

FIXATING ON AND FIXING THE AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMAN'S REPRESENTATION OF SELF IN MODERN PERIODICALS

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A free race cannot be born of slave mothers. A woman enchained cannot choose but give a measure of bondage to her sons and daughters. No woman can call herself free who does not own and control her body. No woman can call herself free until she can choose consciously whether she will or will not be a mother.

—Margaret Sanger, *The Birth Control Review*

231

Margaret Sanger, founder of the first birth control clinics in the United States, published *The Birth Control Review*, a journal that ran from February 1917 to January 1940, specifically to challenge the Comstock Law, a federal act governing the “Suppression of Trade in, and Circulation of, Obscene Literature and Articles of Immoral Use,” in effect since 1873 (Jütte; Kranz), which prohibited the dissemination of birth control information. Sanger had to word her content in a legally ambiguous manner to avoid censorship; thus, her writing straddled a fine line between calling attention to the need for birth control education and avoiding giving direct information on contraceptive devices. From the very first issue of *The Birth Control Review*, which bore the headline “Shall We Break this Law?”, Sanger was forthright in her journal’s mission as a powerful forum for reproductive rights activism. The “We” in Sanger’s headline called everyone, regardless of gender or race, to participate in the struggle for access to universal birth control education. Thus, in 1919, she edited a special “Negro” issue of *The Birth Control Review* to address reproductive politics in the context of the African American population.¹ Sanger’s periodical featured two reproductive-rights texts by African American women playwrights: the drama *They That Sit in Darkness* by Mary P. Burrill and the short story *The Closing Door* by Angelina Grimké.

This article explores how the African American voices in this issue of *The Birth Control Review* were carefully chosen by Sanger to promote her own ideology, and not necessarily to further African American interests. Yet, when these African

American playwrights wrote dramas and stories for Sanger's *Birth Control Review*, they re-created and reinstated the neglected African American woman and mother on stage and set up African American maternity as a controversial site from which to debate reproductive rights and women's rights in general. More importantly, publishing these dramas in Sanger's periodical gave these two women playwrights an opportunity to access and define a ground-breaking public and cultural space more attuned to African American women's voices. As a result of her publication in Sanger's journal, aspiring and unknown playwright Burrill found a multicultural audience for her present and future work. Grimké's short story became the precursor for her canonical play *Rachel* (1920), the first drama written by an African American woman playwright to enjoy a commercial production. By addressing reproductive rights for Sanger's periodical, these African American playwrights embarked on a journey of artistic transformation that would later bring them theatrical recognition.

232 Burrill and Grimké were part of a rising Little Theatre Movement² of "resistant" playwrights, to borrow a term that Jill Dolan applies to feminist critics. Dolan argues that resistant readers analyze "a performance's meaning by reading against the grain of stereotypes and resisting the manipulation of both the performance text and the cultural text that it helps to shape" (*Spectator as Critic* 2). Defying the pressure to tailor their reproductive-rights narratives to the expectations of Sanger's mostly white audience, Burrill and Grimké created innovative African American women's drama that left a theatrical imprint for other contemporary playwrights to follow.³

Writing on the link between drama and periodicals, Susan Smith contends that periodicals were an "important site of public deliberation, contestation and intellectual circulation, at once interlocking and in tension" (xi). Furthermore, she states that drama was a "powerful agent in the attempt to establish and sustain difference and distance between the middle and the lower classes and between the Anglo-Saxon and the various 'Others'" (xv). Documenting and disseminating racial and social anxiety, periodicals were reflections of the continuous struggles for national identity. Plays that ran in periodicals addressed many topical issues of the day, such as the threat of rising immigration, the fracturing of social structures, and the changing business environment. Thus, Smith observes that dramatic texts were an ideal fit for periodicals because as creative endeavours and representations of social conflict, plays moved seamlessly between literary and cultural environments. Furthermore, these dramas participated in "an imaginative construction of an Anglo-Saxon legacy, a mythic history of whiteness, unity and imperial destiny born of a determination to close the sectional wound between post-Civil War Southern and Northern factions" (S. Smith xiii). Periodicals were in fact macrocosms and barometers of the social forces at work.

Between 1890 and 1918, 125 plays were published in periodicals in the United States. 51 of these dramas were written by women for women. American periodicals replicated cultural hierarchies by catering to a white female reader who was both a "consumer and a product to be consumed" (S. Smith 79). Moreover, periodicals

