ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation:	FROM CENSORS TO SHOUTS: ECOLOGIES OF ABORTION IN AMERICAN FICTION
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"From Censors to Shouts: Ecologies of Abortion in American Fiction" registers the urgent need to revisit the literary methods of abortion storytelling in multiethnic American women's fiction with a close attention to one of its most significant tropes: the herbal abortifacients that signify as both code and medicine, recalling the Victorian "language of flowers" as well as essentialist metaphorical connections between femininity, reproduction, and the natural world. This project traces the literary history of herbal abortifacients from abortion's censorship and criminalization in the nineteenth century to present-day movements to reclaim or "shout" one's abortion. The fictional mentions of plants known to be abortifacients demonstrate how literature can communicate reproductive and plant knowledge. "From Censors to Shouts" also offers a window into how the practice of domestic herbalism (a gendered and often racialized practice) evolves over the course of the nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first centuries by pairing a cultural historical analysis of the herbs themselves alongside considerations of how authors' fictional

deployments of these herbs work towards visions of reproductive and environmental justice. "From Censors to Shouts" considers fiction from multiethnic American women writers including Sarah Orne Jewett, Edith Summers Kelley, Josephine Herbst, Marge Piercy, Octavia Butler, Ntozake Shange, Jamaica Kincaid, Toni Morrison, Ana Castillo, and Kali Fajardo-Anstine. The fictional depiction of herbal abortifacients reveals our continued attention to plant knowledge and self-managed herbal abortion. Understanding how these plant names and knowledges have remained crucial rhetorical, cultural, and visual signifiers of abortion access is vital to understanding the reclamation of these knowledges as we re-commit to the fight for abortion rights and reproductive justice amidst a new legal landscape.

FROM CENSORS TO SHOUTS:
ECOLOGIES OF ABORTION IN AMERICAN FICTION

by

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Introduction

Abortion Storytelling, Herbal Abortifacients, and Vegetal Life

When I began writing this dissertation, abortion was a right in the United States. The shift to the past tense underscores the fundamental upheaval of the American justice system but more importantly, a shift in everyday people's ability to exercise bodily autonomy. This more recent iteration of the anti-abortion movement began in the years following the 1973 *Roe v. Wade* decision that established abortion as a Constitutional right, as anti-abortion activists chipped away at abortion access through piece-meal legislation. Such legislation made abortion increasingly inaccessible to women and people of color, low-income earners, those living in rural areas, as well as other constituencies. The *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization* Supreme Court decision released on June 24, 2022, is the culmination of the anti-abortion movement's work post-*Roe*, as the revocation of the Constitutional right to abortion opened the door for trigger laws and abortion restrictions to go into effect, essentially rendering abortion a right on a state-by-state basis.[1]

[1] By "culmination" I do not mean to imply that the anti-abortion movement has stopped organizing post-*Dobbs*. Quite the contrary—the anti-abortion movement has continued to advocate for further restrictions on abortion, including a nation-wide ban, restrictions on the medication used for medication abortion, and even, in some cases, restrictions on the use of embryos for in-vitro fertilization.

Amidst the fear and uncertainty in the wake of the *Dobbs* decision, many looked to the past to understand the present. The *Roe v. Wade* decision, authored by Justice Harry Blackmun, prioritizes a historical analysis of abortion in the United States, critiquing the dangerous effects of criminalized abortion for pregnant people as well as the impact of forced birth on parents. The present crisis echoes the first attempt to criminalize abortion in the United States in the nineteenth century, as the *Dobbs* decision can be read as both a contemporary extension of this late-nineteenth century movement and an attempt to revise the earlier history outlined by Justice Blackmun. Justice Samuel Alito uses *Dobbs* to insist that the "right to abortion is not deeply rooted in the Nation's history and traditions" by alleging that there is a "lack of any real historical support for the right that *Roe* and *Casey* recognized," a direct contradiction of the copious evidence Blackmun supplies in the *Roe* decision.[2] While Alito frames the *Dobbs* decision as an originalist interpretation of the law, he ignores the history outlined in *Roe* as well as the testimonies outlined in *amicus curiae* briefs submitted in opposition to *Dobbs,* which include signatories such as the American Historical Association, the Organization of American Historians, legal scholars Dorothy E. Roberts and Khiara M. Bridges, as well as the firsthand testimonies of abortion storytellers supported by the organization We Testify.[3] Contextualizing the

[2] *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization* 945 F. 3d 265 (2022) 25; 28.
[3] "AHA Signs Amicus Curiae Brief in Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization (September 2021)." American Historical Association, Accessed February 8, 2023.

literary tactics for representing abortion in narrative situates the abortion story within a longer history that can be useful as reproductive justice activists continue to work towards reproductive freedom.

The blatant disregard for historical, textual, and testimonial evidence in the *Dobbs* decision prompted a widespread reckoning with how we as an American public understand the history of abortion in the United States, but also regarding how we engage with stories of abortion. How do we come to know about abortion—in history books, through personal experience and conversations, through film, television, and literature? After *Dobbs*, mainstream media outlets published articles outlining the history of abortion in the United States that often explored the very evidence that Justice Blackmun drew on in the *Roe* decision. Reproductive rights and justice advocates had statements at the ready to further explain and contextualize the immediate impact of the decision. These forms of historical analysis and activist statements draw on the genre of the abortion story as either evidence or crucial components of a text, respectively. Maggie Doherty outlines a fifty-year history of the abortion story as a genre of public testimony, rooting this history in the humorous and "unapologetic" tone of the stories told at Redstockings speak-outs begun in 1969.[4] She observes: "The contemporary abortion story seems to have two main aims: to

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https://www.historians.org/news-and-advocacy/aha-advocacy/aha-amicus-curiae-brief-in-dobbs-v-jackson-womens-health-organization-(september-2021)

[4] Maggie Doherty, "The Abortion Stories We Tell." *The Yale Review*, June 24, 2022. https://yalereview.org/article/dobbs-roe-abortion-stories

evoke the reader's sympathy and to justify the patient's decision to get an abortion." Crucially, Doherty explores her own tension between the narrative desire to cast a "sympathetic" tone when telling her abortion story, and her desire "as a political actor and a feminist… to be fearless and uncompromising."[5] The narrative tension Doherty describes is reflected in the stylistic, tonal, and formal choices each abortion storyteller makes in crafting their story—regardless of whether this story is told as public testimony or in an intimate personal context.

Post-*Dobbs,* the abortion story as an activist genre continues to challenge the narrative conventions of public testimony. As an activist or testimonial genre, the abortion story is a public narrative, occasionally anonymized on social media and typically told in the first-person to claim an experience and often a politic.[6] The abortion story continues to evolve, especially in conversation with the tensions that Doherty outlines—including the various potential desires of the storyteller to craft a sympathetic narrative, to justify, to be uncompromising, to outline a politic, etc. The various deployments of the abortion story in the present moment suggest that the first-person abortion story as a genre works within and against the constraints of its

[5] At present, the organizations Shout Your Abortion and We Testify offer outlets and resources for those seeking to share their abortion stories, with We Testify offering financial compensation to cohorts of abortion storytellers for their narrative work as well as their emotional labor. See "FAQs" We Testify. Accessed February 8, 2023. https://www.wetestify.org/home#faqs

[6] The politics of the abortion storytelling organization Shout Your Abortion have continued to evolve post-*Dobbs,* as the organization debuted a new, defiant slogan declaring that "We will aid and abet abortion"—a politic that moves beyond even the typical politics of the abortion story as a genre. See "Shout Your Abortion." Shout Your Abortion. Accessed February 8, 2023. https://shoutyourabortion.com/

narrative form. The work of the abortion story is undeniably crucial, but the abortion story is just one narrative form available to discuss and depict abortion. Just as abortion has a long history, narratives of abortion have an equally long literary history that extends further than the more recent emergence of the abortion story form as it is currently defined.

One famous narrative trope used to depict abortion is the herbal abortifacient, or plants used to manage an abortion. For centuries, the primary method of abortion was via herbal remedies administered by a midwife or healer.[7] In fact, the popularity of midwives as sources of gynecological, reproductive, and abortion care in the nineteenth century was one of the key factors that motivated the American Medical Association to criminalize abortions not performed by AMA-certified doctors in their AMA-certified hospitals.[8] When abortion was first criminalized in the United States in the late nineteenth century, not only were herbal remedies an important part of everyday life, but the Victorian "language of flowers" was a popular method of communicating that used plants as code for various meanings. Those wishing to communicate about abortion utilized the "language of flowers" to refer to abortion by naming specific herbal abortifacients—pennyroyal, tansy, motherwort, mugwort. Just

[7] See John Riddle, *Eve's Herbs: A History of Contraception and Abortion in the West* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999).
[8] The criminalization of abortion is discussed further in chapter 1. See also Leslie Reagan, *When Abortion was a Crime: Women, Medicine, and the Law in the United States, 1867-1973* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

as roses communicate romantic love, so too do these plants communicate about abortion. The "language of flowers" persisted in the American imaginary well into the twentieth century as both a marketing tool and a literary device. For example, the "botanically specific" poet Edna St. Vincent Millay names the known abortifacient tansy in a 1921 poem published in the year between her two known abortions in 1920 and 1922.[9] Millay's second abortion was an herbal abortion, managed with the help of her mother, who was trained as a nurse, and a copy of *Culpeper's Herbal*.[10] Millay offers a popular, canonical example of the widespread deployment of abortifacients as part of the "language of flowers." This "language" appears consistently throughout American literature, but particularly in American fiction.

"From Censors to Shouts: Ecologies of Abortion in American Fiction" considers the literary deployment of herbal abortifacient plants as code, medicine, and signifier in American fiction from the late nineteenth century to the present. "From Censors to Shouts" offers a new genealogy of the long, literary history of herbal abortion, extending existing scholarship on abortion and abortion storytelling in American literature by focusing specifically on herbal abortion and the role of plants and plant knowledge in narratives of abortion. The naming of specific plants or reference to herbal medicines established euphemistic codes for abortion and offered writers a

[9] Lesley Wheeler, "The Smell of Tansy through the Dark." *The Massachusetts Review* 61, no. 1, 2020: 29-37. 31, 32.
[10] Wheeler, "The Smell of Tansy through the Dark," 33.

flexible signifier with which to critique essentialist metaphorical connections between femininity, reproduction, and the natural world. Tracing the mention of abortifacient plants and preparations in multiethnic American women's fiction demonstrates how fiction operates as a way to communicate reproductive and plant knowledge. By considering both the literary and medicinal utility of the plants mentioned in fiction, "From Censors to Shouts" explores the aesthetic, political, medical, and environmental threads at work in fictional depictions of herbal abortion.

Part of the reason why the "language of flowers" became such a popular technique for referring to abortion is due to the fact that abortion as a practice and a topic was criminalized by the same legislation, the Comstock Act of 1873. This legislation's focus on abortion as a practice and a subject reveals the degree to which knowledge production and circulation about abortion was viewed as a threat. The goal of censorship legislation is to foster shame, stigmas, and taboos, as Stephanie Peebles Tavera notes, and writers navigated these constraints from 1873 well into the present.[11] Given this context, "From Censors to Shouts" is inherently invested in exploring that which is communicated via obfuscation, code, inference, or speculation. Indeed, reading herbal abortifacients as code requires approaching the fiction under discussion as a project of speculation—speculation about the author's

[11] Stephanie Peebles Tavera, *(P)rescription Narratives: Feminist Medical Fiction and the Failure of American Censorship* (Edinburgh: U of Edinburgh Press, 2022), 25.

intended meaning, the occasionally vague implication of plant uses, and the constraints that may have influenced a writer's ability to execute their literary vision. Though the speculative as a literary mode is often concerned with imaging futures, speculation is apparent in all the fiction discussed in this project as authors imagined worlds in which abortion was accessible via the use of coded language or in reference to the past threat of censorship in the case of historical fiction.

While "From Censors to Shouts" is invested in genres beyond the speculative, I find that Alexis Lothian's use of speculation in her work on "old futures" resonates with the ethos of this project. Even in realist fiction in which herbal abortifacients are named, used, and fail, the depiction of such efforts reveals a tension between what methods of abortion were accessible and which were successful. Lothian notes, "fictional speculation often opens up alternative potentialities only to close them down into futures that are all too predictable according to dominant logics. A central argument of [*Old Futures*] is that the failures of speculative fictions' radical possibilities do not invalidate their meaning, their interest, or their capacity to make a difference."[12] From the heavy-handed implications of pennyroyal in Sarah Orne Jewett's Dunnet Landing stories, to the failures of herbal abortion in early-twentieth century fiction by Edith Summers Kelley and Josephine Herbst, to the struggles to

[12] Alexis Lothian *Old Futures: Speculative Fiction and Queer Possibility* (New York: New York University Press, 2018): 20.

learn and apply herbal medicine in Marge Piercy and Octavia Butler's speculative fiction, herbal abortifacients are a consistent presence in the American literary landscape. Naming herbal abortifacients and herbal remedies—even if they fail—invokes a world in which remedies are possible outside of the hospital. By this logic, when writers name herbal abortifacients and herbal remedies in fiction, they conjure an imaginary in which abortion could be accessible and possible across genres, worlds, and time.

The consistent depictions of herbal remedies in fiction raises the question of how plant knowledge circulates widely enough to serve simultaneously as a viable code and a viable remedy. To this end, my readings of the literary depictions of herbal abortifacients resonate with historian of science Londa Schiebinger's exploration of "agnotology" or "the study of ignorances." Schiebinger traces the cultivation and trade of plants alongside the circulation of knowledge about the plants themselves in Europe, the West Indies, and parts of the Americas during the long eighteenth century. She is particularly interested in the circulation of plants known to be abortifacients, as well as the pointed non-circulation of the knowledge of how to use these plants as abortifacients. How does this knowledge circulate such that it evades notice by colonizers? What strategies did Indigenous, enslaved, and otherwise marginalized peoples utilize to protect their knowledge of these plants? Schiebinger traces how the knowledge of plant-based fertility control did and did not transfer in

colonial contexts, and calls attention to the fact that the circulation of plants themselves is distinct from the circulation of the requisite knowledge of each plant's powers. Schiebinger deploys her study of ignorances to critique colonial theft and erasures of ways of knowing. Instead of focusing strictly on the historical record, I pair a cultural historical analysis of the herbs themselves alongside considerations of how authors' fictional deployments of these herbs work. In so doing, I call attention to how multiethnic American women writers use fiction to represent herbal abortifacients and herbal abortion while they also negotiate various censorship and legal constraints.

By attending to the cultural histories and medicinal capabilities of the herbal abortifacients named in fiction, "From Censors to Shouts" participates in the emerging field of the plant humanities. While there is copious ecocritical, ecofeminist, and material feminist scholarship considering the role of "nature" in regard to both the feminine and the natural world, it is the idea of "life" that recent publications centering plants seem most invested in exploring.[13] The idea of "vegetal life" is central to the work of Michael Marder. A key thinker in critical plant studies, Marder begins his bellwether book *Plant-Thinking: A Philosophy of Vegetal Life* by

[13] For more on the myth of the natural, see Carolyn Merchant, *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution*; Londa Schiebinger *Nature's Body: Gender and the Making of Modern Science*; Stacy Alaimo, *Undomesticated Ground: Recasting Nature as a Feminist Space*; Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands and Bruce Erikson's edited collection, *Queer Ecologies: Sex, Nature, Politics, Desire*; and Greta Gaard's edited collection, *Ecofeminism: Women, Animals, Nature.*

proposing that plants have occupied the "margin of the margin, the zone of absolute obscurity undetectable on the radars of our conceptualities."[14] To better recognize and contextualize plants, Marder proposes "plant-thinking" which "situates the plant at the fulcrum of its world, the elemental terrain it inhabits without laying claim to or appropriating it."[15] Marder's commitment to honoring "the logic of vegetal life" is admirable in that he recognizes the limits of our human conception of plant existence, but such commitment to reading the plant as the center of its own world is difficult given my project's investment in how plants interact as one of many parts in the more-than-human world.[16]

The tension between Marder's commitment to prioritizing the "mode of thinking *proper* to plants" and my attention to the ways in which plants populate and signify in American fiction is not new in the environmental humanities.[17] Marder's critique of the marginalization of plants resonates with Robin Wall Kimmerer's critique of scientific language, in which "terminology is used to define the boundaries of our knowing. What lies beyond our grasp remains unnamed."[18] Kimmerer, a

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[14] Michael Marder *Plant-Thinking: A Philosophy of Vegetal Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 2.
[15] Marder, *Plant-Thinking*, 8.
[16] David Abram explores the term "more-than-human world" in *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in the More-Than-Human World*. Abram uses the term to advocate for the recognition of the interconnectivity of the human within the larger world. Rather than the oppositional term "non-human world" or the more general "natural world," the "more-than-human world" compels a recognition of the human as just one scale of being.
[17] Marder, *Plant-Thinking*,10.
[18] Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants.* (Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions, 2015), 49.

botanist and member of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation, has written extensively on the unique role of plants as actants, objects, and signifiers. She points to language as one of the factors that limit our ability to imagine plants and other aspects of the more-than-human world as actants, noting that since English is "a noun-based language… appropriate to a culture so obsessed with things," one is "either a human or a thing."[19] Kimmerer showcases how the "grammar of animacy" is thus dependent on humanness in English.[20] More so than Marder's insistence on reorienting our thinking towards that proper to plants, Kimmerer's attention to how language awards animacy, humanness, and value resonates with the analysis of this project.

Throughout the fiction discussed here, writers depict herbal abortifacients with varying degrees of animacy. Often, herbal abortifacients are referred to as objects of use or things even as writers describe the wider natural world with more general respect.[21] When does a plant become a thing in herbal medicine? And when does the herbal abortifacient gain animacy as an actant in its own right—when it is a plant rooted in the soil, when it is transformed into a tea or tincture, or when it manages the

[19] Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass,* 56, 57.
[20] Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass,* 55
[21] Of course, herbal abortifacients offer a compelling case study in regards to new materialist theories of "animacies," particularly as I engage with Mel Chen's work in this introduction. Yet herbal abortifacients as plants would be considered different than herbal abortifacient uses in other contexts, such as the "pennyroyal pills" made by nineteenth-century pharmaceuticals. This, then, offers an interesting angle concerning Jane Bennett's concept of "thing-power," given that Bennett's concept "gestures toward the strange ability of ordinary, man-made items to exceed their status as objects and to manifest traces of independence or aliveness, constituting the outside of our own experience" (xvi). As plants, herbal abortifacients operate differently than in transformed forms such as "man-made" medicines.

function for which it has been used by humans? Herbal abortifacients, as part of herbal medicinal practices and as a textual code, have been historically depicted as signifiers of medicine and as objects of knowledge in ways that predate their deployment in the fiction discussed in this project. Such plants have been imbued with meaning for centuries, in various *materia medica* and herbals as well as familial medical traditions of knowledge inheritance, and of course by colonizers, censors, legislators, and physicians who deemed these plants and their effects threats to their imagined social, moral order. In fiction, plant names communicate an image, a smell, a purpose, and a history of the plant's species. Thinking with these particular plants involves more than a recognition of plant-thinking, but also a recognition of how these plants have always already been imbued by humans with human-centric meaning. The names of herbal abortifacients are not just referring to one plant, but to a history of plant meanings and purposes.

"From Censors to Shouts" thus considers plants as animate beings, objects of use, and signifiers of meaning in literary narratives of herbal abortion. Adjacent and interconnected to ecocritical thinking in the plant humanities, new materialist deployment of "animacies" extends Kimmerer's interest in the grammar of animacy from a different but not unrelated theoretical tradition. Mel Y. Chen roots "animacies" in "the fragile division between animate and inanimate—that is, beyond human and animal," and does so to "theorize current anxieties around the production

of humanness in contemporary times."[22] Not unlike Kimmerer's discussion of how the English language awards animacy in proximity to humanness, Chen uses "animacies" to break down hierarchies of being and of "humanness" by pointing to the "sentience or liveness of nouns."[23] Chen's case studies venture beyond the plant, including poisons, terms of belonging, and the fetus. Most importantly, Chen's discussion of animacies ultimately turns to "address" as an opportunity, a "scene of engagement in which the "lives" on both sides are beholden to terms unknown." For Chen, the question of address calls attention to "the animation of things unknown in their proximity to humanness, by their uneven agency, by their uncertain capacity to affect…"[24] By naming an abortifacient plant specifically, the authors in this dissertation "address" plants. By addressing a plant, that plant is animated into being and awarded a degree of respect and recognition. By then using the plant as part of an herbal remedy, that plant quite literally engages with the body's capabilities, changing the body's constitution and offering a new experience of life.

It is compelling, then, that Chen situates their connection between animation and address with a discussion of Barbara Johnson's formative article, "Apostrophe, Animation, Abortion." Johnson identifies the apostrophe as "the direct address of an absent, dead, or inanimate being by a first-person speaker." Johnson reads

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[22] Mel Y. Chen, *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Affect* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), 2.
[23] Chen, *Animacies,* 2.
[24] Chen, *Animacies,* 236.

Gwendolyn Brooks' poem "The Mother" (1963) to consider the animating power of language in address or apostrophe, and I argue that her argument extends to fiction as well. As Johnson writes, "It becomes impossible to tell whether language is what gives life or what kills."[25] The language of animation is particularly relevant given the apostrophe's focus on "an absent… or inanimate being," referring in this instance to a fetus. Johnson's analysis focuses on Brooks' navigation of the second person and the noun "abortion" as she invokes a terminated fetus. Johnson observes of the poem's shifting perspective that "it is clear that something has happened to the possibility of establishing a clear-cut distinction in [the] poem between subject and object, agent and victim."[26]

By addressing an abortifacient by name, a writer animates the plant's meaning as an abortifacient. Read in the context of the fictional landscape, the herbal abortifacient is animated via its direct address by name and its invocation in the context of a pregnant person's action. The very naming of a plant animates the

[25] Barbara Johnson, "Apostrophe, Animation, and Abortion." *Diacritics* 16, no. 1 (1986): 34.
[26] Johnson, "Apostrophe, Animation, and Abortion," 32. Additionally, Johnson's engagement with the in-betweenness of animation, life, and death recalls the nineteenth-century determination of pregnancy through "quickening," or the moment a pregnant person felt the fetus move. Significantly, only the pregnant person could experience and address this animation, thus allowing the pregnant person control over when to announce their pregnancy. Before pregnancy became medicalized and relocated into the auspices of gynecology and the hospital, when measured according to "quickening," it is the pregnant person's acknowledgement and direct address of movement in their womb that announced a pregnancy and change their body's relationship to abortion under common law. That is, with quickening as the operating test or measure of pregnancy, the decision to address the animation of pregnancy is entirely the pregnant person's, thus allowing them to instead address a recipe, remedy, or otherwise locate an herb or manage to end the pregnancy before its animation is addressed and made legible to the law. "Quickening" is discussed in more detail in chapter 1.

specific plant's individual characteristics in the context of the fictional landscape. Such depictions invite a cultural analysis of the plant's value and a botanical analysis of the plant's uses, an inquiry that values the plant as an agent and a signifier. Occasionally, writers include additional information about an herb's preparation or use in managing abortion. But essentially, these writers—coming from different racial, ethnic, class, and regional positions, and standing for distinct periods in abortion history—intertwine the rhetorics of life and animacy with a feminist practice of plant knowledge. Attention to the "animation" inherent in naming and describing plant knowledge in fiction highlights the role of language in "animating" life in reproductive and environmental justice imaginaries, a crucial point given the anti-abortion movement's attempt to monopolize the rhetoric of life.

Interrogating the narrative techniques that authors deploy when crafting the scenes of abortion in fiction engages the long pre-history of the abortion story genre, an analysis that explores how authors engage in the work of representing reproductive freedom. Pairing this attention to the narrative work of abortion in fiction with an attention to the material and cultural histories of the plants referenced as remedies offers an opportunity to link the concerns of reproductive and environmental justice more explicitly. Though the two concerns are linked explicitly in definitions of reproductive justice by Loretta Ross and Rickie Solinger, the utility of the environmental and plant humanities in the fight for reproductive justice is often

overlooked.[27] In this way, a single-minded commitment to plant life as divorced from the human—while potentially admirable from an environmentalist point of view—is unsettled, especially when read in the context of literature such as Ruth Ozeki's 2003 novel, *All Over Creation.*

All Over Creation offers a contemporary example of the ways in which reproductive and environmental justice concerns intersect in fiction, particularly in regard to the rhetoric of "life." Ozeki's attention to "life" offers a compelling introduction to the analyses of abortion and the environment in "From Censors to Shouts." *All Over Creation* extends Ozeki's interest in food production, first explored in her debut novel, *My Year of Meats* (1998), which considers the global production and consumption of beef. Instead of meat, *All Over Creation* focuses on potato farming. The novel follows Yumi Fuller as she returns to her childhood home of Liberty Falls, Idaho for the first time since she ran away as a teenager after she had an abortion. Yumi's hometown is haunted by the ghosts of agribusiness past and present, most notably Luther Burbank's legacy, which resonates with the religious conservativism of Yumi's father, Lloyd. Yumi's return to care for her aging parents, Lloyd and her Japanese mother Momoko, coincides with the return of Elliot, Yumi's former high school teacher-turned-employee of the Monsanto-esque company,

[27] Loretta J. Ross and Rickie Solinger, *Reproductive Justice: An Introduction* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2017), 9, 234.

Cyanco. Also arriving in Liberty Falls are the "Seeds of Resistance," an eclectic group of young environmentalists who travel in a French-fry-oil-fueled van dubbed the "Spudnik." Each chapter features an epigraph, the first two being the Idaho state motto and a verse from Genesis, respectively, followed exclusively by quotes by Luther Burbank.

The novel attends to the cultural and botanical history of the potato, as Burbank becomes a mythic figure in the novel. Burbank was a noted horticulturist and botanist who developed hundreds of strains of plants in his career, including the Russet Burbank potato most famously associated with McDonald's fries. Yet for all his scientific developments in vegetable species, Burbank also held eugenicist views. For example, Burbank published *The Training of the Human Plant* (1907), a eugenic text that brings human and plant life together and features chapter titles like "The Mingling of Races," "Heredity—Predestination Training," and "Environment the Architect of Heredity."[28] Burbank makes clear his association between horticulture and the eugenic cultivation of "desirable" traits:

> Now, just as the plant breeder always notices sudden changes and breaks, as well as many minor modifications, when he joins two or more plants of diverse types… so may we notice constant changes and breaks and modifications going on about us in this vast combination of races, and so may

[28] Luther Burbank, *The Training of the Human Plant*. New York: The Century Co, 1907. HathiTrust.

> we hope for a far stronger and better race if right principles are followed, a magnificent race, far superior to any preceding it. Look at the material on which to draw![29]

Burbank's writing on eugenics and evolution found a popular audience. Historian of science Katherine Pandora suggests that his work offers "a passport beyond the confines of the official scientific world of twentieth-century America, into the relatively unknown ground of natural knowledge as generated, expressed, interpreted, and disseminated in the vernacular."[30] Burbank used his lecture series, published books, and the plant species that bore his name to embody the persona of the authoritative man of science for the American public, despite the scientific community's mixed assessment of his work. That a core tenet of Burbank's scientific and social ideology was the cultivation of superior breeds of products and people offers a nightmare scenario to the ideals of reproductive and environmental justice. Unencumbered by any censorious or legal challenges to his work, Burbank was free to imagine people and plants as cultivated in accordance with his social and scientific vision.

Burbank offers an example of plant knowledge practices powered by capitalist greed and social pseudoscience as he weaponized the science of botany and rhetoric

[29] Burbank, *The Training of the Human Plant,* 9.
[30] Katherine Pandora, "Knowledge Held in Common: Tales of Luther Burbank and Science in the American Vernacular" *Isis* 92, no. 3 (2001): 487.

of cultivation to propose an ideal social order. Ozeki mimics Burbank's rhetoric of botany to describe human life as she attends to the disconcerting similarities between anti-abortion and environmentalist rhetoric. Ozeki uses Burbank's writing in epigraphs to help contextualize the difficult history of horticulture and agribusiness as she critiques siloed visions of the natural world and family life. The models of family relationships and seed production that Ozeki idealizes in the novel are dependent not on an ominous cultivation of ideal traits, but a random and spontaneous embrace of the messiness of the natural and more-than-human worlds. Burbank's ghostly presence in the novel—haunting the epigraphs, the landscape, and the crops that the central characters harvest—encourages a discussion of the interrelationship between plant life, human reproduction, and the "natural." Like Burbank, Lloyd, the archetypal potato farmer in Ozeki's novel, draws on his authority as a farmer as he uses plant-centered rhetoric to espouse his anti-abortion views. Lloyd's disapproval of his daughter Yumi's decision to have an abortion as a teenager is a major factor in her decision to run away from Liberty Falls; yet even after she returns to his farm as an adult with three children, Lloyd cannot stop himself from bringing up his feelings regarding her choice.

Ozeki sets Yumi's abortion in 1974, the year following the *Roe v. Wade* Supreme Court decision that legalized abortion. However, Ozeki's depiction of Yumi's abortion demonstrates the many loopholes of the *Roe* decision. Though

abortion is legal in 1974—a fact noted multiple times in the span of the eight-page flashback scene depicting Yumi's abortion—Yumi is fourteen years old when she becomes pregnant. Thus, she cannot access an abortion at a clinic without her parents' consent or knowledge. The person with whom Yumi conceived her pregnancy, her high school history teacher, Elliot, cannot travel with her across state lines to a place with more amenable parental consent laws without being accused of kidnapping, given that his involvement with Yumi constitutes statutory rape. As a result, Yumi seeks an abortion from another source—a "tired-looking" shadow of a woman who "swore [she]'d never do another one of these."[31]

The flashback depicting Yumi's abortion is situated about halfway through *All Over Creation.* Notably, following the genealogy Doherty outlines, the genre of the abortion story would have been available to both teenage Yumi in 1974 and Ozeki writing in the early 2000s. Ozeki renders most of Yumi's narrative sections in the novel in the first person (the only character to be awarded such interiority), but she chooses to represent Yumi's recollection of her abortion in the second person, a significant deviance from the typical abortion story as described by Doherty and popularized by abortion storytelling organizations in the twenty-first century. Rendered in the second person, Yumi seemingly distances herself from her memory of her abortion, even though she is quick to defend her decision in conversations

[31] Ruth Ozeki. *All Over Creation* (New York: Penguin, 2003) , 197-198.

elsewhere in the novel. There is no subject in the first line of the section that details Yumi's abortion—"There are some things you never forget."[32] This line gestures to the beginning of Brooks' poem, "The Mother," specifically her use of apostrophe and address. The poem's first line, "Abortions will not let you forget," uses "abortions" as its subject, but for Yumi, abortion is unnamed until she is in the room alone with the provider. The provider names the procedure as an abortion as she asks for Yumi's consent, to which Yumi replies: "I really, really, really want this abortion."[33] Johnson reads Brooks' specificity in the first line as giving the word "abortions" "a position of grammatical control over the poem."[34] Yet in Ozeki's version, there is no such grammatical power, no specific noun. Seemingly, Yumi is addressing her past self but in the most vague terms possible.

Ozeki contrasts Yumi's experience of motherhood—from her abortion as a teenager to her single mothering of three multiracial children by three different, unremarked upon fathers—with that of her childhood friend, Cass. Unlike Yumi, Cass never left Liberty Falls and is implied to have been unable to carry a pregnancy to term due to her proximity to the chemicals involved in potato farming. Cass's experience reveals the novel's investment with the complexities of the intersection between environmental and reproductive justice, as Cass is denied the right to have a

[32] Ozeki, *All Over Creation,* 196.
[33] Ozeki, *All Over Creation,* 199
[34] Johnson, "Apostrophe, Animation, Abortion," 32.

child given her exposure to harmful environmental contaminants.[35] From the borders of states that enforce strict abortion legislation in Yumi's flashback, to the effects of "animate" contaminants that poison Cass, Ozeki depicts various experiences of pregnancy outcomes to stage a comprehensive critique of how environmental and reproductive factors are subject to transcorporeality, and how life adjacent to agribusiness effects the ability to bear children.[36]

Ozeki's gesture to Brooks' poem places her in conversation with the same grammar of animation that Johnson and Chen analyze as reckoning with the impossibility of "establishing a clear-cut distinction… between subject and object, agent and victim."[37] The slipperiness of agency in Ozeki's novel extends beyond human reproduction to include plant reproduction. At the same time, Cass's experience with animate chemicals interacting with her body demonstrates the new materialist sense of animation, recalling Chen's flexible use of "animacies." The threads of environmental and reproductive justice are connected even further in regards to the Cyanco company's patented "Terminator" gene, which is referred to as having the potential to both render a plant "sterile" and cause a plant to "kill its own

[35] Ozeki even adds another layer to the novel, as Yumi and Cass use their experiences navigating reproduction and pregnancy to advise Charmey, one of the "Seeds of Resistance" who comes to Liberty Falls to stage environmental protests. Charmey's pregnancy spans much of the novel and she gives birth shortly before dying in a terrorist attack engineered by Cyanco. Charmey's daughter Tibet is later adopted by Cass.
[36] Stacy Alaimo, *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), 2-4.
[37] Johnson, "Apostrophe, Animation, Abortion," 32.

embryo."[38] Interestingly, these two descriptions are not quite the same thing. But the novel does not quibble with such distinctions, and Lloyd and the Seeds activists use these two descriptions interchangeably to explain the Terminator gene's effects. Lloyd's easy elision of the two effects of the Terminator gene would be the plant equivalent of flattening Yumi's and Cass's experiences of pregnancy outcomes, if we were to characterize Yumi's abortion and Cass's difficulty carrying a pregnancy to term in more brutal terms. Both Lloyd and the environmentalist Seeds cast their opposition to the gene in terms of life: "plants have a right to life, too."[39] In this instance, both Lloyd and the environmental activists empathize with the plants such that they embrace the anti-abortion rhetoric of the "right to life" as applied to plants. Beyond recognizing the value and animacy of plants as part of the more-than-human world, Lloyd and the Seeds craft their commitment to the environment in terms that seem to accept their complicity with anti-abortion views of fetal animation. By referring to plants with the legal language of human rights, Lloyd and the Seeds move beyond the call to respect and honor the more-than-human world and into proximity to the language of personhood rights. This has the effect of, ironically, centering an anthropocentric rhetoric of human rights. The simultaneously anthropomorphic humanization of plants also reduces the complexity of the Seeds' environmental

[38] Ozeki, *All Over Creation*, 266.
[39] Ozeki, *All Over Creation*, 266.

activism, in that not all environmental activists advocate for the unfettered cultivation and growth of plants with abandon, particularly given the novel's context of monocrop agribusiness—resoundingly critiqued for its focus on profitable crops at the expense of all others. The rhetoric of "life" coupled with Lloyd's disapproval of Yumi's abortion suggests an affinity or at least a complicity between environmentalist rhetoric and anti-abortion discourse that resonates with Burbank's own use of plant language to justify eugenics.[40] But key for this project, the capacity for plants to kill, poison, or impact fertility is overlooked in Lloyd's commitment to plants' right to life. Lloyd does not engage with the logic that the chemicals used in farming impact Cass's right to conceive and bear children, for example. And herbal abortifacients are not accounted for in the novel at all, though their existence and capability to terminate pregnancies complicates Lloyd's slogan. How would herbal abortifacients square with the environmentalist view of the right of these plants "to life"?

Ozeki's novel challenges us to think critically about the representation of abortion and the environment. While Cass's story most directly confronts the intersection of reproductive and environmental justice, Yumi's opposition to her

[40] The conservative history of conservation is a compelling complement to Lloyd's character in Ozeki's novel, as is the rise of ecofascist rhetoric. For more on the rise of ecofascism, see the Anti-Creep Climate Initiative (April Anson, Cassie M. Galentine, Shane Hall, Alexander Menrisky, and Bruno Seraphin) comic, *Against the Ecofascist Creep*. See also April Anson, "No One is the Virus: On American Ecofascism." *Environmental History Now*, October 21, 2020. https://envhistnow.com/2020/10/21/no-one-is-the-virus-on-american-ecofascism/

father's anti-abortion rhetoric brings these two threads together in a different way. Yumi is outraged that her father insists on using anti-abortion language to refer to plants given how it casts plants as rights-worthy beings in a way that also not-so-subtly accuses his daughter of murder. But this rhetoric also forecloses how plants might act. Would Lloyd's insistence on the right to life of plants extend to plants capable of producing abortion, or is this right limited to seemingly innocuous potatoes? Is Lloyd's belief in plants' right to life dependent on his understanding of plants as food, crop, and profit, but not as medicine? Ozeki's novel does not engage with herbal abortifacients, but she stages important questions regarding the animation of life, the narrative forms and functions of abortion in fiction, and the ways in which reproductive justice and environmental justice are connected, even if some factions of each movement dabble in language that works in opposition to their shared goals of the dignity and health of the more-than-human world.

The plot of Ozeki's novel offers almost an inverse of most of the fiction discussed in this dissertation. In subsequent chapters, herbal abortifacients are referenced in ways that revel in the multiple significations of femininity, reproduction, and the natural world. Ozeki, on the other hand, recasts the potato crop as the focus of Lloyd's rhetoric of "life" and his activism, both powered by his devout Christian faith. Yumi's storyline in the novel is not quite as connected to the natural world, as even her abortion scene is set amidst a cacophony of machinery and a

sterile, metal room. The warm gardens and lush scenery are reserved for the farm, most especially for Yumi's mother Momoko's garden grown from mismatched, bountiful seeds.[41] For Ozeki, plant knowledge and human reproductive knowledge occupy separate spheres described with overlapping rhetoric, from Burbank's historical example as well as Lloyd and the Seeds' activist rhetoric. The works discussed over the course of the next four chapters and conclusion consider what it means to represent reproductive knowledge via plant knowledge, as herbal medicine and specifically as herbal abortion. For reproductive plant knowledge, as represented

[41] Yumi's mother, Momoko, is a central part of the novel's plotline about the Seeds of Resistance actions staged on Lloyd's farmland. Momoko cultivates a garden of a wide assortment of plants—food, flowers, trees, etc.—in order to harvest their seeds. Momoko and Lloyd sell their seeds under the "Fullers' Seeds" name, sending them across the country via the post office (something that would have been illegal under the nineteenth-century Comstock Act if these seeds had been herbal abortifacients). Momoko's garden and Lloyd's accompanying newsletter inspire the Seeds of Resistance to come to Liberty Falls. One of the Seeds of Residence's major projects is the development of a "New Garden of Earthly Delights" website that acts as a "computerized seed-library database" that "contains every single variety of Fullers' Seeds, all arranged by genus and species and cross-referenced with the plant names in both Latin and common English" (356). The Seeds' goal is to use this database to offer customers, friends, and like-minded environmentalists the opportunity to "adopt whatever seeds they're interested in, then grow them out and offer them back to other Garden members through the online catalog" (356). In this way, the work of the Seeds in caring for Momoko's seeds echoes the ways in which Yumi, Cass, and the Fullers adopt the Seeds into their lives and eventually, how Cass adopts Charmey's daughter Tibet. Momoko's work inspires the Seeds, even though it is Lloyd's words that initially capture their attention via the Fullers' Seeds newsletter. By the end of the novel, as Momoko prepares to leave Idaho to be with Yumi and her children in Hawaii, Momoko declares that "Everywhere is garden," demonstrating her affinity for and ability to tend to seeds and plants of whatever kind, in whatever environment (414). Momoko's garden offers a compelling counterpoint to Luther Burbank's rhetoric in favor of "mingling" races, as well as an alternative perspective to her husband's insistence on plants "right to life." In order to harvest seeds, Momoko waits until the plant dies "and only then did she get down to business, shaking the seeds from their brittle pockets…" (113). In this way, "life" is not the sole goal of farming, as Momoko sees value in the entire life cycle of the plants, particularly when they become seeds.

through herbal abortifacients in fiction, can act as a code, an aesthetic, a politic, and a reclamation.

"From Censors to Shouts" comprises two main parts, pre- and post-1973, the year of the historic and recently nullified *Roe v. Wade* decision. In the first part, chapter 1 uses three figures from the nineteenth century—abortion provider Madame Restell; Dr. Rebecca Lee Crumpler, the first Black woman doctor in the U.S.; and regionalist fiction writer Sarah Orne Jewett—to triangulate a textual culture of abortion in the wake of abortion's censorship and criminalization by the 1873 Comstock Act. This chapter establishes the circulation of tropes of herbal abortifacients across various media, and shows how it draws, particularly in Jewett's fiction, on the shadow of botanical colonialism.

Chapter 2 uses Edith Summers Kelley's novel *Weeds* (1923) and Josephine Herbst's unpublished first novel *Following the Circle* (1925) as well as her published novels *Money for Love* (1929) and *The Executioner Waits* (1934) to discuss how Leftist, working-class white women writers of the early twentieth century drew on an "unruly" naturalism to depict herbal abortifacients as well as abortion scenes featuring emerging medical technologies. Herbal abortifacients fail in these novels, but the natural world looms large as writers use ecological imagery to ground their ideas about women's roles in Leftist politics. Though herbal abortifacients are named and used in these works, characters find eventual success procuring abortion in

settings more suited to the prominent literary naturalism of the time, in mechanized clinics run by male doctors.

The second part of "From Censors to Shouts" grapples with the reproductive technologies available in the later twentieth century, like the fetal ultrasound, and the persistent restrictions to abortion access despite its decriminalization and legalization. Chapter 3 explores the increasing centrality of technology to abortion stories through Marge Piercy and Octavia Butler's different investments in embryology in their speculative fiction of the 1970s and 80s. Herbal medicine is idealized but adjacent to a utopian commitment to genetically engineered (and vaguely eugenic) reproduction via artificial wombs, imagery that resonates with the tensions introduced in the more naturalist novels of chapter 2.

The final chapter considers how late-twentieth-century authors Ntozake Shange, Jamaica Kincaid, Toni Morrison, and Ana Castillo depict herbal abortifacients in their fiction despite the decreases in abortion access as a result of the "undue burden" framework, introduced in the Supreme Court decision *Planned Parenthood v. Casey.* Herbal medicine is central to all five novels discussed in this chapter, as herbal knowledge is stewarded through generations and treated seriously as effective medicine rooted in women's community, in opposition to the characters' encounters with institutionalized medicine and its histories of racist and sexist violence established in chapter 1.

Finally, the conclusion brings the project fully into the present moment with an analysis of Kali Fajardo-Anstine's short story "All Her Names" (2016), which foregrounds the contemporary Indigenous Chicana experience in the American West. I place Fajardo-Anstine's story in conversation with the overwhelming number of botanical marketing materials used by abortion funds in the wake of the leaked and official *Dobbs* decisions. Both Fajardo-Anstine's story and the turn to botanical imagery in abortion rights materials signal a reclamation of herbal abortifacient knowledge in the cultural and activist imaginary. As abortion is now newly criminalized in some states for the first time in fifty years, self-managed herbal abortion is experiencing a resurgence of interest.

This dissertation offers a literary historical survey of herbal abortifacients in American fiction—a crucial goal given the growing field of literary criticism regarding abortion and especially its intersection with the emerging field of plant humanities—to argue that herbal abortifacients and plant knowledge are crucial narrative tools in literary representations of abortion. The plant names and knowledges referenced in the literature of herbal abortion allow authors to draw on the symbolic power of the natural world while also referencing the medicinal power of herbs. These powers are deployed in different ways from the nineteenth century to the present, but throughout this long history and alongside the emergence of other reproductive medical technologies like surgical and medication abortion, herbal

abortion remains a consistent referent. Herbal abortifacients allow the multiethnic American women authors discussed in the following chapters a way to challenge the "natural" role of pregnancy, childbirth, and expectations of the feminine, but more importantly, herbal abortifacients offer these authors an avenue to circulate botanical knowledge and honor this knowledge as a potent medical and scientific force. In this way, these authors use fiction to imagine a world in which abortion is not only accessible, but a world in which their characters have firsthand access to the knowledge of how to effect abortion—a literary vision that can offer hope as we navigate new obstacles in the present day. The fictional depiction of herbal abortifacients demonstrates our continued fascination with plant knowledge and herbal self-managed abortion. Understanding how these plant names and knowledges have remained crucial components of abortion storytelling is vital to understanding the reclamation of these knowledges as we re-commit to the fight for abortion rights, reproductive justice, and environmental justice amidst the ever-evolving legal landscape. Indeed, this combined rhetoric of human and vegetal life demonstrates that the fight for reproductive and environmental justice is actually the same fight.

Chapter 1

Professionalization and Plant Knowledge: "Naturalizing" Abortion in the Nineteenth Century

The nineteenth century saw both the criminalization of abortion and the concretization of medical and scientific disciplines into fields with institutional backing and authoritative medical credentials. These two phenomena—the criminalization of abortion and the credentialization of medical and scientific knowledge into distinct disciplinary areas—are intertwined. In fact, it was the American Medical Association that helped lead the effort to criminalize abortion in the latter half of the nineteenth century, as one part of an alliance with "vice suppressors" like the religious crusader turned U.S. Postal Inspector, Anthony Comstock. In this chapter, I trace the rhetorical coding of abortion as a "natural" procedure—natural in the sense that abortion can be initiated by the consumption of earthly, organic materials used in botanical and herbal medicine. Following the dual censoring and criminalization of abortion in the 1873 Comstock Act, abortion was increasingly coded in the language of plants and the natural world, principally because it was often practiced in the home by lay healers or midwives using herbal medicine.

Even as botany and medicine concretized into distinct, gendered disciplines over the course of the nineteenth-century, women working in medicine and women writing

regionalist or local color fiction called upon the spectre of plant knowledge to further support their claims to authority, as botany offered a scientific vocabulary to legitimize midwifery's roots in local and herbal medicine and folk medicinal practices rooted in home gardens.[42] Yet while herbal medicine offered some women working in medicine a claim to authority, this authority did not always extend to the freedom to provide abortion, as I show through the cases of Madame Restell, who was famously punished for her work as an abortion provider, and self-styled "doctress" Rebecca Lee Crumpler, the first African American woman to earn a medical degree in the United States. Crumpler publicly drew a subtle but clear line between her work as a doctor, publishing herbal remedies to help new mothers in her advice book, and what she viewed as vulgar threats to morality in the form of abortion.

The rhetorical alignment between botany and medicine by these and other women professionals also featured prominently in the contemporary fiction of Sarah Orne Jewett, whose novels and stories include herbalists and doctors whose medical knowledge extends to abortion and relies fundamentally on plant knowledge. Examining Jewett's white New England women protagonists in the context of how plant knowledge reaches them raises ethical questions about who can claim medical

[42] Here I use specifically gendered language in deference to the genders of the figures under discussion in this chapter. When writing about those seeking abortion, I use gender inclusive language, but when making specific statements or claims about women writers, women botanists, or women doctors, I use specifically gendered language.

authority through plant knowledges that include abortion remedies and what colonial routes can be traced through plant knowledges. Restell, Crumpler, and Jewett all offer visions of who is best suited to wield medical authority as a gendered professional, and what kind of medical authority is viewed less seriously even within a community of women, specifically when some who practice medicine gained their knowledge by potentially suspect means. This chapter explores the twin forces of botany and medicine, and how plant knowledge informs the way nineteenth-century women claimed medical authority, specifically the freedom to provide abortions. In so doing, we see how abortion as a procedure, cast by women like Restell and Jewett as connected to lay healing traditions rooted in plant knowledge and herbal medicine, was rhetorically naturalized even amidst its criminalization under federal law.

What is "Natural"?

Feminist and ecofeminists theorists have long troubled the idea of a "natural," innate, organic, or essentialist state of being. The interrogation of gendered metaphors and implications of the "nature/culture divide" is not new, especially given the canonical status of Carolyn Merchant's *The Death of Nature* (1980), in which Merchant explores the effects of gendered metaphors of nature and machinery on women's experience throughout history. Nor is it new to discuss the strategic essentialism women used to signal their affinity with nature or the natural world to

gain, for example, access to scientific fields like botany. Yet what happens when a consideration of the gendered metaphors of nature and culture, the potential of nature as a gendered space for feminist action, is expanded to consider the gendered, plant-based language of abortion access? This focus brings the decades-long critical conversation of environmental feminism and ecofeminism specifically to bear on how materials from the natural world, plants and herbs, effectively communicated and enabled abortion access and reproductive freedom. Nineteenth-century women utilized strategic essentialism and deployed an affinity with the natural world to carve spaces for themselves in various fields for various means, for example, in some women's efforts to pursue professional careers in botany, landscape architecture, interior design, even medicine. We can even see this strategic essentialism in the literary tradition, as women writers depicting domestic, local scenes were lauded as regionalists or local colorists, excelling in (and sometimes, in spite of) these gendered genres.[43] While women in previous centuries used strategic essentialism in their efforts to gain scientific knowledge in various ways, such as the moneyed patronesses of European courts or wealthy daughters of aristocratic families, the nineteenth

[43] Science fiction author and feminist literary critic Joanna Russ write infamously and exasperatedly, "What on earth *is* a regionalism? … It seems clear that the label *regionalist*, so often applied to women writers, indicates not only that the writer in question concentrates on a particular region, but also that the work is thereby limited (and not of 'broad' interest) and therefore of interest not primarily for literary reasons but for its sociological or quasi-historical interest. The 'regionalist' is a second-rate fictioneer, a documentary-maker manqué(e)." Russ, *How to Suppress Women's Writing* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2018), 63. See chapter 2 for a longer discussion of genre in the early twentieth century.

century saw a more public deployment of working women using strategic essentialism in their own careers, circulated in newspapers, lectures, and other means. Madame Restell, a working-class immigrant from England seeking to earn a living, and Rebecca Lee Crumpler, a descendent of formerly enslaved peoples who became a doctor, both drew on strategic tropes of women's alignment with caretaking, nature, and the natural world in their published works—for Restell, her business advertisements, and Crumpler's advice book, *A Book of Medical Discourses.*

Plants have been used in medicine since before knowledge was even written in various herbals or *materia medica.* And as long as plants have been used for medicinal purposes, there has been knowledge about which plants can produce an abortion. Historically, plants from the mint family such as pennyroyal and parsley, as well as juniper and dittany, to name a few, have been associated with abortion and contraception in the European tradition. By the nineteenth century in the Americas, plants both native and introduced were known for their abortifacient properties, like neem, black cohosh, and cotton root bark. Such specific plant knowledge can be traced through herbals, *materia medica,* and other written treatises on health from the ancients through the Enlightenment. [44] Yet the nineteenth century offers a particularly complex moment in which disciplines of science consolidated into professions, the

[44] As an example, see this Plant Narrative for dittany regarding its history in association with its use as contraception and abortion: Buchanan, *Dittany: Women's Herbs and Reproductive Control*, Dumbarton Oaks, 2021.

line between traditional and "regular" medicine became more solid and stark, and even botany and medicine became distinct fields, particularly in the United States. Medicine proliferated far and wide in the nineteenth century before, during, and after its concretization into an official, organized association, with various strains of "irregular," alternative, and quack medicines, while botany experienced a boom in popularity in which the field was made slightly more accessible to the public through published guidebooks.[45] Botany played a sizeable role in aiding colonial expeditions, as plants made for profitable crops like quinine, indigo, and cotton that drove colonization and enslavement.[46] On a regional and national rather than global level, botany's gendered associations helped open the field to women like Almira Hart Lincoln Phelps, who published *Familiar Lectures on Botany* (1829) and *Botany for Beginners* (1833), in which she wrote about the ease of remembering plant names that comes with practice.[47] In his collection of data regarding the increase in American women botanists in the nineteenth century, Emanuel Rudolph notes that most American women who studied botany were located in the Northeast and focused on

[45] Irregular medicine refers to the alternative to "regular" medicine, that is, medicine practiced by certified practitioners. Regular and irregular medical practitioners were difficult to verify as medical institutions and associations began to form and dictate various requirements in education and curriculum. Quack medical treatments refers to the scam medical solutions. For more, see Justine S. Murison, "Quacks, Nostrums, and Miraculous Cures: Narratives of Medical Modernity in the Nineteenth-Century United States," *Literature and Medicine* 32, no. 2, (Fall 2014).
[46] For more about the uses of colonial botany, see Bleichmar, "Botanical Conquistadors: The Promises and Challenges of Imperial Botany in the Hispanic Enlightenment"; and Brockway, "Science and Colonial Expansion: The Role of the British Royal Botanic Gardens."
[47] Emanuel D. Rudolph, "Women in Nineteenth Century American Botany; A Generally Unrecognized Constituency" *American Journal of Botany* 69, no. 8, (September 1982): 1347.

flowering plants or ferns, a trend Rudolph supposes translates from Victorian Britain, not unlike the Victorian interest in the language of flowers.[48] Handbooks offering indices of the language of flowers proliferated, like Anne Pratt's c. late 1800s volume *The Language of Flowers: The Association of Flowers.* Here, known abortifacient plants are associated with cultural meanings: pennyroyal is recorded as meaning "Flee away," parsley translates to "Feasting. Useful knowledge," while dittany of Crete means simply "birth."[49] The common names of plants that have been associated with abortion since the early modern period through the colonization of the United States and its time as an early republic have, by the late nineteenth century, become associated with largely negative social affects, though their status as mostly flowering plants afforded them potential attention by women seeking to exercise their burgeoning botanical knowledge with acceptably aesthetic blooms.

Of course, the above paragraph speaks primarily to the experience of middle- and upper-class white women embarking on botanical learning and flower arranging as social activities, and does not account for the continued use of herbal medicine by working class women, immigrant women, or Indigenous or enslaved people for whom kitchen gardens and foraging were part of medical practice. But on the level of the broader American cultural imagination, as botany became a distinct field of study,

[48] Rudolph, "Women in Botany," 1350.
[49] Anne Pratt, *The Language of Flowers* (London: Simpkin, Marshall, Hamilton, Kent; Biodiversity Heritage Library, 18--?), 27 & 20, https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/item/229894#page/1/mode/1up.

plants carried social connotations that informed the use of specific flowers in the cultural imaginary. That these connotations also circulated in the service of a Victorian-minded social code that upheld strict moral codes of behavior suggests a predisposition by those fluent in the language of flowers to uphold or foster a stigma regarding abortion and contraception, at least to a public audience.

Even if negative associations with herbs and plants known to be abortifacients existed, the general public could freely speak, write, and communicate about these plants and their abortifacient properties until 1873. Before 1873, there were no federal legal restrictions about how to write, speak, or communicate about abortion and contraception. But following the sweeping Comstock Act, the circulation of all information about abortion and contraception was deemed immoral and illegal. The Comstock Act at its core is anti-obscenity legislation that defines birth control and abortion—along with pornography, erotica, and detailed medical texts regarding reproduction—as obscene and therefore subject to criminalization. The Comstock Act is unique in that it bans not only the writing about abortion, but also the tools by which abortion is effected—any tools, powders, plants, etc. that could be utilized to produce an abortion.[50] Those who wanted to communicate about abortion—its availability, the names of those who could provide abortion, recipes for how to

[50] Library of Congress: American Memory. "A Century of Lawmaking for a New Nation: U.S. Congressional Documents and Debates, 1774-1875." Statutes at Large, 42nd Congress, 3rd Session, 598-600. http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=llsl&fileName=017/llsl017.db&recNum=639

administer an abortion, etc.—were legally barred from doing so. This, of course, did not stop the circulation of information about abortion, but the Comstock Act forced the use of a more creative vocabulary in discussing abortion, a vocabulary that bridges the domestic sphere of the home (in opposition to a hospital) in association with the natural world. In *Undomesticated Ground: Recasting Nature as a Feminist Space* (2000), Stacey Alaimo argues that "nature, then, is undomesticated both in the sense that it figures as a space apart from the domestic and in the sense that it is untamed and thus serves as a model for female insurgency."[51] Instead of imagining nature as a space or model for "female insurgency," plant knowledges allowed those circulating information about abortion a convenient, nature-based code by which to communicate about abortion while evading censure. In this way, nature remains rooted to a domestic space of women's work in providing abortion—using knowledge that is both medical and botanical—adjacent to institutionalized fields of study, yet in the domestic sphere. It is by rhetorically claiming an association with the home in careful balance with the authority of the hospital (and regular medicine) that women circulate and practice their plant knowledge and herbal abortion. Restell conjured a sense of folk remedies in her early advertisements, but by the time the Comstock Act came into being, she could no longer rely on codes to conceal the power of her reputation. Crumpler offers numerous herbal remedies and recipes in her advice book,

[51] Alaimo, *Undomesticated Ground*, 16.

but instead of directly condemning abortion like other "female physician" publications of the time, she instead uses the language of morality to condemn vulgarity, an intentionally vague yet troubling move. Jewett uses plant knowledge across her literary oeuvre, and while she did not write explicitly about abortion, many of the specific plants referenced in her fiction contribute to the code of plant knowledge that flourished in response to the censure of information about abortion. Each of these writers utilize different genres, in different professions, to different ends, but all three write around the topic of abortion and use herbal medicine and plant knowledges to make public claims to professional authority.

