jdahya explains to Lilith that she had a cancerous growth corrected by a member of the Oankali's third sex, an ooloi. An ooloi is neither male nor female and does not contribute genetic material of their own to offspring but is a vital member of Oankali reproduction. The ooloi, in many ways, are Oankali doctors and scientists, researching biological material and mixing

genetic combinations within their unique cellular organelles. Jdahya tells Lilith that her ooloi practitioner, still learning about cancer, opted to cut her flesh in order to observe the tumor with all its available sensory organs. He tells Lilith that she "had not only a cancer, but a talent for cancer" (*Dawn* 22). While Lilith rejects the implications that a predisposition to cancer could be a "talent", a term usually reserved for praising a seemingly natural skill at an art or trade, to the Oankali cancer is an art form. The uncontrollable cell growth that often results in human death represents untapped potential and beauty to the Oankali. With their ability to manipulate genes and body chemistry, they can harness cancer's characteristics of regeneration and reproduction toward their own healing, endurance, and eventual protean capabilities.

Curing cancer through genetic and chemical stimulation, as the Oankali do for Lilith and for all remaining humans, invites bioethical concerns. Gregory Hampton writes that by "reprogramming Lilith's cancer cells, they rewrite a piece of her genetic memory and biological history. The Oankali use eugenics as a method of rewriting and manipulating Lilith's past, present, and future" (272). Claire Curtis contextualizes the use of cancer as a cure by the Oankali within disability studies discourse, arguing that cancer becomes a tool for maintaining able-bodied humans and aliens and while "*Xenogenesis* offers a world where curing is a mode of showing attention and giving pleasure to others. This is clearly not our world and insofar as the novel makes us desire it then we should ask what we desire" (32). Both Hampton's and Curtis's critiques of the role of cancer in the series reveal the eugenic implications of the Oankali practice of gene trade. When judged against twentieth and twenty-first century bioethical standards, the Oankali's blanket correction of disease and disability reproduce eugenic ideas. Yet, the Oankali

operate in an alien framework meant to defamiliarize the logic of genetic determinism. To them, cancer is not a disease but art and creation. It isn't eliminated from the human species so much as it is tamed in order to benefit all life. While this process itself harkens to eugenic programs and attempts to master the biological diversity, the Oankali framework is more enigmatic than a eugenics binary suggests. Through this alternative and sometimes inscrutable logic, cancer becomes an analogy for the greatest genetic problem within the series: the human contradiction.

As described above, the human contradiction is the fatal genetic combination of hierarchy and intelligence. Jdahya explains that human "bodies are fatally flawed. The ooloi perceived this at once... You have a mismatched pair of genetic characteristics. Either alone would have been useful, would have aided the survival of your species. But the two together are lethal. It was only a matter of time before they destroyed you" (*Dawn* 38). To describe the genetic pair as "mismatched" assumes a logic of natural selection that strives toward fitness or the survival of a species. To claim that genetic characteristics can be matched, correctly or incorrectly, implies a form of intelligent design. As the Oankali maintain a natural capacity for genetic engineering, they literally use their intelligence to design genetic code. Lilith initially rejects the notion that humans "were genetically programmed to do what we did, blow ourselves up—" but Jdahya refutes Lilith's interpretation and likens the human contradiction to cancer. He explains, "No. Your people's situation was more like your own with the cancer my relative cured. The cancer was small... But what if you hadn't recognized the significance of your family history? What if we or the humans hadn't discovered the cancer?" (38). Even a small cancer could prove deadly over time without proper oversight and medical intervention.

It is not that a cancerous growth necessarily spells death, but rather that an unchecked and unmonitored cancerous growth hastens death. Jdahya's conception of the human contradiction as analogous to cancer is probabilistic instead of deterministic. He continues to explain that, "your people were in a similar position. If they had been able to perceive and solve their problem, they might have been able to avoid destruction. Of course, they too would have to remember to reexamine themselves periodically" (38). The human contradiction or cancer itself does not impede survival, necessarily. Humans' inability to "perceive and solve their problem"—whether that be advanced medicine to detect and cure cancer or a self-awareness of the destructive force of the human contradiction—spells disaster.

On a population and species level, the human contradiction could have balanced itself if humans detected their flaw. Jdahya concedes that humans are intelligent, "that's the newer of the two characteristics, and the one you might have put to work to save yourselves" (*Dawn* 39). Human intelligence maintains the capacity to "work" against the more "entrenched characteristic" of hierarchical drives. "When human intelligence served it instead of guiding it, when human intelligence did not even acknowledge it as a problem, but took pride in it or did not notice it at all..." (39, ellipses in original). The genetic predisposition to hierarchy as expressed in social structures through race, gender, sexuality, ability, and class stratification, can be corrected or at least controlled by human intelligence. Jdahya denounces the way that human intelligence, instead of "guiding" hierarchical tendencies toward human fitness and survival, actually "served" this tendency. Serving hierarchy with intelligence amplifies its impact through purposeful ignorance or intentional "pride." The incomprehensibility of humanity's active and

passive assent to the entrenchment of hierarchy leaves Jdahya nearly speechless as his explanation trails off in an ellipse. "That was like ignoring cancer," Jdahya concludes, encapsulating the seriousness of the genetic mismatch through his repeated analogy to cancer.

Lilith responds to Jdahya's account of the downfall of humanity by stating that, "I don't think most of us thought of it as a genetic problem. I didn't. I'm not sure I do now" (*Dawn* 39). Lilith struggles to incorporate the idea that a "complex combination of genes" drives human hierarchy. She initially understands genetics to only impact a narrow definition of biology bound to the individual body and not extended to population-wide behavior. In her notes, Butler describes this myopic position as "short-term fitness" with humans "being best adapted to current environment" rather than "being most adaptable to changing environment" ("OEB 3228").⁹ In other words, human evolution halts because intelligence as the "best adaptation to wide range of existing conditions may itself contain the seeds of its own extinction" ("OEB 3228"). When Lilith rejects Jdahya's assertion that hierarchy is genetic, he concedes that "intelligence does enable you to deny facts you dislike. But your denial doesn't matter. A cancer growing in someone's body will go on

⁹ Butler's consideration of a stable versus a changing environment reasonably evokes questions of climate change and other environmental concerns. Regarding climate change, human behavior is not only best suited for a stable, unchanging environment, but that very behavior catalyzes environmental change. This then results in humans becoming ill-adapted to new circumstances, exacerbating the problems. Throughout her fiction, Butler remains preoccupied with the relationship between human action, or inaction, and environmental destruction. For instance, in the second installment of the *Xenogenesis* trilogy, *Adulthood Rites* (1988), Butler describes a community of Resisters who excavate old human settlements for plastic artifacts. Even with their advanced technology, the Oankali could not process and repurpose plastic during their rehabilitation of Earth and it acts as a literal and figurative remnant of former human civilization. Butler's unfinished trilogy, *Parable of the Sower* (1993) and *Parable of the Talents* (1998), projects human ecological destruction into the near future. Her protagonist, Lauren Olamina, navigates a dystopic society characterized by climate collapse and vast wealth disparities.

growing in spite of denial" (*Dawn* 39). Intelligence inhibits human adaptation and survival. In her notes, Butler elaborates:

Too many of us either do not perceive [*sic*] the problem, perceive [*sic*] it, but refuse to take it seriously because it would require sacrifice + self-denial of the very people <wealthy industrialists, agriculturalists, investors, etc.> who are least likely to deny themselves—since they know they can maintain their privilege [*sic*] even as they bring ruin on groups of others...It must be deliberately, consciously interfered with if we are to avoid ruin. The trouble is, the very people benefiting most must do the interfering [*sic*]. Their intelligence must prevail over the certain and persistent 'knowledge' of their bodies. If thine eye offend thee, indeed! ("OEB 3228").

