

## Abortion in the African-American Community:

### *Sociological Data and Literary Examples*

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As any English professor would, I have used several major works by African-American authors in the sixteen years that I have taught and facilitated courses for a variety of colleges and universities. While discussing multicultural works is now standard practice in academia, my particular research interest has always been how the right-to-life issues of abortion, infanticide, and euthanasia are portrayed in American literature. Combining these two statements has resulted in the following admittedly brief paper which I presented before the Fourth Annual Annie T. Thornton Women's Leadership Conference held at the University of Dayton on 5 March 2005. Hopefully, this exploration of how African-American literature considers abortion will be interesting, especially when we first investigate what sociological studies have to say about the extremely high abortion rate among African-American mothers.

### Sociological Data on African-American Abortions

That the abortion rate for African-American women is significantly higher than the rates for other ethnic groups is clear. Over the years 1972-2000, according to the *Statistical Abstract of the United States*, the rate of abortions for white mothers in 1972 was 11.8 per 1000, increasing to the highest rate in 1980 and 1981 of 24.3 per 1000. Since then the rate has dropped so that it was 15 per 1000 in 2000. For African-American and "other" mothers, however (the *Statistical Abstract* labels the category "Black and other"), the rate was 21.7 per 1000 in 1972. It swelled to 49.3 per 1000 in 1975, a few years after 1973 when abortion was legalized throughout the entire nine months of pregnancy by the Roe v. Wade and Doe v. Bolton decisions. The rate peaked in 1977 at 59 per 1000. Although it has dropped since then, the abortion rate for African-American and "other" mothers was 45.7 per 1000 as of 2000. These figures corroborate the popular perception -- "popular" in the sense that it is an axiom of common knowledge in contemporary society -- that the abortion rate for African-American mothers being three times that of white mothers is highly probable. The trend is further illustrated in a companion table in the *Statistical Abstract* covering abortion data from 1990 to 2000. The number of abortions performed on white mothers dropped from 1,039,000 to 733,000 while the number of abortions for "black and other" mothers increased from 570,000 to 580,000.

These statistics are not new. In his 1987 monograph *Aborted Women: Silent No More* David C. Reardon writes that "More than two-thirds of all abortions are done on white women. But the remaining one-third which are performed on non-white women is a comparatively high figure, since non-whites constitute only about 13 percent of the total American population" (5-6). Of course, though, this was said before the most recent census showed that Hispanics are now the largest ethnic group in the United States. Radha Jagannathan, a researcher who studied surveys of 1,236 welfare mothers who requested abortions in New Jersey in 1995, discovered that "White women reported about 71% of their actual abortions, whereas Black women reported only 24% of their actual abortions" (1827). If this statistic can be extrapolated throughout the country, then the African-American abortion rate is substantially higher than is commonly known.

Janet L. Andrews and Joyceen S. Boyle record the familiar statistic -- "currently the abortion rate for African American women is more than three times the rate of abortion for European American women" (430) -- and cite research conducted in 2002 by the Alan Guttmacher Institute, the research arm of the largest abortion provider in the nation, Planned Parenthood. The National Right to Life Educational Trust Fund succinctly supplies abortion figures for both the African-American and Hispanic ethnic groups. In a flyer titled "Abortion's Impact on Minorities" the group notes that 263,911 abortions were performed in 2000 on Hispanic-American women, who "represented 12.8% of the U.S. population of women of child-bearing age" but "accounted for 20.1% of all abortions performed that year". Similarly, 416,218 abortions were performed in 2000 on African-American women, who "represented 13.7% of the U.S. population of women of child-bearing age" but "accounted for 31.7% of all abortions performed that year". The group cites the census Bureau and the Alan Guttmacher Institute as sources for these race-based statistics.

