

“You are the Race, You are the Seeded Earth:” Intellectual Rhetoric, American Fiction, and Birth Control in the Black Community

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The social context of the birth control movement was complicated by matters of race and class, and consequently the movement affected black and white communities differently. Family planning became a hotly debated topic in the black community; indeed, the Black Nationalist leader Marcus Garvey condemned birth control as antithetical to nature while W.E.B. DuBois supported its usage as a means to improve the health of the black community. Although much has been written regarding the debate about race and birth control, other scholars have failed to look at how much attention the masses truly paid to the intellectual rhetoric of DuBois and Garvey. Discussions of black women's sexuality prove important to my study, particularly black America's responses to white views of black women as immoral, impure, and licentious. Black leaders promoted the ideal of black domesticity and moral motherhood as a counterstrategy to white attacks. Over time, appreciating and even desiring black motherhood came to be identified with black communal pride and as a result black women became responsible for upholding the entire race. Evidence suggests that individual responses to birth control are largely dependent upon the degree to which an individual internalized the rhetoric of “the true black woman.” Similarly, while figures such as Garvey and DuBois promoted moral motherhood, in the end they disagreed over the use of birth control. However, their positions were more related than they appear at first glance.

Also key to this study are works of American fiction from the early twentieth century. Authors such as William Faulkner, Nella Larsen, Jessie Redmon Fauset, Djuna Barnes, and Georgia Douglas Johnson used their novels to examine issues of female sexuality in relation to the larger birth control movement. Analyses of literary works highlight the similarity between Garvey and DuBois and also show that certain female authors articulate a more complicated story of birth control, particularly within the black community.

This paper analyzes the role of intellectual rhetoric and works of early twentieth-century American fiction on the subject of birth control in the black community during the 1920s and 1930s. The historical question answered in this paper is how influential was intellectual rhetoric on the black community's response to birth control? Also significant is how works of fiction are useful to understanding the relationship between male intellectuals, such as Garvey and DuBois, and black women. Previous studies simply see Garvey's disdain and DuBois' support for contraceptive

use in the black community as representative of the split within the black community concerning birth control. As this study will show, this interpretation is far too simplistic and fails to explain why birth control was a knotty issue for African Americans.

This topic merits historical study due to the fact that understanding the history of birth control in the black community lends us to a better understanding of why birth control remains largely an economic argument to this day. The focus on public assistance and the welfare state serve as the hotbed of current debate, thus resembling key arguments from the early years of the birth control movement. As law professor Dorothy Roberts notes, “[r]ace completely changes the significance of birth control to the story of women's reproductive freedom.”¹ For this reason and as this study will demonstrate, the birth control movement and its outcome have not been “universally positive.”² The argument set forth in this paper is that both DuBois and Garvey held their positions regarding contraceptive use in the black community because they viewed the female body as a commodity. Indeed, despite their differing opinions on the topic, both held economic arguments for racial betterment that viewed the black woman as a commodity; never were their agendas based on a woman's right to reproductive freedom. Thus, Garvey's position was not entirely one based on his religious convictions, nor was DuBois' position attributable to his feminist mindset.³

Works of American fiction articulate the intersection of female sexuality, desire, class, and birth control. They depict “the tension between motherhood and independence, choice and biology,”⁴ as the writings of black women writers demonstrate. For example, Larsen, Fauset, Barnes, and Johnson focus on women in the debate over who should have the children, unlike their male counterparts. That demographers showed the decline in the black population during the early twentieth century shows that the majority of black women did not listen to the intellectual rhetoric of DuBois or Garvey. As Jessie Rodrique explains, the decrease of African American fertility is not to be attributed to the racist argument that blacks had a high rate of venereal disease. Such an argument invokes the

¹ Dorothy Roberts, *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1997), 56.

² Beth Widmaier Capo, *Textual Contraception: Birth Control and Modern American Fiction* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2007), 176.

³ Historian Jamie Hart forwards the claim that Garvey's Roman Catholic religious beliefs serve as the source of his anti-contraceptive stance in “Who Should Have the Children? Discussions of Birth Control among African-American Intellectuals, 1920-1939,” *The Journal of Negro History* 1994 79(1). In “Black Feminists and DuBois: Respectability, Protection, and Beyond,” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 2000 568, English professor Farah Jasmine Griffin discusses black feminist perspectives on DuBois and concludes that “despite his contradictions, we ought to be grateful to him for keeping black women at the forefront of his vision.” 36.

⁴ Capo, 5.

stereotype of blacks as excessively sexual and immoral. Rather, the low birth rate in the black community simply shows that blacks employed methods of birth control, as had been the case since the days of slavery. Despite the insignificant impact of intellectual rhetoric on the masses, it can be safely assumed that works of American fiction shaped the birth control movement and represented the concerns of the black community more so than did the perspectives of Garvey and DuBois.