became manuals for social decorum and behaviour for both the *arriviste* woman and the upper class example she sought to emulate. Accordingly, women were both united and trapped in the social grouping addressed by the periodical. Each individual interest group was still conscious of being part of a greater whole, an imagined and artificial construction of a dominating white ideal. With the September 1919 Negro issue of *The Birth Control Review*, Sanger appeared to redress racial prejudice by highlighting the plight of ignored African American women. She had reason to want to appear more inclusive after losing supporters for her cause due to her extreme socialist stance during the early stages of her activist career.⁴ Yet, from the first page of the Negro issue, the tone of her message was undeniably paternalistic and subliminally racial. The headline on the cover page for the Negro issue reads: "The New Emancipation: The Negroes' Need for Birth Control, As Seen By Themselves." Using the word "emancipation," three generations after the Civil War, resurrects images of slavery.⁵ Linking emancipation with "birth control" and with a race's "need for" this information implies that, even in the twentieth century, African Americans do not have the same freedoms before the law as others. Furthermore, the use of the third person possessive—as in "the Negroes' need"—racially separates and differentiates their need from the collective need. The dependent clause that follows this racial "need" further marginalizes the African American population by implying that they are "themselves" complicit in this culturally constructed social separation. Sanger's implication was that African Americans saw themselves as incomplete "others" when compared alongside the white majority. The underlying message was that Sanger, her publication, and her readership could address this need because African Americans lacked the authority and education to resolve the issue. In other words, African Americans once again could not free themselves; the "Negroes" needed white authorities to emancipate them. Sanger's headline contentiously positioned African Americans as visible and invisible before the law. Sanger's *Birth Control Review* provided the illusion of an independent platform for African Americans to voice their plight, while using a white editor to mediate their discourse.

233

While Sanger raised the spectre of slavery to justify the "new emancipation" of African American women through her birth control clinics, African American playwrights fought to erase the scars of this violent legacy. Slavery had not only dehumanized the African American individual, but had also set up the African American woman as a breeding machine for a sought-after resource: the African American male worker. Before advocating for reproductive rights, African American women playwrights had to first change the public's perception of the African American mother. Allison Berg states in her study of representations of maternity during this period that "as white women aspired to the mantle of 'scientific motherhood'—wedding their natural maternal instinct to science in order to create the best child possible—black women sought to revise stereotypical images of the mammy in order to define a 'New Negro mother'" (106). In a modern society obsessed with eugenics and the reinforcement of racial boundaries and hierarchies, African American playwrights

had to contend with the gendered legacy of the Progressive Era and New Woman plays. These dramas featured an overwhelming number of white women holding down men's jobs, being single parents, addressing previously taboo health concerns, and speaking openly about the advantages and disadvantages of using birth control. African American women on stage—when they were featured at all—were often cast in the subservient role of the “mammy,” a nursemaid to upper-class white children. When not playing a surrogate mother role to other women's children, African American women were depicted as home wreckers, prostitutes, or seductresses, who led white men into socially unacceptable interracial relationships. Thus, audiences saw the bodies of African American women on stage as embodying the possibility of breeding quadroon or octoroon children who would then ‘contaminate’ the purity of the race.⁶ Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar contend that the standpoint of the New Negro Women during the first wave of feminism was different from that of their white counterparts because “for all their advocacy of freedom, then, these [African American] women are trapped in manipulative, hypocritical, or traditional relationships with men” (137). As a result, African American women were doubly effaced on the basis of their race and gender. They were invisible and voiceless performers subjugated by both African American and white men, and by women like Sanger.

234

Sanger's control over African Americans' narration of their reproductive rights dilemmas is evident in Burrill's one-act play, *They That Sit in Darkness* (1919). As a respected college professor, Burrill brings her experience in academia with an overtly didactic tone, aligning with Sanger's main goal to instruct the readership of *The Birth Control Review* on the consequences arising from lack of access to birth control information.⁷ *They That Sit in Darkness* takes place in the house of Malinda Jasper, a poor laundress from Alabama who has six children, the youngest one just a week old. Her oldest daughter and namesake Lindy has been accepted to Tuskegee University in Alabama, an African American school. As the play opens, the family is making plans for Lindy's departure when Miss Shaw, a white nurse, comes to visit the household. Miss Shaw is appalled at the poor hygienic conditions of the home, and at Malinda's deteriorating health. Malinda asks the nurse for birth control information so she won't get pregnant again because she has neither the physical strength nor the financial means to support any more children. The nurse tells Malinda she cannot give her this information because it is against the law for her to do so. When Miss Shaw tells Malinda to take a break and rest, Malinda lies down and dies of a heart attack. Her daughter Lindy then has to give up her dreams of a higher education to take over the running of the household.

Although Malinda Jasper's case was similar to that of many African American women, Burrill's dramatization was in fact a modified retelling of Sanger's own conversion to the birth control movement. In her recruitment campaigns, Sanger often narrated the story of Sadie Sachs, a poor mother of three who did not want to have any more children, and who Sanger visited as a nurse. Sadie had asked her doctor for birth control information, but he refused to give her any. Soon after, Sachs died of

complications from a self-induced abortion.