The Evasive Rhetoric of Abortion Advertisements

In the late 1830s, advertisements for "female pills" and "preventative powders" lined the pages of New York's *Sun* and *Herald* newspapers. These ads—addressed to married women, but targeted at and read by a much wider audience—used coded language to communicate the availability of abortion in New York City. In the midst of a murky legal landscape, in which the termination of a pregnancy was legal before "quickening" and difficult to prosecute afterwards, everyday women commercialized their knowledge of medical abortion and abortifacients, advertising their products in code to married women, yet providing relief from potential scandal

to most who called for assistance.[52] "Quickening" describes the moment in pregnancy at which the pregnant person felt the fetus move, or "quicken," in the womb, which typically happened at "approximately the fourth month of pregnancy."[53] Prior to quickening, if a person determined that they were pregnant, they could terminate the pregnancy with knowledge obtained in their community, from their parents or a lay healer. This could be done without fear of criminal reprisal or judgement, because before quickening, it held that a fetus was not yet "ensouled," and thus life had not begun.[54] This view of pregnancy—notably, one that put the pregnant person themself entirely in control of determining their own pregnancy's beginning or potential termination—changed over the course of the nineteenth century. In the first half of the nineteenth century, quickening was the foundation of most states' abortion laws—from quickening onwards, the termination of pregnancy was considered an abortion. Legislation on abortion had yet to be incorporated into federal law, leaving individual states to determine their own stances on abortion and contraception. New York City, the booming center of industry, immigration, and innovation, became the stage for the legislation and criminalization of abortion that would become the model for the entire

[52] In his biography of Madame Restell, Browder notes that abortion was banned in the 1828 New York state criminal code, though this ban was effectively unenforceable due to the legal deference to quickening, which placed the determination of pregnancy in the power of the pregnant person. Browder's biography is an interesting and important artifact despite being inaccurate and sensational in places. See Clifford Browder, *The Wickedest Woman in New York: Madame Restell, the abortionist* (Camden, CT: Archon Books, 1988), 13-14.
[53] Reagan, *When Abortion Was a Crime,* 8.
[54] Reagan, *When Abortion Was a Crime,* 7.

country by the century's end.[55]

The most infamous of New York's abortion providers—and perhaps the most notorious figure in nineteenth-century American abortion history—was Madame Restell. Born Ann Trow, Restell immigrated from England with her first husband and young child. After becoming a widower and new wife in quick succession, she assumed the business persona of "Madame Restell" in her late twenties and began providing abortions with the support and partnership of her second husband, Charles Lohman, who operated a printing press alongside Restell's business. Lohman used his press to publish tracts of medical advice that morally and philosophically supported Restell's services, and extolled his freethinking opinions to boot.[56] The Lohmans effectively operated a one-stop shop—creating their own marketing and medical advice media under assumed names using Charles' printing press, and providing powders and potions as well as both medication and surgical abortions using Restell's "female physician" persona. Restell's business soon captivated the entire city of New

[55] For more on the role of immigration on the criminalization of abortion, see Beisel, *Imperiled Innocents: Anthony Comstock and Family Reproduction in Victorian* America; Mohr, *Abortion in America: The Origins and Evolutions of National Policy, 1800*-1900; and Carlson, *The Crimes of Womanhood: Defining Femininity in a Court of Law.*

[56] Browder, *The Wickedest Woman,* 77. Browder notes that Charles Lohman was arrested on September 15, 1847 for publishing Mauriceau's *The Married Woman's Private Medical Companion* in May of that year. Browder also notes that Lohman published under the assumed name of Dr. A. M. Mauriceau, assuming, like his wife, a medical title and a French name. Charles Lohman was a radical thinker, and he also supported freethinkers like Charles Knowlton, who vocally advocated for contraceptive use in his 1832 book, *The Fruits of Philosophy.* To be sure, some of the freethinkers of this time voiced ideas using language that is eerily similar, intentionally or not, to what would be adopted later in the eugenics movement, so any support of contraception should be read carefully and treated cautiously.

York. What began as a small office expanded over just under four decades into a widely publicized outfit with an office on Fifth Avenue.

Restell, in turn, became the poster-woman for abortion in nineteenth-century New York, and the smear campaigns waged by moralists against her and her business popularized a series of tropes and rhetoric that would haunt the abortion rights movement for a century. Tellingly, the 1873 Comstock Act was created partly to target Restell, as Anthony Comstock viewed her as a kind of personal white whale. Restell did not invent the vocabulary of abortion codes—an ancient vocabulary of "bringing on menses" and "female troubles"—but she mastered the art of using these codes to market her knowledge of abortion to achieve a wide reach, which ultimately made her a large target. Restell's cultural landscape shifted over the course of the nineteenth century, as she lived and worked through a tumultuous period in American history: her career lasted from 1839 until her death in 1878, thereby spanning the Civil War and weathering burgeoning industrialization, rises in immigration, religious revivals, spiritualist movements, and the institutionalization of the medical profession with an almost Enlightenment-inspired dedication to science and fact. Though Restell was the most notorious abortion provider in the nineteenth-century, she was far from the only one in the United States, let alone the island of Manhattan.

What is striking in Restell's story is her appeal to professionalization and the open marketing of her abortion services, aided by her husband's printing press.

Restell effectively turned abortion from something discussed at home, a private piece of knowledge to be shared and practiced as needed within trusted communities, into a public commodity, a service to be openly discussed and rendered in exchange for profit, and from this profit Restell in particular became a spectacle.[57] The demand for Restell's services can be traced to any number of factors—one potentially being the rise in immigration and urbanization in the nineteenth century, which pulled young women away from their families and into the workforce before such home-grown knowledge of contraception and abortion could be passed down.[58] But what is unique about Restell is her consolidation of her knowledge of abortifacients, chemicals, and abortion procedures into a brand, a brand that gained recognition and power through her masterful use of the vocabulary of abortion codes, which she wielded in home offices working parallel to the burgeoning institutionalization of medicine. Restell used this coded language to play two games at once: communicating her knowledge of abortion to her potential customers and claiming her authority in wielding and

[57] Though Restell was not the only abortion provider in New York to market her services in these specific ways, she is, as noted, the most notorious and infamous "abortionist" (a word with pejorative connotations and thus not used in the main text of the chapter). As such, she serves as an individual case study for her burgeoning profession.

[58] Here, I'm thinking of Theodore Dreiser's *An American Tragedy* (1925), in which Dreiser depicts a failed romance between a young couple, Clyde and Roberta, that ends in Clyde's murder of Roberta after she fails to procure a, by that time, illegal abortion. The two met through their work at the town factory, where Roberta works away from her farming family. The novel was inspired by a 1906 court case about a similar murder. This estrangement from family-based medical knowledge appears even in contemporary examples, like Kali Fajardo-Anstine's story "All Her Names," in which a young woman tells her grandmother of her first abortion in contemporary Denver, and her grandmother scolds her for not asking about alternative methods of self-managing an abortion that do not require a hospital visit. I discuss "All Her Names" at length in the conclusion.

profiting from this knowledge.

Chronicling the story of Madame Restell is inherently difficult in that she left very little of her own voice behind. Despite the fact that reimaginings of nineteenth-century abortion providers has become a sub-genre unto itself, Restell herself remains a shadowy figure, haunting the newspaper clippings and trial transcripts that bear her assumed name.[59] Indeed, even the transcripts of her 1847 criminal trial, sold to slander her character and pander to vice suppressors and moralists, lack any record of her own voice, as she did not testify on her own behalf.[60] Plus, though her name appeared in many advertisements and other documents, there's no certainty that anything published under her name was actually issued by her alone.[61]

Clifford Browder's 1988 biography of Restell, *The Wickedest Woman in New York: Madame Restell, the abortionist,* consists of information gleaned from these

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[59] The story of Restell haunts contemporary literature, from the abortions performed "Off Harrison" in John Irving's *The Cider House Rules* (1985), to more recent, romanticized reimaginings of Restell's life in Marge Piercy's *Sex Wars* (2005) and Kate Manning's *My Notorious Life* (2013).

[60] Such documents include *Trial of Madame Restell, alias Ann Lohman, For Abortion and Causing the Death of Mrs. Purdy*, published in 1841 by anonymous; *Madame Restell: An Account of Her Life and Horrible Practices Together with Prostitution in New York, Its Extent, Causes, and Effects Upon Society,* published in 1847 by Charles Smith; and *Wonderful Trial of Caroline Lohman, alias Restell, With Speeches of Counsel, Charge of Court, and Verdict of Jury,* published in 1847 by the National Police Gazette. The first document listed concerns Restell's trial for Mrs. Purdy, which was overturned due to a faulty acquisition of evidence, and the latter two concern Restell's trial for providing an abortion to Maria Bodine, for which she was found guilty and served time incarcerated on Blackwell's Island.

[61] Browder claims that Restell's husband, Charles, wrote all of the ads for their practice, but provides no evidence to support this claim other than his own hunch, though he does note that her first 1839 ad copies the first sentence of Robert Dale Owens's 1832 *Moral Physiology; Or, a Brief and Plain Treatise on the Population Question.* Browder notes that both Lohmans were freethinkers who read the latest of the day on the "population question," though we don't know if their own beliefs coincide with the eugenics philosophies that such a term often codes.

various documents as well as deed, prison, and property records. Browder's biography is often as sensational as the nineteenth-century clippings about Restell, but it offers a general timeline of Restell's career. According to Browder, Restell's first advertisement ran in the March 18, 1839 issue of the New York *Sun*.[62] Her early ads, from 1839 through the early 1840s, followed a basic formula. They begin either with a direct appeal to married women—in order to remain "respectable" to possible censors and moralists—or with specific attention to the products being advertised, that is, "female pills," or "female preventative powders." The following ad from the April 13, 1840 issue of the New York *Herald*, follows the former approach:

> TO MARRIED WOMEN–MADAME RESTELL, *Female Physician,* is happy to have it in her power to say that since the introduction into this country, about a year ago, of her celebrated Preventative Powders for married ladies, whose health forbids a too rapid increase of family; hundreds have availed the [mistress] of their use, with a success and satisfaction that has at once dispelled the fears and doubts of the most timid and skeptical. (emphasis original)[63]

Through a long succession of ads, Restell developed her reputation such that simply her name alone, capitalized and in bold, would eventually communicate her abortion

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[62] Browder, *The Wickedest Woman,* 9.
[63] *Morning herald. [volume]* (New York [N.Y.]), "To married women—" April 13, 1840. *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers.* From Lib. of Congress. https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83030312/1840-04-13/ed-1/seq-9/.

and contraception services. But if her name failed as an individual marker, her French honorific would suffice to communicate her services, as French names were code for contraceptive services, as were German and Portuguese names.[64] While the ad's address to married women communicates the respectability of Restell's services, any reader could pick up the ad and divine, via its codes and language regarding the regulation of family size, the kind of procedure on offer.

The code foregrounded in this and many other ads by Restell is her claim of the title, "Female Physician." At the time of this ad's publication in 1840, laws requiring specific medical credentials were about as effective as those legislating abortion—which is to say, quite vague and unenforceable. The American Medical Association had yet to be founded and would not be for eight more years. People in the United States were considering alternative methods like "irregular" medicines and even more outright "quack" medical treatments, all of which contrasted with the practice of certified "regular" doctors who themselves often engaged in ethically questionable practices in order to achieve their expertise.[65] Madame Restell, then, had

[64] Linda Gordon notes, in more detail: "The denomination 'French' indicated a contraceptive device (a "French letter" was a condom), while Portuguese "denoted an abortifacient." Linda Gordon, *The Moral Property of Women: A History of Birth Control Politics in America*, 3rd ed. (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2002), 26.

[65] As a reminder: Irregular medicine refers to an alternative to "regular" medicine, that is, medicine practiced by certified practitioners. Regular and irregular medical practitioners were difficult to verify as medical institutions and associations began to form and dictate various requirements in education and curriculum. Quack medical treatments refers to the scam medical solutions. For more, see Justine S. Murison, "Quacks, Nostrums, and Miraculous Cures: Narratives of Medical Modernity in the Nineteenth-Century United States," *Literature and Medicine* 32, no. 2, Fall 2014.

plenty of company in forging not just her name, but also her assumed medical credentials. Yet what is of note here is her gendering of these credentials: she claims the mantle of not just "Physician," but specifically "Female Physician," where "female" served to refer to her expertise in reproductive bodies, and also to her own gender. As Sharla Fett notes:

> Middling to wealthy white Americans in the antebellum period generally recognized two parallel sources of medical authority. The first, rooted in colonial domestic medicine practices and strengthened by newer antebellum ideals of motherhood, was the moral authority of white women as domestic medical practitioners guided by maternal interest. White doctors made a second claim to authority vested in learned knowledge, class standing, professional training, and male entitlement.[66]

Restell's ads bridge this divide, as her assumed name and title work together to claim the moral authority of heterosexual, married white European womanhood alongside the authority of the medical profession. But to return to Restell's April 1840 advertisement, the ad does not simply rely on the associations underlying the term "Female Physician"; it also details the lineage of her medical knowledge:

> … for notwithstanding that for twenty years they [Preventative Powders] have

[66] Sharla Fett, *Working Cures: Healing, Health, and Power on Southern Slave Plantations* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 134.

been used in Europe with invariable success, (first introduced by the celebrated Midwife and Female Physician Madame Restell, the grandmother of the advertiser, who made this subject her particular and especial study) …[67]

Restell pairs her credentials with a backstory—likely fabricated or embellished, but perhaps not—of knowledge passed down a matrilineal line, from grandmother to granddaughter, from "Midwife and Female Physician" to Female Physician alone. Restell's authority rests ultimately on the efficacy of her medicine, but the air of ancient knowledge, of ancestral ties to European folk midwifery coupled with medical expertise, serves to reassure the audience of "married women" that their health will be in good hands. It is telling, though, that even as Restell emphasizes the long history of her knowledge, rooted in the midwifery tradition, she chooses to cast herself as "Female Physician," relying first and foremost on her assumed gendered medical credentials. As Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English outline in their canonical study, *Witches, Midwives, and Nurses: A History of Women Healers,* midwives and lay healers often relied on herbal remedies and preventative care rather than drastic or invasive surgical methods preferred by "regular" physicians.[68] By invoking midwifery, Restell cleverly hints at an ancient connection to herbal medicine, a wink to her audience that endows her with a certain authority and lineage

[67] *Morning herald. [volume]* (New York [N.Y.]), "To married women—" April 13, 1840. *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers.*
[68] Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English, *Witches, Midwives, & Nurses: A History of Women Healers*, 2nd ed. (New York: Feminist Press, 2010), 68.

to an old country's ancient knowledge.

Restell's choice to link her medical knowledge with an association to Europe works as adjacent to other marketing tactics women used in the nineteenth century to claim medical authority. In the early nineteenth century, Charity Shaw, a white New England woman, dubbed herself an "Indian doctress" to sell her medicines, supposedly inspired by Native American remedies. As will be discussed in the fourth section of this chapter, Shaw's ads played up her (likely fabricated or embellished) association with Native Americans, and she positioned herself as a chosen successor to Indigenous knowledge that relied on stereotypes of Native Americans as inherently closer to nature. Alternatively, by 1875, Lydia Pinkham published advertisements that played up the homemade elements of her "Vegetable Compound" without attention to an ancestral or national knowledge, celebrating her product's origins firmly in a more general, universalized domestic sphere.[69] Restell crafted her advertisements carefully, betting on her audience to trust an English midwife over the other advertisement narratives boasting knowledge from Native Americans or American home brews.

Restell's ads ran regularly in the New York papers, excluding a brief break from 1845-1850, during which she served time in jail and reassessed her business. As her career continued, Restell retained her claim to the mantle of physician, but she

[69]Jason Peter Zieger, "Rise of the 'Indian Doctor: Charity Shaw and the Marketing of Indian Medicine" (MA thesis, College of William & Mary, 2008) 52; For more information on Lydia Pinkham's company, see Sarah Stage, *Female Complaints: Lydia Pinkham and the Business of Women's Medicine* (New York: Norton, 1979).

also dabbled with titles such as "professor of midwifery," which lends the authority of an institution—academia, scholarship, and the like—to the practice of midwifery.[70] Restell continued to publish advertisements for her products and services following the Comstock Act. Her death by suicide in 1878 sparked a media frenzy, as she died rather than face a trial in which she would undoubtedly have been found guilty, seemingly horrified by the prospect of spending the rest of her life in prison. Though Restell's death served as an infamous and notable warning of the dire consequences of the Comstock Act—further sensationalized as such by conservative newspapers—advertisements for "preventative powders" continued to circulate, and later advertisements made explicit the link that Restell kept tentative at best between plant knowledge and abortion. For example, this ad for Chichester's English Diamond Brand Pennyroyal Pills appeared in newspapers beginning in 1881 through the early twentieth century.[71] The ad, pictured below, features a plain sketch of a woman's face, and includes such codes as "Relief for Ladies" and the anonymous authority of "10,000 testimonials."

[70] Browder, *The Wickedest Woman in New York*, 126.
[71] *Chichester Chemical Co. vs. U.S.* 49 F.2d 516 (1931). For more information see "The Consumer's Protection Under the Federal Pure Food and Drug Act," *Columbia Law Review* 32, no. 4, April 1932, 720-736.

[Figure 1] Clipping from *The evening world [volume]*. (New York, N.Y.), January 23, 1894. *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers.* Library Of Congress. https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83030193/1894-01-23/ed-4/seq-8/. Accessed September 22, 2021.

While Restell linked her knowledge of preventative powders and abortion to her grandmother's skill as a "midwife and female physician," Chichester's bypasses any familial narrative or hints of plant knowledge and instead boldly names their pills after the most infamous of abortifacients, pennyroyal. Chichester's makes explicit the link between pennyroyal and "relief for ladies," by using the language of flowers not to communicate social affects, but rather the effects of their product for married and unmarried women alike. Chichester's bold marketing strategy included posting ads in not just newspapers, but also publications like the 1886 issue of *Vick's Floral Guide,* an immensely popular seed guide that notably did not include pennyroyal among the

plants for sale.[72]

While Restell and numerous other women developed their medical knowledge into an abortion or midwifery practice throughout the nineteenth century, still others parleyed their skills into more traditional avenues of medical education. The nineteenth century saw not only the institutionalization of medicine into professional associations, but also the reification of biases against anyone not a white man who sought to gain certified knowledge and entry via institutionalized credentials. Part of the formation of these medical institutions was the enforcement or concretization of medical norms: the norms of white male doctors, and the ostracization of those deemed "others," that is, white women and people of color. So began a struggle for medical power, to overcome or strategically play up differences in order to achieve entry into credentialed authority and the ability to gain and practice medical knowledge.

The Stakes of Nature for "Female Physicians"

Though Restell never published a memoir or other life writing, many notable early women physicians published sketches of their lives for wide audiences. Indeed,

[72] James Vick's Sons (Rochester, NY). *Vick's Floral Guide* (Rochester, NY: James Vick's Sons; Biodiversity Heritage Library 1886) https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/item/154548#page/1/mode/1up. See also "James Vick and His Illustrated Floral Guides." *From the Stacks* (blog), *New York Historical Society Museum and Library*. April 17, 2013. https://blog.nyhistory.org/james-vick-and-his-illustrated-floral-guides/.

the memoir of a woman physician became a genre in and of itself, and women physicians often took the opportunity to use their memoirs to castigate abortion.[73] Elizabeth Blackwell, the first woman in the United States to earn a medical degree, wrote a memoir of her life and medical training that also explicitly discusses Madame Restell. As Susan Wells explains in her study of women physicians' rhetoric, "all women physicians knew of Madame Restell, the New York abortionist whose reputation as a 'female physician' made their own work morally suspect."[74] Wells notes, too, that Blackwell's decision to earn her medical degree was in part a reaction against Restell's practice. Blackwell states as much in the following oft-cited passage from *Pioneer Work in Opening the Medical Profession to Women* (1895):

> There was at that time a certain Madame Restell flourishing in New York. This person was a noted abortionist, and known all over the country. She was a woman of great ability, and defended her course in the public papers. She made a large fortune, drove a fine carriage, had a pew in a fashionable church, and though often arrested, was always bailed out by her patrons. She was known distinctively as a 'female physician,' a term exclusively applied at that time to those women who carried on her vile occupation.
>
> Now, I have always felt a great reverence for maternity—the mighty

[73] Carolyn Skinner, *Women Physicians and Professional Ethos in Nineteenth-Century America* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2014), 82.
[74] Susan Wells, *Out of the Dead House: Nineteenth-Century Women Physicians and the Writing of Medicine* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2001), 32.

> creative power which more than any other human faculty seemed to bring womanhood nearer the Divine.
>
> The gross perversion and destruction of motherhood by the abortionist filled me with indignation, and awakened active antagonism. That the honourable term 'female physician' should be exclusively applied to those women who carried on this shocking trade seemed to me a horror. It was an utter degradation of what might and should become a noble position for women.[75]

Wells suggests that Blackwell had to "overcome her repugnance for the body" in order to become a physician, despite her pronounced respect for the "Divine" motherhood. In other words, Blackwell strategically voices the morally acceptable amount of repulsion towards the practice of abortion as well as a similarly respectable admiration for the reproducing, maternal body. This rhetorical balance gave her the authority of maternal white womanhood that Fett describes as one of the pillars of acceptable medical authority in the nineteenth century—this despite the fact that she was neither a wife nor a mother.[76]

Blackwell goes on to use Restell's example to dismiss all abortion providers

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[75] Elizabeth Blackwell, *Pioneer Work in Opening the Medical Profession to Women* (Hastings: K. Barry, 1895. *Nineteenth Century Collections Online*), 29. https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/ARVRFF693141501/NCCO?u=umd_um&sid=bookmark-NCCO&xid=7aa358f2&pg=3. Also cited in Wells, *Out of the Dead House*, 32.
[76] Wells, *Out of the Dead House*, 32.

more generally, past and present, for their "utter degradation" of the title "female physician." Though Restell had been dead for almost two decades at the time of Blackwell's writing, the coded language she used to advertise abortion services clearly haunted Blackwell's memory. Blackwell admits to knowing this code, even as she rejects abortion in order to gain a more powerful position in the medical field. Her memoir thus shows how the social and moral role of a woman physician takes shape, by demarcating the spaces she believes women can occupy: deified motherhood, contrasted with the abomination that she and the moralists saw in Restell, but also, as Margaret Jay Jessee argues, the "third space" of her own right to a child-free life in service of a career in medicine.[77]

In contrast to Blackwell's copious legacy of lectures, advice books, and autobiographical sketches, Rebecca Lee Crumpler, the first African American woman to earn a medical degree in the United States, published just one known book: *A Book of Medical Discourses* (1883). Crumpler's book is not an autobiography or a testament to her many years working to gain entry to her field. Her Introduction, which is barely four pages, gives a brief explanation of her medical credentials and an even briefer life story. Crumpler stakes her authority on her travels, her education,

[77] Margaret Jay Jessee, "'The Third Sex': Nineteenth-Century Women Physicians in Queer, Liminal Literary Spaces," in *Liminality, Hybridity, and American Women's Literature*, ed. K. J. Jacobson, et. al. (Cham: Palgrave MacMillon, 2018), 168. Jessee further develops her study of Blackwell in *Female Physicians in American Literature: Abortion in 19th-Century Literature and Culture*, (New York: Routledge, 2022), specifically the Introduction.

and her experience in tending to members of her community. Her medical advice in the rest of the volume seeks primarily to correct the mistakes and common misunderstandings she sees in her daily work as a physician. Crumpler begins her book with a dedication: "To Mothers, Nurses, and all who may desire to mitigate the afflictions of the human race, this book is prayerfully offered." As this dedication suggests, the book is steeped in Christian faith and rhetoric. Crumpler begins her Introduction with this expression of gratitude:

> All honor is due to a far-seeing legislation which has recognized the importance of fitting woman for the great and natural office of nurse, or doctress of medicine; for by it facilities are offered to each member of a community for the promotion of Christian engagement.[78]

Here, Crumpler strategically appeals to the good graces of the institutions that have granted her credentials, before offering her own preferred credential, "doctress of medicine." She does not offer her perspective on the contest that Blackwell stages over the title of "female physician," such that the ghost of Madame Restell doesn't seem to haunt Crumpler—at least not here. Instead, she sidesteps the loaded code and styles herself with her own title, "doctress of medicine," even as she locates her position as both a "natural office," and indeed a Christian one, still writing against the

[78] Rebecca Lee Crumpler, *A Book of Medical Discourses: In Two Parts* (Boston: Cashman, Keating, 1883. Internet Archive; U.S. National Library of Medicine, accessed September 27, 2021), 1. https://archive.org/details/67521160R.nlm.nih.gov.

critiques of otherness directed at anyone not a white man who entered the medical profession:

> That woman should study the mechanism of the human structure to better enable her to protect life, before assuming the office of nurse, few will agree. But that good service has been performed by those who were entirely ignorant of it, every one must admit. In my own experience, there was much that to me was obscure, yet, strange to say, I never met with an accident. A kind Father directed every thought in behalf of the helpless.
>
> I believe matrimony to be a divine institution; and that the results arising from a union of the sexes should be considered an important study for each party concerned…. Indeed I desire that my book shall be as a primary reader in the hands of every woman; and yet none the less suited to any who may be conversant with all branches of medical science.[79]

Crumpler positions doctors, nurses, and mothers in the same endeavor—that of protecting life. She uses her position and authority to assert the divinity of both matrimony and motherhood, positions that would be accepted and understood given the pervasive Cult of True Womanhood in the late nineteenth century. Yet Crumpler differs from Blackwell in that she uses this authority to dispense medical advice in addition to moral advice. The last line of the above passage is particularly striking: "I

[79] Crumpler, *A Book of Medical Discourses,* 3-4.

desire my book shall be as a primary reader in the hands of *every woman*," suggesting that all women, regardless of class or race, should have the right and opportunity to gain knowledge about how to care for themselves and their child so as to live up to this divine mandate. Of course, the difficulty of producing this opportunity is to write a book that can circulate without catching the eye of any censors.

Correspondingly, Crumpler begins with the chapter "How to Marry," a useful way to sidestep the subject of contraceptives and abortifacients, subjects that were censored and liable for criminal prosecution by the time of her book's publication in 1883. The chapter, which obviously upholds the heteronormative structures of American life, nonetheless takes as its subject a sociological rather than biological concern, usefully expanding the audience's understanding of what is involved in a "medical discourse." From general advice on the best age for young people to marry, Crumpler then moves to the subject of pregnancy and the care of infants. The former is awarded just a few scant paragraphs, including the following warning:

> Many of the teas, sweats, baths, and potions that are effective in relieving a cold will be wholly ineffective when pregnancy is certain… In all cases of suppression of the monthly flow after marriage, a careful physician should be at once consulted, if there is any reason to doubt that it is caused by pregnancy. Suffice it to say that too frequent physicking and over-indulgence in intoxicating liquors and tobacco, will cause sickly diminutive offspring, to

say nothing of premature births.[80]

Crumpler glosses over both the subject of determining a pregnancy and any question of what to do about an unwanted pregnancy. Interestingly, the first sentence alludes to the many medicinal properties of plants known to be abortifacients; for pennyroyal, parsley, and other abortifacients have numerous uses beyond their abortifacient properties, most notably in reducing indigestion, fevers, or symptoms of common colds.[81] Crumpler seems to acknowledge these uses as she consciously advises against the use of plants in these preparations, as she claims they are "ineffective when pregnancy is certain." This sentence, brief as it is, indicates that Crumpler is aware of the use of herbal abortifacients as teas, sweats, and baths, and second, she does not trust these methods, calling them "ineffective." After she glosses over this subtle but important warning, Crumpler skips the mechanisms of birth and moves on to the care of an already-birthed infant. By telling her audience what is dangerous to continuing a pregnancy, Crumpler—intentionally or not—provides clues as to what could disrupt an unwanted pregnancy already underway. Indeed, in the above paragraph, she includes a sentence about the "suppression of the monthly flow," a familiar euphemism referring to the missed period upon conception. This euphemism was often used as code by abortion providers to communicate that their procedures or

[80] Crumpler, *A Book of Medical Discourses*, 7.
[81] John Riddle, *Eve's Herbs*, pennyroyal: p. 46-47; juniper: 54-55; dittany: 56, the mint family, including parsley: 61-63.

products could rectify the problem of "suppressed flow" to produce abortion. Restell's ads speak to the resumption of the monthly flow, of "bringing on the menses," while Crumpler advises her readers to consult a "careful" physician, "if there is any reason to doubt that it [the suppression of the monthly flow] is caused by pregnancy." While Crumpler's unusual phrasing does not go so far as to bring back quickening as a metric to empower her readers to determine the events of their own bodies, she does provide some wiggle room here—warning against what harms a pregnancy and what she insists is ineffective "once a pregnancy is certain," while at the same time not going out of her way to lecture or rail against abortion as Blackwell does. In Crumpler's measured text, there is room to doubt whether the suppression of monthly flow is due to pregnancy—a small and perhaps unintentional grace, but one that allows her to evade censors and maintain her readership while also avoiding any perceived slight to the divinity of marriage and motherhood.

Crumpler's advice book includes herbal remedies, as she saw her book as working to aid the "prevention of pauperism" by saving readers the expense of hospital procedures, but her recipes primarily offer relief for post-partum and infants' ailments, and she does not make any mention of herbal abortifacients. [82] She includes, for instance, an herbal recipe to encourage the flow of milk in the breasts, a relatively common yet painful part of nursing:

[82] Crumpler's correspondence as quoted in Wells, *Out of the Deadhouse*, 54.

> Steep half an ounce of Indian Posy, or Life Everlasting herb, in a pint of water. Oil the hands, and bathe in the same way I have described, with the decoction as hot as can be borne, the patient being in an easy, half sitting posture. In the intervals of rest, she should drink a teacupful quite hot, with or without sugar…. relief is sure if the work is patiently performed and courageously endured…. The herb has no more specific action than that of relaxing the system through the aid of the absorbents or sweat glands. It relaxes the skin, and is safe to drink as a diet to increase the flow of milk.[83]

Crumpler's solution reads as part recipe, part physical therapy. She explains how much of the herb to use, how to prepare the tea, how to administer the tea to the patient, and what the herb in question accomplishes in the body. Such detail is much different from the scant information available in Madame Restell's advertisements, and for several reasons. Most obviously, Crumpler's herbal tea is intended to help stimulate milk flow for breastfeeding, an entirely legal and morally acceptable activity, while the services advertised in Restell's notices were tenuously legal at best. Second, Restell's financial security rested on her exclusive reputation; she never communicated what exactly each ingredient accomplishments, in part to maintain trade secrets, and additionally because such disclosure might cause the components of her products to be banned. Crumpler, however, aims to heal the patient more

[83] Crumpler, *A Book of Medical Discourses,* 22.

holistically, enabling her to live her daily life and accomplish her daily tasks with optimal comfort, efficiency, and health. Ultimately, both women must tread carefully, but differently, in their explanations of their services, lest the censors come calling about obscene contraceptive advice or the practice of midwifery, accusations that could threaten the revocation of medical authority or credentials. Crumpler's explanation of specific herbs helps to enhance her authority and trustworthiness, but she can only speak so specifically about subjects that do not place her work at the mercy of the censors, or threaten the twinned sentimental and scientific roots of her authority as "doctress of medicine."

It's worth examining Crumpler's plant knowledge more closely here. Crumpler names "Indian posy, or Life Everlasting herb" as the key ingredient for her tea. Life everlasting herb has a rich and full history. The herb is native to the Americas, and grows from Nova Scotia south through Florida, but has a robust cultural presence in the Carolina Lowcountry.[84] Crumpler uses two names for a common, freely available, native herb, prioritizing the names by which the herb is commonly referenced as opposed to any scientific name, as she utilizes her plant knowledge to increase access to the specific properties of an abundant native plant. In

[84] Alice Henkel, *Wild Medicinal Plants of the United States* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Agriculture Bureau of Plant Industry Bulletin 89, 1906. Biodiversity Heritage Library), 34. https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/item/131503#page/3/mode/1up Michele Roldan-Shaw, "Wayback Lowcountry: Life Everlasting." (blog) *Local Life.* https://www.locallifesc.com/wayback-lowcountry-life-everlasting/

most writing about the life everlasting herb today, the herb is noted for its properties relieving symptoms of a cold and for its pleasant syrup-like smell. Tellingly, these properties of life everlasting group it with the plants that serve as relief for common colds when brewed as teas or baths that Crumpler earlier advised against due to their inefficacy "once a pregnancy is certain." Yet Crumpler's use of life everlasting herb here is one part of a more holistic recipe to increase the flow of breast milk, a medical condition that is rarely mentioned or discussed at length even in mainstream media today. How might Crumpler have come across the knowledge of this plant's use as a remedy for this particular ailment? From her family, her community, her school? These questions are difficult if not impossible to solve, given the lack of material evidence left by Crumpler, but we do know that Crumpler circulated specific, accessible plant knowledge to her readers in order to help empower them to seek their own medical cures for common ailments relating to their experience as mothers.

As Crumpler's stated concern with "preventing pauperism" suggests, she believed that the needs of her community were best served by alleviating poverty. Crumpler's mission foregrounds the dual endeavors of reproductive justice and economic justice, as she saw her book as an aid to her Black neighbors whose lives were not respected by medical institutions, something she saw first-hand when completing her field work in Richmond, Virginia immediately following the

"Confederate War," as she calls it.[85] It is clear that Crumpler's main concern is providing recipes and therapies that help women mother their children with dignity, full health, and comfort. Crumpler provides remedies that can be assembled and administered in the home using herbs and common materials, recipes that give her readers the authority to understand the workings of their own bodies and to avoid potentially dangerous and lethal visits to hospitals—run, mostly, by white men, notoriously including J. Marion Sims, the "father of modern gynecology," who had made his major advances in the field by experimenting on enslaved Black women without consent or anesthesia.

Interestingly, at the close of Crumpler's book, she turns from specific medical advice to matters of morality, and rails not against abortion, as did Blackwell, but against the negative effects of "trashy" fiction, another popular target of Comstock's and other moralists, who railed against obscene literature with almost as much gusto as their crusade against abortion. Crumpler explains:

> Our Heavenly Father has provided a healing balm for every disease that man is liable to, and I am prepared to say that all diseases can be cured without the use of alcoholic stimulants. We have access to a large and varied field of remedies, both in the vegetable and mineral kingdoms, the virtues of which unfold to man in proportion to his possession of heavenly virtues.

[85] Crumpler, *A Book of Medical Discourses,* 2.

> Let me, in conclusion, appeal once more to the united efforts of mothers and fathers. Do not try to be blind when you are not. Can you not cut short the certain destruction that awaits your sons and daughters, through the influence of impressions gained by the constant perusal of fictitious, and, in many cases, corrupt library books? Will it not pay to prohibit those under age, or at least under fourteen, from reading even Sunday-School story-papers? We are aware many of them are given for the moral to be derived, but not more than one boy or girl in a hundred ever cares a fig for the moral.[86]

Here, the herbs and materials that Crumpler discussed in earlier recipes are now included in the larger scheme of a Heavenly Father's "vegetable and mineral kingdom." Far removed from this healing kingdom is the "corrupt" literature of the day, motivating Crumpler's call to censor immoral stories from young children and adolescents. She explains:

> Books on the laws of health from the proper source could never injure the mind and morals; but would, if read aloud in the family circle half as often as trashy novels are thumbed over, prove a blessing more lasting than gold.[87]

This sentence of course sets Crumpler's own book, a book of medical advice from a credible, degree-holding source, apart from the "trashy novels" that Comstock sought

[86] Crumpler, *A Book of Medical Discourses,* 117.
[87] Crumpler, *A Book of Medical Discourses,* 118-119.

to censor.[88] His crusade criminalized so much under one sweeping definition of "morality"—from erotica, pornography, and, eventually even *Ulysses,* to tools that produce abortion, contraceptives, and any pamphlets, books, or circulars that would instruct the reader how to perform or effect contraception and abortion. Crumpler uses language eerily similar to that of Comstock himself. And while this move is by no means as clear or explicit as Blackwell's eviscerating view of abortion and Madame Restell, the spirit is similar. Crumpler thus walks a careful line as she demonstrates her commitment to making general maternal and reproductive health information available to her audience, up to a very specific, though never named, point.

Jewett's Healers

Sarah Orne Jewett published steadily throughout the late nineteenth century and into the first years of the twentieth century. As such, Jewett's career spans some of the most crucial early years of anti-abortion legislation and prosecution in American history—spanning the Comstock Act, Restell's death, and the entry of women into the medical profession. Literary scholarship tends to focus on Jewett's

[88] For full text of the Comstock Act, see: Library of Congress: American Memory. "A Century of Lawmaking for a New Nation: U.S. Congressional Documents and Debates, 1774-1875." Statutes at Large, 42nd Congress, 3rd Session, 598-600. http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=llsl&fileName=017/llsl017.db&recNum=639

generic prowess in regionalism and local color, her attention to queer relationships between women and spinsters, and her deep knowledge of the landscapes of coastal Maine and New England. But by bringing these trends together in connection with her textually displayed plant knowledge, including that of herbal abortifacients, we can see how Jewett's works offer a way to trace plant knowledge and abortion through the professionalization of two key women characters: Nan Prince, protagonist of the novel *A Country Doctor* and Mrs. Almira Todd, the seemingly timeless herbalist who befriends the narrator of the Dunnet Landing stories. Both Nan and Mrs. Todd gain success as a doctor and herbalist, respectively. Jewett foregrounds the use of plant knowledge in both characters' trajectories in a way that is reminiscent of the implicit and explicit role of plant knowledge in abortion advertisements and Crumpler's advice book. This is not to say that Jewett's characters' trajectories are standard for all nineteenth century healers, credentialed doctors, or herbalists. This is simply to say that Jewett's stories follow characters as they accrue plant knowledge that leads them to practice medicine and utilize plants known to be abortifacients, and then they negotiate their newfound role as professional healers within their communities. Both Nan and Mrs. Todd use herbal medicine, the kind of medicine linked to a traditional, domestic midwifery that Madame Restell conjures in the backstory she gives herself in her advertisements; a kind of herbal medicine similar to that Crumpler advises in her recipes for teas and accessible remedies in her book.

Unlike either Restell or Crumpler, however, Jewett introduces a language of flowers into her fiction that explicitly links plant knowledge to abortifacients, along the lines of the ads for Chichester's pills.

Jewett's second novel, *A Country Doctor* (1884) has received much critical attention when grouped, as it often is, with other novels featuring women physicians of the same time period by William Dean Howells, Henry James, and Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, as well as less famous literary figures like Rebecca Harding Davis and Annie Nathan Meyer.[89] The figure of the women physician offered these writers a way to discuss the many changes at play in the nation at large. Yet even in this novel—ostensibly focused on Nan Prince's *Bildungsroman*-esque journey to become a woman physician—Jewett complicates the idea of medicine as solely located within the credentialed confines of regular medicine. [90] As if inspired by Restell's ad that locates her medical authority in her "midwife and Female Physician" ancestor, as well as Crumpler's herbal recipes that use the common names of accessible, native plants, Jewett provides Nan with both a traditional, stereotypical male doctor mentor and a woman herbalist as models for her life's work. While much of the novel is

[89] Such texts include William Dean Howell's *Dr. Breen's Practice* (1881), Elizabeth Stuart Phelps's *Doctor Zay* (1882), Henry James's *The Bostonians* (1886), Rebecca Harding Davis's *Kitty's Choice* (1874), and Annie Nathan Meyer's *Helen Brent, M.D.* (1892).

[90] There is some debate as to the genre of *A Country Doctor*—Margaret Jay Jessee argues: "The realist and regionalist genres cannot contain all of Jewett's argument. Crafting a literary thirdspace, the novel includes elements of autobiography, the realist novel, and a traditional *Bildungsroman*. Jewett negotiates the ambivalence of depicting women's actual lived experience and suggesting a better alternative by inserting the structure of a *Bildungsroman* within her realist novel." Jessee, ""The Third Sex": Nineteenth-Century Woman Physicians in Queer, Liminal Literary Spaces," 173.

concerned with Nan's training at the hands of kindly Dr. Leslie, it is bookended by cameo appearances of Mrs. Martin Dyer. A character of no real consequence to the plot, as much as any of Jewett's works are ever concerned with plot, Mrs. Martin is a neighbor of Mrs. Thatcher, Nan Prince's grandmother. It is at Mrs. Thatcher's house where *A Country Doctor* begins, as Mrs. Thatcher's daughter Adeline, long grown and moved away, arrives back at her mother's doorstep in a deathly state, carrying her own young daughter, Nan. Mrs. Martin is with Mrs. Thatcher upon Adeline's arrival; the two women, along with Mrs. Jane Dyer, had been telling ghost stories together. Jewett describes Adeline's arrival from three separate perspectives in the first three chapters, and amongst the calculated chaos, she describes Mrs. Martin's medical skill:

> Mrs. Martin had somehow found a chance amidst all the confusion to ascend to her garden in quest of some useful remedies in the shape of herbs… Next to the doctor himself, she was the authority on all medical subjects for that neighborhood, and it was some time since her skill had been needed.[91]

Though the doctor has been called to aid Adeline, we see Mrs. Martin's work and medical authority first, not unlike how Mrs. Todd's medical authority is prioritized and placed in opposition to her rival, the doctor's, expertise in the first scene of *The Country of the Pointed Firs.* Neither Dr. Leslie nor Mrs. Martin's expertise can save

[91] Sarah Orne Jewett, *Novels & Stories: Deephaven, A Country Doctor, The Country of the Pointed Firs, Dunnet Landing Stories, Selected Stories and Sketches,* ed. Michael Davitt Bell (The Library of America. New York: Library Classics of America, 1994), 164-165. All citations to Jewett, excepting those in reference to *The Country of the Pointed Firs,* refer to this volume.

Adeline, however, and Nan is left orphaned among a community of elderly and middle-aged adults who care for the young child.

Nan's character is linked, as many of Jewett's young girl characters are, to the wilderness of New England's rural woods and gardens. Though she is descended from a family deemed "more colonial than American perhaps," Nan is initially cast as wild, part of the wilderness and land around her, as if her eccentricity is justified due to a deep—albeit troubled and troublesome—association with the original settlers of the region.[92] One of the townswomen remarks of Nan that, "she's wild as a hawk, and a perfect torment… She told how she'd been up into Jake an' Martin's oaks, trying to catch a little screech owl. She belongs with wild creatur's, I do believe—just the same natur'."[93] Nan's childhood wildness sits uneasily with Jewett's characterization of the Prince family as part of a colonial legacy, personified in the character of Miss Anna Prince "the elder," Nan's spinster aunt and namesake. Miss Prince exemplifies what J. Samaine Lockwood calls "colonial revivalism" and the "queerly colonial." First, colonial revivalism "was, in many ways, a nostalgic, racist, and nativist love affair with a regionally specific past, part of an ongoing bid to secure for white New England the spotlight as history's stage." [94] This is evident in Jewett's characterization of Miss Prince:

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[92] Jewett, *Novels & Stories*, 273.
[93] Jewett, *Novels & Stories*, 186.
[94] J. Samaine Lockwood, *Archives of Desire: The Queer Historical Work of New England Regionalism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015), 1

> Miss Prince's ancestors had belonged to some of the most distinguished among the colonial families, which fact she neither appeared to remember or consented to forget; and, as often happened in the seaport towns of New England, there had been one or two men in every generation who had followed the sea. Her own father had been among the number, and the closets of the old house were well provided with rare china and fine old English crockery that would drive an enthusiastic collector to distraction… If Miss Prince's grandmother could return to Dunport from another world, she would hardly believe that she had left her earthly home for a day, it presented so nearly the same appearance.[95]

A little more than halfway through the novel, Jewett takes the opportunity to give a full and rich backstory to Nan's aunt, who remained out of the picture while Nan was being raised by her maternal grandmother and then Dr. Leslie in the town of Oldfields, opposed with the bustling seaport town of Dunport. Miss Prince is characterized by her relation to original settlers of New England, her rich ancestry and invaluable trinkets and treasures, and her guardianship of an almost museum-like house.

Miss Prince's regionally specific link to New England's seafaring past and the "most distinguished among colonial families" connects her to Lockwood's concept of

[95] Jewett, *Novels & Stories*, 275.

colonial revivalism, yet it is her spinster nature that relates to Lockwood's adjacent concept of the queerly colonial, tradition in which "a rehearsal of history, wherein the contemporary woman recalls by way of her present postures the colonial past… such performances tie the modern and emergent to history in the present-day unmarried daughter's very body through forms that emphasize duration and depend on historical allusion and cross-generational intimacies."[96] Miss Prince, past the point of "reproductive potential," serves to remind Nan of her links to the colonial past, as her aunt's character serves as a bridge of sorts between the colonial past and the present moment in which Nan has matured out of her childhood wildness.[97] Nan's dual "heritage," as it were, positions Nan's affinity with the natural world—"the same natur'," as wild creatures, according to Mrs. Meeker—against her colonial pedigree. Nan's wildness is not explicitly linked with Native Americans or Indigenous people, but the intense overcorrecting Jewett does later in the novel to emphasize the Prince family's colonialist ancestry summons the stereotypes of Indigenous peoples, people who died at the hands of the Prince's colonial ancestors, from the larger cultural landscape into the earlier scenes. This tension puts *A Country Doctor* in the tradition of Jewett's works more broadly that detail concerning colonialist attitudes towards Native American peoples and the stereotypes of Indigenous people as more inherently

[96] Lockwood, *Archives of Desire*, 60.
[97] Lockwood, *Archives of Desire*, 60.

connected to wilderness and the natural world. Jewett associates Nan with wildness to only a certain degree before she overcorrects with assurances about Nan's "colonial" heritage, a troubling dynamic that is also reminiscent of the advertisements of New England "Indian doctress," the white woman Charity Shaw who profited off of her assumed proximity to Indigenous peoples and their cures, who I will discuss later in the chapter.

Yet Nan's affinity for the wilderness is not limited to her wild behavior. Throughout the novel, Nan is associated with nature, the natural world, and the flowers and plants around her—to the point that her interest in botany becomes a metaphor for her budding medical career in addition to a useful medical skill. On an outing with Dr. Leslie, Nan becomes distracted by her surroundings and gathers "some bits of a strange water-weed," and makes them "into a damp, round bundle with the leaves and a bit of string":

> This was a rare plant which they had noticed the day before, and they had taken some specimens then, Nan being at this time an ardent botanist, but these had withered and been lost, also on the way home.[98]

When Dr. Leslie discovers that Nan has attempted to harvest samples of this rare plant to examine, he is delighted:

> "You will be the successor of Mrs. Martin Dyer, and the admiration of the

[98] Jewett, *Novels & Stories*, 260.

neighborhood," but changing his tone quickly, he said: "I am going to teach you all I can, just so long as you have any wish to learn."[99]

Nan must be seen first as a capable botanist, an heir to the herbal medicine tradition in the community, before she is deemed capable of studying medicine in any official capacity. Nan's wildness becomes the root of her skill—her association with nature, her study and care of plant specimens is proof of her desire to be "useful," to follow what Dr. Leslie believes is the "work for which nature had meant her."[100]

Initially, Jewett uses the figure of the woman herbalist, represented by Mrs. Martin Dyer, to model a lay botanist for Nan to emulate as she begins her botanical education. Yet after Dr. Leslie allows Nan to more seriously pursue her desire to be a medical doctor, Jewett relies on the popular figure of the female physician to fill in the more formal aspects of Nan's education. As noted earlier, critics such as Margaret Jay Jessee and Judith Bryant Wittenberg discuss the generic work of *A Country Doctor* in regards to nineteenth-century women physicians. Wittenberg specifically regards *A Country Doctor* as working "intratextually" with medical autobiographies like those by Harriot K. Hunt, Marie Zakrzewska, and Elizabeth Blackwell.[101] What *A Country Doctor* offers that Blackwell's memoir and Crumpler's advice book do not is

[99] Jewett, *Novels & Stories*, 261.
[100] Jewett, *Novels & Stories*, 267.
[101] Judith Bryant Wittenberg, ""Challenge and Compliance: Textual Strategies in *A Country Doctor* and American Women's Medical Autobiographies." In *Jewett and Her Contemporaries: Reshaping the Canon*, edited by Karen L. Kilcup and Thomas S. Edwards (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1999), 124.

a clear constellation of interests and predecessors that build to Nan's devotion to medical practice. Jewett gives us the character of Dr. Leslie, a regularly educated, white male physician as well as Mrs. Martin, an older practitioner of herbal medicine, and it is Dr. Leslie's insight that Nan is like Mrs. Martin—that she is as capable of weilding healing powers as his rival—that leads him to instruct her. In this way, the path of medical knowledge is more like that advertised by Madame Restell—from midwife, to female physician; from herbalist, to country doctor. In practice, Nan's work is also similar to Rebecca Lee Crumpler's journey: a credentialed woman "doctress" who relies on herbal medicines. Yet Nan is not primarily motivated by her imagined imapact on her community, as Crumpler expresses in her book. While Jewett spends ample time thoughout the novel staging the "social problem" of the woman doctor's role, she ultimately defers to an essentialist, Divine nature, as Nan insists: "People ought to work with the great laws of nature and not against them…. It is a splendid thing to have the use of any gift of God."[102] At once natural and divine, Nan's rhetorical positioning of her right to be of use, to practice medicine, bridges the rhetoric used by all three real-life medical practitioners: the narrative trajectory of Restell, with the rhetorical insistence and divine invocations of Blackwell and Crumpler.

Having established in *A Country Doctor* that the laws of nature and God

[102] Jewett, *Novels & Stories*, 329, 355.

himself stand behind the right of women to practice medicine, Jewett's later works take this natural and divine right of self-determination a step further, as she introduces abortifacients and non-reproduction into her Dunnet Landing stories. Jewett's most famous work, *The Country of the Pointed Firs* (1896), is a collection of "sketches" rooted in the small, fictional New England town of Dunnet Landing, and centered on an unnamed woman narrator's friendship with the town healer, Mrs. Todd. The collection opens with a scenic description of Mrs. Todd's home and garden, such that our very first impression of the town is Mrs. Todd's carefully tended collection of plants and herbs:

> Mrs. Todd was an ardent lover of herbs, both wild and tame… At one side of this herb plot were other growths of a rustic pharmacopoeia, great treasures and rarities among the commoner herbs. […] Some of these might once have belonged to sacred and mystic rites, and have had some occult knowledge handed with them down the centuries: but now they pertained only to humble compounds brewed at intervals with molasses or vinegar or spirits in a small cauldron on Mrs. Todd's kitchen stove. They were dispensed to suffering neighbors, who usually came at night as if by stealth, bringing their own ancient-looking vials to be filled. One nostrum was called the Indian remedy, and its price was but fifteen cents; the whispered directions could be heard as

customers passed the windows.[103]

Jewett's description foregrounds Mrs. Todd's garden as a site of knowledge and casts Mrs. Todd herself as a member of a mythologized ancient order of knowledge, even remarking that her skills include an ability to concoct an "Indian remedy" alongside "mystic" "occult" brews. Jewett's consolidation of apothecary, "Indian remedies," and "occult" brews is not to be read lightly—and will become particularly troubled in regards to "The Foreigner," where she reveals that Mrs. Todd's knowledge about herbs and botanical healing is attributed to an ambiguously imagined woman of color, Mrs. Tolland, who came to Dunnet Landing from her home of Kingston, Jamaica. Clearly, the legacies of American and British imperialism in the Caribbean and settler colonialism in New England are both rooted in Mrs. Todd's garden from her very introduction. At the same time, Mrs. Todd's herbs and concoctions are part of a "pharmacopoeia," a Latinate description which lends a degree of traditional medical authority to her work. Throughout, though, the troubling sense remains that any medical knowledge concerning herbs or plant originates as "Indian remedies" or otherwise super-natural sources.

This introduction to Mrs. Todd reads as eerily similar to the self-styled "Indian doctress" Charity Shaw's advertisements from the early nineteenth century,

[103] Sarah Orne Jewett, *The Country of the Pointed Firs and Other Stories*, ed. Mary Ellen Chase, Norton Critical Editions (New York: W. W. Norton, 1994), 3-4. All citations referencing *The Country of the Pointed Firs* refer to this edition.

notably her one-page circular circa 1805 titled "Indian Medicines: Recommendations and directions,":

> Mrs. Shaw has, from her infancy been attached to the studies of Natural History --- she derives more information from the Indians in Connecticut, Long-Island, and New-Jersey, of the Medicine of Plants, than from any distinguished Authors whatsoever; their technical terms, and scientifick arrangement, proved too methodical for the slender fibres of her brain—she found it much more conducive to health, to seek plants in the fields than in books—She copied with her pencil all that were curious and useful—gave them to the poor and sick—whose gratitude have brought them thus far into circulation and general usefulness—. It must be observed, that they are not principally designed for those of her sex; whose great delicacy and keen sensibility, induces them to sacrifice their lives, rather than communicate their indigestion to a physician!!![104]

I include this extended passage from Shaw's advertisement here to draw a particular parallel between Shaw and Mrs. Todd. Jewett's characterization of Mrs. Todd's interactions with her neighbors, as Mrs. Todd's rapport with her "customers" recalls Shaw's characterization of her own customers. Though Jewett does not specifically

[104] Charity Shaw, "Indian medicines: Recommendations and directions," (Boston: s.n., 1805?), *American Antiquarian Society*, #422282. Many thanks to Molly Hardy for bringing this document to my attention.

gender Mrs. Todd's customers, Shaw specifies that her customers are mostly "of her sex" and while she links these customers' ailments to "indigestion," she includes in her advertisement details of "Essence of Golden Rod Tansy" stating that "wormwood and mint may be added to the Medicines, or taken in hot water, from a tea-spoon full to a great tea-spoon full—they promote perspiration and rectify the stomach."[105] Tansy (*Tanacetum vulgare*) is a known emmenagogue and abortifacient, and mint too is often associated with abortion, suggesting a coded meaning to "rectify[ing] the stomach."[106]

While I am not suggesting that Jewett used Charity Shaw as an exact model for Mrs. Todd, the similarities demonstrate that Mrs. Todd is crafted to resemble a common, archetypal kind of white woman herbalist who vaguely associated her medical authority with the authority of Native American medicinal practices—an association that draws on settler colonialist stereotypes that presume that Native Americans are closer to nature—and who sells these "Indian remedies" and "Indian medicines" to women and neighbors for profit. Instead of tansy and mint, Mrs. Todd is associated with a potentially even more notable herbal abortifacient—pennyroyal, which, for eight years prior to the publication of *The Country of the Pointed Firs*, had

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[105] Shaw, "Indian medicines: Recommendations and directions."
[106] See Riddle, *Eve's Herbs,* 188-9. Tansy's emmenagogue properties are also noted in Alice Henkle's *Wild Medicinal Plants of the United States.* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Agriculture Bureau of Plant Industry Bulletin 89, 1906), 40. https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/item/131503#page/3/mode/1up

been circulating in newspaper advertisements explicitly in regards to Chichester's pennyroyal pills for "relief for ladies." Pennyroyal (*Mentha pulegium*) itself is a member of the mint (*Mentha*) family, though its individual reputation as an abortifacient carries weight beyond its plant family.

Jewett casts Mrs. Todd's herbalism in the long-standing tradition that Charity Shaw, Madame Restell, and Chichester's used to market their services as trustworthy, authoritative, and professional. Just as importantly, she draws out notions of racial and ethnic difference that circulate though some of that marketing, particularly as those differences relate to the idea of New England as the region most connected with a colonial past. However casually invested in white supremacist nationalism as she was, Jewett nonetheless draws on the exoticism inherent in settler colonial bioprospecting in her descriptions of Mrs. Todd's garden. Not only that, she heightens this exoticized interest into the realm of witchcraft (through her mention of "mythic rites" and "cauldron[s]"), and then assimilates all of these influences into an apothecary for the entire town's use and benefit. Here again we see what Lockwood calls Jewett's investment in "colonial revivalism" in connection to her queerness and queer characters, arguing that Jewett offers an "alternative epistemology" of the "queerly colonial":

> What we have in *Pointed First* is not a colonial revivalism only and easily reducible to the fetishizing of things or the articulation of a white supremacist

> nationalism, but one thought in tandem and variously intersecting with other histories: of geology, of democracy, of an unfolding intimacy of uncertain duration between unmarried women that refuses even to be contained between the covers of *Pointed Firs*.[107]

Jewett's colonial revivalism in the character of Mrs. Todd, like that of Miss Prince, centers the spinster's experience, particularly the figures of older women who challenge a strict reading of any childless woman as a "spinster." However, going beyond Lockwood's account, the things Jewett fetishizes in her Dunnet Landing stories do not just pertain to the intimacy she creates between unmarried women. Central to Jewett's fetishization of things is her deep and specific description of herbs and plants, so much so that these herbs and plants work with existing cultural codes for abortifacients, as well as in reference almost synecdotally to individual characters.

Lockwood's reading of Jewett's older women characters is grounded in queer theory, as she incorporates notions of reproductive futurity and the nineteenth-century nationalist pressure on white women—particularly those yoked to a white supremacist colonial ancestry—to reproduce in service to the "white body politic."[108] Mrs. Todd, too, plays out what Sarah Ensor calls "spinster ecologies," using the spinster as a site of "avuncular" environmental stewardship invested in

[107] Lockwood, *Archives of Desire*, 88.
[108] Lockwood, *Archives of Desire*, 17.

nonreproductive environmental futurity, a figure who "might inspire a queer ecocritical practice attentive to affects customarily considered too weak or quiet to be politically efficacious."[109] Ensor reads Jewett's spinsters as written with "affirmative dispassion, a tone that… might open both queer theory and ecocriticism (and their practitioners) to the possibility of nonironic distancing or a rigorous indirectness."[110] "Rigorous indirectness" is a deeply useful way to describe the many abortifacients in her fiction, particularly her Dunnet Landing stories. Why insist on bringing pennyroyal to the fore—as Mrs. Todd's favorite herb, her constant reference point, no less—if not in part to acknowledge indirectly its importance in the culture at large as a botanical signifier of non-reproductivity? Is pennyroyal not a sign of an "indirect" choice, a "dispassion" towards motherhood, the choice of a "spinster" future, to use Ensor's language? While Ensor is specifically engaged in reading Jewett's spinster figures' affective dispassion in regards to environmental stewardship and queer nonreproductivity, this dispassion applies as well to a reading of pennyroyal as participating in a textual culture of herbal abortion. For though Jewett names specific herbs to bolster her characters' medical credentials, the popular properties of these herbs are not named, but merely suggested. By naming pennyroyal, Jewett indirectly introduces a background of specific, abortion-related medical knowledge that would

[109]Sarah Ensor, "Spinster Ecology: Rachel Carson, Sarah Orne Jewett, and Nonreproductive Futurity." *American Literature* 84, no. 2, (June 2012): 410.
[110] Ensor, "Spinster Ecology," 426.

provide the characters of Dunnet Landing with the security of a child-free future, characters who might feel, to quote Ensor, "a sense of enoughness" with their lives as they are.[111]

Another way to think through Mrs. Todd's persistent association with pennyroyal is Bill Brown's work on Jewett in regards to the "object culture" in Jewett's regionalism. Brown asks, "what ideas are embedded in things?"—a question that becomes especially pointed when considering the language of flowers and plants. Recalling the Victorian the language of flowers discussed in the first section of this chapter, Jewett, a regionalist with a deep appreciation for the natural world around her, would have known what properties the plants around her possessed, and what messages could be sent by representing specific botanicals. Of all the plants that thrive in New England, Jewett chooses pennyroyal to be the favorite of her capable herbalist, a character whose lush garden and noted talents suggest that she knows exactly what her favorite plant is capable of.