Paired with Jdahya's analogy of the human contradiction to cancer, Butler's notes highlight that the systems of economic and political power uphold hierarchies to the detriment of the species. The paradox in this reasoning, Butler claims, is that the powerful must use their capacities of intelligence to undermine their own power and prestige, an action that undermines individual self-preservation. She ends her note with a partial quote of the Bible verse Matthew 18:9, "And if thine eye offend thee, pluck it out, and cast it from thee: it is better for thee to enter into life with one eye, rather than having two eyes to be cast into hell fire." This verse promotes the mutilation of the human body for the sake of liberation and survival, a position that maps onto the Oankali worldview. For the Oankali, any physical change that results in increased fitness and survival cannot be a mutilation. To prioritize the preservation of the physical body over all other concerns

even if it results in destruction—keeping two eyes even if it means hellfire—is incomprehensible within the Oankali mindset.

For the price of rescuing humanity from a complete nuclear apocalypse, the Oankali will alter human genetics with a mixture of their own to birth a new, distinct hybrid species. Jdhaya confirms, "Your people will change. Your young will be more like us and ours more like you. Your hierarchical tendencies will be modified and if we learn to regenerate limbs and reshape our bodies, we'll share those abilities with you. That's part of the trade" (*Dawn* 42). Jdahya's description begins with an opposition of humans and Oankali, reducing them to a binary of "yours" versus "ours," a rhetorical move that emphasizes the otherness of the Oankali while softening their literal alien-ness. The final conditional clause brings the two parties together with "we," where the beneficial adaptations will be shared between both populations and will unify the groups. The ability to "regenerate limbs and reshape our bodies" stems from human cancer. While outside of the speculative future, cancer operates as uncontrollable and fatal cellular generation, within Butler's *Dawn* it becomes a cure. Cancer treats and can even repair the human contradiction.

V. Reproduction with Difference

The Oankali and human trade partnership requires hybrid reproduction for the construction of a new and arguably improved species. The disintegration of the immutable human body and self is the single largest source of tension throughout the *Xenogenesis* trilogy, with humans resisting what they see as the destruction of humanity. Naomi Jacobs writes that, "the issues at play in [Butler's] *Xenogenesis* trilogy are essentially those of the postmodern critique of the humanist subject: the critique of the

individual as a rationally self-determining, self-defining being, and of individual identity as the source of agency" (91). The individual with human agency or integrity, Jacobs continues, "is thought to be complete in himself, impenetrable; his boundaries are inviolable" (93). The Oankali loosen the boundaries and literally and figuratively penetrate the human body. The ooloi use their sensory tentacles to gather biological material from humans. With this material, they are able to analyze, rearrange, and combine multiple species' genetics within their discrete bodies. Only the ooloi possess the unique biology to perform this work. As such, they serve the Oankali community as a form of living fertility clinic.

The ooloi's ability to manipulate DNA and generate new combinations of life promises liberation from the restrictive categories of human phenotypic expression and of biological life more generally. In other words, the ooloi carry the potential to undo the biological markers that code for hierarchical social categories. Several scholars, however, point out the underwhelming results of *Dawn's* politics of sex and gender. Nancy Jesser, for instance, writes that "while [Butler's] xenogenesis is marked by boundary crossings, impurities, and transgressive pleasures with regard to race/species, the stories of male-female interactions and behaviors are largely organized according to categories that naturalize and give gender to aggression, nurturing, hierarchy and heterosexuality" (42). Part of Jesser's argument relies on the maintenance of exclusive female gestation by both the Oankali and humans throughout the series. While Jesser's argument about the dominant frame of human gender relations in *Xenogenesis* rings true, the multisexual reproduction in the series undermines the limiting notion that sexual reproduction is operative for human relations.

I use the neologism multisexual reproduction in this instance to emphasize the multiplicity of the Oankali means of reproduction that cannot be reduced to fit the binary of sexual versus asexual reproduction. While the Oankali predominantly use a form of hyper-sexual reproduction, mixing the genetic material of four individuals split evenly male and female, their ability to make and store "prints" allows for a type of asexual reproduction as well. Held in the memory of any given Oankali, prints can be used to reproduce exact images of the recorded person or thing, foregoing the mixing of DNA in order to produce genetic clones. Jesser's reading of the heterosexual imperative in *Xenogenesis* partly relies on the resisting humans' insistence throughout the trilogy on maintaining autonomous, unmediated, sexual reproduction. The Oankali have chemically sterilized all surviving humans in order to ensure the ooloi maintain full control over the gene trade.¹⁰ The Oankali program is coercive at best as they insist that humans can only reproduce with their intervention.¹¹ Even so, the Oankali and the ooloi specifically offer pleasure, stability, and a degree of certainty over the viability of future offspring. Even though the xenogenesis results in the elimination of exclusively human DNA in the universe, the constructs promise a form of genetic perpetuation.

The allure of ooloi controlled reproduction is the same allure of contemporary biotechnologies that reimagine human reproduction. In "Reproducing the Posthuman

¹⁰ This omnipresent control over reproduction fails in the final installment of the series, *Imago* (1989). In this story, a colony of resister humans on Earth manage to achieve sexual reproduction without Oankali intervention, even though the resulting population is riddled with disease and tumors.

¹¹ The second novel of the series, *Adulthood Rites*, explores the ethical question at the root of Oankali's insistence on controlling all reproduction. If humans are left to reproduce unmonitored, the human contradiction will flourish. Yet, as the protagonist of *Adulthood Rites* argues, humans deserve the opportunity to reproduce free from influence. Ultimately some Resister humans are relocated to a colony on Mars and have their fertility restored. This victory for reproductive rights remains laden with uncertainty. *Xenogenesis* never reveals the outcome of this colony and the reader is left to wonder about their success or failure.

Body" (1995), Susan Squier identifies a "trio of images" that encapsulate the fascination with mediated reproduction: the extrauterine fetus, the surrogate mother, and the pregnant man (113). All three of these images play a role in the alien reproduction in *Xenogenesis*. First, the ooloi remove and remix reproductive cells to form a zygote outside of the body of any of the individuals that contribute genetic information, thereby creating an ectogenetic fetus without a gestating woman. Second, the fetus containing alien DNA can be implanted into the womb of a human and vice versa, positioning the gestating woman as both mother-to-be and alien surrogate. Finally, while in the case of the human-Oankali trade partnership only females gestate fetuses, a pregnant male is feasible in the logic of the speculative world. When Lilith first confronts Jdahya about his gender, asking if he is male or female, Jdahya gently chastises her for assuming an alien species would have such recognizable divisions of sex (even though, it turns out, they do). This brief interaction confirms that other trade species in the Oankali's genetic history have not had such sexual divisions and that the mechanism for incubating new constructs would not default to gestational females. It is the particularities of the human-Oankali trade partnership that result in a reification of a sexual binary based on reproductive labor and differentiation.