History of the Birth Control Movement and the Position of the Black Community

The American birth control movement began between 1905 and 1910. It was no coincidence that this was the same period that the campaign against “race suicide” took hold in the United States, largely due to the decades-long massive emigration of southern and eastern Europeans. In 1911 an article published in *The Outlook* by former president Theodore Roosevelt discussed the curse of American stock as the result of “coldness,...selfishness,...[and] failure in [the] sense of duty;” indeed, “wilful sterility [*sic*]” was to blame.⁵ He continues, “the extent of my reverence for and belief in a woman who does her duty measures also the depth of my contempt for the woman who shirks her primal and most essential duty...so the measure of our respect for the true wife and mother is the measure of our scorn and contemptuous abhorrence for the wife who refuses to be a mother.”⁶

Roosevelt’s account quite accurately represented the nativist sentiment in attacking woman’s “selfishness.” Indeed, many contemporaries, both men and women, black and white, situated a wife’s use of birth control as an explicit rejection of domesticity and mothering. The nativist concerns, as exemplified by Roosevelt, illustrate how dominant rhetoric separated birth control from women’s reproductive freedom. Although not intentional, it remains plausible that the nativist propaganda that denounced the use of contraceptives among “good stock Americans” publicized the existence of birth control methods and in the end promoted it.

The black community’s place within the larger, white-led birth control movement proved wrought with tension. Despite the fact that blacks had long employed methods of birth control, many were suspicious of the larger, booming white led movement due to the history of whites seeking control over blacks’ sexuality.⁷ As already mentioned, race and

⁵ Theodore Roosevelt, “Race Decadence,” *The Outlook*, April 8, 1911; quoted in *Controlling Reproduction: An American History*, Andrea Tone, ed. (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources Inc., 1997), 160.

⁶ Ibid, 161.

⁷ This history of whites seeking control over blacks’ sexuality refers to the days of slavery when masters bred black men and women for the purpose of increasing the free labor force.

class issues became conflated with contraceptive matters during the early twentieth century when white birth rates decreased and talk of racial suicide appeared. Thus, when some blacks were urged to employ methods to restrict their family size, many resented what they perceived as others trying to control their sexuality. Suspicion on the part of African-Americans was not irrational; whites dominated the birth control movement and an overwhelming majority of doctors were men.

Matters of race undeniably complicate the social, political, economic, and cultural histories of birth control. The black experience remains distinct from the white due to the racist stereotype of blacks as aggressively sexual. It should come as no surprise that discussions of reproductive freedom are inherently tied to issues of sexuality. Thus, sources discussing birth control generally, too, include mention of female sexuality, even if not explicit.⁸ The picture of black women possessing sexual desire and as active seekers of sexual pleasure served as an indictment of blacks everywhere in a dominant society that condemned such behavioral transgressions. Due to the stereotype of black women as sexually licentious, from the dominant white perspective, the black community was expected to behave in inappropriate ways.

The white devaluation of the black woman was rooted in racial stereotypes as well as the white belief “that notions about the ‘ideal woman’ did not apply to black women because the circumstances of slavery had prevented them from developing qualities that other women possessed and from devoting their lives to wifedom and motherhood.”⁹ As a contemporary historian has noted concerning this phenomenon, “[t]he slave master felt few compunctions to model the black family after the cult of domesticity.”¹⁰ Therefore, black women’s “inherent” racial characteristics cancelled out the exceptional feminine qualities allegedly held by white women. For much of white society, what defined a black woman was first and foremost her blackness, as quite literally the classification “*black woman*” implies.

The lack of chastity among black women was thought by many to be “one of the causes of the degraded home life among blacks.” Similarly, their frequent sexual deviance was perceived as having disastrous effects for the morality of the entire black race. Accordingly, women bore the responsibility for “keeping the race pure” in the minds of both blacks and whites.¹¹

Some prominent black males, such as DuBois and Alexander Crummell, the Episcopalian minister and intellectual, chose to respond to the relentless white attacks on black women’s sexual conduct by developing

⁸ This will become clear in the following discussion of works of American fiction.

⁹ Beverly Guy-Sheftall, *Daughters of Sorrow: Attitudes Toward Black Women, 1880-1920* (Brooklyn, NY: Carlson Publishing Inc., 1990), 40.

¹⁰ Quoted in Ibid, 40.

¹¹ Ibid, 41.

a philosophy of black communal pride and consequently promoted the ideology of “true black womanhood.”¹² This new dialogue promoted by black men, especially DuBois, asserted that the because of their “‘history of insult and degradation,’ the black woman has emerged as a model of ‘efficient’ and strong womanhood.”¹³ Many other black male leaders shared DuBois’ views and they came not to revere the black *woman* but more specifically the black *mother*. Indeed, these men “designated motherly devotion to one’s own children as an opportunity and privilege, not a stifling duty.”¹⁴ Moral motherhood came to be understood as a privilege because women were responsible for upholding the morality of the family, and as a result, they were depended upon to uplift the entire black race. Using images taken from contemporary publications such as *The Crisis* and *The New Negro*, English professor Anne Stavney demonstrates the pervasiveness of the image of “a certain type of mother, a woman morally and sexually pure.”¹⁵ Although many pictures from the period portray a tranquil mother cradling her child, Stavney notes “these black, male-authored works rarely attend to the actual social and economic conditions encountered by most black women of their era.”¹⁶ To demonstrate the conflict between the ideology of true black womanhood and the realities of black women’s lives, she notes blacks’ recently lowered fertility rates as evidence of women’s ambivalent view of motherhood.¹⁷ As this description of black “true womanhood” reveals, a striking similarity exists between it and white true womanhood. This should come as no surprise, however, when considering the premeditation of the ideology and its *raison d’être*: it was formed as a response to white society thus it had to meet white society on the levels of respectability they determined.