Brown's reading of Jewett mostly concerns material objects—Captain Littlepage's home, for example, and the Indigenous history of the shell heap of Joanna's Shell-Heap Island—though he does also note that it is "the gathering of plants" that cements the relationship between Mrs. Todd and the unnamed narrator. In depicting this act as that which bonds the two women together, Brown writes:

[111] Ensor, "Spinster Ecology," 426.

> Jewett describes instead a culture of nature—the preparation and medicinal deployment of natural specimens, in the form of syrups, elixirs, and teas. Their value derives from their human use, not their natural form—their function, not their place in the taxonomic table, evolutionary time line, or divine system. All of which is to say that the explicitly botanical in Jewett's fiction has been transposed into the cultural.[112]

I quibble here with Brown's suggestion that there is such a clear transference of meaning in Jewett's works—the botanical becoming cultural. For plants are not like the static things that Brown discusses elsewhere in his article; plants are not crystals, rocks, picture frames, interior décor, or ocean shells. While some of those items are of the natural world and potentially possess life, plants are of a different sort—they are alive in and of themselves, and even more importantly, when ingested, they are capable of changing the material, chemical, and biological composition of the humans who dictate their symbolic and cultural meanings. Pennyroyal appears, to the human eye, to be a long string of purple blooms on a green stem, but when ingested in certain quantities, it can change the biological composition of the human doing the ingesting. So to a point, the value of pennyroyal derives "from its human use"—especially if ingested by a pregnant person. But the pennyroyal in this sketch of

[112] Bill Brown, *A Sense of Things: The Object Matter of American Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 88.

Jewett's is not being ingested, not being put to human use—instead, it is being used as a signifier, a signifier of potential not needed by the woman who loves it so, though it was perhaps needed by others in search of a change in biological composition.

By the end of Jewett's collection, as the unnamed narrator looks over Dunnet Landing from a hill while waiting for her steamer away from town to arrive, she tries for a last look of Mrs. Todd, and imagines her with her favorite herb, pennyroyal, a steadfast connection:

> At such a distance, one can feel the large, positive qualities that control a character. Close at hand, Mrs. Todd seemed able and warm-hearted and quite absorbed in her bustling industries, but her distant figure looked mateless and appealing, with something about it that was strangely self-possessed and mysterious. Now and then she stooped to pick something,—it might have been her favorite pennyroyal,—and at last I lost sight of her as she slowly crossed an open space on one of the higher points of land, and disappeared again behind a dark clump of juniper and the pointed firs.[113]

We thus leave the Dunnet Landing of *Pointed Firs* fixated on Mrs. Todd, "mateless and appealing," the picture of Ensor's "affirmative sense of enoughness," with her favorite pennyroyal. The final component of Ensor's spinster ecologies is that her

[113] Jewett, *The Country of the Pointed Firs,* 131.

spinsters are invested in not an "object-based preservation" but in conversation with "the realm of something akin to persistence or continuity."[114] That pennyroyal is Mrs. Todd's favorite herb is enough for Jewett—this representation does not translate to wider access, or direct information about how to obtain or effect an abortion, but it does serve as a code, a wink, a nod that this knowledge exists, though the specifics of this knowledge may not make it into the fiction itself.

A similar situation arose three years after the publication of *The Country of the Pointed Firs* in 1899, when Jewett published her short story "The Foreigner," often characterized by scholars as a ghost story and a story of "selective memory."[115] "The Foreigner" returns to Dunnet Landing and Mrs. Todd and features the same connection between plants and abortion, but the concern with racial and ethnic difference in the context of this connection is more pronounced. This story within a story begins on a stormy late summer evening, as Mrs. Todd tells the unnamed narrator about a woman, Mrs. Tolland, from whom she learned her knowledge of herbs. Scholarly interest in Mrs. Tolland's racial identity has increased in recent years, and scholars have employed various theories of racial formation, accounts of the Caribbean diaspora, and histories of American and French colonialism in their

[114] Ensor, "Spinster Ecologies," 431.
[115] For readings of "The Foreigner" as a ghost story, see Elizabeth Ammons, "Jewett's Witches," and Vesna Kuiken, "Foreign Before "The Foreigner": Caribbean Fetishes, *Zombi,* and Jewett's Conjure Aesthetics." For a reading of "The Foreigner" as a ghost story with attention to Mrs. Todd's selective memory, see Patrick Gleason, "Sarah Orne Jewett's "The Foreigner" and Transamerican Routes of New England Regionalism."

examinations of the story. Like Vesna Kuiken and Patrick Gleason, I read Mrs. Tolland's mother as Black, and I read Mrs. Tolland herself as mixed race, inheriting her mother's Blackness, yet I want to be careful not to project too much or too little onto a character who is such a shadow in Jewett's mind. As Gleason notes, Jewett's careful crafting of Mrs. Todd's equivocating and amnesiac recollections handily makes Mrs. Tolland's identity vague, suggesting that Jewett herself did not have the language to understand complex formations or experiences of race.[116] It is telling that any clarity in regards to races other than white diminishes in Jewett's fiction, especially as she attempts to describe—or dance around *not* describing—a mixed-race Black woman who marries a white New England man.

Where "The Foreigner" fails in regards to a clear or dignified description of race and Caribbean diasporic identity, the story succeeds in describing the American colonization of knowledge: Mrs. Tolland brought not only stories and dances of her home to New England, she also brought her knowledge of plants and herbs. Mrs. Todd clearly recalls the influence of Mrs. Tolland's garden, parallel to the importance of her own garden in *The Country of the Pointed Firs*:

> She [Mrs. Tolland] taught me a sight o' things about herbs I never knew before nor since; she was well acquainted with the virtues o' plants. She'd act

[116] Kuiken, "Foreign Before "The Foreigner": Caribbean Fetishes, *Zombi,* and Jewett's Conjure Aesthetics," 117; Gleason, ""Sarah Orne Jewett's "The Foreigner" and the Transamerican Routes of New England Regionalism," 25.

> awful secret about some things too, an' used to work charms for herself sometimes, an' some o' the neighbors told to an' fro after she died that they knew enough not to provoke her, but 't was all nonsense; 't is the believin' in such things that causes 'em to be any harm, an' so I told 'em," confided Mrs. Todd contemptuously. "That first night I stopped to tea with her she'd cooked some eggs with some herb or other sprinkled all through, and 't was she that first led me to discern mushrooms; an' she went right down on her knees in my garden here when she saw I had my different officious herbs. Yes, 't was she that learned me the proper use o' parsley too; she was a beautiful cook.[117]

Is it coincidence or ignorance that the single herb Jewett names in this passage, parsley, can be used as an abortifacient? Like the pennyroyal Mrs. Todd so favors throughout *The Country of the Pointed Firs*, parsley is a member of the mint family, and can be used as an abortifacient in certain quantities and preparations.[118] In other words, Mrs. Todd and Mrs. Tolland, two unlikely friends with eerily similar names, both become associated with different herbs of the same family, herbs that share similar abortifacient properties.[119] Elizabeth Ammons proposes that something

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[117] Jewett, *Novels & Stories*, 541.
[118] Riddle, *Eve's Herbs,* 62. Parsley's use as an abortifacient was featured in an episode of the Netflix television show *Orange is the New Black* (season 7, episodes 10 and 11), a fact that demonstrates the general circulation of knowledge regarding parsley's capabilities. For an analysis of self-managed abortion in *Orange is the New Black*, see the Advancing New Standards in Reproductive Health (ANSIRH) Abortions Onscreen database entry for "Orange is the New Black," July 26, 2019. https://www.ansirh.org/research/abortion/pop-culture/orange-new-black-0
[119] Kuiken notes the strange similarity between the two characters' names, "Foreign" Before "The Foreigner," 117.

supernatural is apparent in the passage's meandering through Mrs. Todd's memory of Mrs. Tolland's mystical capabilities and knowledges.[120] Yet the passage demonstrates more than a general witchiness, more even than a gesture to Caribbean spiritual practices like obeah or quimbois, though this gesture does recall Jewett's earlier invocation of witchcraft in the description of Mrs. Todd's garden, now with a different racial and ethnic cast.[121] What is more directly on display here is the way knowledge moves through space as Mrs. Tolland leaves Jamaica. Mrs. Tolland brings the knowledge she learned from her mother, who called Martinique home, as she arrives in Dunnet Landing and comes to befriend a white woman. We, Jewett's audience who are already familiar with Mrs. Todd, know she uses this knowledge from Mrs. Tolland to cultivate the wild apothecary that so dominates the first scene of *The Country of the Pointed Firs*. While parsley's value here is contextually linked to cooking, parsley is almost as infamous an abortifacient as pennyroyal. This movement of knowledge, the implied but unacknowledged potential of a plant so favored by a woman far from home, complicates an easy reading of the transference of medical knowledge from place to place, from woman to woman.

Mrs. Todd and Mrs. Tolland's relationship points to the way knowledges of

[120] See Ammons, "Jewett's Witches." In *Critical Essays on Sarah Orne Jewett*, edited by Gwen A. Nagel (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1984):165-184.
[121] Kuiken argues that Mrs. Tolland's character works in the obeah tradition, while Gleason positions her within the "hybrid African, French Catholic, and East Indian" spiritual and herbalist practice of quimbois, "Foreign Before "The Foreigner,"" 36.

herbal abortion have been stewarded and circulated throughout history. It is telling that Jewett creates a robust community for Mrs. Todd in her Dunnet Landing stories, anchored by *The Country of the Pointed Firs*, though she feels the need to revise the origins of Mrs. Todd's knowledge three years later in "The Foreigner." The revised circulation of herbal knowledge is complicated for a number of reasons. For one, Jewett cannot fully imagine Mrs. Tolland as an individual or a character, veiling her through Mrs. Todd's selective amnesia and the ghost story told on a stormy evening.[122] But Mrs. Tolland nevertheless chooses to travel to New England, to attempt to make a home in the rural village, and then to accept Mrs. Todd's tentative attempts at friendship. Mrs. Tolland chooses to share her knowledge of herbs, the "proper use o' parsley," and Jewett depicts Mrs. Tolland as being selective in her distribution of knowledge, as Mrs. Todd acknowledges that "she'd act awful secret about some things, too, an' used to work charms for herself sometimes."[123] Mrs. Todd dismisses the town's exoticization of Mrs. Tolland's "charms" as "nonsense," but her acknowledgment that Mrs. Tolland kept secrets that she took to her grave is not dwelt on. Both Mrs. Tolland and Mrs. Todd carry knowledge of herbalism and the "proper use" of herbs known to be abortifacients, and both women remain childfree throughout their respective stories. Mrs. Tolland relays her knowledge of herbs,

[122] See Ammons and Gleason, respectively, for readings of "The Foreigner" in regards to the ghost story and Mrs. Todd's amnesia.
[123] Jewett, *Novels & Stories*, 541.

including the vague "uses" of a known abortifacient, to Mrs. Todd, knowledge that Mrs. Todd then makes available as a business in other Dunnet Landing stories. Mrs. Tolland freely gives the knowledge that Mrs. Todd uses to build the reputation she has made for herself as Dunnet Landing's herbalist of record. Mrs. Todd here is profiting—quite literally, as we know she sells nostrums of certain "Indian remedies" at fifteen cents per nostrum—from knowledges gained via settler colonial capitalism.[124] Mrs. Todd uses Mrs. Tolland's knowledge to become the medical professional, the community herbalist, that Mrs. Tolland could never have become due to the town's wariness of her. Regardless of whether the remedies Mrs. Todd sells are gleaned from Native American ways of healing or the West Indies, given Mrs. Tolland's background, these remedies nevertheless bear the weight of an exoticized description.

By the end of *The Country of the Pointed Firs,* Jewett has established that Mrs. Todd's favorite herb is pennyroyal, the herb most infamously associated with abortion. While abortion is never mentioned by name in *The Country of the Pointed Firs,* Jewett's references to pennyroyal and parsley, herbs associated with abortion in the late nineteenth century, imply that the community is intentionally childfree, given the ever-present abortifacients and the skilled herbalist with the knowledge to provide

[124] I use the term "settler colonial capitalism" after Iyko Day's concept in *Alien Capital: Asian Racialization and the Logic of Settler Colonial Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016).

"whispered directions." Is it enough for us as readers to bring our own knowledge, our own understanding of the vocabulary of abortifacients to complement the fictional winks, nods, and gestures towards abortifacients that Jewett offers? And what does it mean that Mrs. Tolland fades so swiftly back into Mrs. Todd's memory? When Mrs. Todd tells her story of Mrs. Tolland, Mrs. Tolland has been dead for many years, never able to see the way her friend would eventually put her gift of knowledge to use. Jewett's story leaves more questions than answers about the women's uneven dynamic, questions that linger through the remaining chapters of this dissertation and come to the fore in the final chapter, regarding Jamaica Kincaid's seeming revisioning of these dynamics in her own novel over a century later.

Conclusion

The women and the works discussed in this chapter demonstrate how plant knowledge circulated in textual cultures across various forms of media in the nineteenth century. From newspaper advertisements, to advice books, to fiction, women optimized the connections between botany and medicine to reinforce their own or their characters' medical authority as well as to provide their audience with a wink through the censors, suggesting to a knowing public that they did indeed understand the use of botanical medicine in reproductive matters. By the time Jewett publishes *The Country of the Pointed Firs*, simply the word "pennyroyal"

communicated a connection to abortion, a connection built throughout the century's publications of botanical medicine literature, that booms in the post-Comstock Act era through coded advertisements like Chichester's Pennyroyal Pills. Though the connection between abortion and plant knowledges helped create a botanical code to signal abortion, there is no paper trail of instructions for how to prepare the plants so as to utilize their abortifacient properties. Books that did circulate recipes were those like Crumpler's, that offered relief to mothers who could not afford and could not afford to trust the white medical establishment. Herbal medicine operated outside the bounds of official medicine, but any published herbal medicine recipes had to adhere to the censorship standards outlined in the Comstock Act.

The circulation of plant knowledge also betrays a tension inherent in the archival materials available by white women herbal medicine practitioners and the stories told in their advertisements. The archival materials available from the nineteenth century, like the works discussed in this chapter, suggest that white women like Charity Shaw and Jewett's characters benefitted from conjuring the stereotypical specters of Native Americans and Black women in order to earn a profit from herbal medicines. That these medicines could have been allowing other women to access reproductive freedom does not excuse the implied participation in and perpetuation of harmful stereotypes that these herbal medicine practitioners used in order to sell their products. As we turn to the early twentieth century, how do transforming ideas of

nature, the natural, and reproduction continue to inform the ways in which writers discuss abortion and associated plant knowledges in their fiction? What specters are summoned as technologies and ecologies change, and the limits of the law are tested?

Chapter 2

Failing Herbal Remedies and "Unruly" Naturalism: Abortion and Genre

In the early twentieth century, writers challenged the censorship legislation that characterized the coded circulation of knowledge about reproduction, sexuality, and abortion at the end of the previous century. While Stephanie Peebles Tavera argues that Margaret Sanger's birth control movement rendered the Comstock Law "impotent by 1915," the year of Anthony Comstock's death, novels and print materials continued to be subject to censorship well into the 1920s and 1930s.[125] As it had since its introduction in the nineteenth century, censorship legislation continued to pose a threat to the publication of information regarding abortion in print newspapers, periodicals, and literary fiction, casting a wide net in regards to the variety of its targets. Most infamous of the early twentieth century censorship trials is that regarding the publication of a section of James Joyce's *Ulysses* in Margaret Anderson and Jane Heap's *The Little Review,* and its later publications following the first edition by Sylvia Beach's Shakespeare and Company. Joyce's "Nausicaa" episode faced censorship in 1920 due to its "obscene" depiction of a naked woman's body and masturbation. Building frustration at the American censors' focus on *The*

[125] Tavera, *(P)rescription Narratives,* 24, 58. While Tavera mentions this trial and other specters of "Comstockery" beyond his death in 1915, I find it strange that she makes the statement of the Comstock Act's "impotency" after 1915 before going on to detail its legacy. This legacy is, of course, charged in the post-*Dobbs* present day, as "zombie" Comstock Laws at the state level have been resurrected following the gutting of *Roe v. Wade,* the case that, along with *Griswold v. Connecticut,* worked at the federal level to nullify state-level Comstock Laws.

Little Review inspired modernist contemporary Ezra Pound to remark that a law that "lumps literature and instruments for abortion into one clause is so fine a piece of propaganda for the Germans," generally expressing outrage at the state of the American press.[126]

While censorship in the early twentieth century may first call to mind canonical modernist works like Joyce's *Ulysses*, Anthony Comstock's final foe in life was not a literary author, but birth control movement leader Margaret Sanger. Comstock's crusade against Sanger reveals the extent to which he focused his legislative attacks on women working in the service of reproductive rights, beginning with Madame Restell.[127] Unlike Madame Restell, Sanger's opinion regarding abortion was not dissimilar to Comstock's, as Karen Weingarten notes that Comstock and Sanger together "succeeded in criminalizing abortion, thus completing the task begun by the American Medical Association."[128] Though Sanger became the focus of obscenity legislation in the early twentieth century, it was not for her depiction of abortion, but because of her work towards popularizing contraception and sexual education. The

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[126] Ezra Pound, *Selected Letters of Ezra Pound to John Quinn, 1915-1924*, ed. Tim Materer (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), 132. Quoted in Adam Parkes, "Literature and Instruments for Abortion": "Nausicaa" and the "Little Review" Trial." *James Joyce Quarterly* 34, no. 3, 1997: 283-301. Pound here is writing about Wyndham Lewis's story, "Cantleman's Spring Mate," though he also makes reference to Joyce in this December 1917 letter.

[127] The use of "reproductive rights" as a term here is intentional, as Margaret Sanger's checkered record in regards to her complicity-verging-on-endorsement of eugenicist and white supremacist views would mean that she was not working with respect to a proto-reproductive justice perspective.

[128] Karen Weingarten, *Abortion in the American Imagination: Before Life and Choice, 1880-1940* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2014), 38.

authors discussed here do not make such distinctions, as they depict abortion frankly in their fiction in the context of holistic sexual and reproductive decision-making.

That fictional depictions of abortion as well as abortion as a procedure were both targets of censorship was no surprise and decidedly not news to the women authors discussed in this chapter, who were personally well aware of the interconnected threats of literary censorship and criminalized abortion. Both authors published fiction that depicts attempts to self-manage abortion, and both were well acquainted with how seriously the publishing industry treated the threat of censorship—Edith Summers Kelley's *Weeds* was subject to censorship by her publisher, who removed an entire central section of her novel, and Josephine Herbst's first novel was never published, which many scholars and Herbst's contemporaries attribute to its multiple scenes of abortion. Nineteenth-century authors like Jewett relied on euphemistic references to plant names and knowledges in her fiction, but Kelley and Herbst offer different tactics of knowledge production that build on the earlier reliance on plant names as code. Kelley and Herbst used plant names in their fiction, but they also drew on tropes and themes common in naturalism and proletarian fiction to convey the stakes of bodily autonomy for their women protagonists. Kelley and Herbst write about plant knowledge and herbal remedies as part of their characters' efforts to access abortion, but they also rely on the natural world for its symbolic potential to critique the idea of a "natural" femininity or social role for women. As in the

nineteenth century, herbal abortion remained a viable code by which to escape censors' notice in the 1920s, especially given the early-twentieth-century turn to more mechanized descriptions of birth and abortion that authors like Kelley and Herbst embraced, a turn that resonates with the popular genres of naturalism and proletarian fiction.

These more mechanized descriptions of birth and abortion work in parallel to the emergence of surgical abortion as a topic in fiction and as an increasingly utilized alternative to herbal abortion.[129] Though abortion remained illegal in practice and in print in the United States through the 1920s, socialist feminists in Europe found success in the movement to legalize abortion. Movements in Germany, Austria, Switzerland, England, and the Soviet Union all worked towards the legalization of abortion, and women writers like Herbst who worked in international socialist circles

[129] In regards to the general emergence of surgical abortion as a topic of fiction, I'm thinking of Edith Wharton's depiction of a stereotypically villainous "abortionist" in her novel *Summer* (1917), discussed at length in Karen Weingarten's *Abortion in the American Imagination* and article "Between the Town and the Mountain: Abortion and Politics of Life in Edith Wharton's *Summer*." I am also thinking of depictions of criminalized surgical abortion in Agnes Smedley's *Daughter of Earth* (1929), Margery Latimer's *This is My Body* (1930), Tess Slesinger's *The Unpossessed* (1934), and William Faulkner's depiction of unsuccessful criminalized surgical abortion in both *As I Lay Dying* (1930) and *The Wild Palms* (1939). For an analysis of abortion in fiction as a way to model conversations regarding abortion recovery, see Meg Gillette, "Bedside Manners in Dorothy Parker's "A Lady with a Lamp" and Kay Boyle's *My Next Bride*." Notably, the authors listed both here in this footnote and in this chapter are overwhelmingly white. This chapter faces a limitation similar to that noted by Paula Rabinowitz in *Labor and Desire: Women's Revolutionary Fiction in Depression America,* as both this chapter and Rabinowitz's study explore the "class/gender nexus primarily as it affected white women (as writers and workers)" for whom "race appears outside their discussions of classed female subjectivity" (174). Race appears sparingly in Kelley and Herbst's fiction, a glaring absence and gap for two writers otherwise committed to working towards justice.

would certainly have been familiar with these efforts.[130] In Kelley and Herbst's novels of the 1920s, herbal abortion represents a reference to historical or familial knowledge still utilized in the present, but easily rendered unreliable if exact preparations and instructions are not followed. Herbal abortifacients offer just one method of abortion in Kelley and Herbst's works, as their novels include attempts to access surgical abortions and resonate with movements to legalize surgical abortion.

The literary stakes for representing abortion in fiction evolved throughout the early twentieth century. Despite Sanger's checkered record in regards to abortion rights (as well as her complicity with eugenics and white supremacy), her resistance to Comstock was a powerful rebuke of the chokehold of censorship, even as she continued to perpetuate abortion stigma herself. As Meg Gillette notes: "With social Darwinism, nativism, and eugenicisim all declaring motherhood the primary site of racial and economic competition, the question of who was having babies and who was having abortions was no longer just a titillating topic for gossipy women, but a matter of national policy."[131] Censorship laws remained intact, but instead of veiling

[130] Reagan, *When Abortion was a Crime,* 140, 141n45, 309. In this footnote, Reagan references Herbst along with her contemporaries Tess Slesinger, Agnes Smedley, and Meridel Le Sueur to support her argument that fiction depicting abortion was published contemporaneously with reporting by the birth control movement on international efforts to legalize abortion. Referencing Langer's biography of Herbst, Reagan notes that Herbst's inability to publish her first novel "shows the difficulty for women publicly discussing the topic," though of course Reagan is not focused primarily on herbal abortifacients in her comprehensive historical study. Of interest is that some of these birth control movement reporters are the very same women publishing fictional depictions of abortion, like Agnes Smedley.

[131] Meg Gillette, "Bedside Manners in Dorothy Parker's "A Lady with a Lamp" and Kay Boyle's *My Next Bride*," *Studies in American Fiction* 35, no. 2 (2007): 163.

the topic of abortion entirely in hints and plant names, authors paired plant names with depictions of corrupt amateur abortion providers and surgical abortions in order to frankly portray the stakes of accessing criminalized abortion. At the same time, the rise of proletarian fiction and the continued evolution of naturalism offered new tactics for depicting abortion and women's embodiment in fiction. While modernist writers like Joyce focused on "deviant" or sexual bodies, and Pound voiced his perplexity at the connection between literature and abortion (regardless of whether it was made in jest), women writers of the early twentieth century utilized the various generic traditions available to them to communicate their perspectives on abortion, contraception, and motherhood in literature. Crucially, Kelley and Herbst contextualize abortion in the context of reproductive decision-making writ large, as their fiction depicts women struggling to control their bodily autonomy, couched in imagery of the natural world. Kelley and Herbst's fiction navigate genre as well as options for terminating a pregnancy—weighing the risks of herbal abortifacients and criminalized surgical abortion—even as they both locate a full understanding of reproductive health as a cornerstone of bodily autonomy.

The Generic Stakes of Describing Abortion

If Jewett's fiction is rooted in regionalist preoccupations with "domestic ecology," to use David Hollingshead's phrase, then fiction of the early twentieth

century grapples with an evolving naturalist tradition and the emergence of proletarian fiction as a popular entryway to the burgeoning American Left movement.[132] Early twentieth-century women writers depicting abortion in fiction—via herbal abortifacients and other means, like surgical abortion provided by sympathetic physicians or dangerous medical imposters—drew on both naturalist and proletarian fiction traditions to center the experience of women characters desperate not to have children. Kelley and Herbst refer to herbal abortifacients by name, and the intended use of pennyroyal, tansy, and motherwort as abortifacients is never in doubt. What, then, does it mean that these authors draw on the natural world, though they do so in different ways, as they used naturalist and proletarian fiction traditions to varying degrees?[133]

In recent years, feminist re-readings of naturalism have engaged with the centrality of women to the genre. Jennifer Fleissner's crucial study *Women,*

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[132] David Hollingshead, "Domestic Ecology and Autoimmunity: Eugenic Feminism in the Sixth Extinction." *Modernism/modernity Print Plus* 7, cycle 2, October 7, 2022. Hollingshead uses the phrase following Fleissner's consideration of Gilman in *Women, Compulsion, Modernity,* but I find it works adjacent to the analysis of Mrs. Todd's home gardens offered in the previous chapter. Hollingshead writes that "drawing attention to the story's domestic details opens up new possibilities for reading "The Yellow Wallpaper" as a eugenic feminist text in which the environmental space of the home becomes a key site of racialization" (n.p). This is a similar approach to the one I offer in my reading of pennyroyal and parsley in Jewett's Dunnet Landing stories, though I prioritize a reading of Jewett in regards to settler colonialist perspective that works adjacent to a consideration of explicitly eugenic feminism.

[133] I recognize the drawbacks of using the term "proletarian fiction," given especially Herbst's resistance to the phrase. Herbst preferred the term "revolutionary" when describing the genre, as quoted by Paula Rabinowitz as she justified her use of the term "revolutionary fiction" in *Labor and Desire: Women's Revolutionary Fiction in Depression America* (73). I choose to use "proletarian fiction" due to its rootedness, as Rabinowitz notes, in naturalism in order to draw out the connections between the two movements under discussion in this chapter.

Compulsion, Modernity: The Moment of American Naturalism (2004), considers the centrality of women's stories in the classic naturalist tradition: "what is most striking about naturalism is that, for the first time in American literature, it locates that wild energy and open-ended possibility in the very story so central to lace-curtained New England fiction: the female *Bildungsroman*."[134] Fleissner's analysis of naturalism further grapples with its relationship to emerging understandings of modernity, as she explains:

> Women's new freedoms here are thus inseparable from a growing sense, linking naturalist fiction with the period's burgeoning social-scientific work, that the traditional sense of a natural bodily life and a social public sphere must give way to a recognition of all human life, public and private, as entailing an ongoing attempt to work with and manage the facts of our existence as embodied beings. What is crucial to grasp here is the sense of the natural and the social as intertwined yet still distinct, thus calling for ongoing theorization of their interconnection.[135]

Fleissner's connection between naturalist fiction and "the period's burgeoning social-scientific work" links literature and social-scientific publications to explore the naturalist preoccupation with the "interconnection" of "the natural and the social."

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[134]Jennifer L. Fleissner, *Women, Compulsion, Modernity: The Moment of American Naturalism* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2004), 18.
[135] Fleissner, *Women, Compulsion, Modernity*, 23.

This interconnection is, interestingly, what many newspaper advertisements relied on, as businesses used abortifacient plant names to market the true nature of their wares. In particular, this intersection is evident in Chichester's Pennyroyal Pills that alleviate "female troubles"—referencing "natural" and "social" troubles of an unexpected pregnancy. This intersection also occupies Kelley and Herbst. Compellingly, Fleissner pinpoints this connection as part of the work to "manage the facts of our existence as embodied beings"—a description that could be applied as well to the reproductive knowledge of means to access abortion and contraception, knowledge that directly helped women "manage" their "embodied" experience of continuing or terminating a pregnancy.

Donna Campbell takes Fleissner's intervention a step further by explicitly arguing that the centrality of women to naturalism must entail an analysis of the specific role of women's bodies in naturalism. Campbell's emphasis on bodies makes Fleissner's concern with "existence as embodied beings" more central, as she attempts to "reveal an ""unruly" counterpart to the rules of classic naturalism."[136] Campbell argues that her "unruly" naturalism

> provides a different way of looking at pervasive strains existing in the background rather than the foreground of classic naturalism, including the issues of waste and

[136] Donna M. Campbell, *Bitter Tastes: Literary Naturalism and Early Cinema in American Women's Writing* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2016), 4.

> abjection, disability and age, structure unevenness or excess, sentimentalism and melodrama, social reform, and women's use of technology.[137]

Campbell's emphasis on women's use of technology resonates with Kelley and Herbst's fiction, as women characters claim their right to bodily autonomy via their use of herbal abortifacients or, for Herbst, the turn to "physicians" to obtain criminalized abortions. Campbell's discussion of women's use of technology in *Bitter Tastes: Literary Naturalism and Early Cinema in American Women's Writing* (2016) centers the example of Willa Cather's *O Pioneers!* (1913), in which farm-heroine Alexandra Bergson successfully manages her farm using the latest available agricultural machines. But Kelley and Herbst's protagonists' attempts to gain medical knowledge to better understand how to access abortions offer a different view of what counts as women's use of technology. For not only did Kelley's Judith Pippinger learn how to work a farm, she also learns of and attempts various methods of self-managing an abortion, despite the fact that these methods ultimately fail. Kelley and Herbst craft characters who attempt to access medical technologies of abortion despite the obstacles to obtaining an abortion in the early twentieth century. Both writers insert scenes that insist that such knowledge is not unobtainable, despite the steep learning curves and social obstacles that the characters navigate as they move

[137] Campbell, *Bitter Tastes*, 4.

away from herbal abortifacients and towards uneasy alliances with potentially suspicious "physicians."

If Campbell's "unruly naturalism" offers a framework by which to re-center women's bodies, given her point that "the true subject of the naturalistic text is the human body," then Fleissner's emphasis on repetition and compulsion offer a way of reading the multiple scenes of abortion in these naturalist novels by Kelley and Herbst. Fleissner argues that repetitive motion is characteristic of a naturalistic plot, which is ultimately concerned with "stickiness in place," pointing to Dreiser's Sister Carrie, Gilman's narrator in "The Yellow Wallpaper," Chopin's Edna Pontellier, and Stein's Melanctha. Each of these women is stuck in a repetitive motion, which Fleissner argues "replace[s] naturalist determinism with "compulsion.""[138] This compulsion reveals natural forces within human lives, as "individual will and its subjection to rationalizing "forces" appear as more deeply intertwined."[139] Naturalist compulsions appear as rituals that "rationalize daily life," and by working "to expand realism's organizing gaze to include the tiniest details of daily, bodily life, naturalism too has been read as a mode of ordering what had thought to lie outside the novel's scope."[140] Kelley and Herbst's novels focus at times on the daily rituals of domestic life, as their protagonists attempt to reject the domestic sphere, some of whom

[138] Fleissner, *Women, Compulsion, Modernity*, 8.
[139] Fleissner, *Women, Compulsion, Modernity*, 9.
[140] Fleissner, *Women, Compulsion, Modernity*, 10.

remove themselves entirely from the domestic sphere to New York literary circles or proletarian action. The compulsions in these novels are most evident as their protagonists negotiate reproduction: for Kelley, it's Judith's incessant and increasingly desperate attempts to end her pregnancy, as she tries to rationalize why her knowledge keeps failing even as the townswomen refuse to help her. Herbst is more complicated, as her repetition compulsion spans multiple texts and multiple protagonists. Herbst wrote in her journals and notes towards her memoirs about the deep grief she felt after her younger sister, Helen, who died of complications following a criminalized abortion by an unsafe provider. Helen decided to seek an abortion not knowing that her older sister had accessed an abortion months earlier, a fact that Josephine went out of her way to keep hidden from her family. Herbst's collected works read as repeated attempts to make sense of her grief for Helen, to narratively situate Helen's stories in different contexts, genres, and endings, as she reimagines and revises Helen's fate in at least five of her novels.[141]

Kelley offers a different version of the repeated desperation to seek abortion care before it is too late, stakes that inform other classic naturalist novels like Dreiser's *An*

[141] I read shadows of Helen Herbst's life story in the following five novels, some discussed at length in the later section of this chapter: the unpublished manuscript *Following the Circle* (1925), *Nothing is Sacred* (1928), *Money for Love* (1929), *The Executioner Waits* (1934), and the unpublished manuscript *The Watcher with the Horn* (1960). Some of these manuscripts and novels are discussed also in Julie C. Ehrhardt's *Writers of Conviction: The Personal Politics of Zona Gale, Dorothy Canfield Fisher, Rose Wilder Lane, and Josephine Herbst* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2004), though I connect Herbst's reimaginings and revisionings specifically to Fleissner's concept of naturalism and compulsion.

American Tragedy (1925), though Dreiser focuses on Clyde Griffiths' perspective and lacks the visceral details of women's embodiment that Kelley includes. Herbst's fiction, read collectively, attempts to include many of the "details… of bodily life" to order that which "had thought to lie outside the novel's scope"—namely, Herbst's "stickiness in place" in her grief for her sister.[142] Herbst first includes every detail of her sister's death—almost transcribing her correspondence with her sister verbatim in *Following the Circle*—and she eventually disconnects her sister's death from abortion and re-envisions it as the fault of a car crash in her most critically well-regarded novel, *The Executioner Waits*. In this shift, Herbst increasingly draws on naturalist concerns with the body, technology, and social determinism as she tests the limits of fiction's ability to explore the tension between the realities of inaccessible abortion and the social forces that limit this care. Her movement away from repeated scenes of abortion to imagining other causes of death for her sister's fictional counterparts engages the question of how revising the details of her sister's story effects the meaning of Herbst's collected fiction. As Herbst moves away from depicting herbal abortifacients—which fail in her manuscript—her fiction strays from a focus on the means by which her characters access abortion to later consider a wider frame and larger context for the inaccessibility of reproductive choice. Herbst places her fictional sister's death in *The Executioner Waits* as one moment in the context of a

[142] Fleissner, *Women, Compulsion, Modernity*, 10, 11.

larger story about social action, as her sister's fatal car crash prevents the novel from becoming a commentary about women's inability to access abortion. Grief for Rosamond's death at the hands of an unskilled abortion provider would draw the narrative and emotional focus to her inability to access safe abortion, as it does in *Following the Circle* and *Money for Love*. Instead, as Rosamond dies in a car crash, Herbst refocuses the narrative grief for Rosamond on her failure to escape the economic chokehold of her hometown, placing the novel within the realm of proletarian fiction.[143] Herbst's fiction can be read as an evolution of naturalism "that emerges through its attempt to narrate the modern woman's bodily story," even as she instrumentalizes Rosamond's story as a casualty in the plot for proletarian revolution.[144]

Naturalism as considered by Fleissner and Campbell offers useful insight regarding the role of repetition and deterministic, unruly depictions of women's bodies in fiction, respectively, but by the 1920s and 1930s, proletarian fiction had become increasingly popular. Barbara Foley defines proletarian fiction as "novels written in the ambience of the Communist-led cultural movement that arose and

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[143] As noted by Paula Rabinowitz, Barbara Foley, Laura Hapke, and Julia Ehrhardt, Herbst's Trexler trilogy "fails to overturn the gender conventions of the proletarian narrative" (Ehrhardt, *Writers of Conviction*, 171). Ehrhardt in particular calls attention to Foley's argument that Herbst creates a "tamer" fate for Helen's fictional counterpart by ignoring the actual circumstances of Helen's death, while Ehrhardt claims that Herbst wrote Rosamond's death in deference to "editorial resistance to depictions of abortion in fiction" (Foley, *Radical Representations,* 233, quoted in Ehrhardt *Writers of Conviction*, 171; Ehrhardt, *Writers of Conviction*, 172).

[144] Fleissner, *Women, Compulsion, Modernity*, 13.

developed in the United States in the context of the Great Depression," though Foley also notes that the "temporal rubric" of her definition can be more expansive than just the late 1920s and 1930s.[145] Paula Rabinowitz's landmark study *Labor and Desire: Women's Revolutionary Fiction in Depression America* reckons with the contradictions of reading women's fiction in the proletarian tradition. Rabinowitz, writing in 1991, before the reconsideration of naturalism by Fleissner and Campbell in the 2000s, notes:

> Proletarian fiction, with its roots in naturalism and its connections to the tough-guy, hard-boiled prose of the 1930s detective novels, has been construed as a profoundly masculine genre to differentiate it from the historical romances and other women's fiction popular during the Depression. […] Women's proletarian fiction must be viewed both as a variation of proletarian literature and as coherent genre of its own.[146]

Proletarian fiction depends on a sort of deterministic thread rooted in naturalism to grapple with the struggles of the working-class subject. Rabinowitz writes that "as a genre, the leftist fiction of the 1930s represents a curious revision of the realist domestic novel," an observation that makes Fleissner and Campbell's respective concerns of compulsion and the "unruly" naturalists more significant, especially in

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[145] Barbara Foley, *Radical Representations: Politics and Form in U.S. Proletarian Fiction, 1929-1941* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), vii.
[146] Paula Rabinowitz, *Labor and Desire: Women's Revolutionary Fiction in Depression America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 65-66.

conversation with Kelley and Herbst's fiction.[147] Foregrounding domestic concerns and centralizing the repeated lengths to which women protagonists go to avoid continuing pregnancy extends Rabinowitz's focus on gender and genre to bridge naturalism and proletarian fiction. Rabinowitz points to the tactic of "encoding the mass movement as maternal" as a key way in which women writers "inscribe a female, class-conscious subjectivity"—yet this tactic works in tension with the many instances in which women's revolutionary fiction includes abortion as a gateway to a protagonist's ability to engage in political action.[148]

More recent studies of women's proletarian fiction and abortion offer troubling readings of the role of abortion in this tradition. Joy Castro, for example, reads abortion as "figured negatively in these [proletarian] texts by feminist writers."[149]

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[147] Rabinowitz, *Labor and Desire,* 67.

[148] Rabinowitz, *Labor and Desire,* 71. This point in particular is useful to consider in regards to Agnes Smedley's life and works.

[149] Joy Castro, "My Little Illegality": Abortion, Resistance, and Women Writers on the Left" in *The Novel and the American Left: Critical Essays on Depression-Era Fiction,* ed. Janet Galligani (Iowa City: The University of Iowa Press, 2004) 16. Castro frames her argument as following Judith Wilt's *Abortion, Choice, and Contemporary Fiction: The Armageddon of Maternal Instinct*, which argues that argues that "in the nineteenth-century novel of infanticide lie the seeds of twentieth-century abortion narrative," a point that reads as fairly anti-abortion and seems almost ahistorical in regards to how abortion is, and always has been, a part of pregnant people's lives (23). Wilt expresses her contentious personal opinion about abortion in her book's Preface, stating that "I believe a woman's freedom to abort a fetus is a monstrous, a tyrannous, but a *necessary* freedom in a fallen world" (xiii). Such a framing of abortion as "monstrous" and "necessary" is a perspective that perpetuates anti-abortion stigma under the auspices of being "pro-choice." Wilt also draws, unsettlingly, on Adrienne Rich's unfortunate remark in *Of Woman Born* that "abortion is violence," which is an ideologically fraught perspective from which to begin an analysis of abortion and "choice" in fiction (269). Such a perspective is, I argue, a dangerous one to use as the foundation for an argument about abortion in literature, as such a perspective perpetuates the anti-abortion stigma that the abortion rights movement works against.

Using Meridel Le Sueur, Margery Latimer, Tess Slesinger, and Herbst as her examples, Castro considers how

> Rather than serving as a moment of resistance, abortion instead functions as a moment of submission—the moment in which women, submitting to the demands of their lovers, their class, their politics, realize the extent to which their bodies are commodities and to which ultimately dehumanizing technologies have supplanted nature in capitalist society.[150]

While Latimer and Slesinger's novels depict instances of forced or coerced abortion, an argument that casts abortion technologies as "ultimately dehumanizing" and "supplant[ing] nature" diminishes the rich history of abortion as a literary site by which to negotiate nature and gender. While Castro's argument regarding the role of women's bodies as commodities and the importance of "dehumanizing technologies" relates to Herbst's decision to revise Rosamond's death in the context of a car crash, her argument does not apply in regards to the literary history of herbal abortion that Herbst engages with in her earliest work. Castro's perspective prioritizes views like Meridel Le Sueur's, whose fiction can be read as arguing that "there is no subject position for the working-class woman without children; female historicity grows out of women's potential to mother."[151] While Latimer and Slesinger's novels offer

[150] Castro, "My Little Illegality," 17.
[151] Rabinowitz, *Labor and Desire*, 120.

complicated negotiations of accessing abortion under pressure from their male partners, Herbst's collected fiction offers too many different depictions of abortion to allow for such a specific reading of abortion as "a trope for more general kinds of loss or failed potential," as Castro argues.[152] The focus on technology as dehumanizing and nature as "a refuge, a metaphor for what the women are relinquishing," forecloses the evidence that abortion in the literary tradition that "From Censors to Shouts" traces is also very much about the natural world, and such scenes are part of each novelist's wider exploration of the connections between nature and gender.[153] Indeed, such a sweeping generalization regarding the role of abortion in women's proletarian fiction reduces the complexity with which many women writers depicted abortion in their work.

Castro relies on and perhaps misrepresents Stacy Alaimo's analyses in *Undomesticated Ground* regarding nature as a refuge in the four abortion stories she considers. Castro positions herself in opposition to Alaimo's reading of nature as "feminism's foe." Yet in Castro's four case studies, the nature she identifies often amounts to a small basket of fruit or imagining oneself to be holding a tree struck by lightning—mostly metaphorical tools that Castro sees as working in opposition to the "mechanized terms" of coerced surgical abortion.[154] By contrast, Alaimo's chapter on

[152] Castro, "My Little Illegality," 33.
[153] Castro, "My Little Illegality," 17.
[154] Castro, "My Little Illegality," 30, 24.

women's writing of the early twentieth century and the Left places this writing in conversation with the (masculine) naturalist obsession with returning to nature to assert one's virility and sense of dominance over the natural world, a trend that she traces in movements like the Franklin Delano Roosevelt's Civilian Conservation Corps, which "transported the menacing proletariat—quite literally—to the location of the "good Nature.""[155] The Leftist women writers Alaimo discusses engage with the natural world at a different scale—like rural fields and the work of farm life that Kelley and Herbst depict. This is not to say that the elements of the natural world that Castro focuses on are insignificant or less worthy of attention—this *is* to say that Kelley and Herbst engage with the natural world on a different scale even as they also depict herbal medicine as one way to pursue abortion care.

Crucially, what Alaimo argues is not that women and nature are diametrically opposed. Instead, she offers something a bit more complicated:

> For whereas feminist theory's flight from nature leaves nature dangerously abject, a remarkable range of women's texts inhabit nature in order to transform it, not only contending with the natures that have been waged against women but writing nature as a feminist space.[156]

[155] Alaimo, *Undomesticated Ground,* 96.
[156] Alaimo, *Undomesticated Ground,* 13.

Alaimo's argument also includes her insistence that: "nature, then, is undomesticated both in the sense that it figures as a space apart from the domestic and in the sense that it is untamed and thus serves as a model for female insurgency."[157] Alaimo's argument is thus compatible with Castro's, as Castro sees moments like Slesinger's protagonist's fixation on a basket of fruit as offering insight into her processing of abortion as an act of both neglect and care. Castro focuses on natural metaphors as moments in which women writers grapple with their choices—most of which are coerced in Castro's corpus—using the natural world to parse out their own reactions to a procedure that is stigmatized as against nature. Kelley and Herbst offer depictions of multiple abortions or multiple attempts at abortion that draw on imagery of the natural world, following an "unruly" naturalist attention to women's embodiment as well as imagery of an idealized nature that serves to "model… female insurgency" in partnership with action against class oppression.

"Unruly" Naturalism: Edith Summers Kelley's Weeds

Edith Summers Kelley's *Weeds* (1923) plays a complicated role in this project: despite Judith Pippinger's repeated efforts, including the use of herbal abortifacients, she does not successfully self-manage an abortion in the novel. Judith's pregnancy ultimately ends under vague circumstances that coincide with her attempted suicide,

[157] Alaimo, *Undomesticated Ground,* 16.

which Judith turns to in a moment of tragic desperation. Kelley's novel focuses on how knowledge fails to circulate among communities of women, most of whom are mothers. Allison Berg writes of the shift from the nineteenth-century domestic ideal to the rise in eugenics in the twentieth century: "This shift from the moral essentialism of the cult of True Womanhood to the biological cult of the mother body effectively diminished the maternal role from that of moral agent to that of physical vessel."[158] Berg's work points to a cultural transition from moral crusaders like Comstock to a different view of motherhood focused on physicality, views that align with the "unruly" naturalist focus on women's embodiment. Berg argues that Kelley's fiction speaks back to the medicalized or biopolitical nature of motherhood, especially in her working-class novel *Weeds.* Scholarship on Kelley tends to read her either in comparison to Charlotte Perkins Gilman's work on economics and utopian reproduction, or in comparison to Nella Larsen's novel *Quicksand* (1928). In *Undomesticated Ground,* for instance, Alaimo compares Kelley and Larsen to explore the depiction of nature in the novels as "essentialist with a vengeance as it reduces the protagonists to breeding bodies."[159] Here, following Berg and Alaimo, fiction tracks the social shift from a moral essentialism to nature's essentialism, as it were, as the popular discourses of reproduction and eugenics shifted targets.

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[158] Allison Berg, *Mothering the race: Women's narratives of reproduction, 1890-1930*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2002), 83.
[159] Alaimo, *Undomesticated Ground*, 109.

Weeds follows Judith Pippinger from childhood to motherhood in a working-class town in rural Kentucky. Judith marries Jerry and is surprised when she becomes pregnant, as her knowledge of reproduction does not extend beyond farm animals. The birth scene—originally censored from the novel by Harcourt, Brace and restored in the late twentieth-century reprint by Feminist Press—is horrific, demonic, and mechanical, the perfect example in Berg's analysis of the mother as physical vessel. The birth scene, had it been included, would have occupied the center of the novel—the hinge point at which Judith's life changes from one of relative freedom to one dictated by the domestic tasks she so detests. Much of the scholarship on the novel examines the censored birth scene extensively. The scene is chilling in its violent portrayal of childbirth as Judith is rendered almost unrecognizable and, as Berg writes, "women's reproductive labor is elevated to epic proportions, suggesting the latent power of maternity."[160] Campbell uses *Weeds*' birth scene to point to the novel's "unruly" naturalism in that Kelley fully centers the body in excess in this chapter, despite the fact that the body is rendered in such a machinic way. Additionally, Kelley's unsparingly harsh depiction of Judith's seemingly incessant pregnancies reveal "the idea of the child as parasite or vampire, and of nature working its will on the woman's body without her consent" an idea that "combine[s]

[160] Berg, *Mothering the Race*, 99.

the ‘children consume resources’ and children-as-waste themes of unruly naturalism.”[161]

Yet the aspect of the novel that is most relevant to this survey of herbal abortifacients comes in the second half, after Judith has given birth to more children. Under the domestic strains of farm work, motherhood, and housework, Judith is worn thin, and any hint of her youthful exuberance has dulled in her exhaustion. When a visiting preacher comes to town, Judith has an affair with him. She realizes that she is pregnant soon after the preacher leaves town, and she refuses to have the child. Judith tries various methods to end the pregnancy: vigorous horseback rides, inserting a knitting needle into her vagina, and drinking teas made from pennyroyal and tansy.

What is remarkable about Judith’s attempts to terminate her pregnancy is Kelley’s description of how she comes to know about the methods she attempts:

> She was informed now about many things of which she had been ignorant when her first child was born. She had listened to the whispered confidences of other women and from their dark hints had learned that unwilling mothers had sometimes succeeded in doing what she now felt she must do. Hitherto a powerful physical revulsion had prevented her from trying to interfere with nature in its course.[162]

[161] Campbell, *Bitter Tastes*, 262.
[162] Edith Summers Kelley, *Weeds* (New York: The Feminist Press, 1996), 282.

Here, we learn that after the birth of her first child, the women in her rural community confided in Judith "whispered confidences" and "dark hints" for how to avoid or, more likely, terminate an unwanted pregnancy. The supposed stigmatized immorality of abortion isn't an issue for Judith, but she is concerned that terminating a pregnancy is against nature, exemplifying the essentialism of nature that Berg suggests is emblematic of the early twentieth century. Ironically, though, so many of the methods of abortion that Judith attempts are connected to or derived from nature in the form of horseback rides and herbal medicine, forms of nature that align with Alaimo's argument that nature can serve as a space to "inhabit… in order to transform it."[163] Literally, Judith consumes parts of the natural world in an attempt to transform herself. Even as Kelley "acknowledges the beauty of nature on a farm" she nevertheless "debunks the romantic view of rural life," especially as Judith attempts to use plants, parts of the natural world, to end her pregnancy—a decision that subverts a sentimental vision of domestic, rural farm life.[164]

As Judith attempts to terminate her pregnancy via horseback riding, members of the community take notice.

> By the time [Judith] reached home in the late afternoon, the whole neighborhood knew that she had been out and just how long she had been out.

[163] Alaimo, *Undomesticated Ground,* 13.
[164] Campbell, *Bitter Tastes,* 262

> And having satisfied themselves that there was no sickness in the family, the women drew their own conclusions.[165]

Though Kelley never elaborates on the women's conclusions, it is clear that the women of the town understand that Judith is trying to terminate her pregnancy. Yet these women, who had given her "dark hints," never offer any specific advice to Judith in her desperation. Instead, Judith continues to work through her litany of methods, repeatedly trying various methods to terminate her pregnancy. She tries to use a knitting needle but cannot follow through due to her squeamishness and discomfort, and instead turns to herbal medicine:

> She searched out pennyroyal and tansy and other noxious herbs in the places where she knew they grew, and took to brewing nasty smelling decoctions over the stove and sipping gingerly at the brackish liquor she poured off from them. But all that these evil brews did was to increase her sickness and lassitude. Drearily she shambled about the kitchen through the dragging days and felt too sick and weary for despair.[166]

Clearly Judith knows what herbs to use (as does Kelley), as her precise naming of the herbs suggests knowledge of abortifacient properties. But the novel is sparse on the details of Judith's preparation of the herbs, condensing the description of Judith's

[165] Kelley, *Weeds*, 285.
[166] Kelley, *Weeds*, 286.

recipe simply to "brewing" the herbs into decoctions. The brew only makes Judith sick, indicating that she does not know how to properly prepare the herbs. As she exhausts all the methods she knows, Judith becomes increasingly desperate and attempts to die by suicide. Judith survives, but her attempted suicide relieves her of her pregnancy—she miscarries seemingly due to the shock of her suicide attempt, though the medical details here are vague.

The closest Kelley comes to allowing the reader access to the circulation of reproductive medical knowledge in the novel is an early conversation between Judith and her neighbor, Hat. Hat recognizes Judith's first pregnancy before Judith does. As the two discuss Judith's early pregnancy symptoms, Hat knows in vivid detail what Judith feels and offers advice for soothing nausea or pain. Kelley is careful not to encroach too far into Hat's private thoughts. Hat remains childfree throughout the novel, but the narrator is coy, and notes that Hat's methods and choices are her own business.

> "Wimmin has troubles caows don't never even dream on. You'll find that out afore you're married long," said Hat darkly. From this cryptic prophecy she launched into a description of the pregnant state and went into the subject in all its ramifications. She did not tell Judith how it came that she who had

> never had a child knew so many intimate details regarding the symptoms of pregnancy. That after all was her own affair.[167]

Hat tells Judith about pregnancy, but Judith notes that their entire conversation is shrouded in an "air of salacious secrecy."[168] Instead of assisting her friend, Hat's knowledge remains "her own affair," and the novel never returns to Hat's supposed well of reproductive information. The implication of Hat's secret knowledge, along with the townswomen's "dark hints" and clear understanding of Judith's attempts to terminate her pregnancy, suggests that Judith is denied the information that would allow her to exercise the right not to have a child. As a working-class mother unable to access the knowledge she needs to end or even recognize her pregnancy, let alone the means to provide for the children she does have in a dignified, healthy, and safe environment, Judith is doomed to her unfulfilling marriage. Her unhappy ending has elements of both classic and "unruly" naturalism, in that she is stuck in place with what she views as an excessive brood of children. Kelley offers a picture, via Judith's frustrated and desperate attempts to end her pregnancy, as well as her despair at the prospect of mothering her children, of the harm done by withholding necessary information about reproduction, specifically regarding contraception, abortion, and sexual health in general. Though herbal abortifacients fail, Kelley condemns not the

[167] Kelley, *Weeds*, 148.
[168] Kelley, *Weeds*, 148.

herbs or plants themselves, but the townswomen who refuse to share their information with Judith. Kelley depicts the realities of working-class life in *Weeds,* but her novel fits more squarely in the naturalist traditions rather than the proletarian fiction tradition.

Archiving Abortion Knowledge in Josephine Herbst's Papers

Unlike Kelley, who limits her fictional representation of abortion to an implication in her singular novel, Josephine Herbst consistently returns to the subject in her fiction. Like Kelley, Herbst's fiction is heavily autobiographical, as Herbst uses fiction to revise and reimagine details of her own life. As noted by Julie C. Ehrhardt, Herbst uses her fiction to offer retellings or revisions of "the most formative episode in her life"—her younger sister Helen's death from infection following a criminalized abortion in Sioux City, Iowa in October 1920.[169] Ehrhardt argues that "over the course of a career that spanned forty years, [Herbst] told Helen's story over and over again in stories and novels depicting the plight of aspiring professional women writers who found themselves unexpectedly pregnant."[170] Though Ehrhardt suggests that Herbst commits to Helen's story "at a time when… few writers dared to take on abortion as a subject matter for fiction," this claim denies the widespread inclusion of

[169] Ehrhardt, *Writers of Conviction,* 142.
[170] Ehrhardt, *Writers of Conviction,* 143.

abortion in American fiction as demonstrated in this project so far, particularly in women's revolutionary or proletarian fiction.[171] While Ehrhardt argues that Herbst commits to revising Helen's story in different forms throughout her career, Herbst is at the same time revising her own abortion story. The two stories are inextricable in Herbst's biography and fiction, as Helen died just months after Herbst's own abortion. Though Herbst kept her own abortion a closely guarded secret from her family and most friends, she moved towards writing explicitly about her experience towards the end of her life as she began working towards her memoirs.[172]

Indeed, in Herbst's collected papers, correspondence among Herbst's family suggests that abortion was a consistent part of the women in the family's lives leading up to and following Helen's death, though Helen's death was the point at which abortion became a central focus of Herbst's fiction. What is significant about Herbst's writing—both her published fiction and her archival materials held at the Beinecke—is the fluent command of the codes and euphemisms used to communicate about abortion by the women in her family. This fluency makes it more puzzling that Herbst chose to shift away from the plant names and herbal tropes used to describe abortion after her first novel. Herbst, her sister Helen, and their older sister Alice all have recorded experiences accessing abortion, and Herbst's papers reveal an understanding

[171] Ehrhardt, *Writers of Conviction*, 143.
[172] Elinor Langer, *Josephine Herbst* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1994), 60.

of the many ways in which abortion was communicated and discussed among women, particularly family members, in the early twentieth century. But in her fiction, Herbst moves from fluently deploying the common codes used to describe abortion in her first unpublished manuscript, to eventually circumventing the subject of abortion altogether, despite the fact that she remained a source of abortion knowledge for those close to her throughout her life.[173] Herbst's first two published novels include mention of surgical abortion procedures—which drew some attention in reviews of both works—but she moves away from representing abortion as such in her "Trexler trilogy" of the 1930s, choosing to kill the character representing her sister in a car crash rather than depict an abortion in *The Executioner Waits* (1934), and represent her own sense of childloss via her fictional counterpart's experience of stillbirth in *Rope of Gold* (1939).[174]

I differ from Ehrhardt in that I do not believe that Herbst changed representational tactics because of "editorial resistance," since clearly Herbst's first two novels retained her discussion of abortion as a marginal and then central aspect of each novel's plot.[175] Instead, I argue that Herbst's fiction offers a window into her own personal grief as well as a timeline of literary stylistic shifts. Herbst's shifts in

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[173] Herbst's biographer Elinor Langer notes that Herbst's partner, Jean Garrigue, told Langer that Herbst helped her to access abortion care while the procedure was still criminalized, when Garrigue and Herbst were in an open relationship. See Langer, *Josephine Herbst,* 290.
[174] I discuss Rosamond's death at length later in the chapter; Victoria describes her stillbirth early in *Rope of Gold* (New York: The Feminist Press: 1984), 21.
[175] Ehrhardt, *Writers of Conviction,* 142

representing abortion trace how Leftist women writers' representation of reproductive politics evolved. Herbst moves from using codes that she could reasonably expect women in her audience to understand to plot points that figure bodily autonomy as part of a larger constellation of themes, most prominently the cause of labor rights organizing and economic injustice. Herbst renders the domestic sphere as part of the revolution. In her Trexler trilogy, she deploys the maternal, as Rabinowitz notes, but at the expense of representing abortion, as Rosamond's voice is drowned out after her death by her mother, Anne. As Herbst expands the language she uses to describe women's reproductive choices and pregnancy outcomes beyond abortion in her fiction, she experiences an expanded readership. Whether this expansion is informed by Herbst's shifting perspectives on her subject matter (or vice versa) is unclear.