Jesser argues that "Butler's essentialism should be read within a context of gene theory that undermines racial categories and constructs, but that does not abandon genetic input in other human aspects, most importantly sex/gender" (39). By paying close attention to the metaphoric language Butler uses to describe the Oankali's approach to genetic manipulation, however, Jessie Stickgold-Sarah proposes an alternative reading of the social determinism of the novels. She writes that "readers concerned with Butler's

biological essentialism fear that this determinism forecloses possibilities of freedom" (415). Stickgold-Sarah counters the concern of biological essentialism by teasing out the possibilities and flexibility of a deterministic frame. One crucial intervention into the logic of genetic essentialism, she claims, is the revision of the metaphoric language of genes and DNA away from informational, data-driven, and technological language, "using instead the parallel of painting and art. Thus, the metaphor becomes physical rather than informational and the 'words' of DNA seem more likely to be poetry than software" (417). In trying to describe the Oankali practice of genetic manipulation to her fellow humans, Lilith explains that "we're in the hands of people who manipulate DNA as naturally as we manipulate pencils and paintbrushes" (*Dawn* 167). While Lilith's interpretation of the Oankali scientific process is vital for reconciling the divide between the two species, how the Oankali describe their form of asexual reproduction further reveals their dissociation between genetic determinism and inevitability.

Nikanj, Lilith's ooloi mate, describes the Oankali need for prints of humans (and, presumably, of all lifeforms encountered) as a safeguard of "genetic diversity" (*Dawn* 99). As with any partner trade, the newly joined population will split into three groups: one in trade on the newly revitalized Earth, one in trade on the spaceship, and one that remains untraded to protect the Oankali from unforeseen genetic disaster. Nikanj explains that "The Toaht [who trade on the spaceship] have a print of you—of every human we brought aboard. They need the genetic diversity. We're keeping prints of the humans they take away, too. Millenia after your death, your body might be reborn aboard this ship. It won't be you. It will develop an identity of its own" (99). Whether or not the living humans consent to the trade, prints guarantee their genetics aid the diversity of Oankali-

human constructs. Nikanj makes a subtle but clear distinction between the physical and psychological definition of an autonomous individual. While it tells Lilith that her "body" might again exist through the expression of a print, "It won't be you." What defines Lilith, and by extension "every human we brought aboard," is "an identity of its own." Nikanj confirms that identical biological recreation does not and cannot lead to a recreation of an individual subject. Understandably, however, Lilith's first instinct is a conflation between biological and subjective reproduction. She responds to Nikanj's description of her hypothetical reproduced print by calling it "a clone" (*Dawn* 99).

Cloning is a form of asexual reproduction that uses the biological material from one parent to create an exact replica of their genetic expression. Prints, however, resist the definition of cloning in several ways. First, as Nikanj refutes, "What we've preserved of you isn't living tissue," which alludes to the fact that reproductive cloning requires living cells to be split and then developed into a new individual. Instead prints are "memory" according to Nikanj, a blueprint of biological factors that do not correlate with identity. "Your body" might reappear in the future, but the personality and unique characteristics of that new body will be a distinct person. The human aversion to clones rests on the fear of replicating the exact otherwise autonomous and singular person. This mainstream image of the clone, one that could uncannily take the place of the individual without being recognized as an imposter, underlies Lilith's anxiety about Oankali prints. In the introduction to *Clones and Clones: Facts and Fantasies About Human Cloning* (1998), Martha Nussbaum and Cass Sunstein write that "to many if not most of us, cloning represents a possible turning point in the history of humanity" that carries great uncertainty and tension because "human beings have always been afraid of their own

creative power" (11).¹² In the instance of Oankali prints, the "creative power" rests in alien hands.

While clones illicit fear and anxiety about the autonomous and immutable individual, Butler recognize another anxiety about cloning particular to the gendered experiences of labor and reproduction. Maria Ferreira describes how, with the advent of human cloning, "the female body, traditionally seen in Western culture as a vessel, a receptacle for the penis and later the baby, would gradually lose these connotations and acquire new meanings and new symbolisms" (13). This belief approximates Shulamith Firestone's advocacy for reproductive technology as a liberating means of sex-based labor as discussed in Chapter IV. Ferreira, however, is cautious of such an approach. While "human cloning, indeed could bring about not only the fulfillment of the female fantasy of bearing children without men, but also the male dream of producing children without the help of women... This scenario could potentially cause an even greater imbalance than that of our still predominantly patriarchal world as far as sexual power structures are concerned" (Ferreira 213). In *Dawn*, Lilith's aversion to clones does not explicitly express concern for the status of women. In fact, throughout the novel she objects to the gendering of social labor to induct and, in essence, rear newly awakened humans by derogatorily referring to herself as their "mother." But Lilith's concerns do not necessarily reflect the broader interrogation of reproductive technology in Butler's novel, as her personal reflections attest.

¹² In *I Am The Other: Literary Negotiations of Human Cloning* (2005), Maria Ferreira confirms that "the fantasy of human cloning has become one of the most important myths of our time. New technologies inevitably bring about a crisis in the cultural and social scene" and that "fictional representations of human cloning have been predominantly negative, arousing feelings of deep-seated horror in many readers" (1, 4).

On January 24, 1984, while journaling about some of the preliminary ideas on the human condition that would later appear in *Dawn*, Butler writes: "Consider: I feel that more control of reproduction <clones, artificial wombs, choosing sex of child without abortion, surrogate unrelated mothers—embryo transfer—and any other activity that makes mothers either irrelevant other than genetically or interchangeably or in short supply> will greatly diminish the status of women" ("OEB 3225"). Butler's sentiment highlights the multifaceted approach of reproductive justice that sees the dual necessity of expanding options for fertility and options for contraceptive or alternative means of human reproduction. Without both transformations occurring hand in hand, Butler understands that the "status of women" will be greatly diminished. She is concerned about a technological revolution without an ideological change in the valuation of women as tied to discourses of motherhood. As Ferreira posits, under the current patriarchal regime any attempts at transforming the "sexual power structures" to help balance the distribution of social and reproductive power to keep pace with technological advancements is precarious and potentially dangerous. Due to humanity's penchant for hierarchy, Butler delegates the task of restructuring human reproduction and sexuality to the nonhuman Oankali.

Lilith's misidentification of Oankali prints as tools to create clones serves as a small-scale example of the human's general inability to accurately understand and interpret Oankali reproduction and regeneration. Human characters within the novel and literary critics of the trilogy repeatedly criticize the Oankali for their assumed genetic

determinist worldview.¹³ "The Oankali are essentialists," Sheryl Vint argues, "and they believe that the human genetic predisposition toward hierarchy inevitably dooms human civilization" (57). The routine assignation of the genetic essentialist frame onto the Oankali sets up a false binary between the humans and aliens and absolves the human characters from critique of their own deterministic ideologies. Vint is right that "through displacing the genetic science to an alien technology, Butler encourages her readers to see ourselves as the object acted upon by genetic technology rather than the subjects who choose how to use it" (64). Even when rendered the vulnerable objects of reproductive technology, however, humans assert notions of genetic determinism far more rigid than those of the Oankali. Lilith's insistence that prints result in clones exemplifies the human genetic determinism in *Dawn*. The human rejection of cloning arises from the assumption that an exact genetic copy would result in an exact subjective copy. In other words, cloning proves genetic determinism. The Oankali, however, understand the expression of genes and biology to be much more fluid and unpredictable. Prints are asexual reproduction with difference.¹⁴ Prints may reproduce the physical and biological properties of the remembered human, but they will be, the Oankali assure, different.

