Reproduction and Representation in Gwendolyn Brooks’ “the mother”

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The Great Migration’s Housing & Medical Crisis

Women and mothers in Brooks’ Bronzeville neighborhood were subjected to poverty, abhorrent living conditions, lack of access to medical care and race riots. As the African American population exploded from an estimated 100,000 by the end of WWI to 495,000 by 1950, housing conditions in the South Side deteriorated even more. Small 600 foot apartments were divided into 100 square foot “Kitchenettes” – entire families shared one room and the whole flat was to share the bathroom and the kitchen. Nationally compared with that for white women, the maternal mortality ratio for black women was 2.4 times greater in 1940, 3.6 times greater in 1950, 4.1 times greater in 1960” (CDC). Once we take into consideration that “black infant mortality was nearly double that of white infant mortality…” vital statistics revealed how racism took its toll and how it still does (Reagan 213). Cook County Hospital in Chicago may not have records of the numbers of black women that terminated pregnancies because many are estimated to have self induced but records of the numbers of black women that terminated pregnancies have self induced but were never made.

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Women attempted to control their fertility and family sizes before they had access to legal abortion as contraceptive use and abortion(s) were not uncommon during the mid-century, but they were topics that were considered to be open secrets. Ambiguously phrased ads were not uncommon as “historian those who “were never made”; it is reflective, honest, graphic, loving, contrite, and without shame. We must remember that historically black women have had little to no bodily autonomy and control over the institution of medical care and race riots. As the African American population exploded from an estimated 100,000 by the end of WWI to 495,000 by 1950, housing conditions in the South Side deteriorated even more. Small 600 foot apartments were divided into 100 square foot “Kitchenettes” – entire families shared one room and the whole flat was to share the bathroom and the kitchen. Nationally compared with that for white women, the maternal mortality ratio for black women was 2.4 times greater in 1940, 3.6 times greater in 1950, 4.1 times greater in 1960” (CDC). Once we take into consideration that “black infant mortality was nearly double that of white infant mortality…” vital statistics revealed how racism took its toll and how it still does (Reagan 213). Cook County Hospital in Chicago may not have records of the numbers of black women that terminated pregnancies because many are estimated to have self induced but records of the numbers of black women that terminated pregnancies have self induced but were never made.

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Then: 54
The average life expectancy for Black Americans in 1910; up from the average of 35 in 1900
(“History of Black Mortality and Health Before 1940”

Now: 59%
Of abortion patients in 2014 had at least one previous birth
(Guttmacher Institute 2019)

Brooks’ poetry can be interpreted as political yet never does she issue an ultimatum to the reader; rather she shares her truth of the abortion(s) – the physicality of the experience and the emotional aftermath – while the reader is left to find out what happens to the soap opera character next. The reader is left to their own devices. Brooks’ poetry serves as a lamentation on these pregnancies and those who “were never made”; it is reflective, honest, graphic, loving, contrite, and without shame. We must remember that historically black women have had little to no bodily autonomy and control over the institution of medical care and race riots. As the African American population exploded from an estimated 100,000 by the end of WWI to 495,000 by 1950, housing conditions in the South Side deteriorated even more. Small 600 foot apartments were divided into 100 square foot “Kitchenettes” – entire families shared one room and the whole flat was to share the bathroom and the kitchen. Nationally compared with that for white women, the maternal mortality ratio for black women was 2.4 times greater in 1940, 3.6 times greater in 1950, 4.1 times greater in 1960” (CDC). Once we take into consideration that “black infant mortality was nearly double that of white infant mortality…” vital statistics revealed how racism took its toll and how it still does (Reagan 213). Cook County Hospital in Chicago may not have records of the numbers of black women that terminated pregnancies because many are estimated to have self induced but records of the numbers of black women that terminated pregnancies have self induced but were never made.

Then: 22%
Of the married women interviewed by Kinsey in 1958 had one or more abortions by age 45
(Medical Abortion Practices in the US, 1965)

Now: 24%
Of US women will have an abortion by age 45
(Guttmacher Institute 2019)

Brooks, Gwendolyn. “the mother.” In The Great Migration’s Housing & Medical Crisis. Gwendolyn Brooks, Report from Part One

Statement of Purpose

Reproduction as Liberty

Women attempted to control their fertility and family sizes before they had access to legal abortion as contraceptive use and termination were not uncommon during the mid-century, but they were topics that were considered to be open secrets. Ambiguously phrased ads were not uncommon as “historian Those critics have equated the narrator’s reflection on her abortion with the act of abortion in this poem is an act of love and protection while the reader is left to their own devices. Brooks’ poem does not take a side in the politics of reproduction but to illuminate the truth behind this particular mother and her wanted but unwanted children, a mother that represented the people that Brooks observed and lived with in Bronzeville in her own kitchenette.

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Representation of Motherhood in “the mother”

Hardly your crowned and praised and “customary” Mother; but a Mother not unfamiliar, who decides that she, rather than her World, will kill her children. The decision is not nice, not simple, and the emotional consequences are neither nice nor simple.

-Gwendolyn Brooks, Report from Part One

Conclusion

It’s necessary to historicize both Chicago’s Bronzeville in the early to mid twentieth century as well as the experience of Hospital in Chicago during this time. Black women have been ignored in this area of study—white women were more likely to have medical intervention by both doctors and hospitals while black women sought the assistance of midwives or were left to their own devices. Brooks’ poem does not take a side in the politics of reproduction but to illuminate the truth behind this particular mother and her wanted but unwanted children, a mother that represented the people that Brooks observed and lived with in Bronzeville in her own kitchenette.

Works Cited


