

“How is the truth to be said?”:

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 “it had less to do with cultural differences than with **lack of access to doctors and midwives, for reasons of poverty and discrimination”** (Reagan 42). One can only imagine how the substandard living conditions in Chicago’s Bronzeville, lower life expectancy and lack of economic opportunity contributed to black women needing and wanting to limit the size of their families.



“I remember feeling bleak when I was taken to my honeymoon home, the kitchenette apartment in the Tyson on 43rd and South Park...in the kitchenette at 6424 Champlain, where our son was suddenly born...and in the damp garage apartment...where our son contracted broncho-pneumonia...”

Gwendolyn Brooks, *Report from Part One*

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 had at least one previous birth*

(Guttmacher Institute 2019)

the mother

Abortions will not let you forget.

You remember the children you got that you did not get,

The damp small pulps with a little or with no hair,

The singers and workers that never handled the air.

You will never neglect or beat

Them, or silence or buy with a sweet.

You will never wind up the sucking-thumb

Or scuttle off ghosts that come.

You will never leave them, controlling your luscious sigh,

Return for a snack of them, with gobbling mother-eye.

I have heard in the voices of the wind the voices of my dim killed children.

I have contracted. I have eased

My dim dears at the breasts they could never suck.

I have said, Sweets, if I sinned, if I seized

Your luck

And your lives from your unfinished reach,

If I stole your births and your names,

Your straight baby tears and your games,

Your stilted or lovely loves, your tumults, your marriages, aches, and your deaths,

If I poisoned the beginnings of your breaths,

Believe that even in my deliberateness I was not deliberate.

Though why should I whine,

Whine that the crime was other than mine?—

Since anyhow you are dead.

Or rather, or instead,

You were never made.

But that too, I am afraid,

Is faulty: oh, what shall I say, how is the truth to be said?

You were born, you had body, you died.

It is just that you never giggled or planned or cried.

Believe me, I loved you all.

Believe me, I knew you, though faintly, and I loved, I loved you

All.

Then: 22%

of the married women interviewed by Kinsey in 1958

had 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)

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 black women and motherhood 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 represents the people that Brooks observed and lived with in Bronzeville in her own kitchenette.

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Statement of Purpose

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 their own devices. I propose that it is necessary to historicize *A Street in Bronzeville* and Bronzeville itself to analyze how the legacy of racial injustices and poverty have impacted black women and the institution of black motherhood mid-century. Some critics have equated the narrator’s reflection on her abortion with women who have chosen not to have any children but this is disingenuous to the spirit of this poem — this narrator speaks as someone who has experienced motherhood and the raising of a child and knows first hand how the world can take children (and their mothers) away. Though it may sound contradictory to a modern reader, the act of abortion in this poem is an act of love and protection — the only way to guarantee the child a life without pain and suffering is to not let the child enter the world at all.

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 Jessie Rodrique surveyed a wealth of advertisements and stories in Black Belt newspapers published throughout the 1920s and 1930s that indicated widespread use of contraception and self-induced abortion” (Roberts 82) Brooks’ poem 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 motherhood in the United States. From forced breeding and selling of children in the days of chattel slavery to a severe lack of healthcare resulting in high maternal mortality (which is still true today as black women as three times as likely to die from pregnancy related causes) black motherhood has been under attack. “The diminished value placed on Black motherhood, in turn, is a badge of racial inferiority worn by all Black people,” Dorothy Roberts writes. “Only by exploding racism’s hold can we hope to envision and achieve reproductive justice.”