The Oankali base their decisions on probability and diversity, not essentialism. One ooloi tells Lilith that it "believes that because of the way human genetics were expressed in culture, a human male should be chosen to parent the first group. I think

¹³ For instance, J. Adam Johns writes that "the final viewpoint of the Oankali...is that humanity is certain to destroy itself" and that "Butler is imagining the kinds of moral problems and arguments arising after the acceptance of genetic essentialism" (384). Biological determinism, according to Johns, is an assumed component of the *Xenogenesis* narrative world. Lisa Dowdall defines the Oankali's mission as "the genetic determinism and colonial enterprise" in contrast to the "human resisters' insistence on biological and reproductive independence" (506).

¹⁴ I also discuss repetition with difference as defined by James Snead in Chapter III as a strategy Gwendolyn Brooks uses to establish a space for reproductive privacy in her poetry and fiction.

now that I was wrong" (*Dawn* 111). The ooloi revises its impressions of a sociobiologically essentialist human culture and society and integrates information not available in the genetic code. Nikanj later confirms that humans "are horror and beauty in rare combination. In a very real way, you've captured us, and we can't escape. But you're more than only the composition and the workings of your bodies. You are your personalities, your cultures. We're interested in those too. That's why we saved as many of you as we could" (154). While the genetic expression of the human contraction, the "horror and beauty in rare combination," initiates the Oankali desire to trade with humans, it does not fully motivate their interest. Humans, according to Nikanj, are more than the "composition" or "workings of your bodies." Genetics and biology are not the sole determinants of human identity or society. "Personalities" and "cultures," the individual and communal expression of subjectivity, also define humanity. The Oankali show flexibility in their assessment of genetic essentialism, a flexibility not reciprocated by the humans.

VI. The Genomic Future

The Oankali task Lilith with awakening the first group of humans that will be held together and taught to cooperate as a community in order to survive on Earth. In this section, aptly subtitled "Nursery," humans must confront their species' own immaturity. What might be an infantilizing categorization and an affront to the human ego resonates on a more abstract plane. Butler claimed the "truth" of human evolution and fitness is that "we are a very young species, very newly speciated from our ape ancestors. Our intelligences, our technology, is still at root driven by some very primitive genetic inclinations. Reproduction, territoriality, adult male aggression [*sic*] and hierarchical

drives..." ("OEB 3228"). In the nursery, and later on the training floor and eventually on Earth, humans learn survival without the tools of their former civilizations. The Oankali will not provide the machines and technologies that were a hallmark of human intelligence, perhaps as a strategy to try and override the "primitive genetic inclinations" that human technology exacerbates. As a "very young species" confined at first to the nursery, humanity is positioned to mature, learn, and grow out of the limiting conditions that threaten the species' survival.

In the nursery and on the training floor, humans do not live up to this potential. Cooperation is in short supply and group members, particularly the men, repeatedly question Lilith's authority. Awakened humans swiftly fall into patterns reminiscent of Western heteropatriarchal order. Group members reject Lilith's authority because she is a woman and because she is Black. Almost immediately the human drive for hierarchy overwhelms efforts of egalitarian unity. Even though most awakened individuals pair off into heterosexual couples, there are several instances of attempted rape. Homophobic and racist rhetoric circulates in the group as a discursive attempt to reestablish white heteropatriarchal hierarchies of power. At one point, Lilith's partner Joseph resignedly pronounces the awakened humans are just "people being people, that's all" (*Dawn* 148). Joseph's declaration is a tautology that traps humanity into an inescapable loop. People seek hierarchy, therefore if there are people, they will seek hierarchy. There is no alternative in this construction of a species fatalism, one reminiscent of the routinized gender fatalism that Sara Ahmed critiques in *Living a Feminist Life* (2017). The phrase "boys will be boys", Ahmed argues, constructs and confirms gender performance as "likeness becomes not only an explanation...but an expectation" (25). What "will be"

already prophetically guides the behavior that, in turn, will be confirmed as accurate. The "'will be' in 'boys will be boys' acquires the force of prediction" and "a prediction becomes a command" (Ahmed 25). Joseph's fatalistic resignation of "people being people" eliminates the predictive future element. People being people has shown to end in apocalyptic violence. This species fatalism is genetic determinism taken to its fullest expression.

Humans, not the Oankali, express the most limiting and deterministic construction of humanity throughout the series. Their drive for self-preservation discloses the possibility that they will see the radical potential and opportunity offered by the Oankali. Vint observes that while "the Oankali threaten what it means to be human," through their program of gene trade, "most humans, including Lilith initially, never pause to consider whether this might be a good thing" (65). If "people being people" results in the annihilation of humanity, why continue to advocate for the genetic purity of humans?

Butler's novels *Kindred* and *Dawn* detail the ideological hold of genetic thinking on her characters. Dana and Lilith—as the representative of the surviving humans—operate under the assumption that humans, both individually and collectively, are contingent upon and beholden to DNA. Their investment in genetic thinking precludes them from locating the moments of revolution available in their given narrative worlds. Dana could radically intervene in the antebellum South for the sake of her ancestors and Lilith could advocate for the transformation of humanity, but genetic thinking clouds their vision. The strictures of genetic thinking that asserts genes are causes of human behavior and destiny cannot be recovered for revolutionary ends. And, at its heart, speculative fiction is about revolution either as opportunities gained or opportunities lost.

Other of Butler's works also contend with the relationship between reproductive justice and the power of genetic thinking through speculative fiction. Her short story "Bloodchild" (1984) considers the outcome if humans were biologically useful to an alien species not as genetic trade partners as is seen in *Xenogenesis*, but rather as incubators or surrogates. Crash landed on an alien planet, humans become breeding stock for the alien T'lic because our bodies are ideal hosts for their fertilized eggs. Butler's *Parable of the Sower* (1993) proposes a near-future of social, political, and economic collapse where the protagonist Lauren Olamina's extrasensory capacity to feel the physical sensation of other's through "hyperempathy" arises from unexpected side effects of prenatal medical treatment during her mother's pregnancy. If *Kindred* and *Dawn* undermine the logic of genetic thinking, *Parable of the Sower* "suggests that technology is neither inherently good nor predictable" through a parallel cause-and-effect logic (Schalk *Bodyminds*, 111). Butler's last published novel, *Fledgling* (2005), follows a genetically-modified vampire, Shori, who physically resembles a young Black girl in stark contrast to the pale, white-skinned vampire majority. Shori is ostracized from her community even though her genetic modifications mitigate the vampire's vulnerability to sunlight.¹⁵ In each of these instances, the relationship and evolution of Butler's genetic paradigm deserves further investigation.