Research from 2000 published by Scott Boggess and Carolyn Bradner suggest that it is not only the mothers themselves who have increasingly chosen abortion. Apparently, African-American adolescent males are running counter to a national trend. The researchers discovered that young males in 1995 were significantly less likely than their 1988 counterparts to approve of abortion [in seven circumstances which constitute their surveys....] By 1995, however, black males appeared to be slightly more accepting of abortion in most circumstances than either whites or Hispanics, with racial and ethnic differences tending to be larger if the abortion was for a social reason as opposed to a health reason. (120-1)

Current primary research data since 2000 suggests the same. Andrews and Boyle obtained some significant data and opinions about abortion for their 2002 research from African-American adolescents who chose abortion at an Atlanta abortion clinic. Although they admit that the survey sample had drawbacks (the survey population involved twelve aborting mothers in one city [430]), the researchers came to several important conclusions, encapsulated in their language that "this study helped to dispel [... the] persuasive myths about African American adolescents and pregnancy" (430).

The first myth is that African-American adolescents "continue their unplanned pregnancies and raise the children from those pregnancies with their mothers' or their grandmothers' help". Andrews and Boyle euphemistically counter that "African American women may choose not to become mothers because they want to pursue an education and economic independence" (430). The researchers discuss a second "controlling image [... that young women suffer psychological damage as a result of elective abortion (431). Unfortunately, the researchers conducted second and third interviews of the aborted women "6 and 8 months after the elective abortion" (414). It would be no surprise then, that the researchers report that "relief was the most common reaction at the

second and third interviews" (431). Reardon and others have contributed significant research about Post-Abortion Syndrome, suggesting that severe psychological problems may occur years after the abortion.

The third and final controlling image which the researchers dispel is that African-American mothers base their abortion decisions "on what their partners want them to do" (431). In contrast, they say, the African-American mothers aborted because they found abortion to be a vehicle for asserting "their own fertility" and that "their decisions for abortion and continuing the relationship with their partners in conception were separate albeit related" (431). What affect does their research have on abortion policy for African-American mothers? Andrews and Boyle conclude that "unplanned pregnancy and elective abortion can be a positive, growth-enhancing experience for African American adolescent women" (432).

Primary research has much to say about why African-American mothers abort, and secondary research data has similarly documented and commented on this phenomenon over the past forty years. We are fortunate that in this metropolitan area we have special interest groups which are exploring the phenomenon of the high African-American abortion rate and are seeking to educate the public about causes of the problem and opportunities to solve it. For example, Dayton Right to Life has collated seminal research on this matter in its effort to educate the public on the threat of Planned Parenthood abortion efforts in the African-American community. Dayton Right to Life's research was conducted in collaboration with another research institution at the University of Dayton (The Center for Business and Economic Research) in collaboration with two other agencies. Here are some conclusions which my audience found either worthy of comment or shocking:

*[While] African Americans appear to be somewhat more pro-life than the population as a whole, the Dayton Right to Life [...] study found that opinions on abortion (whether pro or con) tend to be very "soft" and easily shifted [...] For some African Americans, the right to an abortion is viewed in the broader context of a "civil right" as opposed to a "personal right" [...] Abortion is viewed by many African Americans as a "white problem" – particularly among men [...] The Black Church has grown very silent on the abortion issue. In one long-term study, we found that in the 1970's, church attendance was cited as a primary determinant of a pro-life position. By the 1990's, this factor had virtually disappeared. ("Abortion Attitudes")<sup>1</sup>*

Researching this problem has primarily been the province of special interest groups and abortion activists. For example, the correlation of abortion and slavery had been made earlier by Jack Willke in his 1984 monograph *Abortion and Slavery: History Repeats*. However, recent holocaust studies scholars have argued that the persistence of abortion as a solution for untimely pregnancies in the African-American community may be attributed to pre-emancipation attitudes. William Brennan cogently argues in his 1995 monograph *Dehumanizing the Vulnerable: When Word Games Take Lives* that African-American slaves during the nineteenth century in the United States were dehumanized in a variety of "work animal" metaphors (95). "Removal of individuals from membership in the human community and re-classifying them as animals," Brennan further suggests, "has the effect of consigning them to a lower level of existence where their victimization can be more easily rationalized" (89).