Previous Studies

Histories of contraception became popular during the 1970s for several reasons, among them the mass marketing of oral contraceptives in the 1960s and the women’s health movement of the 1970s. Since this time, scholars have revealed black women as active birth control users during slavery and beyond. Furthermore, scholars have condemned the larger birth control movement as racist and classist because its white, middle-class supporters largely ignored the needs of black women. Despite the decades of scholarly work surrounding the topic, many historians have overlooked the important “intersection and influence of race, class, and gender on the

¹² Anne Stavney, “Mothers of Tomorrow: The New Negro Renaissance and the Politics of Maternal Representation,” *African American Review* 1998 32(4), 536. Not only did black men respond, but women, too. Black female authors had much to say concerning sexuality; their works are examined below.

¹³ Quoted in *Ibid*, 537.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 538.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 543.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 544.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 551.

thought of black intellectuals” and how their discourse “reflected the larger birth control movement and yet remained unique in a number of ways.”¹⁸ This is where historian Jamie Hart picks up in “Who Should Have the Children? Discussions of Birth Control Among African-American Intellectuals, 1920-1939.” Hart discusses the discourse of upper- and middle-class African-Americans concerning birth control. Her brief history of African-American intellectual discourse on birth control begins in the 1920s as this decade marks the beginning of the mass marketing of contraceptives in the United States. Extending her study through the period of the Great Depression, she notes that New Deal promises of improvement made discussions of birth control prevalent as it served as one possible way to ease peoples’ economic problems. She argues that males dominated discussions of birth control in the circles of professional and upper class African-Americans with their discourse expressing both opposition to and support for contraception.¹⁹ Members of this black elite worried that working-class blacks’ continued propagation would ultimately lead to a society filled with African-Americans of lesser quality unable to fight oppression.²⁰ Thus, it is no surprise that DuBois became one of the foremost advocates of birth control as a “mechanism for racial progress.”²¹ Demonstrating the role played by gender, Hart maintains that only men opposed the practice of birth control. Few sources reveal women’s opinions in favor or opposition to birth control, reflecting the male-domination of the topic. The evidence Hart uncovers also suggests that men and women supported birth control for entirely different reasons; men understood its implementation as an effort to save the race where women wanted it to save their families from both economic and domestic problems.

Hart’s investigation of the birth control question among African-American intellectuals proves a very valuable study as it shows the important intersection of race, class, and gender in the birth control movement. Not only does she promote thought about the role played by black intellectuals in the birth control movement, she draws attention to the fact that these so-called “leaders” may have been out of touch with the needs and lives of working-class blacks. This is especially evident in her discussion of women’s practical desire for birth control as a means for preserving the general welfare of the family.

English professor Farah Jasmine Griffin researches DuBois’ intellectual agenda as it relates to both gender and race in “Black Feminists and DuBois: Respectability, Protection, and Beyond.” In addressing previous scholarly works that both “applaud his efforts on behalf of black women” and note DuBois’ “chivalric idealization of female sexuality,” Griffin resolves the contradiction by explaining that DuBois “would have

¹⁸ Hart, 72.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 82.

²⁰ *Ibid*, 73.

²¹ *Ibid*, 76.

believed himself to be a champion of black women and progressive on issues of importance to their advancement.”²² At the same time as noting DuBois’ limitations, she argues that he did much to advance our understanding of the oppression of black women. Of particular importance is her discussion of the politics of respectability where she says it “emerged as a way to counter the images of black Americans as lazy, shiftless, stupid, and immoral.”²³ But, she notes the paradoxical nature of this politics of respectability in that its adoption exposes an “acceptance and internalization” of the very images they sought to combat. Griffin’s analysis thus aids our understanding of why black true womanhood so closely resembled white true womanhood. She concludes that, while DuBois (and others, such as Crummell) sought “to protect the name and image of black women,” the manner in which this was done emphasizes individuals’ behavior and less so the structural forms of oppression at the root of the problem, such as racism, sexism, and poverty.

Certainly the discourse of protection materialized from genuine concerns about the situation of black people, but it also suggests the power struggle between the men of both races and the intraracial power struggle between black men and black women. According to Griffin, a promise of protection served as a component of the politics of respectability and attends to important concerns of black nationalism: it restores black men with a sense of masculinity while issuing a privilege of femininity on black women.²⁴ However, in the end it did not allow room for those who did not so nicely fit into the ideology. As I will show below, works of fiction show that the narrow representations of women (forwarded by the newly-emerging ideology) did not allow for their “full complexity and humanity.” As historians, we can better account for black women’s unique experience related to birth control and sexuality by analyzing works of fiction, especially those authored by black females.

While Hart’s use of writings by DuBois and Garvey show black men dominated contraceptive debates, she parallels Anne Stavney’s argument that men not only dominated discussions of black female sexuality but created the prevailing ideology. Stavney’s article, “Mothers of Tomorrow: The New Negro Renaissance and the Politics of Maternal Representation” focuses on early twentieth-century discourses surrounding black women’s sexuality and how such discussions impacted black communities. Although explicit discussion of birth control does not surface in her analysis, Stavney incorporates DuBois’ writings into her study of the crucial role played by “ideological and iconographic forces” as a way to uncover the *intraracial* tensions that occurred during the period.²⁵ Stavney examines black women’s lives during the Harlem Renaissance, with particular attention on

²² Griffin, 30.