If genetic practice is a way of imagining the future, then speculative fiction provides the narrative form and structure to articulate the future's contours. In speculative fiction, Butler finds an ideal genre for integrating and interrogating the dominant

¹⁵ In "Speculative Poetics: Audre Lorde as Prologue for Queer Black Futurism," Alexis Pauline Gumbs argues that the Black vampire proposes a reproductive futurity outside of heteropatriarchal biological reproduction. Gumbs references Shori in *Fledgling* as an example of this vampire figure.

reproductive science of her era: genomics. Like the authors discussed in earlier chapters, Butler engages the most useful formal and stylistic strategies to manifest her preoccupation with reproductive justice and genetic determinism. Nella Larsen formally discloses futurity as a rejection of eugenics, Gwendolyn Brooks constructs a private space for Black women's reproductive experiences, Fran Ross takes reproduction out of the bedroom, and Ntozake Shange amplifies the multivocal chorus of people implicated in reproductive futures. Butler's negotiation with genetic determinism qualifies narration as a vital strategy to construct genomics theory. In doing so, she fortifies speculative fiction's inclusion in the tradition of Black women's literature and amplifies the implications of race in the tradition of feminist science fiction.

Across all literary traditions, including African American literature, science and speculative fiction settle in the margins of serious literature, if and when it is included at all. Even though speculative thought and writing by Black authors stretches back into the nineteenth century, much of it remains understudied. Early twentieth-century examples of Black speculative fiction include Pauline Hopkins's novel *Of One Blood* (1902), W. E. B. Du Bois's short story "The Comet" (1920), and George Schuyler's *Black No More* (1931). It wasn't until the second half of the twentieth century that Black speculative fiction and its writers garnered increased attention—both by readers and, less so, by scholars. In discussions of Black science fiction, Samuel Delany's and Octavia Butler's names have been paired together so often that it is as though one cannot be referenced without immediately mentioning the other. In interviews and essays the two authors often joked about how frequently they appeared together on panels or events and how, seemingly

without fail, critics would only discuss their work in tandem even though the two authors have radically different styles and objectives for their speculative writing.

From any starting point, the search for a Black woman speculative fiction author points to Octavia Butler. She dominates discussions of twentieth century Black feminist speculative fiction even though, as my discussions of Fran Ross's and Ntozake Shange's work show in Chapters IV and V, many other Black women authors used speculative forms in their fiction.¹⁶ For Black women authors, speculative thinking is liberatory. It imagines alternatives to the structures of race, gender, class, nationalist, and species that characterize contemporary Western and global sociopolitical discourse and institutions. Speculative thinking can exist outside of binaries that organize our world. With speculative fiction, nuance and complexity can unfold and spark our imaginations about how the world could be, for better or for worse. It also, more than any other genre, implies a relationship between science and fiction that this dissertation illuminates across periods, genres, and authors of the twentieth century. The construction of and search for reproductive justice also operates as a form of speculation. Until the minimum rights to have children, to not have children, and to raise children in nurturing and safe environments apply to all individuals and communities, the call for justice reaches into a speculative future. In this way, all of the fiction included within this dissertation is speculative as it prompts us to imagine the world where Black women author and control their own reproductive destinies.

¹⁶ In terms of twenty-first century literature, the field of Black women's speculative fiction has grown rapidly and includes authors such as Nnedi Okorafor, Tomi Adeyemi, N. K. Jemisin, and Eve Ewing.

CHAPTER VII

CONCLUSION: A BLACK REPRODUCTIVE PRESENT

But this is not the end of the story, for all the young women—our mothers and grandmothers, *ourselves*—have not perished in the wilderness. And if we ask ourselves why, and search for and find the answer, we will know beyond all efforts to erase it from our minds, just exactly who, and of what, we black American women are.

Alice Walker, "In Search of Our Mother's Gardens" (1983)

I. From Future to Present

Throughout this dissertation, I have argued that Black women's fiction of the twentieth century generates theories of reproductive justice in response to, counter to, and in excess of dominant social, political, and scientific discourses of Black reproduction. Across the chapters, I reveal the lineage of Black feminist epistemologies of reproduction and reproductive science that undermine dominant beliefs of scientific objectivity. It is my hope that these new signifying relationships between and across texts provide an alternative approach to reading Black women's reproduction, or lack thereof, in fiction for literary and cultural critics to produce other readings of Black women's literature or media that grapples with the contextual atmosphere of reproduction. In addition to the construction of theories of reproductive justice, the texts considered here share an interest in undermining the logics of reproduction itself, particularly as reproductive logics rely on imaginations of the future. What characterizes a Black reproductive futurity? And how does the call to "make something besides a baby" interrupt the temporal logics of Black reproduction?

Reproductive logics, as discussed throughout this dissertation, gesture both backward and forward in time. Genetic and epigenetic inheritance presume a reproductive past that, through biological material, impacts the present. The act of

reproduction and bearing children ushers the present into the future with new generations. The present then pulls in two, often conflicting, directions. This concluding chapter of *Make Something Besides a Baby* considers the theoretical construction of the Black past and the Black future in recent scholarship as both demonstrative and limiting in relation to the texts considered throughout this project. In conclusion, I suggest that a Black reproductive futurity built from the theories of reproductive justice found in Black women's literature points us not backward or forward in time, but rather insists on settling into the present. To begin illustrating this reorientation, I first turn to Audre Lorde's poem, "A Litany for Survival".

Lorde's poem appears in her 1978 collection *The Black Unicorn* and culminates in the oft-quoted tercet: "So it is better to speak / remembering / we were never meant to survive" (ln 42-44).¹⁷ The first stanza of the poem curates a series of liminal positions available to the plural possessive "us" to whom Lorde addresses the poem. Those that "live at the shoreline" (ln 1), "who love in doorways coming and going / in the hours between dawns / looking inward and outward" (ln 6-8), also live in the in-between space of time. The past and future collapse inward on the subject, "at once before and after" (ln 9). The interconnectedness of the past and future lead the speaker to seek "a now that can breed / futures" (ln 10-11). The present eludes the speaker as its condition marks the slippage from the future as it becomes past. This line encompasses the radical potential of that ambiguity for possibilities of survival. The sought after "now" promises a

¹⁷ Alexis Pauline Gumbs points to Lorde's 1971 poem "Prologue" as an important precursor to "A Litany for Survival," writing how "Litany" "shows up on blogs, at rallies against police brutality, reprised in the section headings of third wave feminist anthologies. This is a sacred repetition because it is so much of the way that Audre Lorde survives into the present. 'Prologue' is a poem that I have never heard anyone read aloud, though it actually uses the word survival just as much as the litany, and it survives in a more literary way" (132).

multiplicity of "futures." Survival, for Lorde in "A Litany for Survival," means occupying the liminal space of the present.