The third of four daughters, as a child Herbst had a prime vantage point from which to observe her older sisters' obsession with fictions of femininity, published in women's magazines and romantic novels. Herbst's frustration with women's magazines is widely noted: "women's magazines controlled and contained women, in Herbst's estimation; thus, she refused to write for them."[176] Biographer Elinor Langer writes of Herbst's older sisters' Frances and Alice's attempts to find husbands, and the topic frequently appears in Herbst's fictionalization of her older sisters' teenage

[176] Jaime Harker, *America the Middlebrow: Women's Novels, Progressivism, and Middlebrow Authorship Between the Wars* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2007), 120.

years in her novels.[177] Herbst spared none of the family's secrets in her pursuit of literary success, often drawing on family lore both past and present in her work. While Herbst's major literary inspiration was her younger sister Helen, another key focus in Herbst's fictionalization of her family is her mother, Mary. Herbst's papers, particularly her notes towards her unfinished memoir, include mentions of her mother Mary's skill at herbal medicine. In a paragraph about her mother, Herbst writes:

> Years before it [a brothel] had been mentioned genteely [sic] in the papers as a resort—brought about one of my first questionings of the adult world, came to me through the faily [sic, family] papers, ads for painful menses, change of life pills, heartburn and piles. Words not commonly used in our family where the physician was homeopathic and the remedies mild, nature's own, or where for years my mother relied on five drops of bellaonna [sic], five of aconite in a glass of water.[178]

This note is one of many fragments of Herbst's outline for her memoirs, but it is crucial evidence that explains how she learned about the "adult world" through reading newspapers and encountering various euphemisms and codes. The codes include "resort" for "brothel," "ads for painful menses" for contraception or abortifacient medication, as discussed in the previous chapter; and "change of life

[177] Langer, *Josephine Herbst* 21-25.
[178] Josephine Herbst, "Notes," [Box 67, Folder "Notes on Spain, Germany, 1930s"] Undated. Josephine Herbst Papers, Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library. All correspondence and manuscript materials cited in this section are from this collection.

pills," or medication to help with symptoms of menopause. Herbst describes her education about the adult world using a vocabulary of euphemistic newspaper codes in parallel to her mother's use of herbal, or "nature's own," medicine. Herbst mentions a physician, but almost as an aside; according to this note, it is her mother who dispenses remedies. Herbst's education in medical and social codes courtesy of her mother is similar to her descriptions of her older sisters' education in femininity from newspapers and magazines—clearly, the Herbst women were well versed in the codes and euphemisms of the day, unlike Kelley. Without the benefit of intimate relationships with their older sisters or mothers, Kelley and her protagonist were forced to learn about sexual and reproductive health by experiencing the terror of an unexpected pregnancy firsthand.

Though Herbst herself had a difficult medical history, often falling ill and even submitting to an unnecessary gynecological procedure to correct a "misplaced womb" in her early twenties, her own health is not a key concern in her notes towards her memoirs.[179] The Herbst family medical knowledge is most often deployed in correspondence, in advice sent between and among Mary and her daughters, who

[179] See Langer, *Josephine Herbst,* 39-40. Langer explains more about the surgery Herbst elected to have: "If Josie… had anything at all it is possible that what [she] had [was] uterine "retroversions" or tilts, conditions reported much more frequently in the past than they are now when less attention is given to the idea of a uterine "norm." […] In the early years of this [the twentieth] century it gradually became understood that corrective surgery was being performed much too often. [..] Their doctor was not a quack. The medicine he offered was the accepted practice of the moment.[…] It was the practice of the moment with its ignorance of women that was at fault. Josie thought that the operation had saved her from a lifetime of pain and sterility. I think she was lucky to have escaped with her sexual organs intact," 40.

lived scattered across the States for much of their lives. The Herbst women's knowledge of contraceptives or abortifacients appears most significantly in correspondence regarding Helen's pregnancy with her husband Andrew in 1920. Herbst and Helen's correspondence from late September through October of that year chronicles Helen's various attempts to use over-the-counter medicines to end her pregnancy and convince doctors in the conservative town of Sioux City, Iowa to assist her in her attempts. Helen first writes to Herbst:

> I am in a fearful quandary. The totally unexpected may have happened to me. Certainly I hadn't planned on a child yet—not for a year or two—but I'm in doubt. […] Do you by any chance know something to do. I went to the Dr.—he gave me medicine. It didn't help. […] Tell me if you know anything.[180]

Helen reaches out to her sister in an attempt to learn of a more effective medicine than that given to her by the doctor in Sioux City. Helen and Josephine could rely on their mothers' herbal remedies growing up, and thus Helen turns to her family when the physician's remedy does not have the desired result of terminating her pregnancy. Josephine replies with advice regarding medical treatments as well as suggestions about other women Helen could ask in her search for help:

[180] Quoted in Langer, *Josephine Herbst*, 61; Helen Herbst to Josephine Herbst, postmarked September 15, 1920.

> I keep thinking about you. Something must be done. […] But I know women who have done something even as late as 2 months without any danger. Doesn't Alice know any doctor—some of her women friends ought to know. In either S. Francisco or NY it would be so simple. There is some contraption the doctors use—insert it in the womb to dilate the womb gradually + it produces results painlessly—Maybe I could find out if it's anything anyone could insert. […] Castor oil should be taken in big doses of course.[181]

Here Herbst offers advice to her sister about who to consult as well as recipes that Helen should try. Though she makes no mention of her own abortion (a surgical abortion obtained in New York City earlier that year), Herbst reassures her sister that abortion is a commonplace procedure, as she gestures to unnamed women she claims to know who have had the procedure. Whether Herbst chooses not to name these friends to protect their identities, or used these "friends" to avoid telling Helen her own abortion story, is unclear.

Given Herbst's residence in Greenwich Village at a time when it was the center of bohemian life and "free love," as well as the fact that New York City has historically been a central location for abortion access, we can assume that Herbst knew of other women who had abortions.[182] Herbst acknowledges the regional nature of abortion

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[181] Quoted in Langer, *Josephine Herbst,* 62; Josephine Herbst to Helen Herbst, postmarked September 21, 1920.

[182] Herbst's notes include evidence of her keeping tabs on other women writers' sexual and reproductive choices; for example, she notes "Re Edna St Vincent Millay"—"got pregnant in Paris,

access, noting that it would be "simple" to access abortion in large cities like San Francisco and New York. The device Herbst references in this letter does not clearly fit any specific medical technology of which I am aware. Herbst's insistence on one device seems to prefigure the idea of an intrauterine device (IUD) as a method of emergency contraception (notably not as a method of abortion). Herbst's description of dilation could also refer to dilation and evacuation, a method of surgical abortion. Herbst's reference to her sister Alice is seemingly benign, given that Alice lived in Sioux City at this time, when Helen and Andrew were living with Herbst's parents in Helen and Josephine's childhood bedroom to save money. Yet Alice's role as a reliable source of abortion knowledge is more clearly revealed in Helen's response to Herbst in a letter postmarked September 25, 1920:

> Things are the same with me. I can't expect anything till next month. Then I'll start in dosing myself in earnest again. I took Chichester's at first, then some stuff (stronger) that the Dr. gave me. I was going to continue it all month but it was impossible — it made me horribly sick. Alice once took similar stuff 2 mos. & it finally worked. So I haven't lost hope yet. I shall do all I can short of an operation

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produced miscarriage, had infection, result historectomy [sic]." As mentioned in the introduction, Millay did in fact have multiple abortions—one in New York, one in England. Millay's second abortion was managed via a recipe involving herbal abortifacient alkanet, researched by her mother, Cora, a former nurse, in a copy of *Culpeper's Herbal*. It is unclear where Herbst got her information or for what purpose she recorded these details. Neither of Millay's abortions occurred in Paris, and she did not have a hysterectomy, at least not according to Nancy Milford's biography, *Savage Beauty: The Life of Edna St. Vincent Millay* (New York: Random House, 2002) 197, 239, 438. See Herbst Papers, Box 69 "Notes [1920s]."

> for the idea of having a child is simply impossible. From every standpoint it is utterly impossible. Did you find out about that dilation thing? It sounds too easy to be true.[183]

Here, it is implied that Josephine's advice to seek out Alice's recommendations is based on Alice's lived experience of obtaining abortions, revealed by Helen to have been managed using Chichester's, a doctor's remedy, or a combination of the two. Alice's experience successfully self-managing an abortion at home gives Helen hope, especially as an alternative to surgical abortion.

That Helen and Alice turn to Chichester's in 1920 is significant. As discussed in the previous chapter, Chichester's was initially marketed as "Chichester's Pennyroyal Pills," using the coded language of flowers to communicate the abortifacient nature of the medicine. In 1911, a report by the American Medical Association explained that "Tests for the presence of black hellebore, tansy, pennyroyal, savin, and certain other reputed abortifacients resulted, in each case, negatively… no pennyroyal could be found in the pills."[184] Another report of collected excerpts regarding "nostrums and quackery" assembled by the American Medical Association includes an examination of the Chichester's case with accompanying photographs of their advertisements,

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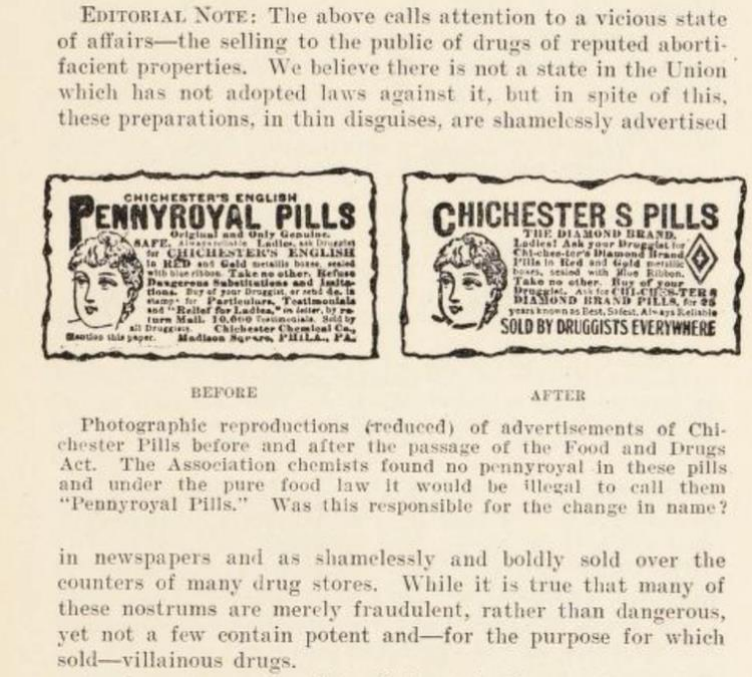
[183] Quoted in Langer, *Josephine Herbst*, 63; Helen Herbst to Josephine Herbst, postmarked September 25, 1920.

[184] Puckner, W.A. and L.E. Warren originally in *The Journal A.M.A.*, May 27, 1911. Included in *Nostrums and Quackery*. 1911. Wellcome Library. 433-434. 131. https://archive.org/details/b29002679/page/432/mode/2up?q=%22pennyroyal+pills%22.

analyzing how Chichester's—under threat, certainly—removed the word "pennyroyal" from their advertisements and products. Of course, the AMA also used this pamphlet explaining Chichester's change in marketing as an opportunity to expand upon its anti-abortion stance of the time, unsurprising given its history as a partner in the passage of the 1873 Comstock Act. The "Editorial Note" to the discussion of Chichester's change in name reads:

> Editorial Note: The above calls attention to the vicious state of affairs — the selling to the public of drugs of reputed abortifacient properties. We believe there is not a state in the Union which has not adopted laws against it, but in spite of this, these preparations, in thin disguises, are shamelessly advertised in newspapers and as shamelessly and boldly sold over the counters of many drug stores. While it is true that many of these nostrums are merely fraudulent, rather than dangerous, yet not a few contain potent and—for the purpose for which sold—villainous drugs.[185]

[185] Puckner, W.A. and L.E. Warren originally in *The Journal A.M.A.*, 433.



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CHICHESTER'S ENGLISH
PENNYROYAL PILLS
Original and Only Genuine.
SAFE. Ask your Druggist for CHICHESTER'S ENGLISH in RED and Gold metallic boxes, sealed with blue ribbon. Take no other. Refuse Dangerous Substitutions and Imitations. Buy of your Druggist, or send 4c. in stamps for Particulars, Testimonials and "Relief for Ladies," in letter, by return Mail. 10,000 Testimonials. Sold by all Druggists. Chichester Chemical Co., Mention this paper. Madison Square, PHILA., PA.

CHICHESTER S PILLS
THE DIAMOND BRAND.
Ladies! Ask your Druggist for Chi-che-ster's Diamond Brand Pills in Red and Gold metallic boxes, sealed with Blue Ribbon. Take no other. Buy of your Druggist. Ask for CHI-CHES-TER S DIAMOND BRAND PILLS, for 25 years known as Best, Safest, Always Reliable
SOLD BY DRUGGISTS EVERYWHERE

BEFORE AFTER

Photographic reproductions (reduced) of advertisements of Chichester Pills before and after the passage of the Food and Drugs Act. The Association chemists found no pennyroyal in these pills and under the pure food law it would be illegal to call them "Pennyroyal Pills." Was this responsible for the change in name?

in newspapers and as shamelessly and boldly sold over the counters of many drug stores. While it is true that many of these nostrums are merely fraudulent, rather than dangerous, yet not a few contain potent and—for the purpose for which sold—villainous drugs.

[Figure 2] Puckner, W.A. and L.E. Warren originally in *The Journal A.M.A.,* May 27, 1911. Included in *Nostrums and Quackery,* 1911. Wellcome Library, 433.

The AMA's report demonstrates the Food and Drug Act's ability to threaten a company into changing its most recognizable code, yet Chichester's troubles had only begun in the early twentieth century. By 1920, Chichester's had been sued for libel; the case was decided, reversed, and declared a mistrial in 1931. Though Chichester's had been made to change its name, clearly Chichester's name had gained or maintained its brand recognizability in 1920, thanks in part surely to its early association with pennyroyal. By 1920, Helen and her sisters discuss the brand by name in the context of Helen's attempt to self-manage an abortion. The coded language of botanical abortifacients ceases to exist in the correspondence of the Herbst sisters, replaced entirely by the brand name of the medicine. Chichester's had

so prominently made a name for itself, deploying the coded plant name of pennyroyal to ensure that its product's effects were made legible to a wide audience, that its success attracted lawsuits and medical reports. The Herbst sisters do not use botanical codes at all in their correspondence, speaking instead about pills, castor oil, and brand names, but the nature of the medical knowledge remains focused on Helen's search for ways to self-manage an abortion, as she tries to avoid a surgical abortion route due to the unreliability of providers.

Herbst's letters to Helen remain reassuring and supportive of Helen's choice to seek an abortion. Herbst suggests that she has been discussing the matter with other members of the family, as she writes in a letter postmarked October 7, 1920:

> I know how these things go by word of mouth. Society women know where to go—there are good doctors everywhere and especially among the younger, more radical men. At least one can advise you whether to take more of that medicine which Mother says is making you ill + I should think it would.[186]

Following her critique of abortion access as limited to word of mouth rather than a more formal or legal system of public health education is Herbst's acknowledgement that she and their mother Mary have been discussing Helen's situation. Herbst learns from their mother that unspecified medications are making Helen ill. Despite the

[186] This quote not included in excerpt of letter in Langer, *Josephine Herbst*, 63; Josephine Herbst to Helen Herbst, postmarked October 7, 1920.

biased nature of the AMA report on Chichester's as part of its targeted campaign against contraception and abortion, it is undoubtedly true that many patent medicines sold to desperate people under the guise of abortifacients actually contained poisonous or toxic materials. In Helen's case, it appears that a combination of the medicine itself and her decision to take copious amounts of it in her desperation to end her pregnancy cause her to become ill. Herbst continues to mention to Helen that she is talking to women she knows in her search for a solution to Helen's situation.

Helen's letter to Josephine postmarked October 16, 1920 speaks to her increasing desperation, as her attempts to self-manage abortion via medicines at home continue to fail. Helen considers turning to a surgical option:

> I have been so distraught by all this business that I ~~didn't~~ couldn't even write. I've spent days + days going to Drs trying to persuade them to do this – they are all too pious + in fear of the law. Thats the trouble in a small town. Of course they do it for their old patients but not a stranger. All of them told so many terrible stories that I began to get cold feet. But pinned down they admitted that <u>done right</u> there was little danger. The trouble is finding an expert physician who will do it. I have finally located a Dr. whom I think will but his rep. isn't of the best. Still I could find out nothing definite against him. So if he'll do it I expect Ill let him. You see there really is a risk of blood poisoning from incomplete abortion. I remember

women who had to come to the hospital + have the uterus scraped. An awful operation + as a result you can never have children. So I must be careful.[187]

Clearly, Helen understood the risks of criminalized abortion. In their correspondence, Helen and Josephine compellingly critique the factors that bar Helen from accessing a safe abortion—untrustworthy doctors concerned more for their religion or license than the health of a patient, disparities in healthcare across rural and urban regions of the U.S., physicians' use of fear tactics and shame meant to persuade Helen to continue her pregnancy.[188] Even in this letter, Helen notes her reluctance to pursue a surgical abortion, citing the risks of infection and blood loss, but she pursues it when it is the only option available to her. She even tells her sister that she does not consider the doctor's "rep[utation] [to be] the best," yet she is set against continuing a pregnancy that causes her deep depression. Helen closes her final letter to her sister with a last critique: "[I]ts terrible that since women have to be the ones to bear children they cant do it without all this nauseating discomfort + depression."[189]

The guilt that Herbst felt for her sister's death remained with her throughout her life. While their mother Mary expressed guilt and regret for "not opposing it more

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[187] Partially quoted in Langer, *Josephine Herbst*, 64; Helen Herbst to Josephine Herbst, postmarked October 16, 1920.

[188] Surprisingly, Helen, Josephine, Alice, and Mary never mention the cost of the procedure as an obstacle, especially given the Herbst family's often precarious financial situation. Herbst only registers the finances of abortion when attempting to convince Maxwell Anderson to pay her retroactively in 1921 for the abortion he coerced her into having in 1920. In 1921, Herbst was trying to finance her travel to Europe, a plotline Herbst later used in *Money for Love* (1929).

[189] Partially quoted in Langer, *Josephine Herbst*, 64; Helen Herbst to Josephine Herbst, postmarked October 16, 1920.

vigorously," the exact nature of Herbst's guilt and grief is difficult to identify. The Herbst family was forced to revisit their grief for Helen around the first anniversary of her death, as Mary writes to Herbst about Alice's supposed recent bout of illness:

> Alice is home again. I was over this afternoon. She is downstairs + is getting well fast. Moving around today "to keep from getting nervous" she said. We hope to see her strong again soon. We still take care of the children the greater part of the time. I did not dare tell you when I wrote first of the fear + dread we were in. We knew nothing for certain the night Dr. Nervig said she must go to the Hospital. But F[rances] + I knew or felt we did. She was a month behind in her menstrual period + must have had some operation. It is difficult to understand how she would dare take the terrible risk, but Nervig told John she did, but by whom or when, we do not know. As A has said nothing directly, Nervig was alarmed + told John "I'd rather have nothing to do with it you know what happened in that family." Nervig may have thought it or may have done it as a warning or to keep A from ever trying such a dangerous thing again but John said he told Alice when he was alone with her upstairs at their home that he could not say that she would get well, live through it, that she was in a very serious condition. You may know there was a gloom over us all. […] Never never let any one you know or care for

> do this terrible thing + oh never do it yourself. More frequently than people know the consequence is disastrous.[190]

Scholarship on Herbst focuses primarily on Helen's abortion and Herbst's own abortion—almost no critical attention is paid to the wider Herbst family as a site of reproductive and medical knowledge. As Helen and Josephine mention in the above-quoted correspondence, they look to their older sister Alice for insight into reproductive and sexual health, as Alice was the first of the Herbst daughters to marry, have children, and ostensibly access abortion care. Alice's earlier abortion is discussed in correspondence between Helen and Herbst, but here, Mary tells Herbst about Alice's decision to terminate a pregnancy almost a year after Helen's death. Mary's reaction is one of shock and residual grief for Helen. She also betrays her ignorance of Herbst's own abortion—"never do it yourself." Herbst is similarly overwhelmed by her grief for Helen in her reaction to the news of Alice's most recent abortion. To her mother and sister, Alice's decision is inextricable from Helen's tragic death, though Alice herself is conspicuously silent about her choice. Mary uses Helen's death to condemn abortion entirely—"Never never let any one you know or care for do this terrible thing"—but clearly, Alice's reaction is quite different, as she turns to an "operation" to access abortion care. In Herbst's family, abortion was a commonplace part of life. From the codes that Herbst learned from newspapers

[190] Mary Herbst to Josephine Herbst, postmarked October 11, 1921.

regarding "painful menstruation," to her own mother's parroting of these codes as she warns a teenage Helen against finding herself in need of another "pulled down" period, to Alice's experience of both self-managed and surgical abortions, Herbst learned how to communicate and circulate knowledge about abortion from her family, most of whom held such knowledge firsthand.[191]

After Helen's death, Herbst fell into a depression. She attended Helen's funeral in Sioux City, returned to New York, and checked herself in to an upstate sanitorium to tend to her anxious mental state.[192] The next summer, she escaped to Berlin, where she committed herself to her new manuscript, *Unmarried*, later renamed *Following the Circle.* This manuscript offers insight into Herbst's frustrations with the institution of marriage as that which protects men and punishes women, both married and "unmarried." The critical opinion of Herbst's first manuscript is low—admittedly, the manuscript reads as underdeveloped and not quite cohesive, though it is energetic. Still, Herbst's first manuscript is significant for its frank depictions of abortion, as Herbst recreates her own abortion story and Helen's through the fictional sisters Judith and Clare. Many scholars including Ehrhardt suggest that the novel was essentially unpublishable due to its multiple abortion scenes.[193] Biographer Elinor Langer suggests that the unpublishable nature of

[191] Mary Herbst to Helen Herbst, October 26, 1915.
[192] Langer, *Josephine Herbst,* 67.
[193] Ehrhardt, *Writers of Conviction,* 168.

Herbst's novel lies in the fact that it is "exceptionally intimate, and of course it was a woman's story."[194] Langer also relays an anecdote that the manuscript's "abortion scenes… are so affecting that the writer Claude McKay, who read the manuscript in Paris, told Andrew Bernhard [Helen's widower] that he could feel the scraping of the knife."[195] The scenes of Herbst's fictional counterpart Judith's surgical abortion are significant, but the novel is concerned with abortion stories from its very beginning, a fact that is overlooked in a singular focus on the latter half of the manuscript. Herbst's archive demonstrates the consistent circulation of knowledge regarding abortion methods in her family as well as the shifting codes used to talk about abortion methods, as Chichester's becomes divorced from pennyroyal and Herbst herself speculates about medical technologies that could manage abortion easily, in one device. That Herbst seemingly indulges in speculation regarding medical technologies of abortion in her correspondence with Helen situates her personal papers in conversation with Campbell's unruly naturalism, as Herbst imagines the technologies that could ideally help save her and her sister from the dangers of criminalized abortion. In this way, the concern with "technologies" in naturalism is not limited to agriculture and industry, but extends to medical devices that Herbst imagines to save Helen from her desperate situation.

[194] Langer, *Josephine Herbst,* 71.
[195] Langer, *Josephine Herbst,* 72.

Revising the Abortion Scene: Herbst's Fiction

Herbst spent the four years following her sister's death recreating fictional versions of the systems of knowledge circulation that were key to her family's correspondence. The abortions in Herbst's first manuscript do not simply happen off-page, in ellipses or the blank space between paragraphs—here, Herbst outlines the way knowledge moves and the steps women take to access abortion, with full knowledge of the risks that the legal and medical systems have placed in their path. *Following the Circle* begins in a small surrogate town of Sioux City—offensively named "Iroquois"—following young Judith and Clare and their older sisters, Evelyn and Mary (Frances and Alice, respectively). Herbst offers more insight in this autobiographical manuscript than in any other text regarding her childhood education on home-based reproductive care. Shortly after Mary's marriage, Judith comes across Mary and her mother in the dining room of the Stahl home. Judith eavesdrops on her mother's attempts to comfort her sister:

> "You have to expect that when you are married," the mother was saying, her voice curiously tired, drained of life. "Don't cry. That's what it is, you know. That's the way it is. Don't cry. But you're so young. Seems only yesterday when you were playing with dolls." The voice floundered then went on, "Maybe it isn't so. We'll try that motherwort tea. Don't you cry now." She

> bowed toward her daughter, the two figures wilting toward one another, while all the time the sobbing went on, low, refusing comfort. Judith edged out the door, went along the porch and in at the front door and up the stairs. She sat down on the floor of her room, her eyes dilating, her heart throbbing. She knew. She knew what they meant. Mary was going to have a baby; she wasn't glad, she was crying, as if her heart would break.[196]

There is no recorded biographical counterpart for this scene, which is not to say that it is not drawn or inspired by Herbst's life. Mary's distress about her pregnancy seems to be partly due to shock, as her mother reminds her that pregnancy is something to be expected in a marriage. Yet Mrs. Stahl, too, is concerned, as she offers her daughter comfort and a remedy. Herbst characterizes Mary and Mrs. Stahl as "wilting" women, distressed, tired, and Mrs. Stahl specifically as "drained of life." The rhetoric of life is here but drained of any positive qualities—the knowledge of a child is something that causes heartbreak for Mary. Too, there is a pessimistic determinism that seems to model itself on the naturalist depictions of unplanned pregnancies—to recall Campbell's "unruly" naturalism, children here signify as a threat, the result "of nature working its will on the woman's body without her consent," a hallmark of Campbell's framework.[197]

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[196] Herbst, *Following the Circle*, 20.
[197] Campbell, *Bitter Tastes*, 262.

Judith observes her sister and mother's responses to Mary's news—clearly Judith knows enough to understand that the expectations of marriage that her mother speaks of are tied to pregnancy, though she learns here that pregnancy does not automatically signal joy or celebration. Additionally, Judith learns from her mother that there are recipes, things one can use to prevent a pregnancy from continuing. Mrs. Stahl names "that motherwort tea" as a possible solution to Mary's situation. The invocation of an herbal remedy uses an element of nature to subvert nature's will, following the "unruly" naturalist view of children as nature's will leveraged against women. Mrs. Stahl proposes using the natural world to stage an attempt of insurgency against maternal or deterministic domestic fate. Motherwort itself is not the most widely known herbal abortifacient. Riddle notes that "In medieval England, the name motherwort was applied to various plants, among them artemisia and squirting cucumber, but in modern times the popular name was applied to *Leonurus cardiaca* L. of the mint family." Riddle notes that directions for using motherwort were included in an 1843 medical advice book *The Mother's Own Book,* "designed for females only," by Alfred Hall.[198] Hall's book, published in Rochester, is one of many advice books published in the United States that included motherwort in its pages. Given Mary Herbst's commitment to homeopathic and herbal medicine, it is very likely that she would have had the opportunity to learn about motherwort tea from a

[198] Riddle, *Eve's Herbs,* 230.

book such as this (if not from members of her own family). Additionally, Mary Herbst spent much of her early life in Philadelphia, which boasted a robust publishing industry that included the print run of a nineteenth-century American edition of the noted *Culpeper's Complete Herbal*. Given Herbst's mother's reputation as a voracious reader and committed believer in herbal medicine, it is not unreasonable to think that she did some research on the subject before she followed her husband West to Sioux City in 1889.[199] The legacy of Mary Herbst's medical knowledge looms large in Herbst family correspondence, as evidenced by the fact that Josephine turned to her mother to further discuss Helen's situation and help in the search for remedies to self-manage abortion.[200]

In *Following the Circle,* Mrs. Stahl's suggestion of motherwort tea seems to work, as there is no mention of any pregnancy as the plot advances. Yet, with an air of inevitability, the birth of Mary's first child follows: "Mary's baby came this time. Motherwort tea didn't always work."[201] The manuscript page reveals that the original typescript draft reads, "Mary's baby came." This frank sentence conveys the inevitability and dread that Mary felt regarding a child, but the written additions to

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[199] Langer, *Josephine Herbst* 20.

[200] Mary Herbst's medical knowledge also looms large in Herbst's index of her library, which includes an obscure reference to an "18th century advice [book] on Gonorheha [sic], Syphilis, "self-abuse", to the married etc. With interesting illustrations of decayed characters and their decayed parts. (Paper cover, on which word Diploma is prominent)." Herbst kept many of Mary's books and papers, including her volume of Shakespeare, so it is not outside the realm of possibility that this strange eighteenth-century medical book is a vestige of Mary's interest in medicine.

[201] Herbst, *Following the Circle,* 29.

the draft change the scene significantly. The handwritten addition of "this time. Motherwort tea didn't always work" on the page reveals that not only did the motherwort tea work effectively for Mary's earlier pregnancy—an implication given that Mary's pregnancy recedes from the plot over the months covered by the intervening pages—but also that motherwort tea had been used in an attempt to terminate the current pregnancy that had come to term. Before Judith moves out of her mother's house, she has witnessed various pregnancy outcomes via her sister's attempts to assert her will over her body using herbal medicinal teas.

Unlike Judith Pippinger in Kelley's novel, Judith Stahl observes her sisters as they learn firsthand about sex and reproduction. Her sister Mary's distress about her earlier pregnancy, witnessed by Judith, is not dissimilar to Judith Pippinger's shock when she realizes she is pregnant in *Weeds*. Yet Judith witnesses Mary leaning on her mother for knowledge and support as she seeks to end her pregnancy. Judith Pippinger's attempts to end her pregnancy are inspired by techniques learned through hearsay and desperation, and they ultimately fail, whereas Mary's early attempt to self-manage her abortion using herbs succeeds. Kelley's use of multiple narrative perspectives in *Weeds* suggests that Judith's desperate attempts at abortion fail because her knowledge is not quite complete, given how the townswomen knowingly observe Judith's attempts but choose not to share their knowledge with her. For Mary's additional attempt at abortion using motherwort tea, the failure is not

attributed to incomplete knowledge, but to the fickle nature of herbal abortion. Mary herself is not to blame, but rather the method itself. Unlike Kelley, Herbst demonstrates that the circulation of reproductive medicinal knowledge between women, especially between family members, is trustworthy and reliable.

The later depictions of abortion in *Following the Circle* are not herbal abortions, but surgical abortions provided by less than reputable doctors. After the birth of Mary's child, the novel follows Judith's early affair with a local married coworker, her move to New York, affair with married playwright Alan Gardner, and her discovery of her pregnancy after her latter affair has ended. Judith realizes that she is pregnant while working at a hotel in upstate New York; here, she has come to know her co-workers, a Hungarian waitress who is never named, and a "widow chambermaid" named Ella, whose initial defining characteristic is her stream of antisemitic remarks regarding the hotel's Jewish clientele. Judith's decision to work at the hotel is motivated by her desire to leave New York City after her affair ends. She tries to reset her life with new surroundings, spending ample time in the idealized natural world around the hotel. Yet it is not until she realizes that she is pregnant that Judith's optimism returns:

> She sat down to write to Clare, turned the calendar to see the date, stopped with her pen poised. There was a great black cross [scratched] over the 2 in July. She sat staring, unbelieving. No, not to her, it couldn't be. […] No, if

> couldn't have happened to her. Late, I'm five days late, she thought, trembling all over, wondering what to do, her mind scrambling together remedies, rejecting them, thinking triumphantly, I'm late, I'm going to have a baby. […] Suddenly her joy in things like that, little things, came back to her.[202]

Herbst's manuscript includes ample details about how Judith tracks her cycle and manages her reproductive health. Notably, after Judith calculates how far along her pregnancy may be, "her mind scrambl[es] together remedies," referencing the herbal abortion methods she observed her sister use earlier in the novel. Judith rejects these remedies not because of their unreliability, but because she wants to carry this pregnancy to term. At this point in Judith's pregnancy, as she relishes the promise of becoming a mother, her mind turns to these "remedies" almost as a reflex, knowing that she can rely on remedies if she needs an abortion.

Judith's initial joy about her pregnancy is paralleled with the Hungarian waitress's predicament. Before Judith realizes that she is pregnant, still preoccupied with her grief regarding her affair, she observes the Hungarian waitress undressing in Ella's room, repeatedly saying "I can't stand it"—Judith wonders, "Was the world full of women who couldn't stand it?"[203] In this unpublished, unpolished manuscript, Herbst attempts to allude to the fact that the Hungarian woman is seeking some kind

[202] Herbst, *Following the Circle*, 102.
[203] Herbst, *Following the Circle*, 101-102.

of reproductive health information from Ella, given that Judith turns to Ella in her own moment of need a few pages later. The truth of the implication about the Hungarian waitress's situation is revealed in the next scene, as she is fired for sleeping with a guest. Shortly after the waitress's departure, Judith receives word from her former lover Alan demanding that she end her pregnancy. A clearer picture of Ella's knowledge comes into focus as Judith seeks an abortion, coerced by Alan's fear to terminate a pregnancy that she wants.

> She was going back [to New York]. […] Women with fat babies were going back too, leaving their vacations for the city and their husbands. She hunted, suddenly frantic, fearful that it was lost, for the address written on a scrap of paper. Yes, it was still in her purse. Mrs. Moss, at the Hotel Blum. She knows, Ella had said, having found out a thing [or] two. Ella who tapped the underground life of women, knew hidden things, Ella had helped her out. She felt the train wheels grinding [ben**e**ath] her, the grinding seemed part of her body, and that it wasn't a part of the other women's pleasant smiling bodies was a curious, gruesome thing, making her pity them as if they were lifeless or merely painted pictures, and she alone of all that crew knew what it meant to be alive, knew what a nightmare…[204]

[204] Herbst, *Following the Circle,* 108. Given Castro's focus on the natural world as refuge or respite in early-twentieth-century depictions of abortion, it is curious that Herbst uses the name "Mrs. Moss" as the code for the abortion provider in New York.

Despite the fact that many writers included references to or frank discussions of abortion in novels of the early twentieth century, Herbst includes a remarkable degree of detail in her unpublished manuscript regarding the practice of reproductive health in general and various experiences of abortion in particular. From Mary's herbal abortion to Judith's tracking of her cycle and the circulation of knowledge from Ella to Judith and the waitress, Herbst reveals the relative availability of knowledge about abortion. It is compelling, too, that Judith contemplates her imminent abortion as she observes women with their children. Judith considers her own body as an extension of the grinding train, a moment in which she becomes mechanical. If Judith Pippinger's predicament demonstrates the consequences of knowledge held hostage, Judith Stahl's experience reveals the potential for knowledge circulation in spite of threats of social taboo and criminal charges.

Judith's abortion scene consists of four typewritten pages, following Judith's fears and observations as she meets the doctor as well as her recovery over the course of a few days in a hotel. Throughout, Judith echoes the refrain, "I may die… God, am I going to die,"[205] barely registering the doctor's attempts at small talk or his observations about the women he sees annually for the same procedure. Herbst does not describe the abortion itself, which is interesting given the visceral degree to which Claude McKay anecdotally responded to the scene.

[205] Herbst, *Following the Circle*, 109, 110.

Judith's sister Clare's life unfolds in parallel, as Clare remains in the Midwest but in a city away from home. Clare marries David, a soldier, and they struggle to make a living outside of the family home before ultimately returning to live with the Stahls in Clare and Judith's childhood room. Clare and Judith's relationship in the last part of the novel unfolds via correspondence, much like Herbst and Helen's relationship during the last few years of Helen's life. Judith often talks about Clare and David to her new friends in New York, conjuring scenes of Clare's life for her friends after her receipt of a letter in which Clare had enclosed a clover. While her talk turns "mechanical, going on of itself," the letter with the clover "was a ticket to Iroqouis, it sent her back… That was clover from the back lot. It was all clover once, acres of it. Now all that part is built up, stuffy houses all alike…"[206] Clare's correspondence ties Judith to her hometown via stories as well as the materials of the natural world itself. The Stahls' hometown is a place where plants are both remedy and landscape, though the plants themselves are threatened by development. Already, Judith has chosen a surgical abortion instead of the remedies based in herbs and plants that her mother and Mary used—whether this is due to the fact that Judith was farther along in her pregnancy or because of Judith's desire for a more foolproof procedure than herbal abortifacients is unknown. When Clare writes to Judith about her own pregnancy and

[206] Herbst, *Following the Circle*, 135.

desire for an abortion, Judith advises Clare to use "that medicine to bring it on."[207] There is no hesitation in Judith's reply—she immediately offers her sister advice about how to terminate her pregnancy in the safety of her own home, under her own power, and without needing to specify exactly what she means by "that medicine" because the knowledge is so quotidian to the sisters.

The sisters' correspondence echoes but does not mirror the correspondence between Herbst and Helen, as the exact medicines are not named in the novel. As in Herbst's letters to Helen, Judith reflects on the difficulties of accessing abortion care in rural areas of the United States: "Where could she [Clare] go? Only secretly and underground could she find a way out, a musty way that was dangerous, that might, in a small town, lead to anything, even to death. She shut her mind from this, thought how easy it was, after all how simple."[208] The manuscript reveals that specific details unique to living in a rural community were on Herbst's mind during her revisions, as the phrase "in a small town" is added in pencil to the above typewritten page. Just as Herbst described the relative ease of obtaining abortion in New York or San Francisco in her correspondence with Helen, so too does Herbst represent in fiction the difficulties and dangers of accessing abortion in a small town with fewer options and potentially more conservative physicians.

[207] Herbst, *Following the Circle*, 138.
[208] Herbst, *Following the Circle*, 138.

The novel form allows Herbst to imagine comforts that she could not feel with certainty in her own life. While corresponding with Clare, Judith muses: "she was afraid to tell Clare of her own experience. That would make her rush into the same thing, that would decide her. One is panicky then, ready to grasp at anything."[209] Herbst's correspondence shows that she did not try to dissuade Helen from a surgical abortion, and Herbst's later correspondence with her mother reveals the degree to which Mary Herbst was opposed to the "operation."[210] If fiction allows Herbst an opportunity to justify her correspondence with Helen, it also allowed Herbst an opportunity to imagine Helen's reactions to their correspondence. In a move that mirrors Herbst's correspondence with Helen, Judith tells Clare about how to access a surgical abortion from a doctor, but "wr[ote] of herself as if it were [her friend] Christabel. Christabel, she wrote, suggesting, wanting to urge Clare on, wanting to hold her back, confident, fearful—Christabel went to a doctor. Had it done. She said it was safe, if you went to a good doctor."[211] Herbst imagines Helen's reply via Clare: "But Clare knew."[212]

At this point in the manuscript, the narrative perspective alternates between Judith and Clare, as Herbst offers Clare's perspective as she visits doctor's offices

[209] Herbst, *Following the Circle*, 138-9.
[210] Though of course this could be revisionist history on Mary Herbst's part, given how Alice's abortion a year after Helen's death inspired a deep well of guilt and grief for both Mary and Herbst.
[211] Herbst, *Following the Circle*, 139.
[212] Herbst, *Following the Circle*, 139.

and attempts to convince various physicians to provide her with abortion care. The sisters' correspondence continues, but Judith is haunted by stories she heard as a child as she writes to Clare. Much like her eavesdropping on her mother's advice to Alice about motherwort tea, here Judith recalls

> … sentences spoken long ago, trapped her mind. Stories half heard as a child, mysteriously obscure for years, switched into her mind.
>
> "Well poor girl, such a painful way to die. That Petersen to blame, wasn't it?" Her mother's voice, mournful… When was this? Long ago. […] Not wanting Judith to hear, but she had heard. Funny how such things come back. She laughed, pretending it was silly, silly the way thoughts jump into your mind.[213]

Judith's memories betray her fears for Clare and foreshadow Clare's death. As in every moment in the manuscript regarding reproductive health, Herbst establishes a doubling, repetitive effect: Mary's two herbal abortions are held in parallel; Judith and the waitress receive hidden knowledge from Ella; and now, the ghost of a dead girl from the Stahls' hometown haunts Judith's fears for Clare. No pregnancy outcome happens in isolation in Herbst's fiction: here, there are precedents, shared knowledge, and resurfacing memories. Herbst's manuscript is almost a compulsion, as she repeatedly gestures towards the potential to be "stuck in place" that a lack of abortion access condemns in an example of Fleissner's naturalist repetition. Though

[213] Herbst, *Following the Circle*, 141.

the stories Judith remembers were once "mysteriously obscure," there is no mistaking the cause of Clare's death. Judith learns of her sister's death the same way that Herbst learned of Helen's—a phone call from a roommate who received a telegram in Judith's name, bearing bad news. Judith reacts the same way that Herbst reportedly reacted, telling her roommate, "It's my little sister. I did it."[214]

Herbst's first attempt to make sense of her and her sister's abortion stories in fiction offers the most insight as to the commonplace nature of circulating information regarding abortion care in the early twentieth century. Unlike her later novels that include abortion stories, *Following the Circle* depicts the circulation of knowledge between and among women. There are ghosts and precedents and names on slips of paper in Judith's world; she can lean on her family for support, access an abortion with the help of her co-workers, and offer her own advice to Clare. The obstacles to safe abortion in *Following the Circle* are conservative doctors in rural states, long distances to cities where abortion is more readily available, and the fickle, inconsistent nature of herbal abortion—obstacles that persist eerily into the present, post-*Dobbs* moment. Judith is well aware of the danger of these "musty" doctors and her relative privilege in obtaining a reference for a willing—and presumably reputable, given his boasts of wealthy repeat clients—doctor in New York. Most importantly for the archive assembled in "From Censors to Shouts," *Following the*

[214] Herbst, *Following the Circle*, 144.

Circle represents herbal abortion as a viable, if not always reliable, option for those seeking to end their pregnancies within the safety of their homes, so as to avoid risking a potentially dangerous "operation." Herbst's attention to herbal abortion and the circulation of knowledge fall away in her subsequent novels, as she focuses her literary attention developing other stories from her family history—namely her own attempts to blackmail Maxwell Anderson to repay her for the abortion he pressured her to have.

Herbst's second published novel, *Money for Love* (1929), explores the transactional nature of relationships, as the title suggests. Admittedly, Herbst makes no groundbreaking insights or revelations in this novel, but it continues Herbst's interest in doubling depictions of abortion, as if to demonstrate her improved skill as a novelist. The novel also concerns the shadow economy of abortion that Karen Weingarten observes in Herbst's contemporary Agnes Smedley's novel *Daughter of Earth*, published in the same year by the same press. Weingarten argues that, in Smedley's novel, "abortion is clearly portrayed as part of a market economy, yet an illicit one where transactions always involve deceit, abuse, and the disempowerment of women. The merchants in this economy, by refusing to allow abortion to enter into a public and open marketplace, use the "open secret" nature of abortion to propagate a shadow economy."[215] Similar to Smedley's novel, *Money for Love* follows Harriet

[215] Weingarten, *Abortion in the American Imagination*, 97.

and her partner Joseph as they navigate their new relationship. Harriet decides to ask her former lover, married successful playwright Bruce Jones, for money to repay her for the abortion he persuaded her to have years ago. The novel follows a small cast, including Harriet's roommate Louise, the sister of Joseph's first wife Rosamonde, who died from complications after a criminalized abortion. Just as Harriet's former affair haunts her perspective of Joseph, so too does Rosamonde's death haunt Joseph's view of Harriet and her abortion. Harriet makes no secret of her frustration with Joseph as he blames himself for Rosamonde's death, especially having survived a criminalized abortion herself: "If anyone was to blame it was some old doctor who didn't know his business."[216] After Rosamonde's death, Joseph is committed to becoming a doctor himself—funding this dream is part of Harriet's motivation for blackmailing Bruce. Harriet believes that if she can get money from Bruce, she and Joseph can sail for Europe where Joseph can receive his medical training and Harriet can escape the proximity of Bruce's success.

Castro reads abortion in *Money for Love* as the "system… that is responsible for so demoralizing [Harriet]."[217] But only reading the novel for the effects of Harriet's abortion limits the work Herbst does in repeating scenes of abortion—it is not just Harriet whose life is impacted by abortion in the novel. Both Louise and

[216] Herbst, *Money for Love* (New York: Arno Press, 1977), 97.
[217] Castro, "My Little Illegality," 21.

Joseph offer lengthy recollections of Rosamonde, how they loved her excitement for the future and respected her clear-headed perspective that abortion was the right decision for her despite their own misgivings. Reading Harriet's abortion alone ignores the wider context of abortion as a "system" in the novel. That *Money for Love* recycles fictionalized versions of Helen and Josephine Herbst's abortion stories first developed in *Following the Circle* is a kind of repetition, as Herbst tries to distill the core points of twinned abortion stories in a new novel about economic and reproductive injustices.

There is no herbal abortifacient mentioned in *Money for Love,* which focuses less so on how to access abortion care and prioritizes the "shadow economy" of negotiating and recouping funds to pay for an abortion. *The Executioner Waits* (1934) is even more distanced from *Following the Circle*'s attention to knowledge production and circulation, as it moves almost entirely into the realm of proletarian fiction. *The Executioner Waits* is the second of Herbst's Trexler trilogy, a series of novels fictionalizing her family's history from her mother's generation on the East Coast in *Pity is Not Enough* (1933), to the dissolution of Herbst's own marriage to John Herrmann in the final book, *Rope of Gold* (1939). Upon publication, *The Executioner Waits* received some of the best reviews of Herbst's career. Many contemporary reviewers noted the similarities between Herbst's novel and entries in John Dos Passos's *U.S.A.* trilogy, which also takes the form of using alternating

chapters that interrupt the primary plot with different individual voices from various stakeholders in the Leftist movement across the United States. The primary plot of *The Executioner Waits* remains concerned with Herbst's family's stories, including the introduction of another version of Helen, this time named "Rosamond" without the "e." In this novel, Herbst has almost abandoned her sister's abortion story. When Rosamond realizes that she is pregnant, she is shocked and upset. She considers finding a way to access an abortion, determined to save enough money to leave her hometown before she and her husband Jerry start a family. She turns first to medicines, trying different concoctions but remaining pregnant: "The awful thing was waiting to find out if something couldn't be made to happen, but in spite of the nasty medicine, her body was as relentless as death."[218] Her mother judges her, believing her efforts to be "against nature," yet agrees to help once it becomes clear that the medicines Rosamond experiments with make her sick.[219]

Herbst describes abortion more conservatively here than in her previous novels, and she more heavily features the economic aspect of Rosamond's decision. Rosamond's mother ultimately justifies her decision to have an abortion because "the world was upside down with the war." Rosamond and Jerry justify the abortion to

[218] Herbst, *The Executioner Waits* (New York: Warner Books, 1985), 191.
[219] Herbst, *The Executioner Waits*, 192.

themselves in terms of their financial precarity but in a language that oddly resonates with nationalistic justifications of industrialization:

> It was no time to be sentimental. The whole progress of the race had been a fight against nature, hadn't it, against letting nature run like a great lush beast through the land. Well, it showed you, you had to fight, you couldn't turn your back and hide your head like an ostrich. You had to act.[220]

If Rosamond's mother believes abortion is against nature, then Rosamond and Jerry cast their desire for an abortion as a fight against nature, an example of the triumph of the human will. The language of a "fight against nature," along with the novel's attention to labor uprisings and farm worker protests, seemingly casts abortion as part of the might of industry that can curb or tame nature—in this case, an unexpected pregnancy. That Rosamond and her mother's invocation of nature come in sequential paragraphs starkly juxtaposes the generational divide exemplified by the two different invocations of nature.

Rosamond decides to pursue an abortion, and finds a willing doctor "of a rather shady reputation," which scares her as she remembers "with terrible clearness the poor women brought into the clinic, their insides poisoned forever, their wombs spoiled for all time, never to bear children again."[221] Rosamond recalls her time

[220] Herbst, *The Executioner Waits*, 192.
[221] Herbst, *The Executioner Waits*, 193.

working as a nurse, much like Judith in *Following the Circle* remembered her mother's stories of women who died or otherwise suffered from criminalized abortion procedures. Rosamond is confident in herself, and in her desire "To be free… To have her body to herself."[222] Rosamond is certain that her decision will not result in her being trapped in her hometown. She drives through the town and reflects on her decision, but before she can act on her decision, the car malfunctions and she dies in a crash. Herbst fundamentally re-writes her sister's death in this novel, revising the plot so that her sister's death is caused by malfunctioning machinery and a truck. In a way, the forces of industry are still to blame for Rosamond's death—a car out of gear as opposed to a shoddy physician and his medical practice—but the morality afforded to victims of car accidents is unclouded by the need to navigate the social taboos regarding abortion that Herbst confronts in her earlier fiction. By revising Rosamond's death as the fault of industry, Herbst casts Rosamond as a victim to the "fight against nature" waged by technology and industrialization. This revision allows Herbst to cast Rosamond as a different kind of victim than how she had typecast her sister's memory previously. In so doing, Herbst revises her sister's agency, denying her the chance to act on the decision that she so confidently believed in, that cost her her life due to the barriers to safe abortion care. Herbst revises her sister's abortion story and allows her own fictional counterpart to grieve her sister without the shadow

[222] Herbst, *The Executioner Waits*, 193.

of guilt—if Helen's fictional counterpart does not die of a botched criminalized abortion, then Herbst cannot feel guilt (however baseless or irrational Herbst's feelings of guilt were in reality, as the criminalization of abortion is to blame, not Herbst herself).

What remains in the novel, though, are references to herbal abortifacients and specifically "pennyroyal tea."[223] In *The Executioner Waits,* abortifacients can be mentioned in passing, but abortion itself is denied, revised, or otherwise obscured. In this way, abortion persists, but in coded language of flowers that Herbst had not utilized since her *Following the Circle* manuscript. Herbst self-censors her characters' experiences of pregnancy and abortion almost in order to make her fictional counterparts' stories less "unruly" than her earlier, unpublished draft, given the visceral reactions it prompted in so many of its readers. Herbst, then, curates her fictional counterparts' stories to better fit the mold of proletarian fiction and as a result, she receives the best reviews of her career.

Herbst returns again and again to the stories of her own and her sister's abortions. She manipulates the plot in different ways, to different ends, but her collected fiction attempts to make sense of the loss of her sister. That her early fiction focuses on the process of knowledge production and circulation reveals that in the early days of her grief, Herbst may have believed that if she or her sister would have known more they

[223] Herbst, *The Executioner Waits,* 202.

could have avoided tragedy. Yet by the publication of *The Executioner Waits,* abortion is sidelined, part of the tapestry of concerns that haunt Rosamond and her husband as they face economic precarity, but it is ultimately not the cause of her unlucky death. If Herbst's early works focus on the support of women family members, her later works lean on caricatures of elder women who disapprove of the younger generation's desire for control of their bodies and destinies. Towards the end of her life, Herbst returned to her sister's story in a manuscript titled *The Watcher with the Horn* (1960). There, she cast yet another Judith with another sister Rosalind, who died vaguely, tragically young. The manuscript, described as an attempt to "[link] the 1920s to the 1940s,"[224] was rejected when sent to publishers in 1960, but its existence proves that Herbst never quite decided how best to represent her loss in fiction. Herbst's compulsion to repeatedly return to the connected stories of her own abortion and her sister's is a meta example of Fleissner's focus on repetition in naturalism. Instead of the naturalist woman character being stuck in place, it is Herbst herself who is stuck in place, haunted by her beloved sister, never quite sure how to narrativize her respect for her sister's choice, her early anger, or her eventual peace with her own decision.

[224] Langer, *Josephine Herbst,* 285.

Conclusion

Kelley and Herbst grapple with how to represent abortion in fiction at a time when the threat of censorship loomed large and constrained their ability to publish uncompromised editions of their novels. Each drew on the complementary yet distinct traditions of naturalism and proletarian fiction as they explored the centrality of women's bodily autonomy in their fiction as well as the interconnected injustices of capitalist patriarchy. Kelley and Herbst represent herbal abortifacients as potentially useful methods for accessing abortion in their novels, yet these herbs are not consistently reliable, forcing the characters to seek other methods. In both authors' fiction, characters attempt to process the coded language of herbal abortifacients established in the late nineteenth century, but some are more successful in this effort than others. Characters seeking abortion care voice their desire for abortion in terms of their desire to gain control over their body, the knowledge of which has eluded them previously.

Herbal abortifacients are referenced as remedy, code, and detail in these novels, representing the persistence of herbal medicinal knowledge even as characters grapple with the occasional failures of herbal remedies. The unreliability of herbal abortifacients becomes almost fatal for Kelley's protagonist, and the failure of at-home remedies forces Clare in *Following the Circle* to turn to an untrustworthy "physician" for what becomes a fatal abortion. The fictional failures of herbal

abortifacients reflect the real-life unreliability of herbal medicine, though Herbst's sister Alice's experience attests to the continued efficacity of home-based medicines in the Herbst family correspondence. What Kelley models in her fiction in terms of the selective circulation of reproductive knowledge, Herbst practices in her correspondence. What does it mean to read Herbst's archive as a window into the circulation of reproductive knowledge in the early twentieth century? Elinor Langer's biography suggests that Herbst was known as a reliable source of abortion knowledge into her late life—it is frustrating, then, that her fiction increasingly evades abortion despite her consistent commitment to helping others achieve reproductive freedom.

Kelley's "unruly" naturalism is ultimately checked by censorious publishers wary of taking the risk that Judith's birth scene would entail, while Herbst's early fiction traces her movement away from naturalist depictions of family and social life towards a more explicitly proletarian agenda in her Trexler trilogy. As Herbst attempts to capture a seemingly comprehensive picture of the labor movement in the United States, she sacrifices details of women's reproductive choices in favor of a larger narrative focused on economic hardship. Of course, as Kelley's novel demonstrates, women's reproductive choices are inextricable from economics, though Herbst's later novels shift the focus away this acknowledgement.

Kelley and Herbst use their novels as both generic statements regarding the centrality of women's bodies to narratives of modernity and the rising labor

movement in the early twentieth century, as well as political statements about the economic toll of motherhood and refusing marriage. These authors trouble conventional understandings of naturalism as a genre of distance and scientific objectivity given how both Kelley and Herbst's novels were subject to censorship for their representations of biological and medical facts of life. Kelley and Herbst's references to herbal medicine, specifically herbal abortifacients, offer an example of a phenomenon Natania Meeker and Antónia Szabari describe in *Radical Botany: Plants and Speculative Fiction,* in that their fictional depictions of plants "oblige us to come to terms with our own vulnerability in the face of processes of ecological, social, political, and intellectual change, and often, with our profound, complex dependence on the very forms of life that we are least inclined (or simply unable) to acknowledge."[225] Meeker and Szabari deploy a broad definition of "speculative fiction." They are quick to acknowledge that their own work does not prioritize "the steady accumulation of knowledge about plants but the speculative drive to bring plant life in relation with human experience," while noting that botanical knowledge as a field "has never again attained the prominence it achieved in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries."[226] Though Kelley and Herbst's works span the genres of naturalism and proletarian fiction, they deploy speculation in their use of plant names

[225] Natania Meeker and Antónia Szabari. *Radical Botany: Plants and Speculative Fiction* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2020), 2.
[226] Meeker and Szabari, *Radical Botany*, 24.

as code for herbal abortifacients. Pennyroyal, tansy, and motherwort exist in small moments in this early-twentieth century fiction, published in the context of Sanger's campaign that championed birth control at the expense of abortion rights. Kelley and Herbst's representation of herbal abortifacients in the context of novels in which childbirth and surgical abortion are traumatic experiences points to their characters' "vulnerability" in the face of increasingly medicalized reproduction and increasingly difficult to attain knowledge of alternative medicine like herbal or homeopathic remedies. As plant knowledge becomes vulnerable, it is lost to those who cannot inherit it or who do not know where to look for information. Without this plant knowledge, Kelley and Herbst's characters are forced to turn to those who can claim positions of social and medical authority—the unreliable but more experienced women of the town and, more ominously, the potentially deadly "physicians" working in anonymity.

As the threat of censorship gradually lessened and challenges to the legal status of abortion increased, authors in the latter half of the twentieth century continued to turn to fiction to imagine other worlds of possibility. But in the second half of the twentieth century, authors more directly embraced the speculative as a genre. By using the speculative to imagine entire worlds rather than as a tactic or tone by which to code plant knowledge, later twentieth-century authors craft alternative landscapes of abortion access and reproductive freedom. In the speculative imaginary, instead of

signifying vulnerability, herbal medicinal knowledge is a means towards gaining scientific and medical authority more reminiscent of works from the late nineteenth century.

Chapter 3

Herbal Medicine on the Margins in Early *Roe v. Wade*-Era Feminist Science Fiction

In the years following the *Roe v. Wade* Supreme Court decision (1973), the language used to describe abortion in fiction shifts yet again, this time to emphasize more scientific and technological terms. The shift to more technological descriptions resonates with the predominance of reproductive technologies like the fetal ultrasound in the American imagination and also continues the movement away from earlier nineteenth-century realism. These realists relied on language rooted in the natural world and the quotidian representation of herbal medicine in their fiction. But in the 1970s and 1980s, literary and legal depictions of reproduction and the body refocus the gaze towards the inner worlds of the human body that are increasingly informed by medical language of embryology and fetal development. This language enters both the Supreme Court ledger in Justice Blackmun's *Roe v. Wade* decision and contemporaneous speculative fiction. Feminist speculative fiction uses the language of science and medicine to confront questions of fetal and plant life. Marge Piercy and Octavia Butler extend the speculative imagination outlined in *Roe v. Wade* in their fiction, as both authors experiment with what Tom Moylan calls "critical utopias" by creating supernatural worlds that critique the human world in which the

full extent of the *Roe v. Wade* decision begins to take effect.[227] While the scientific and medical field most crucial to the legal rhetoric of abortion rights in the immediate post-*Roe* era is embryology, Piercy and Butler's fiction reframes the inner workings of the womb and internal reproductive organs within the context of larger social structures informed by white supremacist capitalist heteropatriarchy. By contextualizing the language of embryos, fetal life, and genes in fiction featuring characters who call attention to race, ethnicity, and gender, Piercy and Butler widen the frame from a singular focus on fetal "life" to consider larger social structures, particularly concerning the medical racism that women of color face. Piercy and Butler thus call attention to the structures of science and medicine that authorize and embolden certain professionals to reduce a human to an organ. Herbal medicine, then, signifies as an alternative way of knowing with which to counter institutionalized scientific and medical authority.