Burrill's language borrowed from the rhetoric used by Sanger and other birth control activists such as Marie Stopes. In her drama, Burrill, for example, wrote of bringing light into the darkness. In this case, though, the writer sets up "darkness" as a signifier for both lack of knowledge and for the African American race. In fact, Burrill framed her play with this contrasting imagery. She opens the play with a description of the Jaspers as a family that "sits in darkness," hopelessly waiting for information, for education, for a future to arrive (5). This scene is then repeated in the last moments of the play when the omnipresent narrator describes the action in terms of this light binary: "As Miles follows her out, Lindy enters the kitchen. The light has gone from her face for she knows that the path now stretching before her and the other children will be darker even than the way they have already known" (8). As an African American, Lindy loses the possibility of accessing the light of knowledge, and must now remain, with her family, in her own figurative and literal darkness. Burrill further reinforces this racial separation in her title, *They That Sit in Darkness*, in which the use of "they" implies a communal distancing of the African American protagonists. The Jasper family make up the "they" who are racially "in darkness" in a southern town removed from the light emanating from the northern metropolis of New York, where, not coincidentally, Sanger's periodical was published. The play reiterates this double positioning of African American women within Sanger's issue, where their reproductive rights are acknowledged, but only as they relate to the rights of white women.

235

While Burrill customized her drama to meet Sanger's interests, Grimké refused to tailor an African American narrative to white sensibilities. Her short stories and dramas offered a more resistant reading of the primarily white, middle-class woman's reproductive rights struggle. In *The Closing Door*, Grimké introduced *The Birth Control Review's* readership to the nascent Anti-Lynching movement, whereby African American mothers chose to commit autogenocide rather than allow white mobs to murder their children. While Burrill glossed over civil rights, Grimké firmly joined civil and reproductive rights under the same militant banner. Grimké's choice to narrate the uniquely African American experience of lynching in her work for *The Birth Control Review* challenged Sanger and her audience to openly acknowledge race as an inevitable component of the reproductive rights debate.

The Closing Door tells the story of an African American couple, Agnes and Jim Milton, through the narrative voice of Lucy, an orphaned teenager whom the Miltons take into their household. Lucy recounts Agnes's doomed pregnancy in flashbacks showing the reader how happy Agnes was to be pregnant with her first child until she hears her beloved brother Bob has been lynched by a mob for refusing to make way for a white man on a sidewalk. When Agnes learns her brother's fate, she closes herself off from the world, retreating to her room to await the end of her pregnancy. Agnes gives birth to a baby boy, but she smothers her unnamed child so it will not suffer the same fate as her brother. Agnes is then institutionalized and dies in an

asylum.

Whereas Burrill elicits public sympathy by transmuting Sanger's birth control story into an African American experience, Grimké asks *The Birth Control Review's* readership to empathize with Agnes through the universal, colour-blind bond of maternity. To do so, she begins her narrative in the midst of blissful family dynamics that could be taking place in any household, with no discernible African American characteristics. While Burrill signals her characters' heritage through distinctive voices—a less educated lexicon for Malinda, a more refined rhetoric for Miss Shaw—Grimké gives Agnes an educated speech pattern interchangeable with that of a white woman.⁸ Consequently, Grimké sets up an image of daily life that could apply to any lower-middle-class woman of the Modern period. When Agnes finds out she is pregnant, her joy is again expressed in a universally empathetic language: "I'm so happy, happy, happy!" (*The Closing Door, Part 1* 12). The African American home is filled with joy with news of the pregnancy, as any household would be. The lynching, however, fractures this idealized depiction. Lynching reasserts racial difference by placing Agnes in the divisive and conflicted roles of both victim and heroine.

236

The menacing public cries from the lynch mob that invade the private domestic space unearth the hidden racial conflict in Grimké's story. Reviewing the anti-lynching plays written by African American women, Judith Stephens explains that Grimké appropriated "the dominant gender ideology of the time which idealized motherhood in order to demonstrate how black mothers were excluded from that ideology" (334). The mob's violent language reminds Agnes that her freedom—to walk the streets, to produce children—is merely an illusion. Agnes realizes she is just "an instrument of reproduction"⁹—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—who go about things—in an orderly manner—on Sunday mornings" (*The Closing Door, Part 2* 10). With this hard-hitting rhetoric that juxtaposes contrasting words, such as "orderly" and "mob," Grimké highlights the disparity between the races.

Grimké also introduced imagery of self-containment, often associated with biological reproduction, to describe the persecuted African American woman. When Agnes retreats into her room, and literally into her own skin, she gives up public mobility. David Hirsch offers a valuable reading of Grimké's multi-layered rhetoric by arguing that Agnes's self-containment and systematic closing of visible and non-visible doors are acts of self-possession, where "with the closing of the door, each room Agnes inhabits becomes a womb of protection" (464). When Agnes first realizes she is pregnant, she does not openly speak of the pregnancy. Her expressions of joy are immediately tainted with an ingrained fear, as she says, "there is such a thing as being too happy, too happy" (*The Closing Door, Part 1* 12). Agnes is afraid of voicing her emotional and physical state because she is apprehensive that the words will alert the outside world to her happiness and make her vulnerable. Even after the baby is born, the child remains hidden from view in her room.