This transformation becomes particularly essential for the collective voice of the poem who acknowledge that "we were never meant to survive" (ln 24, 44). This declaration holds in tension the legacies of the past that threatened the continued survival of Black people in America. The history of Western antiblackness transforms survival into a radical act on both the individual and communal level. In *The Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California* (2007), critical geographer Ruth Wilson Gilmore defines racism as "the state sanctioned and/or extralegal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death" (28). The increased "vulnerability to premature death" affirms its opposite—survival—as a revolutionary act against the systems and institutions that uphold antiblackness. Literary scholar and historian Saidiya Hartman argues that "a history of the present strives to illuminate the intimacy of our experience with the lives of the dead, to write our now as it is interrupted by the past, and to imagine a *free state*, not as the time before captivity or slavery, but rather as the anticipated future of this writing" ("Venus" 4, original emphasis). For Hartman, the present condition slips into both the "past" and the "anticipated future." Similar to the liminal positioning of the communal subject in Lorde's "A Litany of Survival," Hartman charts the present as "the space of the interval, between too late and too early, between the no longer and the not yet" where the survival of the past and the present "hang in the balance" (14). Unlike Lorde, Hartman's tether to the past appears to immobilize the present. When positing "what does one do in the meantime?", Hartman proposes a calculated turn toward and interrogation of the past. She suggests

intellectual endeavors that recruit the past for the sake of the living to establish who we are in relation to who we have been, particularly as a means for interrogating the production of knowledge about the past. But what does it look like to attend to the present for the sake of the living, not for the sake of the dead or the yet-to-come? What does it look like to seek the now, as Lorde suggests?

This suggestion runs counter to one predominant trajectory of Black studies scholarship in the past two decades. In both *Lose Your Mother* (2007) and "Venus in Two Acts" (2008), Hartman uses the available archive of transatlantic slavery to recover the narratives of girls and women lost to time. While acknowledging the archive is structurally incomplete, Hartman mines the archive for the absences and erasures of the enslaved in order to illuminate the aftereffects of slavery for the political present. The legacies of slavery endure through the disposability of Black lives and the fungibility of Black women. Christina Sharpe's *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (2016) builds on Hartman's claims of the resonances of slavery to the contemporary sociopolitical world. Sharpe figuratively renders the present as "in the wake" of slavery "to illustrate the ways [Black people's] individual lives are always swept up in the wake produced and determined, though not absolutely, by the afterlives of slavery" (8). For Sharpe, "the past that is not past reappears, always, to rupture the present" (9). To designate events or systems "past" implies their resolution or conclusion. It is in the past, done and completed. In claiming "the past that is not past," Sharpe undermines the logics of historical linear progression and the willful cordoning of the past to a distant and foreclosed time and space. The past, for Hartman and Sharpe, goes beyond preceding or informing the present. It conditions and continues in the present.

Since Angela Davis's "The Legacy of Slavery: Standards for a New Womanhood," published in *Women, Race & Class* (1981), the lineages of Black women's reproductive and sexual exploitation from American slavery to the contemporary moment have come increasingly into focus. Alys Eve Weinbaum's *The Afterlife of Reproductive Slavery: Biocapitalism and Black Feminism's Philosophy of History* (2019) reconfigures Hartman's theory of the afterlife of slavery to argue that American and Caribbean slavery has "a specifically reproductive afterlife" that rendered "reproductive slavery thinkable" (1). Once thinkable, the notion of reproductive slavery whereby reproductive labor and products (both children and genetic or biological material) circulate in a capitalist market for profit "enables continued—albeit continuously recalibrated—forms of gendered and racialized exploitation of human reproductive labor" (Weinbaum 1-2). Building off the scholarship on gender, reproduction, and slavery by Hortense Spillers, Valerie Smith, and Dorothy Roberts, as well as recent sociological work on race in the contemporary surrogacy market by Heather Jacobson, Daisy Deomampo, Laura Harrison, and France Winddance Twine, *The Afterlife of Reproductive Slavery* identifies Western chattel slavery and the contemporary surrogacy market as the two historical moments when human reproduction operates for profit. Weinbaum avoids arguing that the movement from slavery to surrogacy is "simple continuity" or a "historical repetition," and challenges all interrogations of biocapitalism to position slavery as "epistemically central to biocapitalism even when biocapitalist processes and products do not immediately appear to depend upon slavery as antecedent" (5). By scaffolding *The Afterlife of Reproductive Slavery* on Hartman's and Sharpe's theories of slavery as determinant of

contemporary Black political life, however, Weinbaum narrows the critical lens of the reproductive present.

Literary critic Stephen Best cautions against overidentifying the role of the past for the present. In "On Failing to Make the Past Present" (2012), Best argues that "currently, it passes for an unassailable truth that the slave past provides a ready prism for apprehending the black political present" (453). The critical focus on the afterlives of slavery, Best, argues, threatens to overdetermine the "slave past" and "imply universal applicability" (454). This process locates the communal experiences of race on a fixed historical moment that obscures other potential explanations or potentials. This is not to argue against a critical contextualization and engagement with the histories and legacies of slavery particularly as they appear in discourses of human reproduction. Rather, as I have claimed throughout this project, theories of Black reproduction and reproductive justice arise from specific social, political, and scientific contexts and the complexity and ambiguity of such theories find their most potent forms in literature.

But the present is elusive. When Lorde writes that "we were never meant to survive" in "A Litany for Survival," she understands the past of American chattel slavery as a social, political, and economic mechanism of genocide. Black people were not meant to survive the violence of enslavement. Carrying through the logic of slavery, the condition of the present presumes that Black people are still not meant to survive. Existence is a radical act of resistance. Such survival engages in future-oriented reproductive logic that presumes procreation. In *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (2004), Lee Edelman understands all politics as motivated by the "presupposition that the body politic must survive" through childbearing (3), and Laura Briggs similarly

argues in *How All Politics Became Reproductive Politics: From Welfare Reform to Foreclosure to Trump* (2017) that reproductive labor is the complex and frequently obscured foundation of contemporary U.S. neoliberal policies. Both Edelman and Briggs reveal reproductive futurity as constitutive of contemporary politics and constructions of the nation state. Edelman's queer intervention into the discourse of reproductive futurity denounces this assumption of children as a symbol of heteronormative sexual reproduction and asks "what, in that case, would it signify *not* to be 'fighting for the children'?" (3).

Edelman's suggestion to not fight for the children, or, in other words, to not participate in political discourse as it prioritizes a hypothetical future generation that deserves an improved version of the world, resonates with Helga Crane's denouncement of childbearing in Nella Larsen's *Quicksand* as discussed in Chapter II. Helga asks, "Why add any more unwanted, tortured Negroes to America? Why do Negroes have children? Surely it must be sinful" (Larsen, *Quicksand* 96). Her argument against procreation is, in one sense "fighting for the children," to return to Edelman's phrase. She is fighting for the right to spare a hypothetical future generation from the severity of antiblack racism.

Helga's orientation of a specifically Black reproductive future (or lack of future) characterizes several contestations of Edelman's limited vision of a queer future. For example, James Bliss argues that the Black subject is conspicuously absent from Edelman's theory. Bliss writes that, "neither Edelman nor his utopian critics seem willing or able to imagine a mode of reproduction that is not reproductive futurism; that is, Black reproduction" (85). Black reproduction, to Bliss, is not future-oriented as Black children do not register in the project of maintaining the nation state or securing the nuclear

family. "Reproduction without futurity," Bliss continues, "names nothing more (and nothing less) than the queer capacity of Blackness to reproduce without being productive and to orient lives extimate—simultaneously internal and external—to sociality as Edelman might understand it" (86). Kara Keeling reiterates that "from within the logics of reproductive futurity and colonial reality, a black future looks like no future at all" (578). The logic of reproductive futurity, in this sense, relies on an optimistic hoping for a better social order without the necessary interrogation of the structures of antiblackness that characterize the current social order. In light of the dual gazes backward and forward in time—to a past characterized by death and to a future that excludes Black survival—how do we incorporate or even accommodate a study of Black reproduction in the contemporary era?