[227] Tom Moylan, *Demand the Impossible: Science Fiction and the Utopian Imagination* (New York: Methuen, 1986), 10. Moylan writes: "A central concern in the critical utopia is the awareness of the limitations of the utopian tradition, so that these texts reject utopia as a blueprint while preserving it as a dream. Furthermore, the novels dwell on the conflict between the originary world and the utopian society opposed to it so that the process of social change is more directly articulated. Finally, the novels focus on the continuing presence of difference and imperfection within utopian society itself and thus render more recognizable and dynamic alternatives. […] the critical utopia is part of the political practice and visions shared by a variety of autonomous oppositional movements that reject the domination of the emerging systems of transnational corporations and post-industrial production and ideological structures" (10-11). Critical utopias, then, build on the momentum of liberatory social movements and pursue the questions of utopia inherent in social movement organizing using the literary tools and genre of utopia.

A starkly visual biological science, embryology relies on language to make visualizations of the body's interior legible. Embryology and its related tool, the fetal ultrasound, project various metrics and labels onto fetal images to craft biological narratives, including the designation of a fetus's sex, assigning fetal viability, and detecting fetal abnormalities. How, then, do the narrative tools and scripts of embryology and fetal development manifest in literature? In terms of legal rhetoric, embryology is a crucial component to *Roe v. Wade,* which is heavily informed not only by "medical-legal history" but also "embryological data," to quote Justice Blackmun's terminology. Ultimately, Blackmun's efforts to articulate a medical-legal history of abortion relied on the same tropes of representing the "abortion debate" that many authors stumble into when attempting to depict the nuances of fetal animation. Correspondingly, speculative fiction published in the years immediately following the *Roe v. Wade* decision grapples with the question of fetal representability even as writers continue to depict abortion and reproduction in wider ecological or feminist terms. How does one represent fetal potential as separate from or contextualized within a character's womb in fiction? How can one represent fetal movement while also working towards a "critical utopia" informed by the feminist movement? Additionally, how can one do this work without neglecting the vitality and agentic potential of the natural world, a topic of increasing concern as the environmental movement gains ground alongside feminist and racial justice

movements both in American political life and in speculative fiction? The names of herbal abortifacients fall away in these speculative fiction novels, as authors instead contend with representing agentic plant life and genetic engineering—a theme that also concerns the protagonists' own bodies. Herbal medicine more broadly, however, remains a consistent thread in these novels, even if specific herbal abortifacients are not regularly named. The ecological and the technological work symbolically together, particularly in Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time* and Butler's *Dawn,* as authors incorporate scientific language that resonates with the mainstream media and newspaper frontpages, on which images of embryos and fetuses became more and more commonplace. To complement Justice Blackmun's "medical-legal history" in *Roe v. Wade,* Piercy and Butler take up what Daylanne English calls the "literary-medical gaze" of the early twentieth century.[228] Piercy and Butler use this gaze to explore the tensions between technology and ecology while ultimately negotiating

[228] Daylanne K. English, *Unnatural Selections: Eugenics in American Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 98. English uses the term "literary-medical gaze" to describe Gertrude Stein's use of medical language to describe various characters and their (real or imagined) ailments in *Three Lives*. English argues that Stein's descriptions of Anna, Melanctha, and Lena render the characters as patients, as Stein draws on her experience as a medical student at Johns Hopkins University to embellish the characters' medical situations. Important to note as well is that Stein's medical career ended as a result of her inability to represent fetal specimens in Franklin P. Mall's embryology lab at JHU, one of the premier labs for groundbreaking embryological research in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Stein's inability to represent the embryo specimen satisfactorily relates to her at times abstract or nonsensical descriptions of characters in *Three Lives,* even as she turns her "literary-medical gaze" to the characters. The tension between Stein's medical expertise and her difficulty representing embryo specimens or clear medical issues in her characters seem to reverberate in the later-twentieth-century difficulty in representing fetal animation in the law, medicine, and fiction explored in this chapter. See Steven Meyer, *Irresistible Dictations: Gertrude Stein and the Correlations of Writing and Science* and Lynn Morgan *Icons of Life: A Cultural History of Human Embryos* for more on Stein's work in embryology.

who has the authority to access reproductive freedom. Throughout, Piercy and Butler foreground how race, ethnicity, and gender are crucial to this negotiation of scientific authority.

Justice Blackmun's decision for *Roe v. Wade* is famous for decriminalizing abortion, but it includes much more than a strictly legal justification for the right to abortion. Throughout, Blackmun attempts to remain objective, in deference to his understanding of the Court's duty: "Our task, of course, is to resolve the issue by constitutional measurement, free of emotion and of predilection. We seek earnestly to do this, and, because we do, we have inquired into, and in this opinion place some emphasis upon, medical and medical-legal history and what that history reveals about man's attitudes toward the abortion procedure over the centuries."[229] Over the course of roughly fifty pages, Justice Blackmun reaches into Western history, discussing ancient Greek and Roman societies as he moves through a history of the criminalization of abortion in the United States. Blackmun references social, medical, and legal attitudes to abortion, essentially offering an overview of the institutional stakeholders in the "abortion controversy."[230] Blackmun spends considerable time describing the attitudes of various famous men concerning abortion, abortifacients, and embryology, as well as various institutional stakeholders like the American

[229] *Roe v. Wade*, 410 U.S. 113 (1973), 116-117.
[230] *Roe v. Wade*, 116.

Medical Association, the American Public Health Association, and the American Bar Association. Blackmun is clearly keen to develop a medical answer for the case at hand. Such an answer privileges institutions with a troubled history in regards to abortion rights—especially considering the American Medical Association's institutional prejudice against midwifery in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, as discussed in the chapter 1.

Despite Blackmun's statement that the decision relies on "medical-legal history," the decision also leans on medical technologies as evidence to support its ruling. A central concern of anti-abortion organizers, including those who argued *Roe v. Wade* in front of the Supreme Court, is the belief that life begins at conception. Blackmun engages with this point at length, and his decision ultimately rests on the "separate and distinct" duties he sees of the State to protect "the woman" (the pregnant person) and "*potential* life."[231] Blackmun writes that "Though the State cannot override that right ["a woman's qualified right to terminate her pregnancy"], it has legitimate interests in protecting both the pregnant woman's health and the potentiality of human life, each of which interests grows and reaches a 'compelling' point at various stages of the woman's approach to term."[232] Blackmun's understanding of the State's dual interests informs the structure of his decision to

[231] *Roe v. Wade*, 162, 150, emphasis original.
[232] *Roe v. Wade*, 114.

outline the right to abortion on a trimester basis, which essentially establishes the right of the State to regulate abortion after the first trimester. The trimester framework component of the *Roe* ruling is positioned as out of respect for the viewpoints regarding the increasing "potentiality" of human life as a pregnancy progresses.[233] Blackmun grounds his discussion of "potentiality" in historical understandings of fetal life, from "quickening" (as discussed in chapter 1) to the Catholic church's belief in "ensoulment." Though Blackmun pays close attention to the historical understandings of the development of human life, he also allows himself to slip into speculation and use his extensive research into medical technologies to postulate about the future, not unlike how Piercy and Butler use contemporary medical technologies to speculate about future worlds. In this way, Blackmun's decision is both about the long shadow of the past and visions for an increasingly technological future.

The stakes of Blackmun's speculations about "potential life" are immense. Those speculations are grounded in medical technologies that discuss the beginnings of life, technologies enabled by advances in embryology and sonogram technology. These are the same technologies taken up by anti-abortion organizers as evidence to justify "fetal personhood" legislation. The visual nature of the sonogram allows for multiple interpretations and narrativizations of fetal movement—that is, as far as

[233] *Roe v. Wade*, 114.

evidence goes, the sonogram technology used to determine, assess, and visualize fetal movement is exceedingly malleable. By privileging a medical technological answer to the subject of abortion rights, Blackmun essentially privileges his investment (and the state's) in the "*potential*" life over the pregnant person. In addition, by indulging his imagination and straying from history into speculations about present and future technology, Blackmun offers enough room for future loopholes to *Roe* and provides anti-abortion legislators with a template for outlawing abortion.[234] Even as Blackmun acknowledges the historical nuances of views regarding the beginning of life, when he describes the factual difficulties concerning the claim that life begins at conception, he offers a list of medical technologies presented as "embryological data":

> Substantial problems for precise definition of this view [that life begins at conception] are posed, however, by new embryological data that purport to indicate that conception is a "process" over time, rather than an event, and by new medical techniques such as menstrual extraction, the "morning-after" pill, implantation of embryos, artificial insemination, and even artificial wombs.[235]

Though couched in scientific language and technologies, Blackmun's references to the potential for artificial wombs pulls on a longstanding thread in the feminist

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[234] Jessica Marie Pieklo and Imani Gandy, "Boom! Lawyered: What a Challenge to *Roe* Will Actually Look Like (Podcast Transcript)," *Rewire News Group*, May 23, 2019. https://rewirenewsgroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/BL319.pdf, 2.
[235] *Roe v. Wade*, 161.

speculative imagination. Blackmun does, in good faith, engage with the question of the pregnant person's rights, but the question of the state's interest in potential life seems to motivate the decision (or at least Blackmun's explanations and justifications). "Embryological data" becomes crucial to Blackmun's logic regarding the idea that life begins at conception, and a key part of his development of the trimester framework, even as anti-abortion organizers used imagery and narratives inspired by the same sonogram technologies in their attempts to argue the opposite point.[236]

The imaginative lure of the artificial or separate womb has long figured in feminist fiction, theory, and history; indeed, this idea even extends to ancient and early modern alchemy, a time when science was not entirely separate from medicine, magic, or natural history. Yet in Blackmun's decision, "embryological data" is represented as fact that then springboards into speculation, this despite the inherent and ancient difficulty of discussing, describing, and understanding embryonic and fetal development. Ultimately, the problem that Blackmun uses "embryological data" to evade is a narrative one, the difficulty of representing the fetus.

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[236] The anti-abortion movement has a long commitment to using fetal imagery, most significantly in *The Silent Scream* film (1984). More recent anti-abortion attempts to exploit fetal imagery include the conspiracy theories about Planned Parenthood selling fetal remains and even more recently, the anti-abortion organizer arrested for possession of fetal remains in Washington, DC. See "The Facts about Planned Parenthood and Tissue Donation," *Planned Parenthood*, January 2021. https://www.plannedparenthood.org/uploads/filer_public/fd/de/fddee2ba-5ae1-4a89-9c4f-7e72c8a4db02/210218-fact-sheet-cmp-fetal-tissue-backgrounder-prod.pdf; Michael Levenson, "Anti-Abortion Activists Say They Were Allowed to Take 115 Fetuses," *The New York Times*, April 5, 2022. https://www.nytimes.com/2022/04/05/us/fetus-anti-abortion-home-washington.html.

Theorizing the Womb

Though embryology as a science has existed since the nineteenth century, the scientific study of embryos and fetuses increasingly entered the American popular imagination over the course of the twentieth century.[237] As Sara Dubow writes in her history of the fetus, "A fetus in 1870 is not the same thing as a fetus in 1930, which is not the same thing as a fetus in 1970, which is not the same thing as a fetus in 2010. Although multiple and competing fetuses have always coexisted, particular historical circumstances have generated and valorized different stories about the fetus."[238] The development of ultrasound technology in the late 1950s helped provide a visual image and narrative script for the internal workings of the womb, the consequences of which are wide-reaching in anti-abortion rhetoric, radical feminist rhetoric, and science fiction.[239] To make sense of the grainy, black-and-white images represented on the ultrasound screen, technicians needed to narrativize the procedure for their patients.

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[237] Of course, sonogram technology can be used to view and observe other parts of the body beyond the reproductive system, but in the American popular imagination, sonogram technology is almost synonymous with pregnancy. There is ample feminist scholarship on this topic, from Rosalind Petchesky, "Fetal Images"; Valerie Hartouni's *Cultural Conceptions: On Reproductive Technology and the Remaking of Life*; Janelle Taylor's *The Public Life of the Fetal Sonogram Technology, Consumption, and the Politics of Reproduction*; Sarah Franklin and Helena Ragoné's *Reproducing Reproduction: Kinship, Power, and Technological Innovation*; Sara Dubow's *Ourselves Unborn Fetal Meanings in Modern America*; Lynn Morgan's *Icons of Life: A Cultural History of Human Embryos*; and Lauren Berlant's *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City.*

[238] Sara Dubow, *Ourselves Unborn: A History of the Fetus in Modern America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 3.

[239] Prior research on embryos, like the work of Franklin Mall's lab at Johns Hopkins, relied on the use of fetal specimens rather than images of animate fetuses gestating in pregnant people. See Dubow, *Ourselves Unborn,* 5 and Morgan *Icons of Life*.

Narrativizing sonogram images became a popular rhetorical tactic of the anti-abortion movement, culminating in the 1984 film *The Silent Scream*. In her discussion of the film, Rosalind Petchesky famously suggests that the public fetus is "best understood as a fetish."[240] Anti-abortion organizers armed themselves with sonogram images taken using ultrasound technology and attempted to cast the images as scientific "fact" using quasi-medical language decorated with the moralistic and religious rhetoric of "life." Dubow advises against "overemphasizing the causal role of technology," but at the same time she acknowledges that "ultrasound technology has familiarized a particular visual image of the fetus," even though this "image is only one moment along the historical continuum of Americans' encounters with the fetal body."[241] This section explores the radical feminist attachment to the liberatory potential of separating reproduction from the body using technologies inspired in part by medical advances in embryology and the life sciences. I consider these radical feminist dreams as well as how plants and ecology appear in these imagined worlds alongside critiques of science and medicine to better understand how speculative fiction depicts reproduction and scientific authority in the immediate wake of the *Roe v. Wade* decision.

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[240] Rosalind Petchesky, "Fetal Images: The Power of Visual Culture in the Politics of Reproduction." *Feminist Studies* 13, no. 2 (1987), 270. See also Janelle Taylor, *The Public Life of the Fetal Sonogram: Technology, Consumption, and the Politics of Reproduction* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2008), 27.
[241] Dubow, *Ourselves Unborn*, 6.

The language Blackmun uses in *Roe v. Wade* embraces "embryological data" and the rhetoric of science, medicine, and history to understand pregnancy and fetal development. Key tools for obtaining "embryological data" are the fetal ultrasound and sonogram. The sonogram image's uncanny ability to separate fetus from pregnant person resonates uncannily with the feminist call for the separation of the fetus and the human body in an artificial womb. In her 1970 manifesto *The Dialectic of Sex,* Shulamith Firestone most forcefully proposes the idea of a separate womb as a revolutionary ideal for freeing women from the work of reproduction, housework, and caretaking. For Firestone, the separate womb is not just a technological fact, but a concept related to ecologies as well. Firestone rhetorically opposes the ecological and the technological as she argues:

> Technology has created real preconditions for overthrowing these oppressive 'natural' conditions, along with their cultural reinforcements. In the case of the new ecology, we find that independent of any moral stance, for pragmatic—survival—reasons alone, it has become necessary to free humanity from the tyranny of its biology.[242]

Firestone casts her utopian vision of reproduction separate from gestating bodies as a "new ecology," a rhetoric that implies that there is something "unnatural" about biological reproduction. For Firestone, the liberatory vision of a separate womb

[242] Shulamith Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 2003), 175.

becomes the means by which to free women from biological tyranny. A "new ecology" or "ecological balance" can be achieved by separating reproduction from a biological imperative, replacing biology with technology as the way to achieve this "ecological balance." [243] The phrase "ecological balance" eerily underscores Firestone's concern with overpopulation, a concern that works adjacent to racist and ecofascist fears of a "great replacement." This concern also evokes Margaret Sanger's problematic alliance with similarly eugenicist ideas decades earlier. Firestone renders gender oppression as wryly, ironically "natural" and something to be balanced or offset with technology in service of a greater, more liberatory vision of "nature." Firestone's argument is not without problems—for example, Hortense Spillers critiques the violence done by Firestone's racist depiction of Black women at length.[244] Firestone's writing shows how the utopian, radical feminist desire for reproduction via a separate womb is bound up with both the dream of artificial reproductive technologies and the rhetoric of restoration regarding a "natural," "ecological balance," a rhetorical link between separate wombs and nature that resonates especially with Piercy's work.

Firestone's manifesto was published three years before *Roe v. Wade* decriminalized abortion. Justice Blackmun's "embryological data" and new medical

[243] Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 184.
[244] See Spillers, "Interstices," *Black, White, and In Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

technologies seemingly build on Firestone's calls for a separate womb, though of course Blackmun and Firestone envision different ends for this same technological means. Both engage in what Michelle Murphy describes as late-twentieth century "efforts that [employ] technology in the service of women's liberation."[245] While Blackmun's decision steers clear of an interrogation of nature (save for his brief mentions of herbal and botanical abortifacients) in favor of strictly medical descriptions of this potential technology, Firestone's argument is heavy with natural and ecological justifications. Firestone's manifesto, then, enacts the phenomenon Murphy describes: "Using technologies, from birth control to ectogenesis to menstrual extraction, were acts intended to limit nature through the management of biology."[246] For Firestone, limiting "natural" methods of reproduction would achieve an "ecological balance" of equality between the sexes with the added benefit of potentially working against overpopulation.

While Firestone gestures towards a scientific solution to achieving the "ecological balance" of gender equality, Zakiyyah Iman Jackson reconsiders the very terms of the Western science concerning gender, race, and the human. While Spillers' critique of Firestone calls attention to the racist biases underlying her work, Jackson

[245] Michelle Murphy, "Liberation through Control in the Body Politics of U.S. Radical Feminism," in *The Moral Authority of Nature*, ed. Lorraine Daston and Fernando Vidal (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2004), 335.
[246] Murphy, "Liberation through Control," 335.

uses Spillers to stage her own critique of relying on science to construct humanness. Jackson writes:

> [B]oth science's and philosophy's foundational authority articulate black female abjection as a prerequisite of "the human," and this abjection helps give credence to the linear taxonomical (ontological) thinking present scholarship is trying to displace. Thus, racialized formations of gender and sexuality are actually central rather than subsidiary to the very human-animal binarism recent scholarship hopes to dislodge.[247]

Jackson asks us to reevaluate the very suppositions and biases that power "scientific" concepts in order to understand how the concept of "the human" is reliant on the abjection of Black women, placing Spillers's work on the flesh in the context of science studies to rethink the human. Jackson re-reads Western scientists like Charles Darwin, Ernst Haeckel, and J. Marion Sims alongside African diasporic art and literature. She draws on Black feminist and queer theory to interrogate the racism, sexism, and imperialism that define scientific fields. Jackson uses this interrogation to then think through our understandings of "the human," "matter," and "the animal": "What I claim is that imperialist racist rationale drove a demand for a material basis of scientific evidence *in general* and was the engine of species designations in both

[247] Zakiyyah Iman Jackson, *Becoming Human: Matter and Meaning in an Antiblack World* (New York: New York University Press, 2020), 14.

humans and nonhumans."[248] Jackson specifically turns to Spillers' distinction between "body" and "flesh." Yet Jackson diverges from Spillers:

> Spillers's "before" is often interpreted as affirming the notion that the biological matter of the flesh can and does exist prior to cultural inscription, but this is precisely what I am arguing against. I argue that the conception and *mater*ialization of the organismic body itself is already sociogenically entangled with culture, and indeed, informed by culture — culture itself being determinant of matter and evolutionarily significant.[249]

Here, Jackson argues that there is no "before" in which the body pre-dates scientific or cultural constructions. Jackson argues that "culture itself [is] determinant of matter." It was culture, or more specifically, "that imperialist racist rational" that "drove a demand for a material basis of scientific evidence *in general*" that resulted in the "scientific" progress of those like J. Marion Sims.[250] Jackson's argument moves away from a potentially conservative impulse to recognize the sonogram as something separate from the pregnant person who feels the ultrasound transducer on their skin. Jackson's argument compels a reckoning with the forces that seek to decouple the embryo, the fetus, from the person, and the ways in which the cultural creation of gendered and raced bodies inform scientific bias and discovery. Jackson's

[248] Jackson, *Becoming Human,* 173.
[249] Jackson, *Becoming Human,* 194.
[250] Jackson, *Becoming Human,* 173, 188.

recognition of the cultural inscription inherent in scientific discovery encourages the exploration and critique of new narrative forms for representing fetal animation that confront the role of culture in materializing forms, humans, animals, and matter. Considering the narrative problem of representing the fetus in conversation with Jackson's argument would demand widening the frame of the narrative from a focus on the internal workings of a womb to consider the full person feeling the touch of the sonogram transducer.

Reading Jackson's work alongside Firestone's demonstrates that the "tyranny of biology" that Firestone references is not a reflection of any innate biological feature in humans, but of the science of biology itself. Firestone's manifesto envisions a way to, after Murphy, "limit nature through the management of biology" as she imagines a world in which people could access technology to achieve an "ecological balance" and solve gender oppression rooted in biological reproduction. That Firestone turns to the artificial womb as a technological, scientific solution to patriarchal oppression exemplifies Jackson's argument that scientific authority and progress is predicated by cultural narrative scripts.

Firestone's belief in the artificial womb as a potential solution to achieving the "ecological balance" necessary to eradicate gender oppression draws on the speculative vision of technology to solve a structural problem. Jackson's argument uses Black feminist and queer theory to explore how science is itself part of the very

same structures of white supremacist heteropatriarchy that it is used to legitimize. Both Firestone and Jackson engage with how science and culture are intertwined, Firestone from a techno-determinist role and Jackson by pointing to the ways in which "the conception and *mater*ialization of the organismic body itself is […] indeed, informed by culture." As both are focused on the rhetorics of science and its material effects on culture (and vice versa), I want to call attention to the medical practices that work alongside scientific endeavors of the late-twentieth century. Piercy and Butler offer alternative, speculative worlds that are nevertheless fully in dialogue with realist depictions of twentieth-century science and medicine. Piercy and Butler offer fantastical alternative worlds, "critical utopias" and dystopias, that are rooted in the experiences of twentieth-century American women—Connie Ramos and Lilith Iyapo, respectively. Connie and Lilith see the scientific advances of their otherworldly interlocutors as impressive, yet both retain their perspectives as American women of color as they imagine the potential setbacks or violences that such technologies rely on. What is consistent in both Connie and Lilith's experiences is their desire for a science or technology that they have full control over. In both cases, Connie and Lilith imagine knowing more about herbal medicine and plant knowledge, sciences that would offer them more power over their bodies. Piercy and Butler grapple with the role of plant knowledge in utopian visions of science and the

role herbal medicine could play in offering Connie and Lilith alternative options amidst "utopian" science.

Otherworldly Wombs: Marge Piercy & Octavia Butler

Imagery of fetal animation became central in American mainstream science fiction in what is now one of the most lauded canonical films of the genre: *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968). Though utopias of reproduction as separated from the body date at least as far back as Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland* (1913), the literary fascination with reproductive technologies did not remain a consistent feature in the American imaginary. *2001: A Space Odyssey*, released five years before the Supreme Court decided *Roe v. Wade*, concludes with the image of what has been referred to as the "Star Child." In the final shot, the film leaves viewers with the twinned images of the massive face of the Star Child, though it is unclear whether this face belongs to a newborn child or to a fetal image, wrapped as it seemingly is in a placental or amniotic sac. The Star Child image is juxtaposed with an image of Earth from space, seemingly equating the vaguely fetal image with the enormity of the planet. Though the literary history of reproduction as interconnected with ecologies is long, this film offers the connection between the two for a new age, in the newer iteration of the science fiction genre. As Donna Haraway notes, "the fetus and the planet earth are sibling seed worlds in technoscience… Each image is about the origin of life in a

postmodern world."[251] Haraway's article "The Virtual Speculum in the New World Order" considers how both fetal imaging like sonograms and images of Earth from space rely on "visualizing technologies." She places late-twentieth century developments in fetal visualizing technologies against the speculum, which she views as a metaphor for the tools of "feminist technoscience inquiry." Haraway ultimately dismisses the final image of Kubrick's film as "not feminist" even as she suggests that "there is still a chance, barely, to build a truly comprehensive feminist technoscience politics." The details of the twinned connection between the fetus and the Earth as "sibling seed worlds in technoscience" is, however, a thread that she leaves to be further developed.[252] How do the fetus and the Earth, the reproductive and the ecological, work together in science fiction? How does the reliance on "visualizing technologies" change what is possible in feminist science fiction? And what possibility for germination or cultivation does Haraway allude to in these "sibling seed worlds"? In the science fiction boom from the late 1960s through the 1980s, feminist science fiction considered the question of the fetal image and reproductive technologies in ways that detour from the striking visual image of the Star Child but continue to grapple with the cultural representations of fetal animation alongside planetary, ecological concerns. For the Star Child, in all its vague

[251] Donna Haraway, "The Virtual Speculum in the New World Order," *Feminist Review* 55, no. 22-72, (1997): 23.
[252] Haraway "The Virtual Speculum," 23, 50.

signifying enormity, is not exactly connected to a feminist version of technoscience, divorced as it is from the pregnant person's body and entrenched in the film's investment in the history of "man" as space explorer of a new frontier.

In the sections that follow, I trace how feminist science fiction of the immediate post-*Roe v. Wade* era grapples with the narrative problem of fetal animation and its connection to ecologies. Though embryology and the promise of the artificial womb are of considerable importance to these science fiction novels, literature as a medium distinct from visual sonogram technology requires different means of representing or describing the fetus. These ideas resonate with concepts from Mel Y. Chen's *Animacies,* discussed in the introduction. The "ambivalent grammaticalities" of animacies can be applied to Piercy's and Butler's fiction in that their fiction represents fetal or embryonic specimens in the uneven space between life and death, but so too does their fiction depict ecologies in which human, animal, and matter hold different relations to one another than the hierarchy that characterizes their (and our) present moments. Both Piercy's and Butler's utopian societies depict humans in different relationships with both the ecologies around them and fetuses imagined as separate or distinct from their gestators, though the technologies that mediate these separations differ from Piercy to Butler. The means by which fetuses are represented and animated is not so different from how Piercy and Butler animate

aspects of the natural worlds of their novels, suggesting that the problem of representability for reproduction and for ecologies is linked.

Piercy and Butler's speculative fictions speak to the medical technologies referenced in the *Roe v Wade* decision, since Blackmun's opinion considers the still-futuristic potential for a separate artificial womb, all the while couching the decision in the "embryological data" of fetal development. Feminist speculative fiction published in the 1970s and 1980s reveals a continued concern with the connections between medical technologies and eugenics, as discussed in the previous chapter's analysis of naturalism, but also adds a new emphasis on the ecological resonances of reproduction. Two of Marge Piercy's post-*Roe* fictions consider abortion and ecologies explicitly. Piercy moves from her multiethnic, multiracial critical utopia in *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976) to a more realist critique of the pre-*Roe* decades in her later novel *Braided Lives* (1982). Butler's fiction takes a different journey, as her protagonists Anyanwu and Lilith Iyapo contend with otherworldly abilities and experiences. In *Wild Seed* (1980), Anyanwu is a seemingly immortal African woman who can control the inner and outer workings of her body through her own will. Anyanwu complements her bodily abilities with a cultivation of herbal knowledge as if to translate the powers she contains within her body externally into a medicine that is accessible to those she loves, who do not share her abilities. In *Dawn* (1987), Lilith is a Black American woman who is rescued from Earth's nuclear fallout by aliens

called the Oankali. She is chosen by her rescuers to be a pioneer for humankind, learning about the Oankali relationship to genes, bodies, and ecologies, including sparse details about the womb-like ship in which the plot of the novel takes place. Yet Lilith is subject to a non-consensual fertilization by her Oankali partner, a third-gender ooloi named Nikanj, that leaves her at the will of the aliens who claim to understand her biology and her body better than she does. Both writers experiment with genre and the various methods by which wombs and embryos can be controlled, methods that are deeply connected to ecologies of the Earth and otherworldly "natural" beings like the Oankali ship. By reading a pair of texts by each author, I trace how Piercy and Butler negotiate the promise of ecological utopia and reproductive freedom, but also the concerns that haunt or foil these utopias. For Piercy, herbal abortifacients are a relic of desperate times, while for Butler, herbal medicine is a cover for a superhuman woman with no need for external controls of her bodily functions, and plant knowledge becomes inextricable from human biological genetic knowledge in the minds of the Oankali. What use are herbal abortifacients and plant knowledge in critical utopias dependent on "embryological data"? Are Piercy and Butler's imagined worlds capable of the utopian medical advances that Justice Blackmun predicted would come, that he imagined might nullify the concerns outlined in *Roe v. Wade*?

"Ecological Balance": Piercy's Woman on the Edge of Time *and* Braided Lives

Marge Piercy's novel *Woman on the Edge of Time* follows Connie (Consuelo) Ramos, a Chicana woman who can telepathically communicate with and visit a utopian society called Mattapoisett. Connie's story is tragic: in the novel's present, Connie is committed to a mental institution after standing up to her niece Dolly's abusive boyfriend. Connie had been previously committed to the same institution by both her brother and her ex-husband after she lost custody of her daughter, Angelina. Piercy positions Connie as a woman who is doing her best to make ends meet, who is troubled by the difficulties of economic insecurity and the men in her life who exploit her. Piercy's novel is considered a classic of feminist science fiction and is often discussed in terms of ecological feminist and ecofeminist frameworks. Piercy grew up in a working-class Jewish family in Detroit and spent her young adulthood in the 1960s as an activist for various causes. In a 2014 interview, she locates her politics as such: "Since I've been fifteen I've identified with the Left, and racism was a big festering sore out of my childhood I had to think about and deal with. I cared about women's issues before I could understand them. For so long I lacked a vocabulary. I'm something, but what that something was, I didn't know."[253] Piercy's novel

[253] Elton Furlanetto "'There Is No Silence': An Interview with Marge Piercy," *Utopian Studies* 25, no. 2, (2014): 47. It is necessary to consider Piercy's understanding of her politics alongside her transphobic comments expressed in 2013. Piercy's transphobia is especially troubling in regards to her work on ecological feminism and the historical resonances with Firestone's "utopian" visions. Susan Stryker and Talia M. Bettcher contextualize Piercy's comments in "Introduction: Trans/Feminisms," *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 3, no. 1-2 (2016): 6.

participates in Moylan's concept of the critical utopia in its commitment to the political movements or "oppositional culture of the late 1960s and 1970s," and a recognition of the limits of the utopian genre. Moylan argues that Piercy's novel *Woman on the Edge of Time* "subverts realism from within… and defeats it from without as the power of utopian imagination breaks open the realist text to a radically alternative future."[254] In particular, Piercy's focus on genetic engineering and biomedicine in *Woman on the Edge of Time* brings together the concerns of animating ecologies and reproduction, as plant and human genetics are focal points in the novel's realist and utopian worlds.

The primary plotline of *Woman on the Edge of Time* concerns Connie's attempts to escape from a mental hospital, after she is wrongfully committed by her niece Dolly's abusive boyfriend after she defends Dolly from his physical abuse by attacking him. Piercy also includes various references to other characters' experiences with the failures of healthcare and social services to offer a more wide-ranging critique of medical institutions and biopolitics. For instance, she includes the death of Connie's lover Claud, a Black man who dies from hepatitis as a result of medical experimentation, reminiscent of the Tuskegee Experiment.[255] Additionally, Dolly is forced to have an abortion against her will, under pressure from the aforementioned

[254] Moylan, *Demand the Impossible*, 10, 126.
[255] Marge Piercy, *Woman on the Edge of Time* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1983), 80.

abusive boyfriend, who also coerces her into sex work. Connie's fellow wardmates in the hospital offer further critiques of mental health care in the United States, including the hospital's attempts to surgically "cure" Connie's friend Skip of his queerness. Skip's "cure" is a "side effect" of the wardmates' subjection to medical experimentation during their time in the institution. As part of a multiracial, multiethnic group of people committed to the institution for various reasons aligning with stereotypes regarding their identities, Connie is subject to various tests, drugs, solitary confinements, and surgeries in the hospital's attempt to exert social control over the patients.

Piercy's novel moves between Connie's life in the institution as she seeks to escape an experimental surgery and her time-traveling excursions to the future utopia of Mattapoisett. In Mattapoisett, Connie's abusive treatment at the hands of her present-day medical institution comes into sharp relief against a more socialist, communal vision of utopia. Yet the technology in Mattapoisett is not without its own problems. Connie's visits to Mattapoisett are anchored by her connection to Luciente, a "sender" from Mattapoisett with whom Connie can telepathically communicate. Connie initially believes Luciente to be a man, an assumption based on Luciente's dress and manner, but Connie comes to learn that gender roles are expressed differently and more fluidly in Mattapoisett. There, individuals are referred to using the pronoun "per," short for the gender-neutral "person," although Connie and the

narrator refer to Luciente using she/her pronouns which undermines the consistent use of the gender-neutral pronoun in the future humans' dialogue. Luciente is part of the future society's efforts to connect with "receptive" humans from the past in order to warn them about the potential troubles and wars to come, fought primarily over resource scarcity, genetic engineering for social control, and biomedical experimentation, all of which has the potential to shift the balance of power in future societies. Luciente's "proj" or "project" is to warn Connie and teach her about the promises of the utopian society in order to help Connie appreciate the precarity of the future and the importance of her present struggles as connected the future's war. Piercy features genetic engineering and biomedical science in all three societies in the novel, from Connie's present-1976 version of New York to Luciente's future Mattapoisett to Connie's brief visit to an alternative future dystopia in chapter 15.[256] Piercy's efforts to imagine a utopia in which gender equity has been achieved are widely analyzed in feminist science studies, as noted by Michelle Murphy's choice to use Piercy's "brooders" to anchor her work on second-wave radical feminist science

[256] Connie only visits the dystopian future once in the novel, and her encounter with Gildina offers her terrifying insight into what might happen if her present-day actions fail to encourage the Mattapoisett future to come into being. In the dystopian New York, the ground-level earth is uninhabitable and most humans live in buildings in which the class stratifications are literalized, where the wealthy live high above the polluted ground. Women like Gildina are surgically enhanced for the pleasure of others and subject to biomedical social controls; some women live on short-term contracts to powerful men while others live on longer contracts. Once the women of the dystopia are deemed no longer viable for sex, they sell their organs to survive. I chose to limit my analysis of the novel to the relationship between Connie's present and Luciente's future, but future analyses could return to this dystopian chapter and more fully connect the chilling chapter's critique of patriarchal capitalist excess.

referenced earlier in the chapter. As noted in reference to Firestone's agenda, Murphy describes this historical effort as part of a push to "use science to liberate women by removing reproduction from bodies."[257] Yet I argue that Piercy's fictional interrogation of this point is not strictly about medical science. Though Piercy relies heavily on fetal and embryological imagery to anchor her descriptions of the Mattapoisett "brooders," she also weaves in mentions of herbal medicine as a potential alternative to the technological focus of reproductive medical science, ecological science, and genetic engineering. Piercy's novel has been widely analyzed to the point where some science fiction scholars are tired of its mention, but reading for the tension between the techno-utopian animation of embryological imagery and the wistful depiction of herbal medicine offers a new approach to Piercy's ecologies, especially in conversation with her understudied later novel, *Braided Lives.*

The link between plant ecologies and reproductive technologies is clear in the similarity between the Mattapoisett terms "fooder" and "brooder." In Mattapoisett in the year 2137, Luciente works as a plant geneticist, which means that Luciente is primarily concerned with maintaining the food supply for "per" village.[258] Luciente's profession allows "per" to share with Connie detailed perspectives about food waste, overconsumption, and agricultural practices that are not harmful to the earth. The

[257] Murphy, "Liberation through Control," 344.
[258] Piercy, *Woman on the Edge of Time,* 45. Here and throughout, I use the Mattapoisett gender-neutral pronoun "per" to refer to Luciente and other future-dwellers of Mattapoisett. I keep that pronoun in quotes, though, to prevent confusion with per as an expression of "by means of" or "for each."

"fooder" and the "brooder" are the two most distinct centers in the future community, as other centers like the children's house and the various characters' living quarters are not designated with distinct names or equal significance. In "per" early communications and visits to Connie's present, Luciente is quick to point out the faults in Connie's present reality, which is referred to in Luciente's time as the "Age of Greed and Waste." [259] It is Luciente's generation who must live with the ramifications of the earlier age's societal choices such as overproduction, overconsumption, and reliance on automobiles and fossil fuels that polluted the land. When Connie visits Luciente, one of their early excursions is to the fooder. Here, Piercy introduces the idea that both plants and humans are subject to genetic improvements, as "fooders" and "brooders" are sites at which vegetables and humans are made, respectively. Luceinte's work as a plant geneticist requires "per" to develop species of "zucchini resistant to a mutant form of borer that can penetrate the fairly heavy stalks bred fifteen years ago" as well as "large climbing rose… Called Diana. Big sturdy white with dark red markings and an intense musk fragrance, subzero hardy."[260] Luciente's work, then, is for sustenance, beauty, and infrastructure, manipulating ecologies to produce vegetables, plants, and flowers that can grow amidst the new dangers and pests of the time. Luciente's plant knowledge also

[259] Piercy, *Woman on the Edge of Time,* 47.
[260] Piercy, *Woman on the Edge of Time,* 45, 63.

includes the ability to recognize, harvest, and prepare wild weeds and herbs as food and herbal medicine, which I will discuss later in the chapter. Yet Luciente's plants are more than plants—Luciente names the rose "Diana," addressing the rose and endowing it with a sense of individual identity, almost personhood. In Mattapoisett, names are of great importance, as each Mattapoisett child may choose their own name following their coming-of-age ceremony, and adults are able to change names as they see fit. Luciente's choice to name the rose after a lover plays with the human/animal/matter hierarchy, as Luciente honors the beauty of the rose and "per" lover in its naming. But Luciente also endows this plant and Diana "per"self with a sense of metaphorical importance, given Luciente's commentary on the rose's sturdiness and reliability. Luciente's choice to give the rose a human name can be read as an anthropomorphizing move, but I read this moment as further blurring the boundaries between human, plant, and animal, as the name equally reflects Luciente's dreams for both the plant and "per" former lover.

Luciente's work as a plant geneticist involves not just the science of creating new plant species, but also an engagement with political questions regarding the manipulation of genes. Luciente identifies politically as a "Mixer" rather than a "Shaper"; "per" political ideology is that genetic engineering of humans is dangerous, a potential ground for a "power surge," as opposed to Shapers who "want to intervene genetically" and "breed for selected traits," an ideology that uses the Mattapoisett

reliance on plant genetics to advocate for human eugenics.[261] One of the Shapers' slogans reads, "Do you value yourself lower than a zucchini? Vote the SHAPERS!"[262] This slogan recalls Luciente's work genetically engineering for a specific zucchini, and also alludes to the potential dangers of a society that is so reliant on genetic engineering for its sustenance.

Luciente's embrace of plant genetics sits uneasily with "per" skepticism of the ways in which "brooders" could be used to eugenically breed specific kinds of humans. Connie, however, is quick to observe the connections between the fooder and the brooder, as her first visit to the brooder is characterized by horror. Connie learns that the family structure of Mattapoisett decenters the nuclear family, as three parents take care of one child who bears no biological relation to any of the parents. The three parents also may not have any romantic or sexual relationships. In this way, Mattapoisett aspires to work towards a race-unconscious, multiethnic family structure built from kinship groups who share a mutual respect, but no potentially dangerous feelings like deep love or jealousy. Connie observes race, ethnicity, and gender in her visits with the people of Mattapoisett, bringing with her the knowledge she bears due to her identity as a Chicana woman as well as her experience observing racial dynamics in the 1970s United States. During her first visit to the brooder, Connie

[261] Piercy, *Woman on the Edge of Time,* 220, 219.
[262] Piercy, *Woman on the Edge of Time,* 219.

observes embryos and fetuses of different sizes; she exclaims "bottle babies!" and refers to the gestating beings as "canned child[ren]." Connie feels disgust at the brooder: "All in a sluggish row, babies bobbed. Mother the machine. Like fish in the aquarium at Coney Island."[263] None of the Mattapoisett characters refer to the beings in the brooder as humans, instead referring to the brooder in more clinical, scientific terms as "Where our genetic material is kept. Where the embryos grow."[264] In this way, the Mattapoisett characters refer more to the brooder as a place as they talk around the beings that the brooder actually grows. Luciente and Bee, one of Luciente's "sweet friends," refer to the brooder in scientific terms of "genetic material," yet it is Connie whose language animates the embryos in the brooder, calling attention to their movements, their liveliness. She attributes personhood to the embryos in the brooder, calling the embryos "bottle babies" in a way that is meant to both denigrate the artificiality of the brooder's reproductive process and humanize the fetuses in question. Luciente and Bee's use of clinical, scientific terms to discuss the embryos in the brooder undermines Blackmun's belief that a separate womb would necessitate a view of conception or abortion rights that is more protective of "fetal life," as Luciente and Bee do not seem to project the same degree of humanity onto the brooder embryos as does Connie, who repeatedly calls attention to the liveliness

[263] Piercy, *Woman on the Edge of Time,* 94.
[264] Piercy, *Woman on the Edge of Time,* 94.

of the embryos and their adjacency to personhood by addressing them as "babies." Connie's response to the embryos in the brooder is more horrified than awe-struck, and Piercy connects Connie's disgust at the brooder to her experience as a mother, something that the characters from the future refer to as "live bearing," since motherhood is separate from the act of giving birth in their time.[265]

The source of Connie's unease in the brooder concerns the medicalization of artificial wombs and reproductive technologies at such a large scale, almost replicating an automated factory model of production. Reliance on the brooder facilities coincides with the implied sterilization of all citizens of Mattapoisett. Luciente explains:

> It was part of women's long revolution. When we were breaking up all the old hierarchies. Finally there was that one thing we had to give up too, the only power we ever had, in return for no more power for anyone. The original production: the power to give birth. Cause as long as we were biologically enchained, we'd never be equal. And males never would be humanized to be loving and tender. So we all became mothers. Every child has three. To break the nuclear bonding.[266]

[265] Piercy, *Woman on the Edge of Time,* 95.
[266] Piercy, *Woman on the Edge of Time,* 97.

Luciente explains that all people in the future cannot physically reproduce, the implication being that all humans have been sterilized somehow, and that reproduction instead takes place entirely in the brooders. Luciente insists that this medical change is done to break "the old hierarchies" regarding gender—the same argument that Firestone makes for the separate womb—and Connie learns that genetic engineering has been used in an attempt to break from the hierarchies of race as well. Bee, whom Connie describes as Black, explains:

> Decisions were made forty years back to breed a high proportion of darker-skinned people and to mix the genes well through the population. At the same time, we decided to hold on to separate cultural identities. But we broke the bond between genes and culture, broke it forever. We want there to be no chance of racism again. But we don't want the melting pot where everybody ends up with thin gruel. We want diversity, for strangeness breeds richness. [267]

Connie remains unimpressed, calling the process "artificial," though her skepticism leads her to ask a question that is more telling about her (and/or Piercy's) own ignorances than those of the utopia in question: "It's just so… invented. Artificial. Are there [B]lack Irishmen and [B]lack Jews and [B]lack Italians and [B]lack Chinese?"[268] That this is Connie's main question regarding the broken bond between

[267] Piercy, *Woman on the Edge of Time,* 96.
[268] Piercy, *Woman on the Edge of Time,* 96.

"genes and culture" reveals a limited understanding of the multifaceted nature of race and ethnicity. The future society's break between genes and culture is particularly interesting, given the village's name of "Mattapoisett" and their identification with Wampanoag Indigenous Americans. Throughout, members of the Mattapoisett village refer to acting in the spirit or tradition of Wampanoag people, actions that they believe are free from appropriation or stereotyping given their society's belief in that break between genes and culture. This plot point is particularly interesting given the ways that Indigenous American tribal recognition and rights have been tied to genetic measurements like blood quantum tests and laws. Kim TallBear writes that the 1960s, Connie's immediate past, were a key time in which "new biomedical techniques began to be applied to traditional anthropological questions."[269] Significantly, TallBear also notes: "Of course, mixing is predicated on the notion of purity."[270] Mattapoisett is not the only village that Connie encounters in the novel, as she is also told of a tribe called "Harlem-Black."[271]

Piercy represents a utopian community in which characters believe that they have achieved gender and racial equality and an environmentally-conscious "ecological balance" (a balance opposed to Firestone's eugenic implications of the term, at least from Luciente's "Mixer" perspective). But when Piercy attempts to

[269] Kim TallBear, *Native American DNA: Tribal Belonging and the False Promise of Genetic Science* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 3-4.
[270] TallBear *Native American DNA: Tribal Belonging and the False Promise of Genetic Science*, 5.
[271] Piercy, *Woman on the Edge of Time*, 95.

expand her interrogation of genetic engineering to race, ethnicity, and colonialism, her emphasis on mixing and the decision to characterize racial and ethnic identity features as interchangeably as personality traits reads uncomfortably close to undermining the importance of racial and ethnic identity via the novel's utopic idealism. Racial history and identity become things known and understood via stories, via recreated rituals surmised to be accurate by the villagers. Piercy spends ample time tracing Connie's horror at the separation of reproduction from biology, but Connie is simply curious about the Mattapoisett's attempts to separate race and "culture" from genetics. Connie's reaction to Mattapoisett's almost "colorblind" approach to reproduction goes against Jackson's reading of science as determined by culture. Yet, clearly the Mattapoisetts are focused on individual cultures, races, and ethnicities—the community is, after all, named after Indigenous Americans and the community takes pride in their identity with this history, despite the fact that it is unclear if any of the community members would claim Indigenous identity. The utopian timeline Connie accesses in Mattapoisett strives to achieve an "ecological balance" that is attentive to yet does not fully understand race or ethnicity beyond its manifestations in stories. "Culture" is something the villagers of Mattapoisett can try on regardless of their genetics, breaking race from biology but also opening up the potential for any person to try on any "culture." Piercy attempts to critique race as a cultural construction, but the result disconnects race so entirely from any identity or

lived experience that the result is as if racial identity has become akin to the "flimsies" or one-time costumes that villagers wear in times of celebration.

The interconnections between plant and human genetic engineering are central to the novel's characters and the politics of utopian Mattapoisett. Seemingly, the natural world has become subject to the uses of technology, given Luciente's career as a plant geneticist and the repeated discussion of the ecological fallout following the "Age of Greed and Waste." Yet despite the focus on technology, specifically from the biological sciences, multiple characters reveal their knowledge and respect for herbal medicine. Biomedical technology is the backbone of power in all three societies in the novel—from the surgically implanted social control devices Connie is subject to while institutionalized, to the artificial wombs in Mattapoisett's brooders, to the various technologies at work in the pollution-filled dystopia of chapter 15. Luciente warns of the interconnection of the military-industrial complex and the role of technology in creating weapons, noting that the "crux" of technological weaponry is "the biological sciences. Control of genetics. Technology of brain control. Birth-to-death surveillance. Chemical control through psychoactive drugs and neurotransmitters."[272] The dangers Luciente outlines are the very same biopolitical threats that Connie faces in the institution. Yet each society's use of technology is not completely separate or mutually exclusive from knowledge of and appreciation for

[272] Piercy, *Woman on the Edge of Time*, 216.

plant medicine. The brooder as a culmination of the second-wave radical feminist dream of equality—the fictionalization of Firestone's manifesto—sits alongside an almost wistful description of herbal medicine. In Connie's present-day timeline, her closest friend in the institution is a woman named Sybil:

> Sybil really did think she was a witch, that she could heal with herbs, that she could cast spells both black and white. They'd had an argument last time about those names. Connie had told Sybil that black magic for bad and white for good were racist terms. Finally Sybil had agreed to name the magics red, for blood vengeance, and green, for growing and healing.[273]

Here, Sybil's witchcraft is associated with herbal medicine, spells, and an eventual willingness to update the terms she uses to describe her craft. Sybil associates green magic with "growing and healing," which indicates that some kind of "green" plant medicine is a fundamental and important part of her craft. Sybil's craft in Connie's present-day reality resonates with characters from the future such as Magdalena and Erzulia. Magdalena, who runs the children's house in Mattapoisett, notes that "per" name is inspired by "a woman burned to death for witchcraft in Germany many centuries ago. A wisewoman who healed with herbs."[274] Magdalena's choice to honor an herbal healer by adopting her name is more spiritual than practical, but it indicates

[273] Piercy, *Woman on the Edge of Time,* 75.
[274] Piercy, *Woman on the Edge of Time,* 129.

that herbal medicinal practices exist as something to be lauded and respected in Mattapoisett. The importance of plant knowledge in practice for those in Mattapoisett is clear later in the novel, during Connie's attempted escape from the institution as she calls Luciente to time travel to her present. Luciente teaches Connie about the herbs and plants around her in the woods: "Chickweed. Good raw or cooked. Yes, purslane. No, that one. It's a succulent; you can't miss it. Don't worry, I'll go over everything you pick. Only very inner leaves of dandelions by now; the others will be tough and bitter. Same with chicory."[275] This knowledge is immediately useful to Connie, though her time in the woods is brief as her escape is thwarted.

Connie's friendship with Sybil, and Sybil's belief in her witchcraft and herbal medicinal practices, leads Connie to reconcile with her own family's history of plant knowledge. As Sybil plans her escape from the institution with the help of a college student hospital worker named Mary Ellen, Sybil relishes the fact that witchcraft is catching the interest of a younger generation:

> She told me lots of college students are interested in herbs. We discussed valerian, thyme, rosemary, comfrey. Finally she asked if I really was a witch, and when I assured her, she seemed quite pleased. She said several of her friends are 'into' witchcraft…. She'd read an herbal and cured a leg infection

[275] Piercy, *Woman on the Edge of Time*, 234.

with lovage compresses. We had the most civilized conversation I've had in ages.[276]

Two of the four plants that Sybil names here can be used as abortifacients (thyme and rosemary), and all four plants have herbal medicinal uses as topical tinctures.[277] Sybil even notes how impressed she is that Mary Ellen has read an herbal, a print method of circulating plant knowledge that has ancient roots. This conversation is one of the last in the novel, and it is at this moment that Connie shares more information about her personal relationship to herbal medicine.

Throughout the novel, Connie shares flashbacks or reminiscences about medical crises that plagued her family, such as her own difficulties accessing abortions when abortion was still criminalized, the hysterectomy she received without consent, and the forced hysterectomy of her cousin Inez following the experimentation she was subject to that led her youngest child to be born with an unspecified disability. Yet at this moment, after Connie has decided on her final course of action and has reconciled to her friend Sybil's impending escape, Connie decides to share more about her own family:

"Ah, I don't know herbs from weeds." [Connie] thought of Luciente feeding her that wild greenery and her mouth opened to tell Sybil. She shut it, then

[276] Piercy, *Woman on the Edge of Time,* 336.
[277] Riddle, *Eve's Herbs*, 61-62.

> after a moment said, "My grandmother knew weeds to heal with. But even my parents made fun of that. It wasn't modern and scientific—like going in the hospital and dying of infection!"[278]

Here, Connie traces her own connection to herbal medicine, and describes the reason for the break in her family's use of herbal medicine. "Science" and medicine interrupt the circulation of plant knowledge in Connie's family, and it is the institutions of science and medicine that lead Connie to what we as readers can assume to be her own eventual death in the mental hospital. Connie's decision to share her family history with Sybil is a moment that reaches past her parents' rejection of herbal medicine and her own experience observing the Mattapoisett brooders. Connie remembers the moments she shared with Luciente during her brief escape attempt, and it is this memory that leads her to share a part of her family history that has been kept from both Sybil and the readers.

Though Connie's personal reasons for making distinctions between herbal medicine and institutions of medical science are revealed late in the novel, the distinction between medical practices deemed "alternative" and those that are institutionalized manifests in an earlier visit to Mattapoisett. Connie meets Erzulia, who works as a healer. Though not associated specifically with herbal medicine, Erzulia is described specifically as a "healer," and Connie questions Erzulia's

[278] Piercy, *Woman on the Edge of Time*, 336.

qualifications. Erzulia's name evokes the lwa, or "the spiritual forces of the Haitian religion Vodou," of Erzulie, also written as Ezili.[279] Connie's initial shock regarding Erzulia's role as a healer manifests in her outburst that Erzulia is a "witch doctor," an accusation seemingly based on Ezrulia's appearance as a Black woman with braids, and the resonances of "per" name with Voudou. Though Connie comes to respect Sybil's practice of witchcraft as healing, her exclamation of "witch doctor" here is derogatory. Connie's dismissive stereotyping prompts Luciente to describe Erzulia's training and expertise (using "person" here as a third-person pronoun): "Oh person teaches people to heal themselves. Does surgery. Manipulating, pain easing, bone knitting. Erzulia's skilled!"[280] Though Connie insists that "voodoo and medicine… don't make sense" together, Luciente disagrees while still rhetorically maintaining a distinction between Voudou and medicine. In this way, Piercy introduces multiple practices of healing and knowing in the novel, and all—from Sybil's witchcraft, to Connie's grandmother's herbal medicine, to Erzulia's association with Voudou—are held against or in opposition to technologized, institutionalized medicine.

The centrality of medical institutions carries through to the novel's last chapter, titled "Excerpts from the Official History of Consuelo Camacho Ramos | State of New York — Department of Mental Hygiene, Bellevue Hospital."[281] Here,

[279] Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley, *Ezili's Mirrors: Imagining Black Queer Genders* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), 4.
[280] Piercy, *Woman on the Edge of Time,* 151.
[281] Piercy, *Woman on the Edge of Time,* 372.

the novel fully inhabits the "literary-medical gaze" by explicitly representing and reproducing the state's record of Connie.[282] It is in this final chapter that we learn that Connie never escapes the hospital, even after fatally poisoning four of the hospital staff. As noted by M. Keith Booker,

> A great deal of the power of *Woman on the Edge of Time* arises from confrontations among genres and the worldviews they imply. In addition to the opposition of utopian and dystopian genres, Piercy's vivid depiction of the present-day experiences of Connie Ramos introduces the genre of realistic fiction into this dialogue. And the book ends with a supposed reproduction of some of Ramos's medical records from various mental institutions, thus introducing still another genre. This last genre involves a direct statement of the official ideology of the medical establishment and of the social values it represents.[283]

Through Connie, Piercy critiques the medical institution's inability to see a person's value or humanity. Scientists in the future like Luciente can advocate for the genetic improvement of a vegetable, but the "Mixers" vehemently draw the line at

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[282] Interestingly, Piercy's choice to end her speculative fiction novel with the voice of the state that is otherwise the focus of the novel's critique predates a similar formal choice at the close of Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), in which the novel ends with the proceedings of an academic conference focused on Offred's tale. Both novels are invested in critiquing the state's threat to bodily autonomy, yet it is Atwood's that has dominated the imagination of the reproductive rights movement (as opposed to reproductive justice or abortion rights movements) in recent years, particularly since the *Dobbs* decision.

[283] M. Keith Booker, "Woman on the Edge of a Genre: The Feminist Dystopias of Marge Piercy," *Science Fiction Studies* 21, no. 3, 1994: 340.

purposefully intending to breed better humans. Yet with Connie's point of view, we can resist some of the temptations to wholly embrace the utopian promise of genetic engineering in Mattapoisett, and we especially see the pitfalls of the dystopian future in which women's existence is subject to contracts with wealthy men. It is crucial to note that Connie becomes a permanent ward of the state institution after she decides to poison the doctors' coffee with pesticide stolen from her brother's plant nursery. Connie uses the tools of plant science meant to stifle unsatisfactory weeds or plants to kill those who would subject her to a medically implanted means of social control. In this way, Connie seizes a means of control and crosses the boundaries between plant and human biological science. However, by ending the novel with the medical reports about Connie, Piercy suggests that the medical institution's ability to control not only Connie's body but also her narrative is complete. Much scholarship about *Woman on the Edge of Time* considers the degree to which Connie's time traveling is indeed "real" or part of an extended hallucination. This distinction is not the most compelling aspect of the novel to me; what is most useful about Connie's time traveling is the interconnection between the genetic engineering of ecologies and the genetic engineering of human embryos, linked by the institutions of the fooder and the brooder, that exist alongside a continued respect for plant knowledge and herbal medicine. Additionally, while Connie is captivated by these new sciences, it is plant knowledge that is ultimately the most important tool Connie can access as she resists

medical sexism and racism. Plant knowledge via herbal medicine or plant identification exists as a marginal concern throughout the novel but is key to Connie's final protest and eventual fate. Piercy's attention to plant knowledge continues in her later realist novel, but her attention to the genetic engineering of both plants and humans in *Woman on the Edge of Time* is a concern shared in science fiction by Octavia Butler.

Piercy's later novel, *Braided Lives,* follows Jill Stuart and her cousin Donna as they grow up in Detroit and Flint, Michigan. The novel is set throughout the 1950s, as Jill and Donna become active in social causes like the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee and anti-House Un-American Committee organizing during their time as students at the University of Michigan. *Braided Lives* was a national bestseller, reviewed in the *Times,* and yet there has not been much scholarly work on this realist novel of Piercy's, published between her two famous utopias, *Woman on the Edge of Time* and *He, She, It* (1991).[284] *Braided Lives* follows a fairly typical coming-of-age story arc, yet Jill's coming-of-age story is occasionally broken or "braided" with insights and reflections rendered in italics from an adult Jill. Though *Woman on the Edge of Time* is widely considered a classic work of feminist speculative fiction, its depiction of abortion is more marginal in comparison to

[284] Anatole Broyard, "Books of the Times: Growing Up in the '50s," *The New York Times,* February 6, 1982. https://www.nytimes.com/1982/02/06/books/books-of-the-times-growing-up-in-the-50-s.html

Piercy's later novel, despite the earlier work's deep engagement in questions of reproduction, mothering, and separate wombs.

Braided Lives depicts multiple scenes of abortion, devoting significant space to describing the methods by which characters obtain abortions. Similar to Edith Summers Kelley's devotion of an entire chapter in the exact center of her novel *Weeds* to protagonist Judith Pippinger's birth of her first child (as discussed in the previous chapter), Piercy devotes an entire chapter in about the center of the novel to Jill's abortion. The chapter is titled "The Agon," a term that refers to "the contest of opposed wills in Classical [Greek] tragedy."[285] When Jill is home from university one summer, her mother correctly suspects that she is pregnant after her period is a month late. Jill tells her mother that she is determined to have an abortion, and her mother is concerned about the various dangers associated with criminalized abortion, from blackmail to expensive fees, to the threat of sterilization. Jill insists that her mother teach her how to perform an abortion at home, and her mother agrees.