Whether this history tendency forms the basis of current African-American thinking on abortion or not, the African-American community is becoming more supportive of abortion. In 1993 research Janice Westlund Bryan and Florence Wallach Freed were able to claim that "Blacks and Hispanics [were] more anti-abortion than Caucasians...." (1-2). By 2002, when they offered their research on attitudes toward abortion covering the period 1977 through 1996, Jennifer Strickler and Nicholas L. Danigelis were able to state that from 1987 onward "blacks [were] more approving of abortion than [were] whites" (197). Moreover,

*An examination of change [...] between the first and last time periods [1977-80 and 1993-96 respectively] reveals [that] the change in race effect is statistically significant [...], showing that blacks become more approving of abortion than do whites during this time period [...] Perhaps most striking is the change in the black-white differences. By the mid-1990s, black adults had become more supportive of legal abortion than their white counterparts, after controlling for other factors. This pattern is consistent with other research that found the racial gap in abortion attitudes to narrow during the 1970s and 1980s. (197, 198-9)*

## Literary Examples of African Americans and Abortion

What do literary examples say about the abortion experience in the African-American community? More importantly for this brief study of African-American literature which concerns abortion, what literary evidence is there which may either support or oppose the findings of the sociological data?

Abortion is a relatively new theme in African-American literature. Gwendolyn Brooks' 1945 poem "The Mother" is perhaps the first poetic literary evidence of post-abortion syndrome. Several lines of the poem, if weaved together, constitute the complaint of the aborted mother. "Abortions will not let you forget / [...] I have heard in the voices of the wind the voices of my dim killed children / [...] Believe me, I loved you all. / Believe me, I knew you, though faintly, and I loved, I loved you / All" (430) -- all of these lines form a narrative that shows the anguish of the African-American mother who has chosen to abort.

James Baldwin offers two works, one of which specifically mentions abortion and the other suggests the philosophical ground for the negative approach toward life. In his 1952 novel *Go Tell It on the Mountain* Baldwin offers an interesting speculation: would Gabriel have wanted Elizabeth, his second wife, to have aborted her illegitimate child John (143-4)? Secondly, in *The Fire Next Time* (1963) Baldwin declares that African Americans were taught that they were not worthy of life.

Lorraine Hansberry's 1959 drama *A Raisin in the Sun* is the first major literary work to suggest abortion as a solution to an untimely pregnancy. The word "abortion" is never mentioned explicitly, but the audience is aware that Ruth is seeking an abortionist. Hansberry makes that clear when she has Mama explicitly state what this important subplot of the drama is about. In Act II, scene i, Mama exclaims,

*"I – I just seen my family falling apart today...just falling to pieces in front of my eyes.... We couldn't of gone on like we was today. We was going backwards 'stead of forwards – talking 'bout killing babies and wishing each other was dead..." (80)*

What is more important in Hansberry's drama is an explicit assertion which has escaped critics' notice vis-à-vis abortion. When she confronts Walter with the possibility that Ruth will have an abortion, Mama is quite clear in her definition of the African-American race as a life-affirming people in Act I, scene iii:

*"Your wife say she going to destroy your child. And I'm waiting to hear you talk like him [his deceased father, Big Walter] and say we a people who give children life, not who destroys them – [She rises] I'm waiting to see you stand up and look like your daddy and say we done give up one baby to poverty and that we ain't going to give up nary another one..." (62)*

There are many works from 1959 to my next example which mention abortion, but I deem these as tangential for purposes of this paper. I proceed to a 1978 novel which manifests important aspects of the abortion mentality operating in the African-American community in the post-Roe era. Rosa Guy's 1978 first-person novel *Edith Jackson* presents events in the life of the seventeen-year-old main character almost as a counter to the hopeful elements of Hansberry's drama. Where the Younger family leaves the ghetto in 1959 with hope that they are on their way to achieving the American dream, by 1978 the hope as incarnated in *Edith Jackson* has vanished. Although she lives in fulfillment of *A Raisin in the Sun* (16), Edith's circumstances show a world for an African-American young woman devoid of the comforts of the earlier 1959 Younger family. Unlike Travis, who had his mother to rely on, Edith's mother died from tuberculosis. Unlike Travis who had his father present, Edith's father abandoned the family. Unlike Beneatha whose goals include college, Edith plans to quit school. Edith has been sexually assaulted by a minister. She becomes pregnant by a thirty-two-year-old man. At this point, what options are available to her? A social worker character had earlier informed the reader that the "luxury of choices" is denied to black children (103-4). Her friends tell her she should abort, and so, given the beliefs in her society, Edith decides to abort.<sup>2</sup>