Agnes understands the need for the African American individual to become invisible, for his or her voice to be muted as a survival mechanism. Hirsch argues that even as Agnes “polices and silences her self, the outside ‘mob’ has been internalized. Even while it is within her body, the baby, as a mediated representation of self, is never the same as Agnes, but is—like Lucy’s words—always already in the realm of otherness” (Hirsch 469). The cries of Agnes’s baby and Lucy’s need to voice Agnes’s story emerge as powerful rhetorical forces that cannot be fully contained or hidden because they are part of the African American experience of reproductive rights. To justify this daring and original representation of birth control and its impact on maternity, Grimké explains how Agnes’s child was contaminated by the legacy of his uncle Bob’s lynching. She begins by illustrating how this violent act takes place outside his home, outside his mother’s womb to show how this child’s fate was already determined by the acts of others. When the child is born, his sense of self is already linked to his role as a second victim of racism. He is not given the chance to fight or escape the mob’s hatred because he was exposed to it while growing in his mother’s womb. He was literally born with the mark of death. Agnes’s infanticide only hastened what she saw as her son’s inevitable death.

237

For Grimké, there are three visible actors in the volatile lynching scenarios: the white man who inherited the legacy of slave owners and had an ingrained fear of the African American man; the African American man who was testing his new civic freedoms and who was lynched as a deterrent to racial transgression; and the white woman whose feminist gains gave her new social freedoms to interact with all kinds of men, but whose racial purity—and the purity of those she would reproduce—had to be protected against the “Negro” menace. The fourth actor, the wife or mother of the man who was lynched (that is to say, the African American mother), was not usually represented or voiced in the lynching conflict. Writing on theatre and race, Tamsen Wolff states that 3,200 African men, women and children were murdered by lynch mobs between 1882 and 1932. Yet, Wolff argues that these stories were often unrecorded in popular literature and culture, and thus “the violence done to African America bodies was at once highly visible and overlooked” (171). Therefore, it is not surprising that much of African American women’s drama in this period centered on rescuing, defining, and making visible the key role of the neglected and voiceless African American mother.

Grimké’s story and her future plays introduce the African American mother who willingly forfeits her maternal role where “the self-inflicted pain of childlessness came to symbolize a politics of resistance” (Berg 105). Grimké illustrates this standpoint more fully in *Rachel* (1920), a dramatic version of *The Closing Door*. The play tells the story of a working-class woman who finds out that her father did not die of natural causes but was lynched. The image haunts the protagonist as she sees her educated siblings and the children in her neighbourhood being systematically exposed to racism. Rachel becomes so traumatized by their experiences that she refuses her fiancé’s offer of marriage because she does not want to become a mother and bring

another child into a racist world. She aborts the possibility of parenthood by using self-denial as a form of birth control.¹⁰ In spite of this outward refusal of maternity, Rachel shares Agnes's view of motherhood as a calling, and giving it up psychologically scars her.

While some critics of the play claimed that *Rachel* promoted race suicide, Grimké refuted these charges in an essay printed in the January 1920 issue of *The Competitor* that ran alongside a reprint of her play.¹¹ She countered that her appeal was directed to a passive and conservative white audience who "if they could see, feel, understand just what effect their prejudice [...] [was] having on the souls of the colored mothers everywhere, and upon the mothers that are to be, a great power to affect public opinion would be set free and the battle would be half won" (51). Consequently, I contend that through the characters of Agnes and Rachel, Grimké staged both the imagined possibility and realistic impossibility of motherhood for African American women. For Wolff, for example, "Rachel's hyperbolic, even hysterical, response to mother-

238 hood is remarkably consistent whether it takes a positive or negative direction. This suggests not an individual neurosis so much as a deep ambivalence about a compulsory, idealized maternal position" (173). Like Agnes, Rachel refuses to embrace a traditional vision of maternity that is socially or culturally constructed. Wolff argues that Rachel fights back against a world intent on overwhelming her with a constant threat on her life by arguing that Rachel's sense of being besieged "is much larger than the anxiety about the death of any one individual" (175). Indeed, in Grimké's work, no one dies during the course of the play, but the possibility of being hurt and of dying is an undercurrent that taints the drama from the first mention of the lynching that occurred ten years before. When death finally comes, it is the death of Rachel's dream of motherhood, and the death of Rachel as a normative mother figure.

The African American mother who consciously chooses to give and withdraw life becomes a problematic standpoint for women's rights. By choosing to kill their offspring rather than having him or her be killed by a lynch mob, African American mothers were exerting agency over the fate of their race. Yet, this autogenocide also means African American mothers were denying life to a possible saviour of the race. Moreover, since the murdered offspring was often male, African American writers and playwrights perpetuated biased gender binaries. By having the mother produce only sons, African American playwrights were negating, and indeed denying, any social agency to daughters. By silencing daughters, and not giving them a presence on the theatrical stage, African American mothers and playwrights were complicit in carrying on the cycle of gender victimization.