The chapter "The Agon" begins as Jill imagines both her womb and how her abortion relates to historical and literary figures:

> Under the cushion of fat lurks the womb, spongy fist that will not open while in it cells divide and divide. The steam swirling hot from the tub smothers me as this body goes its animal way. I seldom feel feminine: I felt neuter. An

[285] "Agon." *Britannica.* March 10, 2022. https://www.britannica.com/art/agon-theatre.

> angel of words. I could imagine myself a Hamlet, a Trotsky, a Donne. I thought I was projects, accomplishments, tastes: I am only an envelope of guts. This is what it is to be female, to be trapped. This sac of busy cells has its own private rhythms of creation and decay, its viruses and cancers, its twenty-eight-day reminders of birth and death. My body can be taken over and used against my will as if I were a hall to be rented out. Hot baths with Epsom salts, hot baths with pennyroyal; I am parboiled and still pregnant.[286]

Here, Jill describes her "still pregnant" body in an "animal way." She imagines the womb as actively producing cells and advancing her pregnancy, but she stops short of imagining any fetal or embryological movement, something Piercy may have done to avoid the "fetish" of the fetus that by the 1980s was even more of an inescapable cultural force than when she imagined the "brooders" in *Woman on the Edge of Time*. Though Jill does not describe her pregnancy in terms of an embryo or fetus, she chooses to focus on the "private rhythm" of "cells." Jill seems to avoid terms that could connote personhood—embryo or fetus—and instead focuses on the basest possible scientific unit. Jill refuses to label or narrativize the movements she feels as anything remotely connected to the fetish of fetal life or personhood. While she uses the most minute biological terms to describe her pregnancy, Jill details the specific ingredients used in her attempt to terminate her pregnancy. Along with Epsom salts,

[286] Piercy, *Braided Lives* (New York: Summit Books, 1982), 175.

Jill uses pennyroyal, the herb most associated with the long history of herbal abortifacients. By the time *Braided Lives* was published in 1982, *Roe v. Wade* had been the law of the land for almost a decade. Yet *Braided Lives* is set in the 1950s, so the circulation of knowledge regarding abortion and contraception was still a criminal offense in the present of younger Jill's story.

Piercy includes the names of various herbs and recipes that Jill and her mother use to attempt to abort Jill's pregnancy, yet none of the herbs seem to work. Jill loses faith in her mother's recipes and knowledge, and considers paying for a doctor's services, but cannot come up with the three hundred dollars necessary for the procedure or a way of travelling to the remote location of the only known doctor willing to provide abortion care. Piercy acknowledges the disappointing relevance of these obstacles to accessible abortion in one of older Jill's italicized interruptions:

> I prepare to follow Mother's last instructions…
>
> *If it were even a couple of years ago I would tell you more, but if I do so now, desperate young girls, desperate middle-aged women, the victims of rape, incest, battering, far more numerous than we would like to believe, all the women who simply do not believe in catching a baby as you might the flu or pneumonia, would be tempted to do as I did, just because I survived but*

barely. There have to be better ways. I cannot include a recipe for action that is likely to kill you.[287]

Jill's adult narrative complements her younger, college-age self and offers a commentary on the contemporary obstacles still facing those seeking abortion in 1982. Adult Jill's preface of "even a couple of years ago," can refer to the brief period of time between 1973 and 1976, between the *Roe v. Wade* decision and the Hyde Amendment, during which abortion was as yet unencumbered by legislative threats to its accessibility. Yet the danger of abortion's inaccessibility is palpable in the novel, as adult Jill outlines the threat of death that accompanies her desperation. The language adult Jill uses here suggests that the final method that worked for her was indeed herbal or at least organic in nature, as she references the "recipe for action." While "recipe for action" can be read in terms of instructions or methods, the word "recipe" roots the action in the preparation of a tincture, tea, or other consumable material.

Piercy uses this braided narration to critique the failures of abortion access, the failed promise of *Roe v. Wade* given the resurgence of obstacles to abortion access that result in the same desperation that Jill faced in college. Similar to her blending of utopia, dystopia, and realism in *Woman on the Edge of Time,* Piercy's braided narrative in which the present interrupts the past allows her to subvert and

[287] Piercy, *Braided Lives,* 180, italics original.

commentate on her younger self's story. Adult Jill can, in effect, revise and work in dialogue with her younger self. The effect of this braided commentary is that adult Jill's radical action is rooted in her own personal experience, and we as readers can see what motivates adult Jill's commitment to abortion rights. Near the close of the chapter, adult Jill includes three memories, rooted in time and place. "*Brooklyn, 1963… Chicago, 1969… New York, 1970.*"[288] Each of these memories details adult Jill's involvement in abortion rights actions: her involvement in "a group of women who help other women secure abortion" in Brooklyn, "an outlaw abortion group" in Chicago, and a march for abortion rights in New York during which Jill is "sure every one of us has had an illegal abortion or aborted ourselves."[289] These memories suggest that Jill is involved with activities very similar to those of the Jane Collective, an organization run by women in Chicago that offered abortion services. One of the cities Jill references is Chicago in 1969, the time and place that the Jane Collective was founded.[290] Jill also notes that her Chicago collective worked with a doctor in Pennsylvania, a structure not unlike that Jane used, in which the Collective relied on one out-of-state doctor's assistance before the members of the Collective learned how to perform abortions themselves. Jill weaves in her later-in-life involvement in

[288] Piercy, *Braided Lives*, 185, italics original.
[289] Piercy, *Braided Lives*, 185.
[290] Laura Kaplan, *The Story of Jane: The Legendary Underground Feminist Abortion Service* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995), ix.

abortion services and activism, producing a realist depiction of the work necessary to change the obstacles to abortion access.

Piercy's realist depiction of an herbal abortion (or, at the very least, an attempted herbal abortion) paired with the adult-Jill's continued activism for abortion rights draws attention to the stakes of abortion access in a way that her "critical utopia[n]" focus on a separate womb does not quite address. The timeline tracing the publication of *Woman on the Edge of Time* and *Braided Lives* runs parallel to the time between the Hyde Amendment (1976) and the year before Justice Sandra Day O'Connor introduces the "undue burden" framework in the 1983 Supreme Court decision for *City of Akron v. Akron Center for Reproductive Health*. During this time, the stakes for abortion access changed, and the obstacles impeding that access grew such that "critical utopia[s]" might not have been as sufficient a form in which to highlight the dire, desperate harm that accompanies a lack of abortion access in the realist, present-day. In the switch from science fiction to realism, Piercy demonstrates the changed stakes for abortion rights, and this switch also involves explicitly depicting herbal abortion, even though Jill maintains the secret of the "recipe for action" that terminates her pregnancy. In this way, herbal medicine and plant knowledge remain consistent, if marginal, means by which Piercy's protagonists can access authority over their fates and bodies. While Connie turns to plant knowledge to poison her captors, Jill uses herbal medicine to terminate her pregnancy and access her right to

not be pregnant. It is worth considering, though, that Piercy's character of color, Connie, is doomed to the medical racism and sexism of a state institution, and claims her interest in plant knowledge as an ancestral inheritance only after learning more about plants and botany via her relationship with Luciente. Jill suffers the devastating loss of her beloved cousin Donna after she dies attempting to self-manage an abortion, but she lives to see abortion become a right after channeling her grief and anger into activist organizing. Whether the different fates that await Connie and Jill are influenced by their racial and ethnic identities is unclear, but it is clear that plant knowledge is a crucial if underrated element of both women's stories as they sought to gain authority over their lives despite the medical and legal obstacles they faced.

Butler's New Ecologies in Wild Seed *and* Dawn

While Piercy switches between the genres of speculative fiction and realism, Octavia Butler consistently works in science and speculative fiction. Butler's career is noteworthy for her trailblazing work as the first Black woman science fiction writer to gain mainstream popularity and acclaim. Her science fiction uses otherworldly tropes and tactics to interrogate historical and present-day manifestations of sexism and racism, focalized through her Black women protagonists. *Wild Seed* is an earlier novel of Butler's, published in 1980. The fourth novel in Butler's *Patternist* series, but the first chronologically, *Wild Seed* was published the year after Butler's arguably

most well-known work, *Kindred. Wild Seed* begins in the year 1640, in an unnamed village on the African continent, as the superhuman body-snatcher Doro is drawn to the powerful presence of a woman, Anyanwu. Anyanwu is a three-hundred-year-old shapeshifter who is seemingly immortal, able to manipulate her organs and her body to keep herself healthy and to assume any shape she wishes. The novel traces the power struggle between Doro and Anyanwu, as Doro seeks to use Anyanwu as part of his plan to breed a community of "gifted" superhumans in what he calls his "seed villages," using positive eugenics to encourage various talents such as telekinesis, rapid healing, shapeshifting, and other such powers. Butler's much-discussed *Xenogenesis* trilogy, the first volume of which is *Dawn,* offers an alternative depiction of the womb as something that human characters cannot control, and indeed as a means by which aliens can control humans. This is most evident in Lilith Iyapo's pregnancy as well as the descriptions of the Oankali spaceship, the Chkahichdahk, figured as a sentient, womb-like entity.

In both *Wild Seed* and *Dawn,* Butler uses language that draws on reproductive medicine and science as characters narrativize the inner workings of their bodies in ways not dissimilar to a sonogram technician's narrativization of the inner workings of the womb. Butler's research process for her fiction was extensive, as indicated by the scholarship of Dagmar Van Engen and Aimee Bahng, who suggests that Butler

can be viewed as "a feminist philosopher of science."[291] Despite Butler's interest in genetic engineering, eugenics, and reproductive technologies, she seems to foreclose abortion as a possibility for her characters, as she is more interested in the tensions of the animated pregnant body navigating between life and death, and human, animal, and matter. Butler's characters—gifted humans and aliens alike—benefit from powers that enable them to choose the moment of conception, which seemingly render abortion moot. What does it mean, then, that Butler's interest in reproductive technologies and genetic engineering take the point of conception, rather than the potential need or decision to terminate a pregnancy, as the focus of concern? That Butler relocates her interest to the point of conception rather than the point of discovering a pregnancy might seem to be a deliberate tactic to avoid the subject of abortion. Yet Butler's novels are steeped in womb-like descriptions and a commitment to interrogating questions of bodily autonomy. What, then, does it mean that Butler's novels take reproduction, genetics, and eugenics as a primary concern but avoid the topic of abortion? To explore that question, I will first discuss Anyanwu's powers in *Wild Seed* before moving on to the genetic engineering that Lilith is subject to on the Oankali ship in *Dawn.*

[291] Dagmar Van Engen, "Metamorphosis, Transition, and Insect Biology in the Octavia E. Butler Archive." *Women's Studies* 47, no 7 (2018): 734; Aimee Bahng, "Plasmodial Improprieties: Octavia E. Butler, Slime Molds, and Imagining a Femi-Queer Commons," in *Queer Feminist Science Studies: A Reader,* eds. Cyd Cipolla, Kristina Gupta, David A. Rubin, Angela Willey (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2017), 310.

In *Wild Seed,* when Doro and the reader meet Anyanwu, she is regarded by her people as an oracle and a healer. She assumes the appearance of an elder woman and makes a steady living selling herbs and other such remedies as cover for her superhuman abilities. Anyanwu's reputation as a healer is rooted in her local ecologies. This is significant given the historic theft of Black women's herbal medical knowledge by enslavers and colonizers invested in profiting from colonial botany and plant knowledge.[292] Anyanwu's medicinal knowledge of herbs and plants serves as a historical corrective to the violence done to Black women by enslavers and those invested in racist, sexist colonial oppression. Anyanwu makes connections to each of the local ecologies in which she lives throughout the novel and near the end of the text, Anyanwu is vocal about her hope to pass on her knowledge of herbs and plants to her descendants. This decision is significant given all that Anyanwu experiences in the novel in terms of the racism and sexism of the United States—as well as her knowledge of the white medical circles she joins when she assumes the shape of a white man. Anyanwu's knowledge of and brief experiences benefitting from white supremacy in medicine inform her wish to gift her descendants herbal medical knowledge. This inheritance is also a means by which her descendants could avoid potentially dangerous and lethal visits to hospitals—which are run, mostly, by white

[292] This is evident in the work of Londa Schiebinger, from *Plants and Empire* to *The Secret Cures of Slaves: People, Plants, and Medicine in the Eighteenth-Century Atlantic World* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2017).

men, most notoriously including J. Marion Sims, the "father of modern gynecology," who made his major advances in the field by experimenting on enslaved Black women without consent or anesthesia.[293]

Yet Anyanwu's medical knowledge includes more than her fluency in herbs and plants. Anyanwu is seemingly immortal due to her ability to heal herself and shapeshift, powers that Doro views as useful additions to his breeding program. After Anyanwu agrees to join Doro's program, we learn more about the extent of her healing powers:

> [Anyanwu] focused on her inner ears and remembered perfection there, remembered organs and fluids and pressures in balance, their wrongness righted. Remembering and correcting were one gesture; balance was restored. It had taken her much practice—and much pain—to learn such ease of control. Every change she made in her body had to be understood and visualized. If she was sick or injured, she could not simply wish to be well. […] Thus, she had spent much of her long life learning the diseases, disorders, and injuries that she could suffer—learning them often by inflicting mild versions of them on herself, then slowly, painfully, by trial and error, coming to understand exactly what was wrong and how to impress healing. Thus,

[293] See Deirdre Cooper Owens, *Medical Bondage: Race, Gender, and the Origins of American Gynecology* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2018).

> when her enemies came to kill her, she knew more about surviving than they did about killing.[294]

For Anyanwu to actualize her healing power, she must be able to visualize the change inside her body and see the correction she needs to make. The language of visualization is crucial to how Butler explains Anyanwu's power—Anyanwu has no need for sonogram technology to envision her internal organs or womb, as she can understand and correct the "balance" in her body by knowing and then visualizing the necessary steps to achieve this "balance." Here, balance is not ecological, as in Firestone's understanding of how the separate womb would allow for the "ecological" balance of gendered labor; balance for Anyanwu is the biological perfection of her internal organs working in sync, in full health, to maintain an equilibrium for her super-natural body. This is the opposite of a tyranny of biology—the biological, visual balance of her body *is* what is "natural" to Anyanwu, a balance that she can always return to, that does not rely on additional tools or technologies. In this way, Anyanwu's power allows her to change her body's internal workings through her ability to visualize her internal organs and then urge them to conform to her visualized image of "perfection." For Anyanwu, it is not language that animates

[294] Octavia Butler, *Wild Seed* (New York: Warner Books, 1999), 54.

her body's changes, but her ability to visualize her internal workings of the body that animates her powers.

Butler is clear that Anyanwu's powers also allow her to control when and how she becomes pregnant. After one sexual episode with Doro, the two have a heated fight about Anyanwu's role in Doro's breeding program. She had intended to conceive his child then, but during the course of their conversation, Anyanwu becomes disgusted with Doro's schemes and decides against conceiving:

> Within her body, she killed his seed. She disconnected the two small tubes through which her own seed travelled to her womb. She had done this many times when she thought she had given a man enough children. Now she did it to avoid giving any children at all, to avoid being used."[295]

After Anyanwu's decision here—which she does not disclose to Doro—the argument between the two escalates, and Doro threatens to assume Anyanwu's body, a process that would kill her. In response to his threat, she changes her biology:

> Within herself, she altered her reproductive organs further, made herself literally no longer a woman, but not quite a man—just to be certain. "You may be able to push my spirit from my body," she said. "[…] But my body will give you no satisfaction. It would take too long for you to learn to repair

[295] Butler, *Wild Seed*, 122.

> all the things I have done to it—if you can learn. It will not conceive a child now."[296]

In both these passages, Anyanwu's abilities are contextualized as "within herself"; the action takes place inside her body as Anyanwu visualizes and then actualizes the transformation of her organs. In this moment, Anyanwu's ability to visualize her organs and change them at will results in both willful contraception and a kind of willful intersexuality.

Yet Butler imposes certain limits on Anyanwu's character. Though we know that she can conceive and "kill seed" at will, Butler makes a point of emphasizing that Anyanwu has never willfully terminated a pregnancy. Notably, we do not get this information from Anyanwu's narrative perspective, but from Doro's:

> He had no doubt that she could abort any pregnancy without help or danger to herself. She could do anything with that body of hers that she wished. But she would not abort. Once a child was inside her, it would be born. During all the years he had known her, she had been as careful with her children before they were born as afterward.[297]

Since Anyanwu's powers allow her to willfully practice contraception at any early point of a pregnancy, and, conversely, that she can willfully encourage any "seed" to

[296] Butler, *Wild Seed,* 124.
[297] Butler, *Wild Seed,* 266-7.

the point of conception, it follows that she may not have need for the ability to willfully perform abortion. Doro's logic is flawed, though, considering the numerous reasons people need abortions at various stages in pregnancy. Doro's certainty about Anyanwu's apparently steadfast decision not to self-manage abortion draws a moral line in the novel between contraception and abortion, even though it is unclear whether Doro is aware that Anyanwu had "killed his seed" earlier in their relationship. To take the point further, Doro conjectures that Anyanwu is "as careful with her children before they were born as afterward," extending Anyanwu's ability to control conception to her alleged cultivation of certain traits in her unborn children. Butler's distinction here is worth dwelling on, especially given her career-long fascination with compulsory reproduction, breeding programs, and an almost eugenic preoccupation with optimizing traits. Anyanwu's supposed resistance to abortion here, for all of Butler's otherwise liberatory visions, casts a shadow in the novel that reproduces a stigmatized distinction between contraception and abortion, the very same distinction that Margaret Sanger upheld in the early twentieth century. That it is Doro and not Anyanwu who voices this resistance to abortion is particularly compelling, as it leaves Anyanwu's full perspective on the subject a mystery.

Moving away from the familiar history and setting of planet Earth, Butler's later novel *Dawn* turns its sights to the otherworldly. *Dawn*, the first novel in Butler's *Xenogenesis* trilogy also known as the "Lilith's Brood" trilogy, begins in the

aftermath of Earth's nuclear collapse. The first part of the novel, entitled "Womb," follows Lilith Iyapo in her brief moments of consciousness in which she has been "Awakened" and subject to interrogation on what we later learn is an alien spaceship. In this holding room place, Lilith is questioned by unseen "captors." Lilith observes the conditions of her captivity, tracking the food, clothing, availability of bathrooms, and "the long scar across her abdomen," "acquired… somehow between her second and third Awakenings."[298] The mystery of Lilith's scar proves to her that "She did not own herself any longer. Even her flesh could be cut and stitched without her consent or knowledge," as she refers to her captors as "mutilators."[299] Butler keeps Lilith in the dark at the beginning of the novel, but everything about Lilith's captivity—from the title of the section, the liminal, in-between space she seems to occupy, and the nature of her "mutilation" on her abdomen, speaks to the ghosts of reproductive violence, particularly that faced by Black women. The interrogation room can be read as a space of gestation and captivity, a "womb"-like space, given the title of this section, and the "stitches" without her consent conjure the histories of forced reproductive surgeries and experimentations on Black women and women of color, while Lilith's inability to view her captors speaks to her feelings of unease and powerlessness.

[298] Butler, *Dawn* (New York: Warner Books, 1997), 4.
[299] Butler, *Dawn*, 5.

Eventually, Lilith's captors reveal themselves to her. The Oankali are an alien species of "gene traders," interested in biological material that can be used to perfect their species as well as others. Like Piercy, Butler explores the connections between the genetic engineering of plants and human embryos throughout *Dawn.* The Oankali, by virtue of their compulsion to "trade" or hybridize gene pools with the other species they encounter, are invested in a quasi-eugenic prerogative to genetically engineer a new hybrid species. After her release from the interrogation room, as Lilith explores the Oankali "ship," she encounters plant-like species, "pseudotrees," and animal creatures that have all been altered to serve a specific purpose for the Oankali.[300] Like the inhabitants of Piercy's utopian Mattapoisett, the Oankali subsist on a plant-based diet, and most of their nutrition is grown on their ship. The ship is a particularly compelling entity, as it is both setting and sentient creature. For example, Lilith is told that she may dispose of any food waste by burying it in the ship, to "feed" the ship, as it were.[301]

The "womb" of the novel's first section can refer to Lilith's gestational period in the interrogation room before she is allowed to fully enter Oankali society on the ship, but it can also refer to the ship itself. The ship is a sentient being, one that offers nutrients and sustenance to the Oankali but is also nourished by the Oankali. The ship

[300] Butler, *Dawn,* 61
[301] Butler, *Dawn,* 62.

itself is "grown" from planets that the Oankali colonize (a fact that is more fully explored in later novels in the series). The Oankali can encourage, through chemical signals, various parts of the ship to grow or change based on their needs. In addition to the practical structural and nutritional uses of the ship, the ship itself is said to be made of "flesh" and feel love and affection for those within it, specifically "an affinity, but it's biological—a strong, symbiotic relationship."[302] This suggests that the ship holds the Oankali in a kind of gestational, nurturing relationship. The ship, then, is an animate being, existing separately but interconnectedly with the Oankali. The ship is not human by any means, but it exists as something between a plant, an animal, and a place. Significantly, when Lilith asks Jdahya, the first Oankali she meets in the novel, about the Oankali's homeworld, Jdahya first responds with vague non-answers before noting, "It was a womb. The time had come for us to be born."[303] By the end of the first part of the novel, "womb" comes to signify (1) metaphorically, in reference to the long-gone Oankali homeworld and the Oankali's relationships with their ships; (2) literally, in Lilith's worries regarding the scar on her abdomen and her fears about the Oankali's plans to "gene trade" with her and her fellow surviving humans; and (3) narratively, in reference to Lilith's time gestating, learning, and attempting to understand the Oankali people. Since the entire novel takes place on the

[302] Butler, *Dawn*, 28, 33.
[303] Butler, *Dawn*, 36.

ship, it could be said that *Dawn* is a novel about gestating within womb-like spaces as well as a novel very much concerned with the human womb and its reproductive capabilities. Every facet of the novel—the setting, the characters—is animate and radiates with vital matter. The irony is that this is the same for *Wild Seed* and other novels set on Earth, though we are not conditioned to think of the planet Earth in the same way as the Oankali regard their sentient, womb-like ship as a partner whose destiny is entangled with that of the alien species who occupy the space.

The Oankali's interest in the human species stems from their species' imperative to gene trade. As Jdahya explains to Lilith in the first part of the novel:

> We do what you would call genetic engineering. We know you had begun to do it yourselves a little, but it's foreign to you. We do it naturally. We *must* do it. It renews us, enables us to survive as a growing species instead of specializing ourselves into extinction or stagnation. […] We are powerfully acquisitive. We acquire new life—seek it, investigate it, manipulate it, sort it, use it. We carry the drive to do this in a miniscule cell within a cell—a tiny organelle within every cell of our bodies… One of the meanings of Oankali is gene trader. Another is that organelle—the essence of ourselves, the origin of ourselves. Because of that organelle, the ooloi can perceive DNA and manipulate it precisely.[304]

[304] Butler, *Dawn,* 39.

Jdahya conveys to Lilith the Oankali's imperative to trade genetic material with the species that they come into contact with. Specifically, Jdahya describes this imperative at a cellular level. Like Jill's attention to cells in her description of her pregnancy and Anyanwu's attention to the inner workings of her body, Jdahya and the Oankali use the language of biology and cellular anatomy. Jdahya uses this language to describe the Oankali's drives at the most microscopic level—a drive that could be described as a kind of cellular reproductive futurism.[305] The Oankali's reproductive futurity is quite literally baked into their DNA.

Established by Lee Edelman in *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (2004), the concept of "reproductive futurity" has been critiqued and elaborated on in subsequent texts like José Esteban Muñoz's *Cruising Utopia: the Then and There of Queer Futurity* (2009), Sarah Ensor's *American Literature* article "Spinster Ecologies" (2012), Alison Kafer's *Feminist, Queer, Crip* (2013), Nicole Seymour's *Strange Natures: Futurity, Empathy, and the Queer Ecological Imagination* (2013), and Alexis Lothian's *Old Futures: Speculative Fiction and Queer Possibility* (2018). In the first chapter of *No Future*, Edelman considers the concept of reproductive

[305] Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 2-3. Edelman's concept considers the framework of politics that envisions the "Child" as that which "shapes the logic within which the political itself must be thought… That Child remains the perpetual horizon of every acknowledged politics, the fantasmatic beneficiary of every political intervention." As Edelman critiques this focus on the Child, he asks, "Who *would*, after all, come out *for* abortion or stand *against* reproduction, *against* futurity, and so against *life*?" in a statement that is as revealing as it is frustrating, given that he positions abortion as in opposition to reproduction, futurity, and life in such a way that continues to ignore the context of abortion as concerning a gestating person (16).

futurity in relation to an anti-abortion billboard that features an image of a fetus. He references Barbara Johnson's work on the "tropes that effectively animate by personifying the fetus," and offers his reaction to the billboard:

> That Cambridge billboard thus seemed to announce what liberalism prefers to occlude: that the governing compulsion, the singular imperative, that affords us no meaningful choice is the compulsion to embrace our own futurity in the privileged form of the Child, to imagine each moment as pregnant with the Child of our Imaginary identifications…[306]

In Butler's novel, the Oankali are not so concerned with the eventual Child so much as they are concerned with the materials out of which children are made—cells and genes. But what Edelman and the Oankali have in common is their inability to fully contend with cells, genes, and fetuses in context, as part of a person's body. Though the Oankali are driven by their investment in a cellular reproductive futurity, they practice a family structure that unsettles that which Edelman uses his concept to critique: the heteronormative American family unit anchored by the Child. The Oankali are motivated by their imperative to gene trade, though not necessarily restricted to genes that inspire human life, an important detail given their investment in human's reproductive capabilities and cancer cells alike.

[306] Edelman, *No Future*, 15.

Lothian's critique most clearly illuminates the shortcomings of reproductive futurity as originally outlined by Edelman, in that Edelman's conceptualization sidelines the experience of the pregnant person seeking abortion in favor of focusing on the ways the anti-abortion billboard hails Edelman himself. Lothian writes of Edelman's concept:

> To jump from futurity to children to mothers is certainly on some level to participate in a heterosexual logic of (re)generation…. Yet to ignore the bodies from which queer and other subjects literally emerge is to risk participating in racialized and classed dynamics that elide the question of who disproportionately carries out reproductive labor.[307]

As Lothian notes, Edelman's theory does not recognize pregnant people, a demographic that includes straight, cis, queer, and trans people, people of different races, ethnicities, and abilities. Abortion becomes a footnote in Edelman's concept of reproductive futurity, not unlike how abortion figures on the margins of Butler's novels. Edelman's focus on the Child allows him to discuss queer negativity from a perspective that does not account for the complexities that Lothian calls to the fore, specifically the racial, gendered, classed, queer, and various other dynamics of reproductive labor. The Oankali are oblivious to Lilith's warnings to consider the humans' internalized (and sometimes, blatantly externalized) racist, sexist biases.

[307] Lothian, *Old Futures*, 35.

Their focus on gene trading makes them oblivious to the possibility of other pregnancy outcomes like abortion. *Dawn* dislocates the power of the Child even as it reifies the potency of a cellular reproductive futurity—it is not necessarily the Child or the hybridized descendants that the Oankali are invested in, but the process of genetic engineering and the compulsion to hybridize their species.

Butler's attention to science and scientific detail is much greater than Piercy's, who uses the ideas of genetic engineering in the fooder and brooder to point to wider societal problems like overconsumption and the climate crisis, and to gesture at a race-unconscious solution to racism. Butler, however, focuses on the cells themselves in her descriptions of the Oankali species. Part of Butler's biological language comes from her study of biology, analyzed at length by Aimee Bahng and Dagmar Van Engen. Van Engen specifically uses Butler's archival material to consider the ways in which the ooloi, the third gender of the Oankali species, "offer a trans-specific reimagining of invertebrate terrestrial creatures."[308] Not only is reproductive futurity a key part of the Oankali biology and culture, but so is their unique reproductive system in which a third gender ooloi is crucial. The ooloi appear slightly different from other Oankali, already rendered grotesque in the eyes of the novel's humans due to their many-tentacled appearance resembling almost bipedal octopi. The ooloi's anatomy includes "sensory arms," limbs that are essential for the Oankali

[308] Van Engen, "Metamorphosis, Transition, and Insect Biology," 738.

reproductive process. For Van Engen, the Oankali tentacles, insect-like as they are, "defamiliarize the human body in its heteronormative representations."[309] Despite the Oankali's physical differences from the human survivors, the two species share a concern about the future of their respective species. While the promise of a human-Oankali hybrid species is a key motivation for the Oankali, a significant number of the human survivors are keen to reproduce their species as quickly as possible, as one character refers to the imperative to form heteronormative pairs a "duty."[310] But what Van Engen and Bahng correctly and persuasively describe as Butler's use of scientific language to describe the ooloi and Oankali, is also medical language, given the fact that the ooloi and Oankali attempt to "cure" as well as reproduce with the humans they interact with. Medicine, after all, can be understood as biological science applied to health, and this is what the Oankali do for both their own species and the humans they rescue.

While the Oankali are committed to hybridizing or "gene trading" between their species and humans, the humans themselves grapple with the Oankali's cellular focus. In *Dawn,* like in *Wild Seed,* Butler writes around instead of about abortion, though she does pointedly write about contraception and the question of choice and consent in reproduction. By the time of *Dawn*'s publication in 1987, the rhetoric of

[309] Van Engen, "Metamorphosis, Transition, and Insect Biology," 741.
[310] Butler, *Dawn,* 177.

"choice" was well-known and rampant in abortions rights and women's liberation circles. So, too, was the imagery of the fetus and the rhetoric of "fetal life" and "fetal rights" in anti-abortion organizing. *Dawn*'s concern with the humans' inability to control the science that enables them to choose whether or not to conceive resonates with the reproductive rights or proto-reproductive justice rhetoric of the 1980s.[311] Pointedly, these concerns are focalized through Lilith Iyapo, a Black woman and mother to a young son who passed away before the events of Earth's nuclear fallout.

Lilith's experience as a mother gives her a strange authority with the other humans in the group, one that Lilith views with suspicion given that her focus is learning the skills necessary to survive upon her eventual return to the wilderness of Earth, rather than immediately reproducing the species. Upon learning that Lilith had been a mother on Earth, one human survivor, Paul Titus, mocks her desire to return to an Earth without the structures and institutions of modern life: "Well, I'll bet when he [Lilith's son] was born, you were in a hospital with doctors and nurses all around helping you and giving you shots for the pain. How would you like to do it in a jungle with nothing around you but bugs and rats and people who feel sorry for you but can't do shit to help you?"[312] Lilith's explanation that she had a natural childbirth is met

[311] The term "reproductive justice" is traced to the meeting of twelve Black women activists at a Chicago pro-choice conference in 1994, so this term is not quite contemporaneous with either Butler's or Piercy's novels discussed in this chapter. See Loretta Ross and Rickie Solinger, *Reproductive Justice: An Introduction,* 64-65.
[312] Butler, *Dawn,* 89.

with scorn, but it is telling that Paul—an American human survivor—cannot imagine birth without a hospital, even in the pre-nuclear apocalypse world. The ideal of a medical institution as a place of safety free from pain betrays Paul's relative naivete, as he was only fourteen years old when the nuclear apocalypse froze his ideal of Earth.

Though Lilith's experience as a mother endows her with some authority or respect from other human survivors, this experience is no balm for her own fears about the Oankali's intent to "gene trade." Lilith runs through potential scenarios about what may happen to her:

> In a very real sense, she was an experimental animal…. She was intended to live and reproduce, not to die. Experimental animal, parent to domestic animals? Or…nearly extinct animal, part of a captive breeding program? Human biologists had done that before the war—used a few captive members of an endangered animal species to breed more for the wild population. Was that what she was headed for? Forced artificial insemination. Surrogate motherhood? Fertility drugs and forced "donations" of eggs? Implantation of unrelated fertilized eggs. Removal of children from mothers at birth … Humans had done these things to captive breeders—all for a higher good, of course.[313]

[313] Butler, *Dawn,* 58.

Lilith's fears include references to developments in reproductive technologies, as well as fears founded on the legacy of the American medical and scientific exploitation of women and people of color. The majority of the atrocities that Lilith fears are rooted in scientific exploitation and experimentation at the cellular level, the manipulation of biology for reproduction. While the Oankali's very sense of self is rooted in their biological imperative to reproductive futurity, Lilith outlines her fears here using similar language. Here, Lilith casts her fears about the control and exploitation of her body in a future tense, imagining horrors to come. Yet she soon learns that these fears have in part come to pass, as the Oankali have already taken her "genetic material" and that of all human survivors to create new humans. Paul Titus shares this revelation with her:

> They took stuff from men and women who didn't even know each other and put it together and made babies in women who never knew the mother or the father of their kid—and who maybe never got to know the kid. Or maybe they grew the baby in another kind of animal. They have animals they can adjust to —to incubate human fetuses, as they say. Or maybe they don't even worry about men and women. Maybe they just scrape some skin from one person and make babies out of it—cloning, you know. Or maybe they use one of their prints.[314]

[314] Butler, *Dawn,* 93.

Again, the language of artificial wombs appears, but here Paul speculates about the Oankali's power to change the genetics of any living matter to accommodate a human or human-Oankali hybrid embryo. In this case, Paul imagines something closer to an organic, adapted womb rather than an "artificial" womb like the machinery Piercy imagines in her novel's brooder. The Oankali's skill, then, is not industrial or technological in a traditional sense, but organic and biological, manipulating living matter and ecologies to fit their own purposes, all described with a language of microscopic specificity, the achievement of which would have been impossible for humans without their own developments in machinery. Lilith makes such a comparison explicit when describing the Oankali ship to another human survivor, "The Oankali use living matter the way we used machinery."[315] A kind of embryology, then, and its related biological and genetic sciences become the primary ways in which Lilith and the other humans can understand their fates, and how their bodies will be changed by the Oankali. The "literary-medical gaze" of Butler's novel becomes more explicitly infused with biology and ecology here, as the tools by which the Oankali hybridize their species with the humans utilize the living matter of not just humans but also the genetic "prints" of other materials and beings.

The novel moves from conjecture to practice as Lilith and Nikanj begin the work of Awakening more human survivors to train them for a return to Earth. Prior to

[315] Butler, *Dawn,* 140.

the Awakenings, Lilith learns that all human survivors to be Awakened have been sterilized, something that Nikanj relates to "birth control," despite the fact that neither Lilith nor any of the other humans had any "control" over the decision.[316] This rhetorical move mirrors the gaslighting and violence done by American medical institutions who sterilized women and people of color in the twentieth century.[317] The knowledge of her species' fate weighs on Lilith, as she questions her ability to communicate the human predicament: "How could she Awaken people and tell them they were to be part of the genetic engineering scheme of a species so alien that the humans would not be able to look at it comfortably for a while? How would she Awaken these people, these survivors of war, and tell them that unless they could escape the Oankali, their children would not be human?"[318] Despite Lilith's fears about the future reproduction of humans, particularly the birth of an Oankali-human hybrid species, this fear does not outweigh her desire to leave the Oankali ship and escape the "womb"-like sentient being to return to her own planet. Lilith's anxieties about her fate take the form of rhetorical questions in her internal narrative as well as her use of passive voice, as if she is resigned to her role as an inactive subject in the

[316] Butler, *Dawn,* 96.
[317] Select examples of the sterilization of women and people of color in the United States or on behalf of American medical institutions includes the clinical trials for Enovid, see Linda Gordon, *The Moral Property of Women: A History of Birth Control Politics in America* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2002), pgs. 287-288 and 342-347. See also the Supreme Court case *Madrigal vs. Quilligan,* outlined in the Library of Congress Resource Guide, "1978: Madrigal vs. Quilligan." *Library of Congress*. https://guides.loc.gov/latinx-civil-rights/madrigal-v-quilligan.
[318] Butler, *Dawn,* 117.

reproduction of her species. When she is with Nikanj and her human partner Joseph, she notes, "This was the way she might someday be made pregnant with an other-than-human child."[319] Lilith hedges her future fate with conditional tenses—"might someday"—as well as passive voice, "be made pregnant," which demonstrate the disconnect she feels between her own body and the plans that the Oankali have made for it. At no point in the novel does Lilith express or state an explicit desire to have more children, and she is reluctant to discuss the son she lost in a car accident on Earth. Lilith's feelings about reproduction are largely restricted to the grief she feels about her son and her fear for what might be done to her body by the alien species. The narrow space between grief for a living son taken too soon and fear for an alien future leaves no room for Lilith to imagine reproduction that she could control, because Lilith does not allow herself to imagine being in control of decisions regarding contraception or abortion. There is no "choice" regarding Lilith's reproduction, as evidenced by the conclusion of the novel.

In the final chapters of the novel, Lilith grieves the murder of her human partner Joseph, who was killed by other humans suspicious of his connection to Lilith and, by extension, the Oankali. The man who murdered Joseph, Curt, is returned to suspended animation on the ship as punishment for his crime.[320] Even in punishment,

[319] Butler, *Dawn*, 161-162.

[320] The Oankali's use of "suspended animation" as punishment and/or cure dovetails interestingly with this chapter's focus on Chen's concept of animacies and animation. There is a sense from the opening chapters that humans placed in suspended animation reevaluate their choices once they are re-

though, Curt's "talent" for cancer will be explored and used by the Oankali for their own purposes, as Nikanj explains to Lilith: "Your body knows how to cause some of its cells to revert to an embryonic stage. It can awaken genes that most humans never use after birth."[321] At this point in the novel, Lilith has learned that the scar on her own abdomen is a result of the Oankali's removal of cancer. The Oankali compare the potential of cancer cells as related to the reversion of some cells back to an "embryonic stage."[322] The Oankali's dual interest in human reproduction and the human "talent" for cancer relates to the "animated" link between cancer and fetal movement referenced in some post-*Dobbs* writing about abortion.[323] Even in this scene, as Lilith learns about Curt's fate, which takes the form of an almost reverse-conception, an inverse of the hybrid reproduction that he and the other humans feared most about living among the Oankali, she does not connect Curt's punishment to her own fate.

Lilith's sense of justice regarding Curt's punishment vanishes two chapters later, when she learns that she has been made pregnant by Nikanj. Due to an

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awakened, and that humans come to recognize the repeated suspensions and Awakenings as a pattern or lesson.

[321] Butler, *Dawn*, 236.

[322] The Oankali's interest in Lilith's cancer is not dissimilar to the biomedical community's interest in and continued use of Henrietta Lacks' cancer cells, used widely without her consent. See Rebecca Skloot, *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* (New York: Broadway Paperbacks, 2011) and "Honoring Henrietta Lacks," Johns Hopkins Medicine, accessed 12 March 2023. https://www.hopkinsmedicine.org/henriettalacks/index.html

[323] The rhetorical move to compare a fetus to a cancer cell is not uncommon. Most recently, Jia Tolentino considered this rhetoric in a post-*Dobbs* essay for *The New Yorker*, "Is Abortion Sacred?," published July 16, 2022. https://www.newyorker.com/culture/essay/is-abortion-sacred.

unspecified feature of Oankali biology, as Joseph and Lilith's ooloi, Nikanj could save or incubate Joseph's genetic material, his sperm, within its own body from their sexual encounters prior to Joseph's murder. Without Lilith's consent or awareness, Nikanj makes Lilith pregnant, preferring to use Joseph's "seed, not a print" of his genetic material in the hopes of providing Lilith a more true or intimate relation to Joseph.[324] Eerily, the Oankali's ability to manipulate and experiment on humans without their knowledge or consent, an ability that Lilith had recently felt a grief-inspired sort of pleasure in, has now been used against her. Nikanj asks Lilith if its decision to "make" her pregnant is "an unclean thing," using the language of assembly rather than insemination and of hygiene rather than consent or approval. Nikanj's question skirts Lilith's concerns about the Oankali-human hybrid experiment, her fear of being a dehumanized object or animal made to reproduce and her fear of what her offspring would become. Nikanj's language of cleanliness also draws on the racist anti-miscegenation rhetoric of "dirty" or "mongrel" interracial relationships, a rhetorical move with a violent legacy in the United States that bears even more weight given Lilith's identity as a Black American woman and Joseph's as an Asian Canadian man. The offspring of Lilith, Joseph, and Nikanj will be interracial in every sense of the word, including human races and the hybrid of human and alien species. Lilith's response to Nikanj's question expresses her fear and concern: "It

[324] Butler, *Dawn,* 245.

won't be a daughter. It will be a thing—not human. It's inside me, and it isn't human!"[325] Lilith's fear is that she is carrying something—specifically, has been "made" to carry a pregnancy—that is not human. Lilith is outraged that she did not have the opportunity to decide the timing or circumstances of her pregnancy, but she is most upset that her primary fear has come to pass, and that she is now being made to participate in the reproduction of a human/Oankali hybrid species.

Like *Wild Seed, Dawn* explores the narrative problem of privileging the moment of conception. Nikanj informs Lilith of her conception, and her fearful and tragic reaction demonstrates that this is not something that she actively chose, experienced, or felt—in essence, Nikanj animates her pregnancy via the ability to gene trade and the description of this action to Lilith. Her conception is not something she feels or experiences, which is vastly different from the power of naming the fetal animation through quickening that pregnant people claimed in earlier centuries. Instead, Lilith is subject to a technologically and biologically dependent procedure of fertilization that Nikanj later describes to her.

The Oankali's choice to use humans as active participants in carrying pregnancies to term extends Lilith's earlier observation that the Oankali use "living matter" as humans would have used machines. In this way, Butler and Piercy demonstrate that women who can utilize or understand plant or biological knowledge

[325] Butler, *Dawn,* 246.

but have no control over the scientific means of practicing this knowledge are vulnerable to abuse. Luciente and the people of Mattapoissett have confidence in their brooder because they have knowledge of how it operates. Anyanwu's multiple knowledges protect her—her knowledge and ability to perform superhuman feats as well as her herbal medicinal skills. But it is her herbal medicinal skills that can be passed on, learned, and cultivated by her family members who do not inherit her superhuman abilities. Connie and Lilith, on the other hand, are subject to medical scientific technologies that they have no control over. Connie attempts resistance via the plant knowledge that she can access. Lilith's human-centric knowledge (her career in anthropology before the nuclear destruction of Earth) is useful for building the colony, but not for protecting herself. She has no ability or avenue to learn the science of how to protect herself; the Oankali have a monopoly on the scientific authority and knowledge that places Lilith in a vulnerable position. Even when Lilith does apply knowledge that she learns—that of planting crops and beginning to establish a proto-colony on the training floor—the humans' first attempts at "planting their own crops" are held in parallel to the idea that "perhaps, now it was time for the Oankali to begin to see what they would harvest in their human crop."[326] Even the humans' attempts to exercise their own knowledge—whether it was gained following their captivity with the Oankali or if it dates to their time on Earth—is rhetorically

[326] Butler, *Dawn,* 205.

situated in relation to the Oankali's power over the humans and their ultimate goal of hybridizing the gene pool.

Whereas Piercy's utopia externalizes a quasi-eugenic reproduction of human species in the machines of the brooder ("Mother as machine"), Butler focuses on animate, living matter. In *Dawn,* the Oankali use humans as participants in what they, or at least Lilith, view as an artificial conception process that will result in a "thing," a "monster," "other-than-human." Piercy imagines Mattapoisett to be a multiracial, multiethnic utopian community, one whose future is threatened by the medical racism and sexism that Connie is subject to in the novel's present, whereas the multiracial, multiethnic coalition in *Dawn* splinters as they are quick to find reasons to be suspicious of Lilith's leadership—a bias that Lilith herself predicts to the Oankali. Butler equips Lilith with expertise in anthropology and a deft awareness of the social dynamics within the group of humans she has awakened to demonstrate to the Oankali the social, cultural implications of their decision to make Lilith their ambassador. Butler also draws on the histories of Black women as the victims of medical experimentation as she collapses the historical distance between what is often referenced in terms of medical experimentation on Black women—recall Jackson's engagement with J. Marion Sims as she reconsiders the relationship between science, medicine, and the human—to implicate the contemporaneous racism faced by Lilith as she assumes a position of power with enhanced superhuman healing and strength.

Butler's otherworldly ecologies offer an almost inverse vision to Piercy's brooder, but both feature the sterilization (willing and forced) of all humans in their respective futures. Both Piercy and Butler critique the ways in which science can be used to achieve "ecological balance"—the tenuous attempt at a "post-racial" peace to be found in Mattapoisett and the commitment to hybridization in the Oankali's world. Although the citizens of Mattapoisett bristle at Connie when she attempts to reconcile their understandings of race with her own, the humans in *Dawn* are far from the makings of an idealized post-racial community, as they are capable of slinging slurs and using violence to undermine Lilith's leadership. Yet both futures imagine science as a tool to achieve societal ends, rather than the fact that societal structures inform the very science that both worlds practice, as Jackson suggests. In futures in which all humans are sterilized, there is no mention of abortion, but in these futures there remains the rhetoric of embryology, of fetal animation, and the thrill or threat of the artificial womb, technologies that emerged alongside the twentieth-century movement for decriminalized abortion as a fundamental right. These resonances result in novels that write around abortion, though Piercy includes many more specific mentions of abortion in Connie's present-day reality. What persists in both futures is the connection between the technologies of embryology and the larger ecological frameworks with which human embryology is interconnected.

The Oankali's plan to create a hybrid species is as much about genetic engineering and the practice of positive eugenics as it is about colonization. A primary concern of much of Butler's fiction is planetary exploration, and *Dawn* is no exception. Scholars like Smaran Dayal consider the colonialist themes of the *Xenogenesis* trilogy to be "a complex thought-experiment about planetary dispossession."[327] Dayal offers a detailed analysis of the various ways in which Butler's series can be read in terms of settler colonialism and critical Indigenous studies, and one of the key points of Dayal's analysis is that the science fiction genre offers Butler distance from historical narratives: "A speculative fiction of settler colonialism might not always necessitate the historically accurate (i.e. realist) representation of particular peoples, events, and places."[328] Though Dayal points to the ways in which Butler's novel distances itself from realism through its speculative elements like an alien species and planetary dispossession, many elements of the Oankali species correlate to realist, historical elements that Butler draws on in multiple novels. The genius of Butler is that her thought experiment asks her readers to consider at what point is reproductive futurism too much to bear for human characters who might otherwise believe in its idealism via the American nuclear family. Both *Wild Seed* and *Dawn* feature plotlines about intensive breeding

[327] Smaran Dayal, "Octavia Butler and the Settler Colonial Speculative: *Xenogenesis* and Planetary Loss." *American Studies* 60, no. ¾ (2021): 96.
[328] Dayal, "Octavia Butler and the Settler Colonial Speculative," 112.

programs, and the women like Anyanwu and Lilith who attempt to negotiate control of their own reproduction despite their participation in these genetic experiments. Both novels take seriously the question of how to mother with dignity and how to navigate the mechanics and biology of reproduction. Anyanwu and Lilith offer two extremes of bodily autonomy in which reproduction is controlled by superhuman abilities—abilities far beyond what Blackmun could imagine in the *Roe v. Wade* opinion, despite the fact that the ooloi mode of conception is not unlike a kind of in-vitro fertilization. Butler's fiction focuses on her protagonists' experience of claiming and losing control over their bodily autonomy, respectively. While abortion works on the margins of these novels from the perspective of the plot, it looms large in Butler's attention to Anyanwu and Lilith's experiences of bodily control.

Conclusion

Piercy's and Butler's novels exemplify their interest in a systems-wide critique of reproductive technology as well as the individual abilities of women characters to exercise their reproductive choice with the means available to them. While *Braided Lives* and *Wild Seed* include characters who—by herbal or other means—terminate or foreclose the possibility of pregnancy, *Woman on the Edge of Time* and *Dawn* offer more wide-ranging critiques that turn the "literary-medical gaze" to questions of genetics, eugenics, and reproductive technologies. Typical of the late-twentieth

century feminist dystopia genre, both *Woman on the Edge of Time* and *Dawn* offer narratives and characters that critique a techno-determinist future. Yet this critique is in tension with the fact that the characters most knowledgeable about genetic engineering, Luciente and the ooloi like Nikanj, seem seduced by "living matter," the ecologies and biologies of the twentieth-century humans with whom they come into contact. From Connie's experience "live bearing," to Lilith's "talent" for cancer, the bodies of both protagonists, both women of color, capture the scientific interest and intimate affection of their futuristic, otherworldly counterparts. Through Luciente and Nikanj and their respective knowledges of genetic engineering, Piercy and Butler use scientific language that resonates with the narrative tools and scripts of embryology. If embryology and sonogram technology rely on the narrativization of a visual image, then so too does science fiction, as Piercy and Butler animate their characters' genetics through their encounters with futuristic scientists. Piercy dwells on the potential action that the Mattapoisett "brooders" and Jill's self-managed abortion allow them to achieve, respectively, and she ensures that her characters gain the knowledge if not the institutional authority that they need to achieve their ends. Jill successfully self-manages her abortion, though it is a painful and formative experience for her. Connie achieves revenge against her captors and enables her friend to escape, but at the cost of her own freedom.

Piercy's novels focus on the end goals of the movements in which her protagonists are committed to, while Butler's novels focus on the nuances of power when Black women protagonists are or are not able to control their reproductive freedom and bodily autonomy. The narrative problem of conception troubles Butler's novels, as she uses Anyanwu's supernatural abilities and the Oankali's ooloi traits to evade any clear depiction of conception or fetal animation. Genetic engineering in both *Woman on the Edge of Time* and *Dawn* is tied, in part, to the importance of living plant matter and plant knowledge, an ecological influence that manifests more explicitly in *Braided Lives* and *Wild Seed.* Piercy and Butler's works participate in the tradition of the "literary-medical gaze" and examine the effects of feminist efforts to "limit nature [biology] through technology," efforts that ultimately cannot escape the ecological resonances of herbal medicine, plant knowledge, and an interconnection of human biology with other scientific systems.

Piercy and Butler write in the speculative fiction genre, but both authors use realism at crucial moments to underscore the historical weight of a given topic. As abortion restrictions come increasingly into effect over the course of the 1980s and 1990s, authors incorporate historical knowledge and even turn to historical fiction to consider the role of ancestral knowledge in abortion stories and herbal medicine. Blackmun's reliance on a "medical-legal history" becomes a thing of the past as abortion restrictions render his own opinion a relic; yet in fiction, women authors of

color return to the past and re-envision history in literature to imagine alternative geographies in which abortion—herbal or otherwise—is accessible.

Chapter 4

Reclaiming "Sayable" Herbal Medicine

The 1973 Supreme Court decision *Roe v. Wade* effectively legalized abortion in the United States, but even as the ink dried on that opinion, anti-abortion organizers and legislators began fighting to make abortion once again illegal. Part of this effort included the arguments introduced in the 1992 Supreme Court case *Planned Parenthood v. Casey.* Though this case is sometimes celebrated by abortion rights advocates as a reification of *Roe v. Wade*'s essential holding of the right to an abortion, this case also institutionalized the concept of the "undue burden" test, a standard that proved both useful to abortion clinics fighting abortion restrictions as well as an invitation to anti-abortion legislators to challenge the metrics of what constituted an "undue burden." As the legal landscape of abortion rights became more complicated with various attempts to limit access to abortion to push the limits of an "undue burden," activists, physicians, and everyday people had to navigate new restrictions on an ad-hoc, regional basis—a reality that effectively undermined the essential ruling of *Roe* that established a right to abortion.[329] Throughout this legal

[329] Of course, the *Roe v. Wade* decision itself established a boundary of the right to abortion as it outlined the trimester framework by which abortion could be more tightly regulated in later pregnancy. However, the various attempts to challenge the right to abortion following *Casey*'s establishment of the undue burden test offered legislators more leeway to challenge what exactly constituted such a burden, and as such, to what extent abortion restrictions could reach before constituting an "undue" burden. *Casey*'s invitation to challenge the right to abortion is evidenced in multiple restrictions, especially those that made their way to the Supreme Court like *Whole Women's Health v. Hellerstedt* (2016) and *June Medical Services v. Russo* (2020), both of which affirmed the right to abortion and

maneuvering, people continued to access abortion both within and outside of medical institutions. If the Court allowed state legislators the opportunity to restrict abortion access up to the vaguely defined standard of an "undue burden," the fact remained that people would still be forced to navigate medical restrictions in order to access abortion, and herbal abortion remained an option for these people. Yet now, with the Comstock Laws made irrelevant by the *Roe v. Wade* decision, no censorship legislation stood between people attempting to access abortion and the ability to share knowledge about abortion—herbal or otherwise. This chapter explores the herbal geographies offered by Black women authors and Chicana authors in fiction published in the immediate lead up to and aftermath of the 1992 Supreme Court decision *Planned Parenthood v. Casey,* showing how these writers used their fiction to explore the undue burdens that the state refused to recognize or could not account for in *Casey*'s new standard for abortion restrictions. Ntozake Shange, Jamaica Kincaid, Toni Morrison, and Ana Castillo imagine fictional worlds in which women's communities—operating outside of the gaze of the state—respond to these unrecognized burdens by circulating and reclaiming knowledge of herbal abortion.

While the authors discussed in the previous chapter, Marge Piercy and Octavia Butler, used science fiction to explore the possibilities of bodily autonomy in

found various restrictions imposed on abortion clinics unconstitutional (specifically for these two cases, the attempt to require that abortion providers hold hospital admitting privileges).

dystopian and utopian environments, Shange, Kincaid, Morrison, and Castillo create more realist spaces of herbal knowledge practice within novels that do not necessarily otherwise fit the expectations of the realist genre. These authors recall the herbal medicinal knowledge of various ancestors—Black women enslaved and forcibly moved to the United States, Indigenous and Chicana women whose knowledge practices were threatened by forces of colonization. The past intrudes and informs the present in each of the five texts under discussion, as imaginary spaces of herbal knowledge practice offer alternative medical practices in fiction even as the legislative conversation about abortion continued to become increasingly technological. By expanding the geography of abortion care beyond the hospital and into various settings, Shange, Kincaid, Morrison, and Castillo directly contend with undue burdens unrecognized by the state or the Court. These authors dislocate abortion from the hospital or clinic by equipping their characters with herbal medical knowledge and a connection to spiritual practices rooted in the inheritance and present-day practice of ancestral knowledge. While Piercy and Butler begin to do some of this work, their novels operate within the generic structures of speculative and science fiction.

By using a more realist style not entirely divorced from speculation, wonder, or magic, the authors discussed in this chapter disconnect abortion from the recognizable settings in which it had been imaginatively placed in the mainstream

media and the white feminist reproductive rights movement. In so doing, these authors reveal the less formally recognized obstacles that manifest in ways that overwhelmingly white institutions like the Court, lawmakers, and the medical profession could not imagine. All four authors incorporate geographies of herbal abortifacients, which suggests that the 1980s and 1990s were a particularly useful moment to imagine women characters embracing ancestral herbal medicinal practices, specifically those connected to abortion and reproductive health. Shange's novel, published about a decade before Kincaid, Morrison, and Castillo's works, demonstrates that while *Casey* opened the door for increased abortion restrictions under the guise of the undue burden test, the threat of such restrictions pressed on the American consciousness much earlier. These four authors also offer intriguing depictions of knowledge production and circulation, as each of the five novels discussed in this chapter includes scenes of women characters learning and then practicing herbal medicinal knowledge. That these novels depict not only the fact of herbal medicinal knowledge, but the practice of learning, understanding, and then assuming authority over knowledge demonstrates a pattern of making geographies of herbal abortion knowable and then "sayable." Each of the four authors discussed in this chapter offers various models of how knowledge can be gained and passed on despite the burdens that the characters face in each novel. Before I turn to these

fictional representations of herbal geographies, though, I want to contextualize the undue burden framework in the trajectory of American abortion rights.