As the closing consideration of this dissertation, I want to return to the declaration in *Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo* that all the women in the family "could make something besides a baby" as elucidative of a presentist approach to Black reproduction and reproductive justice. The conjugation of "make" is both present and future and can be read as a directive for the here and now or as a projection of what will occur. As a transitive verb, it points to the construction or production of the grammatical object, "something." Rather than name and define the boundaries of what shall be made in lieu of a baby, "something" registers an ambiguous and open-ended prospect. The phrase does not construct a strict binary between oppositional products, a baby or one other identifiable thing. It expands the field of possibilities and even includes the possibility of

making "a baby." "Besides" can be read as either "otherwise" or "in addition to."¹⁸ The statement may be rephrased as, "create now or sometime else something that may be but is not necessarily a child." This statement disrupts the logics of reproduction by reorienting the temporality away from yet still mindful of the future and by expanding the field of possibilities of what exactly is reproducible.

To "make something besides a baby" creates the opportunity to make the self. This radical reorientation toward self-affirmation unites the constructions of reproductive justice in the fiction considered here. Nella Larsen's critique of a lack of reproductive justice results in the loss of self for all of her protagonists, Helga Crane, Clare Kendry, and Irene Redfield. The irreconcilable obligations of their reproductive bodies become their quicksand, to build on duCille's observation. Like quicksand, the terrain of Black reproduction at first appears contiguous with its surroundings but contact with the deceptive ground spells slow and inescapable death. Without the optimism for a reproductive future, Larsen withholds the future tense from key moments in her novels. That is not to say that Larsen does not offer a vision of a reproductive future. If, as gender and Africana media scholar Tina M. Campt argues in *Listening to Images* (2017), "[t]he grammar of black feminist futurity is a performance of a future that hasn't yet happened but must," circumnavigating the focus on the "future perfect tense of *that which will have happened* prior to a reference point in the future" and toward "the future real condition of *that which will have had to happen*" (Campt 34, original emphasis), Larsen's revocation of the future perfect tense reveals what "must" happen based on what cannot continue. In

¹⁸ These are two common uses of "besides" as an adverb according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*. "besides, adv. and prep." *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, March 2019, www.oed.com/view/Entry/18071. Accessed 16 March 2019

this sense, Larsen sets the stage for what Camppt calls "a grammar of futurity realized in the present" (34).

The transitive tense of to "make something besides a baby" evokes Camppt's call to understand the tense of a black feminist future to be "a future that hasn't yet happened but must" (34). The transitive verb acts in the present but with necessary movement beyond. It sets a temporal rhythm that moves the verb forward toward the object but then recoils and reverses back to the subject. Maud Martha proposes a similar declarative present when she desires "to donate to the world a good Maud Martha. That was the offering, the bit of art, that could not come from any other" (Brooks, *Blacks* 164). Again, the present infinitive of "to donate" locates Maud's action firmly in the present but with the transitive movement of self. She equates herself with an "art" unlike "any other," positioning her self-affirmation and becoming as its own creative endeavor. Both of these instance—"to make" and "to donate"—draw attention to the slippage between noun and verb as they draw together the subjects and objects of the characters with the action itself. They become both a presence and an action, a person and a becoming. As open-ended actions, they do not offer their own foreclosure. That is the radical potential of the present tense.

In posing the question, "what is the 'tense' of a black feminist future?", Camppt cites Hortense Spillers's "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book" (1987) as modeling the "grammatical sense" of her query (34). The minutiae of grammar structure the symbolic registers that condition subject formation, and, as Spillers writes in "Interstices: A Small Drama of Words" (1984), Black women continue to seek "the right verb" (95). As she writes in "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe":

In order for me to speak a truer word concerning myself, I must strip down through layers of attenuated meanings, made an excess in time, over time, assigned by a particular historical order, and there await whatever marvels of my own inventiveness. (65)

Under the imposed layers and structures of vocabulary, grammar, and discourse, Spillers finds potential for the "marvel" of self-invention. She proposes a method of close reading not only the symbolic order but also of close reading the self. In deconstructing the "attenuated meanings," space opens for her to "await" new grammars. "Await," similar to "to make" and "to donate," resists grammatical closure. It is both present and ongoing, looking forward without losing sight of the current state.

This presentism of a Black feminist future extends beyond the texts considered within *Make Something Besides a Baby*. As Patricia Chase observes of Karintha in Jean Toomer's *Cane* (1923), Karintha embodies the "existential question" of "existence" and "identity," and "like many of Toomer's women, she is not to be possessed...she is very much free to *be*. She belongs simply to herself" (259-260). "Karintha is a woman," *Cane* repeats several times (4-5). Even her child remains distant from her essential self as it "fell out of her womb" (4-5). Karintha's dedicated opening chapter fades into ellipses, pulling the reader further ahead while lingering in the unknowability of her present being. As Chase argues, Karintha embodies the archetype of beauty. She is art itself. Toni Morrison's *Sula* (1972) continues this lineage. When arriving home after a decade absence, Sula's grandmother Eva declares that Sula "need to have some babies. It'll settle you" (92). Sula, uninterested in the mundanity of settling, responds "I don't want to make somebody else. I want to make myself" (92). Using the same transitive verb "to make,"

Sula succinctly transitions from a future oriented "make somebody else" to the present and self-becoming of "make myself." In reference to Sula's denouncement, Barbara Smith claims that "self-definition is a dangerous activity for any woman to engage in, especially a Black one" (24). It is also a grammatical challenge.

Black women's self-definition necessarily disrupts the ingrained association between Black womanhood and Black maternity, but this results in a question of who or what will labor to reproduce and ensure the survival of the Black community. Lorde's "Litany" offers one strategy: "For those of us [...] seeking a now that can breed / futures" (ln 1, 10-11). The condition of the present "now" transforms into a reproducible body capable of breeding into multiples. Lorde's gestational image displaces the Black female body and redirects the potential of radical futures in the "now" present moment. Rather than positioning the Black woman's womb as harboring hope for sustaining "futures," Lorde directs the reader to seek a "now." The gaze and directionality of action focuses on the present, particularly as the line break isolates "futures" away from the "now that can breed." Through literature, we seek this radical now.

II. The State of Black Reproduction

If Black women's theories of reproductive justice in fiction call us to the radical now, it is important to close this project with a brief overview of some of the present conditions and challenges of Black reproduction. For instance, in 2014 the Center for Reproductive Rights along with the National Latina Institute for Reproductive Health and SisterSong Women of Color Reproductive Justice Collective issued a report to the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination entitled, "Reproductive Injustice: Racial and Gender Discrimination in U.S. Health Care." The report claims that

maternal mortality in the U.S. is a human rights crisis. Citing the 2014 *Trends in Maternal Mortality* report prepared by WHO, UNICEF, and other transnational humanitarian organizations, the "Reproductive Injustice" report states that the maternal mortality ratio has increased 136% between 1993 and 2013 (Center for Reproductive Rights 12). This increase disproportionately stems from the vastly higher risk Black mothers face during pregnancy, childbirth, and postpartum recovery. In areas with a high African American population such as Atlanta, Georgia, the maternal mortality rate is more than three times the national average, with 94 maternal deaths per 100,000 live births for Black women.