Writing on the role of mothers during the lynching movement, Koritha Mitchell contends that "because she so often survives to suffer in the home from which her husband or son is removed, the black mother/wife is the witness that those content with the racial status quo most want to silence. She bears witness to what it means to live with lynching" (147). Burrill and Grimké tread new ground in theatrical repre-

sentations of race by taking the primarily white audience of Sanger's periodical into an African American household; however, they fail to move that witness/survivor out of the confining setting of the home. Their heroines remain trapped in a domestic space that limits their opportunities for progress. Mobility is given only to nurses, doctors, husbands, and children. In Burrill's play, only Miss Shaw, as a non-African American woman, and Malinda's son, as an African American male child commissioned to get milk, can leave the domestic space. Lindy and her mother stay tied to the area of the kitchen and laundry. Grimké's Agnes and Lucy also remain inside the domestic space while their men venture outside to work or to be lynched. African American mothers cannot enter public space, nor access the agency that comes with this mobility.

Burrill's and Grimké's own voices were similarly controlled and restricted to the space allotted by Sanger in *The Birth Control Review*. The editorial introducing the Negro issue was written by Blanche Schrack, a white woman and frequent contributor. Schrack noted that the "the needs of the two races bring them together constantly in a variety of intimate ways—colored women nurse white babies, there are colored cooks in most white families, and since laundries are practically unknown in the majority of white homes, washing is called for Monday morning by colored washer-women" (3), and pleaded that the life of the "white child" (3) is in danger if the washer woman is unhealthy. Her argument was that African American women's circumstances could only be understood in their relationship to a white woman's needs, and in regards to the continuity of a master/servant relationship. This standpoint reinforced Sanger's covert agenda to present African American reproductive rights as an issue that needed to be filtered, controlled, and supervised by a white agent of authority. Sanger's control of the African American narrative was even more evident in her decision to split Grimké's story across two issues. The key resolution to Grimké's narrative was not advertised on the title page of the October issue, nor was the first part of the text recapped or introduced for the readers' benefit. Burying the climactic second act of Grimké's play in the October "non-special" issue of *The Birth Control Review* suggests Sanger had moved on from "Negro" issues to return to highlighting her eugenics concerns.

239

Had Sanger chosen to include a prominent African American writer, editor, or advocate for the birth control movement in any of her periodical's issues, her attempts at inclusiveness would have earned her more public credibility.¹² Yet, Sanger did not give voice or space to African American women academics, scientists, or activists. Instead, she chose to print a letter by Isaac Fisher, a University Editor (of an unnamed journal) at Fisk University, who was distressed by articles written by a white woman against African American women in academia.¹³ Not only did Sanger not publish written correspondence from these nameless and voiceless disenfranchised African American women, but she also allowed a man to speak for them, further marginalizing and silencing African American women from political discourse. These decisions reinforce Susan Smith's argument that in periodicals "the more closely one examines

the voices joining in the national conversation, the more its conflicted, discontented and polyvocal nature surfaces” (33). In the two issues of Sanger’s *Birth Control Review* featuring work by African American women, Burrill, Grimké, and the white editors shared an uneasy public space. Sanger’s choice to feature the women playwrights’ narratives emphasized rather than covered up African American women’s gendered, social, and racial marginalization.

240 Appearing in Sanger’s periodical was both beneficial and limiting for African American women playwrights like Burrill and Grimké. Although their dramas circulated to a white readership who would not have read their work otherwise, these African American women’s plays were still framed by editorials on eugenics. This contextualization was not unusual, given that periodicals that targeted women often transmitted codes of ideal conduct while censoring undesirable behaviour. According to Smith, periodicals were essential tools for “documenting and dramatizing threats of disruptive disorder to the status quo” (5), such as the menace of women’s unchecked reproduction. Whereas in Burrill’s drama, women’s objectionable reproductive practices made covert appearance through Malinda’s pregnancies, in Grimké’s story, the fear of undesirable procreation was seen through the unspecified heritage of the narrator and Grimké’s hybrid paternity. When a woman’s reproduction process appeared to be ungovernable, it created a social anxiety that expanded to concerns regarding gender control. A constantly pregnant, and moreover undesirably pregnant, African American woman was thus seen as a threat to social order.

Grimké reflects the social anxiety generated by African American pregnancies in her story where Lucy’s origins are not clearly stated. Lucy describes herself as a “yellow, scrawny, unbeautiful girl” (*The Closing Door, Part 1* 10) and thus there is the hint that she can “pass” as not fully African American, even while living in Agnes’s household. This racial ambiguity was important from a eugenics perspective, as the narrator was Grimké’s mouthpiece, and Grimké’s racial background was controversial and problematic for proponents of eugenics. The playwright was the daughter of biracial parents: African American Archibald Grimké, and Sarah E. Stanley. Archibald was the son of Henry Grimké, a slave owner in South Carolina, and Nancy Weston, his slave. Therefore, Grimké was a quadroon with a mulatto father and a white mother. In their introduction to the evolution of eugenics in the United States, Lois Cuddy and Claire Roche comment that women authors often used the narrative of “passing” (where light-skinned men or women attempt to pass for whites) as a way to debate racial equality. While there is no evidence that Grimké ever attempted to pass as white, Cuddy and Roche argue that “the narrative crisis occurs when the whites learn of the ‘tainted blood,’ and the responses of the characters are the measure of their worth” (36). The mostly white readership of Sanger’s *Birth Control Review* would have had a long-standing interest in these eugenic beliefs, as every issue of Sanger’s periodical featured an article, editorial, or comment on the need to exert control over unchecked breeding.