Legislative Context of Planned Parenthood *vs.* Casey

Immediately following the *Roe v. Wade* decision, anti-abortion organizers focused on a wholesale nullification of the decision by attempting to pass an anti-abortion amendment to the Constitution. Yet as legal scholar Mary Ziegler notes, anti-abortion organizers were busy on multiple fronts. As they waited for Congress's vote on a proposed anti-abortion amendment, they focused on piecemeal, state-based abortion restrictions including informed consent, parental consent, paternal consent, mandated wait times, hospitalization requirements, and the like, tactics that found "surprising success" for anti-abortion organizers in courts and clinics across the country.[330] On a national level, they also won the Hyde Amendment in 1976, which prohibits the use of federal funds, including Medicare or Medicaid, to pay for abortions. All of these tactics made it increasingly difficult to access abortion, effectively working to create a structure in which abortion could become so inaccessible due to the restrictions and bureaucratic obstacles to render it de facto illegal. As is true of most of their attempts to restrict bodily autonomy, the Christian evangelical right was motivated towards

[330] Mary Ziegler, *Abortion and the Law in America: Roe v. Wade to the Present* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 26.

anti-abortion action in order to protect the reproductive futurity of the white body politic, potentially motivated in part by the whiteness of mainstream reproductive rights organizing as well as eugenic, racist, white supremacist attitudes towards people of color. In effect, these antiabortion restrictions had the biggest impact on low-income people and people of color.[331]

As discussed at the beginning of chapter three, the language of the "undue burden" entered the Supreme Court ledger in at least four decisions from 1976-1980, but it inspired the fascination of anti-abortion organizers in Justice Sandra Day O'Connor's dissent to the 1983 *City of Akron v. Akron Center for Reproductive Health* case.[332] O'Connor's dissent offered a wealth of rhetoric to anti-abortion organizers, rhetoric that continues to animate anti-abortion legislation passed into the present. O'Connor wrote that "abortion regulations were constitutional unless a law created an 'absolute obstacle… or severe limitation… on the abortion decision."[333] To briefly reiterate the earlier analysis, recall that O'Connor's dissent voices frustration with the *Roe* decision in light of supposed advances in medical technology: "As medical science becomes better able to provide for the separate existence of the fetus, the point of viability is moved further back toward contraception… The *Roe*

[331] J. Benshoof, "Planned Parenthood v. Casey: The impact of the new undue burden standard on reproductive health care." *JAMA* 2, no. 69 (1993): 2249.
[332] Previous cases using "undue burden" language: *Bellotti v. Baird I* (1976) and *II* (1979) regarding minors, *Maher v. Roe* (1977) and *Harris v. McRae* (1980) regarding funding (Ziegler 70).
[333] Ziegler, *Abortion and the Law in America*, 72.

framework is inherently tied to the state of medical technology that exists whenever particular legislation ensues."[334] O'Connor's dissent imagines and weaponizes a future vision of reproduction via a separate womb, a "separate existence of the fetus," reminiscent of the vision that powers Shulamith Firestone's *The Dialectic of Sex* (1970) and Marge Piercy's critical utopia *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976). While Firestone and Piercy use the vision of a separate womb to imagine reproductive freedoms, as discussed in the previous chapter, O'Connor deploys the power of medical technology regarding fetal viability within the womb of a pregnant person, privileging the fetal entity over the pregnant person in a reversal of how Firestone and Piercy treat the hypothetical separate existence of a fetus. Privileging the fetal entity is *the* argumentative tactic of anti-abortion organizers.[335] O'Connor makes it explicit here that *Roe* is tied to "medical technology," as if medical technology is an objective or clear tool. By linking abortion rights to the supposedly objective authority of medical technology, O'Connor further connects abortion law to medicine, two institutions steeped in the structural logics of white supremacist capitalist patriarchy.[336] What is crucial to understand regarding O'Connor's *Akron I* dissent in the context of this chapter is O'Connor's insistence that "the state interest in potential

[334] *City of Akron v. Akron Center for Reproductive Health,* 458.
[335] In the 2022 *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health* decision, Samuel Alito outlines yet another rhetorical shift from the rhetoric of "potential life" introduced in *Roe* and *Casey* to the specifically humanizing term "unborn human being," a rhetorical shift that marks a chilling commitment to those working towards fetal personhood legislation. *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization,* 33.
[336] bell hooks, *Feminist Theory from Margin to Center* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 19.

human life is likewise extant throughout pregnancy" as "At any stage in pregnancy, there is the potential for human life."[337] It is the state's interest, as well as the state's investment in medical technology focused on fetal viability, that powers O'Connor's support for the undue burden framework. This interest can be understood in terms of the state's interest in a white body politic, in a steady labor supply, or a more generalized conservative interest in a religiously-inflected reproductive futurity for white children.

With O'Connor's *Akron I* dissent in the ledger, and a conservative block in place on the bench a decade later, the Court amended *Roe*'s trimester framework in favor of a fetal viability framework in 1992's *Planned Parenthood of Southeastern Pennsylvania v. Casey.*[338] The *Casey* ruling is complicated, as it works in three parts: 1) *Casey* upholds the essential ruling of *Roe,* the right to abortion stemming from the Fourteenth Amendment, as *stare decisis,* or precedent 2) *Casey* rejects *Roe*'s trimester framework in favor of the fetal viability framework, in deference to the advances in supposedly objective "medical technology" and 3) *Casey* institutionalizes a more lax version of the undue burden framework than that imagined in O'Connor's *Akron I* dissent. As anti-abortion organizers and abortion rights organizers alike

[337] *City of Akron v. Akron Center for Reproductive Health,* 460.
[338] The conservative block includes: Chief Justice Rehnquist, Byron White, Antonin Scalia, Anthony Kennedy, Clarence Thomas, and Sandra Day O'Connor, with David Souter as a vote in the center. Only Harry Blackmun, who wrote the *Roe v. Wade* decision, and John Paul Stevens decided consistently for *Roe.*

noted, the *Casey* framework for the undue burden test invalidates regulations that "plac[e] a substantial obstacle in the path of a woman seeking an abortion of a nonviable fetus," a confusing, qualified, and vague ruling.[339] As Ziegler notes, *Casey* "reflected the collapse of any consensus about the facts about abortion," as various stakeholders, legislators, and justices disagreed about the definitions of what constitutes a substantial obstacle, or what exactly qualifies as a nonviable fetus.[340]

The *Roe* decision is grounded in the right to privacy protected by the Fourteenth Amendment, and while *Casey* upholds this precedent, the introduction of the undue burden framework both recognizes that there are obstacles to those seeking to exercise their right to abortion at the same time as it signals an opportunity for anti-abortion organizers to establish and exploit loopholes and other obstacles not deemed "undue" according to the new medical standards of fetal viability. *Casey* essentially invites the anti-abortion movement to prove an ever-earlier scale of fetal viability and then legislate based on new measurements by introducing abortion restrictions that prioritize fetal "heartbeat" or "pain."[341] The roots of the undue burden framework

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[339] Ziegler, *Abortion and the Law in America*, 117.
[340] Ziegler, *Abortion and the Law in America*, 119.
[341] Restrictions based on fetal "heartbeat" measure electricity, while "pain" arguments are fabricated and debunked by medical evidence. See Roni Caryn Rabin, "Abortion Opponents Hear a 'Heartbeat.' Most Experts Hear Something Else," *New York Times*, February 14, 2022. https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/14/health/abortion-heartbeat-debate.html; "State Bans on Abortion Throughout Pregnancy," *Guttmacher Institute*, June 1, 2022. https://www.guttmacher.org/state-policy/explore/state-policies-later-abortions?gclid=Cj0KCQjwwJuVBhCAARIsAOPwGAQyBwYJQ6fTbJf1ALnbeIB28pJokOEU-qRgPmD0OboBkvrpFQGWAqMaAm2pEALw_wcB.

acknowledged the significance of medical technology to abortion law; however, when it comes to abortion law, the medical establishment is anything but objective, given the American Medical Association's historical role in lobbying for the criminalization of abortion in the late nineteenth century as discussed in the first chapter. More than a century later, in the 1990s, the medical establishment remains subject to the whims and political agendas of each individual actor.

There is a difference, however, between what O'Connor and the rest of the Court viewed as an "undue burden," on the one hand, and what actually served as an obstacle to those seeking abortion care, on the other. The initial restriction that the court ruled as an undue burden in *Casey* was the state of Pennsylvania's attempted enforcement of spousal notification as a prerequisite to providing abortion. To the Court, spousal notification counted as an infringement, an "undue burden" to those seeking abortion. The spousal notification restriction—while horrifying in its own right—is only one egregious example of an undue burden. But the Court's decision on this particular restriction happens to—intentionally or not—obscure or erase the range of obstacles facing those seeking abortion care as this particular burden places abortion within the context of a marriage, and further places abortion in the context of a hospital or clinic setting. The references to medical technology and fetal viability tests reinforce the idea that pregnancy is something that doctors inform or confirm to

patients, and that abortion is something that takes place in a clinic with medical professionals.

Sayable Geographies and Cultivated Ignorances

To help understand the imaginative work of disconnecting abortion from medical technologies in late twentieth-century fiction that moved depictions of abortion from the hospital to the home, it is useful to consider the role of feminist geography and plant knowledge. Building on the discussion of Barbara Johnson's related but distinct focus on the animating power of "address," this chapter focuses on the careful negotiation of how to circulate and represent the knowledge of herbal abortifacients in fiction. It is crucial to then place feminist geography as well as the naming of plant knowledge within the colonial matrix of power. In so doing, we can further understand how the works of fiction under discussion in this chapter, which foreground forces of colonialism, settler colonialism, and racial identity, negotiate the articulation of herbal medicinal knowledge.

To further explore these concepts, Katherine McKittrick's work on Black feminist geographies is helpful, as McKittrick challenges us to recognize how, when it comes to seeing and citing space and place, "the material and the metaphorical are

inseparable yet distinct."[342] Both the material and the metaphorical depend on this moment of articulation, of saying into being. McKittrick notes that the representative power of fiction in regards to depicting imaginative spaces creates what she calls "humanly workable geographies." Part of her project is exploring the "sayability" of geographies—how geographies become expressible.[343] Given McKittrick's continued engagement with critical theorist Sylvia Wynter's questioning of the human, McKittrick brings the concept of "articulation" into a different context, that of Wynter's sociogenic principle. As described by Walter Mignolo, "The sociogenic principle is not introduced as an object of knowledge but rather as a locus of enunciation that links knowledge with decolonial subjective formations."[344] This focus on the moment of speech and representation of a self in place, in a moment of space-time, helps underscore the importance of the moments in which authors fictionally represent the moment in which knowledge is created and shared between two characters or between the text and the reader.

Considering knowledge as something produced in regards to decolonial subjective formations offers a framework to discuss Shange, Kincaid, Morrison, and Castillo's representation of knowledge both as knowledge but also in regards to how

[342] Katherine McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 12.
[343] McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds,* xviii.
[344] Walter D. Mignolo, "Sylvia Wynter: What Does it Mean to Be Human?" in *Sylvia Wynter: On Being Human as Praxis* ed. Katherine McKittrick (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), 116.

the characters in each work of fiction navigate their identities. If read in terms of Wynter's "*decolonial scientia,*" then these characters can be seen as ways to "reimagine… the links between geo-history and knowledge and between biography and knowledge."[345] Wynter's *decolonial scientia* offers a new perspective on "*scientia*" as it is imperative "for liberating the actual and future victims of knowledge"—in the context of this chapter, this liberation comes in the form of making life-saving and life-affirming knowledge of herbal abortion sayable, addressable, enunciable to both readers and characters alike.[346] These authors are not publishing recipes for how exactly to self-manage an herbal abortion, but by writing about accessible herbal abortion beyond the reach of hospital-based restrictions in their fiction, these authors offer an imaginative geography in which bodily autonomy is possible.

McKittrick's use of the term "sayable" evokes the communication of herbal abortifacients beyond just knowing the names or appearances of specific herbs as well as something that is communicated in conversation, perhaps casually or using the conventional terms of dialogue—she "said." Each of the novels discussed in this chapter include scenes in which knowledge is taught by one character to another. Each character, then, makes the knowledge of herbal abortifacients "sayable," but in

[345] Mignolo, "Sylvia Wynter," 118.
[346] Mignolo, "Sylvia Wynter," 116.

the context of specific places, the specific biographies of each character, and the specific context of the knowledge's circulation. This element of "sayability" helps us to analyze the obstacles to communicating freely about abortion that persist in depictions of herbal abortion in literature, particularly in regards to the specters of colonialism that haunt the late-twentieth-century novels discussed in this chapter and the fact that the novels discussed here represent various time periods, ranging in setting from colonial times through the 1990s. Geography and "sayability" are particularly related frameworks when tracing abortion restrictions and herbal medicine, as both are linked to communication, if not instruction or directions. In regards to geography specifically, from the initial criminalization of abortion via state-wide laws to the post-*Casey* institutionalization of the "undue burden" framework, each state, each city, each abortion fund could essentially test the limits of its region's infrastructure of abortion care. But in fiction, authors imagine geographies of accessible, usable, and effective herbal medicine, envisioning a "humanly workable geography" connected to the material landscape in the mention of specific herbs and practices of care.

McKittrick's focus on "sayability" is particularly important when read alongside the imaginative potential of herbal medicine as represented in fiction, in response to increasing abortion restrictions in the 1980s and 1990s. The authors discussed in this chapter test the limits of the sayable and rely on the reader's ability

to fill the gaps in the story by reading into the hints and suggestions of the herbal medicine at work in their fictions, even as the authors do not always name specific herbs or preparations. By courting the limits of the sayable and relying on hints and suggestions, these authors simultaneously call attention to the geographies and migrations of plant knowledge and participate in what Londa Schiebinger calls "agnotology" or "the study of ignorances" in *Plants and Empire.*[347] As noted in the introduction, Schiebinger, a historian of science, traces the cultivation and trade of plants alongside the circulation of knowledge about plants themselves in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century natural history. *Plants and Empire* focuses particular attention on abortifacients, as Schiebinger begins the book detailing how Indigenous women in the West Indies and enslaved Black women displaced from their homes by the transatlantic slave trade used plants to terminate pregnancies, and how these women kept their knowledge restricted to their own communities, leaving colonizers and bioprospecters ignorant of various plants' abortifacient properties. She also shows how Linnaeus's view of botany upheld "that the purpose of natural history was to render service to the state," not dissimilar from the way O'Connor describes reproduction in her *Akron I* dissent.[348] Schiebinger's agnotology works alongside McKittrick's analysis of the material and metaphorical importance of expressive

[347] Schiebinger, *Plants and Empire,* 7.
[348] Schiebinger, *Plants and Empire,* 7.

cultures in geography, as the related concepts of cultivated ignorance and careful sayability form the two poles of possibility for rhetorically situating herbal abortion in the following close readings. Both, too, gesture towards the ability of knowledge circulation to work against the state.

Schiebinger's historical studies locate Black and Indigenous women as practitioners and custodians of knowledge of abortifacients and herbal medicine, particularly Black women in the Caribbean.[349] While McKittrick focuses specifically on Black women's stories and artistic expressions, Schiebinger focuses more broadly on the African Diaspora, the West Indies, and Indigenous peoples of the Americas. In the context of this chapter, it's crucial to remember that the histories that characterize the racialization of Black women in the United States and the diaspora are distinct from the histories and racialization of Chicana women in the United States. Keeping these distinct histories in mind, I nonetheless want to consider how McKittrick and Schiebinger both critique the colonial matrix of power, as their work helps to frame the dynamics of how Black women writers and Chicana women writers represent herbal abortion in fiction, with attention to various historical aspects that faced the women they represent. This includes the way that women writers and practitioners cultivated the ignorance of white audiences so as to escape surveillance, but also

[349] Schiebinger, *Plants and Empire,* 7. See also Schiebinger, *The Secret Cures of Slaves: People, Plants, and Medicine in the Eighteenth-Century Atlantic World*, see chapter 2.

worked to make herbal knowledges sayable within the community to ensure that the knowledge circulated and continued. Both Black women and Chicana women faced distinct and distinctly different effects of racialization by white supremacist colonizing forces—effects described in the fiction discussed in this chapter—but women of both identity groups deployed strategies of cultivating ignorance and sayability in turn in order to protect their knowledges of herbal medicine and herbal abortion. How do these strategies become apparent in fiction of the 1990s, reimagined for contemporary audiences in fictional narratives at a moment in which abortion as a subject is no longer censored, but when the concept of "undue burdens" nonetheless newly restricted abortion access in ways that disproportionately impacted women of color? What does an analysis of strategies of cultivated ignorance and careful sayability look like across multiethnic literatures? Shange, Kincaid, Morrison, and Castillo use different narrative and formal strategies in their novels as they consider the "sayability" of herbal abortion in their novels set from colonial times to the present. These authors represent the ways in which attaining, communicating, or practicing knowledge about abortion is an obstacle to some characters, while other character cultivate an ignorance or an intentional silence in order to retain their power in the face of white supremacy. This chapter explores the tension between "sayable" abortion and cultivated ignorances, as authors explicitly name abortion and abortifacients in their fiction even as the state enacts and allows for the creation of

obstacles to abortion. Here, external censorship is no longer a concern, but these authors nonetheless rely on storytelling strategies to demonstrate the continued importance of "sayability" to abortion rights.

Pre-Casey Fictions: "Indigo Subjectivity"

Though Ntozake Shange's novel *Sassafrass, Cypress, and Indigo* was published almost a decade before the 1992 *Planned Parenthood v. Casey* decision, Shange's novel offers a useful example of how "sayable" geographies already operated amidst the push for increased abortion restrictions in the 1980s. Though *Roe* offered a brief victory for the abortion rights movements, the gains promised by the legalization of abortion began to be chipped away with the passage of abortion restrictions. Three years after *Roe* was decided, the Hyde Amendment curtailed the promise of abortion access for low-income people. The Hyde Amendment prohibits the use of Medicaid funding to cover abortion care, which severely limits access to the procedure. The Hyde Amendment is widely recognized as a racist and classist piece of legislation because, according to the Guttmacher Institute, "a disproportionate share of Black and Hispanic women are insured by Medicaid and are therefore subject to Hyde Amendment abortion restrictions."[350] The Hyde

[350] "Federal Policy Snapshot: The Hyde Amendment: A Discriminatory Ban on Insurance Coverage of Abortion." *The Guttmacher Institute*, May 2021. https://www.guttmacher.org/fact-sheet/hyde-amendment.

Amendment's limitations on abortion access for low-income earners can be read as part of a state-sponsored endeavor to disenfranchise low-income earners and people of color. The Hyde Amendment was one of the earliest, but far from the last, abortion restrictions put in place following *Roe* that resulted in a disproportionate impact on low-income earners and people of color.

Given the swift action taken to undermine the promise of *Roe*, it is unsurprising that fiction published in the 1980s critiques the inaccessibility of reproductive care. Ntozake Shange's novel *Sassafrass, Cypress, and Indigo* is an important milestone in the post-*Roe,* pre-*Casey* publishing landscape, as Shange's novel depicts the practice of midwifery and herbal medicine in the context of the home. Shange's character Indigo first learns then practices midwifery to care for her sisters. Indigo's process of gaining knowledge and becoming a practitioner offers a model of activist potential, as recognized by Alexis Pauline Gumbs's theorization of "Indigo subjectivity." Named for Shange's character, Gumbs's formulation of "Indigo subjectivity" describes an approach to Black feminist praxis that resonates with the goal of increased "sayability." Gumbs explains:

> Indigo subjectivity in Black feminist practice is our materialization of a reality, an everyday portable and shareable lived experience, that in its intent and physicality offers healing backward and forward in time and space. This means that our accountability as black feminist practitioners is not only to the

> communities of the living, but to the ancestral presence of those who have both lived earlier manifestations of the oppressions we speak out against and offered precedent for our resistance.[351]

Gumbs's description foregrounds the "intent and physicality" of a healing process that spans temporal and geographical boundaries. That Gumbs names her practice for Shange's character speaks to the facets of healing that Gumbs prioritizes, given Indigo's focus on recording recipes, cures, and practicing these treatments on those she loves. Gumbs locates Indigo's power in her ability to "materializ[e] a reality" and her ability to transcend place and time in her attention to her living loved ones and her awareness of her ancestors' histories.

Shange's novel begins from the perspective of Indigo, the youngest of the three titular sisters, as a child. Shange's depiction of Indigo's knowledge relies on an accurate representation of the plants and herbs of the American South. Gumbs foregrounds how Indigo as a character is invested in "the power to heal," a power learned from her Aunt Haydee, a practicing midwife.[352] Gumbs pays particular attention to how Shange describes Indigo's knowledge of plant medicines and her ability to communicate with ancestral spirits, evidenced in Indigo's dolls:

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[351] Alexis Pauline Gumbs, "Indigo Generations: Shange in Praxis and Being the Folk" *S&F Online,* issue 12.3-13.1, (Summer-Fall 2014): n.p.; N.b.: Gumbs does not consistently capitalize Black feminist here, and I represent her stylistic choice to reflect the original publication.
[352] Ntozake Shange, *Sassafrass, Cypress, and Indigo* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 2010), 4.

> Indigo had made every kind of friend she wanted. African dolls filled with cotton root bark, so they'd have no more slave children. Jamaican dolls in red turbans, bodies formed with comfrey leaves because they'd had to work on Caribbean and American plantations and their bodies must ache and be sore. [...] She crawled up into their arms when she was unavoidably lonely, anxious that no living black folks would talk to her the way her dolls and Aunt Haydee did.[353]

Shange endows the child Indigo with an impressive knowledge of herbal remedies and medicines, not just those that control fertility, but those plants that bring comfort and heal aches and pains. Shange calls attention to the colonial and racist legacies of racialized, sexual violence while also depicting, through Indigo's handiwork, evidence of the continued circulation of herbal knowledge. Indigo knows not only the names and uses of the plants, but also the historical contexts in which these plants were used, which suggests that she has been given a comprehensive education on these plant knowledges. Indigo is the recipient of knowledge passed down and circulated, knowledge that, in the context of other herbal abortifacients, continued to circulate freely perhaps as a result of the cultivated ignorances encouraged by previous practitioners of plant medicine. As Anissa Wardi notes, the "'make believe'

[353] Shange, *Sassafrass, Cypress, and Indigo*, 4.

world that Indigo and her dolls occupy is a metaphor for ancestral epistemology."[354] Shange's third-person narration and dialogue by Indigo's family members refer to Indigo as being born with "the South in her," even as Indigo's name, much more so than those of her sisters, refers to a plant deeply connected to the transatlantic slave trade.[355] Indigo's name and her body map a geography that is both earthly and regional to the plants available in the American South.[356]

Through her name and her herbal knowledge, Indigo represents a geography made sayable as she herself makes sayable the histories she has learned about these plants, as she imagines her dolls benefiting from her care. Indigo understands the importance of herbal geographies, as she blends the importance of geography and identity in her dolls, created so that the plant materials will speak to and attempt to heal each doll's associated historical trauma. Indigo creates her dolls with a full awareness of history, of "the South in her," of her ancestor's oppressions, and yet she creates each doll with care. This care protects her dolls from human and historical evils, but also serves as her own comfort. Indigo knows of the horrors of the slave

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[354] Anissa Wardi, "The Cartography of Memory: An Ecocritical Reading of Ntozake Shange's *Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo.*" *African American Review* 45, no. 1-2 (Spring/Summer 2012): 133.
[355] Shange, *Sassafrass, Cypress, and Indigo,*1-2.
[356] As Wardi notes, "Shange's mapmaking is a metaphysical cartography that is physically grounded in the topography of the coastal islands. Sounding the chord of place throughout the novel, Shange punctuates descriptions of Indigo with "The South in her," a refrain which underscores Indigo as a map of the South, bearing the imprint of her ancestors and the places they inhabited. Shange, situating the South as a site where the dead are animated and ancestral connections are enabled through the natural world, offers a new cartography of history and memory, an African American ecocritical mapping of the American South" (140).

episteme, but she is also armed with remedies to guard against potential harm.[357] The knowledge of these remedies cannot cure state-sanctioned violence, but it does arm Indigo as she works towards an imaginative geography of healing. By the close of the novel, Indigo uses her skills as a full-fledged midwife to aid in the birth of her sister's child. While it is not specified as to how Indigo learns about the specific plants that she uses to create her dolls, it is clear that she learns her midwifery practice from Aunt Haydee, and that her relationship to another woman, Sister Mary Louise, is rooted in her "garden of rose bushes and herbs."[358] Not only does Indigo listen to and learn from the older Black women around her, but she also records recipes in the text itself, recipes that are represented in the novel in italics and bear names like "Moon Journeys, cartography by Indigo" and "Marvelous Menstruating Moments (As Told by Indigo to Her Dolls as She Made Each and Every One of Them a Personal Menstruation Pad of Velvet)."[359] Shange demonstrates through implication (in terms of Indigo's plant-made dolls) or explicit plot detail (in regards to Indigo's midwifery training by Aunt Haydee) that Indigo gains her knowledge from her elders, and that she then records this knowledge to make her practice "sayable" and knowable, presumably to those who succeed her. Specifically, Indigo represents some of her

[357] I use the term "slave episteme" following Alys Eve Weinbaum's definition in *The Afterlife of Reproductive Slavery: Biocapitalism and Black Feminism's Philosophy of History* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019), 1.
[358] Shange, *Sassafrass, Cypress, and Indigo,* 5.
[359] Shange, *Sassafrass, Cypress, and Indigo,* 3, 16.

recipes, her directions, as "cartographies," indicating that her work is invested in making sense of the environments, the geographies, around her.

In Gumbs' outline of "Indigo Subjectivity," she foregrounds Indigo's capacity as a healer, her "blues ethic," and her unique offerings of recipes and self-healing rituals to the reader. For Gumbs, Indigo serves powerfully as a fictional model of manifesting community and healing, as Gumbs outlines in the third section of her article in which she details the community activities and "Indigo manifestations" that she has organized in Indigo's name and spirit. Indigo as a character serves as a link between traditional models of reproductive justice rooted in herbal medicine—used both to end pregnancies, like cotton root bark, and to encourage healthy and safe births of children in midwifery practices—and the potential for material, physical change in the world, as evidenced by Gumbs's work. Indigo's actions and recipes offer Gumbs not just a sayable but an actionable geography for Black feminist praxis. Gumbs' scholarship demonstrates that Indigo represents a hopeful model of reproductive justice action. In this way, we can read Gumbs' attention to Shange's novel as evidence of how Gumbs uses fictional examples to offer or make "sayable" a model of feminist action. Indigo's own knowledge work in the novel moves beyond the page, as Gumbs uses Indigo as a touchpoint in her own lessons and community work. Shange's novel, then, becomes a precursor for the kind of fictional and activist work to follow in the next decade, as abortion restrictions increased, and women

writers of color continued to offer fictional representation of herbal medicinal knowledge production.

If Indigo serves as a model for Gumbs, then what do the characters in Kincaid, Morrison, and Castillo's novels—published at increasingly difficult moments for reproductive justice—offer their readers? How do authors publishing in the 1990s present sayable geographies and court cultivated ignorances amidst a cultural and political landscape thick with the threat of variously imagined undue burdens?

Silences in Kincaid's Fiction

Writing in the 1990s, Jamaica Kincaid incorporates herbal abortifacients into her fiction and creates new geographies marked by variously imagined burdens across fictional landscapes. Yet unlike Shange's Indigo, Kincaid's characters do not offer detailed recipes; instead, Kincaid traces geographies in which the knowledge of abortion, as well as the tools used to produce it, are simply available. Yet there remains an emphasis on showing scenes in which knowledge is either passed down, or pointedly refused. Kincaid creates imaginative geographies for her characters to overcome the undue burdens they face, but she also plays with the ignorances inherited by institutions of knowledge built through colonial, white supremacist, and patriarchal forces.

In her novel *Lucy* (1990), Kincaid depicts the difficulty of accessing abortifacients in a global context, as people move to places far from the landscapes of home. Lucy, the narrator, moves from the West Indies to the United States for work. When Lucy has sex and forgets to use contraception, she muses about what will happen next:

> I did not spend the next two weeks worrying about my period. If it did not show up, there was no question in my mind that I would force it to do so. I knew how to do this… my mother had shown me which herbs to pick and boil, and what time of day to drink the potion they produced, to bring on a reluctant period. [...] The only thing now was that if I did need those herbs, they did not grow where I was and I would have to write my mother and ask her for them. That would have been hard to do; just my asking for these particular herbs would let her know exactly what I had been up to…[360]

Though Lucy does not become pregnant, her musings trace how she came about her knowledge of herbal abortion as well as a general acknowledgement of the difficulty of actualizing herbal remedies in a global context. The burden Lucy faces is not exactly one recognized by *Casey*—Lucy's obstacle is her inability to find herbs that would cause the same effect as the seemingly commonplace herbs her mother instructed her to use in her home country. Kincaid shows that even if a family

[360] Jamaica Kincaid, *Lucy* (New York: Farrar, Straus Giroux, 1990), 69-70.

circulates the knowledge of herbal remedies, knowledge alone is no failsafe against moving through the world to new geographies. Lucy knows what herbs to use, but here global capitalism and the global supply chain work as obstacles to reproductive autonomy. Recalling Schiebinger, we might ask what ignorances helped to shape the current supply chain, what herbs and plants are valued on a global scale so as to be easily available worldwide? Some ignorances have been cultivated so successfully so as to allow some plants, like the plant Lucy needs to create an abortifacient recipe, to escape the notice of capitalist exploitation and remain only in specific habitats. Alternatively, what herbs and plants are not as valued, perhaps due to the cultivated ignorance of those controlling the market, those who have been kept from knowing or who wouldn't even care to know the full nature of any given plant's powers? In both this novel and *The Autobiography of My Mother*, Kincaid plays with the multiplicity of cultivated ignorances on personal and global scales. Lucy assumed that she would be able to access the unnamed plants necessary to terminate a pregnancy, though she did not account for the fact that these plants might not be part of her geography in the United States. Tellingly, Lucy remarks that even requesting this specific plant would "let her [mother] know exactly what I had been up to," which demonstrates that the plant in question is so associated with its abortifacient properties in her mother's eyes so as to serve as a kind of code, reminiscent of the abortifacient plant codes discussed

in previous chapters. Lucy does not become pregnant, but this scene prefigures Kincaid's interest in depicting abortion in *The Autobiography of My Mother* (1996).

As Dorothy Roberts notes in *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty*, herbal abortifacients were crucial to people subject to the violences of colonization and the slave trade, as the knowledge of certain herbs and how to prepare them allowed some to avoid pregnancy in the midst of violent crisis.[361] Both Roberts and Schiebinger describe how enslaved women practiced their knowledge of herbal medicine, particularly their knowledge of herbal abortifacients, while cultivating the ignorance of white enslavers who would seek to exploit their reproduction for profit or otherwise violate their bodily autonomy. Schiebinger documents the extent to which white colonizers and enslavers sought to attain the knowledge of herbal medicine from the herbal medicine practitioners they encountered on their colonial exploits, as one white doctor went so far as to have a Caribbean woman stalked as she treated her other patients so that he might learn of her specific herbal remedies.[362] In this way, cultivated ignorance can refer to the ignorance actively cultivated in white colonizers by women practitioners of color in order to protect their continued practice of herbal medicine, both of abortion and other remedies. Yet, *The Autobiography of My Mother* also demonstrates how

[361] Dorothy Roberts, *Killing the black body: Race, reproduction, and the meaning of liberty* (New York: Vintage Books, 1999), 47.
[362] Schiebinger, *The Secret Cures of Slaves*, 48.

Xuela's dependence on the willful ignorance of a white woman she encounters can result in death, as the white woman is uninterested in learning more about Xuela's medical knowledge.

Set in Dominica, *The Autobiography of My Mother* follows the life of Xuela Claudette Richardson. Xuela's first abortion is written in fairly vague terms, obtained during a visit to a woman called Sange-Sange's house:

> She gave me a cupful of a thick black syrup to drink and then led me to a small hole in the dirt floor to lie down. For four days I lay there, my body a volcano of pain; nothing happened, and for four days after that blood flowed from between my legs slowly and steadily like an eternal spring. And then it stopped…. I was a new person then, I knew things I had not known before, I knew things that you can know only if you have been through what I had just been through.[363]

Due to Kincaid's mention of "syrup," we can infer that Xuela's abortion was an herbal abortion, and the syrup is a kind of tea or tincture that Sange-Sange brewed, most likely using herbs and plant materials. Kincaid does not give specific details about the drink, but she does represent the physical pain the herbal abortion causes Xuela, as well as the knowledge Xuela seems to earn after her abortion.

[363] Jamaica Kincaid, *The Autobiography of My Mother* (New York: Farrar, Straus Giroux, 1996), 82-3.

Xuela then uses this knowledge—both of life and of abortifacients—in a moment of intentional silence that results in the death of her lover's wife:

> It was said of me that I had poisoned my husband's first wife, but I had not; I only stood by and watched her poison herself every day and did not try to stop her. She had discovered—I had introduced the discovery to her—that the large white flowers of a most beautiful weed, when dried and brewed into a tea, created a feeling of well-being and induced pleasant hallucinations. I had become acquainted with this plant through one of my many wanderings while freeing my womb from burdens I did not want it to bear… but this plant was not otherwise useful to me because I was not in need of a feeling of well-being, I was not in need of pleasant hallucinations. Eventually her need for this tea grew stronger and stronger, and it turned her skin black before she died…[364]

By this point, near the close of the novel, Xuela has had multiple abortions, as the passage indicates. Xuela is matter-of-fact about her abortions, how she seeks knowledge of herbal abortifacients through her "wanderings" and plant encounters, and that this knowledge enables her to live out her wish to not bear children. Yet here, Xuela participates in almost the opposite dynamic of that between Mrs. Tolland and Mrs. Todd discussed in the first chapter, from Sarah Orne Jewett's nineteenth-century

[364] Kincaid, *The Autobiography of My Mother*, 207.

story “The Foreigner.” Xuela, a Dominican woman, introduces her husband’s first wife, a white woman living in the Caribbean, to a tea made with a plant Xuela had come to know in her “wanderings.” The passage suggests that Xuela uses plants as either contraception or to self-manage her abortions, though she notes that this particular white plant was not “otherwise useful” to her. In this passage, Xuela is more invested in using the language of “free[ing] [her] womb” than the specific contraceptive or abortive process that the plants provide; it is the language of “freedom” that takes precedence over medical or scientific specificity. Kincaid introduces this note of ambiguity here, but it is clear that Xuela’s “wanderings” afford her the knowledge of a great many plant properties, including which plants have contraceptive or abortifacient properties, and which serve other uses as hallucinogens or poison. Still, Xuela’s and the first wife’s needs for plant-based herbal medicines differ: Xuela uses her plant knowledge to manage her desire to not be pregnant, whether this takes the form of contraception or self-managed abortion is not entirely clear, while the first wife seeks teas that have hallucinatory properties. The first wife becomes reliant on this tea, and Xuela, in her careful introduction of the plant to the first wife, chooses not to mention any additional information about this tea or how she came to know about the plant’s powers. The first wife’s ignorance, cultivated by Xuela, proves deadly. As she dies, her skin turns black, the ultimate irony for a colonizing racist who “had lived among people whose skin was such a color for most

of her life, and for that very reason and that reason only she had despised them."[365] Xuela's silence allows the first wife to live in hallucinatory bliss before she eventually faces an ironic reckoning with her own racism. Kincaid's novel plays with the cost of knowledge, as the first wife faces consequences that Jewett did not or could not imagine for Mrs. Todd, who relied on the assumption that Mrs. Tolland communicated her plant knowledge honestly and fully.

Both Lucy and Xuela carry potent, powerful knowledge in their abilities to recognize and prepare herbal medicines. Kincaid's depiction of this knowledge communicates a traceable geography of knowledge from the West Indies to the United States, from Xuela's life in Dominica and her critique of the first wife's blissful ignorance, not to mention her lover-turned-husband's penchant for cultivating non-native plants in her native land. Lucy's movement to the United States inhibits her access to the herbal abortifacients she is familiar with, yet she does not share her knowledge with anyone other than the novel's audience. Xuela, too, remains silent, choosing not to share details of the effects of the plant that her lover's first wife uses to brew a tea such that the way in which the wife was instructed to prepare the herbs slowly kills her. In this case, the cultivated ignorance of plant knowledge literally kills, as Xuela does not communicate her full knowledge of the plants to those who arrived to her home as a colonizing force. In this way, both Lucy and Xuela contend

[365] Kincaid, *The Autobiography of My Mother*, 207.

with the discrepancies between the knowledge they gained independent or in spite of colonizing forces and the ability to practice this knowledge in colonized spaces of either the United States or the grounds of Xuela's lover-turned-husband's estate.

Kincaid uses Lucy and Xuela to offer fictional depictions of how cultivated ignorances work to the detriment and advantage, respectively, of these women characters. Both Lucy and Xuela also demonstrate how reimagining science from the perspective of *decolonial scientia* such that the biological, cultural, and social components of knowledge are considered in parallel with "the chronological line of the imperial matrix of knowledge." Their knowledge of how to self-manage abortion exists beyond the reach of Western medical knowledge and restrictions in colonial and contemporary times; this knowledge is gained specifically through a matrilineal line or self-exploration, sources that were not accorded value in institutionalized biological or medical science. Most importantly, Kincaid's works offer a fictional complement to the work of linking geo-history and knowledge, as Kincaid roots knowledge of space, place, and self in each character's attainment of knowledge about herbal abortifacients, and how this knowledge stands in implicit or explicit challenge to Western medical knowledge and the pressures to reproduce that power Western economies. Lucy and Xuela privilege their own experience of life, and their desires to live their lives as they see fit, above any narrative script that may be imposed upon them by those who they encounter throughout their journeys. The

fictional work of Lucy and Xuela's independence, armed with the knowledge of plant medicine and herbal abortifacients, offers visions of reproductive freedom that challenges the reach of the colonial state.

Cultivated Ignorances in Paradise

If Kincaid's novels concern the cultivated ignorances at work in colonial and postcolonial contexts, Toni Morrison's epic novel *Paradise* is concerned with cultivated ignorances of a town-wide scale. *Paradise*, the final entry in Morrison's "love trilogy," is entirely premised on the imaginative geography of Ruby, Oklahoma. Ruby is an all-Black town, formed by nine families and its history is guarded preciously even as it is recast and revised by its residents. On the outskirts of Ruby lies the Convent, a building that originally served as a Native American boarding school, a past that brings together the histories of settler colonialism and the movements of Black Americans in the Midwest. Yet in the novel's present of the mid-1970s, the Convent serves as a refuge and respite for a group of women. Throughout the novel, the women of the Convent feud, laugh, and attempt to heal from the wounds the world has dealt them. Women from Ruby visit the Convent, seeking to purchase some of the peppers grown in its garden, but they also inquire after herbal remedies. Though Ruby has its own midwife and herbalist, some women visit the Convent instead to escape the prying eyes of town.

Numerous critics have explored the dynamic between the Convent and the town of Ruby, most often commenting on how the misogyny of the traditional town of Ruby holds the women of the Convent at fault for any perceived immorality or wrongs in the town. The women of the Convent can be read as posing a threat to the traditional, insular town of Ruby. The disconnect between the Convent and the men of Ruby is clear from the infamous beginning of the novel, which follows men of Ruby as they arrive at the Convent and massacre the women. *Paradise* is often discussed in terms of its reproductive politics, from Heather Latimer's analysis that the novel "undermines the perceived split between black and white women during the civil-rights movement over topics like abortion," while GerShun Avilez argues that "reproduction is the lens through which nationalist thought is expressed in Morrison's investigation."[366] By that, Avilez refers to the novel's investment in the project of Ruby as a space to explore "the triangulation of nationalist impulses, anxieties about reproduction, and the politics of gender expression," particularly through the characters of Deacon (Deek) and Steward Morgan.[367] While Ruby is in and of itself a kind of imaginative geography, a geography imagined as a space of community for the settlers of the town, the imaginative pull of Ruby's promise inspires anxieties about the future in Ruby's inhabitants. Through the anxieties of the townspeople of

[366] Heather Latimer, *Reproductive Acts: Sexual Politics in North American Fiction & Film* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2013), 98; GerShun Avilez, *Radical Aesthetics and Modern Black Nationalism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2016), 109.
[367] Avilez, *Radical Aesthetics,* 109.

Ruby who are invested in the purity of the town's lineage, Morrison offers a critique of nationalism whose future is anxiously tied to the "regulation of reproductive practices."[368] This is most clearly demonstrated in the tensions between the twin brothers Deek and Steward Morgan, who descend from the original settlers of the town and as such, are invested in the continuity of their community, but their anxieties about continuity and lineage manifest in undue pressures on their children. The politics of reproduction in Ruby in its entirety are of rich interest and worth exploring at length, but for this chapter's purposes, I want to put particular pressure on the narrative opposition of Ruby and the Convent, particularly in regards to the reproductive regulation of the former and the relative reproductive freedom of the latter. I see my analysis of the novel's exploration of cultivated ignorances regarding abortion as building on existing explorations of the novel's critique of racialized and gendered spaces, and how the opposition of Ruby and the Convent work to advance Morrison's critiques.

Morrison creates parallel significations of reproduction—the town's emphasis on futurity and lineage is set against the Convent's focus on freedom rendered variously, unhinged from familial duty and rooted instead in communal duty, and in such a way that defies the boundaries of life and death making a silent, uninterpretable ancestry *almost* moot. Most critical readings of the novel in regards to

[368] Avilez, *Radical Aesthetics,* 110.

reproductive politics focus on Mavis and Arnette. Mavis, the first woman to come to Connie and Mary Magna at the Convent, arrives after fleeing her abusive family. Mavis had accidentally caused the death of her young twins, Merle and Pearl, in a tragic moment of confusion. She flees from her husband and remaining children by car, and runs out of gas near the Convent, where she stays. Given that the first book in Morrison's love trilogy is *Beloved,* readings of Mavis often compare the accidental deaths of her children to the intentional, protective killing of Beloved by Sethe in Morrison's earlier novel.[369] The two women's children die in vastly different circumstances, but Mavis and Sethe are marked by their motherlove and mother loss; both are haunted by their children.[370] When Mavis arrives at the Convent, she finds that she can hear the voices of her deceased children in the halls, and she is comforted by their presence.

The Convent's reputation for providing abortion existed before Mavis's arrival, seemingly stemming from Connie's connection to Soane Morgan, wife of Deek Morgan, one of the most prominent men in town. Soane wanted to terminate her third pregnancy and travelled to the Convent seeking Connie's assistance, though Connie refuses to help. This refusal is not based on Connie's ability, as Connie does not deny that she has the power and knowledge to be able to provide Soane an

[369] Latimer, *Reproductive Acts,* 99.
[370] Anissa Wardi, *Toni Morrison and the Natural World* (Oxford: University of Mississippi Press, 2021), 32.

abortion. Notably, Connie notes that the room in which the two talk smells of sage, an herb most commonly associated with calm and cleansing, but the plant is a member of the mint family and also known for its abortifacient properties. Despite Connie's refusal of Soane, an herb necessary to produce abortion is distinctly present in the room for the duration of this conversation.[371] What Connie says, then, is in opposition to what the women can infer is possible due to their other senses—no plant knowledge is "sayable" yet here. Connie's refusal is seemingly based on her pride, as Connie believes that Soane did not come to the Convent for an abortion, not really. Connie accuses Soane of visiting her to gloat about her pregnancy, proof of her continued sexual relationship with Deek, with whom Connie had been having an affair.[372] Later, despite Connie's refusal to help, Soane's pregnancy ended by a means unsaid in the text. In this way, Morrison, through Soane, cultivates an ignorance in her readers and in Connie. Connie's recollection of her refusal to help Soane is immediately followed by the revelation of her unease and her regret as she doubts her own recollections of how her initial encounter with Soane ended: "Did she [Soane] walk all the way home? Or was that a lie too? Was her car parked somewhere near? Or if she did walk, did nobody pick her up? Is that why she lost the baby?"[373]

[371] Riddle, *Eve's Herbs*, 25, 62.
[372] Toni Morrison, *Paradise* (New York: Plume by Penguin, 1997), 239.
[373] Morrison, *Paradise*, 240.

Connie's recollection confirms that she and the Convent were known for providing abortions, and this moment paired with Soane's earlier remembrances heavily suggests that the method by which the Convent women helped other women attain abortions was via herbal abortifacients. Connie also recalls in this moment that Soane lost her child, though she implies that Soane's pregnancy seemingly ended in an accidental manner rather than an intentional abortion. The moment in the novel in which Soane recalls her lost child, implied to be a miscarriage, comes much earlier in the novel, as she is brewing a tincture made by Connie after the two had been long-time friends:

> She wanted her tonic properly steeped before her husband returned. One of Connie's preparations lay at her fingertips, a tiny cloth bag folded into a waxed paper packet. Its contents representing the second time Connie had saved her. The first time was a terrible mistake. No, not a mistake, a sin. […] This was 1973. Her little girl–was it?–would be nineteen years old now if Soane had not gone to the Convent for the help sin always needed.[374]

Notably, Morrison includes this recollection and cryptic reference to the long-past encounter between Connie and Soane early in the novel, saving Connie's version of events until much later in the novel, in the sections of Connie's chapter quoted above. Almost one hundred pages separate Soane's early recollection and Connie's, the latter

[374] Morrison, *Paradise*, 100, 102.

of which casts doubt as to the nature of the "sin" Soane describes in this earlier scene. While the earlier scene depicts Soane brewing an herbal tincture and implying that this is the same method by which Connie "saved" her, Soane's carefully constructed version of events implies that she did in fact receive an abortion at the Convent. Additionally, Soane characterizes being saved by Connie as a "mistake" and a "sin," reevaluating her language after considering the year. Early in the novel, ignorant of Connie's version of events, the year 1973 in this context would imply that Soane's shift in perspective could have been prompted by the newly granted right to abortion in *Roe v. Wade*. Yet revisiting this passage with the knowledge of Connie's refusal, Soane's meaning here is unclear—what is the sin that Soane is referring to? Is she referring to her taunting of Connie, giving truth to how Connie views their first encounter? Or is Soane referring to the fact that she did have an abortion without Connie's help, and that she continues to cast this decision to have an abortion, particularly without Connie's help, as a sin? Or, if Soane was denied an abortion by Connie, did her pregnancy otherwise end, via miscarriage? Does Soane view a miscarriage as a sin, carrying the stigma of a lost pregnancy into the realm of religious damnation? There is never any full closure or settled version of events in the novel, so we are left to wonder at the nature and details of Soane's sin in light of the information that she continues to mourn a lost pregnancy, the nature of that loss left unspecified though Connie's refusal to provide Soane an abortion is clear at least in

Connie's version of events. The revisioning and revisiting of Soane's "sin" first in Soane's recollections and then in Connie's chapter unsettle the events of Soane's lost pregnancy even as this reinforces the reputation of the Convent as a place to access abortion care. This early scene from Soane's perspective cultivates the implication of abortion, though we learn later that if Soane did have an abortion—herbal or otherwise—it was not with Connie's help.

The space between Soane's initial recollection and Connie's chapter allows the reputation of the Convent women as abortion providers to reverberate throughout the novel, much as it settles in the minds of the residents of Ruby. This reputation simmers in the plot thread regarding Arnette's teenage pregnancy. Arnette, the daughter of the prominent Fleetwood family, becomes pregnant during a teenage love affair with K.D., member of the equally prominent Morgan family, son of the town namesake Ruby and nephew of Deek and Steward. In the same chapter that Soane establishes the reputation of the Convent as a place to seek abortion, the narrative perspective shifts to that of Soane's husband Deek, who recalls Arnette's as another mysteriously vanished pregnancy in connection to the Convent:

> Perhaps they [Deek and Steward] had made a mistake in 1970, discouraging K.D. and Fleet's daughter [Arnette]. She was pregnant but, after a short stay at that Convent, if she had it, she sure didn't have it.[375]

[375] Morrison, *Paradise*, 113.

Here, Deek reveals how Arnette's brief pregnancy appears to the town of Ruby at large. The gossip machine in Ruby only knows these brief details of the larger story, but it is enough information to burnish the reputation of the women of the Convent as abortion providers, a reputation that continues to sour as the men of the town's attitude turns on the unconventional women, armed as they are with the supposed knowledge. The men of the town's assumptions are the consequences of the ignorances that the Convent women cultivate, as the men let their imaginations create the Convent women's sins in the absence of any concrete knowledge about their lives and work.

Yet the truth of Arnette's short pregnancy is slowly revealed over the course of the novel as well, as Morrison once again reveals more information to round out the implications of earlier remarks. First, in the chapter titled "Divine," Arnette returns to the Convent on her wedding night after she marries K.D., announcing at the front door: "I'm married now… Where is he? Or was it a she?"[376] The novel skips Arnette's interaction with the Convent women, jumping to the Convent women's discussion of Arnette's motives after she had left as they explain Arnette's questions to the newest member of the Convent, Pallas. Mavis recounts the events, saying: "Long story. Came here years back. Connie delivered her baby for her. She didn't

[376] Morrison, *Paradise*, 179.

want it, though."[377] Mavis reveals that the child died after Arnette fled, and therefore Arnette did not know of the child's fate. Following this revelation the room fell silent:

> They paused then, seeing it: the turned-away face, hands covering ears so as not to hear that fresh but mournful cry. There would be no nipple, then. Nothing to put in the little mouth. No mother shoulder to snuggle against. None of them wanted to remember or know what had taken place afterward.[378]

Here, in the silent lull of the conversation, Morrison allows the readers and the newest Convent woman to imagine a scene that most of the women present remember. The truth about Arnette's experience at the Convent is not sayable to the Convent women present, to Mavis, Gigi, Seneca, and Pallas. These women let the truth about Arnette's child exist only in silence, an event that did not need to be repeated or said again due to the harm that it encompasses.

However, in Connie's chapter, we revisit the night of Arnette's earlier visit in one long, unbroken paragraph from Connie's perspective:

> Then the girl from Ruby came. […] She was not anxious, as might have been expected, but revolted by the work of her womb. A revulsion so severe it cut mind from body, and saw its flesh-producing flesh as foreign, rebellious,

[377] Morrison, *Paradise*, 179.
[378] Morrison, *Paradise*, 180.

> unnatural, diseased. Consolata could not fathom what brought on that repugnance, but there it was. […] Consolata … quieted the girl and advised her to wait her time. Told her that she was welcome to deliver there if she wanted to. […] The girl, sharp in her refusal to have the midwife attend her, waited sullenly for a week or so. Or so Consolata thought. What she did not know until labor began was that the young mother had been hitting her stomach relentlessly. […] As it was, she saw swellings and wide areas where the skin showed purple underneath, rather than silver. But the real damage was the mop handle inserted with a rapist's skill—mercilessly, repeatedly—between her legs. With the gusto and intention of a rabid male, she had tried to bash the life out of her life. And, in a way, was triumphantly successful. The five- or six-month baby revolted. […] So he was born, in a manner of speaking, too soon and fatigued by the flight. But breathing. Sort of.[379]

After hints from townspeople and the silences the Convent women keep, Morrison gives space for Connie to recall in an uninterrupted block of text the details of what had happened when Arnette visited the Convent hoping to end her pregnancy. Connie's offer to Arnette does not mention abortion, as she positions herself as a midwife, a term that keeps both the option to give birth and the option to terminate her pregnancy open to Arnette. Yet what follows is a horrific recount of a miscarriage

[379] Morrison, *Paradise*, 249-250.

brought on by Arnette's "repugnance" for her body, as Morrison uses the language of gendered violence and rape to describe Arnette's treatment of her own body. This moment, unknown to the people of Ruby but endlessly speculated about, had been imagined and narrativized by the townspeople with suppositions and stigmas of imagined abortions, yet what transpired according to Connie's memory is a teenage girl's violent revolt against her own body. Arnette sought the Convent women for an escape then, perhaps out of fear or desperation, she chose not to trust the women of the Convent with her plan or her pain regarding her pregnancy, potentially not believing in the Convent women's medical capabilities in abortion or capacity for compassion about her situation.

Connie's chapter transpires in a daze, as Morrison writes Connie's life story and includes Connie's own elaborate recollections of events from the novel that had been relayed as gossip or in brief, as Connie makes legible the stories that are otherwise allowed to exist only as suppositions or rumors. Connie's chapter speaks back to the rumors and events of the novel that are otherwise solely speculation, and we learn that the two most prominent women who have visited the Convent seeking her help did not access abortions, but lost their pregnancies in other ways. Though the townspeople of Ruby use the rumor of the Convent women as abortion providers to further stigmatize them, Connie's recollections do not read as further stigmatizing abortion so much as placing abortion on a spectrum of reproductive care. But her

chapters reveal the uses to which abortion can be imagined, as suspicious townspeople search for reasons to position their respectable town against an unruly neighbor.

Though Connie did not actually provide abortions to Soane or Arnette in these two most notable examples, other hints of herbal abortion remain throughout the novel. That these other references to abortion in *Paradise* exist on the margins of these two falsified abortion stories suggests that there are other cultivated ignorances tended to by Morrison throughout the novel, rumors and codes that were left untranslated by Connie in her chapter. Morrison never explicitly depicts abortion in the novel, but we see the women of the Convent attempting to provide reproductive care of all kinds, both in Soane and Arnette's examples but also in the care afforded to the ghosts of Mavis's dead twins, Merle and Pearl, and the birth of Pallas's child at the Convent. One of the most notable specific references to reproductive care is that Morrison mentions Lydia Pinkham's Vegetable Compound, which counted herbal abortifacients among its ingredients.[380] This mention suggests that any abortions provided at the Convent would have been herbal in nature, particularly given the tinctures and teas that Connie and the Convent women offer and/or sell to the women

[380] Lydia Pinkham's Vegetable Compound contained black cohosh, a known abortifacient. For a history of Pinkham's business, see Stage, *Female Complaints: Lydia Pinkham and the Business of Women's Medicine.* For information about Lydia Pinkham's appearances in twentieth- and twenty-first century American fiction, see Holcombe's dissertation, *Made in America: Fictions of Genetic Industry*, particularly chapter two on Louise Erdrich's novel *Tracks.*

of Ruby. These details together establish the Convent as a respite in which the townspeople could seek herbal abortion outside of Ruby's regulated reproduction, as the Convent features a garden and herbal mixtures, the materials by which abortion is provided. Yet this knowledge of herbal abortion is left as a suggestion in the novel, not made concrete or sayable in Morrison's narration nor in any of the characters' perspectives. Thus even as Morrison traces the consequences of the men of Ruby's inflated imagination regarding the Convent women's work, we as the audience are left to confront that we are in a similar position, assembling clues and rumors about what the Convent women really did.

We know from the first page of the novel that nine men from Ruby massacre the Convent women, and the rest of the novel works to unpack how we reach this point. Towards the end of the novel, the amateur town historian, Pat Best, works through potential narratives of why nine men murdered "five harmless women": "(a) because the women were impure… (b) because the women were unholy (fornicators at the least, abortionists at most) and c) because they *could.*"[381] It is in Pat's memory, after the Convent women are presumed dead, that the townspeople's knowledge of the Convent as a place to access abortion care is made explicit. Pat assembles the evidence for both the members of the town and for the readers intuiting the unsaid in the novel. What has been hinted at and implied for the entirety of the novel is named

[381] Morrison, *Paradise*, 297.

in clear terms as part of a bulleted list. Yet this knowledge, or suspected knowledge, is left outside of the town's history books—these are the narratives that Pat keeps to herself and does not share with her neighbors. The imaginative power the Convent holds over the town of Ruby, specifically over the men, is such that it is not allowed to continue, and the women are punished for whatever crimes the men imagined them to be guilty of.

Morrison published *Paradise* in 1997, post-*Casey*, yet *Paradise* is set in the early to mid-1970s, around the time of *Roe* and in between *Roe* and Hyde when abortion was briefly relatively free from any restrictions and legally accessible in the United States. *Paradise* as a novel is so concerned with how stories are told and retold, how reproductive care is administered to those who wish to become mothers and those who do not, and how we gain a higher meaning from the work we do in community. With this novel, Morrison shows, via the Convent, how a symbol of reproductive care can be punished but never killed by patriarchal forces not sanctioned by the state, burdens not recognized by any court. That Morrison writes a historical fiction epic concerning reproductive freedom set in the mid-1970s at a time in which abortion access undergoes restrictions is no accident. Though the courts attempt to restrict access in the moment of the novel's publication in the 1990s, the Convent women offer an image of reproductive freedom that existed and exists in spite of the forces that would condemn it. This is because the Convent women survive

somehow, and continue producing and sharing knowledge, working towards a kind of paradise.

Though some of the rumors in Ruby are clarified in Connie's chapter, there are stories and narrative threads in *Paradise* that remain unfulfilled. That Morrison includes Pat as the town archivist suggests an attempt to order the narrative "disorder" of *Paradise,* but some suggestions and rumors remain murky.[382] The novel asks, how do we remember that which only exists as a hint, a shadow? What happens to cultivated ignorances that are never made sayable, that remain ignorances, and exist only in allusions to herbs and tinctures like Lydia Pinkham's Vegetable Compound? Morrison's *Paradise* offers some characters like Connie the opportunity to make their experience sayable, but ultimately, Pat's archive is incomplete and the narrative in her town history is peppered with silences and gaps.

Reproductive and Environmental Justice in So Far from God

Shange, Kincaid, and Morrison's novels all engage with the stories of how knowledge of herbal abortion move and circulate in the context of the Black diaspora. From Indigo's lineage of herbal knowledge honoring the herbal medicinal practices of enslaved women, to Kincaid's depiction of Caribbean women in historical and contemporary contexts, and Morrison's depiction of spaces of reproductive freedom

[382] Avilez, *Radical Aesthetics,* 119.

that exist as respites from patriarchal reproductive control, each of these three authors grapple with the role of herbal abortifacients in the variously imagined geographies of the Black diaspora in or near the United States. The depiction of herbal abortifacients as part of imagined geographies of reproductive freedom appears throughout multiethnic literatures especially in the 1990s. Ana Castillo, a Chicana writer, offers rich depictions of Chicana women in her novels, women who experience a range of interactions with both Western medical institutions and more traditional medicinal practices from *curanderas.* In Castillo's best-known novel, *So Far from God* (1993), reproductive justice and environmental justice are intertwined, as the right to parent with dignity in a safe environment implies the right to green space and access to the natural world, free from concerns of environmental toxicity or degradation. Castillo's fiction offers a different engagement with knowledge as concerned with the links between "geo-history" and "biography" in Wynter's *decolonial scientia,* as Castillo's characters engage with a settler colonial matrix of power as Chicana women in New Mexico and practice methods of healing outside those recognized by Western medicine, subject to different contexts than characters in Shange, Kincaid, and Morrison's works who are part of the Black diaspora.[383]

[383] This is not to say that concerns regarding settler colonialism are not present from Shange, Kincaid, and especially Morrison's novel *Paradise*; this is to say that the settler colonial forces are highlighted more directly in Castillo's novel *So Far from God.*

Castillo's novels also take a more activist-oriented approach than the previous three writers under discussion. While Gumbs uses Indigo as a model for activist work in her community, Castillo's *So Far from God* traces activist developments within the plot of the novel itself. In this way, Castillo's work resonates with the specifically activist movements reproductive justice and environmental justice. Reproductive justice, specifically, is defined by Loretta Ross and Rickie Solinger in three parts: "1) the right not to have a child, 2) the right to have a child, and 3) the right to parent children in safe and healthy environments."[384] Reproductive justice responds in part to the white feminist insistence on an abortion-specific approach to reproductive rights in the late 1990s, an insistence that did not take into account a more holistic consideration of how the state and white supremacist patriarchal forces create obstacles that prevent people of color, particularly Black and brown women, from having children and parenting them with dignity. In their book-length introduction to reproductive justice, Ross and Solinger connect the three tenets of reproductive justice to environmental justice, which they define as a "racialized geography of environmental degradation."[385] How, then, does this relationship between environmental justice and reproductive justice play out in the novel's depiction of the obstacles to abortion care? Ross and Solinger's expansive understanding of the

[384] Ross and Solinger, *Reproductive Justice: An Introduction*, 9.
[385] Ross and Solinger, *Reproductive Justice: An Introduction*, 234.

obstacles to exercising the right to have a child and the right to not have a child offer a nuanced perspective to "undue burdens." Given the emphasis that Ross and Solinger place on the environment, it is clear that environmental injustice is an "undue burden" unrecognized by the courts in their initial conception of the framework. Through the stories of Sofi and her daughters, Castillo makes the realities of environmental injustice and its intersections with reproductive justice "sayable" in fiction.