Along with the report, the executive director of SisterSong Monica Simpson testified in Geneva before the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination. In a statement released after her testimony, the Committee "reiterates its previous concern at the persistence of racial disparities in the field of sexual and reproductive health, particularly with regard to the high maternal and infant mortality rates among African American communities" and calls on the U.S. to "eliminate racial disparities in the field of sexual and reproductive health and standardize the data collection system on maternal and infant deaths in all states to effectively identify and address the causes of disparities in maternal and infant mortality rates" (CERD 7). Although little has changed in Black women's maternal healthcare in the years since the Committee's recommendations, the topic has gained traction in mainstream media, particularly after high-profile celebrity testimony emphasized the racial disparities in maternal healthcare.

In 2018, tennis champion Serena Williams told the story of her own postpartum near-death experience when doctors and nurses did not take seriously her report of sudden shortness of breath and her worry over blood clots. When her fears were proven true and tests revealed several blood clots had settled in her lungs, Williams recalls: "I was like, listen to Dr. Williams!" (Haskell). The *Vogue* interview where Williams describes her harrowing experience sparked a surge of media interest in the condition of Black maternity in the U.S. and affirmed the claim put forth by the "Reproductive Injustice" report that increased risk for Black women during and after childbirth transcends boundaries of socioeconomic class. If Serena Williams, a beloved and revered athlete, experiences racial disparities in her reproductive healthcare, logic follows that those with less financial security and access to quality healthcare would face even greater challenges. When Williams jokingly refers to herself as "Dr. Williams," she claims authority over her own reproductive health in a manner that positions her as equal with the medical establishment.

Williams's personal testimony reveals how voices of women of color continue to be ignored and dismissed when it comes to reproductive healthcare, as are their reports of violations of their reproductive freedoms. In a 2018 opinion piece for *The New York Times* titled "America is Blaming Pregnant Women for Their Own Deaths," Kim Brooks describes how the rise of maternal mortality led some states to implement expert panels to review cases where mothers die. Increased scrutiny, however, has not resulted in a decrease in mortality. Rather, unable to declare a medical cause, many reports cite lifestyle factors such as smoking, obesity, or delayed prenatal care as responsible for premature death. In conversation with maternity care provider Stephanie Teleki, Brooks

concludes that "the problem is not that pregnant women are uneducated or uninformed; the problem is that those in charge aren't listening to them."

How do we learn to listen to pregnant women, especially to Black women and other women vulnerable to reproductive injustice? Throughout this dissertation, I have demonstrated reading practices that first and foremost intend to listen to the experiences, testimonies, critiques, and innovations Black women write into their fiction. Listening to the established record of reproductive justice in fiction asserts that reproductive science and medicine rely on narration and, by extension, require close critical attention as text and discourse. Literary scholars have the responsibility to draw these connections and illuminate the relationship between literature and science that other forms of political, social, and cultural discourse obscure.

As such, this project extends far beyond the confines of the texts discussed within this dissertation. One of the most urgent areas in need of critical reading practices is the nearly omnipresent market for DNA ancestry testing. Completed in 2003, the Human Genome Project ("HGP") conclusively proved the likeness of humankind. Confirming what other scientists had argued for decades, the HGP shows that humans are vastly more similar, genetically, than different. Intragroup difference even exceeds intergroup difference. Yet, since the completion of the HGP a surge in individual DNA testing to trace ancestry and a mainstream and scientific obsession with locating and naming the small, nearly insignificant genetic differences between humans obliterates the egalitarian conclusions of the HGP. The exponential rise of DNA testing services speaks to our individual desire for personal, historical, and irrefutable narratives.

Literary and cultural critics have an important role to play in deconstructing the narrative forms of DNA analysis and genealogy. One founder of African American literary criticism, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., has even turned his attention away from traditional literary analysis in order to follow the stories of DNA. In a 2007 article for *Ebony*, "'We Are All African': Genealogical Research and DNA Testing," Gates writes that "when the paper trail ends and we have exhausted our sources" through traditional forms of genealogy, "we are starting to look at something that our ancestors from Africa brought with them that not even the slave trade could take away: their distinctive strands of DNA. Because their DNA has been passed down to us—their direct descendants—it can serve as a key to unlocking our African past" (136). This is not the first time that Black individuals have turned to genealogy in large numbers. The publication of Alex Haley's *Roots* (1976) inspired countless people to try and uncover their own African origin story. In *The Social Life of DNA*, Alondra Nelson writes,

Haley started a social transformation in how we access and interpret the past. *Roots* generated excitement around family history; it encouraged the democratization of a practice that had previously been the provenance of the nobility. In the wake of the phenomenal success of Haley's book and miniseries, 'root-tracing kits' containing family-tree templates and fill-in-the-blank genealogical charts on 'imitation parchment' came on the market in the late 1970s; they were progenitors of today's genetic-ancestry-testing services. (71)

Nelson continues to argue that "the popularity of DNA testing is a symptom of *Roots*' unfulfilled promise," the promise that African Americans could discover and reconcile

their ancestral lineage. Clearly evoking Haley's *Roots*, Gates perpetuates this "unfulfilled promise" in his PBS documentary series *Finding Your Roots*.

Finding Your Roots first aired in 2012. Each episode features Gates presenting a "book of life" to a celebrity guest that contains comprehensive genetic results alongside historical records collected by the show's team of genealogists. While the phrasing "book of life" may promise a critical engagement with narrative, form, or structure by the literary scholar hosting the show, these DNA narratives circulate unchallenged and unread through the standards of literary critique. By bringing DNA narrative into the home through public broadcasting, Gates implicitly endorses the veracity and authority of genetic testing. With commercial DNA testing services easily accessible through mail-in orders, reproducing the drama of historical revelations as seen on *Finding Your Roots* seems like an intriguing prospect for many people. According to MIT's *Technology Review*, users of direct-to-consumer DNA testing nearly doubled in 2017, bringing the total number of users to over 12 million individuals (Regalado). African Ancestry, a niche DNA testing company aimed at recovering the African heritage of members of the Black diaspora, has itself tested over 500,000 individuals. As these services continue to grow and their unintended consequences emerge, more and more close critical attention will need to be directed at the relationship between genetics and narrative.

To anticipate these consequences, genomics should take center stage in the fight for reproductive justice. Genetics may come to determine who can and cannot have children, what characteristics those children may possess, and even how nurturing or equitable will be the environments in which such children will be raised. Already DNA testing is replicating many of the structures of surveillance and control of Black

reproduction and Black reproductive data seen in the fiction of twentieth-century Black women. Police either gain access to existing DNA databases or build their own through DNA dragnets whereby they collect DNA samples from individuals not convicted of a crime. As the Center for Genetics and Society argues, "collecting DNA from people prior to conviction will likewise reflect the racial disparities in arrests that plague our justice system" (Silverstein). The imagination reels at the possible exploitations and injustices that may arise from this era of genomic testing. But, as I argued in Chapter VI, reproductive justice is inherently speculative and will be a vital lens through which to approach the changing tides of genetic research. Fiction writers can imagine and extrapolate the possible paths, but we also need trained critical eyes to help unpack their implications and put them in service for a radical reproductive present.

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