This social anxiety was illustrated in a 1906 Message to Congress by Theodore

Roosevelt, in which the then-President raised the alarm of a possible “race suicide” and “national death” if white middle-class women did not reproduce at the same rate as their immigrant or African American counterparts (qtd. in Berg 3). The threat of “race death” comes up repeatedly in Sanger’s *Review* as justification for the dissemination of birth control information. In the “Havelock Ellis” issue of Sanger’s periodical that ran in February of the same year, Ellis echoed Roosevelt’s rally: “We desire no parents who are not both competent and willing parents. Only such parents are fit to father and mother a future race worthy to rule the world” (qtd. in Roche 262). The Negro issue, featuring Burrill’s play, also included an article titled “Eugenics and Child Culture” by G. Hardy, a pseudonym for Gabriel Giroud, an outspoken French Neo-Malthusian leader who wrote on the desirability of having scientific control over reproduction. He argued: “if gestation and the rearing of the child are not conducted under the most favourable sanitary and economic circumstances, to increase and multiply can be only harmful to the individual, the race, and the species” (18). *The Birth Control Review* reader would have read Hardy’s article right after absorbing the image of the not quite “favourable sanitary and economic circumstances” of Malinda Jasper’s household depicted in Burrill’s play. While the criticism was not direct, I believe that the connection between eugenics and the undesirability of a specific race’s unchecked reproduction would be clear to Sanger’s audience. Moreover, Wolff states that the “the ways in which eugenics is not about black people suggests a baseline assumption of black inferiority, a racism so entrenched that it merits virtually no direct discussion” (170). Sanger’s *Review* illustrated this problematic mentality and perspective when Burrill’s and Grimké’s narratives of thwarted and refused African American motherhood came across as lives of “others,” and not as possible fates for the middle- to upper-class readers of the periodical.

241

While Sanger kept authorial control over the dissemination of Burrill’s and Grimké’s dramas, the publication of these plays succeeded in inserting African American women’s reproductive rights into the universal debate on birth control. Through Sanger’s periodical, the two African American women playwrights rebuilt the besieged African American household by making their plight known to the policy makers who could make a difference. Although *They That Sit in Darkness* had an overt propagandistic agenda, it also shed light on a shared interest in birth control activism by white and African American women. Burrill opened the door to a dialogue between women that looked beyond the divisions of race, and focused instead on common ground: the need for women—not the State—to monitor, safeguard and improve every mother’s life, and by extension that of her children.¹⁴ By presenting the conflicted and complex relationships of race, gender, and reproductive rights, African American women playwrights managed to carve out a space for their voices and for their drama within an admittedly biased system of cultural communication.

Burrill’s and Grimké’s dramas, like all the work of African American women playwrights during the Modern period, occupied a paradoxically visible and invisible social and theatrical space. While white women playwrights, such as Elizabeth

Robins, Cicely Tyson, and Sophie Treadwell, still found it difficult to obtain funding for their work, “obstacles like these were doubled for black women, who faced discrimination on grounds of race as well as gender, and who were even less likely than white women to have access to financial resources for production” (Loeffelholz 179). Thus, the work of African American women playwrights was seldom staged in commercial productions with mass appeal.¹⁵ These women’s dramas remained relegated to smaller stages in community centres or church basements, or appeared only in print, in periodicals such as Sanger’s *Birth Control Review*. When the Negro Little Theatre Movement emerged, with a mission to produce theatre that was a result of communal effort, it became a perfect fit for these disenfranchised African American practitioners.

242 It is important to note that the Negro Little Theatre Movement emerged from an African American-centered education system. The theatre program at Howard University, a chartered and historically African American organization, for example, was one of the most prominent and advanced in North America. Through this program, Howard University professors Montgomery T. Gregory and Alain Locke joined forces with W.E.B. DuBois to provide opportunities for the production, performance, and publication of plays by African American playwrights, and by women in particular. Chronicling the rise of the Negro Little Theatre Movement, Kathy Perkins notes that these three men “encouraged blacks to write plays about the black experience” (3). For example, in 1913, DuBois wrote *Star of Ethiopia*, a pageant of African American history that was produced and performed throughout the 1910s and 1920s. In addition, in 1925, he founded Krigwa, a theatre group which established branches in Washington, DC, New Haven, Baltimore, and Cleveland (Fisher and Londré).¹⁶ DuBois’s Negro theatre company also produced and staged works such as Burrill’s *Aftermath*, a controversial play about an African American soldier who returns home after serving his country only to find out his father has been lynched by a white mob. Although Krigwa presented Burrill’s drama in May 1928, the text was first published in 1919 on the heels of the end of World War I. With the writing and staging of narratives of the African American experience, Burrill and DuBois sought not only to call attention to social injustices, but also to rally the African American populace into collective action.