²³ *Ibid.*, 34.

²⁴ Griffin, 35.

²⁵ Stavney, 534.

how black women, such as Nella Larsen, participated in this cultural movement. Works by Nella Larsen and Jessie Fauset serve as the foundation to Stavney’s argument that some black women resisted their “assigned motherly roles” and that “1920s black women writers attempted to create a geographic and discursive space for sexual yet childless black women.”²⁶ Stavney’s investigation of definitions of black womanhood proves a very valuable study as she analyzes female responses to the black, male-dominated discussions of black female sexuality. She makes excellent use of sources, such as images presented on the covers of popular black publications, and Nella Larsen’s novel *Passing* to show the dominance of the ideology of true black womanhood.

She analyzes a depiction from *The New Negro* of a mother holding an infant. The mother’s averted eyes do not look at the viewer and maintain her reserved character, as does her tranquil, smile-free expression. She is modest, nonsexual, and a devoted mother. The September 1927 cover of *Crisis* featured a woodcut by Aaron Douglas entitled *The Burden of Black Womanhood*. The woman is shown “literally shouldering the weight of the race” as she raises the sun with her arms, symbolizing her ability to bring about a new day. This idealized image of the black woman shows her heroic strength and simultaneous duty to the race. Interestingly, Stavney discusses the figure “with head tilted back” but it appears that her head is tilted forward. With her head tilted back her face looks upward, suggesting hope. Conversely, her head hanging forward indicates despair. Stavney’s reading is critical to her argument that men depicted women in a way quite different from their reality.

While Stavney employs literary analysis to explore the subject of black female sexuality, scholar Beth Widmaier Capo relies upon fiction written during the interwar years to demonstrate how American authors participated in the birth control movement. *Textual Contraception: Birth Control and Modern American Fiction* finds the public debate over birth control in fiction. Demonstrating the movement’s historical impact on female sexuality and reproductive control, Capo uncovers the hidden “tension between motherhood and independence and choice and biology” in the lives of female characters.²⁷ Her overall purpose is to suggest that literature reveals a number of complex dynamics that may have influenced one’s reproductive decision. Ultimately, through her comparative discussion of works by Theodore Dreiser, Meridel LeSueur, Djuna Barnes, Ernest Hemingway, William Faulkner, Jessie Fauset, and Nella Larsen she demonstrates that reproduction became “a public social interest rather than an individual woman’s decision to become a mother.”²⁸ This helps us to realize that DuBois and Garvey did not occupy their relative stances on

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ Capo, 5.

²⁸ Capo, 85.

birth control and women's proper role as a result of their misogyny but rather their discourse reflects a larger social concern which was presumably on the minds of everyone.

Capo's study proves invaluable to this paper as she offers an interdisciplinary approach and adds depth to historical narratives concerning birth control. Her analyses of black, female-authored fiction provides a window into the experiences of black women that otherwise would be very difficult to access. While debatable whether the experiences of Harlem Renaissance authors were similar to that of the masses, we can be confident that all black women were expected to attend to the ideology of true womanhood (whether or not they did is not the issue). The fact remains that authors such as Larsen, Fauset, and Johnson felt the societal demands pressed upon them as women and their fictional characters represented the weight and conflict experienced by all black women.

The Intellectual Rhetoric of W.E.B. DuBois and Marcus Garvey

As mentioned previously, DuBois and Garvey maintained different positions concerning contraceptive use within the black community. DuBois serves as the most notable intellectual birth control advocate within the black community. Before further discussion of his contraceptive stance, his attendant rhetoric concerning black true womanhood must be further analyzed and then compared to his positive eugenicist promotion of birth control.

DuBois promoted the ideal of black true womanhood to combat black women's continued denial of the privileges of femininity. Black true womanhood equated femininity with motherhood. This philosophy was a response to the deteriorating position of African Americans after Reconstruction; black men forwarded the notion of self-help and racial pride and added them to women's responsibility. For example, one white northerner, William Pickett, remarked that the chief cause of "the gravest deterioration in the moral standards of the community" was the black woman's lack of "personal chastity."²⁹ The presumed moral laxity in women, principally black women, was "more damaging than the sexual irregularities of men" because "the offense of men is individual and limited while that of women is general and strikes mortally at the existence of the family itself." Thus, women bore the burden of maintaining racial purity.³⁰ While such views were expressed typically by whites, the response by black leaders such as DuBois added further weight to the shoulders of black women and merely confirmed white male values of womanhood. Embedded in black male praise for black womanhood was praise for the traditionally highly-regarded feminine characteristics: purity, domesticity, and obedience.

²⁹ Quoted in Guy-Sheftall, 40.

³⁰ Stavney, 535.