Herbert C. Casteel's 1990 novel *The Drums of Moloch* may be didactic fiction, but it is interesting because of its iconoclastic elements. Bob Hill is an African-American Democratic Missouri state senator whose "voting record tends to veer more and more toward the liberal side" (25). He has the opportunity to advance his political career, but one item of his political beliefs interferes with national party operatives: he is pro-life. Hill could advance if he would only vote against an informed consent bill before the Missouri legislature, but he refuses. Hill eventually wins the congressional seat towards which Democratic operatives encouraged him, but only after he switched to the Republican Party and made his pro-life views known to voters.

Robert Clark's 1997 novel *In the Deep Midwinter* is interesting for one almost casual comment. The main action concerns the plight of Anna whose abortion in 1949 affects her for the rest of her life (even at age eighty she remembers the abortion). When she is taken to the hospital after her illegal abortion, the narrator reports that Mrs. Clay, an African-American caretaker, says she had "seen it before. With colored girls, at least" (180). The implication is that African-American women who abort not only have vast experience in the practice, but also can teach white mothers how to undergo abortion.

Another 1997 example of more recent fiction concerned with abortion includes Mary Burnett Smith's novel *Miss Ophelia*. Set in an African-American community in Macon County, Virginia in 1948, eleven-year-old Belly befriends Teeny who is pregnant. The girls know that most mothers "get rid of it" (27), and various characters have abortions for various reasons. The novel's main character, Miss Ophelia Love, becomes pregnant, but, unlike others in the community who resort to abortion as a solution to their imagined or real socioeconomic problems, Miss Ophelia gives birth to the baby. The end of this novel runs counter to much late twentieth-century fiction: a conversation which starts out as moral relativism ends in moral certainty (215-6), Belly loves the baby (247-8), and another character asserts that "a good mother is a wonderful thing, especially for a child" (276). This maxim, which may sound flaccid and self-evident at first reading, could be rejected by many feminist critics today because it restricts the freedom of the African-American mother in a torturous bond of patriarchal control. Unfortunately for the feminist critics, Miss Ophelia Love has exercised her freedom of choice and chosen to give life to her child.

## Disturbing Evidence: White Racist Attitudes Toward African Americans and Abortion

While reexamining the literature for this paper, one feature of the literary examples is disturbing: the attitudes toward African-American pregnancy in the white community.

Norma Rosen's 1982 novel *At the Center* presents us with an abortionist, Edgar Bianky, who has one consistent fear: a mother whom he will abort would one day cause trouble for his abortion clinic. He performs an abortion on Alexandra White, an African-American mother. (Why is she named that? Is this supposed to be a pun?). Immediately, Edgar pictures her as the "Genevieve X" who would one day cause trouble for his clinic (214-7). Earlier in the novel, a conversation that a black mother has with her lover receives significant attention (163-4).

John Irving's 1985 novel *The Cider House Rules* is primarily concerned with abortion, even though the film adaptation makes it seem as though the subject and themes concern orphans, one's place in life, and rules by which people live. What precipitates the "hero" character, Homer Wells, into his lifelong career as an abortionist is the predicament of Rose Rose, the daughter of a dictatorial African-American father who not only keeps his fellow apple pickers in line but also rapes his daughter.