Castillo's 1993 novel *So Far from God* follows Sofi and the lives and deaths of her four daughters Esperanza, Caridad, Fe, and La Loca in Tome, New Mexico. Taken together, the stories of Sofi and her daughters can be read as a commentary on the intertwined concerns of reproductive justice and environmental justice. *So Far from God* directly considers herbal medicine through the practice of *curanderas*. In her collection *Massacre of the Dreamers,* Castillo locates the use of herbal medicine in *curanderismo* as part of a lineage reaching to "Arab medical practice" in addition to the herbal medicinal practices of the Indigenous people of the Americas.[386] In her chapter on "*Brujas* and *Curanderas*: A Lived Spirituality," Castillo casts a broad context for the curandera, as she notes: "the history of curanderismo derives from ancient knowledge that spans all five continents."[387] In Theresa Delgadillo's analysis

[386] Castillo, *Massacre of the Dreamers: Essays on Xicanismo* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2014), 154.
[387] Castillo, *Massacre of the Dreamers,* 154.

of the "hybrid spiritualities" in *So Far from God*, she writes that Sofi and her four daughters are "practitioners" of these "hybrid spiritualities… [who] accept multiple forms and systems of knowledge, including the intuitive, mythical, native, psychic, folkloric, spiritual, material, and rational, as well as traditional practices and ceremonies."[388]

The youngest of Sofi's daughters, La Loca, is a central supernatural figure in the novel, as the story begins with La Loca's death and resurrection as an infant. Upon her resurrection, La Loca experiences a change in personality, preferring to never leave her home and not be touched by any person save her mother. She also takes to the company of animals rather than humans, and despite her ambivalence and avoidance of humans, she becomes a practiced healer for her family members. One of La Loca's earliest acts of healing in the novel, aside from her own miraculous resurrection, is her role as the provider of abortions for her older sister, Caridad. Caridad's abortions are described matter-of-factly:

> All in all, Caridad had three abortions. La Loca had performed each one. Their mother had only known about the first. They didn't tell anyone else about it but said to Memo and his family that Caridad had miscarried from being so upset about Memo's cheating on her… It would have been a terrible thing to

[388] Theresa Delgadillo, "Forms of Chicana Feminist Resistance: Hybrid Spirituality in Ana Castillo's *So Far From God*." *Modern Fiction Studies* 44, no. 4 (1998): 891.

> let anyone find out that La Loca had 'cured' her sister of her pregnancy, a cause for excommunication for both, not to mention that someone would have surely had La Loca arrested. A crime against man if not a sin against God."[389]

Notably, La Loca's powers are held in opposition to a God, presumably a Catholic God. La Loca, from her resurrection, is framed as part of the tradition of "woman-centered healing in opposition to the patriarchal church."[390] The specifics of how La Loca "cur[ed]" Caridad by providing abortions are never explained in further detail, though as the novel continues, we learn more about La Loca's mysterious healing abilities.

Castillo outlines traditional specialties of curanderas in *Massacre of the Dreamers,* but La Loca's specific skills of prayer and curing do not fit neatly into any one of these descriptions. La Loca can cook and prefers the care of animals, but she is not much associated with herbs and thus is not a *yerbera,* or a curandera who specializes in herbal medicines. La Loca's ability to provide abortions most closely resonates with what Castillo specifies as the *partera* tradition of curanderas who served as midwives "in times past in which doctors were not readily available."[391] In a section of the novel describing the sisters' various "dons" or "gifts," La Loca's

[389] Castillo, *So Far from God* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2005), 26-27.
[390] Delgadillo, "Forms of Chicana Feminist Resistance," 894.
[391] Castillo, *Massacre of the Dreamers,*156.

experience providing abortions to Caridad are located within her larger knowledge of medical care:

> There were the things she knew about women's bodies. She had never delivered a human baby, but she knew all about a woman's pregnancy cycle. There wasn't even a medical book around for Loca to have learned from pictures—since she didn't read very well and didn't like to. And it was she who took charge back in the days when Caridad had her untimely pregnancies…[392]

La Loca's knowledge cannot be traced through an archive or an education system; her abilities and insights seem to be a divine gift. La Loca's knowledge is specifically reproductive, rooted in her hybrid spiritualities and with implied connections to Indigenous and mystical knowledge. As she notes in her essay on curanderas, Castillo emphasizes the role of the supernatural in the healing process:

> I use the term *supernatural* loosely because supernatural implies a probable reality beyond natural forces. However, for curanderas the supernatural is a reality based on the natural forces of the universe. Another explanation is that curanderas believe that persons can cause physical and emotional illness in others by the use of personal power or with the help of noncorporeal beings.[393]

[392] Castillo, *So Far from God*, 164.
[393] Castillo, *Massacre of the Dreamers*, 155.

La Loca's healing powers seem to be an example of the supernatural working as an extension of reality, a truly super *natural* talent for bending the will of nature. La Loca's abilities are represented straightforwardly, plot points tinged with magical realism where the inexplicable happens and is accepted rather than questioned—there is no sense of cultivated ignorance, nor even of knowledges said or communicated, simply miraculous occurrences that strike at will. Miracles from La Loca become almost quotidian in Sofi's household. La Loca's knowledge about midwifery and abortion is a useful counter to the pains that women took in the nineteenth century to root their own authority within specific traditions or codes of professionalism; here, La Loca does not enjoy reading, so she does not and would never peruse medical textbooks or medical advice books like those published by Rebecca Lee Crumpler, yet she simply gains the knowledge and abilities to work her medicines.

While La Loca's knowledge of healing or midwifery seems innate or intuitive, Caridad must be taught and study her healing skills. Caridad works as a hospital orderly early in the novel, but following a deadly attack that almost kills her, she moves away from La Loca and her family to live alone. There, under the supervision of her landlady, doña Felicia, she begins her journey to becoming a curandera. Living by herself, Caridad becomes "very interested in herbs." She receives her early lessons from her landlady, doña Felicia, in the third chapter, which features one of the novel's characteristically fanciful chapter titles: "On the Subject of Doña Felicia's Remedios,

Which in and of Themselves Are Worthless without Unwavering Faith; and a Brief Sampling of Common Ailments Along with Cures Which Have Earned Our Curandera Respect and Devotion throughout War and Peace." What is particularly striking about this chapter is that doña Felicia's lessons about curanderismo are preceded by her life story, and her recipes are written not in numbered lists of steps, as in Indigo's cartographies, but via dialogue. Castillo's emphasis on doña Felicia's voice and history resonate with a key component of a reimagined *decolonial scientia* that emphasizes the role of the personal, the cultural, and the spatial as interconnected in scientific knowledge.[394] Before doña Felicia begins any lessons with Caridad, Castillo offers first insight into doña Felicia as a person, rooting her knowledge in lived experience and her identity, not attributable to Western medicine or a beneficiary of the American colonial matrix of power, but rooted in her own faith in her own definition of God and her abilities. Doña Felicia's method of curing is rooted in plants and herbs, as she tells Caridad, "Everything we need for healing is found in our natural surroundings."[395] Doña Felicia refers primarily to the herbs and her hands, "those two wrinkly instruments of ancient medical technology," as her primary tools of healing.[396] In this way, doña Felicia's medical practice is entirely bound to nature—the plants she uses, her own hands as tools, and a super*natural* faith in the

[394] Mignolo, "Sylvia Wynter," 118.
[395] Castillo, *So Far from God*, 62.
[396] Castillo, *So Far from God*, 62.

"hybrid spiritualities" that characterize Castillo's novel. As Caridad's training continues, Castillo references the names and uses of various herbs and plants in addition to methods doña Felicia used to set bones, massage muscles, and cure other ailments.[397]

Caridad incorporates methods of healing inspired by her curandera training into her own life, which contrasts from her earlier healing courtesy of La Loca's hybrid spiritual methods or the medical hospital's technological fixes following her attack. Though she was subject to advanced medical technologies in the immediate aftermath of her attack, it was not until she returned home that Caridad began to heal. Like her work as a nurse before her attack, Caridad's time in the hospital is separate from her fuller life at home, as home in the novel is the significant space of "hybrid healing practice."[398] After she begins her curandera training, for Caridad, "life became a rhythm of scented baths, tea remedies, rubdowns, and general good feeling… Her body, already externally repaired from the mutilation it had undergone, now was slowly restored internally by the psychic attentiveness she received from her teacher and which she learned to give to herself."[399] She also changes her diet:

> Her "moon" became regular by taking rue at least three days before she estimated that it was due. Te de anis she drank for anxiety and she also

[397] Castillo, *So Far from God,* 62.
[398] Delgadillo, "Forms of Chicana Feminist Resistance," 905.
[399] Castillo, *So Far from God,* 63.

> prescribed it on a regular basis for her sister Fe. Romero, the woman's herb, she also took a cup of each day.[400]

Part of doña Felicia's lessons in healing include the *yeraba* practices of herbal medicine, evidenced by Caridad's naming of specific herbs and their use as teas. Rue, anise, and rosemary ("romero" in Spanish), are all plants that can be used as abortifacients depending on how they are prepared.[401] Rue and rosemary are more widely known as abortifacients than anise, though the popularity of these plants differs depending on the region of the world. Rue is known for being used as an abortifacient in South, Central, and North America, as historian John Riddle cites scholarship linking the use of rue as an abortifacient and emmenagogue by "Spanish New Mexican people" in particular.[402] This, of course, corresponds with the location and some characters featured in Castillo's novel. Romero or rosemary is a member of the mint family, one of the most notable plant families for abortifacient properties given its members pennyroyal, parsley, and sage. Though the efficacy of each different plant in the mint family differs, all plants in the family can have "antifertility" effects.[403] Like most members of the mint family, rosemary can be taken to manage an abortion, to practice contraception, and to regulate menstruation, which seems to be how Caridad uses both romero and rue in tandem. As two plants

[400] Castillo, *So Far from God*, 64.
[401] Riddle, *Eve's Herbs,* 31, 48-49, 61-62.
[402] Riddle, *Eve's Herbs*, 50, 272 n. 54.
[403] Riddle, *Eve's Herbs*, 31, 61-62,

from different families, rue and romero have different chemical constitutions with different but not necessarily counteractive chemical agents. Caridad's herbal remedies are part of her healing process after her attack, which was implied to include sexual violence. Caridad, then, uses her newly developed healing powers to target the aspects of her body in need of the most care, using herbs that heal and serve the reproductive system.

When Caridad dies, after flying off a cliff in the Sky City of Acoma, her body is never found, though it is said that Caridad's body returned to the earth: "Just the spirit deity Tsichtinako calling loudly with a voice like wind, guiding the two women [Caridad and Esmeralda], not out toward the sun's rays or up to the clouds, but down, deep within the soft, moist dark earth where Esmeralda and Caridad would be safe and live forever."[404] Caridad and the woman she loves, Esmeralda, flee a man who stalked them to Acoma by flying off the cliff and falling safely within the earth. Caridad's work as a curandera combines the healing of both the body and the spirit, and the final moments of Caridad's story in the novel confirm that both her spirit and her body remain safe from any further harm, even after death.

Caridad's journey of healing and her relatively peaceful (as compared to her sisters) death serve as bookends to the chapter of the novel devoted to Fe's life and death. Chapter eleven, or, "The Marriage of Sofia's Faithful Daughter to her Cousin,

[404] Castillo, *So Far from God*, 211.

Casimiro, Descendent of Sheepherders and Promising Accountant, Who, By All Accounts, Was Her True Fated Love; and of Her Death, Which Lingers Among Us All Heavier than Air," tells of Fe's job at the Acme International factory, where she cleans and prepares parts of weapons to be used in the Gulf War. Fe's marriage, miscarriage, and death have received the most critical attention in scholarship on the novel. Most scholars focus on how Fe's story depicts the interconnections of environmental and reproductive injustice. Some critics pair readings of Fe's fate with that of Esperanza, who died as a prisoner of war while serving as a foreign war correspondent in Saudi Arabia, or with La Loca's inexplicable death of HIV/AIDs, inexplicable due to the fact that she maintains large distances from every human being save her mother. Some also pair Fe's death with her mother Sofi's engagement in local politics, as Sofi runs for mayor in chapter nine and later invokes Fe's memory in her activist work. Fe's death, the most straightforward of deaths especially preceding Caridad's more magical realist death within the earth, re-roots the novel in the concerns of the present moment, breaking the cloud of magical realism and possibility that her sisters' stories encourage.

Fe is the most conformist of Sofi's daughters, dreaming of her wedding day that she believes would mark her full entrance into domestic heteronormativity and its attendant emphasis on consumer culture. Fe marries Casey and prepares for a life of marital bliss, but shortly after her marriage she loses her job at the bank, where she

has worked since her graduation from high school. The bank cites her "handicap" as the reason for her termination, as Fe's vocal chords are damaged from the weeks spent screaming after her earlier breakup, yet she insists that no one has a problem understanding her.[405] Fe finds a job as an "assembler" at Acme International, and shortly after beginning this job, she experiences headaches and physical effects that she shares with her co-workers, mostly other women. After working at Acme for a number of months, Fe shares with her co-workers that she had experienced a miscarriage, and three of her co-workers tell her that they had recently had hysterectomies. As Fe spends more time at the company, she moves through various positions and encounters a chemical that she is told is "ether."[406] Yet, Fe's health seriously declines after she begins working with the "ether," as first her manicure then her fingernails fall off and she begins to smell of glue. When she visits a doctor for indigestion, she receives a dire diagnosis:

> And that is when they found out that Fe had cancer. She had cancer on the outside and all over the inside and there was no stopping it by then. But what they also found out was that before she started at Acme International, she already had skin cancer. And because she already had melanoma, what they found out from the lawyer they retained was that she would not be able to sue

[405] Castillo, *So Far from God*, 177.
[406] Castillo, *So Far from God*, 182.

> Acme International for the other cancer she had undoubtedly gotten from her chemical joyride at Acme International, which was eating her insides like acid and which no amount of Rolaids would have ever helped.[407]

The chapter moves quickly from symptom to symptom through Fe's cancer diagnosis, as Castillo relies on short sentences beginning with "And," which describe the effects of each symptom, each development in Fe's case. This list builds a long, unraveling, unending litany of difficulties. Castillo's writing style is suffocating as the symptoms continue for long stretches, which is apt, given that the fatal chemical Fe was exposed to is described as being "heavier than air," a description that Castillo highlights in the title of the chapter.

Fe's attempt to hold Acme accountable for her declining health is complicated by the company's sexism, since company officials dismiss Fe and try to scapegoat her for alleged misconduct despite having knowingly exposed her to the lethal chemical. When Fe is finally able to view a report that logs information about the chemicals Acme uses, Castillo describes her findings in a continuation of her unending list:

> And she began to read, not Fe the manicured, made-up bride of a few months before but a Fe without even the nice insides she had when she had started at Acme International, about the chemical she more than once dumped down the drain at the end of her day, which went into the sewage system and worked its

[407] Castillo, *So Far from God*, 183.

way to people's septic tanks, vegetable gardens, kitchen taps, and sun-made tea.[408]

As she reads the company's report, Fe thinks of all the domestic spaces and environments where the chemical responsible for her suffering has traveled. Castillo reminds us of Fe's commitment to the domestic space, her formerly manicured, newlywed appearance falling apart along with her body as a result of her exposure to the lethal chemicals. Stacy Alaimo reads Fe's cancer as an example of transcorporeality, or the way in which the environment works across and inside all bodies and interrelated matter.[409] It is in the report that the chemical, which Fe had been instructed to leave uncovered due to her boss's insistence that it would evaporate, is revealed to be "heavier than air," seeping not into the air, but through the sewage system into all manner of domestic environments as well as into Fe herself.

The geography of the town and regions in which Fe and her sisters live is implicated in this report, a report that articulates the environmental degradation that their family faces in the authoritative language of the federal government. In this way, their geography only becomes "sayable" to the government and those in power via the language of bureaucracy. Though Caridad knows the herbs and plants of the

[408] Castillo, *So Far from God*, 188.
[409] Alaimo, *Bodily Natures*, 72-76.

region as a result of her newly gained curandera skills, implied in her ability to harvest herbs that power her healing teas and tinctures, these plants are implicated as potentially poisoned by the chemicals that Fe, under orders, dumped down the drain at Acme. Though it is never specified if the chemical reached as far as Caridad or doña Felicia's herbs, Fe's concerns compel us to imagine this possibility. It is in Acme's report that we learn how the right to untainted environments from which to grow fresh and edible herbs—in addition to the right to live in environments free from harmful, carcinogenic chemicals, much less handle them unknowingly—is violated by the military industrial complex, and proves to be an obstacle to accessing herbal abortion not imagined by the Supreme Court, though the United States government ultimately benefits from Acme's arms manufacturing. The military and the United States government are responsible for this obstacle to environmental justice that is also an obstacle for reproductive justice in the undue burden of poison, though this potentiality could not have been imagined by the 1992 Supreme Court as they made their ruling in *Casey.*

Fe's storyline demonstrates not obstacles to abortion, but obstacles to achieving reproductive and environmental justice. And while Fe herself suffers and dies as a result of her exposure to lethal chemicals, the negligence of the company officials resulted in the chemical's further spread through Tome and New Mexico more broadly, threatening Fe's co-workers' right to reproductive justice, as they

suffer hysterectomies, as well as threatening the local environment and gardens, including gardens like Caridad's where she grows herbs to brew in her teas. The obstacles to reproductive justice outlined in Fe's storyline are not obstacles recognized by the Supreme Court, are not even recognized clearly by the mainstream environmentalists that Castillo criticizes in the chapter devoted to mourning Fe and the other "martyrs" of Tome killed because of environmental and other injustices. Though Fe's death is not explicitly linked to Caridad's abortions and curandera teachings, these points work together to present the various indignities facing those seeking to exercise their rights to full reproductive and environmental justice.

Castillo's novel depicts herbal remedies as a quotidian part of domestic spaces, even though easy access to herbal abortifacient teas is accompanied by horrific depictions of Western medicine. *So Far from God* juxtaposes traditional medicinal practices like curanderismo with the mechanized dehumanization of Western medical hospitals, but the novel also attests to the importance of environmental justice and access to green space to grow herbs for medicines in the work of reproductive justice, particularly by bookending Fe's story with Caridad's. Reading Fe and Caridad's separate but connected stories offers a constellation of obstacles that women and pregnant people face in their efforts to terminate pregnancies, carry pregnancies to term, and mother with dignity. Caridad's herbal medicinal knowledge is taught through stories and recipes communicated via

dialogue, which reveals Castillo's emphasis on the "sayable" elements of herbal medicine. Castillo makes this knowledge "sayable" through the multilingual tapestry of her novel, which slips between English and Spanish and relies heavily on Spanish terms particularly in moments depicting curanderismo. Yet despite Castillo's commitment to "sayability," the obstacles to a full spectrum of reproductive care remain.

Conclusion

The works discussed in this chapter offer various examples of characters learning and then practicing the work of herbal medicine, specifically herbal abortifacients. All five novels offer moments in which herbal abortifacients are either named or implied, moments that challenge the reader's knowledge and presuppositions regarding herbal abortions. Some herb names may be familiar, while others are not even named, but the context of abortion is clear in the moments discussed in this chapter. In this way, each of the novels court the cultivated ignorances of both the characters in the novels and the readers themselves, challenging readers to recognize a plant name, decode the euphemism being communicated, and wonder whether a plot point is realist or verging into the supernatural. Too, these novels challenge the reader's understanding of what constitutes an obstacle to reproductive care, as the obstacles that characters face are

not similar to those under discussion in the Courts. If the focus on the legal landscape of abortion rights seemed to fall away in this chapter, that is no accident, but a design of the way these authors chose to foreground the obstacles to abortion that immediately faced them within their own communities, their own families. Instead of parental consent laws, there are children who are armed with knowledge passed from their elders about the names of herbs used by their ancestors to terminate pregnancies. Instead of paternal consent laws, there are the halls of the Convent that act as a refuge even as Arnette tortures herself instead of asking for help from those with the knowledge to care for her. "Undue burdens" are not vaguely defined in these novels—they are clearly apparent as characters try to assert their rights to bodily autonomy, and the burdens that they face are those imposed by a white supremacist capitalist patriarchal state. Despite these obstacles, abortion remains remarkably accessible to the characters throughout the majority of the five novels under discussion. While each author courts and challenges the reader's ignorances of herbal abortifacients, the authors also envision worlds in which abortion care is somehow more present due to the very fact of its repetition, its explanation in dialogue from characters who teach and learn about herbal medicinal practices.

Each of the five novels, too, contend with the colonial and settler colonial matrices of power as it concerns knowledge production and circulation, as the novels foreground a circulation of knowledge based in personal biography, personal history,

and personal knowledge of space and place—all of which results in knowledge that is made "sayable" or communicated within each novel. But it is in Castillo's novel that the activist movements of reproductive justice and environmental justice are most explicitly connected, where the threat of environmental degradation, sexual violence, and the American government most clearly threaten the lives and reproductive freedoms of the novel's characters. Gumbs uses Indigo as an inspiration for her own activist praxis, but it is Castillo's story that takes up the question of activism directly as she traces four sisters' lives and deaths to underscore the various fronts by which reproductive freedoms can be threatened. For at the end of Castillo's novel, all four of the sisters—Sofi's four daughters—have died, and she claims the responsibility to build a better world in their memory. Yet once a geography of herbal abortifacients is "sayable," what does one do with these "sayable," sharable stories in a landscape where undue burdens begin to grow into more difficult obstacles, more wide-reaching restrictions, such that abortion is de facto illegal in most states? Writing for a readership that holds such "cultivated ignorances" about herbal abortion, how might authors more fully communicate the knowledge of where herbal abortifacients might be found, or how they might be used, so as to create a "sayable geography" of herbal abortion knowledge such that readers begin to challenge their own cultivated ignorances regarding reproductive access, care, and knowledge circulation? How

might the representation of self-managed herbal abortion in fiction translate, as Gumbs suggests in her reading of Indigo, into real-world action for abortion rights?

Conclusion

Shout Your Abortion: Reimagining Ecologies of Abortion Knowledge

"Before all this bullshit, we only had the herbs, mija."

As Abuela Lopez says in Kali Fajardo-Anstine's short story "All Her Names" (2016), herbs were once the primary means of abortion care "before all this bullshit"—namely, the criminalization and medicalization of abortion—forcibly relocated the procedure from the home to the hospital.[410] Abuela Lopez's conversation with her granddaughter, Alicia, comes in one of the story's flashbacks, after Alicia tells her grandmother about her medication abortion. Once Abuela Lopez "got … her temper sealed away," she poses a question to Alicia: "why didn't you ask me?" Alicia learns then that "Abuela Lopez knew what plants to use, the temperature at which to sip the tea, how many cups for how many days, how long the cramps would curl Alicia's insides, and to what extent she should expect tenderness in her breasts."[411] Fajardo-Anstine, a contemporary writer of Indigenous, Chicana, and Filipino descent, depicts Alicia's experience as she subsequently pursues her grandmother's remedy for self-managed herbal abortion in a rapidly gentrifying Denver, Colorado. Fajardo-Anstine's story outlines some of the crucial categories of knowledge necessary to manage an herbal abortion. Additionally, Fajardo-Anstine

[410] Fajardo-Anstine, *Sabrina & Corina* (New York: One World, 2020),184.
[411] Fajardo-Anstine, *Sabrina & Corina,* 188.

highlights the intimacy of abortion storytelling, as Alicia faces first her grandmother's temper and then an opportunity to inherit botanical reproductive knowledge in the same conversation. Fajardo-Anstine continues the literary tradition of representing herbal abortifacients as she also showcases the ways in which abortion storytelling can open opportunities for reclaiming familial, botanical knowledge.

Fajardo-Anstine does not include the full dialogue of Alicia sharing her abortion story with her grandmother, leaving the intricacies of her abortion story off the page. Initially, Abuela Lopez responds with anger, calling Alicia "selfish, cruel, stupid, childish."[412] Then, Abuela Lopez arms Alicia with the specific knowledge she needs to obtain the materials to self-manage an herbal abortion, should she need or want this information in the future. Abuela Lopez has since passed away in the story's present, but Alicia uses the knowledge Abuela Lopez gave her when she becomes pregnant for a second time. Fajardo-Anstine does not dwell on the circumstances of either of Alicia's pregnancies, centering the story on the ways in which Alicia obtains the materials necessary to access her abortions: first, through medication abortion pills, and second, through herbs. To terminate her second pregnancy, Alicia follows Abuela Lopez's instructions and visits a botánica to ask "for an herb called neem." [413] She speaks with an unnamed woman shopkeeper in

[412] Fajardo-Anstine, *Sabrina & Corina,* 188.
[413] Fajardo-Anstine, *Sabrina & Corina,* 185.

Spanish about the intended purpose of the herb. The woman at the shop tells Alicia in Spanish that there is no guarantee the herbs will work, and that the herbal abortion will hurt. She provides Alicia with the herbs as well as "explicit directions to steep the leaves in boiling water for half an hour."[414] Fajardo-Anstine includes the herb's name as well as specific instructions for the herb's preparations, offered by the woman shopkeeper as a kind of supplement to Abuela Lopez's initial instructions. By depicting the scene directly in the story's present, in a realist mode, without any of the codes or secrecy that cloud scenes of herbal abortion in depictions discussed in earlier chapters, Fajardo-Anstine normalizes and contextualizes Alicia's choice to self-manage an herbal abortion.

Unlike how Alicia accesses a medication abortion at a clinic, she must first be invited into the knowledge of herbal abortifacients by her grandmother before she can access the means to manage an herbal abortion, the legality of which is unremarked upon in the story and which remains fuzzy in the present moment.[415] Abuela Lopez gives Alicia the tools to make abortion "sayable" by providing Alicia the name of the abortifacient plant, instructions for its preparation, and familiarity with the botánica which supplies and sells the plant. The woman shopkeeper offers Alicia additional guidance when Abuela Lopez is no longer present to help her. Fajardo-Anstine's

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[414] Fajardo-Anstine, *Sabrina & Corina,* 185.
[415] Daena Horner, Molly Dutton-Kenny, Ember Peters, Cheré Suzette Bergeron, Amanda Jokerst. "A Place for Herbal Abortion in Clinical Herbalism." *Journal of the American Herbalists Guild* 21, no. 2 (fall 2022): 51-63. 51, 52.

choice to render Alicia's conversation at the botánica in Spanish underscores the fact that this knowledge is passed between members of a community—a local community, a linguistic community, those who can literally speak the same language and understand each other. Fajardo-Anstine's multilingual story underscores how the community members who have stewarded this knowledge engage with Alicia on their own terms. This exchange at the botánica is not a reprisal of Sarah Orne Jewett's character Mrs. Todd, who profits off of the knowledge that she gained from Mrs. Tolland, nor is this scene reminiscent of Edith Summers Kelley's *Weeds*, where the women of Scott County watching Judith Pippinger struggle to terminate her pregnancy from a distance; instead, this scene is more of a spiritual successor to Toni Morrison's *Paradise,* wherein the community of women at the Convent share knowledge in conversation and community.

Like the Convent, the botánica is a threatened space. Before making her way to the botánica, Alicia meets her former lover Michael at a bar where Michael sees "a smattering of Anglo newcomers, white kids in Carhartt hoodies and Red Wing shoes, the clothing of work they'd never known."[416] Michael disdains the "newcomers," but Alicia's relationship to Denver's gentrification is more complicated. In jest, Michael calls Alicia "my little gentrification Malinche," referring to Alicia's marriage to a white man, Gary, and their modernist home in a neighborhood where Alicia "lived

[416] Fajardo-Anstine, *Sabrina & Corina,* 182.

among them [Denver's Anglo newcomers], greeted them by name in the dog park, walked alongside their designer strollers on Saturday mornings."[417] Michael teases Alicia for her proximity to gentrification, but he also remarks wryly about what he sees as the potential benefits of gentrification. He is uneasy about the botánica, and he says that he would "be happy to see [it] close for good."[418] His ambivalent feelings about the botánica, as well as its proximity to the gentrifying bar, suggest that it is in danger of becoming a casualty of the city's new residents.

Yet, to Alicia, the botánica is more than a place to purchase herbs necessary for an herbal abortion. The botánica offers an alternative vision of medical care that treats people with dignity, an alternative that is starkly contrasted with Western medicine in the story. In another flashback, we learn that Alicia's relationship with the botánica predates her visit to acquire neem for her herbal abortion. Alicia had previously visited the botánica "over a decade" ago at Abuela Lopez's request to obtain "a list of herbs" that would allow Alicia's father to "die with dignity of mind."[419] After working in uranium mines, Alicia's father developed liver cancer, for which he was prescribed opioids. Abuela Lopez became frustrated with the medicine, as "nothing masked his agony without shutting down his brain."[420] The botánica

[417] Fajardo-Anstine, *Sabrina & Corina,* 183. Alicia's relationship to gentrification in Denver is complicated on an additional level due to her identity as a mixed race woman, whose "Anglo mother" had abandoned Alicia and her father when Alicia was a small child.
[418] Fajardo-Anstine, *Sabrina & Corina,* 183.
[419] Fajardo-Anstine, *Sabrina & Corina,* 183.
[420] Fajardo-Anstine, *Sabrina & Corina,* 183.

offers Abuela Lopez and Alicia a way to provide palliative care to Alicia's father while also offering the potential for him to die with some sense of self. Her father's illness, caused by his work in dangerous uranium mines, echoes the representation of environmental injustice in Ana Castillo's *So Far from God,* in which Fe dies of cancer caused by her on-the-clock handling of radioactive materials with minimal safety precautions. The connection between environmental and reproductive justice is evident in Fe's story, as neither she nor most of her women co-workers can carry a pregnancy to term while working at the Acme factory. In Fajardo-Anstine's story, it is the botánica that connects the threads of environmental, reproductive, and economic justice, as the botánica stocks the materials for herbal medicinal cures that offer Alicia and her father more dignity and more sense of self than Western medicine. That such a space is threatened by gentrification suggests that herbal medicinal remedies—motivated by dignity, not profit—are a casualty of late-stage white supremacist capitalism as the "Anglo newcomers" threaten the botánica's continued existence in Denver. One of the crucial elements of both reproductive justice and environmental justice is the right to parent with dignity—a right that Alicia's father is denied as he suffers an untimely death caused by the environmental risks of his workplace, while Alicia herself exercises her right to not be pregnant with materials grown from the earth. Both of Alicia's trips to the botánica demonstrate its crucial role in stewarding herbal knowledge and the materials by which to practice

herbal medicine in a rapidly changing community—knowledge that includes herbal abortion. While Michael is unsettled by the botánica and jokes about some of the products on its shelves, Alicia draws on the botánica's resources as she claims ownership over her body.

Before its inclusion as part of Fajardo-Anstine's 2019 debut collection *Sabrina & Corina,* "All Her Names" was first published in *The American Scholar* in June 2016, the same month that the Supreme Court decided *Whole Woman's Health v. Hellerstedt.* Notably, *Whole Woman's Health* reaffirmed the constitutional right to abortion outlined in *Roe* and affirmed in *Planned Parenthood v. Casey*. *Whole Woman's Health v. Hellerstedt* considered the constitutionality of statewide admitting privileges requirements for abortion providers, and the Court's ruling offered temporary relief in the fight for abortion rights in the early 2010s. *Whole Woman's Health* was a direct rebuke of two targeted restrictions on abortion providers or "TRAP" laws, legal tactics that became increasingly weaponized in the 2000s and particularly the 2010s.[421] "TRAP" laws work as part of the generalized effort to make abortion inaccessible, an effort that included threats to defund Planned Parenthood and even threats of violence targeting abortion providers, including the murder of Wichita, Kansas physician Dr. George Tiller in his church in 2009 and the mass

[421] "What are TRAP laws?" Planned Parenthood. Accessed 30 January 2023. https://www.plannedparenthoodaction.org/issues/abortion/types-attacks/trap-laws

shooting at a Colorado Springs Planned Parenthood in 2015 that resulted in the deaths of three people.

In 2015, the latest in a slew of anti-abortion attacks directed at Planned Parenthood prompted Amelia Bonow to write a Facebook post about her abortion in which she praised the abortion providers at her local Planned Parenthood in Seattle.[422] Bonow's post went viral, and writer Lindy West created the hashtag "#ShoutYourAbortion" to categorize the narratives that others shared in response to Bonow's initial post. The #ShoutYourAbortion social media movement has by now evolved into a grassroots activist organization that pivoted their agenda post-*Dobbs* to circulate information more directly regarding medication abortion pills under a mission to "elevate safe paths to access, regardless of legality." But in 2015, #ShoutYourAbortion offered a network of stories, each different from the last, that opened a space for sharing, stigma-busting, and community, focused on normalizing abortion amid anti-abortion legislative attacks. #ShoutYourAbortion popularized one genre of abortion storytelling utilizing social media. The group continues to share abortion stories, including a 2018 edited collection of stories authored in the first person, as well as the continued opportunity to add a story to the organization's

[422] Planned Parenthood's role as a target of so many anti-abortion actions in the 2000s and 2010s is worth thinking about more fully, especially in regards to its complex history and the ways in which it is often centered as a fundraising cause while local abortion funds are frequently overlooked.

website and/or social media pages, sometimes using an anonymized first-person perspective.[423]

"All Her Names" uses fiction to de-mystify the process of obtaining an herbal abortion. In the context of a short story, Fajardo-Anstine demonstrates Alicia's ability to find "safe paths to access, regardless of legality," though this access is dependent on contextualizing Alicia amidst a community in a third-person perspective rather than the first-person testimony typical of the abortion story. [424] While the first person focus of the abortion story gained momentum on social media, Fajardo-Anstine renders Alicia in the third person and leaves the details of her abortion storytelling dialogue with Abuela Lopez to the imagination. What Fajardo-Anstine prioritizes in "All Her Names" is the circulation of knowledge regarding herbal medicine, not limited to herbal abortifacients, as a way to reclaim one's dignity from the often-violent forces of Western medicine and gentrification. The literary depictions of abortion discussed thus far vary in the perspectives used, some deploying the third person while others are told in dialogue or through euphemism. Alicia chooses to pursue an herbal abortion method over a surgical or medication option, but crucially, Fajardo-Anstine does not use Alicia's later choice to denigrate or otherwise discount

[423] *Shout Your Abortion*, ed. Amelia Bonow and Emily Nokes. (Oakland: PM Press, 2018); "Abortion Stories," Shout Your Abortion. Accessed January 30, 2023. https://shoutyourabortion.com/abortion-stories/

[424] "Mission Statement" Shout Your Abortion. Accessed January 30, 2023. https://shoutyourabortion.com/about/

her earlier decision. Fajardo-Anstine's story and the stories told via #ShoutYourAbortion offer forms and templates by which people understand and engage with abortion as a normal and dignified part of life.

Though the #ShoutYourAbortion hashtag began in 2015 as a way to categorize abortion stories on social media, the concept of public abortion storytelling has a long activist history, as noted in the Introduction. #ShoutYourAbortion helped popularize the abortion story as a first-person genre on social media in the context of the 2010s attack on abortion rights, as the hashtag offered a model and a community by which people could claim their own experience directly. The hashtag also works as an invitation for the imagined audience to "shout your abortion," as it continually addresses and invites its audience as it circulates online. #ShoutYourAbortion is just one of the available options and models by which to share an abortion story that emerged in the 2010s. In 2016, Renee Bracey Sherman, a reproductive justice advocate who previously worked for the National Network of Abortion Funds, began her abortion storytelling organization, We Testify. Building on her work as a reproductive justice advocate and abortion storyteller, including her 2014 guidebook *Saying Abortion Aloud: Research and Recommendations for Sharing Your Abortion Story,* Bracey Sherman founded We Testify "to center the voices of people who've had abortions."[425] We Testify offers materials and opportunities for abortion

[425] "About" We Testify. Accessed January 30, 2023. https://www.wetestify.org/home#about

storytellers on their website, and the organization compensates cohorts of abortion storytellers for their time and contributions to practice economic justice and the valuing of "all labor—including emotional labor."[426] The name of the organization announces the power of a community of abortion storytellers in its collective "we."

Both Shout Your Abortion and We Testify utilize abortion storytelling in an endeavor to normalize abortion and center abortion storytellers, respectively, and both organizations gained momentum in advance of the *Whole Woman's Health v. Hellerstedt* decision in June 2016. [427] Notably, both medication and surgical abortion are referenced in #ShoutYourAbortion stories and by the abortion storytellers of We Testify, as these methods were nationally recognized as legal and safe methods post-*Roe* and pre-*Dobbs.* So, too, is abortion referenced as treatment for miscarriage and ectopic pregnancy. But herbal abortion, due to its relative rarity and unsettled legal status in the present moment, is not often referenced in abortion storytelling. The reasons for this can be as various as the relative rarity of herbal abortion in the present-day United States or its checkered legality. But crucially, while herbal abortifacients are relatively absent from contemporary abortion storytelling despite their consistent presence in fictional depictions of abortion, reproductive rights and justice organizations heavily utilize herbal abortifacients in their imagery.

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[426] "About" We Testify. Accessed 30 January 2023. https://www.wetestify.org/home#about
[427] Here, I use "Shout Your Abortion" to refer to the organization, rather than #ShoutYourAbortion to refer to the hashtag and its categorization of stories.

Over the course of the year 2021, as the *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization* case came before the court and it became clear that the Trump appointees would have an opportunity to revoke the constitutional right to abortion, various abortion rights and abortion storytelling organizations shifted their imagery towards the botanical.

[Figure 3] Screenshot of one of three images included in Abortion Liberation Fund's tweet announcement of its name change. Abortion Liberation Fund of PA (@abortionliberationfundpa) "new name, who dis? #abortionliberation," Twitter, November 15, 2021, https://twitter.com/abortionfundpa/status/1460277043673899010?cxt=HHwWhIC53f-O-cMoAAAA

[Figure 4] Image on homepage of Cascades Abortion Support Collective website, featuring the *Prunella vulgaris* plant (of the mint family) and identification tag noting its more common names of "all heal" or heal-all." The image also includes a CASC Abortifacient shirt "featuring a fist full of abortifacients designed by one of our most adored collective members! The shirt features eucalyptus, penny royal [sic], yarrow, and blue cohosh." "Cascades Abortion Support Collective" Cascades Abortion Support Collective, accessed January 27, 2023. https://www.cascadesabortionsupport.org/

For example, these images from the Abortion Liberation Fund of Pennsylvania (ALF-PA) and the Cascades Abortion Support Collective (CASC) utilize and name herbal abortifacients prominently in their logo and marketing materials, respectively. The first image comes from a Twitter announcement regarding the Abortion Liberation Fund's re-branding in November 2021. The abortion fund moved away from its previous name, "Women's Medical Fund," in part to move towards more gender-inclusive language and embrace the language of "liberation" in concert with movements to end white supremacy, given that the fund identifies that "all abortion

restrictions [are] rooted in white supremacy."[428] In addition to their new name, the ALF-PA also announced a new logo, explaining that the "flora" in the image are included to "[honor the] history of abortion being done by midwives & other healers through traditional medicine."[429] In January 2021, the Portland, Oregon-based CASC offered their "Abortifacient Shirt," pictured above in an image that remains on the homepage of CASC's website well after the shirt has sold out. The shirt, designed by one of the collective's members, "features eucalyptus, penny royal [sic], yarrow, and blue cohosh."[430] Though no longer offered for sale, the shirt and its logo remain a key signifier on the organization's webpage. [431] Also pictured in the CASC homepage image above is a *Prunella vulgaris* plant of the mint family—a significant plant family in regards to herbal abortion, given its notable members pennyroyal and parsley, as well as an identification tag noting its more common name "all heal," though it is also known as "heal-all" or "selfheal." The many variant common names for *Prunella vulgaris,* as well as its famous relatives, resonate with the goals of the CASC abortion fund, which, like most local abortion funds, offers "services informed by our collective belief that all people deserve safe and supportive abortion care, no

[428] Abortion Liberation Fund of PA (@abortionliberationfundpa) "new name, who dis? #abortionliberation," Twitter, November 15, 2021, https://twitter.com/abortionfundpa/status/1460277043673899010?cxt=HHwWhIC53f-O-cMoAAAA.
[429] Abortion Liberation Fund of PA (@abortionliberationfundpa) "new name, who dis? #abortionliberation,"
[430] "CASC Abortifacient Shirt" CASC Shop/Donate. Last accessed March 7, 2022. https://www.cascadesabortionsupport.org/shop/o6t2d81mlh9uoi3ns0nhlv7kmuzey0
[431] As of February 2023, almost two years after the shirt's debut, the image remains on the CASC home page.

matter what."[432] An image of the *Prunella vulgaris* also serves as CASC's logo on its other merchandise, apparently calling on the history of the herb's storied herbal medicinal legacy for holistic healing.[433]

Both AFL-PA and CASC use botanical imagery to call upon the history of herbal abortion knowledge at a moment when abortion as a constitutional right was severely threatened. AFL-PA and CASC both recognize that herbal abortion signifies a history of community-centered care, often performed by a midwife or lay healer, in which doctors and politicians could not legislate away pregnant people's reproductive freedom. AFL-PA does not depict or name a specific herbal abortifacient, but CASC's abortifacient shirt references abortifacient plants of various regional homes, ranging from pennyroyal's native regions in Europe, the Middle East, and North Africa to blue cohosh's native regions in eastern North America.[434] Consciously or not, CASC offers a global bouquet of herbal abortifacients held in the widely recognizable symbol of the raised fist, most associated with Black Power. The image calls to mind the interconnectedness of reproductive, racial, environmental, and economic justice—all of which are crucially connected in the fight for abortion rights.

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[432] "Abortion Support Services" CASC. Accessed January 30, 2023. https://www.cascadesabortionsupport.org/abortionsupport

[433] For more on *Prunella vulgaris*'s medicinal uses, see "*Prunella vulgaris*: Descriptions: Kew Species Profiles," KEW Plants of the World Online. Accessed January 30, 2023. https://powo.science.kew.org/taxon/urn:lsid:ipni.org:names:455176-1/general-information

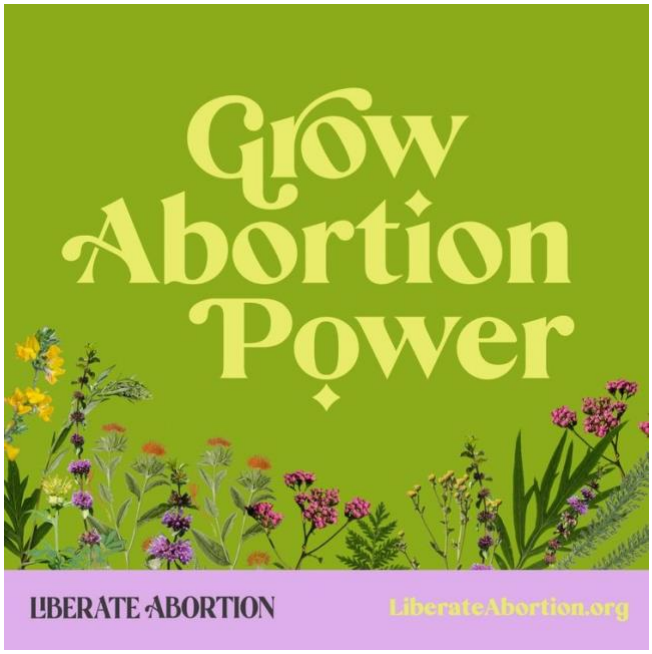
[434] "*Mentha pulegium*," KEW Plants of the World Online. Accessed January 30, 2023. https://powo.science.kew.org/taxon/urn:lsid:ipni.org:names:451022-1; "*Caulophyllum thalictroides*," The University of Texas at Austin Ladybird Johnson Wildflower Center Plant Database, January 24, 2019. Accessed January 30, 2023. https://www.wildflower.org/plants/result.php?id_plant=cath2

Both the AFL-PA and CASC draw on imagery of general and specific herbal abortifacients, respectively, in concert with language and symbols that seek to communicate the organizations' opposition to white supremacy in the fight for abortion rights. In this way, Fajardo-Anstine's suggestion that the botánica is a space of community knowledge threatened by gentrification resonates with current priorities of organizations in the fight for reproductive freedom, who increasingly turn to the concept of "reproductive justice," coined by the organizers of SisterSong and further contextualized by Loretta J. Ross as part of an effort to "[focus] on the role of colonialism and white supremacy in determining reproductive destinies."[435]

In addition to the central role of herbal abortifacient imagery in the materials used by local abortion funds, herbal abortifacients are also heavily featured in national campaigns for abortion rights. Pennyroyal's signature purple blooms along a thin stalk as well as the yellow sprays of rue and yellow bulbs of tansy are among the plants included in the marketing campaign for Liberate Abortion, "an effort comprised of more than 150 reproductive justice and rights organizations, groups, and abortion providers working in coalition to fight for abortion that is available, affordable, accessible, and stigma-free for anyone who needs it."[436] The various taglines that Liberate Abortion utilizes in its freely available graphics include familiar

[435] Ross and Solinger *Reproductive Justice: An Introduction,* 2.
[436] "About." Liberate Abortion. Accessed February 19, 2023. https://www.liberateabortion.org/about

sentiments in the fight for reproductive freedom, but it also features the phrase "Grow Abortion Power," explicitly invoking the imagery of the natural world in the fight for abortion rights. That Liberate Abortion's graphics featuring the "Grow Abortion Power" slogan also incorporate images of known, recognizable abortifacients underscores the organization's awareness of the history of abortion as a practice rooted in herbal medicine as well as the popular interest in herbal medicinal recipes and herbal abortion. Yet to an unwitting observer, Liberate Abortion appears to be using any array of plants. Liberate Abortion does not include any explanation or index of the plants used in its graphics—only those with the ability to identify these plants by their appearance are welcomed into their signification as abortifacients. In this way, Liberate Abortion invites those interested in the fight for abortion rights to learn more about the plants that feature so heavily in the long history of abortion rights by presenting a number of herbal abortifacients in their graphics and allowing curious observers to do the work of discovering just which plants are represented and why.



[Figure 5] A downloadable graphic on the "Graphics for Social" page. "Graphics for Social" screenshot, Liberate Abortion, accessed January 27, 2023, https://www.liberateabortion.org/graphics. The long stalk of purple blooms (prominently as the third and fifth plants from left) is pennyroyal; rue appears to be the fifth plant from right as a small spray with yellow blooms.

Despite Liberate Abortion's clear invocation of herbal abortion and herbal abortifacients in its graphics, herbal abortion sits uneasily as part of public testimony and activist-oriented abortion storytelling. While we can read Liberate Abortion's inclusion of herbal abortifacients in image if not name as an invitation for viewers and interested observers to follow their curiosity, a more paranoid reading of the advertisements would be that Liberate Abortion does not want to include the names of specific herbal abortifacients in this time of crisis for abortion access. For a national umbrella organization fighting for abortion access to name herbal

abortifacients could invite legal liabilities or at least confusion in some desperate moments. Though herbal abortifacients are a potent and enduring symbol of resistance, hope, and defiance, the practice of herbal abortion "exist[s] at the unfortunate intersection of social stigma and criminalization," as noted by a collective of American herbalists writing about herbal abortion post-*Dobbs.*[437] Without the proper support and knowledge, herbal abortion can be toxic and deadly. Given the chaos, desperation, and uncertainty in the wake of the *Dobbs* decision, there persists a real fear that pregnant people could turn to herbal abortions without proper knowledge and support and accidentally harm themselves. Such fears were covered in the mainstream press, including the *New York Times'* report on trending TikTok videos that named various herbal abortifacients but did not supply any further information, creating a misinformation web that could have led to some people seeking these herbs in desperation and becoming seriously injured. Interestingly, by referring to these plants—pennyroyal, mugwort, parsley—by name only, the TikTok videos echo the nineteenth-century advertisements that utilized plant names to code the nature of their products. However, in nineteenth-century advertising, these plant names work as code to communicate the abortive nature of pills, tinctures, and teas—products already made and supplied that may or may not have contained the actual essences of these plants. Nineteenth-century advertisers sought to sell a product and

[437] Horner et al,"A Place for Herbal Abortion in Clinical Herbalism," 51.

make a profit—they were not encouraging individuals to identify, forage, collect, and prepare plants of their own accord (though the safety and efficacy of these medicines remain in question to some degree). In fiction, these plant names work as code, symbol, and plot device for readers to imagine the full use of these herbs in the context of the plot and the contemporaneous scenes represented therein. Yet occasionally, we see the potential danger of using herbal abortifacients when recognized only by name—recall that Judith Pippinger accidentally briefly poisons herself after using pennyroyal without fully understanding how to prepare or ingest the herb. In the present moment, references to herbal abortifacients circulate in TikToks with stunningly less context and more danger to a susceptible, desperate, and scared audience.[438]

The post-*Dobbs* TikToks referencing herbal abortifacients without context or warning are a nightmare scenario of the circulation and production of herbal medicinal knowledge in the present, one that sits compellingly adjacent to the reclamation of histories of herbal abortion practice by reproductive freedom organizations. As noted in an article for the *Journal of the American Herbalists Guild*

[438] It is worth considering how knowledge regarding herbal abortion on TikTok and Instagram work adjacent to the general "wellness" movement, which prizes Goop-ified remedies, diuretic teas, and other dangerous products misleadingly labeled "organic"—a trend in products considered more "natural" and therefore healthier. The depictions of herbal abortifacients in fiction rarely idealize herbal abortion as more "natural" or healthy—often, herbal abortion is the only or the first method available to characters, with the exception of Alicia who chooses to pursue herbal abortion for her second abortion but who does not idealize herbal abortion as somehow more "natural" and therefore better.

co-authored by a group of herbalists and nurses, the stigma and fear of herbal abortions in the United States can be connected to the lack of "support and knowledge as to safe and effective practices" and "continued criminalization of non-clinical abortions in the United States."[439] These authors describe the continued stigma and fear as frustrating given "the global practice of herbal abortion [and] its larger context in society."[440] The authors note that in the wake of *Dobbs,* "sweeping statements by herbalists… members of mainstream media… along with social media platforms… have perpetuated stigma and fear of herbal abortions," though the perpetuation of stigmas and fears seem to be more connected to the circulation of plant names without a fuller context of the history, risks, and correct preparations of herbal abortion.

What seems to be missing in this conversation, as alarmed journalists, concerned herbalists, and opportunistic influencers speak past one another is the fact that any threat to any method of abortion access can result in stigmatizing language. Herbal abortion is not a more "natural" option to terminate a pregnancy than medication or surgical abortion, nor is it the answer to the revocation of *Roe v. Wade.* As this dissertation has explored, herbal abortifacients work as symbols of reproductive freedom throughout literary history, but the efficacy of this symbol

[439] Horner et al,"A Place for Herbal Abortion in Clinical Herbalism," 52, 53.
[440] Horner et al,"A Place for Herbal Abortion in Clinical Herbalism," 52.

waxes and wanes in conversation with wider social contexts and emerging medical technologies. As the birth control movement gained momentum in the early twentieth century, authors depicted the fallibility of attempting herbal abortion without a full understanding of the herbs or its preparations alongside equally dangerous methods like criminalized surgical abortion. Herbal medicine signifies at the margins of speculative fiction novels published in the years preceding and in the immediate wake of *Roe v. Wade,* indicating the lure of herbal medicine's symbology and the fact that it remained a potent signifier even amidst the promise of accessible surgical abortion. And as access to abortion in clinical and medical contexts once again eroded in the last decades of the twentieth century, authors returned to the symbolic potential of herbal abortifacients and plant knowledge to demonstrate alternatives to a Western medical system that dehumanizes women, poor people, and people of color. It is inevitable that the history of herbal abortion remerges amidst the latest threat to abortion access, as dozens of states once again criminalize abortion.

As noted by legal scholars Michelle Goodwin and Mary Zeigler, "abortion access has everything to do with access to information."[441] In the post-*Dobbs* context of "zombie" Comstock Laws and renewed attempts to gag, censor, or otherwise limit the amount of information regarding abortion and reproductive health made available

[441] Michelle Goodwin and Mary Zeigler, "The Next Anti-Abortion Tactic: Attacking the Spread of Information." *New York Times* December 3, 2022, Accessed February 19, 2023. https://www.nytimes.com/2022/12/03/opinion/abortion-first-amendment-free-speech.html

to patients and the public alike, herbal abortifacients serve as a symbol of reclaimed knowledge and resistance against white supremacist patriarchal oppression.[442] These plants continue to operate in fiction today amidst the new reality in which abortion is once again a crime in some parts of America. While practitioners of herbal medicine continue to develop and hone their skillset regarding the use of these plants, in our present moment, the symbolic importance of the plants themselves has gradually overwhelmed the full context of these plants as grown, cultivated, and harvested in a specific context. As the potency of the herbal abortifacient as a symbol reaches a new height—from its continued reference in literature, to its use in marketing imagery for reproductive freedom organizations—the vast majority of the American public is unaware of the plant knowledge necessary to handle these plants safely. In this way, herbal abortifacients in the United States now serve primarily as a symbol in image or in fiction. What does it mean for these symbols of resistance to become disassociated from their original use, even as the very use of these plants as symbols of resistance depends on a long and storied history of their practical use?

Given that herbal abortion is rarely the topic of abortion storytelling in its deployment as an activist genre, it is useful to consider the ways in which herbal

[442] "Zombie" language indebted to Jacqueline Antonovich's Twitter thread, September 24, 2022; Laurel White, "A 172-year old law could go back into effect in Wisconsin." *Wisconsin Public Radio*, December 1, 2021 https://www.wpr.org/172-year-old-abortion-law-could-go-back-effect-wisconsin ; Melissa Gira Grant, "A Forgotten 1990s Law Could Make It Illegal to Discuss Abortion Online." *The New Republic.* August 1, 2022. https://newrepublic.com/article/167178/1990s-law-abortion-online-illegal-cda

abortifacients continue to serve as important signifiers even though the specifics of herbal abortion as a practice are not a mainstream priority for abortion rights organizations. Herbal abortifacients as plants remain a strategic narrative and symbolic tool. Organizers, artists, and writers alike embrace the strategic essentialism of the natural world inherent in the herbal abortifacients—if herbal abortifacients, as plants, have the power and potential to effect an abortion, then rhetorically, how can one argue that abortion is "unnatural?" This embrace of herbal abortifacients as symbol subverts the example I used to begin this project, from Ruth Ozeki's *All Over Creation.* If plants have "a right to life," as conservative anti-abortion farmer Lloyd Fuller believes, then what does it mean for plants to exist that help people access abortion, given their medicinal properties?

This very logic is at the heart of the *pañuelo verde,* or the green bandana that has become the symbol of abortion rights for groups in Argentina including Catholics for the Right to Decide and the National Campaign for Safe, Free, and Legal Abortion.[443] Marta Alanis of Catholics for the Right to Decide explains that green, as "the color of nature," "signifies life and we're confronted by a sector that calls itself

[443] Samantha Schmidt, "How green became the color of abortion rights." *Washington Post,* July 3, 2022. https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/interactive/2022/abortion-green-roe-wade-argentina/. María Antonieta Alcalde, Mariela Belski, and Paula Avila-Guillen. "Passing the Green Torch to Our Sisters: How the Green Wave Took Over the U.S." *Ms.* July 11, 2022. https://msmagazine.com/2022/07/11/green-wave-latin-america-marea-verde-roe-v-wade/. The concept of the bandana was originally inspired by the Mothers of the Plaza del Maya, a group in Argentina who used white cloth in their protests.

pro-life and robs us of the word."[444] The green bandanas have been used in protests for abortion rights across the Americas, including Chile, Colombia, Brazil, and Peru, as well as in Mexico and the United States. Just as the herbalists and midwives writing for the *Journal of American Herbalists Guild* call attention to the use of herbal abortion across the globe, so too is the connection between the natural world and reproductive freedom a global phenomenon.

Whether the global embrace of the "Green Wave" and its strategic connection between reproductive freedom and the natural world will lead to an embrace of herbal abortion as a procedure is unclear. But what is clear is the enduring importance and popularity of the symbolic potential of herbal abortifacients and plant knowledge to the fight for abortion rights and reproductive freedom. As symbols, herbal abortifacients communicate a long history of defiance and community knowledge. As plants, herbal abortifacients depend on the environment of the natural world for a place to grow and thrive. Used in fiction, advertisements, marketing imagery, or medicines, the plant names of herbal abortifacients gesture to an ecosystem of alternative care even as we continue to navigate hostile legal landscapes in which the right to not be pregnant and the right to parent with dignity are increasingly curtailed in the name of "life." The deployment of herbal abortifacient names and images in the

[444] Leila Miller, "How the green bandana became the symbol of the abortion rights movement." *Los Angeles Times*. June 30, 2022. https://www.latimes.com/world-nation/story/2022-06-30/la-fg-latin-america-green-bandana

United States can be read in conversation with legal attempts to censor and limit access to information about abortion access, as plant names and knowledges have continued to be depicted in fiction from the nineteenth century to the present. Yet as we navigate a new chapter in the fight for abortion rights as connected to the movements for reproductive, environmental, economic, and racial justice, the genres of abortion storytelling in the public sphere have shifted to capitalize on forms unique to social media.

Despite the relative absence of herbal abortion in abortion storytelling as an activist genre, the iconography of botanical knowledge and codes gained new life in visual symbols in the early twenty-first century. The utility of the visual signifier means that such icons translate across the globe, speaking to the global nature of the fight for reproductive freedom. The green bandana and the purple sprig of pennyroyal speak to one another across countries, across time, and beyond language to point to the enduring connection between the rights to environmental and reproductive justice, movements that depend on the belief in a person's right to experience the world with autonomy and dignity. While plant names and knowledges have a long literary history as codes, signifiers, and symbols, it remains to be seen how herbal abortifacients in literature of and about the present post-*Dobbs* moment will work in conversation with the increasingly central role of herbal abortifacients and the natural world as visual signifiers in global activist movements. It is clear, though, that herbal

abortifacients in written and visual forms remain a consistent narrative tool in the fight for reproductive freedom.

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