Although the general expression of black true womanhood appears remarkably similar to that of white true womanhood, DuBois claimed it departed from the dominant ideal. Accordingly, he asserted that the departure remained due not to the black woman's moral failings but was the result of "her history of sexual abuse and exploitation,"³¹ the fault of white society's system of slavery. In his poem "The Burden of Black Women" the theme of white men as "spoilors of women...shameless breeders of bastards" reveals his belief about the source of black women's victimization.³² One historian has put it thusly: "despite these divergences in the thoughts of blacks and whites about black womanhood, both groups viewed motherhood as the most essential function of women, thereby seeing women as a means to an end rather than as ends in themselves."³³ Although white true womanhood was a cultural expression of nineteenth-century America, well into the twentieth century people praised its ideals. Black women came to occupy a pedestal just like their white sisters. In short, black male activists adopted nineteenth-century notions of white womanhood to construct a twentieth-century nonsexual, devoted, and submissive black female subject.

Although black men constructed black moral motherhood in order to reclaim and desexualize the black woman's body, it could not have been successful without the support of at least some black women. Indeed, prominent women such as Mary Murray Washington, Addie Hunton, Fannie Barrier Williams, and Frances Harper promoted the reformist ideology. Mrs. E. A. Hackley, who traveled around to Southern black schools to give lectures to female students, maintained it the black woman's privilege to "carve the destiny of a race" and bear "the weight of future generations of a handicapped, persecuted people."³⁴ What enabled a woman to "rock the cradle and rule the world"³⁵ largely depended on her class. Part of the problem for lower-class black women was that they occupied the position of both laborer and breeder and thus could not restrict themselves solely to the private sphere, the space the cult of true womanhood deemed appropriate for females. Despite poor women's inability to strictly follow the idealized image of Negro womanhood, intellectual rhetoric spoke to them through images, if not through words. Yes, publications such as *The Crisis* and *The Messenger* used powerful graphic images coupled with persuasive texts that reached poor blacks, even the illiterate, which conditioned the black community to see women as obligated to provide a service to humanity. To be certain, the political goals of the race depended on woman's body.

³¹ Guy-Sheftall, 62-3.

³² Quoted in Ibid, 62.

³³ Ibid, 12.

³⁴ Quoted in Stavney, 539.

³⁵ Quoted in Ibid, 538.

An excellent example of the emphasis placed upon enlightened motherhood comes from the “Little Mothers’ League” which originated in 1917. Its purpose was to teach “the little colored mothers of tomorrow what so many, many mothers of today do not know;—just what is best for the little babe.”³⁶ The participants ranged from ages six to ten and pledged a three-month commitment to attend weekly lessons and demonstrations on various subjects, such as proper clothing and cleanliness. The popularity of this group, indeed, its mere existence, provides evidence of the strength of the ideology of maternal desire. Its ultimate goal was not only to groom girls to be mothers but to insist that they *want* the opportunity and privilege of motherhood.

The ideology of true black womanhood was widespread and DuBois’ effort to create a new image of black women was successful in that it took root in much of the black community. But a paradox surfaces when we consider DuBois’ stance on birth control, for he believed the survival of the race depended on a black woman’s use of birth control. The paradox is that black women’s identity and social worth depended not only on their desire for motherhood and resulting ability as capable mothers but also on their passionlessness. Passionlessness replaced licentiousness. DuBois helped to create a specific type of mother, a nonsexual, modest woman. But can a woman use birth control and be sexually pure? Can she use birth control and still extol motherhood?

Because we know that some prominent black women promoted the emerging ideology we also know that some did not. In order to determine whether any women recognized the tension between birth control and the reformist ideology, we turn to textual contraception. But before doing so it remains important to ask if contraceptive consumers thought it problematic to use birth control while identifying with moral motherhood. To begin, demographic studies show a decrease in black fertility rates at this time; therefore, we may safely conclude that the conflict was not a problem of such concern that it prevented the use of birth control. Clearly then, the reality of a woman’s current situation overshadowed her accompanying desire to adhere to the ideology.

The early twentieth century was a time when many middle- and upper-class blacks deliberately limited their fertility, including the members of DuBois’ “talented tenth.” Members of this black elite worried that working-class blacks’ continued propagation would ultimately lead to a society filled with African-Americans of lesser quality unable to fight oppression.³⁷ Thus, it is no surprise that DuBois became one of the foremost advocates of birth control as a “mechanism for racial progress.”³⁸ Reconciling DuBois contradictory positions concerning female sexuality

³⁶ Quoted in *Ibid*, 540.

³⁷ Hart, 73.

³⁸ *Ibid*, 76.

and birth control proves a difficult task. In fact, it is too large in scope to adequately attend to in a paper of this size. Nevertheless, it remains too important an issue to entirely ignore. Simply understanding DuBois’ defense of black womanhood and also his support of birth control offers one explanation as to why birth control was such a contentious issue for the black community, for they received mixed messages.

A real tension existed within the black community, largely created by one of its most prominent black leaders. DuBois encouraged black women to appreciate and desire motherhood, as it served as a way to uplift the race; at the same time, he supported birth control as it, too, could better the condition of the black community. However, because DuBois and other male leaders constructed a sexually pure black woman in response to white attacks, they left no rhetorical room for birth control. To use birth control meant one desired sexual intercourse for its own sake rather than as a means to motherhood. Black women practicing birth control lost their elevated status as modest, nonsexual women.