Naomi Ragen's 1994 novel *The Sacrifice of Tamar* depicts the anguish of an Orthodox Jewish woman who has been raped by a black man. She carries her pregnancy to term, and the fear that the child would be born as one of color is avoided. However, when that child in turn marries another Jewish white woman, becomes a father, and his child is born black, the racial fears resurface and almost tear the family apart.

Finally, Stephen Dixon's *Gould: a Novel in Two Novels* involves the exploits of Gould Bookbinder, whose sexual exploits crosses racial boundaries. When Gould impregnates his black lover, she wants an abortion (34). In fact, helping Lynette with obtaining an abortion "was certainly the more than decent thing to do" (40).

## Literary Criticism and African-American Abortion

Discussion among humanities scholars of the African-American abortion rate may not necessarily be within their province, but certainly reviewing the evidence of abortion attitudes in the literature should be, and some scholars have dared to approach the subject. Some literary critics are quite clear about the effect of abortion on African-American mothers. In her now famous 1986 essay "Apostrophe, Animation, and Abortion" Barbara Johnson writes that "the world that has created conditions under which the loss of a baby becomes desirable must be resisted, not joined. For a black woman, the loss of a baby can always be perceived as a complicity with genocide" (36). What Johnson says is not new – for pro-lifers, at least. Abortion as a tool for Black genocide is a claim that Erma Clardy Craven first enunciated in her seminal 1972 essay whose main title is "Abortion, Poverty and Black Genocide".

Interestingly, what I have found is that some critics are hesitant to mention abortion at all as a subject of inquiry in African-American literature. For example, while he comments on Hansberry's *Raisin in the Sun* as an endorsement of "patriarchy not at the

expense of female strength or female governance [since] Manhood in *A Raisin in the Sun* is wholly compatible with feminism" (779), Anthony Barthelemy chooses not to reflect on the decision about abortion made in the drama. Similarly, Darlene Clark Hine, editor of the 1993 monograph *Black Women in America: an Historical Encyclopedia*, argues that "Indeed, a revisionist reading of [Hansberry's] major plays reveals that she was a feminist long before the women's movement surfaced" (528). If this is true, then, since she specifically eliminated abortion as a solution to Ruth's untimely pregnancy, Hansberry would be philosophically closer to Feminists for Life than she would be to other feminist organizations.<sup>3</sup>

Unfortunately, some literary critics do not help the discussion of abortion in African-American literature when they offer to academics or the reading public works which can be classified into two categories: the merely distorted or the polemical. In her 1990 work *Abortion, Choice, and Contemporary Fiction: The Armageddon of the Maternal Instinct* Judith Wilt offers her unique perception of the "right-to-life issues of the 1950s and 1960s: save the Rosenbergs, ban the bomb, feed the black children of Mississippi. And give life to women dying from botched abortions" (92). The phrase "right-to-life issues" as used here is anachronistic since it is customarily associated with the three issues which concerned the pro-life movement since the mid-1960s: abortion, infanticide, and euthanasia.

To illustrate the second category, I suggest that Carol Mason's 2000 article is more polemical than an examination of cultural differences. The title alone ("Cracked Babies and the Partial Birth of a Nation: Millennialism and Fetal Citizenship") is freighted with distortions of key terms used in the pro-life movement. "Cracked babies" is an almost horrible attempt at punning; I find nothing humorous about children born to crack-addicted mothers. The "partial birth of a nation" is a clever way to deflect attention from the gruesome practice of third trimester abortions much perfected by an abortionist of note in the Dayton metropolitan area.

Furthermore, Mason's claim that abortion can be considered a social good for two groups can be easily countered by historical evidence. She argues that whites consider abortion as a social good because "'crack babies', who are explicitly presumed to be black, are routinely portrayed as impure, tainted, and polluted babies who are a liability to society and from whom the tax-paying citizenry should be saved". Secondly, she claims that "legal disputes [on abortion] may be seen as unwittingly reinscribing the racist tenets of far-right groups that consider abortion to be the apocalyptic end times of white America" (35). Refuting the racist charges requires another paper, but noting the work of volunteers and paid staff in pregnancy support groups as they assist mothers with untimely pregnancies -- many of whom are African American -- should suffice.