African American reformers took their public and communal call to arms to the domestic sphere. They appealed to mothers and homemakers seeking to educate themselves about their rights. African American activists employed their own communities’ resources (such as churches, schools, and halls) to set up day care centres and kindergartens. These sites not only helped mothers who worked outside the home, but also gave these women a space where they could share information and receive schooling. In her work on the history of African American activism, Eileen Boris describes the purpose of this endeavour as building self-esteem and pride, whereby “an educated mother could turn from housekeeping for the family to housekeeping for wages, but it was expected that she would clean her own home

as professionally as she would another's" (227). African American activists aimed to translate educational gains obtained at home into political and social action in a public space. Writing dramas on reproductive rights was, therefore, one component of a broader educational curriculum envisioned by African American reformers.

Indeed, in her history of one-act plays by American women, Susanne Auflitsch states that "with its emphasis on the need for female education, Burrill's play partakes of the long tradition within feminist discourse of "true motherhood" that has been concerned with the topic of female education from at least the eighteenth century, and on both sides of the Atlantic" (175). As a charter member of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the president of the National Association of Colored Women (NACW) from 1896-1901, Mary Church Terrell called for the rise "true motherhood" of African American women to counter prescriptive white discourse. True motherhood for Terrell did not mean separation, but rather an acknowledgement that motherhood was universal, in an echo of the message that Burrill's and Grimké's dramas and stories gave to readers of Sanger's *Review*.¹⁷ By recording and recreating a new African American model of maternity, playwrights such as Burrill and Grimké generated transformative and transgressive theatrical paths for practitioners of African American theatre.

243

NOTES

1. The Oxford English Dictionary notes that the term *Negro* was used from the seventeenth to the nineteenth century as the standard address for dark-skinned people originally native to the African continent ("Negro," def. 1a.) At the start of the twentieth century, prominent African American intellectuals and community leaders applied the word to promote literary and cultural movements. Thus, "the 1920s had christened itself variously as the New Negro, the Negro Renaissance, the Negro Awakening, and the Jazz Age," according to James Hatch in his chronicle of the Harlem Renaissance (215). During this period, members of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), such as W.E.B. DuBois, Alain LeRoy Locke, and Jessie Redmon Fauset, were militant in their activism to renew a public awareness for African Americans' contributions to the arts and politics. Thus, the adjective *Negro* became associated with a cultural renaissance and active political participation. DuBois in particular used theatre "as a tool depicting blacks as living, breathing human beings with the same attributes and failings as their white counterparts" (Hill 154). Therefore, when Sanger named the special issue of her journal "The Negro Issue," she was following a social trend.
2. For more information on the Little Theatre Movement, see Chansky.
3. Throughout this article, I will be using the term *white* to refer to fair-skinned people of European or American descent. The Oxford English Dictionary defines *white* as "those ethnic types (chiefly European or of European extraction) characterized by light complexion, as distinguished from black, red, yellow, etc. ("white," def. 4a). The adjective *white* is the preferred expression used by contemporary and recent African American scholars, who apply it as a counterpoint to the terms *black* or *African American* (Hill 154; Elam and Krasner 331; Hatch 215).
4. It is noteworthy that when Sanger visited Vancouver on July 2, 1932 to give a talk sponsored by the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, she sparked interest in birth control from the mostly socialist crowd. Following Sanger's visit, and inspired by the articles of poet and politician

Alexander Maitland Stephen defending birth control that appeared in the socialist newspaper *B.C. Federationist*, a group of ardent supporters formed the Canadian Birth Control League in December of 1924. This league then led the way to the founding of a birth control clinic in 1932 whose goal was not “childlessness, but *wanted* children, better marriages, freedom for women and race improvement” (McLaren and McLaren 65; emphasis in original).