Another manner in which African Americans received mixed messages was that Black Nationalist leader Marcus Garvey vocalized his opposition to birth control. He opposed birth control for the same reason DuBois supported it. According to Garvey and his followers, birth control was being used to “eradicate the black race.” Minutes from one meeting of the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), illustrate Garvey’s disdain for birth control where he urged blacks not to “accept or practice the theory of birth control such as is being advocated by irresponsible speculators who are attempting to interfere with the course of Nature and with the purpose of God in whom we believe.”³⁹ Garvey’s rhetoric shows concern with nature and not the welfare of black women. Garvey’s unwillingness to acknowledge the potential of blacks practicing birth control as a pathway to their independence and self-sufficiency, a central tenant to his nationalist goals, proves myopic.

Even though DuBois’ and Garvey’s discourse expresses both support for and opposition to contraceptive use in the black community, common ground exists on a number of levels. First, both intellectual leaders maintained their position believing that their way was the best way to racial progress. DuBois insisted that quality and not quantity could improve the race while Garvey maintained the more blacks to fight the Negro fight, the better. But each man also viewed the female body as a tool of racial betterment. The central role of a black woman’s body proves undeniable; she was a valuable commodity. The complexity of birth control within the black community remains evident. Birth control should “allow the woman to institute her own reproductive policy rather than following the dictates of racial betterment.”⁴⁰ But instead of being her private issue the confluence

³⁹ *Ibid*, 75.

⁴⁰ Capo, 94.

of race, gender, and class resulted in woman's body becoming a socially contested space. To DuBois and Garvey, as well as all blacks, racial betterment meant economic, social, and political improvements. DuBois encouraged working-class blacks to employ contraceptives because fewer unplanned children meant parents could better provide for their existing family, financially and socially. Garvey's separatism depended on strength in numbers to overcome the economic, social, and political plight of the Negro. Then and now, birth control remains grounded in economics.

The role played by black intellectuals in the birth control movement highlights their idealistic view of the lives of working-class blacks. This is especially evident in women's practical desire for birth control as a means for preserving the general welfare of the family, as discussed by Hart and strengthened by statistical evidence of decreased fertility among blacks. Intra-racial tensions existed within the black community concerning the true black woman and the birth control movement. Analyses of works of fiction show how male authors differed from female authors. Women writers put women at the center of the struggle over female sexuality and woman's body and challenged prevailing ideologies while male writers typically did not. Textual considerations authored by black women also highlight the inherent problems in intellectual rhetoric concerned with female sexuality and birth control (to respond to this point at the end of the Fiction section, see notes, 12).

The Role of Literature

Moral motherhood was a contested ideology within the black community. Works of fiction show that an intra-racial conflict existed between women and men. English scholars Stavney and Capo each demonstrate black, male-authored works rarely attend to the actual social and economic conditions encountered by most black women of their era. Using images taken from contemporary publications such as *The Crisis* and *The New Negro*, Stavney demonstrates the pervasiveness of the image of "a certain type of mother, a woman morally and sexually pure."⁴¹ Comparing these images to fiction supports the argument that moral black motherhood was a contested ideology within the black community. The tension between characters Irene Redfield and Clare Kendry in Nella Larsen's 1929 novel *Passing* reflects Larsen's life and presumably the personal conflict she experienced. Larsen's novel largely concerns one woman's struggle with sexuality, sex, and mothering in response to white images of overtly sexual black women and black images of nonsexual black women. Although the novel's main character, Irene, subscribed to the ideology of true black womanhood, she lived a miserable and conflicted life because she hated mothering and desired sexual excitement. Her nemesis, Clare, behaved in overtly sexual ways and evaded motherhood. Like Care, Larsen did not

⁴¹ Stavney, 543.

bear and raise children; she did not relate to the *true* women of her time. Larsen resembled both Clare and Irene because she suffered from male-imposed images of the ideal woman. Larsen's novel depicts the timely struggle over the black woman's body.

Jessie Redmon Fauset discusses premarital sexuality in *Plum Bun*. This 1928 novel details the life of Paulette, a woman who has sexual relationships without intending marriage. Not only does Paulette reject marriage, she views it as a burden. Similarly, Fauset's 1924 novel, *There is Confusion*, tells the story of a woman who understands the consequences of female sexuality. She says to her boyfriend, Peter, "[y]ou know perfectly well that for a woman love usually means a household of children."⁴² Fauset, too, demonstrates black women's concern with prevailing ideologies as she addresses female sexuality and its relationship to motherhood and the institution of marriage.

Another work authored by Larsen, *Quicksand*, offers a pro-contraceptive narrative of motherhood and depicts "the destructive impact of maternity on a woman."⁴³ Through her character, Helga, Larsen illustrates the destructive impact of societal expectations related to female sexuality. "Helga married to fulfill her sexual desires" and in the end, due to her inability to access birth control, she became "trapped in a cycle of endless childbearing" that ended in her death.⁴⁴ Larsen's message in both *Passing* and *Quicksand* is clear: the successful pursuit of female sexual fulfillment depends upon access to birth control.

Author Djuna Barnes explores the themes of unmarried sexuality, abortion, and birth control in her 1928 novel *Ryder*. The female characters in *Ryder* understand motherhood as "biological entrapment" and engage in dialogue that alludes to the problem of infanticide. One character, Kate, describes the trap of motherhood and declares, "I'll kill it the minute it's born, but I'll bear it!...I'll stand over it like a distempered bitch before a wailing litter, and I'll stamp it into the ground."⁴⁵ As explained by Capo, *Quicksand* and *Ryder* reveal how the cultural image of the selfless wife and mother became a disputed matter within public discourse.⁴⁶ Clearly Larsen and Barnes demonstrate woman's frustration with the idyllic Madonna image and instead represent woman as a "body out of control." This relates particularly well to the situation of working-class blacks whose position within the birth control movement differed from that of whites because of their experience with infanticide. We know that despite the impression created by black male political leaders and female activists that the glorified

⁴² Quoted in Capo, 54, from *Plum Bun* and *There is Confusion*.