## Four Questions for Future Research

How do I end this conference paper? Last week I ran several searches in the MLA International Bibliography database, an online compendium of research since 1963 by humanities professors on substantial issues and works of literature. For this paper I consulted the database to determine current scholarship on the issue of abortion in African-American literature. The first search I entered was just the word "abortion", which resulted in 121 hits. I then searched for instances of "African American", which yielded 7,206 hits, and "black", which totaled 10,784 hits. I then combined search results. "Abortion" and "black" produced zero hits. "Abortion" and "African American" yielded one result -- a paper titled "'We a People Who Give Children Life': Pedagogic Concerns of the Aborted Abortion in Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*" which was presented before the National Association of African American Studies and the National Association of Hispanic and Latino Studies at its annual conference in Houston in 1997.

I remember Houston in February 1997. It was a lovely city and hot, despite the downpour that greeted us as our plane landed. While I should feel proud that the only combined literary research on the issue of abortion involved my study of Hansberry's drama, I think that we can all agree that being able to cite a dated work may be unacceptable for today's students. Where are the other researchers who are considering the right-to-life issues of abortion, infanticide, and euthanasia in African-American literature?

The literature is there. While conducting research for a paper on poetry on the life issues, several works were found in African-American full-text literature databases. Similarly, I have written on abortion in rap music. The songs that I focused on, which were composed and performed by African-American rappers, all condemn abortion as a practice because it either resulted in the dissolution of the relationship between lovers or contributed to the genocide of the African-American race ("Abortion and Rap Music").

If the corpus of scholarly interest in this topic is so scant, then there is great opportunity for literature professors and students to investigate deeper into the sociological phenomenon which provoked this paper and the literary evidence which gives the sociological data a human face. I offer the following four questions for students to explore in their future research.

First, why is there such silence regarding abortion as a theme in African-American literature?

Second, is Baldwin correct when he writes that blacks were taught that they weren't worthy of life and does this philosophical base drive the high abortion figures?

Third, why do African-American mothers, when faced with untimely pregnancies, presume that abortion is the preferred solution?

Finally, where is the literature -- the stories, the poems, the dramas -- which show how pregnancy support groups such as Birthright or the Women's Network (in Clark County) have helped vast numbers of African Americans? Susan K. Ridley's 2002 work *Relieved but Deceived* is one contribution which expresses the anguish that abortion causes in the African-American community. Where are the others?

It is my greatest hope that, perhaps in ten years if not sooner, we will study life-affirming works as much as we now study Baldwin, Brooks, or Hansberry.

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## Endnotes:

<sup>1</sup> Andrews and Boyle provide another example of racist attitudes towards adoption. African-American mothers may choose abortion over adoption because they view it as a "white" practice (431). [[Back](#)]

<sup>2</sup> The example of Edith Jackson's experience with abortion runs counter to a paradigm that I formulated when I reviewed many similar abortion novels directed toward an adolescent and young adult reading audience in other research. In "Adolescent Fiction on Abortion: Developing a Paradigm and Pedagogic Responses from Literature Spanning Three Decades", I considered how white teenaged and

young adult mothers considered many more choices besides abortion. I found that, towards the end of the 1980s and early 1990s, the decision to abort was neither the first choice of white mothers nor the ultimate resolution of the problem posed in these novels. My comments on this fiction can be found either in the hardcopy of the conference proceedings or on the web at <http://uffl.org/vol%209/koloze9.pdf>. [Back]

3 I have written on the matter of critical reception of the abortion theme in Hansberry's drama elsewhere. I presented a paper titled "'We a People Who Give Children Life': Pedagogic Concerns of the Aborted Abortion in Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*" before the National Association of African American Studies and the National Association of Hispanic and Latino Studies at its annual conference in 1997. The full text can be located either in conference proceedings or at [http://lifeissues.net/writers/kol/kol\\_08raisinthesun.html](http://lifeissues.net/writers/kol/kol_08raisinthesun.html). [Back]

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