- 244
5. Ten years after the publication of the Negro issue, Sanger continued to align her ongoing reproductive-rights efforts with the successful abolitionist cause. Sanger appropriated the rhetoric of enslavement in her Introduction to *Motherhood in Bondage* (1928), in which she declared that “here in our country we are countenancing a type of slavery that is a disgrace to American ideals” (xix). Sanger described “birth control” as the “surest instrument of emancipation of enslaved womankind,” declaring that to the victimized women, her name “has become a symbol of deliverance” (*Motherhood in Bondage* xi). Thus, Sanger built her credibility by justifying her writings as answers to a public request.
 6. Since increased class mobility in Antebellum society had exacerbated fear of miscegenation, the Racial Integrity Act was passed in 1910 in Tennessee and 1924 in Virginia. The Act enforced racial boundaries that had circulated for over a hundred years during the time of slavery by stating that people should be recognized before the law according to race. Thus, any white person with one drop of “colored” blood was considered colored, and the same principle applied to Native Americans.
 7. Mary Burrill was perhaps best known for teaching speech and drama in Washington, DC, and among her students were playwrights May Miller and Willis Richardson. The latter would become the first African American playwright to have a play produced on Broadway when his drama about women’s suffrage, *The Deacon’s Awakening*, was staged in 1921 (Fisher and Londré).
 8. Speech and character voice were key, illustrative components of dramas that appeared in periodicals. As Susan Smith notes, “if the theatre of this period was primarily visual, the drama in periodicals was primarily verbal and aural. Though often complemented by illustrations, the American plays as well as the foreign plays dramatize situations through accessible language and dialogue” (14).
 9. In *Motherhood in Bondage* (1928), Sanger repeats this rhetoric by stating that some of the letters she received “tell of husbands who look upon their wives as mere breeding-machines” (xviii). Sanger recounts how she used this imagery, though to different effect, in an earlier publication, *A Woman and the New Race* (1920). In describing the text, Sanger claims “that book carried in simple and elementary terms the message of Birth Control as the surest *instrument* of emancipation of enslaved womankind” (*Motherhood* xi; emphasis added). In this instance, Sanger gives the word “instrument” a positive connotation by using it across racial boundaries. She makes the term a tool of empowerment rather than one of oppression. It should be noted, however, that ultimately, agency still resided with the white woman, as she was the one wielding the *instrument* of education. Sanger in fact argues that “to these women, my name has become a symbol of deliverance” (*Motherhood* xi). The African American woman remains objectified as the “other” who has to passively wait to receive enlightenment from the white educator.
 10. Laura Dawkins states in her work on maternal infanticide that African American mothers in modern dramas reject the white version of the mother as a suffering and resigned Christian *mater dolorosa*. African American women prefer the representation of motherhood as an angry, destructive persona that evokes “the figures of Lilith and Medea, mythical mother-monsters who unleash violence upon their own children” (227). Furthermore, the murderous mother in these works not only self-destructs, but also “functions as an agent of subversion, stirring fear as well as sympathy” (227). Both of Grimké’s narratives show the heroines cursing the God they revered. Agnes challenges Him to be “pitiful” (*The Closing Door*, Part 1 9), and Rachel laments that “God is laughing” because African Americans are his “puppets” (*Rachel* 246). These mothers refuse the saintly image of maternity proposed by organized religion because they feel that it is disjointed from the reality of their lives.
 11. *The Competitor* published three issues in Pittsburgh, PA between 1920 and 1921, showcasing a selection of essays, short stories, and plays by prominent African American playwrights.

12. Sanger tried to make up for her misstep by printing a one-sentence apologia from W.E.B. DuBois, a prominent founder of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), and the editor for twenty-four years of the cultural magazine *Crisis*. DuBois's note read: "I believe very firmly in birth control, but I regret to say that I have been absent so long from my desk that I am unable to promise any article in the near future" (*Birth Control Review* 3.10, 15). The succinct response clearly shows that he was only asked to contribute an article, and not to edit the issue, in spite of his credentials as a prominent editor and advocate for birth control. Sanger relegated DuBois's note to the bottom of a back page next to an advertorial for subscriptions to her periodical.
13. Fisk University is a private and historically African American institution highly regarded in the United States. It was founded in 1865, a few weeks after the end of the Civil War, with a mandate to educate freed slaves. At the time, it welcomed students of any age, from children to senior citizens, so long as they had "an extraordinary thirst for learning" ("Fisk University History" n. pag.) The institution was accredited in 1930, and the campus was designated a historic facility in 1978. Some of the best known African American activists and leaders, such as W.E.B. DuBois, educator Booker T. Washington, journalist Ida B. Wells-Barnett, and historian John Hope Franklin are Fisk alumni and have been a part of Charles S. Johnson's prestigious Race Relations Institute at Fisk ("Fisk University History").
14. Sanger saw herself as contributing to this education movement through an inclusive national birth control campaign. She attempted to organize a "Negro Birth Control Committee" in each community, which would be led by a local priest and would recruit African American doctors and nurses. Although Sanger meant this as a project of African American empowerment, neither she nor the people subsidizing these efforts included African Americans in the decision-making part of the process, and the project failed.
15. Grimké's *Rachel*, for example, had its premiere at the Myrtilla Miner Normal School on March 3-4, 1916, in a production sponsored by the Drama Committee of the District of Columbia branch of the NAACP.
16. For more information on DuBois's links to the Negro Little Theatre Movement, see Erroll G. Hill and James V. Hatch's *A History of African American Theatre* (2003) and Jonathan Shandell's essay in *The Cambridge Companion to African American Theatre* (2013).
17. In one of her speeches at the National Mothers' Congress in 1899, Terrell argued her case by stating: "I cannot recall that I have ever seen a baby, no matter what its class, colour, or condition in life, no matter whether it was homely or beautiful according to recognized standards, no matter whether it was clad in rags or wore dainty raiment, that did not seem dear and cunning to me" (qtd. in Boris 220). Rachel's infatuation with children in Grimké's play uses a similar rhetoric when the heroine says: "I know now why I just can't resist any child. I have to love it—it calls me—it draws me. I want to take care of it, wash it, dress it, live for it. I want the feel of its little warm body against me, its breath on my neck, its hands on my face" (*Rachel* 227).

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246

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