⁴³ Capo, 102.

⁴⁴ Capo, 102.

⁴⁵ Quoted from *Ryder* in Capo, 103. While Capo discusses this passage as representative of the disturbing "psychological effects of uncontrolled fertility" she does not discuss it as an issue of infanticide. It is my opinion that Barnes is referring to infanticide.

⁴⁶ *Ibid*, 103.

maternal imagery of African-American motherhood proved out of touch with the reality of most black women. Scholar Dorothy Roberts notes that women in slavery may have implemented infanticide “in desperation to protect their children.” That slave women were viewed as breeders of slaves makes it possible that they committed infanticide as a measure of last-resort for their reproductive control. It may also be that they viewed the act as “the greatest sign of maternal love.”⁴⁷ Angelina Grimke’s “The Closing Door,” published in 1919 reveals this notion that murder can be the highest sign of maternal love and connects the tragedy of lynching with that of infanticide. Agnes and Jim Milton were a young married couple whose joy from learning of Agnes’ pregnancy was overshadowed by the tragic lynching of her brother in Mississippi. Although the couple had long-lamented their childlessness, the news of the lynching made Agnes rethink the matter. Shortly after the birth of the child, she smothers it with a pillow because she saw herself as “an instrument of reproduction!—another of the many!—a colored woman—doomed!—cursed!—put here!—willing or unwilling! For what?—to bring children here—men children—for the sport—the lust—of possible orderly mobs.”⁴⁸ For Agnes, indeed for Grimke herself, birth control is preferred over murder. Grimke’s audience undoubtedly understood the social ills which led Agnes to her difficult decision.

African-American author Georgia Douglas Johnson’s poem “Motherhood” is told from the perspective of a woman; she writes, “[d]on’t knock at my door, little child,/I cannot let you in,/ You know not what a world this is/Of cruelty and sin.” The woman pleads with her “spiritual children not to impregnate her body” because of the cruelty of the world. Without doubt the cruelty in Johnson’s world largely concerns racism; thus, she enters the debate over racism, fertility control, and motherhood. Johnson provides more wretched tales of infanticide in the 1929 play “Safe” and the 1922 story “Maternity.” In “Safe,” a mother chokes her newborn to death due to the trauma of a lynching in her town. After the murder she muttered, “Now he’s safe—safe from the lynchers! Safe!”⁴⁹ Infanticide resulted from a child’s “mezzotint” skin in “Maternity.” Because the mother believes her child is doomed by his skin color, she puts “him in the kindly grave!”⁵⁰ Grimke and Johnson successfully portray the complexity of the birth control issue within the black community and demonstrate how infanticide further removed black women from the experience of white women.

William Faulkner’s 1930 novel *As I Lay Dying* is also demonstrative of the lengths to which women will go to avoid maternity. Exploring female sexuality outside the bounds of marriage, birth control and abortion

⁴⁷ Capo, 93n12.

⁴⁸ Quoted in Ibid, 94.

⁴⁹ Quoted in Ibid, from “Safe,” 96.

⁵⁰ Quoted in Ibid, from “Maternity,” 96.

remain important topics in the lives of his poor characters. He presents seventeen-year-old Dewey Dell Bundren with “the female trouble.” Dewey seeks an abortion and “rejects the notion that childbirth constitutes the natural fulfillment of feminine collective desire.” Nevertheless, Dewey is no rebel: she makes known that she does want to be a mother, just not now: “It’s not that I wouldn’t and will not it’s that it is too soon too soon.”⁵¹ By the novel’s end, she remains unable to abort the fetus or to access accurate birth control information. That Faulkner’s character desires children serves as an illustration of the differences between male and female authors. Despite his exploration of sexuality and birth control, Faulkner does not question woman’s desire for motherhood, thus he fails to challenge the dominant ideology of woman’s place. However, Larsen attacks motherhood as a fulfilling institution in *Passing* with her character development of both Clare Kendry and Irene Redfield.

Another Faulkner novel, written in 1939, *If I Forget Thee Jerusalem* also upholds popular discourse concerning women’s bodies. Harry and Charlotte are his forbidden lovers practicing birth control until the unfortunate day when her “equipment” (a douche bag) broke. The couple’s geographical isolation meant that Charlotte could not replace the item and resulted in her pregnancy. The novel ends with Charlotte’s death resulting from her decision to turn to the *tragic* method of abortion, performed by Harry himself. That the abortion ends in Charlotte’s death makes questionable Faulkner’s stance; did he intend to portray the evilness of abortion or rather its horrible reality? I maintain that he sympathized with the lovers but not their decision to have an abortion.⁵²

Conclusion

Intellectual rhetoric and works of fiction coincide and tell us much about the intraracial conflict concerning birth control in the black community. Some male-authored works do not accurately depict the black woman’s material reality. The discursive space occupied by black women during the 1920s and 1930s portray the tension resultant from the colliding ideologies. Nella Larsen, Jessie Fauset, and Georgia Douglas Johnson attempt “to reclaim and resexualize the black woman’s body in the face of...black maternal uplift ideology.”⁵³ Without the contribution of literary analyses, we could not so accurately access the intraracial conflict. Black women writers’ tales of “the debilitating effects of uncontrolled fertility on female sexuality”⁵⁴ allow us to understand how distanced from the reality of black women was the intellectual rhetoric of DuBois and Garvey. DuBois’ alignment with Margaret Sanger and the larger birth control movement is

⁵¹ Quoted in Ibid, 153-4, from *As I Lay Dying*.

⁵² I read the outcome differently than Capo who does not argue that Faulkner condemned abortion but rather than his text is not “explicit,” 155.

⁵³ Stavney, 553.

⁵⁴ Capo, 159.

well-documented. Equally well-documented is the movement's alliance with ideologies that supported the gendered status quo. For example, Sangerites of the 1920s argued that birth control would strengthen marriage; they extolled motherhood. They did not criticize the institution but rather the conditions of motherhood. This was their method of promoting birth control to a larger audience. Birth control became a means of controlling a population, rather than a means of increasing women's reproductive freedom; without doubt DuBois' rhetoric demonstrates his agreement with such a position, as does his association with Sanger. Black women writers contest the image of selfless wife and mother. It seems that they were more realistic than DuBois, Garvey, and their intellectual cohorts because black female authors understood the complicated connection between sexuality, birth control, and material reality. In spite of their disagreement about contraceptive use in the black community, they were in complete agreement about the social role of black women: they were valuable as (re)producers. Larsen, Fauset, and Johnson focused on women as complex beings with desires, sexual desire and the desire to control their body. Unlike their counterparts, black male leaders and many female activists, these women "focused on the specific role of women in the debate over who should reproduce."⁵⁵

This subject is significant because it suggests the importance of historical perspective to the study of birth control in the black community. Our modern understanding of birth control, arguments supporting and opposing it, largely center on economic concerns. This is not a recent development, as the history of eugenicists' growing interest in blacks during the economic crisis of the 1930s demonstrates. Eugenicists developed a program that encouraged the racially, economically, and physically "fit" to reproduce (positive eugenics) and discouraged, even prevented, the "unfit" from reproducing (negative eugenics). Initially, the eugenics movement was energized by the massive influx of unwanted immigrants; during the 1930s the movement opened its doors to the black population. Interest in poor blacks grew due to increased concern in sterilizing individuals whose children would need public assistance.⁵⁶ Evidence of eugenicists new focus is that "[t]he location of most sterilizations shifted from the West, where California led in the number of involuntary operations, to the South."⁵⁷

This relates to the current situation in the United States because "government funding policy continues to encourage sterilization of poor women" under the Medicaid program but does not disseminate information concerning other contraceptive techniques and abortion.⁵⁸ As Molly Ladd-Taylor argues, sterilization programs' support in the United States is

⁵⁵ Capo, 143.

⁵⁶ Roberts, 70.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid, 97.

absolutely tied to "the economic rhetoric of taxpayer savings." According to Dorothy Roberts sterilization is a widespread method of birth control among black women. Current governmental policies penalize black reproduction and thus share a feature of the eugenic rationale in our recent history. They also affect the way Americans value each other and think about social problems through their devaluation of black reproduction.⁵⁹ Proposals intended to solve the problem of the welfare state offer incentives for low birth rates among welfare-moms and/or threaten to revoke welfare funds from mothers unwilling to have birth control implants and/or surgical sterilization. This affects certain races more than others while such policies run the risk of justifying an oppressive social structure. This identification of controlled reproduction as the way to improve the economic condition of the poor mainly affects the black population. Black women continue to be pushed to the margins with issues concerning their bodies. Black women who lived during the early years of the birth control movement, especially those of the working-class, like the black women of today, continue to be viewed as passive subjects to be coerced out of their reproductive freedom.

Sterilization has long been a way to punish unwed sexuality. Eugenicists added moral sin to genetic flaw by asserting sexually promiscuous individuals were mentally defective. Being a sexual woman (unmarried and sexually active) was a moral sin and easily identifiable because the sins of the flesh are written on a woman's body.⁶⁰ The fictional characters in works by Meridel Le Sueur show how the state labels a poor, young, pregnant, and unmarried woman "feeble-minded" in an effort to control her sexuality. In "Sequel to Love," published in 1935, the main character finds herself in "the place where they keep the feeble-minded" and acknowledges that because she already bore one child out of wedlock "they won't let me out of here if I don't get sterilized."⁶¹ To the narrator and reader, compulsory sterilization and imprisonment are mechanisms of power enacted upon the classed bodies of women. Therefore, the characters in the novels of the 1920s and 1930s bear resemblance to women today; all struggle for reproductive control of their own bodies. The larger economic system threatens woman's bodily autonomy. Then, as now, it is difficult to hear the voices of these women. It is the confluence of gender, race, and class that objectifies women and gives black women a unique relationship to the birth control movement.

⁵⁹ Ibid, 103.

⁶⁰ Capo, 19.

⁶¹ Quoted in Capo, 132, from "Sequel to Love."